

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Peace or Pause? Unseen Stakes in the 2024 India-China Border Agreement

By Prem Singh Gill

SYNOPSIS

The October 2024 India-China border patrolling agreement marks a significant diplomatic breakthrough, raising questions about whether it represents a strategic shift or a tactical pause in bilateral relations between the two Asian giants. This analysis explores the agreement's implications for their bilateral relations and Asian security through historical precedents.

COMMENTARY

From the Galwan Crisis to the Kazan Agreement

The recent announcement of an agreement between India and China regarding patrolling arrangements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) marks a significant diplomatic breakthrough in one of Asia's most complex territorial disputes.

This development, coming four years after the deadly [Galwan Valley clash](#), raises fundamental questions about the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations and the broader implications for Asian geopolitics. While External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's characterisation of the agreement as a "[return to 2020](#)" suggests a restoration of the status quo ante, the underlying dynamics warrant deeper examination.

The timing of this agreement, announced on the eve of the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, reflects the intricate interplay between bilateral relations and multilateral frameworks. This synchronisation echoes historical patterns where major Sino-Indian diplomatic initiatives often coincided with multilateral engagements. For example, it is reminiscent of the [1988 Rajiv Gandhi-Deng Xiaoping breakthrough](#) that occurred against the backdrop of broader Asian diplomatic realignments.

The contemporary context, however, is a more complex tapestry of international relations, with both nations navigating their roles within an evolving global order.

From a theoretical perspective, this agreement challenges traditional realist assumptions about territorial disputes between rising powers. It does not conform with Graham Allison's "[Thucydides Trap](#)" thesis, which posits an inevitable conflict between rising and established powers, for India and China appear to be crafting a more nuanced approach to managing their territorial differences.

This development aligns more closely with constructivist interpretations of international relations. The agreement's focus on patrolling arrangements rather than permanent territorial settlements reveals a pragmatic approach to conflict management. This bears similarities to the confidence-building measures (CBMs) implemented along the India-Pakistan Line of Control (LAC) in the 1990s, though with notable differences in scope and context.

The approach aligns with what Robert Jervis terms the "[security regime](#)" concept, where potential adversaries establish mechanisms to reduce the risk of unintended escalation without necessarily resolving underlying disputes.

Beijing's Border Pause, Delhi's Bold Play

Several key factors set the India-China LAC agreement apart from earlier Sino-Indian border protocols.

First, it comes at a time of relative military parity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), with both India and China maintaining substantial troop deployments in the region, making unilateral aggressive action less likely.

Second, this agreement is shaped by significant global strategic realignments, particularly the evolving competition between the US and China and Russia's changing influence in Asian geopolitics.

Third, both nations are increasingly aware of the economic costs associated with prolonged military standoffs; in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, they recognise that sustained tensions can hinder economic recovery and development, prompting them to seek more stable diplomatic arrangements.

The agreement's implications extend beyond bilateral relations. For Russia, hosting this potential reconciliation at the BRICS summit reinforces its ambition to use BRICS as a relevant forum to project a non-Western geopolitical avenue for significant global dialogue and as a counterweight against US containment and Western Domination of world affairs. For smaller Asian nations, it potentially offers a template for managing territorial disputes with larger neighbours.

The agreement also challenges the prevailing narrative of inevitable conflict between Asian powers, suggesting the possibility of what Amitav Acharya calls "[multi-aligned](#)" diplomacy in a multiplex world order.

The sustainability of this agreement is likely to depend on three key factors. First is

both governments' ability to maintain domestic political support despite nationalist pressures. Second, the evolution of the broader international security environment, particularly the developments in US-China relations and their impact on Asian strategic calculations. Third, the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms in preventing and managing future incidents along the LAC.

Looking ahead, this agreement could represent either a pivotal change or merely a practical *modus vivendi* in Sino-Indian relations. Which way relations between the two will head will become more apparent through several indicators: the pace of military de-escalation along the LAC, the revival of economic cooperation (particularly in areas affected by post-2020 restrictions), and the nature of bilateral engagement in multilateral forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Conclusion

This 2024 border agreement represents a pivotal moment in contemporary Asian diplomacy, offering insights into the evolving nature of conflict resolution between major powers in the 21st century.

While sceptics might view it as a temporary accommodation driven by immediate strategic considerations, the agreement's potential significance extends beyond its immediate military implications. It demonstrates the capacity of rising powers to manage territorial disputes through institutional frameworks and diplomatic innovation, even in an era of increasing global tensions and nationalist pressures.

The agreement's success will ultimately be measured not just by its ability to prevent future military confrontations between India and China but by its contribution to a new model of Asian diplomatic practice. Combining traditional bilateral negotiations with multilateral frameworks and confidence-building measures, this model could offer valuable lessons for managing other regional disputes.

As Asia continues its rise in global affairs, the ability of its major powers to develop such innovative diplomatic solutions may well determine whether the region can avoid great power conflict.

Looking beyond 2024, the true test of this agreement will lie in its ability to facilitate a broader strategic dialogue between India and China, one that addresses not just territorial issues but the fundamental question of how two rising Asian powers can coexist and potentially cooperate in shaping the emerging world order.

The answer to this question will have profound implications for Asia and the future of global international relations.

Prem Singh Gill is a visiting scholar at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and a scholar in Thailand. He is a member of the Indian diaspora, belonging to the third generation living in Thailand.
