



TAKSHASHILA
INSTITUTION

PULSE OF THE PEOPLE

STATE OF INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

SURVEY REPORT 2024

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The Takshashila Institution is an independent centre for research and education in public policy. It is a non-partisan, non-profit organisation that advocates the values of freedom, openness, tolerance, pluralism and responsible citizenship. It seeks to transform India through better public policies, bridging the governance gap by developing better public servants, civil society leaders, professionals and informed citizens. Takshashila creates change by connecting good people, to good ideas and good networks. It produces independent policy research in a number of areas of governance, it grooms civic leaders through its online education programmes and engages in public discourse through its publications and digital media.

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INTRODUCTION

When India gained independence in 1947, it inherited the British policy on the status of Tibet, as well as the McMahon line – the border between Tibet and India. With China's annexation of Tibet in the 1950s, India and China became neighbours for the first time, and while India accepted China's claim over Tibet, differences over the McMahon Line continued to impinge on the relationship, eventually resulting in a major turning point in bilateral relations – the war of 1962. The diplomatic relations frozen in the aftermath of the war began to thaw in the 1970s. However, it was only in 1988 that the two sides embarked on a new phase of normalisation. Subsequently, they inked a series of bilateral agreements and understandings to govern the LAC. The peace held till 2020, barring frictions and clashes in 2013 (Raki Nala), 2014, 2015 (Burtse), and 2017 (Doklam).

In the past few years, India-China relations have been transforming dynamically. In the aftermath of the deadly clashes that erupted on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 2020, India's China policy has become highly oriented towards security. This is especially manifest in India applying a national security lens with regard to imports, technology, investment, and talent from China. This has, of course, not translated into an improvement in India's trade balance with China, with the trade deficit crossing the US\$ 100 billion mark in FY 2021-22.¹

More recently, however, the two countries have attempted to engage diplomatically and achieve stability in the border dispute. A new agreement disclosed on October 21, 2024, revives India's access to patrolling and grazing rights in the Depsang and Demchok regions, restoring them to the pre-2020 stand-off status.² The agreement has spelled optimism for bilateral engagement on the boundary question.

INTRODUCTION

But beyond the immediate crisis triggered by the standoff in Eastern Ladakh, there are structural, underlying issues creating friction in the bilateral relationship, such as India's support for the Dalai Lama, and China's friendship with Pakistan. In addition, India's expanding relations with the US and participation in groupings like the Quad are also significant factors in the India-China relationship.

In general, the sentiment toward China among the Indian populace appears to have become quite negative since 2020. But, what do Indians actually think about India-China relations, and the trajectory of India's China policy going forward? How do the people expect the Indian government to react to key events that may emerge in the near future? The Takshashila Institution's 2024 Survey report, *'Pulse of the People: State of India-China Relations'*, attempts to address these pertinent questions.

The Survey questionnaire captured data on 11 substantive inquiries pertaining to India-China relations, from over 600 respondents, over a period of two months. A majority of these respondents (391) are between 30 and 60 years of age, followed by the second biggest group of respondents (219) aged 16-29. Most respondents affiliate with the private sector (242), and the second biggest groups are students (125) or employed with the armed forces (122). Their responses have yielded some vital results: many confirmatory, and some counterintuitive, that can together serve to inform policy.

We believe the Survey has the potential to act as a springboard for future research, while also inspiring thought for not just the academic reader, but also for public and private sector professionals, think tanks, and civil society.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01

A majority of respondents (54.4%) shares the sentiment articulated by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, that the boundary dispute along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is at the front and center of the current tensions in India-China relations.



04

The Survey asked respondents whether ties with China would have been better had President Xi Jinping not been in charge in Beijing, and if China had been a multi-party democracy similar to India. Interestingly, a vast majority (61.5%) believe that if the Chinese political ecosystem was more democratic, with multiple political parties contesting for leadership and power, India's relations with China may well have been better.

02

A notable group (26.6%) also believes that China's inroads and influence in India's neighbourhood is the second-most vital stressor in the bilateral relationship, which is a surprising result, with respondents according lower significance to more visceral factors such as China-Pakistan friendship, India-US partnership, and a massive trade asymmetry favouring China.

03

Regarding the 3 key aspects of bilateral economic relations, namely trade, talent, and investments, respondents have expressed a positive attitude vis-à-vis India's greater engagement with China. A majority of them agree that greater trade with China is in India's developmental and security interest (49.6%), and that investments from China are beneficial, especially in sectors opening up new employment opportunities for Indians (56.3%), and that Chinese talent should be welcome in India, if requisite Indian talent in a particular industry is lacking (52.4%).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

05

However, many expressed uncertainty (46.6%) that if anyone other than Xi were leading China, India-China relations would be better. This indicates that there is a belief that the trajectory of the relationship between the two rising neighbours is bound to be difficult regardless of the leader in power in Beijing.



06

The Survey also assessed the respondents' understanding of how external stakeholders and scenarios impact and relate to relations between India and China. Overwhelmingly, a majority of the respondents (69.2%) believe that if forced to choose, India must align closely with the US-led West, and not the China-Russia axis.

