

Xi Jinping's Third-term: A Reassessment of the Future India-China Relations

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Abstract

The most significant result of the 20th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Five-Year Congress was the unusual third term for general secretary Xi Jinping. There have been apprehensions that there may be fewer constraints on the use of Chinese power as Xi has succeeded in overturning the single substantial constitutional provision that China developed in recent decades—limiting the term of its leader to 10 years. Along with fully controlling the party and the government, Xi has stacked the Central Military Commission with his picks. Additionally, the President has given important positions to three generals who served in the Western Theatre Command, which borders India. It emphasises the increased focus of China on India. It has been a hallmark of Xi's reign to stick to policies despite adverse consequences, whether related to the country's economy, Taiwan, the South China Sea, zero-Covid, or the Indian border. China's approach to the territorial conflict with India has been inconsistent. On one hand, it does not play a significant role in Xi Jinping's rhetoric; whenever he lists the essential territorial conflicts, the boundary with India is not one of them. Therefore, it is not a part of the national concern. However, this is also a region with clashes and casualties, as evident through the clashes, conflict in Galwan valley and Tawang sector. In this working paper, Xi's third term is examined and its impact on the future of India-China relations.

Introduction

After a week-long political gathering (16 Oct 2022 – 22 Oct 2022) that saw the elimination of significant adversaries and the strengthening of Xi Jinping's political position, the Chinese President has been affirmed for an unprecedented third term.

About 2,400 delegates gathered in Beijing for the 20th Party Congress, the most significant gathering in the five-year political cycle of the ruling Chinese Communist party to approve significant organisational changes and constitutional amendments. Xi took the initiative and announced his third term as the party's general secretary. Xi has continued to hold his position as chair of the military commission in charge of the People's Liberation Army. The long-speculated reappointment has marked Xi's successful and resounding consolidation of power in Beijing (Davidson et al., 2022).

A seven-member Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) headed by Xi, the CCP's inner circle of power, presided over by the party leader's loyalists, was also announced. The Standing Committee line-up is additional proof that Xi's hold on power is unaffected by the turbulent events of the past year, which included a severe economic slowdown, discontent with the zero-COVID policy, and China's growing estrangement from the West, which was made worse by support for Russia. In his brief remarks before adjourning the Congress, Xi stated that the revised Constitution lays out precise guidelines for maintaining and bolstering the party's general leadership (PTI News Agency, 2022).

Xi has continued staring at Galwan to send a stronger message to India. He promoted three generals who had previously served as Western Theatre Command (WTC) commanders near the Indian border after the CPC Congress. General He Weidong, one of them, previously received a "double promotion" and was appointed one of the two vice chairs of the Central Military Commission (CMC) (Moorthy, 2022).

How has China changed under Xi Jinping since 2012-till now?

The rise of Xi Jinping in China began in November 2012 when he succeeded Hu Jintao as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. In March 2013, he began his first five-year tenure as President of China. Under his government, China started reclaiming land in the South China Sea between 2013 and 2014 and built artificial islands in this region, some of which had runways and other facilities, expanding its territorial claims to contested areas in the important waterway. Following terrorist incidents in 2017, China's government under Xi Jinping began a brutal crackdown on the Uyghur and other largely Muslim ethnic communities in the Xinjiang region. International censure and charges of genocide were levelled in response to mass detentions and human rights violations.

As Xi Jinping began his second five-year tenure as party head in October 2017, the party enshrined his philosophy, known as "Xi Jinping Thought", in its Constitution. It elevated him symbolically to Mao's position as a leader whose doctrine is known by his name. China's two-term presidential term limit was removed in March 2018, indicating Xi's desire to hold onto power for at least ten years. Schuman (2022) has talked about the hard work put in by the propaganda machinery of Xi Jinping. It has devalued Deng Xiaoping, the leader who favoured a more cooperative form of governance. It is obvious that Xi has been preparing the stage for a return to one-man rule over China's political system.

During Xi Jinping's second term in office, China's adversaries became the subject of tougher messaging. In July 2018, the United States under President Donald Trump imposed tariffs on Chinese imports, sparking a trade war, with China responding similarly.

Over time, Hong Kong also came to bear the brunt of this tough messaging. It was immobilised between June and November 2019 by large-scale protests calling for democracy. Midway through 2020, the Xi administration responded by enforcing a national security law that stifled opposition in the metropolis.

In the first month of 2020, a new virus started what came to be known as the COVID-19 pandemic, and China quarantined Wuhan. A crackdown on China's burgeoning internet firms began when officials announced an anti-monopoly inquiry into e-commerce behemoth Alibaba in December 2020 (Beijing (AP), 2022).

