

75 YEARS OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS - INDIA'S NEIGHBOUR RELATIONS

NEWS: India and China mark **75 years of diplomatic relations** in 2025 amidst complex geopolitical tensions and strategic rivalry. The milestone highlights the need for a pragmatic, long-term approach in managing a multifaceted bilateral relationship shaped by historical conflicts, border tensions, and economic interdependence.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Evolving Relationship Context: From Pan-Asianism to Strategic Competition

- **Historical Shift:** The India-China relationship has transitioned from the **idealism of Pan-Asian solidarity** in the 1950s to one marked by **strategic distrust and competition** in the 21st century.
- **China as a Central Foreign Policy Factor:** Among all external actors, **China remains the most consequential** in shaping India's foreign policy, influencing decisions related to **border deployment, trade, technology partnerships, and global alignment strategies**.



Border Infrastructure and Militarisation Post-Galwan

- **Turning Point in 2020:** The **Galwan Valley clash** in June 2020 marked a decisive shift in India's threat perception and posture toward China.

- **Persistent Tensions at the LAC:** The **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** remains militarised and volatile, especially in Eastern Ladakh, where India has deployed **over 60,000 troops permanently**.
- **Infrastructure Race:** Both nations are engaged in **aggressive infrastructure build-up**, including **roads, helipads, airstrips, and communication networks**, aimed at ensuring operational readiness and strategic dominance.

Military Readiness as a Core Policy Pillar

- **Doctrine of Deterrence Without Provocation:** India's strategy focuses on **defensive preparedness** that **deters Chinese aggression** without initiating escalation.
- **Preventive Guardrail:** Military readiness acts as a **crucial stabilising factor** in the absence of a permanent border resolution, allowing India to negotiate from a position of strength.

Economic Interdependence Amid Strategic Tensions

- **Trade Deficit Paradox:** Despite strained relations, **China remains one of India's top trading partners**, with the **trade deficit approaching USD 100 billion in 2024–25**—reflecting India's market dependency on Chinese goods and components.
- **Limited Decoupling:** India has **not opted for full economic decoupling**, preferring targeted diversification strategies in critical sectors such as electronics, telecom, and pharmaceuticals.

Competitive Coexistence and Multilateral Engagement

- **Strategic Autonomy Framework:** India maintains a policy of **competitive coexistence**, cooperating in **multilateral forums like BRICS, SCO, and QUAD**, while also **hedging against China's regional ambitions**.
- **Balanced Engagement:** This approach preserves India's **strategic autonomy** and **reduces friction** by avoiding zero-sum outcomes, while enabling issue-based collaboration.

Regional Strategic Contest in South Asia

- **China's Expanding Footprint:** Projects such as the **Hambantota Port (Sri Lanka)**, **Pokhara International Airport (Nepal)**, and **large-scale loans to the Maldives** illustrate China's growing influence in India's immediate neighbourhood.
- **India's Counter Strategy:** India responds through **connectivity initiatives**, **timely economic assistance**, **military diplomacy**, and **crisis interventions** to reaffirm its role as a trusted regional partner.

Diplomatic Signalling and Controlled Narrative Shift

- **Recalibrated Messaging:** Recent statements by **Prime Minister Modi** have invoked the idea of **ancient civilisational ties and healthy competition**, suggesting a **carefully managed narrative shift** that blends firmness with selective engagement.
- **Softening without Compromising:** This diplomatic signalling aims to **avoid overt antagonism** while ensuring that **India's core strategic interests remain safeguarded**.

Emerging Signs of Tactical Thaw

- **Resumption of Verification Patrols:** In 2025, **joint verification patrols** were **quietly resumed** in less-contested sectors—indicating cautious confidence-building.
- **Technical Cooperation Renewed:** Agreements to **restart expert-level talks on hydrological data sharing** and discussions on the **resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra** show early signs of diplomatic thaw, though not resolution.

Way Forward: Four-Pillar Policy Architecture

India's long-term China strategy must rest on an integrated, four-pronged framework:

- **Military Readiness:** Sustain high-altitude deployment, joint military drills, and defence indigenisation.
- **Economic Diversification:** Reduce critical-sector dependency on Chinese imports while nurturing self-reliance.
- **Diplomatic Engagement:** Leverage bilateral, regional, and multilateral channels to manage friction.
- **Narrative Control:** Project strength, stability, and openness to cooperation without yielding strategic space.

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