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India's China Challenge: Exploring Possibility Amid Paradox

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Abstract

India's dilemma with China is characterised by increased bilateral trade, border disputes, and geostrategic rivalries. The coexistence of territorial conflict and trade highlights India's vulnerability to China. This study calls for a reassessment of economic efficiency to address the diplomatic costs of production and the importance of adaptable international diplomacy. The ability to navigate diplomatically in a hostile and interconnected geoeconomy and geopolitics is a key indicator of economic efficiency. Furthermore, it asserts that, under a multi-alignment framework, a defensive diplomacy approach is more effective in achieving and maintaining strategic autonomy. Therefore, diversifying supply chains and establishing geoeconomic partnerships with other nations are India's top priorities to manage its relationship with China. India has strategic opportunities consequent upon China's growing global influence and its disputes with the US-led Western world order. Additionally, India's multi-alignment strategy reduces geopolitical tension among external powers by reducing dependence on any single country.

Keywords: India; China; Trade Deficit; Geostrategy; Territorial Disputes; Strategic Autonomy; Multialignment

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1. Introduction

For contemporary India, the relationship with China is a key strategic concern. Strategically balancing China's influence in South Asia and beyond is a crucial component of its comprehensive strategic planning and decision-making processes. China's efforts in three main areas worry India. First, India is disadvantaged by China's unilateral infrastructure expansion in the Indo-Pacific, which also jeopardises the interests of other nations. Second, there is growing worry over China's increasing military and marine presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Third, regions that are part of India's territorial claims are impacted by the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Panda 2020).

Moreover, India has a significant trade deficit with China, in addition to territorial and geostrategic issues. To reduce imports of low-cost goods from China, India is using two strategies: imposing Quality Control Orders (QCO) and anti-dumping and anti-subsidy tariffs (Sen 2024). In 2024, India imposed more than 30 anti-dumping measures against China, the most of any nation it has ever targeted. Products impacted include welded stainless-steel pipes, tubes, soft ferrite cores, industrial laser machines, and industrial items, including vacuum-insulated flasks and plastic processing machines (Mishra 2024).

Meanwhile, China damages Indian companies by aggressive strategies meant to stifle competition, even though China is not regarded as a market economy (European Union 2015; Trachtman 2017). China was classified as a non-market economy (NME) under Article 15 of the agreement that permitted China to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). The domestic laws of each nation are independent in determining whether China is still categorised as a non-market economy. Since China threatens the local industry of partner countries by selling its goods at lower rates than in its own domestic market, India favours China's classification as a non- market economy (Mishra 2020). Moreover, the increasing integration of technology and financial activities would result in a more thorough analysis of these relationships in an interdependent supply chain in which trade dependency is increasingly becoming weaponised, wherein economic transactions are increasingly examined through the prism of national security.

This tendency supports protectionism and a cautious approach to supply chains. As a result, countries implement defensive tactics in a hostile interdependent supply chain. The well-known proverb "Hide your strength, bide your time," which is credited to Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the late 1980s, is more appropriate for India's negotiating style, which advocates for defensive diplomacy amid a hostile, interdependent global economy. These defensive tactics involve engaging, managing, and accommodating the hostile relations between countries, and that is what is required in an interdependent world economy wherein economic interdependency averts conflict.

China is currently India's largest product trading partner. The nuances of India's economic dependence on China are reflected in the country's bilateral trade deficit (Minhas 2025). Thus, the contradictory relationship between China and India is highlighted by the presence of territorial conflicts and growing trade flows. This runs counter to the saying that "when goods do not cross borders, soldiers will" (quoted in Chen 2024). India's large trade deficit with China necessitates a cautious approach to economic engagement. China is in a better position to profit from India's significant reliance on Chinese resources, particularly essential minerals.

This article explores several geopolitical and geoeconomic conundrums, such as trade, territorial disputes, and security issues between China and India. It looks into whether China can outmanoeuvre India in territorial and geostrategic disputes by using trade diplomacy as a weapon. The article also examines India's prospects for following a strategy of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment amid a changing global order.

2. Trade Deficit

India's imports from China have increased significantly despite the restrictions. China's imports rose from $60 billion in 2014–15 to more than $100 billion in 2025–2026. Trade between India and China is advantageous to the latter; exports to China have accounted for 3.6% of India's total exports, while exports to India represent less than 3% of China's total exports (Trading Economics 2026). This suggests that China is not exposed to India's exports, while its export market dependency on India is even lower. India's growing trade deficit makes India's economic relations with China extremely unfair and imbalanced.

