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India–China Relations in the NDA Era (2014–2019): Cooperation, Competition and Conflict

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Abstract: The India-China relation holds a unique position in the world, as cooperation and confrontation are the primary bases of their relationship. The present study focuses on the India-China relationship during the NDA period (2014-2019), under the leadership of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The objective of the paper is to examine whether the NDA era has been able to bring any changes in India's China policy, or has it merely maintained continuity. Based on the secondary sources, the paper has adopted a qualitative research method and case study approach. The study reveals that this phase portrays a measure adjustment period rather than a total rupture from the past policy. The Indian government has adopted a more assertive approach in its foreign policy during that time. This phase can be marked by a pattern of competitive coexistence.

Index Terms - NDA Government, Strategic Competition, National interest, economic interdependence, India-China relations, Indian foreign policy, Chinese foreign policy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sino-Indian relationship is one of the most dynamic and complex relations in the contemporary global politics. Both nations have a common colonial experience and nation building process. After 1962 India-China war, both nations were engaged to normalize their relation during 1980s. Since then, many years have been passed, but the relation remains in the same place, where cooperation and conflict are the main factors of the relation. In 2014, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came into power under the leadership Narendra Modi. Indian foreign policy takes a different dimension during the NDA era. The government has given priority for economic development and also a pragmatic diplomacy. The relation between these two Asian giants observed an apparent paradox during that time. Two different sides of the relations have been noticed during that period, such as high level diplomatic engagement including informal summits in the one hand, and heightened border issue on the other. In this backdrop, it is necessary to examine the nature of this relationship by assessing several main aspects.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

India and China both nations are emerging powers and fastest growing economics in the world. So, their interactions to each other have not only important for regional stability but also for restructuring international relations. The NDA period observed a clear shift in foreign policy approach, marked by strategic outreach and assertiveness. This period also witnessed simultaneous cooperation and confrontation between both nations, and also Chinese growing dominance in the South Asian region, which making it analytically important. Besides, it has also a theoretical background. The relationship during that time provides some important concepts related to liberal and realist ideas, such as economic interdependence, national interest, security dilemma, balance of power. It has also policy relevance.

III. LITERATURE SURVEY

The researcher has studied the books and articles to write this paper. The researcher has studied the book entitled “India’s China War”, authored by Neville Maxwell. This book provides a historical background of the said relations and also a detailed analysis of 1962 war (Maxwell, 1970). Another remarkable volume entitled “How China Sees India and The World: The Authoritative Account of the India-China Relationship”, written by former foreign secretary Shyam Saran. The volume presents the relations through the perspective of culture, history and diplomat perception, and also Chinese perception about the World (Saran, 2022). A prominent foreign policy analyst C. Rajamohan in his volume entitled “Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific” highlights the relation through maritime perspective and shows how both nations have expand their interests in the Indo-pacific region. The author has used the Hindu myth of Samudra Manthan, to show heightening strategic turbulence of both countries in the seas of the Indo-Pacific (Mohan, 2012). The researcher has also studied the book “Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy”, authored by former foreign secretary Shivshankar Menon. He discusses five crucial initiatives of the Indian government (Menon, 2016). Kanti Bajpai in his book “India Vs China: Why They are not friends” discusses four ‘P’s of this relationship, such as Perimeter, Partnership, Perception and Power Asymetry (Bajpai, 2021). In addition to these books, the researcher has also studied numerous journal articles to get more insights of this relationship. Christopher Clary in his article titled ‘Is India Underbalancing China?’ deals with how India balances with China. He emphasizes China’s strategic revisionism and also highlights Sino-Pak Axis, another major concern for India (Clary, 2025). A.K Bardalai in an article ‘Doklam and the Indo-China Boundary’ provides a detailed analysis of the Doklam crisis. He highlights the challenges that Indian troops faced due to infrastructure limitations (Bardalai, 2018). Many studies have been made to understand different perspectives of India-China relation, but there are few studies that comprehensively analyze the relation during the NDA regime.

