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Policy paper

China – India: the Sino-Indian spring, mirage, reality or necessity?

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SUMMARY

Executive summary	3
The ‘way of the air’, a very empirical symbolism	4
New Delhi, the BRICS summit and the arrival of Xi Jinping	4
Trade – however unbalanced it may be (in Beijing's favor) –, a critical engine that must not seize up	6
Multipolarity, opportunities... and rivalries	7
The Sino-Pakistani dynamic, more ostentatious (and redhibitory?) than ever	7
Arunachal Pradesh, the concrete theater of Sino-Indian rivalries	9
The 13th Beijing Xiangshan Forum (September 15-17): some (positive) lessons for New Delhi	9
Recommandations	13

Executive summary

At the end of September, a stone's throw from the UN headquarters in New York, where the 81st annual session of its General Assembly was taking place—a major diplomatic event and international media showcase if ever there was one—, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar confided in a few sentences to a rapt audience his "good" opinion of the current state of the volatile Sino-Indian relationship:

"If you ask me whether the (India-China) relationship is better today compared to the situation in 2025, I would answer in the affirmative. This is even more true if we compare it with 2024. After the 2020 standoff [1], all 'normal contacts' between the two countries ceased. While trade continued, official relations, visa issuance, and air links were affected (...). Once the border crisis was resolved, it was natural for the situation to begin improving. What we are seeing is that as the situation at the border returns to normal, the bilateral relationship is also returning to normal... If this materializes, we will both benefit." [2]

Indeed, one could not put it better; nor find a more fitting tone to both (with restraint) acknowledge the evident improvement in the current situation, while guarding against any premature and dangerous excesses of optimism regarding the future developments in this calmer chapter.

In the following paragraphs, a quick look at some symbolic manifestations attesting the ongoing easing of relations between the Dragon and the Elephant; and to the multiple (insurmountable?) obstacles standing in their way at the end of 2026.

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The ‘way of the air’, a very empirical symbolism

Shortly before the Chinese president's trip to India for the BRICS Summit (New Delhi; September 12-13; see paragraph below), China Southern Airlines announced the imminent resumption of direct flights between Guangzhou and the Indian capital, after a six-year hiatus[3]. Six months earlier, Air India had also resurrected its direct service between New Delhi and bustling Shanghai, again after a six-year hiatus that had made life difficult for the business community and the travel of businesspeople from Asia's largest and second-largest economies.

Meanwhile, Indian and Chinese authorities are currently discussing a possible opening of Xinjiang (Chinese East Turkestan) airspace to Indian airlines providing services to Europe or North America impacted (in terms of operating costs and flight time) by the ban on overflying Pakistani airspace decreed by Islamabad in the spring of 2025[4], following the most serious Indo-Pakistani hostilities in a quarter of a century (Kargil crisis; April-July 1999).

New Delhi, the BRICS summit and the arrival of Xi Jinping

On September 12 and 13, the Indian capital hosted the 18th BRICS summit, this multilateral forum of the Global South bringing together a dozen states[5] with "emerging economies."

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While the previous annual session did not include Chinese President Xi Jinping among its participants, this year was different, with him arriving in New Delhi at the head of a veritable Chinese armada of several hundred people (officials, businesspeople, journalists); an impressive number that speaks volumes about the importance the world's second-largest economy attaches to this event. It was also an opportunity for the leader of the former Middle Kingdom to use this alternative forum to assert (in a more confident tone) Beijing's ambitions in an international context where disorder and posturing are increasingly taking precedence over fundamental principles and decorum among the actors in the international community.

Seven years after his last visit to the land of Gandhi and Nehru (in 2019), the Chinese president was (therefore) back in the homeland of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A year earlier, Modi had made his first official visit to the People's Republic in seven years. In terms of reciprocity, the symbolism is powerful and carries double weight in these Asian countries, which are highly sensitive to these issues.

Some will have noted, however, the relative lack of warmth in the much-anticipated handshake (about twenty seconds; an eternity visibly for some) between these leaders of the two largest populations on the planet, united in the face of the heavy fire of the hundreds of journalists and photographers immortalizing the moment.

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Trade – however unbalanced it may be (in Beijing's favor) –, a critical engine that must not seize up

In 2025-2026, the total volume of Sino-Indian trade exceeded €130 billion; a highly profitable bilateral trade for Beijing, which recorded a comfortable surplus that year (a trade surplus of around €100 billion). The current fiscal year is following a similar pattern: in August, the trade deficit weighing down India's accounts already exceeded €80 billion, finally forcing New Delhi to consider some drastic measures to try to address this decidedly unfavorable accounting situation[6].

