

# What's Behind the India–China Border Disengagement Deal

Experts say the deal may not signify a permanent border solution between the two nations, as mutual concerns remain.

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Chinese leader Xi Jinping arrive for a photo during the BRICS summit in Kazan on Oct. 23, 2024. Maxim Shipenkov/POOL/AFP via Getty Images



## News Analysis

NEW DELHI—A recent agreement between India and China to completely disengage militarily along their disputed border of eastern Ladakh was a result shaped by complex diplomacy between the two nations, the timing of U.S. elections, and the larger geopolitical developments in the Indo-Pacific, according to experts.

This diplomacy was seen not only in the military communication channels set up between the two countries to defuse tensions but was clearly visible at multiple recent multilateral forums.



The agreement, announced on Oct. 21, came on the heels of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Pakistan and a few days before the BRICS Summit in Russia. India and China are key members of both intergovernmental groups. The border development also emerged ahead of the extremely harsh winter season in the high-altitude region.

Satoru Nagao, a non-resident fellow at the Washington-based think tank Hudson Institute, told The Epoch Times that the India-China border agreement is a significant geopolitical development in the Indo-Pacific triggered by China's changing priorities in the region. India is not currently an urgent matter for China, because it wants to focus on Taiwan, the U.S. election, and the new administration in the White House.

“India's border claim is the same, but China accepted it this time because China was preparing for a probable Trump victory in the U.S. and it's also bracing itself for an invasion on Taiwan,” said Nagao before former U.S. President Donald Trump was declared the winner in the November election. “China wants a cease-fire on the India-China border because it wants to concentrate on the Pacific side.”

Two days after the disengagement was announced, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese leader Xi Jinping met formally

for the first time since the deadly 2020 Galwan conflict—in which at least 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers were killed—during the 16th annual BRICS summit in Kazan on Oct. 23.

During their meeting, Modi and Xi announced that their special representatives would meet to find solutions and “explore a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question,” according to a [statement](#) by the Indian external affairs ministry.

## No Strategic Shift

Experts said the troop disengagement simply means that both militaries are withdrawing from a confrontational stand and have made a mutual agreement on joint patrolling areas.

Analyst Andrew Scobell of the United States Institute of Peace said [during a discussion](#) on Oct. 31 that the deal doesn’t signify a permanent border solution between the two nations.

“While Xi and Modi seem keen to patch things up and expand mutually beneficial economic interactions—China is India’s top trading partner—the border deal does not necessarily herald a fundamental strategic shift by Beijing and New Delhi,” said Scobell. “The border dispute is unlikely to be resolved any time soon as the two countries remain far apart on their respective territorial claims and unwilling to compromise.”

Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar called the agreement the result of “patient and persevering diplomacy” at a New Delhi Television forum a few days before he left for BRICS.

“There are areas which for various reasons after 2020, they blocked us, we blocked them. We have now reached an understanding which will allow patrolling as we had been doing until 2020,” he said at the forum.

Jaishankar has himself come under criticism from Chinese state media, with an op-ed entitled “India’s diplomacy has a ‘S. Jaishankar problem’” published on Sept. 9. The foreign affairs minister had repeatedly voiced his concerns about China’s adversarial relationship with India in recent months. He also on many occasions said bilateral ties should be conditional and require peace and stability at the border.



Indian army soldiers stand on a snow-covered road near Zojila mountain pass that connects Srinagar to the union territory of Ladakh, bordering China on Feb. 28, 2021. Tauseef Mustafa/AFP via Getty Images

According to experts [previously interviewed](#) by The Epoch Times, the criticism of Jaishankar by Chinese state media is a “strategic narrative” aimed at meeting China’s agenda with regard to bilateral ties.

In addition, the formal and informal meetings between the leaders of both sides, as well as the match of words between their respective figureheads and various media, were not isolated events, according to experts. These events converged with their evolving, respective diplomacies, and the border disengagement agreement is one event in that sequence—it’s not an end in itself.

# Diplomacy at SCO Summit

At the SCO Summit 2024 held in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad, Jaishankar took indirect jabs at China and Pakistan on Oct. 16, while their leaders, Li Qiang and Shehbaz Sharif, listened. India shares disputed borders with both China and Pakistan and disapproves of the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) project that runs through territory claimed by India but controlled by Pakistan.

“If trust is lacking or cooperation inadequate, if friendship has fallen short and good neighborliness is missing somewhere, there are surely reasons to introspect and causes to address,” said Jaishankar. “The objective is to strengthen mutual trust, friendship, and good neighborliness. It is to develop multi-faceted cooperation, especially of a regional nature. It is to be a positive force in terms of balanced growth, integration, and conflict prevention.”

He also called for mutual respect and decried unilateral agendas—again aiming his comments at China.

“Cooperation must be based on mutual respect and sovereign equality. It should recognize territorial integrity and sovereignty. It must be built on genuine partnerships, not unilateral agendas. It cannot progress if we cherry-pick global practices, especially of trade and transit,” he said.