07

However, a majority also believe that the Quad, which is a grouping of India, the US, Japan and Australia, has only been somewhat effective (50.8%) in countering China. Many respondents (44.4%) even see it as "ineffective" in this regard.

08

On two key 'red lines' China perceives as critical to its territorial integrity, national security, and ideological stability – the issues of Tibet and Taiwan, respondents weighed in to suggest India's policy options. When asked what India should do if both Beijing and the Tibetan Administration-in-Exile in India nominate their own successors to the current Dalai Lama, an overwhelming majority (64%) expressed support for the latter nominee. A minority believes that India must recognise neither (17.9%).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

09

In the case of a Taiwan Strait conflict, however, attitudes are more moderate, with only a small minority (3.5%) suggesting that India get involved militarily. A larger number (28.7%) argued that India should support the US logistically in such a conflict. While some respondents (13.3%) may have advocated India has no role to play in this conflict, the overall response pattern suggests greater awareness of the regional fallout of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait. In this light, most respondents said that India should play the role of a peace-broker (54.4%), encouraging diplomacy and negotiation toward a peaceful resolution.



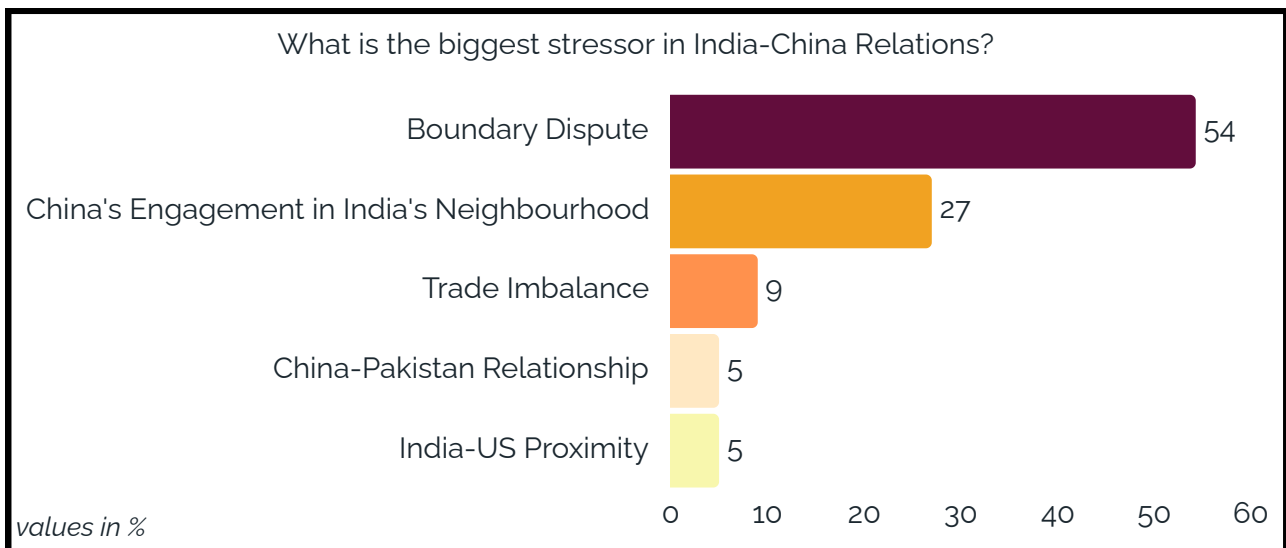
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Amidst intense deliberations surrounding a solution to the ongoing tensions in India-China relations, the Survey also assessed the respondents' opinions on the best way forward. Strengthening India's military posture and deterrence (41.2%), and at the same time, re-starting high-level political dialogue at the level of leaders on the two sides (31%), have emerged as the two most popular policy suggestions.

THE BIGGEST STRESSOR IN INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

By a vast majority, 54.4% of respondents have opined that the 'boundary dispute' is the biggest stressor in India-China relations.

Chinese aggression along the LAC, especially since April 2020, has resulted in an ensuing military standoff with India and has fundamentally transformed bilateral relations. Subsequently, India has undertaken efforts to strengthen its border troop deployment and infrastructure development, while engaging with China through 21 rounds of corps-commander-level dialogues. While there has been disengagement in major friction points in the Eastern Sector of the LAC, and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri announced on October 21, 2024, that an agreement on patrolling rights has been reached in Depsang and Demchok,³ the need for de-escalation and de-induction still exists. This is because both sides have equalled troop deployment numbers in anticipation.



THE BIGGEST STRESSOR IN INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

The border dispute has been identified as the central issue by Survey respondents. Other major fault lines, such as China's increasing inroads into India's neighbourhood (26.6%), the trade imbalance favouring China (9.3%), India-US proximity (4.9%), and friendly China-Pakistan relations (4.9%), have been considered as relatively less vital in worsening India-China relations.

