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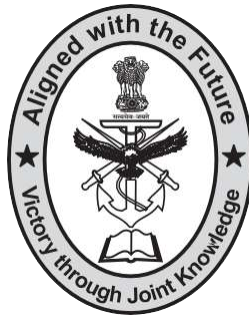
AUTONOMY WITHOUT EQUIDISTANCE, DIPLOMACY AND DETERRENCE IN CONCERT: INDIA'S CHINA POLICY IN SEPTEMBER 2026

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**Autonomy Without Equidistance,
Diplomacy and Deterrence in
Concert: India's China Policy in
September 2026**



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"Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far."

— Theodore Roosevelt, 1901

On 12 September 2026, President Xi Jinping arrived in New Delhi decked out for the BRICS Summit, his first visit to India in seven years.¹ Three days earlier, at Air Force Station Jodhpur, the Indian Air Force (IAF) and Japan's Air Self-Defence Force had begun Exercise Veer Guardian-26, in which Japanese F-2A fighters operated from an Indian air base for the first time.² Three days after Xi's arrival, at Auli in Uttarakhand, roughly 100 kilometres from the Line of Actual Control (LAC),³ the Indian and US armies opened the 22nd edition of Exercise Yudh Abhyas, conducted simultaneously at Mahajan in Rajasthan.⁴

The public record does not show that these events were choreographed together, and this article does not claim that they were. Their calendars nonetheless fell within a single fortnight, and New Delhi let the overlap stand. This article argues that the exercise calendar, read alongside the diplomatic record, offers a revealing indication of where India's China policy currently stands. Read together, Yudh Abhyas-26, Veer

Guardian-26 and the BRICS Leaders' Summit reveal a pattern that neither Beijing's characterisation of Indian non-alignment nor Washington's periodic concern about a wavering partner adequately captures. New Delhi has developed the capacity to run engagement and deterrence on parallel tracks, in full public view, with each track addressed to a distinct audience.

Historical Context: Six Years After Galwan

The Galwan clash of June 2020 was the most serious military confrontation between India and China in over four decades, and it altered Indian threat perception in ways that have proved durable. Since then, India's approach to Beijing has moved from visible military mobilisation and cautious disengagement talks to a more settled posture, in which diplomatic engagement and military hedging run as parallel, mutually reinforcing tracks rather than sequential ones. The diplomatic track was on display on 12 September. After Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Xi met on the summit's margins, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) reported a shared commitment to a "*fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable*" resolution of the boundary question, alongside Modi's call to observe existing border agreements.⁵ The two sides' readouts differed on how closely border peace should be tied to wider relations, and no new dialogue mechanism was announced.⁶ The military track has moved in step, through deepening defence cooperation with the United States and Japan.

This dual-track approach is usually described in the language of strategic autonomy, a term that can obscure as much as it explains. Strategic autonomy is best understood as retained room for manoeuvre in decisions with national security implications.⁷ It has not meant equidistance between China and India's other major partners, either in intent or, increasingly, in practice. What September 2026 makes visible is how far that practice has moved from the more cautious rhetoric that typically surrounds it, and how comfortable New Delhi has become with allowing that gap to be seen. A fair test of autonomy is whether India keeps the freedom to decide when, where and with whom to use the capabilities it builds. The strongest counter-argument is that deeper interoperability, with the procedures and equipment dependencies that accompany it, may over time narrow that freedom. Exercise evidence alone cannot settle the question.

Convergence as Signal

When Xi arrived for the 18th BRICS Summit,⁸ most commentary focused on the diplomatic choreography: a Modi-Xi meeting on the summit's margins, six years after the Galwan clash.⁹ Considered in isolation, the visit fits a familiar narrative, that of two rivals managing a cautious and deliberate thaw.

That commentary captures only part of what took place. Veer Guardian-26 ran at Jodhpur from 9 to 22 September, overlapping the whole summit.¹⁰ Yudh Abhyas opened at Auli on 15 September, two days after Xi left Delhi, and runs until 28 September.¹¹ Its dates and participating units had been reported before the summit opened.¹² Beijing has long described the Quad as an anti-China grouping. After the Quad foreign ministers met in New Delhi in May 2026, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said China did not support “*exclusive cliques or bloc confrontation*”, while India's MEA replied that the Quad was not directed against any country.¹³ India's conduct in September was operational rather than rhetorical: Veer Guardian went ahead while Xi was in the capital, and Yudh Abhyas opened within days of his departure.

