

## **India's Foreign Policy Towards China: A Decade Of UPA Government (2004-2014)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The stunning rise of China and India is one of the most commendable developments in contemporary world politics. The increasing power aspirations of China and its more assertive posture in Asia makes the management of its relations with China, one of the major challenges for India's foreign policy. Moreover, there are some issues, most notably the border issue and Pakistan factor, that complicate the relationship between the two Asian giants. At the same time, both the nations are experiencing an unparalleled overlapping of interests in the drastically shifting economic, political and strategic environment. Under these circumstances, the UPA Government has endeavoured to bring about a new paradigm in the relations between India and China, whereby the two countries can cooperate to promote these convergent interests in the international arena even while being firm on protecting India's national interests on areas where there is a divergence of interests. This chapter will trace the evolution of relations between both countries from 2004 to 2014 with a view to find out to what extent this dual approach (cooperating with China on areas of convergent interests while being firm on protecting India's interest on areas of divergent interests) of the UPA Government has been successful.

**Key words:** India-China, UPA government, foreign policy, bilateral relations, Manmohan Singh

## **Introduction**

Once great powers, India and China are again back as claimants to pre-eminence in Asia as well as in the world. The world's two oldest civilizations are now account for 35 percent of total world population with 15 percent of total geographical area of the world and are the giants of the developing world in terms of economic growth. The simultaneous ascendance of China and India is one of the most significant events in the contemporary uni-polar world politics. Together they characterize as a redoubtable force in the sphere of economic, political and security affairs at the continental as well as at the global scenario. India and China are profoundly engaged in international economy and seize nuclear powers with expanding military capabilities to cope with their rising ambitions [1]. When comparing their steadily growing power and aspirations, China is more assertive posture in Asia so the management of China's rise is one of the major challenges for India's foreign policy. But India never exposed such a strategic framework in its China policy because that would be perceived as incoherent and reactive [2].

In the beginning of bilateral relations, India had supported China's entry into international community in the 1950s and the then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru had always been a firm advocate of closer collaboration between the two Asian giants. However, India's trounce in the war of 1962 and the discordant border issue that erupted in war had broken Nehru's idealistic visions. Then the visit of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988 opened up novel episode in the mutual relations. India's rapprochement with China improved markedly during the 1990s which led to a momentous hike in trade. Still the trepidations about China's territorial claims in India's northeast and its intimate cooperation with Pakistan even today strain reciprocal engagements [3]. Practically, India encounters the challenge of balancing its desire to expand economic bond with China with its anxiety about China's strategic intentions, particularly along the disputed China-India border and in the Indian Ocean [4]. Despite of their apprehensions over major border disputes in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, China and India have cooperated successfully in international problems like climate change as well as trade talks, there they represent a significant portion of a 'developing country' bloc and found much cohesion in their agendas [5].

The historical legacy of China-India relations constructs mixed attitude within India towards forging cordial relations with China. This has been seen in the mindset of political parties too, while the left parties like the Communist party of India (Marxist) has constantly favours friendly relations with China, the right wing parties plus some people inside the security establishment examine China as a major security threat. Yet, India's own focus on its internal development encourages constructive dealings with China [6]. Here the question is whether the two nations can find common grounds to work together in asserting a vision of the world that is equally beneficial for them or their mutual conflicts will avert them from forming a partnership that has broader implication. During the UPA government, India and China has succeeded in an extent to shed their wariness toward each other by initiating measures to stabilize their cooperation such as regular high-level visits. Actually this rapprochement is intended at the mutual need to focus on social and political stability, economic development and the sense of security for evading the perils of stagnation or declension. Various analysts has the observation that the potential for a synergic partnership is enormous from 2005 when they begun to use the term 'chindia', a term proposed for the first time by India's Member of Parliament Mr. Jairam Ramesh in his book *Making Sense of Chindia: Reflection on China and India* [7].

