

Jaishankar's China Visit: The Paradox of China-India Relations

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Summary

Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's first visit to China since 2019 signals growing momentum in the China-India thaw, with potential for renewed cooperation, particularly on the global stage. Engagement through platforms like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is back on the agenda, even as differences remain. While New Delhi's closer ties with the United States and divergent regional visions limit the scope of collaboration, both sides share an interest in promoting multipolarity and strengthening non-Western institutions. Yet, this global cooperation is ultimately constrained by unresolved bilateral tensions – ironically, one of the most promising aspects of their relationship remains hindered by its most contentious.

The first visit by India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to China after five years signals continued steady improvement in China-India relations after a cautious beginning in October 2024, as [Jaishankar himself recognised](#), and is gaining momentum beyond a mere thaw. Jaishankar was in China for the foreign ministers' meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Significantly, Beijing received him with particular care and organised bilateral meetings not only with his counterpart, Wang Yi, but also with [Vice President Han Zheng](#). The visit, one of several in less than two months, indicates that recent tensions over Beijing's support for Pakistan in its May 2025 conflict with India and over the Dalai Lama's reincarnation have not derailed the process of thawing relations. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's [likely visit to China](#) for a SCO leaders' summit in August 2025 will be the high point of this process. It will indicate that the initial work of restoring basic normalcy in China-India relations has been completed and the border has sufficiently stabilised. Of course, then the hard work of making substantive progress in relations and [de-escalating the border](#) dispute will begin.

Beyond symbolising the thaw in Sino-Indian relations, Jaishankar's visit demonstrates a paradox. China and India have greater interest and space to cooperate more amid a fast-shifting global environment, but are constantly hampered by contentious bilateral issues.

On one hand, the visit and the thaw behind it have opened space for more global cooperation between New Delhi and Beijing. During his meetings in China, Jaishankar spoke about the ["very complex"](#) international situation, while in his [official address](#), he described growing "economic instability" in the world and urged the SCO to "stabilise the global order" and "address longstanding challenges that threaten [their] collective interests". He also highlighted the rise of multipolarity, which officially both China and India pursue, and the SCO's key role in advancing it. In short, Jaishankar underscored the need for the two Asian giants to cooperate on a global level in response to the growing global instability.

Background is key to understanding this interest in cooperation on a global level. First, both sides need to improve their strategic positions in the face of United States' (US) President Donald Trump's tariffs, threats against the BRICS, and proposed [massive financial penalties](#) on both as buyers of Russian oil. China, in the middle of a Cold War with the US, needs to prepare for the likely resumption of its trade war with Washington. India has also seen tensions in its relations with the Trump administration, caused by the warming of US-Pakistan relations and difficult trade negotiations, a fact that Beijing [recognises](#). Improved Sino-Indian relations will strengthen the bargaining positions of both powers vis-à-vis the US and hedge their economic bets.

Second, cooperation within the BRICS, of which both India and China are members, has grown recently. While deeply disunited on many issues, the BRICS has promoted [cooperation in grain supply](#) and greater use of the [members' currencies in trade](#), with both initiatives being de facto a hedge against Washington. Significantly, in a break with past practice, the grouping recently took a [collective strong position](#) on a controversial political issue – Israel's attack on Iran.

On the other hand, Jaishankar's visit highlights the fact that contentious bilateral issues continue to constrain the potential of China-India cooperation on the global level. The territorial dispute is one such issue, with the Indian external affairs minister insisting on the need for [de-escalation on the border](#). India has long conditioned progress in bilateral relations on progress on the border. Beijing's support for Islamabad is another issue that disrupts bilateral relations, with Pakistan alluded to as a disruptive ["third party"](#) in the relationship by Jaishankar. China's neglect of Islamabad's support for terrorism has also been particularly sensitive for India, as revealed during the [SCO foreign ministers' summit](#). Jaishankar also raised China's use of [economic coercion](#) against India, which has included restrictions on the export of [rare earth and fertilisers](#). Lastly, the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, a ["thorn" in bilateral relations](#), according to a Chinese spokesperson, shaped the political background against which the visit took place.

The very fact that these issues featured so prominently during a visit symbolising the new thaw between China and India underlines their importance and continued role as stumbling blocks in India-China relations. These issues constrain Sino-Indian cooperation on a global level by generating mistrust and regular tensions. As they cannot be ignored, the two sides should either resolve them or learn to manage them better. At present, Beijing and New Delhi have decided to downplay them to prevent these issues from undermining the thaw. But how long can they do this for?

Jaishankar's visit to China symbolises not only the recent improvement in China-India relations but also its paradox. It points to the potential for more cooperation between the two sides on a global level, but also to the contentious bilateral issues that limit it.

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