

CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS INDIA SINCE DENG XIAOPING: EVOLUTION, CHALLENGES, AND PROSPECTS

Aaquib Khan¹

¹Department of Strategic & Security Studies, Aligarh Muslim University

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution of Chinese foreign policy towards India since Deng Xiaoping's ascension to power in 1978. It examines the guiding principles of China's foreign policy, including peaceful development, sovereignty, and economic pragmatism, as they relate to Sino-Indian relations. The analysis traces key milestones in the relationship, from the normalization of diplomatic ties in the late 1970s to recent episodes of cooperation and competition. It also delves into the economic, military, and strategic dimensions of the bilateral dynamic, highlighting the challenges posed by unresolved border disputes, trade imbalances, and regional competition. The paper concludes by evaluating the prospects for future collaboration and conflict management, underscoring the significant implications of Sino-Indian relations for regional stability and global geopolitics.

Key Words: Chinese foreign policy, Deng Xiaoping, Sino-Indian relations, geopolitics

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between China and India, two of Asia's largest and most influential countries, has been characterized by both cooperation and competition since the late 1970s. This complex dynamic has been shaped by historical disputes, economic interests, and strategic considerations. The bilateral relationship is further complicated by their shared borders, cultural interactions, and geopolitical ambitions, which influence how both nations approach global and regional issues. This paper examines the evolution of Chinese foreign policy towards India since the era of Deng Xiaoping, analysing key principles, major events, and the multifaceted nature of Sino-Indian relations.

Deng Xiaoping's ascension to power in 1978 marked a turning point in China's domestic and foreign policies. Deng's "reform and opening-up" policy fundamentally altered China's economic landscape and, by extension, its approach to international relations (Asia for Educators, n.d.). This transformation had profound implications for China's relationship with India, setting the stage for decades of engagement marked by both opportunities and challenges.

Both nations are heirs to ancient civilizations and hold the potential to shape the 21st-century global order. However, their bilateral relations have historically oscillated between conflict and cooperation. While economic and cultural ties have grown, the shadow of unresolved border disputes, historical tensions, and competing regional strategies often clouds their engagement.

Key Principles of Chinese Foreign Policy Since Deng Xiaoping

Reform and Opening-Up

Deng Xiaoping's leadership introduced sweeping reforms aimed at modernizing China's economy and integrating it into the global system. The "reform and opening-up" policy marked a strategic pivot, focusing on attracting foreign investments and increasing trade relations (Asia for Educators, n.d.). This policy shift was rooted in pragmatism and a long-term vision of strengthening China's global standing.

China's engagement with India during this period reflected its broader goal of fostering stable bilateral ties to ensure a conducive environment for economic development. For instance, bilateral trade agreements in the 1980s demonstrated China's intent to balance competition with cooperation, recognizing India's growing market potential.

Peaceful Development

The concept of "peaceful development" became a cornerstone of China's foreign policy during Deng's era, symbolizing a departure from the aggressive revolutionary policies of Mao Zedong. By emphasizing peaceful coexistence, China sought to rise as a global power without alienating neighboring countries.

This principle significantly influenced Sino-Indian relations, with both nations exploring mechanisms to manage border disputes through dialogue. However, the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 highlighted the limitations of this principle in addressing deep-rooted territorial disagreements (Smith, 2023, May 4).

Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

China's historical emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity has shaped its interactions with neighbors, including India. Regions like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh have remained flashpoints of tension. The Chinese leadership

views territorial claims as non-negotiable, a stance that has often clashed with India's assertions, complicating efforts to resolve border disputes (Ghosh, 1994).

Non-Alignment and Strategic Independence

China's non-aligned stance allowed it to navigate complex global politics without formal alliances. This principle facilitated bilateral negotiations with India while enabling China to pursue strategic partnerships, including its close ties with Pakistan. Similarly, India adopted a non-aligned foreign policy during the Cold War, but both nations' evolving alignments reflect changing geopolitical realities (Joshi, 2022).

Evolution of Sino-Indian Relations Since 1978

1978–1988: Reestablishing Diplomatic Ties

The normalization of Sino-Indian relations began in earnest during this period. Following Deng Xiaoping's reforms, China's focus shifted to economic development, prompting efforts to stabilize relations with neighbors. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 1978 visit to Beijing signaled a thaw in relations, laying the groundwork for formal diplomatic ties (Reuters, 2008).

