

China's Foreign Policy Narratives and India's Diplomatic Responses: Case Studies of Tibet, Doklam, and the Line of Actual Control (LAC)

Sai Chethana Legala

Research scholar, Department of Political Science, Osmania University, Hyderabad

Abstract—This paper examines the evolving dynamics of India–China relations through the lens of foreign policy narratives and diplomatic responses, focusing on three critical case studies: Tibet, the Doklam standoff, and the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It argues that China's strategic narratives rooted in sovereignty, territorial integrity, historical legitimacy, and national rejuvenation shape its external behavior and regional diplomacy. India's responses, in contrast, are structured around principles of strategic autonomy, rule-based order, territorial sovereignty, and diplomatic balancing. By analyzing discourse, policy documents, and diplomatic practices, the study highlights how narrative construction functions as a tool of power in international relations. The paper demonstrates that India–China relations are not only shaped by material capabilities and military power but also by ideational structures, political communication, and strategic storytelling. It concludes that narrative competition has become a central dimension of bilateral relations, contributing to mistrust, diplomatic rigidity, and regional instability, while simultaneously defining the boundaries of engagement and cooperation.

Index Terms—India–China relations, foreign policy narratives, Tibet, Doklam, Line of Actual Control (LAC), Strategic diplomacy, Border disputes, Geopolitics

I. INTRODUCTION

India–China relations represent one of the most complex and consequential bilateral relationships in contemporary international politics. As two ancient civilizations and modern nation-states with overlapping regional ambitions, historical grievances, and competing geopolitical visions, their interaction is shaped not only by material power but also by narratives of identity, legitimacy, and sovereignty. In

recent decades, the relationship has increasingly been defined by strategic distrust, border tensions, and competing regional leadership aspirations.

China's foreign policy is guided by carefully constructed narratives that emphasize historical victimhood, territorial integrity, national rejuvenation, and the indivisibility of sovereignty. These narratives are institutionalized through party ideology, state discourse, and diplomatic communication. India, on the other hand, constructs its foreign policy discourse around strategic autonomy, democratic legitimacy, rule-based international order, and peaceful coexistence.

This paper argues that the India–China relationship cannot be fully understood through military or economic analysis alone. Instead, it must be examined through the prism of foreign policy narratives the interpretive frameworks through which states define threats, justify actions, and shape diplomatic behavior. By focusing on three critical case studies Tibet, Doklam, and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) this study explores how Chinese narratives and Indian diplomatic responses interact to produce recurring patterns of tension, mistrust, and strategic competition.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: FOREIGN POLICY NARRATIVES

Foreign policy narratives constitute structured systems of meaning through which states interpret international realities, construct national identity, and legitimize strategic choices. These narratives go beyond diplomatic rhetoric; they function as cognitive frameworks that shape how political elites, institutions, and societies perceive threats, opportunities, allies, and adversaries. Through

narrative construction, states define their role in the international system, justify foreign policy behavior, and generate domestic and international legitimacy for strategic actions.

Narratives perform multiple interrelated functions. First, they construct national identity by defining historical continuity, civilizational purpose, and collective memory. Second, they establish normative boundaries by distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate actions, lawful and unlawful claims, and acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Third, they operate as strategic instruments of power, shaping international perceptions, influencing diplomatic outcomes, and mobilizing domestic support. In this sense, narratives are not passive reflections of policy but active forces that structure political reality.

From a constructivist perspective, narratives are constitutive elements of international politics. They shape interests rather than merely expressing them, define security priorities, and structure diplomatic engagement. States act not only based on material calculations but also on socially constructed meanings, identities, and historical interpretations. Perceptions of threat, legitimacy, and entitlement are therefore produced through narrative frameworks rather than objective material conditions alone.

At the same time, realist and neoclassical realist traditions recognize narratives as instruments of strategic power that complement material capabilities. Narratives provide ideological justification for power projection, military expansion, and diplomatic coercion. They function as soft power resources that legitimize strategic behavior both domestically and internationally, reducing the political costs of assertive policies. Thus, narratives operate at the intersection of ideational power and material power, reinforcing each other in the pursuit of national interests.

