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Threat Perception, Competition and the Quest for Hegemony in China-India Relations

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FATIH BEYAZ, MAY 19 2025

While the 21st century represents a period in which Asia is rising and the balance of power is shifting from West to East, two major actors stand out at the center of this rise: China and India. The relations between these two nuclear powers carry both potential for cooperation and structural tensions in historical, geopolitical, economic and strategic terms. This article focuses on questions such as whether China sees India as a threat, India's role in the US-China rivalry, whether China aims for hegemony or regional superiority, and whether the rivalry between these two powers will inevitably end in conflict. Such questions are addressed in a context where China's historical strategic culture and India's post-colonial quest for strategic autonomy collide. China's historical superiority perception based on the "Middle Kingdom" understanding and India's diplomatic tradition shaped by the principle of "non-alignment" fundamentally affect the ways in which the two countries perceive each other. Therefore, focusing not only on current strategic developments but also on historical memories is essential to understanding the Sino-Indian rivalry.

Although China-India relations have historically been built on common ties such as Buddhism and trade, they have been marked by competition and conflict in the modern nation-state. After India declared independence in 1947 and China was established as the People's Republic in 1949, a friendly atmosphere was established in the early years under the slogan "India and China are brothers", but this atmosphere was permanently shattered by the 1962 War. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 broke out when border disputes in the Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh regions escalated to a military dimension and resulted in a major defeat for India. This war is the historical basis for the current geopolitical uncertainty and insecurity. Although normalization steps were taken in the 1980s and 1990s, the border line (Line of Actual Control – LAC) between the two countries has still not been clarified. Events such as the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict have shown how active these historical fault lines remain. Behind this historical tension lies not only border disputes, but also the narratives that the two countries use to construct their national identities. While China emphasizes its liberation from the "hundred-year humiliation" of the 19th century and its resurgence, India sees its struggle for independence against British colonialism as the basis of national pride. This situation further strengthens both countries' perceptions of external threats and feeds the need to increase their strategic autonomy.

In order to better understand this historical process, it is necessary to look at the border definitions during the Qing Dynasty and the British Empire. In particular, the McMahon Line, drawn by the British at the Simla Conference in 1914 and based on India's current position, has never been officially recognized by China. China has rejected this line, arguing that it was an imposition of Western imperialist powers, and different approaches to the status of Tibet have created additional tensions between the parties. Therefore, the 1962 War can be read not only as a military conflict between two modern states, but also as a challenge to post-colonial border arrangements. The two countries' approach to border disputes is also closely related to the internal political dynamics of the states. While China, especially under the increasing influence of nationalist public opinion, defines the issue of territorial integrity as an uncompromising red line, in India, similarly, control of the border regions is important in terms of national honor and political legitimacy. In this context, even a small tactical gain or loss on the LAC can have major strategic and political consequences.

The rising wave of nationalism in the public opinion of both countries after the conflict in the Galwan Valley has made

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it even more difficult to step back. In addition, the border disputes reveal the different military strategy and logistics approaches of China and India. China has greatly improved its transportation and infrastructure capabilities on its western border and has reached the capacity to conduct rapid military buildup in the region. In contrast, India has more difficulty in reaching the border regions due to geographical conditions, which directly affects the deterrence capacity of the Indian army. This infrastructure difference makes it easier for China to make more aggressive maneuvers on the LAC line. Finally, the difficulty of resolving these historical tensions in terms of international law and border agreements further complicates the issue. Despite the border agreements signed in 1993, 1996 and 2005, the parties have not reached a common agreement on where exactly the LAC passes. China and India's different perceptions of the LAC cause the de facto areas of control to constantly change and these changes to sometimes turn into violent clashes.

Although China's foreign policy approach is often defined by criticisms of Western-centered hegemony and the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs", this understanding has evolved into a more proactive and strategic framework with the Xi Jinping era. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is considered as an attempt to expand China's sphere of influence through trade and infrastructure lines between Asia-Germany-Africa. In this complex strategy, India is an active center of resistance to China's regional projects. India's opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Belt-Road Initiative is perceived by China as an obstacle to regional integration. Moreover, India's participation in anti-China alliances such as QUAD (USA, Japan, Australia, India) is interpreted by Beijing as a threat of "encirclement". However, it cannot be said that China sees India as its primary threat. China's priorities are Taiwan, the South China Sea and its competitive ground with the US.

