



Civilizational Exchange and Strategic Transformation: India–China Interactions in Historical Perspective

Ankit Yadav

Research scholar, student at Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi, ankitstrang@gmail.com

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19413960>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 18-03-2026

Published: 10-04-2026

Keywords:

Asian Regionalism, Civilizational Exchange, Cultural Interactions, Economic Interdependence, Historical Perspective, Strategic Transformation.

ABSTRACT

India-China relations are an example of one of the longest civilizational engagements, with a history of several thousand years. Prior to the emergence of modern nation-states, both regions were closely connected with each other through trade, cultural, and religious exchanges. The Silk Route, for example, connected both regions through the exchange of commodities as well as ideas. The expansion of Buddhism from India to China is an example of civilizational engagement between both nations. Chinese monks like Xuanzang and Faxian traveled to India to collect religious books and knowledge. This created a common intellectual and cultural space between both nations. However, with the emergence of colonialism and independence movements, both nations have developed a different kind of relationship. The rise of nationalism, political boundaries, and geopolitical tensions, including a war between both nations in 1962, have created a culture of mistrust between both nations. In the twenty-first century, the relationship between both nations is marked by increasing economic interdependence between both nations. The trade between both nations has grown manifold since 2000. Hence, it can be argued that India-China relations are an example of a relationship marked by both continuity and change, where historical civilizational engagement between both nations is accompanied by contemporary political and strategic challenges.

Introduction



India-China relations embody one of the most lasting and intricate instances of civilizational interaction in world history. Both nations are among the earliest surviving civilizations on earth. Both have nurtured thriving traditions in areas such as philosophy, politics, religion, and economics. The relationship between the two nations stretches back thousands of years and has passed through a number of historical periods, including civilizational cooperation and strategic competition (Sen, 2005; Shambaugh, 2013).

Civilizational interaction is one of the extremely important tools of analysis while discussing the civilizational interaction between India and China. Civilizations are not self-generated phenomena but are developed by interaction, assimilation, and adaptation (Toynbee, 1961). Both nations have been interacting with each other through civilizational interaction in the form of trade routes, religious movements, and intellectual movements. The civilizational interaction between India and China has given birth to the concept of “Asian Cosmopolitan Sphere,” in which “ideas, beliefs, and practices have circulated between different nations and regions of Asia” (Pollock, 1998).

An important theory for understanding civilizational interaction is cultural diffusion theory. The theory explains how new ideas and practices are disseminated between different nations through population movements, trade, and communication (Rogers, 2003). The most important example of cultural diffusion between India and China is the expansion of Buddhism. The expansion of Buddhism religion between India and China is an extremely important example of intellectual and spiritual interaction between two nations. The spread of Buddhism is a medium through which Indian philosophy, art, and literature were disseminated to China (Liu, 1988; Zürcher, 2007).

However, the change in India-China relations in the modern era is a result of the larger changes in global politics. The rise of nation-states, colonialism, and nationalism has significantly transformed the relations between India and China. According to Anderson (1983), nationalism has resulted in the development of imagined communities that have transformed the identity of the nation-state. India-China relations have been significantly influenced by nationalist and territorial concerns.

After the year 1947, there was a change from civilizational diplomacy to state-centric diplomacy in India-China relations. Sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security concerns were the key features of this change. The China-India war in 1962 was a significant change in the India-China relations paradigm. It introduced a long-term dimension of distrust in the relations between the two countries (Maxwell, 1970; Garver, 2001).



India-China relations in the modern era have introduced a new dimension of interdependence and conflict. On the one side, the relations between India and China have seen a significant increase in trade and investment flows. It is a result of the larger phenomenon of globalization in the modern era (World Bank, 2022). On the other, the relations between the two countries have seen a rise in tensions in the Indo-Pacific region.

