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India-China Geopolitical Power Transition After The Galwan Clash: From Major Competition To Co-Operation In The Changing World Order:

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Abstract:

In the changing geopolitical landscape, India-China bilateral relationship has entered a new phase after the Galwan clash. In 2024, after four years, both countries agreed to resolve their issues to strengthen their strategic relations. India and China have had trade connections since ancient times, along the Silk Road. They have not only shared trade relations but also made connections through the bridges of Bodhidharma and various cultures and traditions. In the 1950s, India-China bilateral relations entered a new phase, in which India emerged as a democratic country, and China established itself as a communist nation. At first, India was the first country to recognise China as a communist nation. Still, China had various issues with specific regions within Indian territory, which it claimed as its own. After the 1962 Sino-Indian war, Indian government was alerted to China's intentions, and from that point onward, tensions escalated. Although both countries have been trying to resolve their border issues through joint working meetings (JWM). China's continued attacks and incursions into disputed border areas have made its relationship more complicated. Especially after the 2020 Galwan attack, India-China relationship came to a standstill. But after 2024, both countries agreed to reestablish relations. Both countries met in late Oct 2024 to discontinue patrolling in areas like Depsang and Demchok along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). In 2024, at the BRICS summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held a dialogue. In August 2025, at the SCO summit, both countries met and signed a cautious thaw, agreeing to be partners, rather than rivals. India and China focused mainly on stabilising border security, resuming direct flights, and managing economic linkages to foster a new chapter in bilateral relations. In 2026, both countries are now in a phase of strategic shift from discontinuity to the reestablishment of new relations. In this paper, the main research objective is to examine the strategic and geopolitical impact of the Galwan Valley clash on their bilateral relations. The theoretical framework for both countries would be offensive realism, given their changing dynamics.

Key Words: India, China, Galwan Clash, Geopolitical changes, Strategic Relations

Introduction:

The Galwan clash again changed India-China bilateral relations, and their border disputes flared along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and in other disputed border areas. Especially from Chinese troops' movements and incursions into the India-China disputed border areas, and many times at many villages near the border areas. Both countries' well-connected bilateral relationship has been put on hold again. Indian government has broken all trade relations and banned all Chinese apps. Basically, their relationship has entered a phase where even diplomatic and military talks have ceased. After this war, Indian government enhanced its military strategies and security levels to secure its disputed border areas.

In contrast, China enhanced its economic development, military enforcement, and the use of advanced technology. China is always in a better position than India, as the Chinese government has better strategies, a developed economy, and, most importantly, advanced

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technology; it recognised the benefits of Artificial Intelligence (AI) before the Galwan attack. After the 2020 clash, competition between the two countries has become one-sided. Consequently, they have been escalating their strategies to secure three sectors (western, middle, and eastern) through technological development, economic strategies, military power, advance infrastructure development projects.

Research Questions:

- How has the post-Galwan period rephrased the power-changing dynamics between India and China?
- What strategies has India adopted to strengthen border management mechanisms since the post-Galwan period?
- How has China changed its strategies in the Indo-Pacific after the post-Galwan period?
- What are the key components of the post-Galwan power transitions for both countries' security?

Research Objectives:

- To analyse the post-Galwan power transition between India and China.
- To examine the strategic and geopolitical impact of the Galwan Valley clash on their bilateral relations.
- To evaluate India's enhanced security strategies, military modernisation, defence technology, and, most importantly, its strategic partnership after the Galwan clash.
- To assess China's advanced strategic position in response to India's evolution.

Research Methodology:

This case study is based on a qualitative, descriptive research design focusing on the post-Galwan clash period, during which both countries are diplomatically trying to balance their positions amid geopolitical and strategic analysis. Secondary sources include academic books, journals, official government documents, reports, and newspaper archives.