When China's foreign policy doctrines are examined, the concept of the "China Dream" expressed by Xi Jinping in particular reveals that China desires to re-establish its historical superiority. In the foreign policy aspect of this dream, China aims to create secure spheres of influence, build alternative structures to Western institutions (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), and maintain a permanent military presence in strategic regions. India finds many of these goals to be contrary to its own interests and perceives them as threats to regional balance. China's perception of India is shaped as a regional power seeking strategic autonomy rather than a purely military or economic threat. Beijing sees India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific strategy developed under the leadership of the US as a regional challenge to China's claim of "peaceful rise" in the long term. In particular, the institutionalization trend of the QUAD alliance and India's active role in this structure are considered as developments threatening China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. The widespread concern among Chinese strategists about "two-front pressure"—the US in the Pacific and India in the south—reinforces this perception.

The infrastructure and investment-based relations that China has developed with countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives as part of its "containment of South Asia" strategy are interpreted by India as China's "subtle geopolitical influence wars." In particular, the transfer of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka to China for 99 years and the investments made in the Gwadar Port in Pakistan are interpreted as China's aim to encircle India's maritime environment in the context of its "string of pearls" strategy. China, on the other hand, presents these investments as economic development projects, but does not deny their military secondary effects. In this context, China's foreign policy approach has turned to "grey area strategies" that aim to create geopolitical influence zones through economic means without denying classical realist balances. In other words, instead of direct military intervention, the understanding of drawing countries into its sphere of influence through economic dependency, technology transfer and infrastructure investments prevails.

While it is seen that China's strategies in Africa are also being implemented in Asia, India interprets this strategic transformation as a threat to its regional power projection. In particular, China's "digital silk road" initiative carried out through digital infrastructure investments and 5G technologies is evaluated by India as a challenge to cyber sovereignty. From India's perspective, the Chinese threat is felt not only on a military level but also on a normative and institutional level. China's orientation towards the construction of an alternative international order through structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS complicates India's balancing policy with the West. Although India is included in these structures, China's decisive influence on these platforms is seen as an element that could limit India's strategic autonomy. For this reason, India interprets China's rise in multilateral diplomacy not as an attempt to reshape the global south, but as an effort to impose its own leadership through

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balancing the West.

India perceives China not only as a neighbor but also as a regional rival. The mistrust that has been going on since 1962 has peaked in recent years with the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley. India also sees China's strategic partnership with Pakistan and its Tibet-Uyghur policies as threats. India is also taking steps to balance Chinese influence in the technological and economic fields. The ban on Chinese-origin applications such as TikTok and WeChat in India and the exclusion of companies such as Huawei from 5G tenders are examples of this. This orientation in India's foreign policy is also reflected in domestic politics. The negative attitudes towards China among the Indian people are reinforced by nationalist discourses. The Modi government is particularly using the border tensions with China as a theme of unity in domestic politics and is emphasizing strategic autonomy with projects to nationalize the defense industry. This shows that India's foreign policy is shaped not only by security but also by domestic political legitimacy.

India has traditionally adopted the concept of "independent foreign policy" or "strategic autonomy". However, the increase in military, economic and diplomatic partnerships with the US in recent years has led to comments that India is indirectly positioned in favor of Washington in the US-China competition. QUAD has strengthened India's position in the Indo-Pacific strategy. While the Chinese side interprets this approach as a "new Cold War", India sees these structures as a "balancing mechanism". However, this perception of China is not static. India's development potential, especially in new generation power elements such as artificial intelligence, space technology and cybersecurity, triggers long-term threat perceptions in Beijing. Chinese analysts warn that India's democratic system may also pose an alternative in terms of global soft power because it is more compatible with Western values. Therefore, it is thought that India may pose a challenge not only in military but also ideological and diplomatic terms.