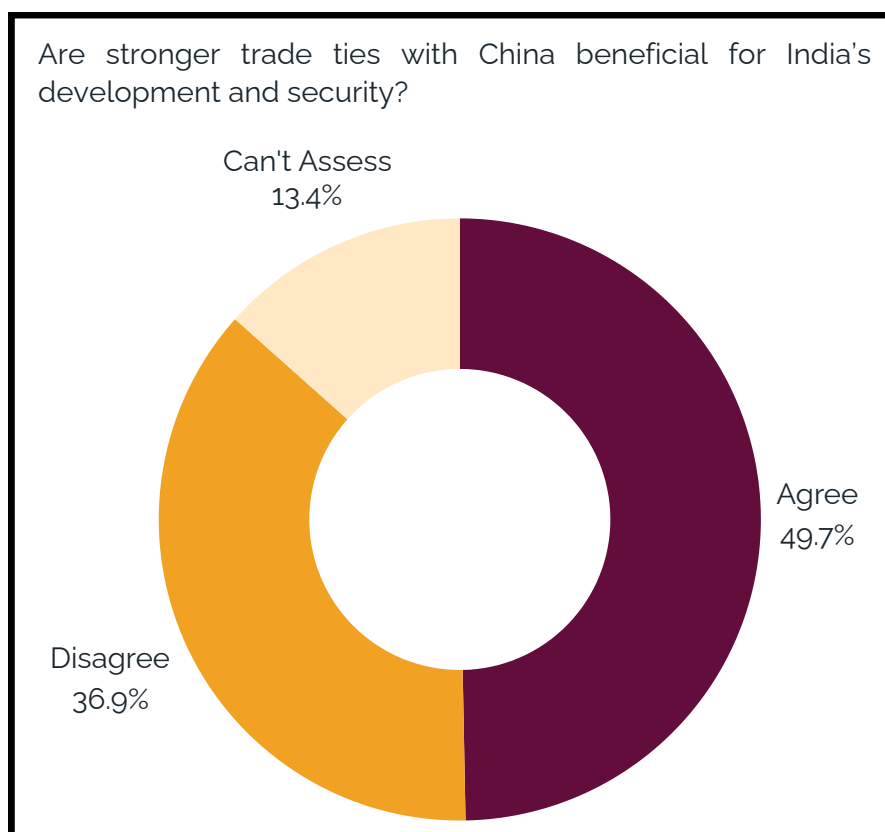
It is evident from the above-mentioned statistics that the Indian populace does not agree with the Chinese approach of applying the prism of US-China competition to India-China relations. Similarly, it is interesting to note that India's difficult relations with Pakistan, which continue to remain a visceral and emotive issue within the populace, have not been deemed prominent in determining India-China relations. China's inroads in India's neighbourhood, however, has been deemed the second most important stressor, after the boundary dispute.

Given the power asymmetry between India and its smaller neighbours, the latter tend to deploy a hedging strategy to extract maximum benefit. As a result, India and China continue to compete for influence in countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, as changes in government lead to shifting dynamics. In this light, 26.6% of respondents to the Survey recognise the national security challenges posed by the Chinese military, economic, and political support to India's neighbours – which is a statistic of note for Indian policymakers.

ASSESSING TRADE, INVESTMENT & TALENT

As discussed above, the boundary dispute between India and China has spilled over into other areas of the relationship. A national security lens has become prominent and pervasive in India's approach to all domains of cooperation.

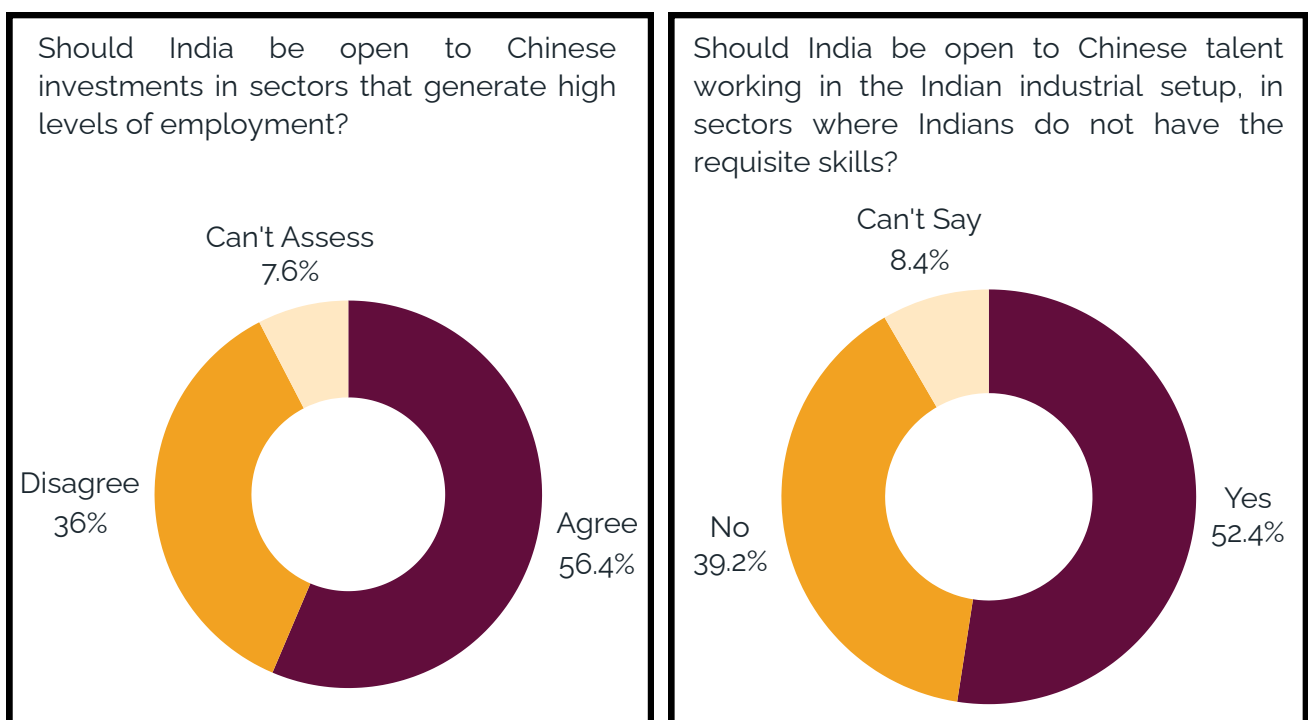
When it comes to trade and investment, the application of such a national security lens is evident, too. In this context, the Survey finds a rather mixed response. A significant minority of respondents (49.6%) have expressed support for stronger trade ties between India and China. They opine that such ties shall further both India's development as well as security interests.



