



## Less may be more for India and China

[sanskritias.com/current-affairs/less-may-be-more-for-india-and-china](https://sanskritias.com/current-affairs/less-may-be-more-for-india-and-china)

### (Mains GS2:India and its neighborhood – International relations)

#### Context:

- “Lower the expectations” might not seem a very ambitious prescription for the immediate future of India’s troubled relations with China.
- However, it may be just the right tonic to guide the way forward, as both countries seek a new equilibrium after a major rupture in relations following the border crisis.

#### Recent Track-II dialogue:

- Recently Track-II dialogue was organised by the Ananta Aspen Centre in New Delhi and the China Reform Forum in Beijing, which is affiliated to the Central Party School.
- This brought together former ambassadors and military officials from both sides.
- The consensus was shared by the two sides (India and China) at a Track-II dialogue held in early April, possibly the first of its kind to be held after the border crisis.

#### Hampered by expectations:

- The chequered history of India-China relations is rife with examples of how misplaced expectations have burdened the relationship, often only leading to recurring disappointment.
- In the 1950s, relations veered from being led by idealised notions of restoring some pan-Asian, civilisational partnership, one that actually never really existed through centuries of historical exchanges to confrontation and ultimately war in 1962.
- For an example of a more recent vintage, the holding of two “informal summits” in Wuhan and in Mamallapuram near Chennai.

- These informal summits were certainly valuable exercises in getting the leaders of both countries to engage with each other directly and in leading to largely undisturbed peace on the borders, was seen as marking the start of another new promising era in ties, only to turn out to be another false dawn.
- Rather than once again veer from high expectation to familiar disappointment, the search for a new equilibrium with China should be driven by modest goals, led by conversations driven by hard talk and self-interest, rather than lofty goals of partnership.

### **At the core of dialogue:**

- At the recent dialogue, the shared view was that the key to arriving at a more realistic state of relations will be managing three issues i.e. the boundary question, trade, and the increasing impact of third-party and multilateral engagements on the two-way relationship.
- On all three fronts, setting the sights on limited goals may end up paying rich dividends.

### **The boundary dispute:**

- Ten months after the clash at Galwan Valley, which marked the worst violence on the border since 1967, both sides are nowhere near full de-escalation.
- Initial optimism of a quick end to the crisis, following disengagement on the north and south banks of Pangong Lake, the most thorny of the disputes in eastern Ladakh, has now given way to an apparent stalemate.
- The readouts from both sides after the eleventh round of talks between Corps Commanders on April 9 suggested as much, with no joint statement.
- At the Track-II dialogue, Chinese speakers, unsurprisingly, offered no clarity on what prompted the People's Liberation Army's mass mobilisation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) last summer
- Chinese speakers also did not clarify on the hammer blow dealt to agreements that ensured decades of a carefully managed peace.
- It is clear now that there is certainly no appetite in China at the moment for a final settlement of the boundary question, which means a prolonged period of continued uncertainty on the borders.
- The absence of a permanent peace does not mean that both countries are necessarily destined for conflict.
- If China has made clear that there is little likelihood of clarifying the LAC, one possible way forward is to clarify the most sensitive spots, and arrive at understandings, such as coordinated patrolling either by time or area.
- These are small steps that have helped cool down the temperatures.

### **The view on trade:**

- On the trade front, the view in India has shifted remarkably from what was an all-out courtship of China Inc. to talk now of “decoupling”.
- The idea of roping in China as a major economic partner now seems premature in light of the many unresolved political problems.
- However, the trade figures for a year that saw the biggest border crisis in decades tells a different story altogether.
- Trade reached \$87.6 billion and China was India’s largest trading partner, with India importing \$66.7 billion worth of machinery and medical equipment, among other goods, and exporting a record \$20 billion to China, mostly ores to fill the appetite of China’s rebounding economy.

### **Area to focused:**

- Jettisoning all activity with China is neither realistic nor prudent.
- Instead, the need is a clear-headed, all-of-government approach that decides where both sides can cooperate.
- The infrastructure that has no security implications and clean energy given China’s capacities on solar and wind will be obvious choices.
- Both sides need to have a clear conversation on how third parties and external engagement are an increasing factor.
- The Track-II dialogue made it clear how China is viewing relations with India through the prism of its relations with the United States that are its abiding priority.

### **Focus on shared platforms:**

- Rather than view every element of such engagements as a threat, that both sides would be better served having a conversation about what the red lines are was a shared view at the dialogue.
- Moreover, as relations stabilise, India and China could start injecting more energy into their own shared platforms such as BRICS, which, for instance, could come up with its own vaccine initiatives as the Quad has done.
- They could also revive their bilateral cooperation in Afghanistan, which began and ended after the Wuhan summit with a modest joint training programme for diplomats.

### **Conclusion:**

- As both countries chart a course forward after last year’s rupture in ties, they may find a conversation that is driven by hard talk and finding shared interests.
- As India and China go back to the drawing board, less may indeed be more.

