

‘Realism’ in India’s Relations with China

By David Scott

India’s Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar held an important interview with ANI News on January 4, 2024, discussing his latest book, *Why Bharat Matters*. Its back cover emphasized “India’s quest to ascend the global hierarchy;” a quest where India’s more powerful neighbour China’s own ascent has been noticeable in the last decade.

In his **interview**, Jaishankar repeatedly stressed the need for “realism” in India’s relations with China. He argued that India should be “dealing with China from a basis of realism...that strain of realism [which] extends all the way from Sardar Patel to Narendra Modi.” He further noted that in “the last seventy-five plus years of our [India’s] foreign policy, we have had a strain of realism about China, and we have had a strain of idealism, romanticism, non-realism about China...[which] ends up as Chindia policy. Lastly, he argued that “there is a very sharp difference of opinion on how to respond to China between Nehru and Sardar Patel,” and that the Modi government “has been very much more in conformity with a strain of realism which originated from Sardar Patel.”

Consequently, this piece looks at Patel’s “realism,” Chindia “romanticism” and current “realism” imperatives for India.



Tibet and the Disputed Himalayan Border

Deputy Prime Minister Sardar Patel’s realism was on show when Mao Zedong’s newly-proclaimed People’s Republic of China (PRC) sent military forces into Tibet in October 1950. Patel’s famous letter to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru over Tibet on November 7, 1950, lamented how China meant to “delude us by professions of peaceful intention” and warned of Chinese “perfidy” and “malevolence.” It further stressed the need for “a military and intelligence appreciation of the Chinese threat to India,” advocated a strengthening of military forces along the Himalayas, and maintenance of India’s forward position and rights in Tibet. Patel’s death in December that same year removed his voice from the Indian cabinet. As such, in the following year of 1951, Nehru failed to maintain Indian rights in Tibet, and instead recognised Chinese annexation.

Jump forward seventy-five years, past the 1962 War, Tibet and the disputed Himalayan border remain a sharp issue in India-China relations. China claims Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh which are administered by India, and India claims Aksai Chin administered by China, with the demarcation of their mutual border—the Line of Actual Control—remaining highly contested. The Doklam confrontation in 2017 and Galwan clashes in 2020 sent India-China relations into a sharp and immediate downspin, which was further aggravated by another confrontation at Tawang in December 2022.

These confrontations left relations at a continuing low throughout 2023, which witnessed both sides achieving limited progress at disengagement along the border, and instead, undertaking more substantive troop and infrastructure buildups. The Indian defence minister's trip to Tawang in October 2023 was **designed** to consolidate India's border position. The 20th round of Commander-level talks held in October 2023 and the 28th Meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on China-India Border Affairs held in November 2023 all made little substantive progress. Jaishankar pointed out during a January 2024 public talk—with the unmistakably realist title **"Bharat's Rise in Geopolitics"**—that he had **told** Chinese counterparts that "unless a solution is found at the border, they should not expect other relations to move on normally."

Collapse of the Chindia Paradigm

Nehru's "romantic" pursuit of *Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai* or "India-China brotherhood" during the 1950s, was re-echoed by the mantra of Chindia economic cooperation between China and India, encapsulated in 2006 by Jairam Ramesh's book, *Making Sense of Chindia*. However, India-China trade became increasingly asymmetric to India's disadvantage. India's trade deficit with China of \$671 million in 2006 soared to \$87 billion in 2022.

Moreover, India has increasingly demonstrated a willingness to reduce reliance on China for critical sectors of its economy. India blocked Huawei from its 5G network in 2022, and placed licensing restrictions on imported Chinese laptops in 2023. In October 2023, Chinese smart phone companies, Xiaomi Corp and Vivo Mobile, were investigated by the Indian police for money laundering, including charges of **"spreading Chinese propaganda."** The same month, tax evasion probes were launched against forty leading Chinese solar companies. China's **state media** finished the year blasting "India's unscrupulous suppression of Chinese firms."

With 90 percent of India's rare earth minerals imported from China, India pursued an internal and external **"dash"** for critical minerals security in 2023. In April, the state-owned IREL (India) Ltd announced plans to ramp up domestic extraction and refining capacity of lithium, beryllium, titanium, niobium, tantalum and zirconium.

Six months later, in October, India joined the US-led “anti-China” **Mineral Security Partnership**. Pharmaceutical imports from China was another focus for India. In November, the *Global Times* reported with disquiet “India’s endeavor to ‘decouple’ from China in the supply chain for active pharmaceutical ingredients.”

India continues to reject Chinese infrastructure initiatives, boycotting the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in October 2023. Instead, India joined in the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience announced in May 2023, and signed up for the Supply Chain Resilience Agreement, one of the pillars of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), in November 2023.

Realism Imperative: Balance of Threat

Stephen Walt’s “**balance of threat**” criteria —“aggregate power,” “offensive military capabilities,” “geographic proximity” and “perceived offensive intentions”—as a way of understanding why states become or are rivals can help us understand Indian strategic calculations about China.

1. Aggregate power (population and economy). India’s population may have overtaken China’s in 2023, with a younger profile likely being advantageous in its long-term economic development. Indeed, India’s annual growth rate for the financial year through March 2024 is **projected** to hit 6.7 percent, surpassing China’s 5.2 percent.

Nevertheless, much higher levels of economic growth from 1990 to 2020 left China’s nominal GDP 4.74 times higher than India’s in 2023, and 2.51 times higher in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms.

2. Military Capabilities. China’s bigger economy translates into much bigger military spending. For 2023-2024, China’s \$225 billion military budget is three times that of India’s, which stands at \$72.6 billion. In terms of indigenous production, China has also out-performed India in key issues like construction of aircraft carriers and fighter aircraft.