When Manmohan Singh took over as Prime Minister of India in 2004, the expectations were high due to his particular interest in foreign policy [8]. The UPA government under the leadership of Manmohan Singh had persistent on adding to a long haul constructive and cooperative partnership with China on the basis of the principles of Panchsheel, mutual respect and sensitivity for each other's alarms and equality. In addition, the official policy towards China is not only conducive to their socio-economic development and prosperity but also to reinforcing multi-polarity in the world and expanding the positive aspects of globalisation [9]. Surprisingly, Chinese leaders exhibited 'positive vibes' and affable attitude towards the Indian counterpart which has been missing since the 1950's bonhomie. From the part of China the pronouncements of their objective to deepen ties with India as the country's 'strategic choice' together with promise to make 'greater efforts' to resolve boundary question has achieved momentum. President Xi expressed his opinion in such a way that the Chinese and Indian 'dreams' are interconnected as well as mutually compatible. Indian leadership responded to this in an equally positive voice by rejecting the relevance of 'containment' idea in favour of 'cooperation' that

could bring more gains in its place. The overall message was that the time for confronting and containing each other is ended and the wisdom should lay in cooperation and benefiting from achievements for the common good. The two obvious signs were: a) the 'strategic partnership' initiated in 2005 was yielding enduring outcomes in a wide spectrum and b) leadership has attained higher level of confidence. Thus the India-China cooperation during UPA phase has been much positive than negative tone [10]. National Security advisor Shivshankar Menon showed up at the Chinese embassy in Delhi to underline the strong commitment of the UPA government to elevate the bilateral relationship with china [11].

## **Sino-Indian Engagement 2004-2014**

The UPA Government has devised its foreign policy approach towards China on the basis of power politics and in consonance with the existing global power equations. This policy dynamics was evident in the signing of Nuclear Deal with United States in July 2005 which was a landmark event. Besides, the Indo-US cooperation has extended to other areas like terrorism, economy, science and technology, etc. Although, the growing close partnerships between India and other major powers were not allowed to hamper in any way the cordial relations with China [12]. Moreover, the China-India strategic and cooperative joint ventures for peace and prosperity has expanded swiftly with more substantive interaction between two governments, much deeper understanding of each other's positions on key concerns and much more acknowledgment of common intentions. By means of the mounting economic and commercial ties, there is physical connectivity as well as unprecedented flow of ideas has occurred, for example the year 2011 was the year of China-India exchanges. Again, both the countries have engaged in a number of constructive dialogues on matters including political, economic, cultural and defence cooperation [13].

## **Political Relations:**

The Chinese government and media had welcomed the regime change in India in the year 2004, which brought into power a Left Front supported Congress-led coalition. Beijing trusted that the Communist-backed government would be sufficiently deferential and avoid taking actions like nuclear tests which would incur their wrath. In the precedent years, successive Congress governments had soft-peddled divergences with China with the aim of maintaining friendly mutual relations [14]. During the UPA period, Beijing and New Delhi have assumed

practical and flexible policies to guarantee that the ongoing parleys do not become impediments to the improvement of responsive engagements. Thus the partnership has turned into more mature in sharp contrast to the emotional approach in the past due to their differences on the boundary problem [15]. The exchange of visits by leaders indicated the importance of the relationship and high level interaction plays an important role in improving Sino-Indian relations. Major high-level exchange visits between the two countries have taken place in 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2013. This exciting sequence of high-level diplomatic and strategic meetings and negotiations over the period of UPA government has been made earnest headway in resolving some of the focal concerns [16]. Since January 2005, both the nations have initiated several rounds of strategic discussions that are intended at enhancing higher level coordination and cover multiple topics of common concern ranging from the boundary question, confidence building measures (CBMs) and India's aspiration to achieve permanent membership in the UN Security Council to issues of non-proliferation, anti-terrorism and nuclear security. When Premier Wen Jiabao visited India in March 2005, the governments of India and China asserted a strategic partnership towards peace and prosperity and the character of partnership is to keep away from confrontation, encourage friendship and intensify economic interaction [17].

