

Contrasting Approaches to India-China Relations: Leadership Competence and Strategic Vision in Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy

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Abstract: *This article critically compares the strategic approaches of Dr. Subramanyam Jaishankar and Rahul Gandhi in managing India-China relations. Drawing on media statements, parliamentary debates, and policy positions from 2014 to 2024, it highlights the disparity in diplomatic competence, strategic vision, and national commitment between the two leaders. Dr. Subramanyam Jaishankar's experience-driven policy reflects realpolitik and strategic autonomy, while Rahul Gandhi's positions often appear reactive and politically motivated. The study offers a nuanced perspective on leadership roles in shaping India's China policy and underscores the implications of partisan narratives for national security and diplomatic coherence*

Keywords: India-China relations, Indian foreign policy, Dr. S. Jaishankar, Rahul Gandhi, strategic leadership

1. Introduction

The relationship between India and China represents one of the most complex and integral bilateral relations of contemporary international relations. As the two most populous countries in the world and emerging economic powers, their interactions have profound implications for regional stability and global geopolitical situation [1]. Managing this relationship has become an important challenge for India's foreign policy, especially after the confrontation in the 2020 Galwan Valley, which represented the most serious military conflict between both countries in decades [2].

In Indian political discourse, the difference between professional diplomatic leadership and oppositional populism is clearly evident in Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, India's Minister of External Affairs, and Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. Their approach to China policy has been characterized by a persistent contradiction between national positions and a clear misunderstanding of strategic complexities. This comparison reveals not only divergent political preferences but also a fundamental gap in the levels of competence and commitment to national interests in foreign policy discourse.

Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, a career diplomat turned politician, has been the principal architect of India's current China policy under the Modi government. He adopts strategic realism by promoting military readiness and economic self-reliance, balanced with diplomatic engagement his frequent departure[3]. In contrast, Rahul Gandhi has consistently criticized the government's handling of relations with China, calling for greater diplomatic engagement and questioning the effectiveness of current strategies to manage border tensions [4].

This article seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the approaches of these two influential figures in India-China relations, examining their public statements on key issues such as border management, economic relations, and broader geopolitical considerations. Through this comparison, the

article aims to clarify the fundamental differences in their strategic worldviews and assess the implications of these contrasting approaches for India's policy toward China.

2. Literature Review

This study is significant as it addresses a critical gap in comparative foreign policy analysis within the Indian political context. By juxtaposing the strategic orientations of key political figures, it offers insights into the democratic discourse shaping India's external engagements, particularly with a major regional power like China

2.1 India-China Relations: Historical Context and Contemporary Challenges

The academic literature has extensively analyzed the Sino-Indian relationship, highlighting its multifaceted nature, encompassing territorial disputes, economic cooperation, and strategic competition [5][6]. Sino-Indian relations have undergone distinct phases, from the "Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai" era of the 1950s to the contemporary era of strategic competition and border tensions [7].

Recently, research has focused on the escalation of tensions following the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley standoff [8]. Raimedhi [2] argues that these incidents marked a critical turning point in the bilateral relationship, shifting it from manageable competition to active confrontation. Similarly, Panda and Baruah [9] highlights how border incidents complicate other aspects of the relationship, including economic and multilateral cooperation. Flavel [10] provides a comprehensive analysis of the territorial dispute, emphasizing how unresolved border issues continue to influence broader strategic calculations. Recent work by Menon [11], Chellaney [12] and Narayan et al. [13] explores the intensification of border tensions under the current leadership of both sides, with implications for regional stability.

2.2 Indian Foreign Policy Leadership and Decision-Making

The role of leaders in foreign policymaking has received significant attention in Indian studies. Mukherjee [14] examines the influence of leaders' personal beliefs and strategic cultures on policy formulation, while Pant [15] analyzes the impact of different political parties on India's foreign relations.