Due to developer Evergrande Group's (China's 2nd largest real estate company) inability to comply with regulatory limits put in place in 2020 to rein in debt, China's heavily indebted real estate industry, a significant growth driver, experienced a protracted downturn by September 2021. (Charles & Bracken, 2022)

Following the August 2022 visit of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to the self-governing island that China claims as its territory, China conducted military drills surrounding Taiwan (Beijing (AP), 2022). In October 2022, Xi began his third five-year tenure as Communist Party chief, defying recent practice that confined leaders to two mandates.

How does India see China?

During the Cold War Era and the development of globalisation in the late 1970s, India and China began to reconcile. They were in the same stage of growth, which provided a foundation for their burgeoning friendship. Several confidence-building measures (CBMs) were agreed upon due to this parity, allowing India and China to normalise and broaden their cooperation in other sectors (Nair et al., 2021). They joined some multilateral organisations, including the BRICS bloc (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the East Asia Summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and others.

Chinese investment in India's electronics, solar, telecommand, and most significantly, digital sectors rose dramatically as trade boomed. Ghoshal (2013) points out that India felt a tinge of envy at China's rise, but it also recognised prospects for mutually beneficial collaboration.

However, over the past 20 years, India has grown more aware of the risks posed by the growing economic, military, and technical disparities between the two nations. The most important reason for that shift is due to changes in Chinese behaviour as a consequence of the Asian power shift (Moorthy, 2022). China has experienced less pressure to adhere to the CBMs due to its increasing regional power. It has been flexing its muscles in the disputed Indian and Chinese border regions, leading to protracted standoffs.

