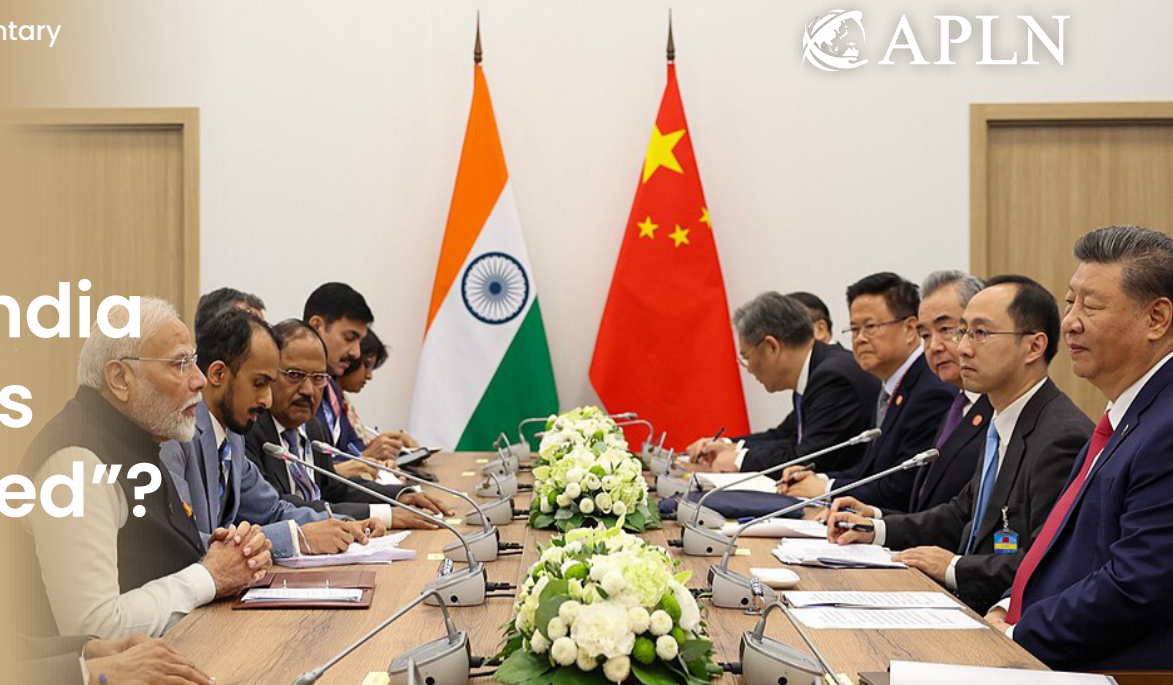


# Have China-India Relations “Restarted”?

Lin Minwang



The military standoff and tension on the China-India border are about to end. On 21 October 2024, India’s Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, [announced at a press conference](#) that India and China have reached an agreement on border patrolling. The next day, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian also [confirmed the agreement](#), adding that China and India have maintained close communication on issues concerning the China-India border area, through diplomatic and military channels. Speaking in Canberra on 5 November 2024, India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar [said](#) that “the disengagement process is nearly complete.” This means that the military standoff in the western sector of the China-India border, which erupted in 2020, is now expected to deescalate.

## A Long Standoff Comes to an End

This China-India border standoff of 2020 is one of the longest military standoffs between two nuclear powers since the end of the Cold War, and it is also the most serious border skirmishes between the two countries in last 50 years. Both sides suffered troop casualties, and the confidence-building mechanism on the China-India border has been severely impacted and damaged because of it. From June 2020 to September 2022, the two sides successively achieved disengagement at Galwan (加勒万), Pangong Lake (班公湖), Wen Quan (温泉; the Indian side calls it Gogra), Jianan Pass (加南达; the Indian side calls it Hot Springs). Since then, this process had been suspended. However, it took the two countries more than two years to fully turn the page on this controversial issue.

The agreement on border patrolling has obviously been a result of years of negotiations. Only through mutual understanding and mutual concessions can a result acceptable to both sides be achieved. According to disclosures by senior Indian officers to the media, the two militaries will patrol disputed areas on the border according to an agreed schedule, to avoid future clashes. For both sides, this means that they have regained the right to patrol the disputed Depsang area/ Tiannan River Valley (天南河谷) and Demchok area (典角), and their right to patrol in disputed areas will be guaranteed by the agreement. At the same time, their territorial sovereignty claims and positions remain unchallenged.