3. Geographic proximity. China’s geographic contiguity remains an uncomfortably acute issue for India. The China-Pakistan nexus, coupled with the ongoing Chinese penetration into the Indian Ocean translates into a palpable sense of strategic encirclement for India. Concerns in New Delhi rose further following Mohamed Muizzu’s election victory in November 2023, which brought a pro-China government to power in the Maldives. Consequently, Muizzu’s first foreign trip was to China, in January 2024, where the relationship was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, the Maldives’ participation in China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative was deepened, and Indian troops were ordered out of the Maldives by March 2024.

4. Perceived offensive intentions. Polling by the **Pew Research Center** published in August 2023 noted that negative views of China in India had reached “historic highs.” “Unfavorable” views of China which stood at 48 percent in 2019, had jumped to 67 percent (of which, 50 percent were “very unfavorable”) by 2023.

Realism Imperatives: Counter-Balancing

India’s response to this growing sense of threat from China has led to balancing behaviour, involving “internal balancing” and “external balancing.” The former involves India building up its military forces, while the latter involves security cooperation with other partners who have similar concerns about China.

Certainly, India has been building up its own military forces against China, in the Himalayas through diverting forces away from facing Pakistan on the western flank and reactivating airbases, and in the Indian Ocean by building up its navy. But on the naval front, India is finding itself hard pressed to keep up with China, as evident from their respective indigenous aircraft carrier programs. India’s INS *Vikrant* (IAC-1) took fifteen years to construct before finally being commissioned in 2022, whereas China’s *Shandong*—a larger carrier—took only four years to construct before its commission in 2019. As of late-2023, China’s third carrier, the *Fujian*, had already begun undertaking sea trials, with a commissioning date expected around 2025. On the other hand, India’s second indigenous carrier (IAC-2) had only been

agreed in principle by the Defense Procurement Board in September 2023, and is awaiting formal approval by the Defence Acquisition Council in January 2024. Its development will likely entail several more years of construction, by which time, China will already have moved on to more advanced and sophisticated construction projects.

Given this military imbalance between India and China, India needs to externally balance with other actors around the Indo-Pacific which share similar concerns about China—what Arzan Tarapore refers to as “**zone balancing.**” India’s balancing behaviour towards China, “constraint” being perhaps a more nuanced term, is unstated and delicate, but evident nonetheless. It is observable from India’s security links with Australia, France, Japan, France and the US, which all have overlapping strategic geometries. India’s gifting of INS *Kirpan* to Vietnam in June 2023 and *Nomadic Elephant* exercises with Mongolia in July 2023 illustrates neighbourhood counter-balancing of China.

Purnendra Jain’s 2021 profile of India’s “**hesitant realism,**” linked the border tensions at Galwan in 2020 with India’s subsequent-and-consequent deepening strategic ties with Tokyo and Canberra. India’s Reciprocal Access Agreements (RAC), signed with the US in 2016, Japan in 2020, and Australia in 2021, underpin their strengthening fourfold co-operation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or the Quad).

China-concerns are also on show with France, reflected in their **Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region** in 2018, their RAC in 2019, and their expanded **India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap** announced in July 2023. The India-France-Australia trilateral run at the Senior Officials level in 2020 was upgraded to the ministerial level in 2021, halted briefly in 2022, and **resumed** in June 2023.

India also maintains a cordial enough relationship and military links with Russia, a close ally of China, despite US concerns. However, these friendly enough links with Russia have not translated into meaningful China-India cooperation within the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral. The reality is that the RIC itself faces an **“existential dilemma”**—its members lack the “strategic glue” necessary to stand united against US pressure given continuing China-India competition and confrontation. The Russian Foreign Minister may have **stated** in March 2023 that the “RIC is a platform for India and China in our presence—because they might not feel themselves comfortable being one on one all the time”, but the RIC has remained stymied. Indian officials said in May 2023 that RIC was unlikely to meet until the border dispute with China is **“normalised.”** Consequently, despite India hosting the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023, which Russia and China attended, no RIC meeting was arranged.

To conclude, there is an ancient basis for Indian realism in the shape of Kautilya’s *raja-mandala* or “circles of states” framework propounded in his *Arthashastra* back in the fourth century BCE, with maxims like “a neighbour of your enemy is a potential ally” in play with India’s **regional diplomacy** in South Asia and around China. Hence, Jaishankar’s comments in 2020, in his *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*, that “geopolitics and balance of power are the underpinnings of international relations. India itself has a tradition of Kautilya politics that places a premium on them.”

In this balancing vein, Jaishankar stressed at the **Kautilya Forum** in October 2023 that “the Quad stands out in the Indo-Pacific” as a particularly valuable framework for India to work with the US, Japan and Australia. The Quad has been operating as a political grouping at the Senior Officials-level since 2017, Ministers-level since 2019 and Summit-level since 2021. India participates in their annual quadrilateral naval exercises which have run since 2019. India joined the Quad Infrastructure Coordination Group, set up in 2021 as a counterpart to China’s BRI infrastructure initiative. India is also cooperating with its Quad partners to counter cyber threats from China. The press release of the **Quad Senior Cyber Group** meeting held in December 2023, while not mentioning China specifically, was clearly aimed at the Asian giant, noting “serious concern about cyber attacks in the region on critical infrastructure.”

Returning to Jaishankar's *Why Bharat Matters* interview, using imagery from the Ramayana to explain India's strategic geometry, he compared the Quad countries to Raja Dasrah's four sons, and France to Lakshman. Bhopinder Singh **explained** Jaishankar's allusion to the "familial bonhomie and fundamental alignment" with Quad partners and France as reflecting their "China-wariness that remains as serious and relevant as earlier." This is "realism" in action.

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