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# Chindia: Cooperate, compete or confront

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TWO great civilisations with different post-colonial development models, different social as well as political setups, different oriental attributes, and most importantly, different economies that together account for more than a third of the world's population — China and India (Chindia) — are not only consolidating their place in Asia, but also making their presence felt on the global stage.

As the competition grows for energy and raw materials to feed their rising economies — as seen in both wooing Africa — and their naval presence intensifies to protect the supply routes in the Indian Ocean, the discourse on a potential Indo-Sino rivalry in the future is gaining pace.

While Beijing is developing strategic port facilities in India's neighbourhood of Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, New Delhi has taken the lead in hosting the first Indian Ocean Naval Symposium to encourage strategic cooperation among the countries in the Indian Ocean Region.

Though their bilateral relations have steadily improved, the history of war in 1962, unresolved border disputes, economic competition, the Beijing-Islamabad proximity, and the presence of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees in India — keep the relations on tenterhooks.

In spite of the challenges, it is important to stop viewing the developments in mere India-versus-China terms and take an optimistic India-plus-China approach that guarantees a win-win situation. As the global economic balance shifts towards Asia, Chindia could engage in cooperative as well as competitive, and not necessarily confrontational engagement.

Given the state of infrastructure in India and the realisation about its linkage with growth, China's success is acting as a catalyst for change in India. In the prevailing mood of competition, the Indian leadership has said: "We want to catch up with China," but doing so requires "greater political consensus" on reforms, which is an internal dilemma, without China in the picture.

While it is fashionable among common Indians to believe that Chindia are engaged in a developmental race, New Delhi has reinforced that China's rise is an opportunity rather than a threat to India. It has clearly stated that Indians would do well to stop racing with the Chinese and start admiring — "We are not in a race...They have already won the race."

In the foreign policy realm too, "China is a model for India in how to operate in the new world order and deal with the United States." Analysts argue that India's new foreign policy diluting non-alignment is influenced by China's realism. Further, the 'look East' policy could also be a result of the "concern that a rising China might economically and politically isolate India from Southeast Asia."

Energy has been the prime reason for competition in recent years, but has also witnessed cooperation. Chindia are the world's fastest growing energy consumers, with China and India importing about 40 per cent and 70 per cent of their needs respectively. They have signed numerous pacts in the hydrocarbon sector, most notably the 2006 "Memorandum for Enhancing Cooperation in the Field of Oil and Natural Gas".

Yet, India has lost out to China in \$10 billion of auctions for energy assets, among others, in Kazakhstan, Myanmar, as well as parts of Africa. At the same time, however, the two countries partnered successfully in Syria in 2005.

From about \$1 billion in 1995, Chindia's annual bilateral trade inched towards \$20 billion in little more than a decade. The two have pledged to double it by 2010 by signing agreements on science, space exploration, agriculture, education, tourism, nuclear energy, among others. China is already India's leading trade partner in the region and is expected to replace the United States as the top trade partner in a few years.

Since 2003, there has been a steady progress in security cooperation too. Starting with joint naval exercises, an agreement in 2004 facilitated exchanging military exercise observers; the following year, Chindia announced a deal to convert "bilateral engagements into a long-term and strategic relationship," pledging to resolve long-standing border disputes and boost trade and economic cooperation.

More recently, the two armies conducted their first-ever joint anti-terrorism military training exercise in China. A aptly termed 'Hand-in-Hand 2007', the drill was aimed at deterring the "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism and extremism, and promote the development of a bilateral strategic partnership."

Yes, there are problems between Asia's "dragon" and "elephant", but they exist between India and Pakistan as well. In fact, the Indo-Pak dimension was, is and will remain more complicated than Indo-Sino relations can ever get. Yet, if India and Pakistan can stave off confrontation through efforts to cooperate, amid limited competition, then why not Chindia?

Again, unlike the Iran-Israel relationship, where ideology determines geostrategic interests, there are few or no ideological factors remaining to deter Indo-Sino ties, leaving them to just worry about geostrategic interests.

Former Singapore diplomat and academic Kishore Mahbubani attributes the lack of regional

conflict despite Chindia's simultaneous emergence to Asia's geopolitical competence - being innovative and creating new patterns of cooperation not witnessed by the West.



Thus, while competition is inevitable, there is nothing stopping the two countries with "oversized egos" from cooperating and avoiding veering off towards confrontation. Their cooperative relationship has significant implications not only for the future of the two countries, but also for the Gulf region, the Asian continent and the world at large.

Both countries have extremely good ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Iran and Israel. Apart from intensifying economic ties, Chindia can serve as the honest peace brokers between the capitals of the GCC countries on one side, as well as Teheran and Tel Aviv on the other.

The future of Chindia ties will, no doubt, be greatly influenced by the United States. While Washington would desire "a unipolar world and a multipolar Asia, China would prefer a multipolar world and a China-centric unipolar Asia." On the other hand, India — which is growing closer to the United States and which Washington wants to use to counter Beijing — "would like to see a multipolar world and a multipolar Asia," thereby intensifying Beijing-New Delhi competition.

If the 21st century has to truly be Asia's, Chindia ties have to be based on the development and security of the two countries and their people, as well as playing a constructive role in world affairs. And, as New Delhi has stressed: "The world is big enough for both countries and each is too big to be contained by the other," which lends hope against confrontation.

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