

Modi–Xi Meeting at BRICS Delhi Summit: Thaw to Cautious Rapprochement

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Introduction

The much awaited meeting between Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, on 12 Sep 2026, on the sidelines of Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) Delhi Summit was a significant engagement between the two countries. Confirmation of Chinese head attending the summit and bilateral meeting with PM Modi came just two days before the event—highlighting the characteristics of ‘Beijing Diplomacy’. Xi last visited India in Oct 2019 for a ‘One-on-One’ meeting with Modi at Mamallapuram to consolidate the ‘Strategic Guidance Mechanism’ evolved in Wuhan by the two leaders in Apr 2018. India–China relations appeared to be on the reset mode.

In May 2020, massive intrusions by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in Eastern Ladakh to arbitrarily change the status of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) came as a big surprise for the Indian leadership. Deadly border clash a month later at Galwan severely strained the bilateral ties, derailing the process of normalisation. The heightened tension continued despite partial disengagement, consequent to series of talks at politico-diplomatic and military levels. Breakthrough came about when Modi and Xi met in Kazan, Russia, on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Oct 2024. It was followed by another bilateral meet on the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Tianjin, China, during Sep 2025.

Thaw and Consolidation

The recent Modi–Xi meeting at Delhi was to consolidate the thaw in the bilateral relations. Beyond the optics, it is apparent that both India and China are keen to manage their rivalry, rather than allow it to become permanently adversarial.

The official Indian readout provided a concise gist of the meeting. Modi reiterated that peace and tranquillity in the border areas remain basis for the continued development of India-China relations. He highlighted three guiding principles—mutual respect, sensitivity and interest—to convey a pragmatic message.¹ It succinctly conveyed that strategic normalisation is prelude to the stabilisation of ties and progress in the other areas. In essence, the situation on LAC remains a yardstick for restoring the trust deficit and make relations more sustainable. India’s emphasis was on expanding cooperation and obviate difference from turning into disputes.

The Chinese readout conveyed a different strategic viewpoint, wherein Xi described China and India as development partners rather than rivals. He outlined four-point plan for long-term relations; emphasising strategic understanding, win-win cooperation, mutual respect, and openness through multilateral platforms. The relationship should be handled from strategic and long-term perspective. He also stressed on the broader responsibility of India and China as major developing countries in shaping more equitable global order.²ⁱⁱ

There was a revealing difference in emphasis, as Modi prioritised border to be an imperative for cooperation while China started with strategic partnership. However, both leaders committed to achieving a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable resolution of boundary dispute.ⁱⁱⁱ³ They also agreed that differences must not be allowed to escalate into confrontation. The two leaders discussed economic concerns, including structural trade imbalance and market access to the Indian goods; and additionally agreed to gradually expand business, cultural, and institutional exchanges to foster regional stability.

The Ground Reality: Hard Facts

Border dispute remains the most contentious issue. While the disengagement of troops has happened with 'Buffer Zones' mechanism and fresh patrolling protocols in place, however, there has been no de-escalation. Almost 50,000-60,000 remain deployed by either side. PLA continues to build military infrastructure all along the LAC, especially opposite Arunachal Pradesh. Tibet has been heavily fortified and made into a 'Ironclad Shield', as per Xi's directions.^{iv4} As President, Xi visited Lhasa in Jul 2021 and Aug 2025, and actively reinforced this strategy by directing the military and local officials to focus on border area consolidation and security.

While the economic ties continue to flourish with bilateral trade having crossed USD 151 bn mark in 2025, the imbalance with deficit of around USD 112 bn in China's favour has emerged as another faultline.^{v5} India is heavily reliant on China for upstream industrial goods. These include pharmaceuticals ingredients for making medicines, electronics and semiconductors for smartphones and industrial machinery, photovoltaic cells and solar modules for green energy, and rare earth minerals such as lithium and graphite.^{vi6} Situation is further compounded with China weaponising trade through targeted export control and imposing ban on vital materials such as germanium, a crucial ingredient for fibre—optic cables, disrupting supply chains and exploiting asymmetrical trade imbalances.

India and China are competing for geo-strategic influence across Asia and Global South; besides technology, manufacturing, and infrastructure. Their visions on the emerging world order are at variance. Delhi seeks multipolar world, implying greater strategic space for India. China, on the other hand, while seeking reduction of the Western influence, envisions unipolar Asia and bipolar world.

The BRICS Summit in Delhi was itself an exercise in managing the competing interests. For India and China, BRICS provides a conducive platform for cooperation without requiring bilateral strategic convergence. This perhaps offers a realistic template for their broader relationship.

Neither side has abandoned its core interests. China–Pak nexus, Beijing's deepening inroads into South Asia, and growing footprint in the Indian Ocean, besides persistent efforts to marginalise India will continue to be Delhi's major concerns. Equally, China remains wary of India's partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, specifically with the United States, Japan, Australia, and Europe.

Thaw to Cautious Rapprochement: No Reset

Given the above ground realities, Modi–Xi meeting at best sought to manage competition and create guard rails to avoid future conflict. It could prove consequential if the dialogue can translate into strategic guidance to improve border management mechanism, military-to-military communication, regular diplomatic engagement, greater economic predictability, and expanded people-people exchanges. While restoring these links may not resolve the boundary question, it will create political space necessary for making relations more stable. In fact, functional relations require multiple channels. For years, India–China relations became increasingly securitised.

Resumption of direct flights, opening of border trade posts, establishing more military hot lines and commander-level interactions are positive developments, contributing to confidence-building measures. However, India needs to be cognizant, not to treat tactical détente as strategic alignment. What lies ahead is harder and more realistic India–China equilibrium.

Given the wide strategic gap, India's 'China Policy' must be dynamic and agile; cooperate where interests converge, compete where there is divergence, and deter when core interests are threatened. Given the asymmetry in national power vis-a-vis China, Delhi needs to build leverages to be able to effectively deal with Beijing's assertiveness. India's stance, therefore, needs to be firm and balanced to convey a strong message to Beijing that willingness to normalise relations should not be mistaken for strategic accommodation.

The India–China emerging relations today can be best described as 'Competitive Coexistence' and with militarised LAC; it tantamounts to 'Armed Coexistence'. The recent Modi-Xi meeting has created political space and momentum for consolidating the thaw in relations, paving way for cautious rapprochement. Given the prevailing deep trust deficit, reset is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Endnotes

ⁱ Media Releases, "Prime Minister's bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping", *Government of India, Prime Minister's Office*, 12 Sep 2026, accessed 15 Sep 2026, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases?dt/41778/Prime_Ministers_bilateral_meeting_with_Chinese_President_Xi_Jinping_September_12_2026

ⁱⁱ Media Releases, "President Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China*, 12 Sep 2026, accessed 15 Sep 2026, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202609/t20260913_12021206.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Media Releases, "Prime Minister's bilateral meeting with Chinese President".

^{iv} Liu Xin, "Xi's Speech Sets Policy Direction for Tibet", *Global Times*, 30 Aug 2020, accessed 15 Sep 2026, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199356.shtml>

^v Aishwarya Dhabade, "India-China trade deficit: How big is the \$112-billion gap and why is it so tough to plug?", *MoneyControl*, 15 Sep 2026, accessed 15 Sep 2026, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/india-china-trade-deficit-how-big-is-the-112-billion-gap-and-why-is-it-so-tough-to-plug-14030164.html>

^{vi} Alex Travelli, “India Wants to Buy Fewer Chinese Imports, But Keeps Buying More”, *New York Times*, 12 Sep 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/12/business/india-china-trade.html>

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