In November 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao's visited India in that occasion two sides issued a Joint Declaration containing a ten-pronged strategy to intensify cooperation. Also the year 2006 was known as 'India-China friendship year'. Again, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh visited China in January 2008 and during the trip a joint document titled "A Shared Vision for the 21st Century" was issued. During the time of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India in December 2010, trade was the primary agenda and the two sides together lay down a bilateral trade target of US\$ 100 billion for 2015. Mr. Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China made a State visit to India in May 2013. Premier Li chose India as his first overseas stop and this was a deliberate choice to reemphasise the significance of their relationship. At the time of the visit, they inked eight agreements and released a Joint Statement. The noteworthy proposals contained in the Joint Statement were the decision to designate 2014 as the Year of Friendly Exchanges between India and China and decision to conduct the first High Level Media Forum. Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh paid an official visit to China in October 2013 and he became part of the agreements pertained to border, trans-border Rivers,

establishing service centers for servicing power equipment in India, road transport and Nalanda University [18]. The high-level political connectivity between the two nations has kept all over this period which reflected the determination of both the countries to extend cordial relations despite the existence of differences over the boundary dispute and the Pakistan factor.

## **Cultural Exchanges:**

India and China has brought their people together through structured Cultural Exchange Programmes (CEP) from 1988 onwards. The latest CEP has signed in 2013 during the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to China which provided for cooperation in a gamut of cultural fields including exchanges of trips of performing artists, officials, writers, archivists as well as archaeologists, organizing cultural festivals, film festivals and exchanges in the field of mass media, youth affairs plus sports. At the time of the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India in 2006, both sides agreed to commence a five year programme for reciprocal exchange of youth delegation. Since 2007 Exchange of Youth delegation between Indian and China has been continuing. During Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to India for the BRICS Summit of 2012 leaders of two countries determined to celebrate 2012 as the 'The Year of Friendship and Co-operation'. Besides they decided to further strengthen cultural exchanges between their citizens. Youth exchanges have been encouraged, while the youth of China expressed great desire to know Buddhism, Bollywood and Yoga, young people of India expressed their admiration to the Chinese economic miracle [19].

During the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India in December 2010, the leaders of India and China concord on a project involving compilation of an Encyclopaedia of India-China Cultural Contacts. And the Encyclopaedia of India-China Cultural Contacts has released in English and Chinese versions in 2014 in Beijing during Vice President Hamid Ansari's visit to China. The Encyclopaedia attributes over 700 entries, encapsulating the rich history of contacts and exchanges between India and China in the spheres of trade, economy, literature, culture and philosophy [20]. During the visit of Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and Premier Li Keqiang in 2013, they destined 2014 as the Year of Friendly Exchanges between India and China. To commemorate the special year of 2014, Glimpses of India Festival was organized across numerous cities of China by showcasing Indian performing arts, exhibitions of modern

Indian arts, depictions of Buddhism links between the two countries, food and film festivals etc. [21].

**Economic Ties:**

Ever growing economic ties between the world's two fastest growing economies have become the most salient aspect of the mutual partnership. Reciprocally advantageous economic cooperation could provide a bolster in times of crisis over potential nuclear and military security matters [22]. The Manmohan Singh government had pursued the goal of robustly building economic dealings with China and on the other side China was responsive to the constructive economic engagement with India. China has come out as India's strongest trading partner and the investment options between the two nations have increased considerably [23]. In the analysis of bilateral trade shows that most of the time China has attained trade surplus but from a temporary decline in the influx of Chinese imports in the Indian markets, the scenario has altered many times and India also has enjoyed a positive balance of trade with China. The trade relations of the two countries are regulated by India China Joint Business Council (JBC), which guarantees a free exchange of products and services between India and China. In unison, they believed and the governments of both the countries expressed on different occasions that they cannot grow fast in isolation from each other and if they co-operate each other they will get more benefits [24]. India-China mutual trade was as low as US\$ 2.92 billion in 2000 that attained US\$ 41.85 billion in 2008, making China as India's largest trading partner in goods by substituting the United States of America [25]. The emergence of China as India's biggest trading partner in the year 2008 indicates that they have been ushering into a new-fangled phase of association mostly guided by economics and commercial components [26]. Bilateral economic trade has exposed tremendous escalation during the tenure of UPA government, from a mere US\$ 133.5 million in 1988, total trade has reached nearly US\$ 70 billion in 2014 [27].