Chinese leader Xi Jinping shakes hands with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan before a meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, on April 28, 2019. Madoka Ikegami/Getty Images

Madhav Nalapat, a geopolitical analyst, told *The Epoch Times* that India's state policy doesn't endorse China's Belt and Road Initiative projects, which have created massive debts for host nations.

"India does not favor projects, which, frankly, do more harm to a country," said Nalapat.

He said that he doesn't expect China and Pakistan to address India's concerns immediately after Jaishankar's speech, but he believes SCO is a good international platform to assert India's stance.

Michael Kugelman, director of the South Asia Institute of the Washington-based Wilson Center, told *The Epoch Times* that one shouldn't overstate the impact of Jaishankar's comments at the SCO on India-China relations or any type of geopolitical reality in the region.

"At the end of the day, there were no major concrete achievements coming out of the meeting, because this is a group that has some countries that don't agree—India, China, Pakistan," said Kugelman.

He said that because of this reason, there was a lot of emphasis on issues like combating poverty and climate change, promoting connectivity, and countering terrorism.

“That all sounds good. It’s something you can agree with on a rhetorical level. And in that regard, when Jaishankar says that you know the terrorism issue has to be addressed, everyone knew that he was referring to Pakistan. But at the end of the day, we already know that India and Pakistan disagree on the issue of terrorism, among other things,” he said.

## Security Concerns in Pakistan

Burzine Waghmar from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London told The Epoch Times in an email that China lost two of its engineers working on a power project to a suicide attack in Pakistan a fortnight before the SCO summit began, and Li Qiang raised this issue with Pakistan. Despite many such setbacks, China hasn’t withdrawn its trust in Pakistan.

“Xi [had earlier] pointedly urged PM Shehbaz Sharif at the SCO Samarkand summit, Sep. 2022, to protect Pakistan-based Chinese companies and workers who have come under frequent attacks since the inception of the CPEC,” said Waghmar.

Thousands of Chinese engineers are in Pakistan working on economic corridor projects, and Waghmar said China maintains confidence in the Pakistan army to contain these recurrent attacks.

Just a week after the suicide bombing, Li and Sharif celebrated the opening of a Beijing-funded airport in restive southwest Pakistan. Earlier, Pakistan had formed a special security division of the military to secure the CPEC, with an “approximately 13,000-strong contingent of battalions and paramilitary forces,” said Waghmar.

He said that Rawalpindi, the headquarters of the Pakistan army, has officially stayed mum about the number of personnel or cost of the

military group to protect Chinese expatriates.

In addition to the security division that Pakistan created to protect the CPEC, Nagao said that China has also taken its own initiatives to protect the route connecting Xinjiang with the entire length of Pakistan.

“That is why Chinese military and Chinese private military companies are deployed in Pakistan now. Of course, such a plan is a threat to India. Firstly, the China-Pakistan alliance itself is a threat to India,” said Nagao.

“Secondly, increasing [the] number of Chinese military forces in South Asia and the Indian Ocean is [a] threat for India. Thirdly, Gilgit-Baltistan is the area India is claiming as a part of Kashmir. Thus, China’s CPEC is threat for India.”

## **Diplomacy at BRICS**

Nagao said that BRICS is also an important international forum for India-China diplomacy and its developments vis-a-vis the border dispute.

He said China is currently dealing with three kinds of threats from India: security, economic threats, and diplomatic risks.

“China’s security threat is related to the land border issue and the issue in the Indian Ocean. The economic threat is China’s dominance of the market, critical technologies, and supply chain, so-called economic security. And [the] diplomatic threat is related to the influence of the Global South,” said Nagao.

He said that if China continues to expand its influence in the Global South, its agenda for global hegemony will push it to contain India’s rise.



In this context, the expert believes BRICS is an important opportunity for India to deal with Chinese diplomacy and to ensure India's interests, including its border concerns.

“Because BRICS includes rising Global South countries, China is using BRICS to expand its influence in the Global South. China is also seeking new Global South members and making BRICS an anti-West group,” said Nagao.



Officials attend a plenary session in the outreach/BRICS Plus format at the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, on Oct. 24, 2024. Maxim Shemetov/Pool/AFP via Getty Images

According to him, India's membership in BRICS ensures that it doesn't turn into a completely anti-West group.

While addressing a session at Hudson Institute on “India's role in a New Pacific Order” last year, Jaishankar drew a clear distinction about how India is not against the West.

“So, I make this very important distinction. Where India is concerned, India is non-Western. India is not anti-Western,” Jaishankar had said.

Nagao said this interplay is visible at BRICS, where India is opposed to including pro-China and anti-West countries in the forum.

“Thus, thanks to India, BRICS is a group of the Global South countries but not an anti-West grouping. This year, BRICS accepted four new countries,” said Nagao.

Nagao also pointed to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s statement at the summit as a manifestation of such positioning.

“We must be careful to ensure that this organization does not acquire the image of one that is trying to replace global institutions,” Modi said.

Nagao said India’s diplomacy was successful, because the 2024 BRICS Summit did not decide on any other new members because of India’s hesitation.

In this diplomatic tug-of-war between the two nations in the Global South and in the Indo-Pacific geopolitics, the issue of the disputed border will keep coming back in the future ahead, he said.

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