In the India–China context, narratives function as strategic resources embedded within broader geopolitical competition. China’s foreign policy discourse emphasizes sovereignty, historical unity, territorial sanctity, and civilizational continuity, constructing a narrative of natural entitlement to territorial claims and regional leadership. India’s narrative, in contrast, prioritizes pluralism, democratic legitimacy, international law, peaceful coexistence, and strategic autonomy. These contrasting interpretive frameworks generate fundamentally different understandings of legitimacy, security, and order.

The interaction of these competing narratives produces diplomatic friction, strategic rigidity, and institutional distrust. Disputes are not merely about territory or security but about competing meanings of sovereignty, legitimacy, and historical justice. As a result, compromise becomes politically costly, and flexibility is constrained by domestic narrative commitments. This transforms bilateral disputes into identity-based conflicts, where symbolic meaning becomes as significant as material interests.

Thus, foreign policy narratives constitute a critical analytical lens for understanding India–China relations. They reveal how power operates not only through military capabilities and economic strength but also through discourse, symbolism, and meaning-making processes. By foregrounding narratives, this framework enables a deeper understanding of why diplomatic engagement often fails to resolve tensions and why rivalry persists despite economic interdependence and institutional engagement.

III. CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY NARRATIVES

China’s foreign policy discourse is structured around a coherent and deeply institutionalized narrative architecture that integrates ideology, history, nationalism, and strategic ambition. These narratives are not episodic but systematically embedded in party ideology, state communication, education systems, diplomatic language, and strategic doctrine. Together, they function as a comprehensive framework that shapes China’s external behavior and diplomatic posture.

A. Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

Sovereignty constitutes the central normative pillar of China’s foreign policy narrative. It is conceptualized as absolute, indivisible, and non-negotiable. Territorial claims are framed not as contemporary political disputes but as matters of historical continuity and civilizational legitimacy. This framing transforms territorial issues into moral claims rather than negotiable political questions.

Within this narrative, any external challenge to China’s territorial claims is portrayed as a violation of sovereignty and an illegitimate interference in internal affairs. Diplomatic disagreements are thus reframed as moral transgressions rather than strategic disputes. This moralization of sovereignty delegitimizes opposing claims and constrains diplomatic

compromise, as concessions would symbolically undermine the foundational narrative of national unity. Sovereignty discourse also functions as a disciplinary narrative, shaping international engagement by setting strict boundaries on acceptable external involvement. It allows China to reject international arbitration, multilateral adjudication, and external mediation while maintaining normative legitimacy within its own discourse framework.

B. Historical Victimhood and National Rejuvenation

The narrative of historical victimhood occupies a central place in China's foreign policy imagination. References to the "Century of Humiliation," colonial exploitation, and foreign domination construct a collective memory of injustice and dispossession. This historical framing is not merely commemorative; it functions as a political resource that legitimizes contemporary assertiveness.

The concept of national rejuvenation reframes China's rise as a moral and historical necessity rather than a strategic ambition. Expansion of influence, territorial consolidation, and regional leadership are portrayed as acts of historical restoration and civilizational revival. This narrative transforms strategic expansion into moral correction, positioning China's actions as inherently just and historically warranted.

This framework also generates a powerful domestic legitimacy mechanism, mobilizing nationalism in support of foreign policy objectives. Public support for assertive diplomacy is constructed not through fear-based narratives but through pride, dignity, and historical redemption. As a result, diplomatic flexibility becomes politically constrained by nationalist expectations.

C. Stability and Non-Interference

China's promotion of non-interference and stability forms the normative façade of its foreign policy discourse. Officially, China presents itself as a defender of state sovereignty, non-interventionism, and peaceful coexistence. This discourse positions China as an alternative to interventionist Western models of international order.

However, this narrative operates alongside a strategic paradox. While rhetorically emphasizing non-interference, China simultaneously asserts influence through economic leverage, infrastructure diplomacy, strategic partnerships, and security engagements.

Influence is exercised not through overt intervention but through structural dependencies and strategic positioning.

This duality allows China to project power while maintaining a discourse of restraint and legitimacy. Influence is normalized as cooperation, and expansion is framed as development partnership, thereby reducing international resistance and normative backlash.

D. Narrative Power in Regional Disputes

Collectively, these narratives shape China's diplomatic language, strategic signaling, and policy justification in regional disputes. They construct a moral hierarchy in which China's claims are framed as legitimate, historical, and non-negotiable, while opposing positions are depicted as illegitimate, external, and destabilizing.

