



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 6.865 (SJIF 2023)

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT'S IMPACTS ON THE SHIFTING DYNAMICS IN INDIA-CHINA POLITICAL RELATIONS

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DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2023-89352318/IRJHIS2311001>

Abstract:

The Russia - Ukraine conflict has significantly impacted global political-security dynamics and influenced competing relationships between major powers. Notably, the competitive relationship between rising powers India and China has undergone complex shifts in line with current global geopolitical contexts as both recognize common interests in shaping the emerging multipolar power structure. This paper utilizes qualitative analysis of secondary data collected in September 2023. The results show that despite existing profound contradictions, bilateral political relations have improved in the short-term. Specifically, India and China both see benefits in maintaining stability to focus on development amidst volatile geopolitics. They also wish to jointly build a multipolar world order. However, this is likely a temporary shift as outstanding border security and competition issues between the two powers in the Indo - Pacific remain pressing.

Keywords: India, China, competition, multipolar order, power.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Amidst complex global geopolitical volatility, relationships between major powers play a crucial role in shaping the international order. Notably, the relationship between two rapidly rising Asian powers - India and China - has attracted special attention from the international community. This relationship is considered to profoundly impact the modern world order and Indo - Pacific security architecture. Although they have vibrant economic ties, India and China's bilateral political relations contain many contradictions, competition, and potential for conflict. Recently, the Russia - Ukraine conflict has deeply impacted global geopolitical dynamics and strongly influenced India - China political relations. The complex shifts in India - China political relations have profoundly impacted political-security dynamics in the Indo - Pacific region and global power structure. Therefore, this paper has two important objectives: i) Overview India - China relations before the Russia - Ukraine conflict, ii) Analyze and explore reasons leading to positive shifts in post-conflict

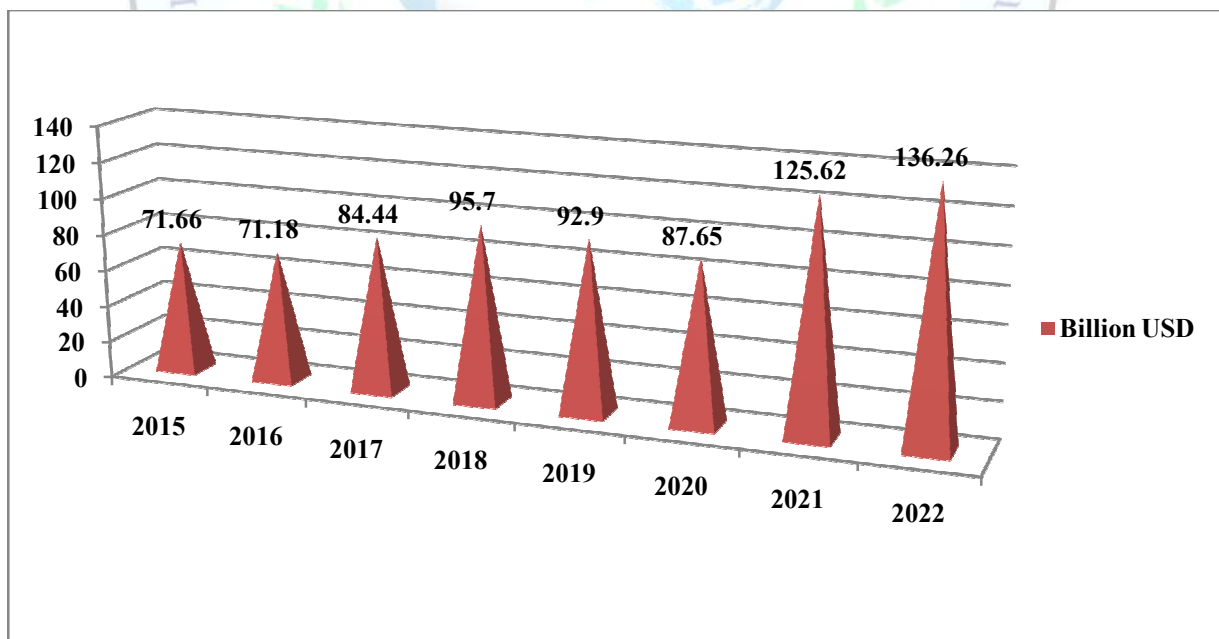
India - China political relations, focusing on aspects of cooperation and strategic competition. The results will clarify evolving political relations between the two powers given current geopolitical contexts, while providing assessments and forecasts for the future.