Similarly, a majority of the respondents (56.3%) opine that India should adopt a stance of openness towards Chinese investments, especially in sectors that lead to high employment generation.

ASSESSING TRADE, INVESTMENT & TALENT

For instance, investments from China in the manufacturing sector, such as the auto sector, may not only lead to the import of technological know-how but also create opportunities for employment for both, the vocationally trained, as well as the unskilled workers' pool.

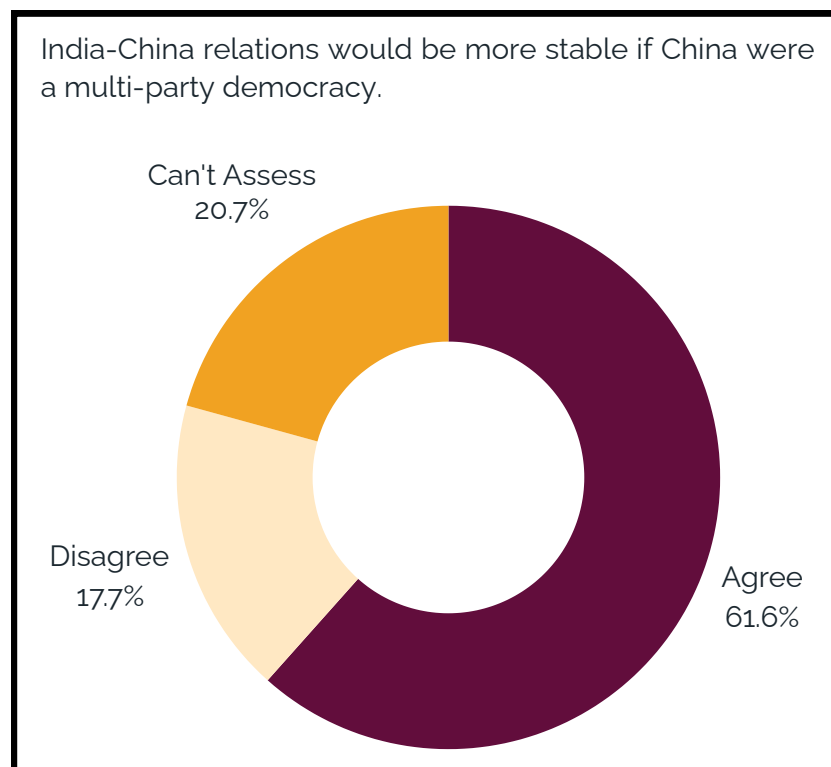


In addition, a majority of the respondents (52.4%) also suggest that India should be open to Chinese talent working in the Indian industrial setup, especially in sectors where Indians do not have the requisite skills. Domestically, China is facing Western sanctions on the export of its talent, while India is facing talent shortages in critical technological domains. Talent import, in this regard, may emerge as a mutually beneficial domain of cooperation.

IMAGINING A DIFFERENT CHINA

India and China are both rising powers in a dynamic Asian regional order. Both command significant economic and military might and influence, though the asymmetry in comprehensive national power strongly favours China. The relationship is also marred with structural fault lines. Hence, it is a popular assumption that India-China relations are bound to remain competitive and tense. However, Survey respondents challenge the notion, and a majority of them (61.5%) argue that if China were a multi-party democracy, India's relations with its biggest neighbour would be more stable.