India-China Changing Relationship from Ancient Times to the Contemporary Period:

India and China have shared a relationship for almost 2000 years. They have been engaged with each other through cooperation and strategic partnerships since ancient times. In the 1st century CE, Boddhidharma reached to China through Buddhist monks and merchants. Many Chinese drew inspiration from Indian Buddhism, culture, traditions, painting, music, art, dance, science, and technology. Our religious thought and traditions inspired many Chinese leaders, and they built Buddhist temples. In addition to these connections, both countries maintained peaceful cooperation and shared political contacts and diplomatic relations. In the 19th century, as imperialism emerged, both countries' anti-nationalist movements also emerged.¹ Despite a bilateral relationship between India and China, a territorial dispute began before independence, during the British Empire, when the two countries made many agreements to protect their respective regions. But for China, it was an unethical decision. India and China have

three disputed boundaries: the Western Sector, the Middle Sector, and the Eastern Sector. During the British Empire in India, British India sought stable, secure border regions with Tibet to protect its interests in the Himalayan region within Indian territory and to prevent Russian influence. As a result, they decided to sign the Shimla Conference in 1914. During the conference, the British representative, Sir Henry McMahon, negotiated a separate agreement with the Tibetan representative, Lonchen Shatra. This resulted in the demarcation of a boundary line, later known as the McMahon Line, which ran along the crest of the Himalayas. This line effectively placed the Tawang and other areas of present-day Arunachal Pradesh within British India. Although this agreement was taken with the presence of three parties, the British India, China and Tibet, but after 1949, China refused to accept the McMahon line status, they claimed that it was an unauthorised decision, which led to the foundation of Arunachal Pradesh.²

India shares a 2152 km-long western border with China. It is divided between the Union Territory of Ladakh and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. In this sector, there is a territorial dispute over Aksai Chin. India claims it as part of Kashmir, while China claims it is part of Xinjiang. The dispute over Aksai Chin can be traced back to the British Empire's failure to clearly demarcate a legal border between China and its Indian colony. During British rule in India, two proposed borders between India and China were the Johnson's Line and the McDonald Line. The Johnson's line (proposed in 1865) shows Aksai Chin in erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir (now Ladakh), under India's control, whereas the McMahon Line (proposed in 1893) places it under China's control. India considers the Johnson Line a legitimate national border with China, while China considers the McMahan Line the correct border with India. At present, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) separates Indian territory in Ladakh from Aksai Chin. It is concurrent with the Chinese claim line in Aksai Chin.³ In the middle sector, the Siliguri Corridor became the main concern for Nepal's government, especially after the Gen Z protest in 2025. At this point, India-China Chicken Neck was under threat. It's a very small part of Indian territory, but it is of significant importance for both countries. If China can control this area, it can easily enter and gain authority in its claimed territory.

During the Cold War, India obtained independence, and China became a communist country. During this time period, both tried to maintain good relations as in the past. India was the first country to accept and support China as a communist country. Indian Prime Minister Nehru said, "Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai." To maintain bilateral relations between India and China, the two countries signed the Panchsheel Agreement on 29th April 1954. The Five Principles of the Panchsheel Agreement emphasise mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual

non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, peaceful co-existence, equality and mutual benefit.⁴

Due to territorial disputes, India's behaviour towards China as a big brother was not welcomed. After mutual acceptance, China in 1962 attacked the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and occupied the Aksai Chin region in Ladakh. For some time, they also occupied areas in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), which is now called as Arunachal Pradesh. China has claim on the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh as it's an integral part of China. To develop better relationship of local people and show them that Indian government is not interested in developing their region, Chinese government has invested in building villages and new infrastructure projects near the disputed border. But since then, India has been more concerned with improving connectivity in the eastern sector, as people feel neglected by the government. Most importantly, to secure this territory from Chinese, Indian government initiated measures to ensure a smooth transition in war-like situations. The Eastern sector is the most important part of Indian territory as it would connect with Southeastern countries. Indian government have been building infrastructure development projects to enhance their relationship with these countries Indian-Mayanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway. These projects are important for India to establish itself strategically. It's a show deeper version of regional integration and emerged as an important part of Southeast Asian geopolitics.⁵

After the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Nehru's Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai perspective completely changed. Since that period, both countries have been working to build a good, trustworthy relationship. China has its own territorial claims in India. India does not accept China's claims to those regions, including the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh and the Ladakh region. Two more of India's neighbouring countries are under China's right-hand palm policy, such as Nepal and Bhutan.⁶ After the military standoff between India and China, the two countries shifted to high-altitude competition and a minimum level of cooperation.