Likewise, it is equally remarkable that the priority given by the top leaders in each country to their economic interactions. Indeed, it is evident from their declarations as they are inserting an inordinate amount of hope and confidence on the economic front to bring their broader engagements closer. The visit of President Hu Jintao in 2006 was the first by a Chinese head of state to India in a period of ten years and economics was again got immense precedence in the catalogue of conversations. The years 2012 and 2013 demonstrated a downturn in trade but

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has remained bullish on expanding economic cooperation with China. An India-China Strategic Economic Dialogue was set up in 2010 under which cooperation in fields like railways, high technology and energy are encouraged [28]. It has been empirically confirmed that bilateral trade has bestowed great advantage to both the countries even though there is enormous potential in both the countries to boost their mutual transactions further [29]. At any circumstances, it is palpable that trade has come to be seen as an increasingly chief navigator of relations by both sides particularly in the light of lingering political mistrust on a number of wide ranging problems spanning from the long running border dispute to China's all weather rapport with Pakistan [30].

## **Defence Cooperation:**

The tenure of UPA government has witnessed lots of cooperation in the field of defence. A bilateral dialogue mechanism has been instituted to forge better cooperation in defence ties. As a component of larger confidence building exercise, both the countries have been carrying out joint military training and army exercise. Also, India and China have agreed to cooperate jointly on the anti-piracy missions because both are the victims of piracy. India has not much influenced by the ongoing China's military and strategic modernization programmes on the reason that China's requirements are dissimilar from India's needs to an extent. China's deeds with regard to its strategic capabilities are predominantly steered by the affairs in the United States. India understands the military build up of China with great maturity hence, the only worry which India constantly has the magnitude of escalating Sino-Pakistan nexus. Consequently, from the side of India arises certainly a fear that Pakistan will gain from the ongoing strategic modernization agenda in China thereby have negative repercussions as well as wider ramifications for India's national security [31]. The role of China in strengthening Pakistan's conventional arm, missile and nuclear capabilities has been a major part of their bilateral relationship. In reality, no other Asian country has ever armed on such a level and consistent mode over such long period of time as China executing in Pakistan. This is on the reason that China deems their involvement in Pakistan as a balance of power approach which would serve the rationale of countervailing the increasing nuclear capacities of India [32]. On the other hand India was well aware of the reality that despite being major source of arms supply to Pakistan, China was interested in putting up good relations with India.

Indian Chief of Army Staff's (COAS) visit to China on December 2004 gave a boost to the rising military contacts between India and China. The Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited China in May 2006 in order to promote cooperation in the defence sector and trim down tension on the Sino-Indian border. Additionally, the two sides inked a Memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation, commenced annual defence dialogue, formalized Joint Military exercises and training programmes, counter terrorism and called for study tours by senior and mid-level officials of each other's lands [33]. In the field of defence, they set up an annual defence dialogue in 2006 and conducted joint counter-terrorism exercises on the unit level in 2007 and 2008 [34]. The army to army cooperation as a part of Annual Defence Dialogue (ADD) has begun between China and India in December 2008. The Joint Defence on Sino-Indian Training exercises were code named 'Hand-in-Hand 2008' which was intended to increase and strengthen military to military cooperation between the two armed forces [35]. Then, the 2013 border defence cooperation agreement have facilitated in managing misunderstandings and the pushing as well as shoving that occurs from the undemarcated boundary [36].