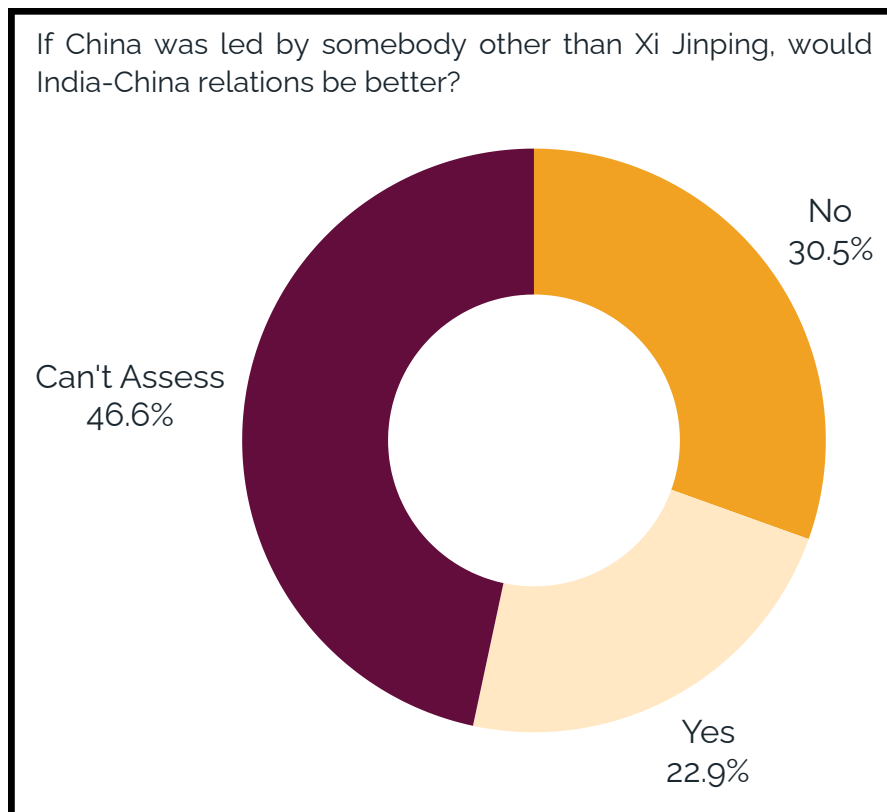
If China were indeed to be a multi-party democracy, likely, its aggression would not go unchecked, and a more transparent policymaking system would be in place, bringing a semblance of stability to its foreign relations. This is perhaps the logic dictating the response pattern emerging from Survey results.



IMAGINING A DIFFERENT CHINA

However, a significant minority of respondents (46.6%) are also uncertain that if China had been led by somebody other than President and Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, bilateral relations would have been more stable. This result may be based on the assertion that China continues to remain under CPC rule, and follow a party-state model of governance, with the supreme leader at the center of decision-making.

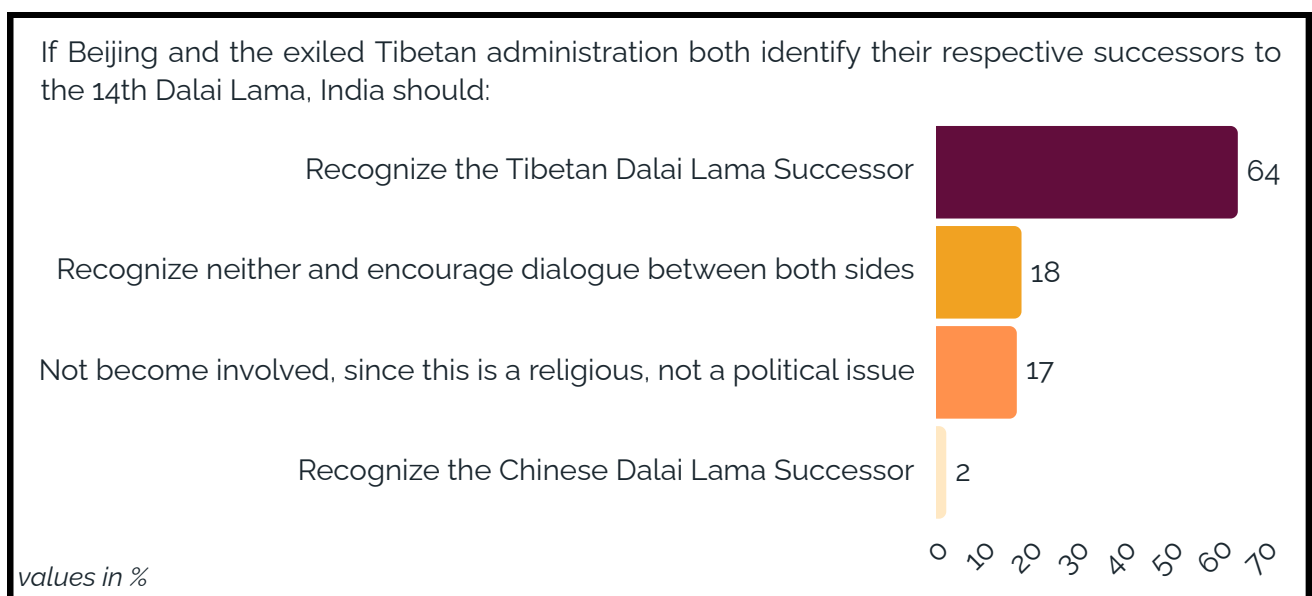
In fact, the second-most number of respondents (30.5%) argue that if another leader were at the helm of affairs, assuming the CPC continued to exercise supreme authority, India-China relations would not be more stable.