Regarding Dr. Jaishankar's foreign policy approach, some scholars have emphasized his emphasis on realpolitik and strategic autonomy. Mangu [16] describes Dr. S. Jaishankar's diplomatic style as "assertive pragmatism," combining principled stances with tactical flexibility. His academic background and diplomatic experience shaped his unique diplomatic philosophy of maintaining diverse partnerships while safeguarding India's strategic interests [17].

Research on Rahul Gandhi's foreign policy stance is limited, primarily focusing on his criticisms of government policies rather than a systematic analysis of his strategic worldview; furthermore, his qualifications are shrouded in mystery. Singh [18] examined Gandhi's speeches in parliament on foreign policy, highlighting his emphasis on dialogue and multilateral approaches. However, a comprehensive analysis of his stance on China remains unclear and incomplete.

2.3 Comparative Analysis in Foreign Policy Studies

Comparative foreign policy analysis has become an important research method for international relations scholars. Herman and Herman [19] proposed a framework for comparing the foreign policy orientations of different leaders, focusing on their belief systems, decision-making processes, and policy outcomes. This approach has been applied in various contexts, particularly in South Asia [9].

Recent comparative studies on Indian foreign policy leadership include Basroor's [20] analysis of different prime ministers' nuclear policy approaches, and Ganguly and Pardisi's [21] study of the diverse strategic cultures in Indian politics. However, existing literature still lacks systematic comparative studies of the perspectives of the opposition and ruling parties on specific bilateral relations.

2.4 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite a wealth of literature on India-China relations and Indian foreign policy leadership, a significant gap exists in systematic comparative analysis of how different political leaders have responded to the China challenge. This study aims to fill this gap by comparing and analyzing the public statements, policy approaches, and public expressions of leaders Dr. S. Jaishankar and Rahul Gandhi, clarifying their responses.

Given the tensions in India-China relations and the ongoing debate within Indian political circles regarding how to address China, this analysis is particularly timely. By comparing the responses of the government (Minister of External Affairs) and the opposition (Leader of the Opposition) this study

contributes to a broader understanding of the democratic discourse on Indian foreign policy issues.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study methodology to analyze the contrasting approaches of Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Rahul Gandhi to India-China relations. The comparative case study approach allows for an in-depth investigation of two different strategic approaches while maintaining analytical rigor [22]. This study adopts an interpretive framework that emphasizes understanding the underlying belief systems and strategic cultures that influence each leader's approach to China policy.

3.2 Data Collection

The analysis draws on multiple data sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of both leaders' positions on India-China relations:

Primary Online Sources:

- Media interviews, panel discussions and Podcast (NDTV, CNN-News 18, India Today, Republic TV, Times Now, ANI, MOJO and Firstpost)
- Social media posts

Secondary Sources:

- Academic articles

The study covers the years 2014–2024, which includes the Modi government period and significant developments in India-China relations, including the 2017 Doklam standoff, the 2020 Galwan conflict and comparing the diplomatic positions of both leaders - Dr S. Jaishankar and Rahul Gandhi, identifying areas of convergence and divergence, and examining the rationale behind their approaches.

3.3 Limitations

Some limitations must be acknowledged. First, India-China relations are constantly evolving, requiring close monitoring of the current political context. Second, public statements may not fully reflect his private strategic considerations, especially on sensitive diplomatic issues. Finally, this analysis is limited to media interviews, media panel discussions, and online posts.

4. Analysis

4.1 Strategic Worldview: Professional Competence versus Opposition Opportunism

The fundamental differences between Dr. Jaishankar and Rahul Gandhi extend far beyond policy issues such as strategic capabilities and national commitment. Dr. Jaishankar's strategy reflects his decades of diplomatic experience and profound understanding of geopolitical realities, consistently demonstrating what scholars call "strategic empathy"—the ability to understand the adversary while upholding national interests [3]. His articulation of

India's challenge to China is based on a comprehensive analysis of power dynamics, historical precedent, and long-term strategic planning.

