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THE DRAGON DANCES AGAIN: XI'S INDIA VISIT AND THE LONG SHADOW OF TRUMP'S BEIJING

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The Dragon Dances Again: Xi's India Visit and the Long Shadow of Trump's Beijing



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There are very few incidents in the Asian geopolitical arena that draws attention not only domestically but also internationally. The Chinese president Xi Jinping is scheduled to visit India for the 18th BRICS leaders' summit ¹in New Delhi. The visit comes more than six years since his previous visit. The visit comes as India is hosting the meeting during its 2026 BRICS chairmanship. The meeting, which is expected to take place in the second half of 2026, would be a significant diplomatic turning point, as both are painstakingly mending their relationship after the Galwan Conflict in 2020². However, to interpret this much-anticipated visit just as a bilateral thaw would be a mistake to a deeper and troubling story. The visit is much more established on the grounds of great power change for China rather than any real settlement of India-China tensions.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi formally invited President Xi Jinping to attend the BRICS summit on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Tianjin in August 2025. ³President Xi thanked the Prime Minister and offered Chinese support for India's BRICS presidency⁴. Both leaders spoke of avoiding disputes and of being development partners rather than adversaries. Yet, on closer inspection, this was also a language of controlled ambiguity that obscured the fact that the 2020 border conflict remains structurally unresolved. Despite the agreement along the border in October 2024, both sides have yet to reduce the number of additional troops on the border. Put differently, the reset is a reset of the

atmosphere rather than of the ground reality. This visit also warrants critical analysis. President Xi has made three trips to India, including two official visits ⁵in September 2014 and during the BRICS summit in Goa in 2016, and a famous informal trip to the Mahabalipuram summit in October 2019. Each trip was predicted to be the foundation of a new phase in bilateral relations, but it ultimately brought new tensions. The 2017 Doklam standoff occurred between the visits in 2016 and 2019. Galwan occurred less than a year after Mahabalipuram. The pattern is not coincidental. It reflects a fundamental imbalance in how India and China view their relationship. India has always wavered between accommodating and displaying assertiveness, while China pursues incrementalism on the ground while portraying cordiality at the summit level.

2026 is unique not because the conflict has been resolved, but because of the drastic shift in the external circumstances that have brought both countries on the table. In response to India's import of Russian oil, President Trump decided to impose a 25% tariff on the country.⁶ A week later, he raised the tariff to 50%, threatening to disrupt the \$200 billion US-India bilateral trade, which threatens thousands of jobs in the country. On the other hand, in April 2025, President Trump announced a 34% tariff on U.S imports from China⁷. Further, in May 2025, both sides reduced the rate to 10% for 90 days. India was unprepared for the strategic recalculation and concurrent wooing of Beijing. When viewed in this context, the thaw between India and China is more of a defensive reaction to the breakdown of the triangle geometry.

President Donald Trump took an official trip to Beijing from May 13-15, 2026, which somehow reflects strategic engagement and crisis management. The US-China tension ⁸since 2000 has been a geopolitical ascent, with New Delhi establishing itself as a crucial Indo-Pacific stakeholder and strategic partner. India's long-term geopolitical significance remains unaffected by Trump's visit to Beijing, which suggested a reconfiguration of the American objectives with investment promises and diplomatic overtures to President Xi Jinping.⁹ This highlights the necessity for India to strengthen its foreign policy, broaden its strategic alliances, and capitalise on its demographic and economic advantages. Regardless of positive or negative changes in their relationship,

India positions itself as a major regional power, and the Indo-Pacific is constant, despite the perception that it is to counterbalance China.

Despite the increased diplomatic interaction, limited outcomes can be seen, which ultimately reflects the ongoing difficulty of the US-China relationship. The expectations from the meeting were considered to be high, yet issues over sanctions, technological restrictions, minerals, Taiwan, artificial intelligence, and the Iran dispute remained unresolved. The outcome might be zero, yet the international attention to it was huge, including an extension of the trade ceasefire. However, this whole situation makes India's strategic flexibility in a multipolar system more adaptable rather than declining. These further stresses the necessity for India to enhance its foreign policy and fortify regional and multilateral alliances. This will help to adjust to a more complex geopolitical environment in which India remains an essential partner in regional stability and global governance. Yet there is another way of looking at it, when the heads of the powerful nations sit across from each other and one of them is invited to the White House, the US is no longer viewing China as the main strategic enemy that needs to be contained. A deal between President Trump and President Xi would encourage them to ignore or minimise the Chinese actions in Pakistan, including the transfer of sophisticated missiles and ships, in exchange for economic or technological considerations. This will not only affect India's Border Strategy, but dealing with it means more expensive domestic defence build-ups and raises the possibility that China will support Pakistan through coercive grey-zone tactics in Kashmir and the western Himalayas. In other words, every compromise on the Western Front might result in more space for China to be assertive along India's borders.

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compromise on the Western Front might result in more space for China to be assertive along India's borders.

Secondly, in an attempt to stabilise relations with China, India has reset its approach to the Line of Actual Control. The lack of the Phase's "*return to status quo ante on the border*" during External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's first visit to Beijing since the pragmatic diplomatic shift, rather than a strategic concession¹⁰. This change shows India's desire for measured engagement to manage tensions while upholding long-term strategic goals. New Delhi seems to be striking a balance between diplomacy and deterrence in a complicated border environment, realising that stability and ongoing communication can coexist with ongoing attention to sovereignty issues. India's changing rhetoric may point to taking a more adaptable and mature negotiating posture rather than accepting whatever is thrown their way. This one aim to uphold border peace, bolster military readiness, and infrastructure and create a strategic space where geopolitical and economic capabilities could flourish.