A VIEW ON CHINA'S 'RED LINES'

China has designated "reunification" with Taiwan and the complete integration of Tibet as 'red line' issues that must be respected by countries globally.⁴ It expects India to do the same. The Tibet issue is not only historically relevant, but is also a contemporary factor in India-China relations. Likewise, there is increasing discussion within India about the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

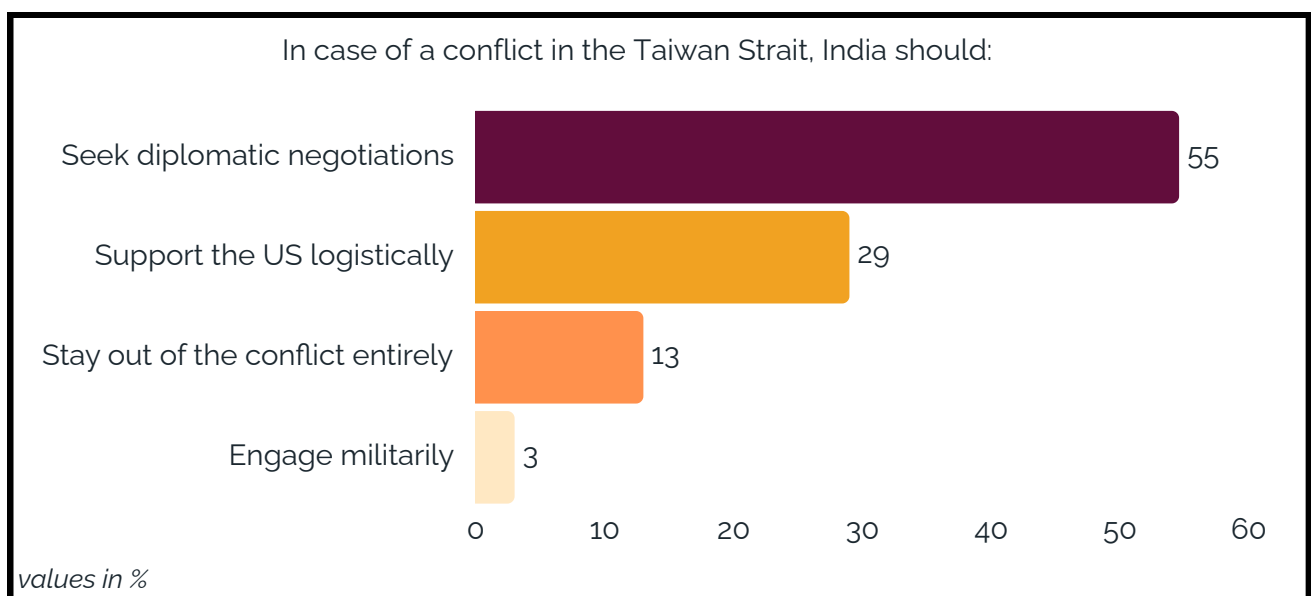
In our Survey, responding to a question on the future of the institution of the Dalai Lama, a majority of respondents (64%) seem to side with the choice that might be made by the exiled Tibetan administration.



A VIEW ON CHINA'S 'RED LINES'

On the Taiwan issue, however, respondents advocate a more moderate approach. A vast majority of them (54.5%) encourage India to play the role of peace-broker by suggesting that in the event of a Taiwan Strait conflict, the government should seek diplomatic negotiations between conflicting parties.

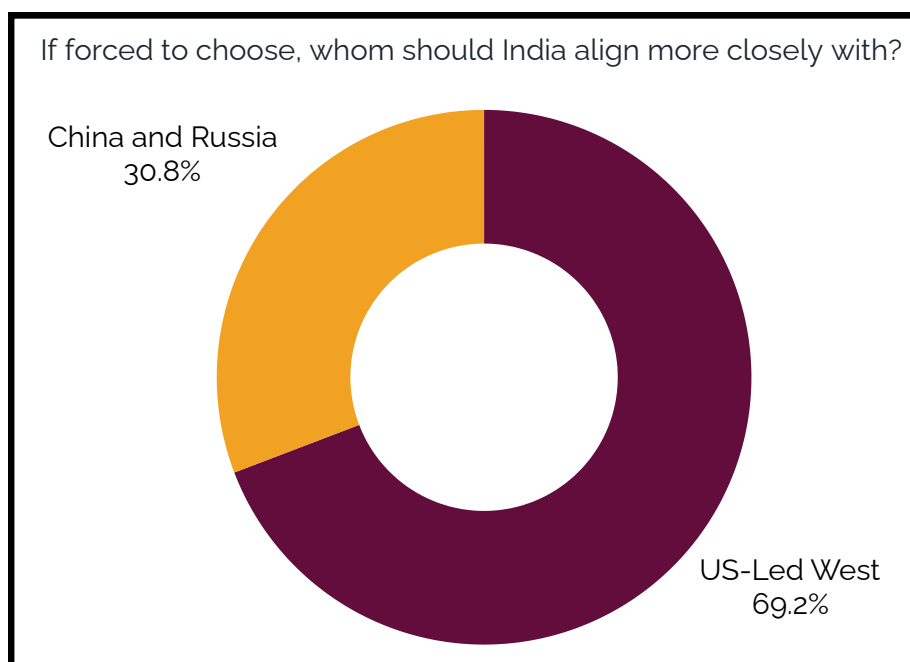
Only a small number of respondents (13.3%) advocate that India stay out of the conflict entirely. The second preferred policy response for India that the respondents opted for (28.7%) is to provide logistical support to the US in case of conflict. Hence, even though a conflict in the Taiwan Strait will be a far-off development from the Indian national security perspective, response patterns suggest that domestic audiences understand the potential global fallout of such a conflict.



