

## Power Shift - India-China Relations in a Multipolar World

Speaker: Zorawar Daulet Singh  
Chair: Amb. Ashok K. Kantha  
Discussant: Ananth Krishnan  
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Venue: Zoom Webinar, ICS Delhi

A book discussion on the book 'Powershift: India – China Relations in a Multipolar World', authored by Mr. Zorawar Daulet Singh was held at the Institute of Chinese Studies. The discussant was Ananth Krishnan, China correspondent at *The Hindu*.

The text is a timely addition to the debate around the complexity of bilateral relations between China and India on the backdrop of the ongoing border dispute in Eastern Ladakh. It dwells upon the how both the countries are coping with each other's rise with changes in the international order. It touches on the upheaval in the Sino-US relations, BRICS and Belt and Road initiative that also plays an important role in shaping the strategic choices for the future trajectory of India – China relations. The book highlights that the emerging multipolar world has impacted the relationship and the course of events would have a critical role on India's security and regional order. It is therefore important for both the states to invest in shaping the ties with the lens of the global order.

### Drivers and dynamics of the relationship

The author noted that the text helps in comprehending the synthesis of the relationship and how both Beijing and New Delhi are trying to cope up with an increased presence of each other on the world stage. The relations between the two have witnessed a heightened state of competition and mistrust. It showcases the dynamics of the border dispute, the widening chasm in US – China relations along with the geopolitics of the Indo – Pacific, China's Belt and Road initiative on the backdrop of a changing world order while unboxing the India – China relations. The tailspin in the relationship is a result of a pessimistic viewpoint of each

other's foreign policy and diving trust in the geopolitical sphere. Some sort of incremental engagement witnessed since 1988 has been jeopardized in the last several years. As per India's viewpoint, China's footsteps to raise its economic and political clout was seen as stepping on India's ambitions in the region, and as per China, India's closeness to its strategic rivals such as US and Japan was seen as a threat to its future manoeuvres. Regarding the border dispute, the author highlighted that the issue is not bilateral or unilateral, but entangled with the question of where Beijing and Delhi would fit in the Asian world order.

### The policy debate

India's China policy stems from the process that entails both opportunities and geopolitical risks with important issues such as its position on the world stage with respect to geopolitical calculus and future economic prospects. Realpolitik engagement and managing the period of competition is the most viable option for New Delhi, the author noted. Other policy option such as a security framework of likeminded democracies to face the common threat of China doesn't seem to be viable for two primary reasons – the range of challenges Beijing poses to its neighbours and US are different and occur in different geographies, therefore a coordinated NATO style strategy may not work as there would always be disagreement over security priorities among the member states. The QUAD seems to be intuitive but would not be easy to operationalize because India's own identity includes several facets ranging from pluralism, inclusiveness and geopolitical independence. For India it is understandable to have ties with China's neighbours to gain geopolitical leverage, to compensate for national asymmetry with China.

### The way forward

The author argued that the lack of unease and knowledge of the other side has led to a hedging policy and reluctance to reach an accommodation or a geopolitical understanding. The context is that the major power setting has shaped the calculus in the relationship between Beijing and New Delhi. The role should be more bilateral for each other, regardless of the fluidity and flux in the ties. For India and China it is important to learn to manage their complex relationship and evolve their existing modus vivendi to incorporate a framework

where the differences are handled maturely without impacting the common or overlapping interests.

The discussant also agreed that the text explains what has worked and hasn't in terms of engagement between Beijing and New Delhi. The balance of power impact of global geopolitics are shaping the ties between the two which should be given attention. The domestic policy of China and internal changes in China seem to be effecting its behaviour externally. It was noted that a meaningful political dialogue is critical to settle the border issue, laying a focus on the merits of pursuing a settlement.

Responding to the question on the role of political leadership in addressing the border issue, the author highlighted that the process of Special Representatives level dialogue that achieved the understanding on the precise areas of dispute, reached a saturation point in 2012-13 and things flattened out. There is a need to stabilize the frontiers, the revival of dialogue is important and the political settlement process needs to address the issue, though the level of engagement at the political level has been constricted lately. On the question of the effectiveness of economic measures undertaken by India such as a ban on apps or curbs on investments from China to convey a message to Beijing, the author agreed that at the peak of the crisis it was understandable to pose curbs in wake of the situation. But on broader note, India made a shift with a reset in terms of economic relations with China early this year, focussing on rejuvenating the Indian industry, partly inspired by the moves of the Trump administration. If such a narrative takes shape in Beijing, it would be difficult to maintain any future economic engagements between the two.

On the existence of the narrative of equilibrium between China and India from the Chinese point of view, with respect to the issue of Belt & Road initiative, Tibet, economic relations etc. which are critical in engaging with India, the speaker mentioned that Beijing seeks reciprocal advantage like India's position on the level of collaboration at the multilateral frameworks where China would keep on investing in the future and where some sort of concession could be achieved. Though, these issues may not be as vital to the Chinese as well. There is a mismatch in what each of the states are seeking from each other. Therefore, it is important to understand the level of equilibrium whether it is with respect to tentative stability or a long term approach.

On the issue of handling economic relations between China and India in a positive way while maintaining trust, the speaker pointed out that there is a lack of effective industrial policy

blueprints, the nature of India's political economy and absence of domestic buffers that complicates the situation. There is a need to identify the sectors which are important from the political perspective which would help in designing any future policy of economic engagement.

In the concluding remarks, the Chair highlighted that the book is an important contribution to the existing literature on India-China relations. The text would trigger off useful conversation on the boundary question, geopolitical development and the impact on the bilateral relationship and the quest for a new equilibrium and policy ideas.

*This report was prepared by Pritish Gupta, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

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