

India's Engagement with China under the Leadership of Prime Minister Modi

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Abstract:

In 2020 India celebrated 70 years of diplomatic relations with China. India's engagement with China under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is proactive rather than defensive in nature. While Modi has shown himself willing to claim India's interests within the region with regard to China, his initial term showed a seamless interest in consolidating New Delhi's regional presence in a way favorable to India. Specifically, India increased its diplomatic engagement with diplomatic partners within the Indo-Pacific region, proceeding from the premise of reconciliation with a rising China. The bilateral relations between India-China have expanded in the past decade. The article analyzes the effects of hometown diplomacy, the role of informal ties as well as the strategy of issue-based diplomacy of Modi. It also singles out the key challenges of bilateral ties, to wit: issue of Masood Azhar, India's application to Nuclear Supplier Group, the 14th Dalai Lama's separation, South Tibet territorial dispute and Border standoff. The authors also reveals two strategies of Modi's government – engaging and competing.

Keywords:

BJP, informal summit, bilateral relations and closer developmental partnership, India, China

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Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured a massive victory and came to power in 2014. Some observers in China expected that the Prime Minister would “inject new vitality” into the relationship with China, given that Modi had previously been the Gujarat’s Chief Minister where he advocated closer economic cooperation with China. There were hopes that Narendra Modi would follow the pattern of Deng Xiaoping, focusing on economic development, internal strengthening and infrastructure development. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi publicly acknowledged that Sino-Indian relationships were at “a new starting point”. Delhi reciprocated the optimism, with the Indian national security advisor speaking of the possibility of the relationship reaching a new height (Jain, 2014). Modi stated that the whole world was one family, harmoniously with the Chinese philosophy of universal peace and love. The ancient oriental wisdom is still highly relevant in today’s world. China and India have enough foresight and ability to join hands and form a “Dragon-Elephant Tango”, to guarantee a brilliant future in the coming 70 years and write a new chapter in building a global community (Eric, 2015).

The People’s Republic of China and India established diplomatic relations on April 1, 1950, with India being the first non-socialist state to build relations with China. After that Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai made a state visit to India in 1954 where China and India made a Joint Statement and proposed the Panchsheel treaty. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru also made a state visit to China the same year. He was the first head of government of a democratic state to make an official state visit to China.

China and India celebrated the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations on April 1, 2020. Looking around the world, China and India, as the only two emergent states with a population of more than 1 billion, shoulder the historical mission of national transformation, play a key role in the process of the collective upsurge of emerging countries, and inject strong momentum into profound international changes.

China-India relations have endured many difficulties. The idea of “Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai” resonated throughout the two countries. In 2013, Chinese President Xi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi started “hometown di-

plomacy” and held informal summits in Wuhan and Chennai, both countries carried out strategic communication on overarching, long-term, and strategic issues of international and regional importance, and agreed to strengthen closer partnership development between India and China.

China-India relations stand at a new starting point and usher in new opportunities (Jha, 2017). Analyzing the history of civilizations we might single out the key principles of international life inherited from ancient Asian civilizations – they are leading, transmitting, shaping, and integrating. They are still of great importance for modern leaders. “Leading” means to reach consensus and develop bilateral relations under the guidance of our national leaders. “Transmitting” means international consensus reached at every stage of negotiations which are result-oriented. “Shaping” is to go beyond the mode of managing disagreements, shape stable bilateral relations and accumulate optimistic momentum. “Integrating” is strengthening connections and collaboration and achieving co-development.

Hometown Diplomacy. “China-India Friendly Exchange Year” was celebrated in 2014. In September, President Xi Jinping paid a state visit to India and visited Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Modi where the two leaders made the Joint Statement on Building a Closer Developmental Partnership.

Modi visited China in 2015, and went to Xi'an, the hometown of President Xi Jinping. That year, President Xi and Premier Li met with Modi on the sidelines of the 7th BRICS Summit in Ufa and Leader's Summits in East Asia Cooperation in Malaysia. They decided to open the Nathu La Pass to certified pilgrims to Xizang. The same year, to make diplomatic ties stronger, India celebrated the India Tourism Year in China. The Prime Minister of India made a state visit to China to attend the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, and met with President Xi. President Xi Jinping visited India to participate in the 8th BRICS Summit in Goa and met with Prime Minister Modi. In 2017, President Xi Jinping met with Prime Minister Modi at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Astana. Modi also visited China to join the 9th BRICS Summit in Xiamen and met with President Xi Jinping. Both leaders made an attempt to re-build the relations and to cement them through this hometown diplomacy through personal ties between them.