However, the shadow of the 1962 Sino-Indian War persisted, influencing public and political perceptions on both sides. While diplomatic engagements resumed, underlying mistrust continued to shape interactions.

1988–2000: Thawing Relations and Economic Cooperation

Rajiv Gandhi's historic 1988 visit to China marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations. During the visit, both countries established a Joint Working Group to address boundary issues, signaling a pragmatic approach to resolving disputes (Harvard Business Review, 2007).

The 1990s witnessed steady improvements in relations, spurred by India's economic liberalization and China's growing openness. Trade volumes increased, and agreements were reached on cultural exchanges and scientific cooperation. Nevertheless, sporadic border skirmishes and China's ties with Pakistan continued to test the relationship.

2000–2010: Strategic and Economic Partnership

The early 21st century saw both nations emphasizing strategic and economic partnerships. Bilateral trade surged, making China one of India's largest trading partners. Leaders from both countries articulated a vision for harmonious development, emphasizing collaboration in global forums like the United Nations.

However, unresolved issues, including China's opposition to India's bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat and its growing influence in South Asia, highlighted the complexity of the relationship (China Briefing, 2023).

2010–Present: Cooperation Amidst Competition

Recent decades have been marked by intensified competition and intermittent cooperation. While economic ties expanded, reaching \$136.2 billion in trade by 2023, tensions escalated over border disputes and strategic competition (Smith, 2023, October 13). The 2020 Galwan Valley clash represented a nadir in relations, leading to heightened military build-up and nationalist rhetoric on both sides. Simultaneously, both nations engaged in joint military exercises and continued diplomatic dialogue, underscoring the duality of their engagement.

Economic Aspects of Sino-Indian Relations

Trade and Investment

Trade has been a cornerstone of Sino-Indian relations since Deng Xiaoping's reforms. Bilateral trade expanded rapidly, with China emerging as India's largest trading partner. Key trade categories include electronics, machinery, and pharmaceuticals. However, India's persistent trade deficit with China remains a contentious issue, prompting calls for greater market access and diversified trade portfolios (China Briefing, 2023).

Economic Cooperation and Competition

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has intensified competition with India. Projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have raised security concerns in India, particularly regarding sovereignty issues in disputed territories (Kugiel, 2012). In response, India has championed alternative initiatives, such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, to counterbalance China's regional influence. These competing strategies reflect the broader contest for economic and geopolitical dominance in Asia.

Military and Strategic Aspects

Border Disputes

The unresolved border disputes between China and India are a central source of tension. The lack of a clearly demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC) has led to periodic clashes, including the 1962 war, the 1967 skirmishes, and the 2020 Galwan Valley incident (Smith, 2023, May 4).

These conflicts underscore the strategic importance both nations attach to their border regions. China's investments in infrastructure along the LAC and India's military modernization efforts reflect the enduring significance of these disputes.

Strategic Competition

China's growing influence in South Asia, through investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, has heightened India's strategic concerns. India perceives these moves as part of a "string of pearls" strategy aimed at encircling it. In response, India has strengthened ties with the U.S., Japan, and Australia, notably through the Quad (Lukin, 2019).

Challenges and Future Prospects

Challenges

1. **Border Disputes:** Despite multiple rounds of negotiations, the border issues remain unresolved, with both sides maintaining strong military postures.
2. **Economic Imbalances:** India's trade deficit with China continues to fuel calls for protectionist measures and diversification of supply chains.
3. **Regional Rivalry:** Competing infrastructure projects and strategic alliances underscore the broader geopolitical rivalry.

Prospects for Cooperation

1. **Climate Change and Sustainability:** Both nations face shared environmental challenges, offering potential for collaboration on renewable energy and conservation.
2. **Counterterrorism:** Joint efforts to combat terrorism could provide a common platform for dialogue.
3. **Multilateral Engagement:** Platforms like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization offer avenues for cooperation despite bilateral tensions.

2. CONCLUSION

Chinese foreign policy towards India since Deng Xiaoping has evolved significantly, reflecting broader changes in China's global outlook. The relationship remains characterized by a complex mix of cooperation and competition, with economic engagement growing alongside strategic tensions. Moving forward, the ability of both nations to manage their disagreements while capitalizing on shared opportunities will be crucial. The trajectory of Sino-Indian relations will shape not only regional stability but also the global order in the decades to come.

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