Post Galwan period key developments between India and China:

From the 1962 Indo-China War to the 2020 Galwan Valley Clash, even after many skirmishes and incursions across many regions, the situation has become normalised between India and China, leaving their bilateral relationship on border issues unresolved, despite both sides agreeing on stability and peace on many occasions. Based on the Five principles of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect for territory, and to have an equal qualitative bilateral relationship at all land, both countries came to an agreement, which was signed on 7th September, 1993, on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in their border areas. Another agreement, called the

Confidence Building Measure (CBM), was signed on 29th November.⁷

In 1996, both sides agreed not to use arms and explosives within 2km of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). But after a peaceful existence agreement from Chinese side during the pandemic, when almost all countries were in a difficult situation, China again showed their aggressive attack on June 15, 2020. In this clash, both countries' armies faced off near patrolling point 14 in the Galwan Valley of eastern Ladakh, at an elevation of more than 4,300 meters above sea level. In this clash, Indian army and Chinese People's Liberation Army threw rocks at each other. As per the report, 20 Indian soldiers were killed.⁸ However, Chinese media denied this attack.

The post-Galwan period is crucial for both countries; as a result, China has been facing intense geopolitical competition from India. India has rapidly increased its military capacity and is trying to pose a tough challenge. India is focusing on building better relations with its neighbouring countries, where China is a major obstacle, as it has a new strategic plan to maintain trade relationships with other countries. Most of India's neighbouring countries, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, have connections with China. Chinese government has built networks to provide these countries with military and trade facilities through maritime linkages. To encircle India, it's their geopolitical strategy called the String of Pearls. The String of Pearls stretches from mainland China to the southern coast of Port Sudan (Africa). The main maritime linkages with other countries relate to the Indian Ocean. The main ports of neighbouring countries are Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), Kyauk Pyu (Myanmar), and Chittagong (Bangladesh). Chinese strategic connections raised concerns in India, as they sought to secure and ensure safe interconnections with other nations. Indian government developed the Necklace of Diamonds Strategy. It helps to increase economic and security cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.

To improve relations with countries in these coastal regions, India developed a strategy to build strong, well-connected naval bases and expand its military capabilities through advanced weapons. India has some strategies, such as the Malabar exercise, and improved intelligence sharing to ensure stability and security in the Indian Ocean region.⁹ However, boundary disputes and maritime security are the main concerns for both countries. However, China's economy, technology, and military capacity are stronger than India's. In 2026, India's reputation in world politics would have a stronger impact than in the past era. They have been trying to develop their own advanced technologies to protect their internationally disputed border areas and enhance the capacity of their militaries with better facilities. They have created their own apps to stop Chinese influence in Indian social media.

India's response after the Galwan clash was massive, as it sought to intensify security and adopt a revised security posture. They focused on greater engagement with the US and its allies and on new economic policies designed to protect the country from China's aggressive economic practices, especially during the economic recovery, which had several components, including investment screening measures, product bans, and tax investigations. India made tighter security and restrictions on Chinese capital flows into the country.

To prevent Chinese interconnectivity, Indian government initiated a policy that all inbound investments from India's land-based neighbours be subject to government approval. After the Galwan war, Indian government rejected 10 Chinese FDI applications in the 2021 financial year, 33 in 2022, and 15 in 2023, while 14 FDI proposals were put on hold. From 2020-2023, India banned at least 250 Chinese mobile apps, including social networking, messaging, video, and gaming apps such as WeChat, PUBG, and TikTok, citing national security concerns and affecting major tech firms such as Tencent and Baidu.