## The Need to Deescalate

The 2024 China-India border agreement may seem very “sudden.” However, considering the ongoing global situation, it also seemed natural that China and India would finally break the deadlock at this time. The 2024 border agreement provides a foundation for the improvement and normalization of China-India relations. This also makes it difficult for the Indian side, in the future, to come up with seemingly convincing reasons and excuses to block the improvement of bilateral relations.

First of all, the value of India using the “American card” in its China strategy is constantly declining, while its risks are constantly rising. In the past few years, the downturn in China-India bilateral relations has been synchronized with the deterioration of China-US relations. India has taken advantage of the opportunity provided by the Sino-Indian border standoff to enhance its relationship with the United States, and at the same time it has also pressured China through the “American card” to accept India’s claims on the border, especially the so-called restoration to the situation before April 2020. However, during the four-year border standoff, China has remained firm in its stance and has not succumbed to pressure by the quasi-alliance between India and the United States, which may have led India to realize that playing the “American card” against China is not so effective. Moreover, as the US-India defense relationship deepens, both sides have discovered increasingly significant strategic and policy differences, even in terms of ideology. What the United States wants is for India to join in the encirclement of China, but it is unwilling to provide a more explicit commitment to security assistance for India in return. On the contrary, it has risked India to come in direct confrontation with China on the Sino-Indian border.

Secondly, India hoped to obtain a great opportunity to assert its power in the region by relying on its strategic partnership with the United States. However, in the past few years, India may have realised that in an increasingly confrontational geopolitical order, the strategic cost of “relying on” the United States is too high, while the obtained strategic benefits are too few. Due to its strategic collusion with the United States, India has sacrificed the goodwill and strategic friendship with traditional friendly countries such as Russia and Iran. At the same time, it has not obtained the expected support and recognition from its Western partners. On the contrary, countries such as Canada, who are members of the Five Eyes Alliance, still continue to support the “Khalistan movement” that foments separatist forces in India. The United States promotes “economic decoupling” from China, but it has not brought much economic benefits to India. Furthermore, the failure of India’s China policy has accelerated the need for policy adjustment. Whether in terms of border demands (restoration to the situation before April 2020) or the strategy of decoupling from China economically, India has not achieved its goals.

The border standoff with China has led to a [huge burden on India](#), especially in terms of infrastructure construction at the border and competition in economic development at the border-village; the policy of economic ‘decoupling’ from the Chinese economy – that is attempts to reduce its economic dependence on China— has failed and in fact been contradicted by a continuous [rise in the volume of bilateral trade](#) since 2021; the [strict visa policy](#) for Chinese technicians has led to difficulties for Indian industry and businesses using Chinese technologies and products. In India’s neighborhood diplomacy, taking China as the object of prevention has led to systematic setbacks for India in its relationships with neighboring countries. In this year’s general elections in countries neighboring India, political forces that are anti-India or campaign on an “India Out” agenda came to power. In contrast, these political forces welcome China’s greater economic presence in South Asia.

In May 2024, after Narendra Modi began his third term as Prime Minister, India's foreign policy strategy gradually returned to "multi-alignment." Prime Minister Modi visited Moscow in July 2024. The border disengagement agreement with China further paved the way for a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan, on October 23, 2024. The meeting between the leaders of the two countries officially confirmed that China-India relations will turn a new page. Prime Minister Modi put forward ideas and suggestions on improving and developing bilateral relations, and President Xi expressed this agreement. The two sides made more specific plans for subsequent strategic contacts and dialogues, including an early meeting of Special Representatives on the Boundary Question, the Foreign Ministers and other officials at various levels of the two countries to strengthen communication and cooperation on various bilateral issues. More importantly, both sides agreed that this Summit leaders' meeting was constructive and of great significance. They agreed to view and handle China-India relations on a strategic and long-term basis, not allowing specific differences to affect the overall situation of bilateral relations, and making positive contributions to regional and world peace and prosperity and promoting world multipolarity.

Undoubtedly, China-India relations have entered a track of improvement, and normalization is just around the corner. It is now to be seen how long will it take to reach this normalization.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Cover image:** Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi in a bilateral meeting with the President of the People's Republic of China, Mr. Xi Jinping, on the sidelines of the 16th BRICS Summit at Kazan, in Russia on October 23, 2024. Wikimedia Commons.

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