China-India Relations: Cooperation and Conflict
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The following article is first in a series examining China-India relations in the 21st century.

Sino-Indian relations make for a compelling case study, as their strategic complexity and future importance defy any easy explanation. Theirs is a relationship that straddles the entire breadth of geopolitical possibility, encompassing points of conflict and cooperation in the military and economic spheres, territorial and resource disputes, dissonant domestic political systems, and perhaps most importantly: the unprecedented opportunity for two of the greatest development success stories in human history to shape the world of the 21st century. Because conflict or not, both countries recognize the need to work together to lubricate the international system that has served them so well.

Fighting for the Himalayan High Ground

Of the disputes weighing down on Sino-Indian relations, unresolved border issues in the Himalayas (both in Arunanchal Pradesh and Kashmir) loom large. The two sides fought a war over one of the disputed areas in 1962, which ended in a humiliating Indian defeat, and though there have been scattered diplomatic flare-ups and unauthorized excursions since then, no more shots have been exchanged. In 2006, a Chinese envoy incited widespread outrage throughout India when he declared that the entire Indian state of Arunanchal Pradesh belongs to China. The most recent rhetorical snipes occurred in 2009, when India announced the deployment of additional troops and air power along its Himalayan border with China, leading Beijing to re-assert its claim to approximately 90,000 square kilometers of disputed territory.

A resolution is likely to remain elusive due to the strong historical case to be made on both sides, as well as the inherent strategic value of the territory in question. From a military point of view, the state in control of the disputed
territory bordering Arunanchal Pradesh possesses a valuable launching pad for military strikes, while the other side is left with the logistical headache of having to traverse the Himalayas in order to reach population centers on the other side of the border. Moreover, and perhaps more salient to the realities of 21st-century warfare, the area can serve as a conduit for destabilizing the domestic politics of the opposing side, whether by supplying rebels in India’s northeast or by inciting revolt in China’s Tibet Autonomous Region.

The disputed area also has an important environmental dimension, one that could come to impact the strategic balance between India and China as water scarcity becomes more pronounced in the future. The Tibetan plateau feeds the Brahmaputra River, which flows through Assam before it meets the Ganges in Bangladesh and ends at the Bay of Bengal. The government of China is building a dam at the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra, and has recently approved the construction of three additional dams as part of its 12th Five-year Plan. Though these dams are firmly in Chinese territory and the Chinese authorities have offered every assurance that they won’t impact the downstream flow of the Brahmaputra, Indian officials are still nervous, and Prime Minister Singh brought up the matter explicitly during his first official visit with President Xi.

While these longstanding disputes will not be easily resolved, both sides remain optimistic that a negotiated solution is in the cards. A new dialogue organ, the ‘Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs,’ became operational in 2012. It is a forum meant to mitigate the risk of future military buildups along the border and add impetus to the overall negotiating process.

Border negotiations between the two sides will likely remain fixed on a road to nowhere, with no new public outbursts, especially from the Chinese government. Beijing wants to avoid being branded as a belligerent, irredentist power over the Himalayas, particularly when it is already risking the label with its stance on the South China Sea. And it just so happens that this well-traveled body of water, which Beijing has recently identified as falling under its ‘core interests,’ is another important cog in the machinery of Sino-Indian relations.

**Overlapping Spheres in the South China Sea**

India has several interests at stake in the South China Sea. Indian trade contributes to the massive amount of shipping that traverses these waters (half the world’s merchant fleet sails through the South China Sea every year), and thus India has an interest in maintaining its ships’ free right of movement in what it views as international waters. There are also energy interests at stake, as India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) has a joint oil exploration venture off the coast of Vietnam, an asset that India would be willing to dispatch ships to defend, if a much-publicized statement by Indian Navy Chief Admiral D.K Joshi is to be believed. And finally, the South China Sea is central to India’s ‘Look East’ policy, which envisions deepening political, military, and economic links with the ASEAN countries.

That India would risk confrontation by propelling its influence into China’s strategic backyard seems less brazen when one examines China’s Indian Ocean policy, which could have been called ‘Look West’ if it wasn’t already known as the ‘string of pearls.’ Beijing has long sought to establish a series of naval outposts in the Indian Ocean, with the presumed aim of keeping the Indian Navy from consolidating its influence over its own strategic backyard (to use the same logic that Beijing applies to the South China Sea). A few notable pearls are: a port in Gwadar, Pakistan which China took over operations for in 2012, the Hambantota port complex in Sri Lanka, and more recently, if the rumors are to be believed, a Chinese naval base in Seychelles.

Though we’re still several years from a Chinese blue water navy that could use these bases and turn an abstract threat
into a concrete one for India, it’s understandable that India would seek to project its own naval power into China’s backyard, albeit in a similarly hypothetical fashion.

**Economic and Political Opportunities**

On the economic front, Sino-Indian relations are a success story. Economic ties have been diversifying and strengthening at a steady clip, and bilateral trade has grown from less than $3 billion in 2000 to roughly $66 billion in 2012, and some estimates have it reaching $100 billion by 2015. Although bilateral trade has seen impressive growth, some politicians in India have been voicing worries about their country’s widening trade deficit with China. Efforts to alleviate this deficit, primarily in the form of official pressure on China to open up its IT and pharmaceutical industries, have so far produced little results.

As the two largest developing countries in the world, and a combined two-fifths of the world’s population, India and China’s bilateral relationship stands to impact international politics and the fight against various transnational threats ranging from pandemics to terrorism to global warming. A seed of shared leadership on some of these matters seems to exist, as the new ‘five core principles of cooperation’ exchanged between PM Singh and President Xi in March included a call for ‘collaboration on multilateral affairs in order to address global challenges.’

Both India and China are members of the BRICS countries, which recently took a step towards relevance by announcing the establishment of a BRICS development bank to compete with the World Bank and the IMF.

Yet paradoxically, China has not been very accommodating in India’s quest to secure a seat on the UN Security Council, so it remains to be seen whether the rhetoric of Sino-Indian shared responsibility and leadership is substantive, or if Beijing views influence at the highest levels of international politics as a zero-sum game.

Despite lingering differences, it appears that the forces of attraction will win out over conflict in Sino-Indian relations. Perhaps an old sign at one of the Himalayan border crossing puts it best: China and India, two old civilizations developing hand-in-hand.

*Part two in the series will examine the alliances and international loyalties impacting Sino-Indian relations.*

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