In regional conflicts, including border disputes and geopolitical rivalries, narrative framing transforms strategic competition into legitimacy struggles. Disputes become conflicts over meaning, history, and identity rather than negotiable political disagreements. This narrative structure intensifies rigidity, reduces diplomatic flexibility, and institutionalizes mistrust.

Thus, China's foreign policy narratives function not merely as communication strategies but as instruments of structural power. They shape international perceptions, constrain diplomatic space, legitimize assertive behavior, and embed strategic competition within moral and historical discourses. Understanding these narratives is therefore essential for comprehending China's external behavior and its interactions with India and the broader international system.

IV. INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC WORLDVIEW

India's diplomatic worldview is shaped by a synthesis of historical experience, civilizational identity, constitutional values, and strategic pragmatism. Rooted in the legacies of anti-colonial struggle and post-independence state-building, India's foreign policy discourse has consistently emphasized strategic autonomy, normative legitimacy, and institutional multilateralism.

A. Strategic Autonomy and Non-Alignment

India's commitment to strategic autonomy reflects a long-standing reluctance to be absorbed into rigid

alliance systems. Unlike classical neutrality, India's approach represents a dynamic balancing strategy that seeks flexibility in partnerships while preserving independent decision-making capacity. This tradition, inherited from the Non-Aligned Movement, has evolved into a contemporary policy of "multi-alignment," allowing India to engage simultaneously with competing power centers without formal alliance entanglements.

B. Rule-Based International Order

India's diplomatic narrative strongly emphasizes adherence to international law, multilateral institutions, and treaty-based norms. Unlike power-centric frameworks, India presents itself as a stakeholder in a rule-based global order where sovereignty, territorial integrity, and dispute resolution mechanisms are governed by legal and institutional processes rather than coercive power.

C. Territorial Sovereignty and Constitutional Legitimacy

Territorial integrity in India's discourse is not merely strategic but constitutional. Borders are framed as legal-political constructs protected by democratic legitimacy and constitutional authority. This framing transforms territorial disputes into matters of legal principle rather than negotiable strategic interests, thereby limiting diplomatic flexibility while strengthening normative positioning.

D. Peaceful Coexistence and Dialogue

India's worldview is deeply influenced by the Panchsheel principles mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, and peaceful coexistence. Diplomacy is framed as the preferred instrument of conflict resolution, with military preparedness functioning as a deterrent rather than a primary tool of policy.

In the context of China, India's diplomatic responses reflect a dual-track strategy: engagement through dialogue and cooperation mechanisms on one track, and strategic deterrence and security preparedness on the other. This creates a calibrated approach that seeks stability without strategic submission.

V. CASE STUDY I: TIBET

China's narrative on Tibet is constructed around historical continuity, civilizational unity, and

sovereign legitimacy. Tibet is portrayed as an inseparable component of Chinese territory since ancient times, and any external engagement with Tibetan identity is framed as illegitimate interference in China's internal affairs. This narrative is reinforced through diplomatic discourse, educational frameworks, and international messaging, making Tibet not merely a territorial issue but a symbol of national unity.

India's role in hosting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile introduces a symbolic contradiction to China's narrative dominance. While India officially recognizes Tibet as part of China, its humanitarian asylum policy and cultural protection of Tibetan identity create a soft challenge to China's sovereignty discourse.

India's diplomatic response has been characterized by strategic restraint and calibrated ambiguity:

- Formal diplomatic recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet
- Informal humanitarian support to Tibetan refugees
- Cultural and religious accommodation without political endorsement of separatism

This approach reflects a dual legitimacy strategy: moral legitimacy through humanitarian protection and diplomatic legitimacy through formal recognition of sovereignty. Tibet thus becomes a symbolic arena of narrative contestation, where diplomacy is shaped less by military confrontation and more by symbolic power, identity politics, and normative positioning.

VI. CASE STUDY II: DOKLAM

The Doklam standoff of 2017 represents a paradigmatic case of narrative conflict escalation. China framed India's intervention as a violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, presenting the issue as unilateral aggression against Chinese territory. India, in contrast, framed its actions through treaty obligations and collective security logic, emphasizing its security partnership with Bhutan and the legal basis of intervention.

This divergence produced competing legitimacy claims:

- China's claim: sovereignty-based legitimacy
- India's claim: treaty-based and security legitimacy

The crisis demonstrates how narrative framing transforms geographical disputes into ideological and normative conflicts. Doklam was not merely about territory but about the authority to define legitimacy, legality, and regional order.

