

The Future of China-India Thaw after the Indo-Pakistan Conflict

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Summary

The May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan has been a blow to the recent and still uncertain thaw in China-India relations. Nevertheless, the thaw is likely to continue as both sides have too much to lose from renewed tensions.

Since October last year, China-India relations have been gradually thawing following an agreement to complete troop disengagement along the disputed Sino-Indian border. The agreement was a hard-won breakthrough for both sides as their relationship had been de facto frozen following deadly [border clashes in 2020](#). Then came the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict. As expected, [Beijing backed](#) its “[iron brother](#)” Pakistan against India with intelligence, military advice and diplomatic support, while Chinese-supplied [weapons and aircraft](#) proved critical for Islamabad’s military operations. Naturally, this support antagonised New Delhi and outraged the Indian media.

Will the China-India thaw continue after this new crisis? [Continued bilateral engagement](#) tentatively suggests it will, but it is too early to say. After all, engagement does not equal progress. As the thaw is [still young and fragile](#), the May 2025 conflict and its [aftershocks](#) might eventually derail it. Moreover, the conflict again brought to the fore the Pakistan factor in China-India relations and, with it, the underlying adversarial dynamics between the two sides.

Fortunately, both sides have good reasons to continue the thaw. China does not want to halt the hard-won improvement in its relations with India over a secondary issue such as the India-Pakistan conflict. Beijing has much to lose from undermining the thaw and very little to gain. Renewed antagonism would create another front on China’s periphery at a time of [growing Taiwan tensions](#), weaken its strategic position vis-à-vis the United States (US) and push India deeper into Washington’s embrace. It will also impact access to the growing Indian market at a time of US-imposed economic and technological restrictions on Chinese business.

Beijing’s relatively [cautious position and rhetoric](#) during the May 2025 crisis point to its willingness to keep the thaw alive. Of course, as expected, China supported Islamabad, but its support should not be exaggerated. China did not renew military tensions on the disputed border, or weaponised water against India, or publicly threatened consequences if New Delhi harms the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

This leaves the ball in India’s court. For New Delhi, there might be some strategic logic in halting the thaw. The goal would be to pressure Beijing to reduce its support for Islamabad and deter it from backing Pakistan in a future conflict. However, this logic is misleading.

Beijing's [political and military relationship](#) with Islamabad is too important and too well established for Indian pressure to weaken.

On balance, India is likely to continue with the thaw. The costs and risks of derailing it are simply too high. First, halting the thaw is likely to increase Chinese support for Pakistan. China would view such an Indian act as an expression of hostility and aggressiveness and a proof that engagement does not work, reinforcing [negative Chinese stereotypes](#) about New Delhi's foreign policy. It will intensify the China-India rivalry and convince Beijing that support for Pakistan is a powerful tool either to counter a seemingly hostile and US-aligned India or force it to soften its China policy. The likely outcome will be an increase in the quantity and quality of Chinese arms exports to Pakistan and greater Sino-Pakistani cooperation – the exact opposite of what India wants. Paradoxically, improving relations with Beijing might help New Delhi manage its reemerging Pakistan problem, as China can use its influence to restrain Islamabad.

Second, halting the thaw will unsettle the disputed border. It will freeze progress on the [three-step process](#) of stabilising the border, of which only the first step – disengagement – has been completed. Moreover, it might produce border tensions or escalations, like the those of 2020 and [2017](#). A tense border would entrench India's conflict with China, keep New Delhi even more preoccupied with South Asia at the expense of its Indo-Pacific and global ambitions, and undermine India's vaunted strategic autonomy by increasing its reliance on Washington. Strategically, a tense border will also exacerbate India's [two-front dilemma](#), which Indo-Bangladeshi tensions might be slowly turning into a [two-and-a-half front dilemma](#), and complicate India's [military position in Kashmir](#). Naturally, all this would also impose domestic political costs on the Indian government.

Third, halting the thaw will likely have economic consequences for India. It will impact bilateral trade, which has acted as a safety net for China-India relations, amid trade wars and a crisis of the world trading system. This outcome would be ironic as India's business community played an important role in persuading New Delhi to thaw relations with Beijing. Moreover, India needs Chinese [rare earths](#), [electronic components](#) and active [pharmaceutical ingredients](#) for its manufacturing, making improved relations with Beijing important for New Delhi's '[Made in India](#)' programme, exports and technological rise. Of course, India also needs Chinese [foreign direct investment](#).

Finally, for India, derailing the thaw at this time carries substantial risks. Currently, India is facing an international situation that increases its vulnerabilities in a renewed confrontation with Beijing. New Delhi has reasons to question the reliability of its key partners, particularly the US, after its conflict with Pakistan. It is facing a more belligerent Pakistan to its west and a hostile and unstable Bangladesh to its east. Conflict in the Middle East, US President Donald Trump's [uncertain South Asia policy](#) and [difficult trade negotiations with the US](#) and [the European Union](#) make the current moment even more sensitive. At such time, the last thing India needs is another faceoff with the Chinese.

In conclusion, while the India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025 has delivered a blow to China-India relations, it is unlikely to halt the thaw. Simply put, Beijing and New Delhi have too much to lose from its failure. Developments such as the [meeting](#) between India's National

Security Advisor and China's Foreign Minister and a [scheduled visit](#) by India's defence minister to China suggest that the thaw will likely continue. However, so will the China-India rivalry, ensuring that the thaw will not be smooth sailing.

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