### **Confronting Issues:**

At the root of mutual mistrust and perpetual source of distress plus suspicion is the unresolved border dispute that stays on as a thorn in the mutual partnership. Likewise, China's military, nuclear, economic, political and diplomatic support to Pakistan is a major cause of concern for Indians. The Line of Actual Control (LAC), distinguishing the disputed Indian and Chinese sides of the border rests undemarcated with no joint accord on the precise alignments of the border [37]. In spite of the talks since 1981, the strenuous strives by successive Prime Ministers such as Rajiv Gandhi's visit in 1988, Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit in 2003, Manmohan Singh's talk with Premier Wen Jiabao in 2005 and President Hu Jintao in 2006, Manmohan Singh's visit in January 2008 and a mixture of other channels like the Special Representatives talks, there has barely been any improvement on the demarcation or delineation of the LAC on the ground or on military maps thus LAC has become a matter of sensitivity [38].

India-China relations claimed some success when the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited India in April 2005. The Chinese Premier's visit to India was a milestone in Indo-China relations because on that occasion Chinese Premier formally recognized Sikkim as an inalienable

part of India and regarded that Sikkim was no longer a concern in India-China relations. He also handed over the modified Chinese map to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh which exhibited Sikkim within the international boundaries of India. In addition, both the countries set out political parameters and guiding principles to settle border disputes. But the Indian side repudiated to reiterate its support for one China policy and China's suzerainty over Tibet at the end of the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to New Delhi in December 2010. This is to show its assertiveness in its dealing with China due to the criticism faced by Manmohan Singh Government that its soft image was letting its foreign policy down. During United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, India began to steadily raise the number of Indo-Tibetan Border Police in Arunachal Pradesh, add new border outposts, and maintain a more forward position along the disputed border to dissuade any Chinese incursions [39].

In some circumstances international forums have turned into a competitive arena for the two where they have tried to marginalize or refute access to each other. For example, in 2008 China attempted to resist the Indo-US deal that would permit the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to trade nuclear materials with India. Similarly such roadblocks have been encountered by India at the East Asia Summit (EAS), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Asian Development Bank (ADB), etc. On the other, where India has larger influence, it has in the same way tried to contain Chinese access or influence such as at the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Mekong Ganges Cooperation (MGC) forums [40]. Meanwhile, some observers have the opinion that India has been playing somewhat a 'double game' to balance the pursuit of its national interest and its position vis-a-vis China. For instance, India's 'Look-East' Policy has been put to the test as India bumps shoulders with China in forging diplomatic dealings with ASEAN countries [41]. In the meantime, India and China could work cooperatively on a number of bilateral, regional, and international matters, including the construction of building blocks for innovative Asian security architecture [42]. In its relations with China the Manmohan government has always maintained a strategic balance by continuing with confidence building and economic engagement on the one hand and defending its decisive security interests in its foreign policy towards the world on the other. Anyway the trajectory laid down by the incumbent UPA government with China will endure.

## Conclusion

Between 2004 and 2014, India-China showed a rapprochement in their relations that focused on economic and de-emphasizing their border issues. There was a concerted endeavour from the part of UPA government for the institutionalized engagement to secure a healthy, stable and constructive bilateral relationship between India and China. Besides the multi-layered strategic consultation, the political will to deepen strategic engagement in a constructive, credible and sustainable manner was tremendously obvious in this tenure. In the midst of irritants most notably the border issue and Pakistan factor both nations have experienced an unparallel convergence of interests in the rapidly changing economic, political and strategic environment of the globe. Today both nations are re-focusing their foreign policy beyond their regional concerns than to the global economic and geo-strategic interests. Comparing to the UPA government, the recent trends indicate that both India and China would remain highly competitive in the global and regional trade and economic domain and would continue to compete for status and influence in the international arena in general and in the Asian region in particular.

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