

## The Sino-Indian relationship: Multi-dimensional and going global

*In the wake of President Xi Jinping's visit to India, **Chietigj Bajpae** takes stock of relations between the two Asian giants. He argues that while many rivalries persist, economic interdependence, India's expanding military capability and a pragmatic approach to foreign policy on both sides are likely to prevent open hostility.*



*This post forms part of a new series on the India At LSE blog, India's Foreign Relations Under Modi. Click [here](#) to see more posts.*

Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to India on 17-19 September 2014 has brought the Sino-Indian relationship back into the spotlight. The emergence of strong and decisive leaders in both countries – Xi in China and Narendra Modi in India – offers both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, both leaders are in a better position to make concessions to resolve long-standing tensions in the bilateral relationship. However, they are also prone to engaging in sabre-rattling behaviour to reaffirm their strengthened mandate.



Recent developments demonstrate that both of these trends are at work in the bilateral relationship. On the one hand, growing economic interdependence is likely to deter open hostilities. China has emerged as India's leading trading partner and Modi, who made several visits to China during his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat, has also spoken of emulating the Chinese development model while attracting Chinese investment to upgrade India's infrastructure and manufacturing capacity. During Xi's visit, China pledged to invest \$20 billion in India as part of a five-year economic and trade development plan and 12 agreements were signed covering industrial parks in Gujarat and Maharashtra states, smart cities, and a high-speed rail link along the Chennai-Bangalore-Mysore route. Xi also pledged to grant Indian companies, particularly in the pharmaceutical, agricultural and IT sectors, greater access to Chinese markets to correct the imbalance in the trade relationship. Both sides have also agreed to several initiatives to strengthen people-to-people and cultural contacts, including designating 2015 the 'Visit India' year in China and 2016 the 'Visit China' year in India.

This alludes to a more cooperative and interdependent relationship, which was reinforced by the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to India shortly after Modi's inauguration and Li Keqiang making his first overseas visit as premier to India in May 2013. The fact that Xi Jinping excluded Pakistan in his recent tour of South Asia also sent a subtle hint of de-linking the India-Pakistan relationship from China's relations with both countries.

The competitive dynamic in the Sino-Indian relationship has also been tempered by semi-institutional ties, confidence-building mechanisms and more robust rules of engagement. This includes the 2005 "India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity", the Strategic Economic Dialogue, a Maritime Cooperation Dialogue that will begin this year, and the conclusion of a Border Defence Cooperation Agreement in October 2013.

Both countries' expanding military capabilities have also served to deter the outbreak of an all-out war. While lagging behind China, India's fast developing nuclear capabilities has ensured the presence of a credible nuclear deterrent in the Sino-Indian relationship. Moreover, India has sought to correct the conventional military imbalance with plans for a new mountain strike corps and upgrading infrastructure along the disputed border.

At the same time however, Modi's appointment of hawkish officials such as General VK Singh to the minister of state for the North East Region (bordering China) and Ajit Doval as national security advisor signals a more assertive approach towards China. This has already been evidenced by such gestures as the invitation to the prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile, Lobsang Sangay, to attend Modi's inauguration.

The unresolved border dispute remains a thorn in the bilateral relationship. While both sides have pledged to seek a timely resolution to the dispute, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) distinguishing the Indian and Chinese sides of the border has still not been demarcated and limited progress has been made in resolving the dispute under the special representatives' framework, in place since 2003. This has contributed to frequent transgressions along the disputed border, as demonstrated by tensions in the Depsang Valley of Eastern Ladakh in April 2013 and recently in the Chumar area coinciding with President Xi's visit to South Asia.

On a more fundamental level neither state has much experience in sharing power with the other. In the pre-colonial period both civilizational states were essentially masters of their own domain with a Himalayan divide separating them. However, the emergence of "disruptive technologies" such as ballistic missiles and cyber-warfare has reduced the strategic space between both states, thus increasing the likelihood for misunderstanding and friction.

Historically, the strategic weight of China and India in Asia has made their bilateral relationship a microcosm of broader regional dynamic. During the colonial period, interaction between both countries was subordinated to colonial rivalries as Indian opium and soldiers were used to gain markets and quash rebellions in China. In the post-colonial period, initial cordiality in the Sino-Indian relationship was accompanied by Asian and developing world solidarity through such initiatives as the 1947 Asian Relations Conference and the "Bandung spirit" of 1955, which became the precursor for the Non-Aligned Movement and the Asia-Africa Summit. The 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', (which recently marked its 60th anniversary) not only served as a symbol of friendship between the world's most populous countries, but also codified the process of interaction within the developing world. Finally, growing animosity in the Sino-Indian relationship was accompanied by a fracturing of the regional architecture along the Cold War divide as manifested by such initiatives as the US-led Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

This linkage between the nature of the Sino-Indian relationship and the regional order will continue to gain momentum in the post-Cold War period as both countries acquire new tools and platforms of interaction amid their rise as major regional and global powers. This is already evident by the growing importance of third parties to the bilateral relationship. The fact that Xi's visit to India was accompanied by visits to Sri Lanka and the Maldives (under the aegis of China's 'Maritime Silk Road' strategy) and preceded by Modi's visit to Japan and a visit by Indian President Pranab Mukherjee to Vietnam indicates the growing presence of both countries' in each others' peripheries. It also demonstrates the potential for both countries' to leverage relations with third parties to influence the bilateral relationship.

At the international level, both countries have also cooperated on issues ranging from counter-terrorism to

economic globalisation, climate change and calls for a multi-polar world through such forums as the Russia-China-India strategic dialogue, the G20, the BASIC group of countries and BRICS forum. The recent agreement for the establishment of a BRICS development bank and China indicating support for India to be admitted as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is further evidence of the convergence of interests on global governance.

This reflects the increasingly multi-dimensional nature of the Sino-Indian relationship. While China is an increasingly important economic partner for India, as well as an ally on issues of global governance, border frictions and both countries' engagement with each others' strategic rivals will remain sources of mutual mistrust in the bilateral relationship.

To be sure, in recent years the Sino-Indian relationship has been subordinated to both countries' increasingly pragmatic foreign policy, in contrast to their ideological approach during the Cold War embedded in Nehruvian non-alignment and a Maoist vision of revolutionary world struggle. This will deter any rash or aggressive behaviour in the bilateral relationship. Instead, as both countries remain focussed on growth, development and the consolidation of political power, any rivalry is likely to manifest itself in the realm of rhetoric, economics, military modernisation and a competition for allies. Nonetheless, unlike their brief border war in 1962, which was overshadowed by the superpower rivalry of the Cuban Missile Crisis, future developments in the Sino-Indian relationship are likely to take centre-stage given the growing strategic weight of both countries in the international system.

#### **About the Author**

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