Informal Meetings. President Xi Jinping held an informal meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Wuhan on 27-28 April, 2018. They had in-depth discussions and reached a broad consensus on the overarching, long-term, and strategic issues of international and bilateral importance and their respective visions for national progress as well as regional and global politics. This informal meeting was momentous in the history of bilateral ties. The same year, Prime Minister Modi had a state visit to China for attending the SCO Summit in Qingdao and had a meeting with President Xi³.

In 2019, President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi held the second informal meeting in Chennai, restated the consensus of Wuhan, and agreed to shape a closer partnership for growth, and enhance in-depth strategic declaration, promote beneficial cooperation in various grounds, and mutual scholarship between the two civilizations. Besides marking 70 years of diplomatic ties, the year 2020 was also celebrated as the China-India Year of Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges. The two states decided to hold celebratory activities to establish the historical connection between the ancient civilizations, deepen people-to-people and official exchanges between the two countries, including their legislatures, businesses, academia, cultural and youth organizations as well as the defense forces.

At the same time India looked doubtfully at what it saw as a unilateral attempt to change the status quo at the disputed boundary line in September 2014 (even as Modi was rolling out the red carpet for Xi in his home state), and at China's extending relationship with Pakistan through the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC). China, for its part, was dissatisfied with the U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region and the cooperation with Japan as a regular participant in the annual U.S.-India maritime exercise. What followed were two years of strain in the Sino-Indian relationship, with various dialogues being put on hold, and the tone and temperature of the relationship heating up. It culminated in the Doklam crisis during which the two countries' militaries faced off in the Bhutan-China-India tri-border area⁴.

³ Ministry of External Affairs, India. URL: <http://www.mea.gov.in> (accessed: 01.06.2022)

⁴ Ibid.

Through the informal meetings India engaged with China both strategically and diplomatically bilaterally as well within multilateral forums such as the SCO. During the informal meetings both leaders' exchange their views on both countries emerging as the two largest economies of the world, and expressed their strategic visions on how to maintain stable, peaceful and balanced relations among the two countries.

Engaging. The India-China border conflict in the year of 1962 was a serious setback to bilateral relations. In 1993, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited China and signed the Treaty on "Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control" (LAC) Areas. His visit then reflected the growing concern about security. There are several reasons why India is still seeking to engage with China. As mentioned before, keeping bilateral relationship stable is important for domestic reasons. A peaceful periphery would allow India to focus on its socio-economic objectives, ensure growth, job creation, and social service provision. India would not have to divert expenditure from development to defense, and could buy time to build up Indian military capabilities.

Moreover, Narendra Modi still hopes that India's economy can benefit from the China's one. He considers Chinese strengths particularly in the infrastructure and manufacturing sectors to be beneficial for India. From this perspective, Chinese companies can bring much-needed investment, which has been quite limited till recently. The Chinese market is also potentially attractive for Indian goods and services, particularly for certain agricultural products, pharmaceuticals, and information technology-related services.

What is more, Delhi believes that engagement could potentially incentivize Beijing to respect India's interests. As a result of China's membership in various international institutions and its relationships with India's neighbors, Delhi is well aware that China has the ability to affect India's interests and options – negatively or positively. For instance, in the past Delhi hoped that a positive relationship with China might persuade it to use its influence with Islamabad to shape Pakistan's behavior in a way that might benefit India.

Competing. Despite increasing cooperation, none of India's fundamental disagreements with China has been resolved, and some Indian concerns have certainly grown. These differences include boundary disputes, involving three

major incidents since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 (before Doklam, there was an incident in April 2013 and then again in September 2014). Beijing did not take up Modi's suggestion of resuming the process to clarify the Line of Actual Control that divides the two countries. Delhi has dismissed the Chinese idea of a code of conduct in part due to the concern that it would limit India's infrastructure development near the boundary areas, as China has already done.

Prime Minister Modi ignored Beijing's quiet demarches to let sleeping dogs lie, and visited Arunachal Pradesh to celebrate the 19th anniversary of its formation on 20 February. This provoked a powerful response from China, whose Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin summoned Ambassador Ashok Kantha to express his dissatisfaction and opposition to Narendra Modi's visit. The entire text of his protest was released by the Chinese foreign office and carried in full by Xinhua the next day. China, he said, has never recognized the Arunachal Pradesh unilaterally set up by the Indian side; it is a universally recognized and inevitable fact that significant disputes do exist on the eastern section of the China-India border⁵.

In spite of all these distressing signals, China pulled out all the stops to welcome Narendra Modi in June 2015. Xi Jinping took an entire day out of his calendar to spend it with him in Xi'an. The joint statement issued after the visit began by recognizing "the simultaneous re-emergence of India and China as two major powers in the region". Beijing had never agreed to this before, and it was envisioned to keep the door open for serious further engagement on global issues⁶.