This article has attempted to show that India-China relations must be seen as a dynamic interplay of continuity and change. India-China relations have seen a rise in trade and investment flows as a result of globalization in the modern era. However, historical memory and civilizational identity have significantly influenced the India-China relations paradigm.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative, historical-analytical. The study is based on secondary sources of data. In this study, the secondary sources of data include books, journal articles, historical books, and reports. These sources of data help in obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the historical development of the relationship as well as the contemporary dynamics of the relationship. The chronological method of analysis is used in the study. In this method, the history of the relationship is divided into three major phases: the ancient period, the colonial and post-independence period, and the contemporary period. In addition to the chronological method of analysis, the study also employs the thematic method of analysis. In the thematic method of analysis, the study focuses on the major aspects of the relationship, such as trade, cultural, religious, and strategic ties. Comparative analysis is also used in the study. In the comparative method of analysis, the similarities and differences between the different phases of the history of the relationship are identified. The inter-disciplinary nature of the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship.

Civilizational Exchange in the Pre-Modern Era

In the pre-modern era, the relations between India and China have been seen as being largely influenced by the processes of cultural, religious, and economic interaction between the two nations, as opposed to any direct political or diplomatic relations between them. As opposed to the relations between nations in the modern era, which are based on the concepts of sovereignty and strategic interests, the relations between these two civilizations in the pre-modern era are seen as being mediated through the processes of economic, religious, and intellectual interactions between them. Such interactions are seen as being



indicative of the concept of civilizational connectivity, which refers to interactions between civilizations through the processes of culture and intellect, cutting across regions (Sen, 2005).

One of the mechanisms that facilitated early interactions between these two civilizations was the Silk Road, a network of overland and maritime routes that connected South Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia. This network was used to transport commodities such as silk, spices, textiles, and medicinal products, which laid the basis for early economic interdependence between the two regions (Hansen, 2012; Liu, 1988). In addition to their economic significance, the Silk Road can also be seen to have facilitated the spread of ideas, technologies, and culture, which laid the basis for a trans-regional culture.

Of the various forms of interaction between these two civilizations, the spread of Buddhism from India to China can be seen to represent the most significant case of civilizational interaction. Buddhism originated in 6th century BCE in India, but later spread to China through Central Asia, particularly among merchants and Buddhist monks. This can be seen to exemplify the concept of cultural diffusion, which refers to the spread of culture or ideas through sustained interactions between societies (Rogers, 2003). However, Zürcher (2007) indicates that this was an adaptation of Buddhist culture in the context of Chinese culture.

The involvement of the Chinese pilgrims, such as Faxian and Xuanzang, was a vital aspect in this process. Their visit to India was based on the pursuit of authentic Buddhist scriptures and knowledge. After obtaining the desired knowledge, these pilgrims translated the important Buddhist texts into the Chinese language upon their return, thus institutionalizing Buddhism in the Chinese society (Beal, 1884; Sen, 2005). This led to the emergence of divergent traditions such as Chan (Zen) Buddhism, thus creating a fusion of Indian and Chinese philosophical ideas.

Another aspect that reveals the significance of the exchange between the two civilizations is the translation of the Buddhist texts. This reveals the importance of the exchange of ideas in the creation and sustenance of the interaction between the two civilizations. This exchange is based on the need to make the ideas and concepts consistent, as the philosophical ideas emanated from India and had to be translated into the Chinese worldview (Wright, 1959). This reveals the concept of hybridity, as proposed by Bhabha (1994), where the creation of new ideas is based on the fusion of divergent cultural ideas.

Another aspect, aside from the religious exchange, is the involvement of the two civilizations in the exchange of artistic and architectural ideas. For instance, the involvement of India in the creation and sustenance of the early Chinese Buddhist sculptures is evident, especially in the iconographic depictions



of the Buddha. The Gandhara style, which is a fusion of the Hellenistic and Indian styles, is evident in the early Chinese visual arts (Rowland, 1970).

Another aspect is the exchange in the knowledge systems, where the Indians imparted some of the knowledge in the field of science, especially in the areas of astronomy, mathematics, and medicine, which affected the Chinese in the creation and sustenance of the calendar and the medical systems.

Another important aspect was the maritime trade routes of the Indian Ocean, which complemented the overland routes. The maritime routes facilitated communication between the coastal regions of India and China, with cities like Guangzhou becoming centers of cultural interaction (Chaudhuri, 1985).

Thus, in conclusion, it may be said that the pre-modern era of India-China relations is a period of civilizational engagement, which has seen a great deal of cultural transfer and intellectual assimilation between the two nations.

