

The U.S. Factor and the Evolution of China-India Relations

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Abstract

China-India relations are at a crossroads. Since May 2020, the two neighbors have been locked in a protracted border standoff. The format of bilateral engagement based on the delinking of the boundary dispute from cooperation in other areas is under challenge. This article argues that the U.S. factor has been playing a significant role in the evolution of China-India relations since 1988. The U.S. factor impacts China's perception of India and India's policy toward China. Prior to the U.S. strategic shift to great-power competition, China viewed India as a partner and focused on engagement with India. Designating China as a major competitor, India used the U.S. factor as leverage in its relations with China. However, India was suspicious of the cooperative side of the Sino-U.S. relations and chose to hedge between China and the U.S. Since the U.S. has identified China as a strategic competitor and introduced the Indo-Pacific strategy, India has significantly tilted toward the U.S. and embraced the Quad. As the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy leaves China facing two-front challenges, China's security concerns about India have largely increased. The asymmetry of mutual security perceptions of China and India is decreasing. Since India's China policy is moving from hedging to balancing and China is introducing balancing into its India policy despite commitment to engagement, the two Asian powers might be trapped in a mutual balancing in an era of great-power competition.

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