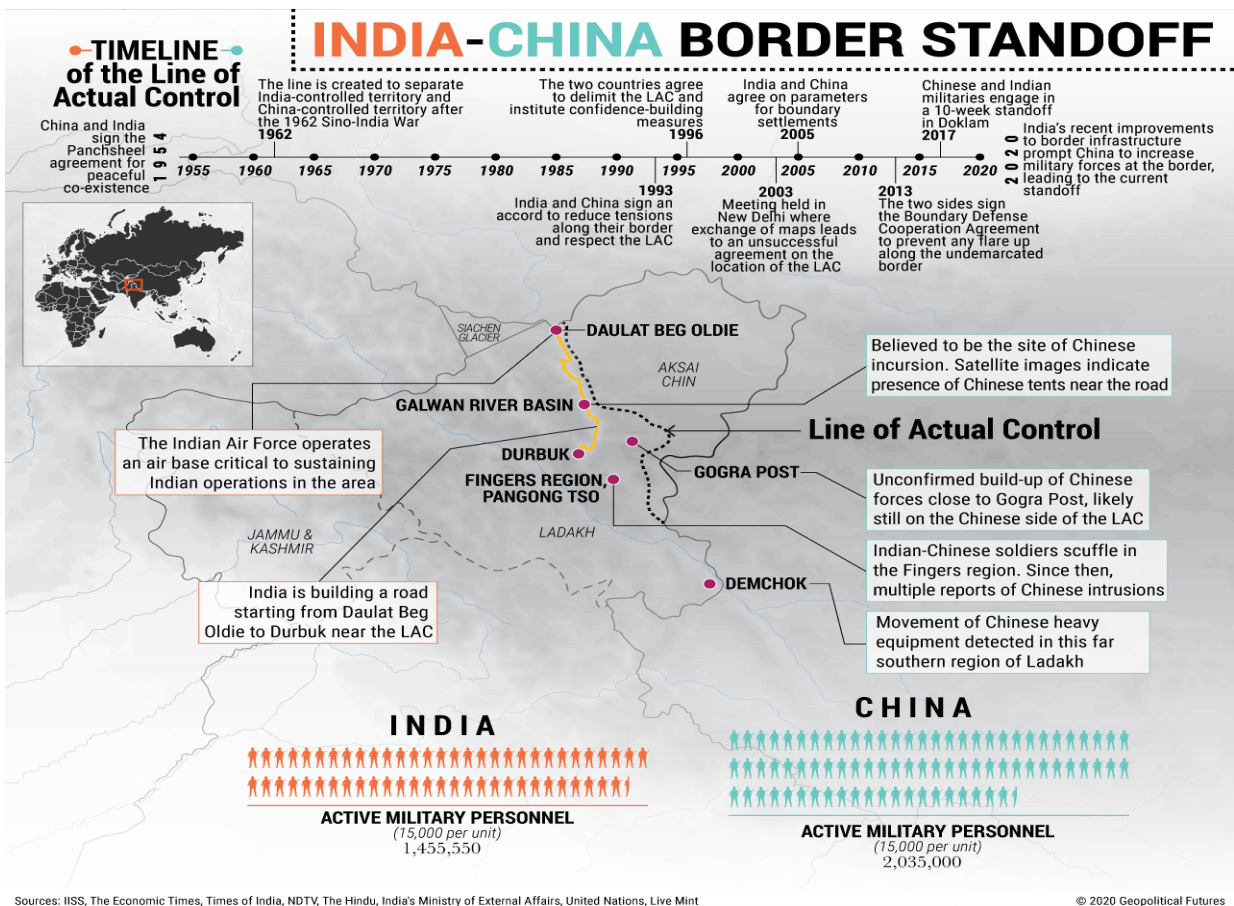


Figure 1: Timeline of the Line of Actual Control

Source: *Geopolitical Futures*

India has avoided taking sides and operated as a "swing state" between major regional powers such as until very recently, which was apparent in India's alignment with NAM during the Cold War era. This can also be inferred from India's initial ambivalent response to the Quad. In his keynote speech, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged China and India to "operate together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each other's interests" at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

Many people argue that India's decision to reconsider its participation in the Quad was motivated by the border stalemate in Doklam in 2017 (Smith, 2019). In that event, India's decision to include the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Strategy in its foreign and military policy was probably made due to the border conflict in Galwan in 2020.



Figure 2: Timeline of the India-China standoff in 2020

Source: *The Hindu*

Deepak (2022) talks about the connectivity initiatives undertaken by India under its "Act East Policy", where India has turned its attention away from China and towards Southeast Asia. One of these, the India-Myanmar-Thailand-Cambodia-Vietnam Trilateral Highway, has been extended and is anticipated to be finished by 2023 (Deepak, 2022). The Chinese policy of constructing ports and naval bases near India's marine outposts, including Coco Island in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Marao Atoll in the Maldives, and Gwadar in Pakistan, is perceived as China encircling India. India is unarguably concerned due to this "String of Pearls" surrounding its neck. Sagar (2020) discusses how India is worried about the increased presence of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and its debt trap diplomacy for small littoral states.

India supports the notion of "ASEAN centrality" and envisions an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, inclusive and is based on a rules-based international system (Saha, 2022). This clear balance has improved India's security cooperation with the United States and other regional powers. This expanding cooperation is indicated by the institutionalisation of the India-US 2+2 Dialogue, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the Quad, and the US-India Malabar naval exercises.

How does China see India?

China has a strong conviction in its inherent supremacy. China sees itself at the top of Beijing's firmly hierarchical vision for Asia, and India is never seen as an equal. China's policy towards India has largely balanced India in South Asia by supporting Pakistan and forging relationships with smaller regional nations. This is because China is aware of India's historical influence in South Asia, its potential as a regional power, and its global impact. As a member of the "Global South," Beijing has attempted to create "coalitions" with India wherever possible, whether it is working together in WTO to oppose huge subsidies given by western countries to their farmers or coming together to demand financial resources under Article 9 of the Paris Agreement as discussed by Mizo (2016). Arguments and conflicts were controlled because neither party wanted to drastically alter the diplomatic situation (Sun, 2022). This difference in perception of threats which both countries view each other, sometimes also creates problems at ground level.

The Doklam impasse caused China to rethink the nature of India's threat on a fundamental level. Despite their uneven national might (India's GDP is 20 per cent that of China's), China is at a disadvantage due to the asymmetry of threat perceptions. In other words, China regards India as a secondary problem, whereas India sees China as its main threat. Security of the Pacific region from Western powers is, without a doubt, Beijing's top priority. India may not yet be able to compete with China in terms of national strength or a conventional or nuclear arms race. Still, due to this asymmetry of security objectives, it is much more determined and focused on China than China on India (Sun, 2022).

China is outraged by the expanding US-Indian alliance. This is appended by the Dalai Lama, Tibet, river-water sharing, and trade imbalance issues. Some Chinese academics have asserted that India's opposition to the "One China Policy" stems from the Kashmir dispute, the site of a protracted territorial dispute between China and India (Moorthy, 2022). On similar lines, Sushma Swaraj, the late Indian Foreign Minister, had also urged China to uphold its own "One India Policy". But it is clear that China needs India as a trading partner to boost its GDP, and the country cannot afford to lose the level of GDP, which would sharply decline. It is understood by both parties that the countries are engaged economically, lesser are the chances of conflicts. The Wuhan Summit also made it apparent that the two countries do not intend to engage in military conflict and are both eager to resolve the misunderstandings in their bilateral ties.

Major Challenges ahead for India and China

In a multipolar world, China envisions itself to be Asia's sole superpower. China sees India's rise as a threat to its vision of becoming a unipolar power in the region.

