



GAME ON: FRAMING INDIA-CHINA RELATIONSHIP TRAJECTORY IN 2024?

by

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How are India-China relations poised for 2024? For India and China, passive-aggressive tensions, primarily due to India's projected global rise and current security-focused bonhomie with the U.S., have certainly shaped the year gone by, as evidenced by Chinese President Xi Jinping ignoring the G20 summit held in India or India intensifying its crackdown on Chinese smartphone makers.

The scenario will get even more conspicuous in the coming years, with India's growing security-technological tilt to the U.S. and a widening China-U.S. "tech Cold War" driven by the intent to stymie the other's advancements in new technology – the marker for a digital era hegemon. So, trade and economic engagement, too, is no longer a stabilizing factor. Will pragmatic realism triumph or will India and China cross over the existing point of no return into a limited war?

Certainly, the December clash in 2022 [highlighted](#) that the growing constancy of unchecked hostilities between the two countries was becoming predictable. The good news though was that the incident did not escalate in 2023, with rounds of prosaic, uneventful [commander-level meetings](#) blunting the conflict's headline-grabbing impact. The underlying distrust and accompanying psychological wargames, however, have in some ways calcified what little flexibility was left in the ties.

Fight for the Global South

In early 2023 itself, by organizing the "Voice of Global South" summit, which did not include China, India isolated the rival-neighbor in a strategically important geopolitical constituency. This also highlighted maturity, shrewdness, and diplomatic heft on India's part, which later in the year also colored the G20 summit and facilitated the negotiations for a final declaration – a feat [lauded](#) by the international community.

Delhi taking a lead in coalescing the Global South

has been hard for China to stomach. It disturbs Xi's foreign policy agenda, particularly his [periphery diplomacy](#), which he has built mostly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is at the heart of his ambition to realize the "Centenary Goals." A more contested foreign policy turf will be visible in 2024 and beyond, with China intensifying its [wooing of the Global South](#) leaders minus India, be it via the Belt and Road Forum or the G77 + China.

Notably, their respective stances in the Hamas-Israel war illustrate how their future trajectories for Global South will pan out: China's unambiguous anti-West to India's tricky "[non-Western, not anti-Western](#)" tightrope diplomacy. [China's "unwavering" support for the Palestinian cause](#), as opposed to India's neutral yet [Israel-tilted stance](#), has won China brownie points in the Arab and developing world. Yet as India has not taken Israel's side overtly (New Delhi [calls for a two-state solution](#)), it is doubtful that India's relations with the Arab world or Global South will be impacted in 2024. Similarly, their respective stances will also frame the functioning in the newly expanded common forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS.

Clash of Strongmen

Given that 2024 is election year in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will sound unyielding on China. The existing checks and curbs on Chinese investments in India will continue to take a sharper form. Pursuing an anti-China economic supply chain network will become a major focus of India's foreign policy approach in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, a creeping pace back to the stalemate situation should be expected post elections, at least going by India's current attitude of avoiding escalation.

Concurrently, the clash of strongmen personalities on display will gain steam. The year 2023 went on to become a milestone for Modi's personal diplomacy, particularly with the West exemplified by Modi's state visit to the U.S. and as Guest of Honor at the Bastille Day Parade in France. By staying away from the summit in Russia, Modi looks in no hurry to reverse his diplomatic wins in 2024.

In contrast, Xi's image has been in the doldrums since the [COVID-19 crisis snowballed](#), and the [latest](#) economic slowdown and peril-ridden domestic



politics (including “[disappearing](#)” ministers and [military purges](#)) have not helped matters. 2024 is likely to further [hamper](#) China’s economic growth, in large part due to Xi’s personalistic control over policymaking gaining momentum and inhibiting innovation. Factors like ageing population, [unemployment woes](#), and overreliance on imports (from food to raw materials) will also play a crucial role. India’s contrasting ascendant, relatively politically stable trajectory will fuel the rivalry.

Whither Neighborhood Stability

The diplomatic, economic hardening will have negative implications both on the border dispute and for regional stability. As regards the former, enhancing border infrastructure by both China and India is becoming an abiding factor of strategic discord. Particularly, India’s [increasing strategic investment](#) in border areas and in its northeastern region has unnerved China.

Further, it will likely complicate the neighborhood scenario. For example, the [recent](#) Chinese outreach to Bhutan on boundary negotiations and attempts at forging a diplomatic accord would have security implications for India (e.g., increased threat over the Doklam tri-junction, in particular the nearby Siliguri Corridor that links India, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh). More so, if China’s intent to [develop the Teesta river project](#) with Bangladesh comes to fruition, which looks likely in 2024 unless India reconfigures a better plan to manage its immediate neighborhood. Besides, the [China-Pakistan military ties](#) will continue to grow especially in view of Pakistan’s economic decline, exacerbating the double threat against India, and eventually the tense complications for the sub-region, as all three neighbors are nuclear powers.

India’s Russian Roulette

Consequently, it becomes imperative for India not to lose its tentative grip on ties with Russia. Even as Modi missing the [annual summit in Russia](#) might give the impression of a cooling trend, the Russian President’s warm welcome for India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and a personal message for Modi suggests otherwise: That Russia, which too cannot afford to lose friends or lose India as an energy

market, might be willing to overlook or adjust to India’s geopolitical need to build capital with the European countries. With the signing of a [protocol](#) for 2024-2028 in multiple areas, their ties look steady.

Regional “Flashpoints” Convergence

Not just with the U.S., India’s growing and stable partnership with Japan, which has already hardened its China stance, and even the European Union, which has also enhanced strategic links with India as a counter to China’s economic coercion in the Indo-Pacific will continue to worry China.

India’s growing bilateral chemistry with regional powers like South Korea and even Taiwan will also play a part in outmaneuvering China. Post 2024, the new Indian government should look to leverage China’s [deep-seated technological vulnerabilities](#) on Taiwan, especially if the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party comes back to power. As such, India’s minilateral success particularly within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has also raised hackles in China and will become a harbinger of hope for developing regional solidarity against China’s status quo altering attempts – the list of hotspots due to China’s unending appetite for territory is rather long, including Himalayan, South and East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait conflicts. The Quad’s [growing popularity in Southeast Asia](#) is a testament to its growth as an inclusive entity despite some criticism, to India’s favor.

In short, no amount of “win-win” regional [cooperation rhetoric](#) by the Chinese or even the ever-looming threat of economic engagement becoming a liability will be enough to compel India to a more deferential stance toward China in the near future. Due to the new-era complexities that favor India and seem tilted against China – largely a consequence of China’s own unnecessary aggression and coercion tactics – the India-China interplay will get riskier, with or without a Himalayan war.

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