Transformation in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Period

Colonial and post-colonial periods: This period witnessed a major shift in the nature of India-China relations, from civilizational relations to state-centric relations, which were influenced by nationalism, territoriality, and geopolitical factors. This was a major departure from the pre-modern era, in which relations between the two countries were limited to culture and were informal in nature, as characterized by the emergence of political relations, which were influenced by concepts of sovereignty and nation-states (Anderson, 1983).

The entry of European colonial powers into Asia resulted in a disruption of the traditional economic and cultural ties that existed between India and China, which were a part of the Asian region and were traditionally connected by economic and cultural ties (Bayly, 2004). The colonial powers, in their bid to consolidate power, restructured the economic systems of the region, which resulted in a weakening of the traditional ties between India and China (Bayly, 2004). The colonial period saw the establishment of colonial rule in India, while in China, the Qing Dynasty was facing a challenge from Western colonial powers, which resulted in instability in China (Fairbank, 1968).

The emergence of nation-states in the mid-20th century: The relations between India and China underwent a major shift in the mid-20th century, when both nations emerged as nation-states in 1947 and 1949, respectively, and sought a positive and mutually beneficial relationship, as characterized by the



Panchsheel Agreement of 1954, which was a reflection of the positive and cordial relations that existed between the two nations in the early days of their emergence as nation-states (Ministry of External Affairs, India).

Nevertheless, this cooperative relationship proved to be fragile, as underlying tensions, particularly with regards to the boundaries of the border, eventually resulted in conflict. The 1962 Sino-Indian War proved to be a turning point, marking a shift towards a relationship of strategic rivalry (Maxwell, 1970; Garver, 2001). The conflict, therefore, not only affected diplomatic relations but also impacted the way the two nations perceived one another.

In the post-colonial era, the significance of nationalism proved to be crucial in shaping India-China relations. According to Anderson (1983), nationalism creates a sense of identity, which in turn impacts political behavior. Nationalism, therefore, played a crucial role in shaping the relationship between India and China.

It is, therefore, argued that the evolution of India-China relations during this era reflects a shift from a relationship based on civilizational connectivity to one based on geopolitical rivalry. Although historical ties played a crucial role, they eventually gave way to a relationship based on strategic rivalry, thus marking a new era in India-China relations characterized by cooperation and conflict.

Economic Interdependence and Strategic Rivalry in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, India-China relations can be seen as a complex interplay of economic interdependence and rivalry. Since the early 2000s, trade relations between India and China have increased manifold, and China has become India's top trading partner. India-China trade has seen a significant increase in recent years, and China has become India's top trading partner, according to data from the World Bank (2022).

Despite the economic interdependence between India and China, the relationship is highly unbalanced and skewed in favor of China. India's trade deficit with China is widening, and India's imports from China are significantly higher than its exports to China. India's trade balance is continuously in favor of China. India's trade imbalance with China is a result of the structural difference between India and China in terms of their economic and technological development. China has a diversified and competitive manufacturing industry, and India is heavily dependent on China for the import of goods and services, including electronics, pharmaceuticals, and telecommunications.



Despite economic interdependence, India-China relations lack political trust and cooperation. India-China relations are now largely governed by geopolitical rivalry, especially on issues of border disputes. India-China relations witnessed a major turning point when Indian and Chinese forces clashed in the Galwan Valley in 2020. India-China relations have witnessed a major deterioration since the clash, and the relationship has become highly volatile and untrustworthy.

This duality can be comprehended in the theory of complex interdependence, which asserts the presence and potential for economic ties, along with political rivalry and conflicts, in the interstate system (Keohane & Nye, 1977). In the India-China case, though economic ties continue to strengthen, both states have concurrently followed strategies to reduce the level of strategic dependence. For instance, India has taken steps such as regulating Chinese investments, reviewing digital infrastructure, and attempts to reduce supply chain dependence through initiatives such as “Atmanirbhar Bharat” (Government of India, 2020).