COUNTERING CHINA: INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY OPTIONS

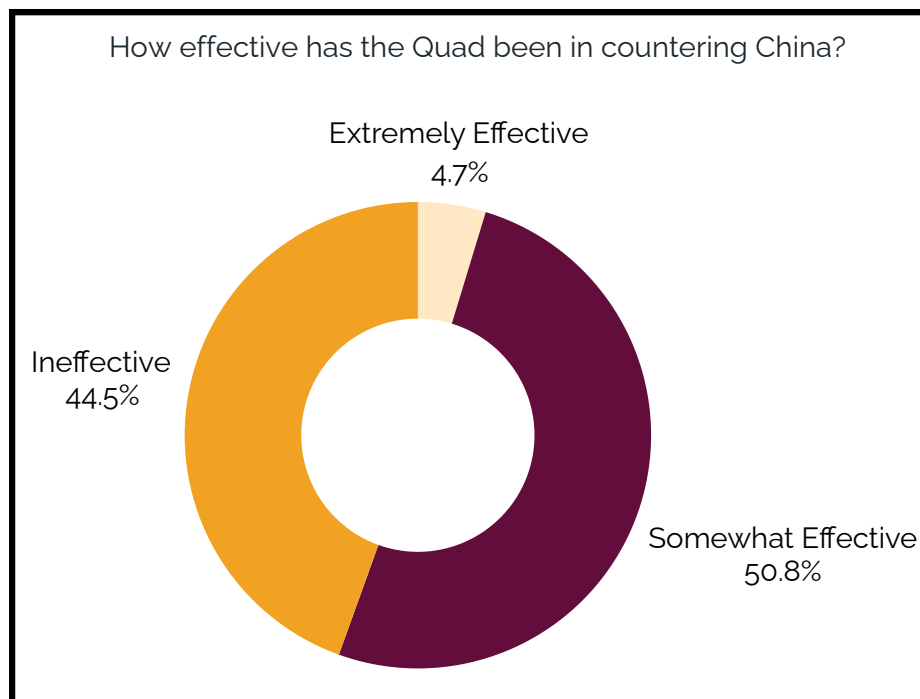
Despite the positive sentiment expressed towards India's increased economic cooperation with China, an overwhelming majority of Survey respondents (69.2%) makes the case that if push comes to shove, India must closely align with the US-led West, and not with China and Russia.

This is pertinent to understand the prevailing domestic sentiment in India – that even though there exist vocal lobbies⁵ supporting China as an ancient civilisational partner and Russia as a historical friend and trade partner, the US and its network of alliances is seen as more beneficial for India's global ambitions and national interests.



COUNTERING CHINA: INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY OPTIONS

However, a majority of the respondents also believe that the Quad, a grouping of the US, India, Japan and Australia (the latter two being close US allies), has only been somewhat effective (50.8%) or ineffective (44.4%) in countering China. Here, it may be crucial for the Indian government to understand the expectations the populace may have of the Quad, and re-assess the opportunities and challenges it can create for India's role in regional security.