IV. OBJECTIVES

The present study focuses on the relational equation of this bilateral relation during the NDA period (2014-2019). In this context, the main objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the nature of the diplomatic relation between both nation during the NDA era (2014-2019).
2. To analyze the effectiveness of the NDA government’s policy towards China.

V. METHODOLOGY

The present study employs a qualitative research approach, based on the secondary sources. Hence, the researcher has used several government reports, official statements, books, journal article, and newspaper to draw conclusion. Besides, to gain more insights about their strategic behavior, the study also includes the elements of case study method.

VI. KEY PHASES OF THE RELATIONS

The NDA era (2014-19) marks a significant period in the evolution of the said relations. During the National Democratic Alliance, the government has adopted significant initiatives in foreign policy. After thoroughly observed the period, it can be categorized into three important phases:

6.1 Engagement Phase (2014-2016)

In 2014, after assuming the power, the Prime Minister Modi has made several changes to reorient the country’s foreign relations. The diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation were the initial efforts of the government to reorient the foreign relations. This period was marked by high level diplomatic talks including reciprocal visits to rebuild the relations with China. In September 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a visit in India, which signified a re-energized dedication to enhancing the relations (Nandy, 2020). It was his first visit to India, after became President of China in 2013 (BBC News, 2014). Both India & China signed several agreements related to economic development, more investments and trades. They have planned to build Ahmedabad and Guangzhou as sister cities. Next year in 2015, Indian Prime Minister

Narendra Modi visited China for three days. Several dialogues on trade, border disputes, and regional stability have been discussed during this visit. Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao visited India on the same year and talked with Indian President Pranab Mukherjee about their cultural and economic relations. In 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi came to India and met with Indian Prime Minister. This time, they were engaged in a dialogue about the growing trade imbalance and counter terrorism efforts.

Despite these several dialogues, the structural tensions related to border issues remained same, which revealed the limit of diplomatic efforts. Therefore, this period indicates a Liberal institutional approach, as both nations intended to boost economic cooperation through bilateral talks.

6.2 Confrontation Phase (2017)

On June 2017, Doklam issue has created a turning point in their relations. Troops of the India, Bhutan and China were engaged in a conflict in a disputed area. It is a tri-junction, where the borders of the three countries meet at a single point. This Doklam region is an 89km disputed area between Bhutan and China. India's intervention on behalf of Bhutan illustrated as willingness to accept an assertive approach in defending its strategic interests. The Doklam issue showed a transition from cautious engagement to calibrated assertiveness in India approach. As per realist view, we can say that this issue created a security dilemma between them. The Doklam standoff also revealed that the fragility of their relationship and showed the economic cooperation had limited capacity to prevent conflicts. So, the year of 2017 symbolizes the phase of confrontation.

6.3 Reset Phase (2018 & 2019)

After the Doklam issue, India and China decided to normalize and recalibrate their relations. We saw informal summits played a key role to reset the diplomatic ties. This innovative form of dialogue represents a pivotal moment in their relationship. On April 27-28, 2018, the Wuhan Summit between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, aimed to reset the trust and restore strategic communication (Nandy, 2020). Besides, the 21st meeting of Special Representative Talks was held in November 2018 in China, where Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval met with his counterpart Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi (Ministry of External Affairs, GoI, 2018). Following the success of the Wuhan Summit, the second informal summit was held in 2019, where Chinese President Xi Jinping visited in Tamil Nadu, India (India Today, 2019). These informal summits indicate a departure from traditional formal diplomacy to a leader-oriented strategic diplomacy. This leader-oriented diplomatic style emphasizes on the role of personal diplomacy in improving relation. Besides high level diplomatic engagements, the cooperation continued between both nations through multi-lateral frameworks such as BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Despite various efforts have been made to reset the relation, border issues remained in same. So, it can be said that this period demonstrates a pragmatic synthesis, where India and China tried build a sound relation without intensifying conflicts.