2. RESULTS:

2.1. Overview of India - China relations before the Russia - Ukraine conflict:

In the 21st century, the international community is witnessing the remarkable rise of India and China - two countries with potential to become global superpowers. According to 2022 data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), both India and China have the world’s highest GDP growth rates. India ranks sixth with a total GDP of USD 2.66 trillion, while China holds second position with a total GDP of USD 14.72 trillion (Kiet, 2023). Experts worldwide predict these two countries’ economies will continue rapid growth in the future, maintaining positions as the world’s two most populous powers in the 21st century. However, India and China have very complex bilateral relations, with many similarities to the current relationship between China and Japan, often called “Economics hot, Politics cold”. The India - China relationship before the Russia - Ukraine conflict featured both cooperation and competition. This is considered the foremost trend pursued between countries amidst contemporary globalization. Therefore, India and China have comprehensive economic cooperation during their rise to become global superpowers. Under the impact of globalization trends, trade attraction and geographical proximity have made China and India top partners in each other’s 21st century economic security and trade strategies (Table 1).

Table 1: India - China economic-trade cooperation from 2015-2022



(Source: Chinese Customs)

Bilateral trade between India and China expanded vigorously in the early 21st century. China quickly became India’s largest trading partner in 2008, a position it still holds today (Embassy of

India, 2022). Statistics in Table 1 show robust growth in bilateral trade from 2015-2022, with India - China economic cooperation increasing 90.14% during 2015-2022 at an average annual rate of 12.87%. In 2022, total trade between them grew 8.47% over the previous year to USD 136.26 billion, surpassing USD 100 billion for the second time in history. These figures demonstrate the comprehensive and open economic cooperation between China and India in the 21st century.

However, contrary to comprehensive economic ties, these two powers have completely conflicting and contradictory political relations, especially regarding power competition and influence in the Indo - Pacific region. Three main reasons lead to instability in India - China political relations:

Firstly, border security disputes in the Himalayan region. The India - China border conflict originated in 1903 when the British Empire invaded Tibet. This stemmed from the British and Russian empires' "Great Game", which made the British worried about Russian expansion into South Asia - where the British held their largest colonies worldwide (Burk, 2005). Hence, the British Empire invaded and established Tibet as a "buffer zone" to separate Russia and China from British India. However, due to Tibet's strategic importance as the core of China's East-West corridor geopolitical ambitions, also known as the "Silk Road" in Chinese history, relating to China's national security on its southern border with South Asia. Therefore, China took advantage of India's crisis from partition along geographical, religious and ethnic lines with Pakistan. China launched the "Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" campaign and brought Tibet under Beijing's control in 1951. This collapsed the "buffer zone" between India and China, causing intractable instability in India - China relations for decades. Therefore, bilateral relations have remained unstable until now, with frequent border disputes between military forces on both sides in this region. Most recently in December 2022, conflict between Indian and Chinese troops broke out again near Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, injuring soldiers and escalating tensions amidst extremely complex regional and global geopolitics, especially after the Russia - Ukraine conflict in Eastern Europe.

Secondly, water security issues in the Tibetan Plateau. According to 2023 United Nations World Water Development data: "Around 80% of people in Asia are living under water stress. Northeast China, India and Pakistan are most severely affected" (Jyoti, 2023). Hence, India and China are seriously impacted regarding non-traditional security over water resources near their border. Therefore, China's occupation of Tibet has caused tremendous instability and tensions in Indian society. Direct tensions arise because India and China's water resources both depend on flows originating from the Tibetan Plateau, especially the Brahmaputra River which is very important for the livelihoods of Indians living in its basin. Lately, Beijing's efforts to control water flows from rivers in the Tibetan Plateau through dam building has worried New Delhi that China seeks to "weaponize water" and indirectly pressure India's policies and strategies towards China. According

to research by Tibet Policy Institute (TPI) scholar Dechen Palmo on China's efforts to control Tibetan water flows, he observed and estimated: "In the past 70 years, China has built around 87,000 dams, over 22,000 of which are higher than 15 meters, close to half of the world's total dams today, causing massive ecological and water security impacts on downstream countries that have enjoyed free flows for centuries" (Tsultrim, 2020). Hence, these water security instabilities have negatively impacted India - China political relations for decades.

