

India-China Ties: Undefined Border Will Remain Driving Factor In Relationship

In reality not much has changed, the two sides lack a clear understanding of each other and misperception, **nationalism and overall strategic mistrust have become the driving force. Even after much talk of building mutual understanding, in reality the gap continues not only among the governments but also among the people.** In November 2025 Prema Wangjom Thongdok, a UK-based Indian woman from Arunachal Pradesh was harassed at Shanghai airport on her way to Japan. As per reports, Chinese officials claimed that, “Arunachal is not a part of India” and that she “should apply for a Chinese passport” as she was Chinese and not Indian.

By Dr Gunjan Singh Jan 04, 2026



Representational Photo

The year 2025 marked the 75th anniversary of the establishment of India-China diplomatic relations. However, 2025 holds another important position in this relationship as the two sides resumed bilateral channels after the 2020 violent Galwan clashes which put a complete freeze to the relationship. One can say it was a restart of the bilateral relationship. The groundwork of this was put in place in October 2024 when the two sides reached a patrolling agreement in Depsang and Demchok areas of Ladakh, an important step towards disengagement.

Incremental Normalization

Since then, there has been a flurry of developments which paint an image of growing normalization. One of the most pertinent developments was the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Beijing to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s (SCO) summit. His first in seven years and he also met Xi Jinping on the sidelines. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited India in August 2025 and stated that the two sides need to cooperate and focus on people-to-people contacts. The primary motto of Beijing’s renewed push for normalization of relationships is rooted in this. The two sides have also underscored the necessity to cooperate in the increasingly uncertain geopolitical scenario. However, the differences in their approach are obvious from statements made during the SCO sidelines. In Modi’s words, “We are committed to progressing our relations based on mutual respect, trust and sensitivities” while Xi asserted that they should, “not let the border issue define the overall China-India relationship”.

China has continued to harp on the necessity of people to people contact to be an important component of normalization. As early as in April 2025 China had started issuing visas for Indian travellers. As expected, New Delhi also followed suit and started issuing visas to Chinese tourists. In July 2025 the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra was restarted after being halted due to the Covid19 pandemic and the Galwan clashes, after a gap of five years. To further boost contact, direct flights were restarted in October 2025. India’s IndiGo airlines started flights between Kolkata and Guangzhou.

Structural Differences

However, notwithstanding the normalization push, not much has changed fundamentally in India-China relations. The relations are still shrouded in mistrust and lack of understanding. While New Delhi has continued to assert for a talk and resolution of the border, the central challenge in bilateral relations, Beijing has continued to push for increased economic integration. These appear similar to the Chinese approach after 1988, where the border was put on back burner and other channels of building trust and cooperation were strengthened. The move did help in economic growth, as per financial year 2025 the bilateral trade stands at around US\$ 128 billion, though in Beijing's favour. The bilateral trade deficit has only increased and for the year 2024-25 stood at US\$99 billion. Moreover, increased economic cooperation will only lead to higher deficits and more trade is also unlikely to restore strategic mistrust.

In reality not much has changed, the two sides lack a clear understanding of each other and misperception, nationalism and overall strategic mistrust have become the driving force. Even after much talk of building mutual understanding, in reality the gap continues not only among the governments but also among the people. In November 2025 Prema Wangjom Thongdok, a UK-based Indian woman from Arunachal Pradesh was harassed at Shanghai airport on her way to Japan. As per reports, Chinese officials claimed that, "Arunachal is not a part of India" and that she "should apply for a Chinese passport" as she was Chinese and not Indian. The Indian External Affairs Ministry (MEA) responded by saying that such incidents were, "most unhelpful in building mutual trust and understanding".

One cannot ignore the role of the United States in this relationship. Even the recent Pentagon report expressed similar sentiment. As per it, "China is likely seeking to leverage the easing of tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India to stabilise strained bilateral ties and, more strategically, to prevent a further deepening of New Delhi's partnership with Washington". While rejecting the Pentagon report and accusing the United States of hurting India-China ties, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said, "The Pentagon's report distorts China's defence policy, sows discord between China and other countries, and aims at finding a pretext for the U.S. to maintain its military supremacy". At the same time, China believes India to be an important cog in the alleged American strategy to contain China.

Fraught With Uncertainty

China's announcement of building a mega dam on Yarlung Tsangpo, which flows through Tibet and enters India as Brahmaputra, has raised further unease in New Delhi. The Brahmaputra which is one of major water sources for India and the dam has the capacity to upset the ecological balance. China treats even cross-border water resources as its own and the history of Chinese non-commitment to sharing hydrological data further adds to New Delhi's concern. The fact that the region is the seat for seismic activity further challenges the human security in the region.

The India-China relationship is firmly rooted in history; border continues to be the driving factor in this bilateral relationship as after 24 rounds of special representative talks nothing conclusive has been achieved. In the last one year the two sides have even failed to deescalate the tensions. While the eye-to-eye situation has eased, on both sides thousands of troops remain close to the disputed points and ready to deploy. And in more recent news, a theatrical trailer of a Bollywood movie depicting the Galwan clashes has irked China.

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) continues to be disputed and fraught with uncertainty. The Galwan clashes undermined the Confidence Building Mechanisms (CBMs) which were put in place after years of talk and had managed to maintain peace on the LAC for almost forty years. This does provide a lesson for this bilateral relationship - the more cosmetic the 'improvements' they try and achieve the more entrenched the challenges become.

(The author is Associate Professor, O P Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India. Views Expressed are personal. She can be contacted at gunjan@jgu.edu.in. This series is curated by Prof Avinash Godbole and Prof Sreeradha Datta, JGU).