This is the article's central claim. India is no longer treating engagement and deterrence as competing options between which it must choose. It pursues both concurrently and accepts the exercise calendar as a channel of signalling in its own right.

Yudh Abhyas-26: From Training Drill to Capability Statement

Yudh Abhyas is an annual exercise sponsored by the US Army Pacific in partnership with the Indian Army and held since 2004; it began as a platoon-level activity and has grown steadily.¹⁴ The 2026 edition departs from recent editions in ways that merit closer examination.

For the first time, the exercise is being conducted simultaneously across two distinct operating environments.¹⁵ Mountain warfare, cold-weather operations and counter-drone training are concentrated at Auli, while live firing of the HIMARS rocket system, Stinger missiles and the M-LIDS counter-drone system is planned at the Mahajan Field Firing Range in Rajasthan.¹⁶ Desert manoeuvre and Himalayan operations have historically been trained in separate editions.¹⁷ Running them concurrently suggests

an intent to rehearse command, control and logistics across more than one theatre at once, a capability most relevant to a contingency involving more than one active front.

The US contingent includes soldiers of the 11th Airborne Division from Alaska, whose baseline training is in cold-weather and high-latitude warfare, now working on terrain that resembles India's northern frontier. A US release reported by ANI also names the 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force, which it says introduces long-range precision fires and integrated command-and-control systems to the bilateral framework.¹⁸ Multi-Domain Task Forces are recently established, theatre-specific formations that combine long-range fires with cyber, electronic warfare and intelligence, and whose tactical focus is neutralising anti-access and area-denial systems.¹⁹ Official releases, however, place the HIMARS live-fire at Mahajan rather than Auli.²⁰ The task force's reported presence is therefore best read as a substantive addition to the bilateral framework, not as a deployment on the LAC.

The scope of the exercise has also shifted. The 2024 edition at Mahajan was framed around counter-terrorism in a sub-conventional scenario under a United Nations mandate, although it already featured US HIMARS and Stryker vehicles.²¹ The 2025 edition in Alaska emphasised high-altitude operations in sub-arctic conditions, air mobility, electronic warfare and counter-drone systems.²² The 2026 edition adds multi-domain operations, unmanned and counter-unmanned systems, and integrated battle groups in mountainous terrain.²³ This trajectory corresponds with the operational challenges of the high-altitude frontier: contested high ground, logistics under altitude, and the growing role of drones.

Parameter	2024 (20th edition)	2025 (21st edition)	2026 (22nd edition)
Location	Mahajan, Rajasthan	Fort Wainwright, Alaska	Auli, Uttarakhand, and Mahajan, Rajasthan, conducted simultaneously
Personnel	About 600 a side	450 Indian personnel	About 600 a side, across both sites

Parameter	2024 (20th edition)	2025 (21st edition)	2026 (22nd edition)
US formation	1-24 Battalion, 11th Airborne Division	1-5 Infantry, 11th Airborne Division	11th Airborne Division; 3rd Multi-Domain Task Force also reported
Stated focus	Counter-terrorism in semi-desert terrain	High-altitude operations in sub-arctic conditions, air mobility, electronic warfare, counter-drone	High-altitude and multi-domain operations, unmanned and counter-unmanned systems, integrated battle groups

Table 1: Yudh Abhyas, scale and character, 2024 to 2026 editions.

Source: compiled from notes 4, 11, 21 and 22.

The 2026 edition matches 2024 in troop numbers but not in character. The change over two years is therefore one of a kind rather than size, from a sub-conventional, semi-desert exercise to a high-altitude, multi-domain one oriented, however unofficially, toward the northern frontier. That shift, more than any headcount, is the stronger evidence for this article's argument.

Veer Guardian-26: Precedent over Scale

Where Yudh Abhyas demonstrates land-domain capability, Veer Guardian-26 performs an analogous function in the air domain and establishes a precedent that will outlast the exercise itself.