Thirdly, power competition between rising powers. India and China's rapid 21st century rise to become global superpowers has generated enormous demands for markets, energy, logistics security, etc. to sustain their economies. This motivates both countries to establish regional and global power structures conducive for their continued prosperity. Therefore, they have engaged in power competition between powers regionally and globally. Hence, the India - China instability over Tibet for decades has directly led them to compete in the Indo - Pacific region. In the early 1990s, China openly expanded its power southwards into South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and built its "String of Pearls" strategy in this traditionally Indian-influenced region. To counter China, former Indian Prime Minister Narashima Rao announced the "Look East Policy" in 1991, expanded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi into the "Act East Policy" in 2014 with two main objectives: i) Enhance economic cooperation and connectivity with Southeast Asian countries, with the goal of building an economic corridor from South Asia to the South China Sea and broader Pacific, ii) Increase power and directly compete with China's policies and strategies in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the rise of these two inherently unstable powers has led India and China into intense power competition in the Indo - Pacific.

In summary, India - China political relations have frequently contained contradictions leading to bilateral diplomatic tensions, especially border disputes in the Himalayas. Before the Russia - Ukraine conflict, both powers could not find common interests in bilateral political relations and had very unclear political cooperation.

2.2. Positive shifts in India - China relations post Russia - Ukraine conflict:

On August 15, 2023, during a high-level meeting between Chinese and Indian Army Corps Commanders, China's Ministry of Defense emphasized: "India and China will strive to maintain peace and stability along border areas" (Dat, 2023a). This demonstrates efforts to stabilize unstable India - China political relations amidst post-conflict geopolitical contexts. On August 25, 2023, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit. Both leaders committed to: "Improve and develop China - India relations in line with the shared interests of both countries and peoples, conducive to peace, stability and development of the world and region. Properly handle border issues from a strategic view of bilateral relations, and jointly maintain peace and stability in border areas" (Dat, 2023b). This shows both

Indian and Chinese heads of state are trying to repair relations amidst complex global fluctuations caused by the Russia - Ukraine conflict. Although on August 31, 2023, China publicized its “2023 Standard Map” including disputed border areas with India at Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin, provoking strong protests from New Delhi. However, the intractable border dispute is an “unsurprising” and “temporarily deferrable” issue given the currently shifting political landscape has facilitated positive changes in India - China political relations at present. Causes include:

Firstly, both powers want to build a multipolar world order, multilateralism, and avoid U.S. global hegemony. The rise of any global superpower inevitably provokes strong reactions from incumbent powers at the peak of global power, explained by scholar Graham Allison’s “Thucydides Trap” concept. This stems from ancient historian Thucydides’ assessments and observations on causes of the Peloponnesian War, which he described as “the growth of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta”. Scholar Graham Allison, based on Thucydides’ research, realized recurring correlations between conflicts and tensions between rising and incumbent dominant powers throughout history. Graham Allison argued China now poses fears for America’s global dominance (Stephens, 2023). Hence, America and Western allies try containing China’s rise through the “Hub and Spoke” and “Island Chain” strategies encircling China, especially at its “gateway” in the East China Sea, worrying India about enduring U.S.-dominated world order in coming decades. This completely misaligns with India’s rise, especially amidst increasing contemporary interdependence between countries. Therefore, the multipolar world order is top priority for rising powers’ foreign policies, especially the BRICS bloc. BRICS represents emerging powers committed to multilateralism - Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa. At the 15th BRICS Summit on August 26, 2023, this bloc welcomed six new members - Argentina, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Moreover, BRICS emphasized: “Some 40 countries have expressed interest in joining BRICS, with 22 submitting formal requests” (Minh, 2023). Thus, BRICS has become a new pole linking multilateralist countries against U.S. global dominance.