Thus, the Indian government recently eased restrictions on foreign direct investment (FDI) from Chinese companies, allowing them to acquire stakes of up to 10% in Indian companies. At the same time, New Delhi introduced an expedited approval process (within two months) for investment projects in high-tech sectors[7]. As a result, in Q2 2026, Indian exports[8] to neighboring China increased significantly (+40% between April and August), much to the delight of Prime Minister Modi, Indian public finances, and businesses.

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Multipolarity, opportunities… and rivalries

These undeniably increasing economic and trade interactions (bilateral trade was less than €3 billion in 2000; €55 billion in 2010; €68 billion in 2020; and €138 billion in 2025!) cannot, of course, bring New Delhi and Beijing closer together on all levels, nor make these two Asia-Pacific titans the best of friends, nor erase a long history of differences and disputes. Regarding the recent Trump-Xi-Jinping summit at the White House (September 23-25), Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar stated that, notwithstanding obvious points of convergence, Washington and Beijing nevertheless remain competitors[9]. Is this an analogy to the current state of the Sino-Indian relationship? And the former Indian ambassador to China and the United States prophesied that major capitals will continue to adapt to the evolving global situation by forging new partnerships and concluding new agreements…

The Sino-Pakistani dynamic, more ostentatious (and redhibitory?) than ever

On October 1st, in the capital of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, at a reception celebrating the 77th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Pakistani Prime Minister S. Sharif—while pointedly noting that Islamabad and Beijing were also celebrating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations this year—highlighted the close ties between the two countries to his Chinese guests:

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"Pakistan is extremely proud of our unwavering strategic cooperative partnership with China, "he declared, emphasizing that the "unbreakable" friendship between the two nations had stood the test of time[10]. In harmonious response to these pleasantries —reciprocal and customary in both capitals—the representative from Beijing paraphrased the host country's head of government verbatim, speaking of "unwavering strategic cooperative partners" and "brothers bound by unbreakable friendship."

These demonstrations of (perhaps superficial?) esteem were certainly not exceptional, but they would in no way have aroused such enthusiasm in the Indian capital. This is all the more true given that, just two weeks earlier, Beijing and Islamabad had formalized a border demarcation in a disputed Himalayan region[11] by creating the Pakistan-China Boundary Joint Commission, predictably provoking the anger of New Delhi.

While Pakistani authorities view this bilateral mechanism as an "important step" intended to strengthen (Sino-Pakistani) cooperation in border management, trade, and connectivity, their Indian counterparts were much less enthusiastic about this initiative, which they consider "devoid of any legal basis", asserting to both Islamabad and Beijing: "Pakistan has no standing to enter into agreements concerning Indian territory that it occupies illegally and by force." [12]

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Arunachal Pradesh, the concrete theater of Sino-Indian rivalries

In August, the Chinese media, usually quick to react when an Indian initiative concerns "disputed territories" - in this case the Northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh - were irritated by the recent designation by their usual Indian name on the new official maps of some thirty distinct places and sites scattered throughout this eastern Indian Himalayan state, denouncing an initiative "going against the dynamic of improving bilateral relations, likely to complicate efforts to properly manage border issues." [13]

This comes even as the local press (Arunachal Times of August 10) informed its readers that Chinese border troops had recently repeatedly prevented Indian forces from accessing patrol points in the Taksing area (Upper Subansiri district), and were gradually extending their control over traditional Indian grazing and hunting areas along the disputed border (known as the line of actual control or LAC).

The 13th Beijing Xiangshan Forum (September 15-17): some (positive) lessons for New Delhi

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In mid-September, one week before the Chinese president's trip across the Atlantic, was held the 13th Beijing Xiangshan Forum, the main annual intergovernmental conference on security and defense organized by the Chinese authorities.

The 2026 vintage officially carries the following ambition: "To forge a consensus on stability and advance security governance together." A vast and ambitious project indeed.

The host country's defense minister personally set the tone, stating that global security was at a pivotal moment requiring great care to be given to multilateralism, dialogue, negotiated solutions and pragmatic cooperation, while also stressing the need for better international coordination in emerging security areas[14].

Speaking (but without naming it) about neighboring Japan, with whom relations have (once again) become increasingly strained (since the fall of 2025) – “We must bear in mind the lessons of history and remain extremely vigilant against any latent manifestation of hegemony, militarism, and historical revisionism” –, the Chinese admiral (the first to hold this ministerial position in the People's Republic) displayed little similar ill humor toward neighboring India during his address. This was surely appreciated by the three Indian defense attachés present at the forum...