Moreover, China has non-tariff barriers that restrict market access for Indian exporters, especially for medicinal and agricultural goods. China prohibits third-party laboratories from doing second-chance testing on pharmaceutical items that fail random sampling. Companies are unable to challenge the lab's decision because there is no way to appeal it. Bilateral trade suffers as a result of this circumstance, which also causes financial hardships (Verma 2022).

Additionally, China controls the entire supply chain of rare earth minerals, from mining and extraction to refining and processing. With over 70% of global rare earth ore extraction and 90% of rare earth ore processing, China's decisions in this arena carry significant global national security ramifications (Andrews-Speed & Hove 2023). The way China handles the transfer of vital minerals and electric car technologies could lead to the weaponisation of trade. There is 'the possibility of using trade as a means of political pressure...in the pursuit of power' (Hirschman 1945). China had also requested that automakers refrain from exporting their electric vehicle technology to India (Lew 2024). Meanwhile, India's demand for minerals and technology is expected to increase, leading to higher import prices and more vulnerability.

Consequently, this circumstance serves as a warning to India to take preventative measures, such as investing in the creation of alternative supply chains, while partnering with China wherever it is possible. Instead of depending on Chinese imports, India should encourage Chinese investments in India to integrate into China's supply chains (The Economic Survey 2023-24). However, the experiences of other countries and regions that have received substantial Chinese investments do not support the notion that increasing foreign direct investment (FDI) from China may lead to lower imports. For instance, imports from China increased by 70% to $432 billion for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) between 2017 and 2022, with more than 80% of these imports being Chinese intermediates (Wester 2023).

Furthermore, China's strict regulation of its enterprises' foreign investment and technology flows aims to maximise local value chains and position China as a major contributor to the world's technological production. Additionally, China's manufacturing trade surplus has increased since 2019, due to both growing industrial capacity and waning domestic demand (The Economic Survey 2023-24). Chinese companies are now venturing into new markets overseas as a result of the widening gap between domestic production and demand.

China's mercantilism influences its terms of engagement in an economy that is purportedly a free market (Fu-Lai Tony Yu 2017). Chinese predatory pricing, which sets prices below cost to eliminate competition and gain market control, is harming India's clean energy manufacturing sector. For instance, in reaction to India's anti-dumping investigation of Chinese enterprises, China has covertly prevented India from obtaining solar equipment (The Economic Survey 2023-24). This undercuts India's endeavours to increase domestic production through the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme. China's control over a number of product categories increases the risk of economic coercion since the Chinese government can limit access to necessary commodities for political purposes.

This is particularly apparent in the export of rare earth and critical minerals, which are crucial for the green transition efforts of various countries including India. Such dominance has also led to monopolistic behaviours, significantly restricting opportunities for new players to become manufacturing leaders. The Rhodium Group's recent research notes, 'the Chinese government can prompt companies to collaborate, merge, and consolidate, or to coordinate to increase market shares, inflate prices, limit product access where they have significant market power or prefer domestic firms in their supply and client networks' (Boullenois & Jordan 2024). China imports high-tech products from wealthy industrialised nations; it imports very few low-tech goods, where developing countries hold a comparative advantage- a trend largely produced by strategic policy measures that have escalated in recent years (The Economic Survey 2023- 24).

Thus, drawing on experience, it would be unrealistic to expect China to help build India's manufacturing capabilities. Nonetheless, India cannot isolate itself from China, the world's top manufacturer and exporter. India must carefully choose which sectors to open to Chinese FDI, considering its manufacturing capabilities, strategic interests, and national security. India is reacting with a range of measures, including anti-dumping and anti-subsidy fines and quality control directives. Moreover, India is exploring potential alliances with like-minded nations to mitigate the impact of subsidised imports from China (IBEF 2025).

Seeking collaborations with Western nations facing similar problems might be the solution. For instance, India has joined the Minerals Security Partnership and Pax Silica Initiative, the plurilateral projects to reduce dependency on China for essential minerals. Furthermore, strategies to increase trade, investment, and research & development in important minerals between Australia and India are the main emphasis of the two countries' Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on vital minerals. India's ability to become self-sufficient in vital minerals and provide fair access to these resources for a green energy transition will be strengthened through cooperation with the US, EU, and Australia (Vaid 2024).