The issue of Tibet, the presence of the Dalai Lama, and Tibetan refugees in India continue to be a source of concern and distrust⁷. The two states have different approaches of how the succession for the 14th Dalai Lama, now 84 years old, should play out. A few months ago, a Chinese official publicly avowed to

⁵ Xinhua. (2015). China Calls in Indian Ambassador to Voice Unhappiness on Modi's Visit to Disputed Territory. 21 February 2015. URL: <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-02/21/c> (accessed: 01.06.2022)

⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, India. URL: <http://www.mea.gov.in> (accessed: 01.06.2022); Mallet, Victor & Hornby, Lucy. (2015). India and China Sign \$22bn in Deals during Modi Visit, Financial Times. 17 May 2015. URL: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/88de2eea-fc60-11e4-ae31> (accessed: 01.06.2022)

⁷ Wei (2014). Deepening Mutual Trust. *The Hindu*, 6 January 2014. URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper> (accessed: 01.06.2022)

visiting Indian journalists that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation would require Beijing's consensus, and no role for other countries (PTI, May 2019). There are also differences about sharing the waters of the Brahmaputra River, which flows from China into India and then to Bangladesh. While China and India have a mechanism in place to manage these differences, Indian concerns about Chinese dam construction, potential river diversion, and erosion of its usage rights remain. Moreover, Beijing's suspension of hydrological data-sharing during the Doklam crisis did little to reassure Delhi that China would not use this leverage to try to influence Indian behavior in future.

Modi's issue-based diplomacy. Over the years, issue-based diplomacy has become more apparent in Narendra Modi's engagement with China. India has regularly raised bilateral, regional, and global issues in its relations with China, and has been trying to find out China's real attitude towards itself. To achieve foreign diplomatic dividends, India adopts a diplomatic strategy that it is uncertain whether China is keen to establish and maintain equal major power relations. India is assured about the forthcoming development of its strength against China. Modi's issue-specific diplomacy tends to be more aggressive and challenges the existing consensus between India and China. The Government of India has deconstructed China-India relations into many specific issues and regularly raises its demands regarding them with China. India considers these matters as a criterion to judge the nature and direction of China-India bilateral relations (Bajpai, Jing & Mahbubani, 2015). These responses are a means to measure China's respect for India and the significance assigned to China-India relations. Differing from conventions of Chinese diplomacy, India's strategy does not emphasize the overall condition of bilateral relations i.e., strategic partnership. India's foreign policy with China places more stress on the specific problems that exist between the two countries. Since 2016, it has become increasingly clear that the Indian government tries to measure the relations with China by defining the nature of the relationship and seeking to achieve precise interests, by raising issues based on diplomacy with China (Hailin, 2018).

Issue of Masood Azhar. Masood Azhar is a militant belonging to the Pakistani-based banned militant organization Jaish-e-Mohammad. India accused him of planning the Pathankot airbase shooting in January 2016. The Indian government requested the Pakistani government to take measures against

Masood Azhar. It also asked the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to include Azhar in the sanctions list of UNSC Resolution No. 1267. Insofar as China is a permanent member of the UNSC, it steered several rounds of shelving the listing of Masood Azhar. In 2017, some Western countries, including the US, sought to include Masood Azhar on the sanctions list, but the listing was again shelved by Beijing. India expressed strong dissatisfaction with China's repeated canceling of the listing, accusing it of approving double standards on the anti-terrorism issue. India believes that this is a manifestation of the fact that China's foreign policy regarding South Asia is not balanced and neutral. The Indian Ambassador to China, Vijay Gokhale, while talking to Chinese scholars, clearly stressed that India considers the issue of Masood Azhar as a key indicator to measure both countries' relations.

Issue of India's application to Nuclear Supplier Group. While Masood Azhar's case is still at an impasse, a diplomatic dispute broke out between China and India over India's status as a nuclear supplier state. With the support of the United States in June 2016, India sought to join the NSG as a member. In the annual meeting of the NSG, which was held in Seoul, South Korea, China did not support India's application to the Nuclear Supplier Group, citing the following reasons. Firstly, so far, the group's agenda has never included any specific subject about "the joining of a non-Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory country," and this annual meeting did not embrace parallel subjects either. Secondly, the group has clear requirements for accepting new members, which should fulfill criteria, including technical, political, and legal aspects. One of the most important criteria involves the NPT, specifically, "the applicant country must have signed the NPT". Besides the reasons China listed, there might be third-party factors involved. India announced in a high-profile way before the annual meeting that it had gained support from the United States, Russia, and many countries for its equivalent membership qualification for the Nuclear Supplier Group. India also tried to apply diplomatic pressure on the Chinese officially, driving them to make conciliation in the face of the majority opinion of the international community.