Conducted from 9 to 22 September at Air Force Station Jodhpur, Veer Guardian-26 is the second edition of the exercise, the first having been held in Japan in January 2023, and the first in which Japanese fighter aircraft have operated from an Indian base.²⁴ Japan's F-2A, a variant of the American F-16, operated alongside the IAF's indigenous Tejas, the Su-30MKI and the Rafale. Official releases describe "*advanced operational missions*" and interoperability without publishing specific combat profiles.²⁵

The scale is modest: three F-2A aircraft from the 8th Air Wing and about 110 personnel.²⁶ The exercise cannot be read as a demonstration of mass, and its significance lies elsewhere. It establishes a precedent for Japanese military presence

on Indian soil, considerably easier to reactivate in the future than to build from nothing. It also builds working familiarity across airframes of distinct lineage, American-derived, Russian, French and indigenous, directly relevant if India, Japan and the United States must ever operate in the same contested airspace.

Geography as Strategy

New Delhi occupies the diplomatic centre of the picture, hosting the summit track. Auli lies well to the north, close enough to the LAC that a high-altitude exercise there requires no further explanation. Mahajan and Jodhpur lie far to the west, in the opposite direction from the China-facing frontier. The spread across one diplomatic and three military locations is itself part of the pattern this article traces.

The logic behind this distribution becomes clear on closer inspection. Locating the mountain phase at Auli allows India to demonstrate high-altitude and counter-drone interoperability where it matters most. Locating the live firing of long-range systems at Mahajan and the air exercise at Jodhpur keeps the most conspicuous capabilities away from the frontier while still demonstrating them to Washington and Tokyo and lets New Delhi characterise the air exercise as generically defensive rather than pointedly anti-China. Each audience receives its intended signal without India inviting the charge of conducting a China-facing exercise on China's doorstep.

The pattern is not new. Auli hosted the 2022 edition of Yudh Abhyas, when Beijing objected that the exercise violated border agreements, and the MEA replied that India gives no veto to third countries.²⁷ India has otherwise tended to keep Quad-adjacent air exercises away from the China border, reserving the northern sector for bilateral Army exercises that can be characterised as high-altitude training. What has changed is the content placed within that geography: multi-domain and counter-drone training, and simultaneity across two theatres. New Delhi thereby retains a measure of diplomatic deniability regarding intent, useful in the event of formal protest, while leaving little genuine ambiguity regarding capability for the audience that matters most in this analysis: the planning staff on the opposite side of the LAC assessing what its counterpart can now do.

Reconciling the Two Tracks

At first reading, this pattern may appear incoherent. How does a country that hosts the Russian and Chinese presidents at a summit organised around Global South solidarity conduct, in the same fortnight, major exercises with two of its three Quad partners? The two tracks resolve this apparent contradiction once they are understood as serving distinct audiences and distinct objectives.

BRICS diplomacy operates on the register of positioning: it presents India as an indispensable convenor of the Global South, practising strategic autonomy by declining to treat any single power as its exclusive partner. It is conducted through declarations and summit photographs intended to project consensus among eleven economies divided over the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine; the New Delhi Declaration was nonetheless adopted unanimously.²⁸ The Quad exercises operate on a different register, that of demonstrated capability, aimed chiefly at Beijing and, by way of reassurance, at Washington and Tokyo, showing that India's strategic-autonomy posture does not amount to a retreat from substantive commitments. Troop deployments and terrain choices carry this message; formal statements do not.

The Russian dimension complicates any simple China-versus-West reading. President Vladimir Putin arrived in New Delhi on 11 September for a three-day visit,²⁹ and the IAF's Russian-origin Su-30MKI operated alongside Japan's F-2A at Jodhpur. Autonomy, as practised, means declining to choose among suppliers and partners as well as among rivals.

That convergence delivers a message no formal statement could deliver as plainly. India tells Beijing, without a formal alliance to hide behind, that a cordial reception at the summit table does not halt its military preparation along the frontier. In the same fortnight it tells Washington and Tokyo that its reluctance to formalise Quad military integration does not mean that practical defence cooperation has stalled. The change in Yudh Abhyas since 2024 and the fact that India conducts more exercises with the United States than with any other country,³⁰ suggest that this cooperation continues to deepen.