India's multi-alignment policy aims to create alternative supply chains for vital resources and technology. This approach may also be crucial for settling geostrategic problems.

3. Geostrategic Issues

Regarding China's hegemonic aspirations in Asia and the need for a multipolar region, India maintains strong ties and mutual understanding with the US, Europe, Japan, and Australia. China supports a multipolar world to lessen the hegemony of the United States. But in its desire to become a regional superpower, it overlooks the goal of a multipolar Asia (Wu2023). In China, the consensus is that India has joined the QUAD to encircle and besiege China with support from the West (Chunshan 2023). The Chinese believe that India can keep the balance between the world's major countries, such as the United States, Japan, Russia, and the Global South, even though they generally dislike India's close ties with the United States (Saaliq and Pathi 2023).

China argues that there is enough room on Earth for both China and the United States to grow separately and prosper together (Feng 2024). Given that it might threaten China's hegemony in the region, China counters India's rise. Consequently, China's paradoxical stance is evident in its acknowledgement of equal opportunity for both the US and China to develop independently and collectively, while simultaneously denying such equality to India in Asia, and particularly in South Asia. Recognising that global hegemony is unattainable, China may choose to maintain its status as a regional hegemon. Meanwhile, the camaraderie between China and Pakistan allows China to benefit from disputes between India and Pakistan.

China's assertive posture in Asia, its opposition to India's rise as a regional power (Menon 2024: 8), and its mercantilist trade policies all indicate its aspirations for unipolarity and imperialistic inclinations in the region. Moreover, China's trade and debt diplomacy have powered its imperial design (Mishra & Rishi 2024). China's neo-mercantilist imperialism involves fostering nationalism, patriotism, and technological advancements; hoarding gold and foreign reserves; attempting to achieve a favourable balance of payments through trade protections such as export subsidies, tariffs, and exchange rate manipulation; and strategically expanding into South Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Fu-Lai Tony Yu 2017). It unleashes the cycle of debt, austerity, poverty, and governmental negligence rooted in China's financial imperialism under the pretext of development or debt relief (Maci 2025).

For instance, China's influence is expanding quickly by taking advantage of a gap in the massive unmet demand for infrastructure among developing nations, which are primarily autocratic (Carney

2024). Unlike private companies, China's party-state and electoral autocrats both place more importance on political goals than on maximising profits. Because of this convergence of interests, it is anticipated that the majority of Chinese infrastructure spending would occur under elective autocracies (Carney 2024). By providing loans to autocracies, China can negotiate its own terms and conditions without concern for democratic repercussions.

The World Bank's International Debt Report 2023 highlights a marked increase in the indebtedness of South Asian, African, and South American countries to China since the 2010s. Specifically, in South Asia, the debt owed to China has surged almost sevenfold over 11 years, rising from $6.4 billion in 2012 to $42.9 billion in 2022, with Pakistan bearing two-thirds of this debt (World Bank 2023). Furthermore, the discussion on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is crucial to understanding China's imperial strategy. The Chinese method of not collaborating with local firms will not aid in generating new employment opportunities in Pakistan. Given that Chinese companies are exempt from taxes, they import everything, including labour, from China, thus eliminating dependence on Pakistani enterprises to meet their needs (Khaliq 2023). The concern is that it effectively makes Pakistan a vassal state of China. Because of this, CPEC seems to be a neo-colonial project that would grant China authority over Pakistan in a manner akin to the British East India Company's colonisation of the Indian Subcontinent (Ahmad 2023).

There are hazards associated with this strategy for the participating nations. For instance, in 2017, Sri Lanka gave China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited a 70% lease on the Hambantota Port for 99 years for $1.12 billion. This deal was not a debt-equity swap or cancellation; rather, it was distinct from the initial financing for the port's development. The Hambantota Port has thus been seen as a representation of China's sovereign overreach in Sri Lanka (Stacey 2017). Moreover, except for Antarctica, every continent has at least one port where China is present. By the end of July 2024, 14 port projects had been cancelled or suspended, leaving 115 of the 129 projects active. Environmental concerns, deteriorating political ties, financial difficulties, and issues with both internal and international security are some of the reasons given for these cancellations or suspensions (Liu 2024).