As a reminder, a few weeks earlier (at the end of August), the 25th round of talks between the special representatives of China and India on the border issue took place in the Chinese capital.

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This round resulted in an eight-point consensus in which both sides reaffirmed their commitment to "respect the consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries and to preserve peace and tranquility in the border areas, in order to create an environment conducive to the healthy and steady development of bilateral relations. [15] The emphasis on "preserving peace and tranquility in the border areas, in order to create an environment conducive to the healthy and steady development of bilateral relations" is particularly noteworthy...

Very noble and laudable intentions put on paper. Without indulging in too many (hazardous) illusions, as many observers and institutions[16] seem to intuit, in the autumn of 2026, relations between Beijing and New Delhi obviously remain burdened by a tenacious mistrust. The various initiatives (see Xi Jinping's participation in the BRICS summit organized in the Indian capital) aimed at easing this unnatural dynamic probably signal less a complete overhaul of their chaotic relations than their mutual interest in working together on a trio of areas with mutual benefits: trade, investment and the very sensitive border issue.

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References

[1] An episode of high Sino-Indian military tension along the volatile Line of Actual Control (LAC) – east of Ladakh; Galwan Valley in particular – began in May 2020 following aggressive movements by Chinese troops and Indian counter-maneuvers in this contested area.

[2] The Indian Express, India Today, The Hindustan Times, September 29, 2026.

[3] In the context of the re-establishment of direct air links between the two countries, following the interruption of services due to the Covid-19 pandemic and tensions on the Sino-Indian border.

[4] Pakistani airspace has been closed to Indian aircraft since April 2025, following the terrorist attack in Pahalgam (Indian Kashmir) and the ensuing Indo-Pakistani military confrontation in May.

[5] South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, China, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia.

[6] China Global South Project, October 5, 2026.

[7] However, the principle of joint venture is retained where the Indian partner is necessarily the majority shareholder.

[8] Primarily composed of industrial products, automotive components, printed circuit boards, smartphones and other electronic equipment.

[9] The Indian Express, September 29, 2026.

[10] Pakistani Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, October 1, 2026.

[11] Including in particular the Shaksgam Valley, on the northern slope of the Karakoram, north of the Siachen glacier (the highest battlefield on the globe), an area of some 5,000 km² ceded in the sixties by Islamabad to Beijing; this, while New Delhi considers that the region in question is an integral part of Indian Ladakh.

[12] Indian Ministry of External Affairs, press release dated September 16, 2026.

[13] The Hindu, August 23, 2026.

[14] China Daily, September 16, 2026.

[15] Global Times, August 27, 2026.

[16] Cf. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (“India’s relationship with China should be understood sector-by-sector”, September 25, 2026).

Strengthening and consolidating confidence-building measures

The Indian and Chinese governments must work to consolidate and bolster mutual trust; otherwise, the current trust deficit—evident on both sides—could sound the death knell for what is, at present, a tenuous, imperfect, and incomplete "Sino-Indian spring."

Downplaying points of contention and ongoing disputes in the public arena

If Beijing and New Delhi wish to refine, sustain, and deepen this still-nascent Sino-Indian thaw, they must avoid prematurely exposing the complexities, consequences, and developments of their unresolved disputes to the public eye, the media, and general opinion.

Working together—jointly and constructively—on issues of common interest

As the world's two most populous nations and its second and fourth-largest economies, India and China possess the collective capacity—in human, scientific, financial, technical, and diplomatic terms—to decisively shape a positive course of events, provided they have the political will to do so.

Increasing joint, non-contentious initiatives that are simple to implement, altruistic

What better path for these two Asian giants than to more frequently pool their capital—human, scientific, and creative—in support of major regional and global causes? This would allow them to move forward together, share, foster mutual understanding, and draw closer to one another.

Taking a firm stand when necessary—when the gravity of the situation demands it—is essential, even if it sparks questions among the public.

If, by chance, striking the table in unison—with a deafening crash—and speaking out loudly and clearly for a worthy cause proves to be the best (or perhaps the least bad) solution to a serious problem, then the Dragon and the Elephant should not hesitate.

It is up to the leaders of both nations to demonstrate sincerity—if such a thing exists—and conviction, both to their own citizens and to the international community.

Across various summits, meetings, visits, official photo opportunities, and formal ceremonies, the body language and expressions of these leaders too often reveal a lack of warmth, good nature, or genuine enthusiasm—a telling sign of a relationship that is, quite simply, devoid of soul.

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