VII. ANALYSIS

During the NDA era (2014-19), this relation shows a complex pattern of engagement. This can be comprehended through a liberal and realist lens. The role of leadership in managing the foreign relation also played an important dimension in this period. After a detailed analysis, it is found that the NDA's approach was a combination of assertiveness and engagement to deal the foreign relations. It can be defined also as strategically pragmatic approach. The leadership-driven diplomacy, initiated by the Modi government also received lot of praises. In this case, government adopted two strategies, such as *Assertiveness*, by which India was safeguarding its strategic interest like Doklam, and *Engagement* through informal talks and bilateral summits. This shows India's approach of balancing behavior. The NDA government illustrated a more assertive foreign policy posture under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

If we look it from theoretical perspective, the relation during that time was characterized by promoting national interest, power asymmetry, security dilemma etc. This realist framework explains strategic mistrust, persistence of border issues and India's balancing behavior towards China. It is also observed that China was the largest trading partner of India, which indicated the intensity of economic interdependence. Even in the crisis situation, bilateral trade continued to grow. This shows that economic matters operate separately

of political disputes. This supports the liberal approach that economic interdependence can act as a stabilizing factor. In addition, their continued engagement in multi-lateral platforms provided a sphere for dialogue. This frameworks or platforms can help to ease conflict and promote solidness. Further, the informal summits demonstrate liberal perspectives. Hence, the liberal views interprets the role of diplomacy and institutions; continued economic engagement and efforts to manage conflict. The liberal perspectives highlighted the diplomatic and institutional engagement, economic interdependence etc. On the other side, the realist view emphasized on structural factors, such as border issues, power competition etc. Therefore, it can be argued that neither liberalism nor realism alone could capture the nature of this relation. Rather, it was a condition of competitive coexistence, where cooperation and conflict exist simultaneously. In a nutshell, it is found that a single theory could not capture the equation of overall relation during that time. Instead, it reflects a combination of cooperation and conflict. So, the Competitive coexistence offers a suitable approach for understanding the relation.

VIII. FINDINGS

After a detailed analysis of the India-China relations during the NDA regime (2014-18), it reveals a complex relationship, where cooperation and conflict coexist simultaneously. The main findings of the present study are:

1. A major finding is that despite the territorial disputes and power competition, the economic relation did not come to an end. Rather, it continued to expand, which indicating the liberal aspect. India and China both nations have prioritized economic pragmatism over political clash.
2. The study reveals that no single theoretical approach could interpret the overall relation. Therefore, a hybrid theoretical framework is necessary to understand the equation of this relation.
3. We have noticed that both nations engaged several times in multilateral institutions such as BRICS, SCO, QUAD; but limited effort has been observed to resolve the core disputes.
4. During the NDA era, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, the government's policy toward China showed continuity in strategic objectives, but shift in approach. The government adopted a more assertive and personalized diplomacy. It is noticed that this period portrays a recalibration of existing strategies.
5. Another key finding is that the informal diplomatic style with leadership driven engagement can reduce the tensions. Because it helps to rebuild political trust, prevents escalation of conflicts and establish communication channel.
6. During this period, India has strengthened relations with like-minded democratic countries and also increased engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. This is proved that India's gradual transition toward strategic balancing against China.

In view of these findings, it is necessary for India to employ new tactics for managing the foreign relation. Hence, India should follow a multi-dimensional calibrated strategy. Government should promote more informal high level bilateral summits to improve relations. Besides, government must adopt selective economic engagement and promote domestic manufacturing to reduce import reliance. India should engage more on multi-lateral institutions and invest in confidence building measures. This will help the nation to maintain long term stability and establishing credibility.

IX. CONCLUSION

The India-China relations cannot be understood through a singular narrative of either cooperation or conflict. During 2014-2018, the relation was characterized by a dynamic mixture of engagement and contention. The NDA government followed a two-track approach combing diplomatic engagement with strategic caution. However, this period appears as a transformative phase that set the path of future developments in their relations. This period witnessed India's balancing behavior, strategic distrust and selective cooperation. These factors laid the foundation for the intense tensions witnessed in later years. From this perspective, this period is not a separated phase as it has a critical link between historical border issues and contemporary geostrategic rivalry. To sum up, the relation during that time presents overall systematic interrelationship between these two Asian Giants in a multi-polar world. This is a unique type of relationship- where a competitive relation exists-yet direct conflict is avoided and, conversely, mistrust persists even within a cooperative relationship.

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