To maintain or strengthen its economic and political clout with host nation governments, China extends or renegotiates loans rather than forgives debt for the building of ports and other infrastructure, unlike organisations like the World Bank and IMF, which are more likely to forgive debt, particularly for impoverished and heavily indebted nations. Additionally, the World Bank and the International Development Association (IDA) offer resources on relatively favourable terms. This includes zero-interest rates, extended grace periods, and long-term maturities, which make the repayment of these credits more manageable for borrowers (World Bank 2020). Compared to World Bank funding, Chinese lending has less favourable terms, such as higher interest rates, shorter maturities and grace periods (Morris et. al. 2020). Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly altered the global infrastructure finance and investment scene. It encourages a "China-centric" approach to development, usually disregarding human rights, transparency, and market-based principles (Ramo 2004).

In tandem with its allies, India has responded to China's growing influence methodically. India has maintained strong trade relations with China while avoiding official military alliances targeted at the country. Demonstrating this balancing, India has never been a treaty ally with any nation and does not envision such a strategic framework (Brunnstrom 2024). Instead, India has adopted a multi-alignment policy, spurred by global rebalancing and accelerated by globalisation. Building relationships with developing markets in Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia is the main goal of India's trade partnership diversification plan. In addition, it seeks to strengthen ties with established allies, including the US, EU, and ASEAN.

This strategy will improve resilience against geopolitical disturbances and lessen reliance on a small number of locations (IBEF 2025). In keeping with its goals in a multipolar Asia and the world, it allows India to build solid allies based on common interests and values without making overt alliances. India's quest for strategic autonomy through a multi-alignment strategy seems a reasonable response to the current major power politics brought about by China's geostrategic rise. The tactical transition from non-alignment to strategic autonomy and multi-alignment reflects this strategy.

India's strategy of using a multialignment approach and maintaining strategic autonomy is crucial to managing its territorial dispute with China without bringing extra-regional forces into a bilateral dispute, given the geopolitical tensions in Asia. The multialignment strategy exerts psychological and geopolitical pressure over its territorial disputes with China. This article addresses the Eastern Ladakh border dispute to demonstrate India's comprehensive strategy for resolving the territorial conflict with China.

4. Territorial Disputes

China and India are notable for having populations exceeding a billion people, for rising in the global hierarchy, and for sharing a border. This poses a difficult problem. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, said in 1962, "It is a little naïve to think that the trouble with China was essentially due to a dispute over some territories," referring to the border conflict with China. It was for more profound reasons. A huge border separates two of Asia's biggest nations from one another. They were very different. The test was to see if any one of them would have a more dominant position than the others on the border and in Asia (cited in Alamgir 2009, 58-59). India views the border dispute as a critical problem, emphasising the need to preserve peace and tranquillity based on respect, trust, and sensitivity (PM India 2024).

China, on the other hand, views border peace as desirable but not essential, placing greater importance on the larger facets of its relationship with India. China and India should never let the boundary question define their bilateral relations or let particular disagreements influence how they see their bilateral relationships as a whole (Wang 2025). China feels that the bilateral ties go beyond the boundary problems, while India is demanding a quick settlement to the long-running border conflicts. The current instability in Eastern Ladakh serves as the best example of India's strategic approach to these concerns.

By beginning the pullout of soldiers in two of the seven places of tension, especially in the Demchokand Depsang Plains regions, India and China are taking the first steps toward improving their bilateral ties. Restoring mutual patrolling rights is the aim of this agreement. These areas were plagued by what are known as legacy difficulties before the 2020 Chinese assaults. Chinese troops had earlier taken control of the Charding Nullah in Demchok, and the PLA had barred Indians from accessing patrolling posts 10 to 13 in the Depsang Plains. China had been reluctant to talk about these places until recently, preferring to concentrate on disengagement at other locations, such as Galwan Valley and Hot Springs, which makes this deal noteworthy (Dutta and Tiwary2024).

Figure 1: India-China Conflict Zone

Source: NDTV Image

The impediment to patrolling has been a central point of negotiation for the last two years. In the regions of Depsang and Demchok, an agreement has been reached to restore patrolling to its previous status before the interruptions. Furthermore, the behaviour of the troops in the event of a face-off is codified in Article 8 of the 2013 border defence agreement. The following are some of the regulations in place: if both sides' border defence forces come into contact in areas where there is no mutual understanding of the line of actual control, they must exercise the highest level of self-control, refrain from provocative actions, refrain from using force or threatening to use force against the other side, treat one another with courtesy, and avoid an exchange of fire or armed conflict (MEA 2013).

