

# India and China: the eternal regional “enemy neighbors”?

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With New Delhi chairing both the G20 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) this year, the battle for influence between the two Asian giants seems to be intensifying at regional level, suggesting that reconciliation between the two countries seems unthinkable.

Indeed, the various clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh in 2020, New Delhi's bans on more than 300 Chinese applications, and India's increasing economic protectionism towards China are just some of the examples that illustrate the stormy relations between India and its Chinese neighbor. The relocation of 70,000 Indian troops from western India (Punjab, Kashmir) to the north (Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh) over the past two years, along with fighter jets and surface-to-air missiles, corroborates India's change in regional geopolitical priorities.

Nevertheless, this phenomenon should in no way mislead us about the potential rapprochement between the two countries, for two main reasons. Firstly, from an economic point of view, it is worth highlighting the fact that bilateral trade has grown by 43% in 2021, and by 8.6% this year according to *The Economist*.

From a military perspective, 18 rounds of negotiations have been undertaken by the military commands of each country to ease tensions on common borders, notably in Ladakh (Maccartney-MacDonald line), Aksai Chin (Ardagh-Johnson line) and Arunachal Pradesh (MacMahon line). The aim was to withdraw troops from five "hot spots" to create buffer zones. As a result, negotiations proved fruitful, with only two of the original five hot spots remaining.

Furthermore, both countries have several advantages in cooperating and remaining in the détente phase that has been underway for several months. On the one hand, India is highly dependent on China for its infrastructure and industrial production. The same applies to the pharmaceutical industry, insofar as India imports 70% of its active ingredients from China. Along the way, the significant role of Indian lobbies, strongly linked to Chinese ones, almost forces New Delhi to positively maintain its economic cooperation with its neighbor. Therefore, total independence is improbable at present. India takes advantage of this economic dependence, which by extension means economic growth, to strengthen its defense industry and attempt to even the odds, although the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is more modernized.

On the other hand, Beijing also has a vested interest in maintaining good relations with New Delhi, since it is its aggressive actions against its border neighbor that have, in a way, pushed India "into the arms" of the West, as evidenced by the increase in military and economic agreements with the USA and France in recent years. What is more, Chinese exporters are keen on the economic opportunities offered by India's vast domestic market.

Despite this rapprochement, the BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, which was held from August 22<sup>nd</sup> to August 24<sup>th</sup>, highlighted the divergences between its members regarding their vision of the Global South, and the enlargement of this informal association of countries, which was created in 2011. Indeed, China was strongly in favor of this enlargement, now comprising 11 states in total (the original member countries plus Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia), while India expressed reservations.

Thus, Indo-Chinese relations are defined by persistent tensions due to territorial, geopolitical, and ideological differences, suggesting that a rapprochement, or even détente, between the

two giants is impossible. Nevertheless, relations have greatly improved in terms of both economic and military cooperation, as evidenced by recent rounds of bilateral negotiations. It's a safe bet that these relations will be genuinely fruitful for both parties, and that they may well break the West's many attempts to woo India as a regional strategic counterweight to Chinese expansionism. In spite of this, India is maintaining its relations with the West, as its neighbor is nonetheless perceived as a threat to national and regional stability. On the Chinese side, President Xi Jinping is unlikely to attend the G20 summit on September 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Instead, Premier Li Qiang will attend the 18th G20 Summit in New Delhi, according to a Foreign Ministry press release. At the end of August, new tensions arose following the publication of a map by the Chinese government claiming some lands that New Delhi considers its own, notably in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. As a direct consequence, tens of thousands of soldiers have gathered on both sides of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), a border not clearly demarcated between the two countries. On Monday September 4, 2023, India launched major military maneuvers, notably along the disputed Himalayan border with China. The eleven days of operations are meant to be "*an annual training exercise*" in areas bordering Pakistan and China, according to Agence France-Presse.