Members of the strategic and intellectual community are currently debating India-China relations, which has highlighted a number of concerns, including the relationship's potential for the future and its main obstacles in the present. In the slightly more than seven decades of India-China ties, there has been more of a culture of mistrust and suspicion than of amity (Kumar, 2022).

Over the years, this mutual mistrust and suspicion has increased, reaching extreme levels in the present situation. Reaching an agreement on a number of delicate problems, such as Sino-Indian border concerns, has always been difficult due to the differences in viewpoint between the two parties.

India and China have not always been at loggerheads with each other. Both countries have made numerous sincere attempts to resolve their issues, notably with regard to the border problem. But regrettably, China's rapidly altering behavioural pattern was unable to contribute to the settling of the disputes. Any pledges made by China are completely ignored by it, whether they are bilateral or multilateral (Kumar, 2022).

China broke all the established protocols and the agreements by arming soldiers with lethal weapons during the standoff, so the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) agreements that were signed between India and China on the military front along the line of the LAC proved to be of no effect for India. After the conflict in Galwan, there was some disengagement from some places, but it is insufficient until India obtains complete disengagement and returns eastern Ladakh to its prior state in the military negotiations it is having with China (Shaban, 2020). India's insistence that China stops all of its involvement has not had any impact.

What is the future of India-China relations?

Several actions can be made on both sides for mutual advantage to further strengthen this relationship. Both countries must recognise that they both are probably the only nations that have continuing legacy and ancient civilisation. The two countries must resolve their border dispute, which has emerged as the main source of this conflict. This cannot be allowed to continue since it would be disruptive not only for the governments but also for the people.

Therefore, both countries can send officials to preside over a debate focusing on this issue and finding answers. Additionally, both countries' borders need to be kept peaceful (Deepak, 2022). The peace procedures ought to be long-term rather than only transitory. This would begin with the boundaries between China and India being clearly defined, and in the event of a violation, both countries should agree on the appropriate sanctions.

This will lessen border tensions like the Doklam impasse and the Galwan valley incident, which was highly complicated and hindered the country's bilateral ties (Shaban, 2020)

Another aspect of the situation that needs to be addressed is the economic front. Despite the fact that there is a good chance of a positive association, the current performance is far worse than normal. An immediate area of concern is the trade balance, which is heavily skewed in India's favour but still needs improvement. According to Counterpoint Research, about 114 million, or 72 percent, of the 158 million smartphone devices exported (i.e., made available on the Indian market), were manufactured by Chinese companies. Various consumer markets in India are currently dominated by Chinese businesses. These include the computer hardware industry, which is dominated by Lenovo; the home appliances market, which is dominated by Haier; the telecom equipment market, which is dominated by Huawei; and so on (Singh, 2020). The Chinese market is closed to a large number of Indian items, including rice that is not basmati, goods related to information technology, and pharmaceuticals. It is imperative that India's goods be permitted entry into the Chinese market.

China has always emboldened Pakistan to continue its proxy war against India (Shaban, 2020). But, China cannot ignore the fact that Pakistan is home to some of the most wanted terrorists, who are the brains behind the majority of terrorist activities carried out around the world. The problem of terrorism that is emanating from Pakistan should be of primary focus for both China and India (Moorthy, 2022).

Conclusion

The India-China relationship has experienced several ups and downs since the 1950s, changing from friendly to hostile to cordial. The tensions that have developed between the two nations have surely had an effect on their bilateral relationship. The military budgets of both countries have increased as a result of border intrusions, notwithstanding the peace and tranquillity on the frontiers that have been established in recent years. Because of mistrust between the two countries, there has been an arms race, which has further exacerbated the security situation.

Despite all the contentious issues between the two nations, China has become India's top trading partner. Recent years have seen an upsurge in commerce between the two nations. The two countries relations have also tried to increase their engagements through their summit meetings, informal summits and official visits.

Both nations should make use of the special arrangement structure in place so they may communicate with one another and with nations in the South Asian subcontinent, as well as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, to discuss regional issues.

The two nations should stop harbouring mistrust for one another and start building confidence during a military crisis. This can be accomplished by having frequent meetings with the top military officials so they can go over the latest military projects being undertaken. Military drills should be conducted annually, and defence delegations should switch places. India and China must come up with creative and sincere efforts to engage each other diplomatically.

There are numerous strategies to strengthen the relationship between the two nations. It is crucial for both countries to engage in dialogue rather than disengagement and disruption. India should focus more on internal policy since it will ultimately make the nation stronger and eliminate any potential for mistrust. Finally, it's crucial to always keep in mind the lessons learned in the past.

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