India's relations with the US are deepening in many areas, from defense industry cooperation to technology transfer, from maritime security to energy supply chains. However, this rapprochement does not mean that India has given up its strategic autonomy. On the contrary, India sees its cooperation with the US as part of a multilateral strategy and simultaneously maintains relations with actors such as Russia and Iran. This multi-faceted foreign policy approach is being closely monitored by China and interpreted as a potential encirclement strategy. India's strategic autonomy doctrine was founded on its role in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War, but has been redefined in the 21st century with the principle of establishing flexible partnerships in a multipolar world order. Although the 2+2 dialogue mechanism developed with the US, defense agreements such as LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Agreement) and COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) have transformed India's strategic preferences into a more concrete rapprochement with the West, New Delhi interprets these relations within the framework of a balance policy. Such agreements have the potential to change the military balance China faces in the Indian Ocean and are being carefully analyzed by Beijing. In addition, India's naval power projection in the Indo-Pacific region, especially through the strategic location of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, deepens China's vulnerabilities on maritime trade routes.

For China, which is trying to create alternative routes to the Strait of Malacca, this situation brings the security gap known as the "Malacca Dilemma" back to the agenda. India's joint patrols with the French Navy and the military cooperation developed with Southeast Asian countries increase China's sense of regional encirclement. Therefore, India is an important geostrategic variable for China not only in terms of diplomatic and economic aspects but also in terms of maritime strategies. On the other hand, China's policy of "fragmented engagement" against India is also important in this equation. While encouraging economic cooperation on the one hand, on the other hand, its efforts to create pressure in border regions and to establish geopolitical balancing relations with small countries in South Asia against India are noteworthy. Such two-way approaches deepen the security dilemma that has led India to accelerate its cooperation with the US. Rather than pushing India completely into the Western bloc, China prefers to create strategic uncertainty in its decision-making processes, which further strengthens New Delhi's multipolar strategy. On the geoeconomic level, relations between the US and India are gaining momentum not only in terms of security but also access to critical and next-generation technologies. Increasing cooperation in semiconductor production, artificial intelligence infrastructure and defense technologies creates an axis that can challenge China's technological superiority. In this context, India's rising position in global value chains could complicate China's "digital hegemony" strategy. Chinese strategists are seriously concerned about India's potential to become the "technology hub of the

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West” in this sense.

There are two main views in academia regarding the goal of China’s foreign policy: First, China is seeking global hegemony; second, its aim is to limit US hegemony and become a dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region. Current indicators show that China is primarily aiming to establish regional supremacy rather than global hegemony. In this context, India is an actor that complicates and balances this supremacy. At the heart of China’s quest for regional supremacy lies the strategy of creating economic dependency. This strategy, also known as debt trap diplomacy, provides China with permanent advantages in strategic areas, especially in the case of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. India sees these developments not only as an economic challenge but also as a geopolitical one, and in response, it develops foreign policy strategies such as “Act East” and “Neighborhood First.”

The basis of China’s regional supremacy strategy is not only economic investments but also normative influences. China aspires to shape international norms and institutions in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, the “development model” that Beijing offers to countries in the region—authoritarian stability, high growth, and economic governance based on infrastructure investments—is presented as a strong option against alternatives that prioritize Western values. The spread of this model means not only geopolitical but also ideological competition for countries based on democratic norms, such as India. Therefore, China’s quest for regional superiority extends not only to physical areas but also to political narratives. In addition, China’s military modernization process and its policies of creating de facto situations in the South China Sea show that the construction of regional hegemony is shaped within the framework of classical realism.

These developments present indicators that make India question China’s intentions in the region. For example, China’s increasing submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean and its permanent military base in Djibouti threaten the strategic balance in the geography that India sees as its traditional “sphere of influence.” For this reason, India is trying to balance China’s expansion by deepening its relations with ASEAN countries and focusing on regional forums (e.g. BIMSTEC, IORA). However, China’s debt-trap diplomacy strategy is not only implemented in Sri Lanka but also in countries geographically close to India, such as Pakistan, the Maldives and Myanmar. The economic dependencies established in these countries through infrastructure investments and financial loans provide China with not only economic but also diplomatic and military access opportunities. In this context, India’s “Neighborhood First” policy aims not only to be a good neighbor but also to break China’s strategic influence. New Delhi has begun to place greater emphasis on increasing investment capacity in these countries, developing joint infrastructure projects and using cultural diplomacy. In addition, India’s “Act East” policy is also a direct response to China’s influence in Southeast Asia. Strategic partnerships established with countries that take a more cautious stance against China, such as Japan and Vietnam, provide India with both diplomatic legitimacy and military depth. India’s free trade agreements with ASEAN can also be evaluated as steps towards breaking China’s economic monopoly in the region. At this point, it is clear that India has assumed the role of a “balancing power” against China’s efforts to establish regional hegemony.