Secondly, China seeks to stabilize political relations with India to enable stable economic ties amidst economic downturn. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s economy has shown signs of downturn from its Zero-COVID policy consequences. Meanwhile, U.S. and Western allies’ measures to contain China’s rise have reduced China’s economic resilience. Supply chain shifts have severely reduced China’s market and generated compounding instability in its economy and society. According to economist Stella Y.Xie’s research and observations, signs of China’s economic downturn emerged in April 2023, starting in real estate and spreading to manufacturing and services (Xie, 2023). Regarding analysis of China’s declining real estate sector, Julian E.Pritchard, head of China economics at Capital Economics, assessed: “Further losses in real estate could trigger wider financial instability” (Xie, 2023). Currently, major Chinese conglomerates like Evergrande, Country

Garden, Zhongrong Trust, etc. face financial crises, destabilizing China's economy with potential to spread across sectors like shadow banking, labor markets, etc. in the near future.

Moreover, scholar Nicholas R. Lardy observed China's economic fluctuations recently and assessed: "There is no doubting now that China faces serious structural challenges, including declining productivity, a labor market crisis, technological barriers to transfers imposed by the U.S. and allies, real estate bubbles, and rapidly rising youth unemployment among those aged 16 to 24" (Lardy, 2023). Hence, economic downturn pressures and social instability have compelled Beijing to flexibly adjust economic policies with "friendly" partners to seek solutions for its declining economy. Among these, India is a major Chinese trade partner since the early 21st century, representing an enormous market with the world's largest population today, and convenient geographical proximity enabling logistics transfers. Therefore, China currently seeks to stabilize political relations with India to create opportunities for domestic product exports and stimulate consumption to help its economy escape downturn. On May 5, 2023, during a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Foreign Ministers' Conference, former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi negotiated with India and emphasized: "China is ready to work with India to conduct bilateral consultations and exchanges, strengthen coordination and cooperation on multilateral platforms, and jointly address regional and global issues" (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 2023). Thus, this demonstrates China wants to stabilize India relations to counter U.S. and Western allies' containment policies that compel Beijing to strategically adjust to stimulate its economy and adapt to the current global context.

Thirdly, the geography of the Himalayas has become a "constant" preventing outright conflict between the powers. Observing geographical maps of the Himalayan region and studying the history of their border disputes shows the "border security" factor has become an "intractable" issue in India - China relations for decades, as nationalism rises strongly in both countries' societies. Therefore, comprehensive India - China cooperation across economics and politics is very difficult to concurrently maintain long-term. However, given the Himalayas' harsh geographical structure, they erect a barrier separating the entire border between both powers and prevent the fate of "outright war" between these two magnificent ancient civilizations. In his work "Prisoners of Geography", scholar Tim Marshall evaluated the Himalayas' geographical structure on India - China relations, assessing: "The Himalayas have become the new Great Wall, separating the entire border of two ancient civilizations as well as past and future instability leading to outright conflict" (Marshall, 2020, p.29). Hence, India and China's leaders both recognize this "intractable" issue causes contradictions in their competitive bilateral relations. Therefore, amidst the world's currently shifting landscape after the Russia - Ukraine conflict, the consensus on common interests in foreign policies to establish a multipolar world order and multilateralism to create an environment conducive to

China and India's rise has led both powers' leaders to strategically prioritize deferring "intractable" issues negatively impacting India - China cooperation. This has created positive shifts in political cooperation between India and China to counter U.S. global hegemony. However, India-China competition in the Indo - Pacific will persist, especially in Southeast Asia. Yet until 2030, competition between the powers across this region will not witness major volatility or tensions since the U.S. will remain the dominant global power soon and the Taiwan issue remains unresolved.

3. CONCLUSION:

In summary, this paper has assessed India and China's political relations in foreign policies are undergoing positive shifts. Causes stem from both powers recognizing common interests in bilateral political and economic cooperation, especially supporting multilateralism to create conditions conducive for India and China's 21st century rise. However, this trend is only temporary and such relations cannot be sustained long-term since both China and India have serious contradictions involving national security and face many challenges, particularly regarding border disputes, water security, and strategic competition in the Indo - Pacific. Therefore, although India - China relations until 2030 will positively shift to shape the multipolar world order, their bilateral competition in the Indo - Pacific will not witness major volatility or tensions that could spark conflict by 2030. However, looking towards the future, as both powers continue rising vigorously and accumulating "intractable" bilateral contradictions, India - China competition across the Indo - Pacific will intensify on par with China-U.S. competition, especially in Southeast Asia.

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