Additionally, the rivalry has now spilled over into the larger Indo-Pacific region, where both states aim to enhance and enlarge the scope of their strategic influence. For instance, the Belt and Road Initiative by China and India’s engagement with the larger Quad alliance have highlighted the competitive nature of the bilateral relationship in the Indo-Pacific region (Shambaugh, 2013; Pant, 2019). In conclusion, the India-China bilateral ties in the 21st century reflect a state of competitive interdependence, where the two states have concurrently developed deep economic ties, along with a state of rivalry and conflict. Though the economic ties have the potential to offer opportunities for mutual advantages, the presence of unresolved conflicts and asymmetries continues to pose a limitation in the development of a stable and cooperative bilateral relationship.

Comparative Analysis: Continuity and Change

A comparative analysis of the relationship between India and China at various historical junctures reveals a complex relationship of continuity and change. The relationship has undergone significant changes in terms of political structures, economic considerations, and cultural exchanges. Despite changes in the nature of interaction from civilizational to strategic rivalry, some underlying aspects of historical connectivity continue to influence contemporary relations between the two nations (Sen, 2005).

During the pre-modern period, the relationship between India and China can be characterized by civilizational exchanges. The relationship between the two nations during this period can be attributed to cultural and intellectual exchanges through non-state actors. The relationship between the two nations



during this period can be characterized by a high degree of mutual learning and adaptation, particularly through the spread of Buddhism. The spread of Buddhism created a common platform for both nations, leading to a common culture and philosophy. The absence of political boundaries and the prevalence of informal associations ensured harmonious relations between the two nations. The relationship between India and China during this period can be characterized as a form of early transregional integration, as suggested by Abu-Lughod (1989).

However, with the emergence of modern states, a significant shift can be noted in the relationship between India and China. The modern period can be characterized by a significant shift from non-state to state-centric relations. The issue of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national identity gained prominence during the modern period. The emergence of modern states and colonialism redefined the relationship between India and China. The emergence of modern states redefined national identities. The relationship between India and China can be characterized by a significant shift from cooperation to strategic rivalry. The relationship between the two nations can be characterized by a significant shift from harmonious relations to strategic rivalry. The 1962 Sino-Indian War marked a significant shift in relations between the two nations. The relationship between India and China can be characterized by strategic rivalry since 1962.

Despite such changes, a degree of continuity is also noticeable, particularly with regards to the domain of economic and cultural interaction. In the current era, the degree of trade between the two countries is manifold, which is a reflection of the logic of globalization and economic interdependence in the domain of international relations (World Bank, 2022). However, it is pertinent to note here that such a situation is a sharp departure from the situation in the pre-modern and modern eras when the degree of economic interaction was not influenced by the policies of the state, the market forces of the world economy, or technology. Another degree of continuity with the current bilateral relations is the continued impact of historical memory or civilizational identity. It is noticeable here that the historical experiences of the two nations have a bearing on the current bilateral relations between India and China. As argued by Callahan (2010), the role of national narratives is quite significant with regards to the construction of foreign policy discourse.

However, it is also important to note that the current bilateral relations between India and China have a number of contradictions, and the economic exchange is accompanied by a degree of strategic rivalry. This phenomenon can be comprehended in the context of the concept of competitive interdependence, which has been used to explain the nature of international relations and the presence of a degree of



rivalry and interdependence in the bilateral relations between states (Keohane & Nye, 1977). India and China have a considerable degree of economic exchange and trade, but the bilateral relations are marked by a number of contradictions, including the border, regional, and global governance issues.

Moreover, the shift from the civilizational paradigm to the geopolitical paradigm has resulted in a considerable degree of change in the nature and extent of the bilateral relations between India and China. While the pre-modern and even the modern economic exchange between the two states was not subject to the influence of global geopolitics, the current relations have been impacted by the global politics and the presence of a degree of competitive interdependence in the bilateral relations. This is a reflection of the broader changes in the nature and character of the international system, where states exist in a competitive and interconnected global environment.

In conclusion, the evolution of India-China relations has shown a balance of continuity and change. While the nature and context of their interaction have undergone a sea of change, the undercurrents of their historical relationship have continued to influence their contemporary relations. It is imperative to understand this duality to grasp the intricacies of their relations and find a way forward.