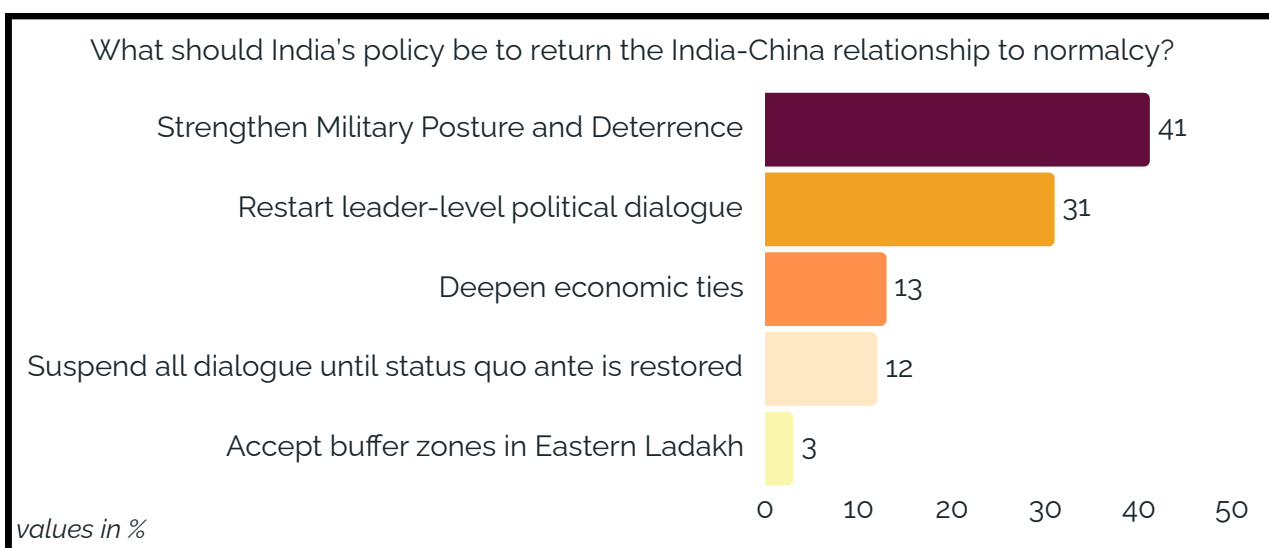


A NEW MODUS VIVENDI

Survey respondents also weighed in to assess the most beneficial policy options for India to progress its relations with China. A significant minority (41.2%) supports building India's military strength and deterrence posture vis-à-vis China. India has already undertaken measures to increase its troop deployment and enhance infrastructure development along the LAC. A firm stance in defence and security may hence sit well with domestic audiences.

At the same time, the second most popular suggestion from respondents (31%), is for India to restart leader-level political dialogue with China. In this regard, the meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Kazan, Russia, is a great start.⁶

It is also notable that only a few (11.8%) suggest India continue to break off all communication till the pre-May 2020 status quo ante is restored in Eastern Ladakh. And so, in light of recent developments surrounding the conclusion of an agreement on patrolling rights, followed by the meeting between President Xi and PM Modi on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Russia, these response attitudes are positive.



CONCLUSION

As India-China relations continue to dynamically evolve and shape both domestic and regional politics, India must carefully consider the understanding of the relationship developed by the populace. In assessing the opinions and attitudes captured in this Survey, policymakers may find relevant information on what their domestic audiences deem appropriate responses for China-related developments. At the same time, academic deliberations may find statistically significant intuitive and counterintuitive insights, providing a springboard for future research.

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ANNEX

Survey Design and Logistics

The 'China Challenge' Survey is designed by the Indo-Pacific Studies Programme at the Takshashila Institution. The 2024 edition of the Survey received 655 responses through social media channels (i.e. Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Signal and OpenTakshashilaTM, the Institution's open platform to reflect, educate, and discuss).

The age composition of the respondents is as follows:

- Youth (16-29 years): 219
- Middle-aged (30-60 years): 391
- Elderly (61-96): 45

Employment statistics for the respondents are as follows:

- Private Sector - 242
- Student - 125
- Armed Forces - 122
- Self-Employed - 88
- Public Sector/ Government - 78

ANNEX

Questions and Response Statistics

1. What is the biggest stressor in India-China relations?

- Boundary Dispute - 356
- China's engagement in India's neighbourhood - 174
- Trade Imbalance - 61
- India-US Proximity - 32
- China-Pakistan relationship - 32

2. Are stronger trade ties with China beneficial for India's development and security?

- Agree - 325
- Disagree - 242
- Can't Assess - 88

3. Should India be open to Chinese talent working in the Indian industrial setup, in sectors where Indians do not have the requisite skills?

- Yes - 343
- No - 257
- Can't Say - 55

4. Should India be open to Chinese investments in sectors that generate high levels of employment?

- Agree - 369
- Disagree - 236
- Can't Assess - 50

ANNEX

5. India-China relations would be more stable if China were a multi-party democracy.

- Agree - 403
- Disagree - 116
- Can't Assess - 136

6. If China was led by somebody other than Xi Jinping, would India-China relations be better?

- Yes - 150
- No - 200
- Can't Assess - 305

7. If forced to choose, whom should India align more closely with?

- The US-led West - 453
- China and Russia - 202

8. How effective has the Quad been in countering China?

- Extremely Effective - 31
- Ineffective - 291
- Somewhat Effective - 333

9. In case of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, India should:

- Stay out of the conflict entirely - 87
- Seek diplomatic negotiations - 357
- Support the US logistically - 188
- Engage militarily - 23

ANNEX

10. If Beijing and the exiled Tibetan administration both identify their respective successors to the 14th Dalai Lama, India should:

- Recognize the Tibetan Dalai Lama successor - 419
- Recognize the Chinese Dalai Lama successor - 10
- Recognize neither and encourage dialogue between both sides - 117
- Not become involved, since this is a religious, not a political issue - 109

11. What should India's policy be to return the India-China relationship to normalcy?

- Strengthen military posture and deterrence - 270
- Suspend all dialogue until status quo ante is restored in Eastern Ladakh - 77
- Accept buffer zones in Eastern Ladakh - 23
- Deepen economic ties - 82
- Restart leader-level political dialogue - 203



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