However, the entire three-step process of disengagement, de-escalation, and de-induction of troops at the border is still pending completion to re-establish normal relations. Disengagement involves both parties withdrawing from confrontation, whereas de-escalation refers to forces retreating to positions away from the contested area. When both parties remove their troops and equipment from the area permanently, this is known as de-induction. Whether this will occur in parallel or sequentially is yet to be determined. Meanwhile, to avoid and lessen a lack of trust and the abrupt acquisition of strategic advantage, whether overt or covert, a parallel strategy calls for simultaneous improvements in disengagement, de-escalation, and de-induction.

The simultaneous rise of China and India in contemporary geopolitics presents a unique conundrum. India acknowledges that using deadly force is rarely a deciding factor and that it can instead prolong and intensify conflicts in ways that undermine reason and the "basic human decency" that one seeks to uphold (Bharadwaj and Bhatt 2024). In line with Martin Luther King Jr., India appears to believe that the current choice is between nonviolence and nonexistence rather than between violence and nonviolence. Not only are the futures of China and India at risk, but also those of their neighbours and regional stability, which are impacted by the great power competition in the area, as demonstrated by the current conflicts in Eurasia and West Asia. However, a major source of friction has emerged due to China's revisionist claims over both land and maritime territories.

5. India's Opportunities in Multi-alignment to Manage China's Challenge

To protect its interests and engage the world's major powers to defend a rules-based order and thwart China's revisionist strategies, India is actively engaging with China. India understands the need to oppose and challenge China while still competing, working together, and coexisting. This acknowledgement suggests that a direct conflict between these two Asian countries is not feasible, even in the face of antagonism. Furthermore, it is impossible to categorise the two countries' bilateral relationship as friendly or overtly adversarial. It would not be beneficial for India to pursue animosity or separation from China.

China is a rival and a source of inspiration for India. India is exploring opportunities with China without escalating bilateral disputes on a global scale. This strategy advises using resources and timing wisely to outmanoeuvre adversaries without engaging in direct combat. Beyond only taking action or not taking action, it promotes covert and reasonable measures to ensure victory.

Furthermore, material contrasts with China hinder any internal balancing on India's own, and its strategic autonomy restricts its capacity to form close treaty partnerships with any state. But in a world where rival alliances have split the world apart, economic efficiency is redefined. Instead of concentrating only on the factor cost of production, it takes into consideration the social cost of production at home as well as the requirement for diplomatic flexibility on the global scene (Mishra & Rishi 2025). In this situation, protecting economic interests abroad enhances tangible advantages at home. Countries are willing to forgo economic efficiency in favour of domestic employment, privacy protection, and national security.

Additionally, the material differences between China and India might be offset by the multi-alignment strategy. For instance, India and the US signed a Memorandum of Understanding to "Expand and Diversify Critical Mineral Supply Chains" under the Supply Chain track. The agreement will leverage complementary strengths and facilitate mutually beneficial development of

Indian and US critical minerals exploration, extraction, processing, recycling, and related activities (PIB 2024, October 4). India has also joined the US-led Minerals Security Finance Network, which also comprises 14 other countries and the European Union, to ensure a steady supply of essential minerals, such as silicon, graphite, copper, and lithium. The diversification strategy is consistent with the availability of alternative sources, which enhances cost competitiveness and price sensitivity in trade exchanges. Having competing blocs also serves as a deterrent to hostility between them. Therefore, a multialignment strategy helps India maximise economic interests and minimise geopolitical issues.

6. Conclusion

The paradox of deep economic interdependence coexisting with geopolitical rivalry characterises India-China ties, and that strategic autonomy through multi-alignment and defensive diplomacy is India's best course of action. India's main focus is on managing its rivalry with China to bring it to its growth agenda because China's developing powers are inherently prone to competition, cooperation, coexistence, confrontation, and challenge. Therefore, in today's dynamic and conflict-ridden global system, China needs more diplomatic flexibility than confrontation. Furthermore, defensive diplomacy is better adapted to controlling China in a volatile global order under a multi-alignment approach in an interdependent and conflict-ridden world. In such a world, India's desire for defensive diplomacy and strategic autonomy through multi-alignment is a tactic to hide its strength and bide its time.

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