Addressing the Coincidence Hypothesis

A reasonable objection warrants consideration before this argument proceeds further. Defence exercises are planned months in advance, tied to unit rotation cycles and

training calendars unrelated to any head of state's travel schedule. On this reading, the overlap between the BRICS Summit and the two Quad exercises reflects coincidence rather than calculation, the product of a crowded military calendar intersecting a crowded diplomatic one.

This objection has considerable merit. India was unlikely to reschedule a two-theatre army exercise or a first-of-its-kind air exercise around Xi's travel plans, and nothing in the public record suggests that the exercise dates were chosen to coincide with BRICS.

The objection does not, however, dispose of the question. The overlap may have been intentional, opportunistic or merely structural, and the public record cannot distinguish among these. What it does show is that the summit's dates were public from at least May 2026,³¹ and that both exercises were reported in the days before the summit opened.³² The overlap was therefore foreseeable, and the public record reviewed for this article shows no sign that either exercise was postponed, scaled back or reframed. Whichever explanation holds, accepting the optics was a choice, and one consistent with India's conduct in 2022.³³ It is a strategically consequential choice whether or not the calendar itself was engineered.

Strategic Implications

China policy. This convergence points to a repeatable template. Diplomatic normalisation, encompassing border talks and summit-level engagement, can proceed on its own track, separate from the military hedging conducted through exercises and capability development. Each track follows its own logic without being publicly tied to the other. New Delhi is not required to choose between a reset narrative and a deterrence narrative in its public messaging, since it pursues both without needing to reconcile them publicly.

The Quad's institutional trajectory. The shift in Yudh Abhyas since 2024, from a counter-terrorism exercise in semi-desert terrain to simultaneous high-altitude and multi-domain training across two theatres, with a US Multi-Domain Task Force reported among the participants, suggests that the practical substance of India's defence partnerships with Quad members is advancing faster than the Quad's institutional form. The relevant question for Indian planners is less whether the Quad will eventually acquire treaty status and more how much operational integration can

be achieved through exercises alone before informal coordination begins to resemble formal alliance behaviour in substance if not in name.

Crisis stability. There is a less comfortable implication here. If this form of capability signalling becomes a routine feature of summit-adjacent diplomacy, Beijing may begin interpreting bilateral exercises as calibrated messaging tied to specific diplomatic occasions, rather than as independent training cycles that happen to coincide with a particular date. This makes exercise scheduling a diplomatic variable in its own right, one that India's defence and foreign policy establishments will need to coordinate more closely than logistics-driven training calendars currently permit.

Recommendations

Four recommendations follow for decision makers.

Coordinate the calendar. The Ministry of Defence, HQ Integrated Defence Staff and the MEA should review the annual exercise calendar against the diplomatic calendar as a matter of routine, so that an overlap is a decision taken with open eyes rather than an outcome discovered afterwards. This is not a call to reschedule exercises around visits. It is a call to know in advance what message a given overlap will carry.

Explain as well as defend. India's 2022 answer to Beijing's objection was that no third country holds a veto. That position is sound, but it can be complemented by using existing border-management channels to convey the schedule and purpose of routine exercises near the LAC, reducing the chance that a training event is read as a calibrated message.

Hold autonomy to a stated standard. Interoperability should be pursued in ways that preserve freedom of decision: by favouring open standards and indigenous command-and-control systems, maintaining a diverse inventory, and balancing exercises with the United States and Japan against those with other partners.

Plan exercise signalling as a tri-service task. Yudh Abhyas and Veer Guardian were run by different services within the same fortnight. A joint planning cell under HQ Integrated Defence Staff, feeding into future theatre command structures, should treat the exercise programme as a single instrument of national signalling, with common public messaging across the Services.

Conclusion

The 18th BRICS Summit is likely to be remembered primarily for its language on Middle East restraint and global trade resilience.³⁴ The more consequential story may lie elsewhere. Within a single fortnight, New Delhi hosted Xi Jinping, hosted the first deployment of Japanese fighters to an Indian air base, and opened a two-theatre Yudh Abhyas with the US Army, one of whose theatres lies roughly 100 kilometres from the LAC. Read together, Yudh Abhyas-26 and Veer Guardian-26 offer a revealing indication of India's China strategy that complements what joint statements and readouts convey. They suggest that the concurrent pursuit of engagement and deterrence, conducted in full public view, is becoming a repeatable element of Indian strategic behaviour rather than an isolated occurrence.

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.

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