China's reaction to the Galwan clash and India's subsequent economic retaliation has been uncharacteristically restrained. While China's Foreign Ministry blamed India for the violence, the clash was hardly covered in state media, and Beijing only confirmed the death of four Chinese soldiers eight months after the confrontation occurred. China has better economic structure than India, they have been showing their economic backbone by developing new projects near the disputed border areas and enhancing their significance helping role model with other nations to strengthen their power. Chinese government accepted that fact that India-China border disputes should be treated differently and there should not be any connection for Beijing argued that the border dispute should be treated and there should not be any connection for trade partnership. As, India bans Chinese apps and FDI restrictions discriminatory trade measures, Chinese media criticised their steps towards the cooperative relationship.

China's restrained response was unsurprising for two reasons. First, Sino-Indian economic relationship gives China a significant advantage, as it has remained one of India's largest trading partners with a substantial trade surplus and often alternates with the US for the top spot. In the 2024 fiscal year, despite India's stringent post-Galwan measures, Chinese exports to India exceeded USD 100 billion, once again making China India's top trading partner. This recurring trade dominance gave China the confidence to wait out the situation until India adopted a more flexible economic stance. Second, China aims to deter Indian adventurism on the border without pushing New Delhi closer to Washington. Even in critical areas like pharmaceuticals, where India heavily relies on Chinese Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API), China has not imposed restrictions. This reflects Beijing's

broader strategy of refraining from using its economic influence against India to avoid further escalation.¹⁰

To reduce China's influence on other countries, India's foreign policy and diplomatic activities are becoming its main focus and strengths. As such, they have been participating in various international platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Quad. Although they face tough competition, their negotiations over investments run parallel to the border dispute. Chinese foreign policy is primarily focused on strengthening its power within the global order. As they want to establish their authority in these claimed areas. At present, Chinese troops are entering to reassure people that they are not part of those areas; they have been trying to establish relations with the people. Indian government has been rapidly encouraging infrastructure development programs for security purposes and to improve connections with that region.

To address their gaps in bilateral relations, both countries reached a decision on patrolling in Depsang and Demchok in October 2024. India's demand was for complete disengagement and de-escalation of troop presence and patrolling rights in these areas. Since 2020, both countries have engaged with each other to resolve their problems by conversations such as the Senior Highest Military Commander Level (SHMCL) talks, the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), at the diplomatic level and the meetings at the politico-strategic level between heads of state, foreign ministers, defence ministers, national security advisors, and special representatives on the India-China boundary question. Before the meeting between the leaders of India and China, the two countries had held several meetings at the political and strategic levels. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping had several interactions at the G20 Summit in November 2022, the BRICS Summit in August 2023, and a bilateral meeting at the BRICS Summit in October 2024.¹¹ On 31st August 2025, the Prime Minister of India visited China to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, where the heads of India and China met and exchanged views bilaterally. Finally, after a pause in their relationship, they are back on a positive side of peace and stability in the border region. Their geopolitical strategies have shifted due to the USA's recent tariff strategies. Both countries are now more engaged with each other, and direct flights between them have resumed.¹²

Conclusion:

In the phase of Iran and Israel, the USA war, India and China have been adopting balanced pragmatic roles after the Galwan clash, where both countries are more concerned about escalating their bonds on the matter of border security, territorial stability, and maintaining economic linkages over direct intervention. Both countries bilateral relationship, were in a hold after Chinese

aggressive attack in Galwan. But after four years, they decided to thaw their boundary security, restart their peaceful relations, and, most importantly, engage in international cooperation to maintain strong strategic ties and economic linkages. But due to the ongoing war, both countries are divided geopolitically, where China actively participating in the Middle East conflict as a diplomatic mediator and economic partner to weaken the USA's presence. In contrast, India is taking a balancing approach and avoiding direct condemnation of Israel's act. From this changing geopolitical perspective, despite their critical relationship, both countries have been trying to resolve their problems. Experts are optimistic that India and China will improve their geopolitical relationships.

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Foot Note

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