The 2026 BRICS chairmanship of India presents us with an opportunity to reinforce its growing global influence and leadership credentials. This is the fourth time that India has had the responsibility following the summit in 2012, 2016 and 2021. ¹¹The BRICS platform presents India as a bridge-builder and norm-shaping actor, capable of engaging major powers while preserving its strategic autonomy. The visit of President Xi presents India with an opportunity to reaffirm its security interests while demonstrating leadership through dialogue, multilateral cooperation, and agenda setting.

The Trump-Xi summit ¹²solidifies a G-2 logic on trade, technology, and South Asian security, where they could keep India out of the decision-making process of areas such as supply chain, governance regulation, security agreements, and border management practices. This leads to an uncomfortable but necessary conclusion: India must now function in a very unstable environment where it cannot outsource its China strategy to the framework of American strategic rivalry. Given the situation, India may need to fortify its own direct relationship with China while continuing to handle unsolved border conflicts and strategic difficulties on its own.

Xi Jinping's visit to India, when it comes, will be welcomed with ceremony, framed as a civilisational meeting of two ancient powers, and hailed as proof that Asia's two giants can coexist. All of that may be true. But the harder truth is that the visit is occurring not because India and China have resolved their differences, but because both find themselves navigating a world remade by Trump's transactionalism, in which old alignments are unreliable and old assumptions are dangerous. New Delhi's strategic task is not to celebrate this moment but to use it, with clear eyes, firm demands, and the unsentimental recognition that the dragon's dance, however graceful, is never without purpose.

Significance and Opportunities for India:

- **BRICS moment as a leverage moment**

The event showcases a rare asymmetry. India has previously underutilised events like this. India must enter the BRICS summit with a pre-negotiated agenda, not a hoped-for one. Back-channel diplomacy through the special representative mechanism must produce a minimum of three deliverables.

Firstly, a commitment to complete disengagement from the friction points.

Secondly, formally resuming the boundary talks under the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination.

Thirdly, joint Statement on restraining third-party military transfers in South Asia, referring to the weapons supply from China to Pakistan.

- **Change of World Order, an Invitation to Fast-track Self-reliance**

The Trump administration's approach towards India, with tariff penalties and pressure against Apple manufacturing in India, might look like short-term challenges but could prove challenging in the long term. This creates the political space and domestic justification for India to build genuine strategic autonomy. India must accelerate the indigenisation of its defence industrial base. The Defence Acquisition Procedure should not be delayed, as it already has been for Tejas Mark 2, the Advanced Medium Combat

Aircraft, and Indigenous Missile Systems. The money spent on the foreign procurement, which could be produced domestically, can become a liability in the international relations alignment. India can further use the concept of “India+1” supply chain concept like China, which, despite the US, remains a structural reality among Europeans and Japanese Manufacturing.

- **The Anxiety can be used as a Diplomatic Tool**

While the growing relationship between the US and China is an alarm to India but can be used as a diplomatic tool. The major institutions, as well as a large section of the Congress, still view India as a strategic partner. This alarm is shared with India by other countries, including Japan, Australia, Vietnam, the Philippines and South Korea. This could be a coalition concerned, and India can be positioned as the lead.

The concept is not to contain China nor to confront the US; it is about ensuring that major-power bargains remain with the countries that are involved in the situation. As this year, it is our Presidency for the BRICS, India should push institutional reforms that prevent the forum from becoming a Chinese dominated alternative order specifically by strengthening consensus mechanism and establishing transparent dispute resolution procedure.

- **CHINA TRADE REBALANCING OPPORTUNITY**

Trade deficit of India with China stands at \$99.2 billion approximately.¹³ The Chinese always used this as a leverage by threatening supply disruption especially in pharmaceuticals, electronics and critical components. The current diplomatic thaw between US and China irrespective of their meeting last month, creates a window to renegotiate this imbalance- as China now facing Western decoupling pressures and the U.S tariff walls, genuinely needs an alternative market and investment hub.

India should open up a sideline track discussion and negotiations with China Separately from the political dialogue, aiming to reduce trade deficit through three specific channels including greater market access for Indian pharmaceutical and IT service export, secondly, reduction of Indian dependence on Chinese API's and electronic components

through a credibly funded import substitution programme backed by PLI schemes and third is the establishment of a bilateral investment framework that permits Chinese manufacturing investment in India under strict national security review, capturing the jobs and technology transfer without surrendering strategic oversight.

- **Line of Actual Control (LAC) as a Zone of Strategic Communication**

The LAC remains one of the major issues between India and China and has been affecting the other aspects of bilateral relations as well. India should propose the establishment of proper ways to notification requirements before any before any change in patrol patterns or infrastructure construction within agreed proximity zones. India should simultaneously accelerate its own border infrastructure programme with a specific completion deadline. The infrastructure gap between India and China along the frontier, while narrowing, remains real and must be closed on a war-footing timeline.

- **The Civilisational Framing as Soft Power Asset**

Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping have focused much more on the concepts based on ancient civilization including Vishwaguru, Taoism and Buddhism among others. India's civilisational identity, rooted in pluralism, non-domination, and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, offers a genuinely differentiated narrative from both American liberal hegemony and Chinese civilisational nationalism, which is explicitly hierarchical and Han-centric. India should systematically develop and project an indigenous theoretical framework for international order, especially in multilateral forums where the Global South is actively looking for a non-Western, non-Chinese intellectual anchor.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

ENDNOTES

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