Strategically, Doklam also revealed:

- China's preference for coercive signaling through infrastructure development and military pressure
- India's preference for defensive deterrence combined with diplomatic engagement

The standoff institutionalized mistrust and hardened strategic perceptions, contributing to long-term rigidity in India-China relations. Doklam thus represents a shift from negotiated ambiguity to confrontational clarity, where narratives became securitized and diplomacy became increasingly constrained by domestic political expectations and nationalist discourse.

VII. CASE STUDY III: LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL (LAC)

The Line of Actual Control functions not only as a territorial boundary but as a discursive and symbolic frontier. China frames LAC tensions as routine border management issues, emphasizing stability, disengagement mechanisms, and crisis management protocols. This framing seeks to depoliticize confrontations and present them as technical disputes rather than sovereignty violations.

India, however, frames LAC incidents as direct challenges to territorial sovereignty and national integrity, transforming local military confrontations into matters of national dignity and constitutional legitimacy.

The Galwan Valley clash (2020) marked a narrative rupture. It symbolized the collapse of confidence-building mechanisms and exposed the fragility of existing diplomatic frameworks. Diplomatic communication failed not merely because of strategic miscalculations, but because narrative compatibility broke down:

- China emphasized stability and disengagement language
- India emphasized violation, sacrifice, and sovereignty discourse

The LAC has since evolved into:

- A militarized frontier
- A psychological boundary of mistrust
- A symbolic site of national identity assertion
- A narrative battlefield where legitimacy is contested

This transformation reflects the securitization of narratives, where diplomacy becomes constrained by domestic political pressures, media discourse, and nationalist mobilization. The LAC thus represents a shift from managed rivalry to structured confrontation, with long-term implications for regional stability.

VIII. ANALYSIS: NARRATIVE COMPETITION AND DIPLOMACY

The interaction of Chinese and Indian foreign policy narratives produces a complex matrix of strategic and diplomatic outcomes. Far from being mere rhetorical exercises, these narratives shape state behavior, constrain policy options, and influence regional stability. Several patterns emerge:

1. **Diplomatic Rigidity:** Competing narratives harden each state's positions. India's framing of sovereignty, rule of law, and territorial legitimacy clashes with China's emphasis on historical unity, non-interference, and territorial sanctity. These contrasting interpretive frameworks limit flexibility, making compromise politically costly and symbolically challenging.
2. **Strategic Mistrust:** Narratives institutionalize suspicion. China interprets India's engagement with the Dalai Lama, military modernization, and Quad participation as challenges to sovereignty. India interprets China's assertiveness in Tibet, Doklam, and along the LAC as expansionist behavior. This mutual mistrust reduces trust-building potential and complicates negotiations.
3. **Limited Crisis Management:** The lack of narrative convergence undermines existing crisis management mechanisms. For example, border incidents at Doklam and Galwan revealed the limits of protocols designed for operational de-escalation. When underlying narratives are incompatible, communication channels alone cannot prevent escalation.
4. **Symbolic Escalation:** Disputes are amplified beyond material concerns. Military skirmishes and

infrastructure development are interpreted as symbolic threats to national identity, historical pride, and domestic legitimacy. Narrative framing transforms tactical incidents into strategic messaging, amplifying domestic and international attention.

5. Institutional Fragility: Bilateral and regional institutions intended to manage disputes are weakened when narrative competition dominates. Multilateral platforms such as BIMSTEC, BRICS, and ASEAN-related dialogues are constrained in effectiveness because narratives are prioritized over procedural mechanisms.

Overall, narrative competition converts practical disputes into identity-laden conflicts. Each side's domestic and historical framing constrains diplomatic manoeuvrability, creating a structural tension that reinforces cycles of confrontation and mistrust.

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL ORDER

The implications of India–China narrative rivalry extend beyond bilateral relations and influence the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture:

- Regional Polarization: Narrative divergence incentivizes alliance formation. India's strategic engagement with the United States, Japan, and Australia through the Quad is partially driven by a narrative-based perception of Chinese assertiveness. Conversely, China seeks to build counter-balancing coalitions in Asia, leveraging economic and security instruments.
- Institutional Fragmentation Divergent narratives hinder regional governance. ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and IORA must navigate competing legitimacy claims, making consensus difficult. Smaller states are forced to adopt hedging strategies, aligning selectively without fully committing to one narrative framework.
- Strategic Signaling and Perception Management: Narrative competition shapes regional signaling. Naval deployments, infrastructure projects, and bilateral treaties are interpreted through narrative lenses, amplifying uncertainty and elevating the potential for misperception.
- Normative Contestation: Narratives influence normative frameworks in the region. China's emphasis on non-interference and historical

sovereignty contrasts with India's advocacy for a rules-based international order. This normative contestation creates ideational fault lines that shape diplomatic behavior and regional institutional design.