Issue of the 14th Dalai Lama's separation and South Tibet territorial dispute. The 14th Dalai Lama problem and South Tibet territorial dispute are those “diplomatic issues” that the Indian government often takes on when there are setbacks in India-China relations⁸. In 2016, New Delhi broke the resolution that was maintained by the two countries for many years. India invited the US Ambassador to India to visit South Tibet and meet the 14th Dalai Lama. In April 2017, India offered the Dalai Lama to visit South Tibet. Besides, it is not rare for India to play the Tibet card and the Dalai Lama in dealing with issues involving China. Nevertheless, since Modi came to power, he has behaved more provocatively on this issue, demonstrating that he has stronger assurance and a clearer stand on the matter.

Border Standoff. Indian forces and Chinese troops engaged in a skirmish in the Galwan Region on June 15, 2020, that resulted in 20 deaths of Indian soldiers and an unspecified number of Chinese troops⁹. It was part of a non-resolved border standoff along the Galwan River, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (Gokhale, 2021).

Long before the present border standoff emerged, Sino-Indian relations had been gradually deteriorating due to lack of trust. The most fundamental misperception between the two states is the inability to understand each other's international stance. The border standoff at Doklam in 2017 was followed by increasing Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean. These actions persuaded India that, despite its efforts, China was not sensitive to its interests. Furthermore, in 2018, misperception and mistrust became prevalent in Sino-Indian ties. Both countries regarded the other as being responsible for the standoff, and previously national security adviser Shivshankar Menon (2020) stated that what happened in Ladakh marked a fundamental and substantial shift in China's international behavior, pushing the Indian government to step up efforts to take a tough stance on China. China's latest acts on the Line of Actual Control

⁸ Chellaney, Brahma. (2020). A Tipping Point in the Himalayas. *Hindustan Times*, June 10, 2020. URL: <https://www.hindustan-times.com/columns> (accessed: 01.06.2022)

⁹ Aparna Banerjee, Aparna. (2020). India-China Border Clash: 20 Indian Soldiers Killed, Confirms Army. *Livemint*, June 16, 2020. URL: <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-china-border-clash-at-least-20-indiansoldiers-killed-confirms-army-11592325205852.html> (accessed: 01.06.2022)

in eastern Ladakh – from the Indian perception – have destroyed the border management system that both sides built up in 1993 and seriously damaged India-China relations (Menon, 2020).

Both states have mistrust regarding the intentions and behavior of each other (Shisheng & Jue, 2020). India feels dissatisfied as China does not want to give India the suitable status with regional and global influence due to its own influence at the global arena. However, China adopts a benevolent attitude towards India as it does not consider India as a major threat to China. India is looking for a closer relationship with the US in political field. China and India have different opinions and different perceptions of each other's advance strategies. China claims that the China-India relationship is a non-zero-sum game between the powerful nation of China and the less powerful nation of India, whereas India sees it a zero-sum game between two equally powerful nations (Hailin, 2020).

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There is no doubt that engagement between India and China relations has grown considerably. India needs to adopt the proper approach to deal with the challenges that are coming from China. Although China has become increasingly self-confident at regional and international level, India has not shown any discontent so far. India and China must resolve real border issues to give relations a boost, which will ultimately forge greater cooperation in future. India should take proactive measures against China across its border areas. With a neo-realist outlook on international relations, the expansion of their interests becomes the key factor that will guide further India-China ties. The two states stand at a crossroads after 70 years of bilateral relations. Partnership seems to be unlikely at the present time, while armed confrontation would be a destructive move as it would weaken both nations to a lesser or greater degree. Prime Minister Modi and Xi Jinping enjoy a certain measure of mutual respect, and they should discuss misunderstandings of identity and possible ways of reconciling their own dreams.

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Международные отношения / исследовательская статья

Индийско-китайские отношения во внешней политике Нарендры Моди

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Аннотация: В 2020 году Индия и Китай праздновали 70-летие установления дипломатических отношений. Взаимодействие Индии с Китаем в период премьерства Нарендры Моди носит во многом упреждающий, а не оборонительный характер. Моди явно продемонстрировал готовность отстаивать интересы Индии в регионе в отношениях с Китаем, с самого начала переориентировав внешнюю политику на консолидацию Индии в качестве регионального лидера и глобального игрока. Индия расширила сотрудничество с партнерами в Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе, вместе с тем сохраняя курс на стабильные связи с Китаем. В статье анализируется роль «дипломатии родного города», неформальных связей, а также стратегии «проблемоориентированной дипломатии» Моди. Авторы выделяют ключевые проблемы современных двусторонних отношений, среди которых проблема Масуда Азхара, заявка Индии на присоединении к Группе ядерных поставщиков, территориальный спор в Южном Тибете и пограничные столкновения. Авторы также раскрывают две стратегии правительства Моди – вовлечение и конкуренцию.

Ключевые слова: Бхаратия джаната парти, неформальный саммит, двусторонние отношения, Индия, Китай

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