Within the framework of international relations theories, China-India relations are a “security dilemma” situation. As the parties try to increase their own security, the other party perceives this as a threat. However, this situation does not mean an inevitable war. Economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence and cooperation on multilateral platforms show that this tension can be kept under control. According to neo-realist theory, conflict between great powers is inevitable; however, the China-India example also shows that this conflict can be managed without directly turning into a hot war. The parties’ keeping diplomatic channels of contact open, participating together on multilateral platforms (e.g. BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and establishing communication mechanisms in times of crisis play an important role in softening structural competition. This also makes China-India relations have dynamics that do not condemn them to an absolute conflict line.

The fact that both countries are nuclear powers makes direct military conflict scenarios more cautious. Nuclear deterrence doctrines are one of the key factors that prevent border conflicts from escalating into full-scale war. While China adheres to the principle of “no first use,” India has adopted a similar deterrence policy. While this mutual nuclear balance enables the parties to conduct tactical conflicts on the border, it also reduces the risk of a large-scale war on a strategic scale. In this context, China-India relations offer an important exception to the “conflict inevitability”

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thesis envisioned by classical realism. However, the sustainability of this exception depends on the depth of institutionalized communication mechanisms between the parties. The border crisis communication lines established after the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict show that both sides have improved their crisis management skills. Particularly, meetings held at the military level and crisis control talks held through diplomatic channels have prevented the escalation of the conflict. The institutionalization of such mechanisms places China-India relations in the category of “managed competition.” On the other hand, as the areas of competition diversify, the security dilemma deepens. China’s aggressive strategies in areas such as technology, artificial intelligence and space are clearly included as threats in India’s national security documents. Therefore, a “silent war” is ongoing not only in military but also in technological and economic areas. In this context, China-India relations are taking shape not only over physical borders but also in new security areas such as data, energy and trade routes.

This multi-layered security environment can make tensions more unstable. However, multilateral structures that both countries are a part of—such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—have the potential to balance structural competition. Although these platforms are not a means of directly resolving bilateral disputes, they can prevent strategic misunderstandings by creating an environment of dialogue between the parties. In addition, it is seen that China and India have overlapping interests in areas such as energy, climate crisis and global governance reforms. This common agenda can pave the way for constructive competition. Finally, domestic political factors also shape foreign policy behavior. China’s increasing nationalism and the rise of Hindu nationalism in India are causing external threats to become domestic policy material. This sometimes leads to harsh statements and symbolic displays of power directed at the public. However, managing these internal dynamics will be decisive in ensuring long-term stability between the two countries. The leadership of both countries should avoid steps that will risk strategic stability for the sake of short-term domestic policy gains.

Relations between China and India are shaped by the insecurities stemming from historical border disputes and the great power competition that has come to the fore in the multipolar order of the 21st century. It can be said that China does not see India as an absolute threat but perceives it as a strategic rival, while India pursues balancing strategies against the Chinese threat. Competition is structural, but conflict is not inevitable. The future relationship of these two civilizational states depends not only on bilateral dynamics but also on the evolution of global balances of power. Looking ahead, it is possible that both countries will tend to act more cautiously in foreign policy in the face of increasing internal pressures (economic slowdown, demographic change, environmental crises). This situation may lead to areas of cooperation (climate change, regional trade, energy security) coming to the fore. However, at the same time, if strategic insecurities deepen, new tensions are likely to occur in the border regions. Therefore, the China-India competition will continue to be a dynamic process shaped not only by great power policies but also by domestic political transformations.

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About the author:

Fatih Beyaz is a Ph.D. candidate in International Relations at Sakarya University, with a master's degree in Political History from Kocaeli University. His academic work focuses on Chinese foreign policy, East Asian strategic dynamics, and international political economy. He is affiliated with various research institutions, including the Turkish Historical Society as a Far East Studies Specialist.

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