Conclusion

India and China's relations have been a dynamic combination of continuity and change, and these have been affected by a number of political, economic, and civilizational factors. Their relations have seen a tremendous transformation over the years, from ancient civilizational ties to the current geopolitical ties, which have been affected by a number of developments and changes in the India-China relationship (Sen, 2005).

Their pre-modern relations were marked by civilizational connectivity and intellectual ties, but the current India-China relations have been affected by nationalism, territorialism, and strategicism, as compared to the pre-modern relations, which were marked by civilizational ties and intellectual ties (Anderson 1983; Maxwell 1970). The current India-China relations have been marked by a combination of economic interdependence and geopolitical tensions, which is a reflection of the logic of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1977).

However, it is important to note that despite the tremendous transformation in the India-China relations, civilizational ties have still played a significant role in the current India-China relations, which is a reflection of the historical memory of the India-China relationship (Callahan 2010). Therefore, it is



important to understand that the India-China relations cannot be viewed in purely strategic terms but need to be related to the civilizational ties as well.

Moreover, it is important to understand that despite the economic ties between India and China, the trade ties between the two countries have still not been balanced, and the territorial ties have still not been resolved, and therefore it is important for the two countries to look at a more balanced approach in the India-China relations, where economic ties need to be linked with the confidence-building and diplomatic ties between the two countries (Pant and Joshi 2021).

It is important to understand that the future India-China relations would be determined by the ability of the two countries to achieve a balance between competition and cooperation, and the ability of the two countries to use the civilizational ties in a way to foster a better understanding between the two countries.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my college 'Ramlal Anand College, University of Delhi' for giving me such a great opportunity to write a research paper. It would not have been possible without my institution's support. Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisor Mr. Kaptan Sir who guided me in right direction to write a good research paper. Further I would like to thank all my batchmates as well as entire Political Science department of my college for motivating me to write this research article.

References

- Abu-Lughod, J. L. (1989). *Before European hegemony: The world system A.D. 1250–1350*. Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Bayly, C. A. (2004). *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914*. Blackwell.
- Beal, S. (1884). *Buddhist records of the Western world* (Vols. 1–2). Trübner & Co.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Buzan, B. (2010). *China in international society: The Chinese century?* Routledge.
- Callahan, W. A. (2010). *China: The pessoptimist nation*. Oxford University Press.



- Chaudhuri, K. N. (1985). *Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An economic history from the rise of Islam to 1750*. Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. (2003). *Comparative civilizations and multiple modernities*. Brill.
- Fairbank, J. K. (1968). *The Chinese world order: Traditional China's foreign relations*. Harvard University Press.
- Garver, J. W. (2001). *Protracted contest: Sino-Indian rivalry in the twentieth century*. University of Washington Press.
- Hansen, V. (2012). *The Silk Road: A new history*. Oxford University Press.
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. Simon & Schuster.
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1977). *Power and interdependence*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Lall, S., & Albaladejo, M. (2004). China's competitive performance: A threat to East Asian manufactured exports? *World Development*, 32(9), 1441–1466.
- Liu, X. (1988). *Ancient India and ancient China: Trade and religious exchanges*. Oxford University Press.
- Maxwell, N. (1970). *India's China war*. Jonathan Cape.
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2021). *India–China relations official reports*. Government of India.
- Mohan, C. R. (2003). *Crossing the Rubicon: The shaping of India's new foreign policy*. Viking.
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Needham, J. (1959). *Science and civilisation in China*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pant, H. V. (2012). *India rising: Responsible to whom?* Routledge.
- Pant, H. V., & Joshi, Y. (2021). India–China relations after Galwan: The future of the relationship. *International Affairs*, 97(2), 507–523.
- Pollock, S. (1998). The cosmopolitan vernacular. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57(1), 6–37.
- Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). Free Press.
- Rowland, B. (1970). *The art and architecture of India*. Penguin Books.
- Sen, A. (2005). *The argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian history, culture and identity*. Allen Lane.



- Tellis, A. J. (2017). *Troubles, they come in battalions: The manifold challenges of the Sino-Indian rivalry*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zürcher, E. (2007). *The Buddhist conquest of China: The spread and adaptation of Buddhism in early medieval China* (3rd ed.). Brill.