In sum, narrative competition contributes to regional instability, fragmented governance, and heightened strategic uncertainty, challenging both conflict management and cooperative security initiatives.

X. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective management of India–China relations require interventions at multiple levels, addressing both material and ideational dimensions:

1. Institutionalized Narrative Dialogue Mechanisms: Establish regular bilateral and multilateral forums for strategic dialogue that focus on narrative convergence. These can include senior policy dialogues, academic exchanges, and think-tank collaborations aimed at clarifying intentions and reducing symbolic misunderstandings.
2. Crisis Communication Frameworks: Develop robust hotlines, incident-at-sea protocols, and border management communication channels that integrate both operational and narrative-level messaging. Transparency in deployments, exercises, and territorial activity can reduce misperception.
3. Track-II Diplomacy: Promote informal diplomatic engagement through Track-II initiatives, where scholars, retired officials, and security experts discuss disputes without the constraints of domestic political pressures. These mechanisms allow experimentation with narrative framing and de-escalatory language.
4. Multilateral Confidence-Building Platforms: Expand cooperation through regional institutions (e.g., BIMSTEC, IORA, ASEAN) for joint disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, and security exercises. Shared functional engagement can produce mutual trust without compromising sovereignty narratives.
5. Normative Convergence through International Law: Encourage both states to adopt shared legal frameworks for border management, maritime governance, and dispute resolution. Anchoring engagement in international law provides a neutral narrative reference, reducing symbolic escalations

and reinforcing legitimacy.

These recommendations aim to balance strategic competition with narrative management, allowing for conflict containment while preserving national dignity and historical identity.

XI. CONCLUSION

India–China relations are shaped not solely by material capabilities, geography, or economic interdependence but also by competing narratives of identity, sovereignty, and legitimacy. The cases of Tibet, Doklam, and the LAC illustrate that foreign policy narratives are not peripheral; they are central instruments of strategy, influencing diplomatic behavior, constraining compromise, and shaping regional order.

Narrative competition transforms disputes into symbolic and identity-laden conflicts, creating strategic rigidity and complicating crisis management. At the same time, narratives define the parameters for engagement, cooperation, and dialogue, highlighting their dual role as both constraint and opportunity.

Managing this relationship requires narrative literacy, institutionalized dialogue, and proactive diplomacy. Policymakers must recognize that resolving disputes is not merely a matter of physical control or military deterrence but also of aligning interpretations, managing perceptions, and creating shared frameworks of legitimacy. Pragmatic cooperation in functional domains, coupled with structured dialogue, offers a pathway for stable competitive coexistence, reducing the risk of escalation while preserving strategic autonomy.

Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific's stability and the long-term trajectory of India–China relations depend on the ability of both states to balance narrative assertion with pragmatic diplomacy, integrating historical identity with contemporary strategic imperatives.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Acharya, *The End of American World Order*. Polity Press, 2014.
- [2] K. Bajpai, "India–China Relations: Cooperation, Competition and Conflict," *International Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 1, pp. 1–15, 2017.
- [3] D. Brewster, *India's Ocean: The Story of India's Bid for Regional Leadership*. Routledge, 2014.

- [4] J. W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*. University of Washington Press, 2001.
- [5] R. D. Kaplan, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*. Random House, 2010.
- [6] J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W. W. Norton, 2001.
- [7] C. R. Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy*. Viking, 2016.
- [8] A. Panda, *China's Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications*. Routledge, 2019.
- [9] H. V. Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- [10] S. Rai, "Narrative Power and Strategic Rivalry in Asia," *Asian Security*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 115–132, 2020.
- [11] D. Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- [12] G. Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge, 2013.
- [13] H. White, *The China Choice: Why America Should Share Power*. Black Inc., 2012.
- [14] S. Zhao, "Chinese Nationalism and Its International Orientations," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 1, pp. 1–33, 2013.