In stark contrast, Rahul Gandhi's China policy exhibits a worrying pattern, suggesting either a fundamental misunderstanding of strategic realities or a deliberate attempt to undermine the national position for political gain. His divergence from government policy during critical diplomatic periods has attracted criticism from former diplomats and strategic affairs experts who question whether such behavior aligns with national interests [11].

Most worryingly, Rahul Gandhi's pronouncements seem to reinforce China's position or undermine India's diplomatic efforts. For example, during the Doklam crisis, his questioning of India's military preparedness and territorial claims drew criticism that he was providing ammunition to the adversary at a crucial moment [12]. This pattern extends beyond China policy to the broader realm of foreign relations, with critics arguing that Gandhi's approach to foreign policy has undermined India's international standing.

The opposition leader's strategic worldview appears to be influenced more by domestic political considerations than by genuine strategic analysis. His criticisms of the government's China policy often focus on process than substance, suggesting a lack of understanding of the complexities of diplomatic engagement and strategic deterrence. Former Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal noted that Rahul Gandhi's interventions in foreign policy often "exposed a worrying deficiency in his understanding of the fundamentals of international relations" [23].

Rahul Gandhi's approach also reflects what critics call a worrying tendency to align with international criticism of India, raising questions about whether he is genuinely committed to defending national interests rather than seeking political capital. His speeches at international forums often emphasize India's shortcomings rather than its achievements, which has led to accusations that he provides material for anti-India rhetoric overseas [24].

4.2 Border Management: Strategic Leadership versus Undermining National Unity

The 2020 Galwan Valley incident clearly demonstrated the difference between responsible leadership and opposition opportunism during a national crisis. Dr. Jaishankar's handling of the crisis showcased exceptional crisis management skills; he firmly defended territorial integrity while preventing escalation through diplomatic means. His communication strategy maintained national unity while clearly articulating India's position to the international community.

Rahul Gandhi's response to the Galwan Valley incident, however, revealed a troubling pattern of behavior wherein political expediency taking precedence over national interests. Instead of demonstrating a united national front during the crisis, Rahul Gandhi immediately attempted to exploit the situation for domestic political gain, and his remarks were used by Chinese media to question India's

resolve [25]. His demand for detailed information on military deployments and tactics in the context of the current tensions raised serious questions about operational security and his understanding of crisis management protocols.

Most worryingly, Rahul Gandhi tended to echo China's narrative on the incident. His questioning of Indian casualties and military readiness has provided ammunition for China's attempts to portray India as weak and divisive [26]. Defense analysts point out that such rhetoric during periods of military tension emboldens adversaries and complicates diplomatic efforts.

The opposition leader's approach to border management has also exposed a lack of strategic understanding. His criticism of infrastructure development along the Sino-Indian border demonstrates a lack of understanding of fundamental principles of border management and military deterrence. Former Army Chief of Staff General V.K. Singh noted that Rahul Gandhi's stance on border infrastructure "reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of territorial integrity is maintained" [18].

Rahul Gandhi's questioning of military leadership and readiness during sensitive times has drawn criticism from veterans and strategic affairs experts. His remarks often aim to question India's capabilities rather than promote discussion of other policies. This contrasts sharply with Dr. Jaishankar's consistent support for military modernization and a clear communication of India's defense capabilities.

4.3 Economic Relations: Strategic Vision versus Populist Opposition

Dr. Jaishankar's approach to economic relations with China demonstrates a profound understanding of the link between trade strategies and national security. His advocacy for selective decoupling in strategic areas while maintaining commercial ties in non-sensitive areas reflects a nuanced strategic thinking based on global best practices and India's own vulnerabilities [27].

Rahul Gandhi's stance on Sino-Indian economic relations reveals a pattern of opposition for opposition's sake, often contradicting established strategic wisdom without offering coherent alternatives. His criticism of Chinese investment restrictions amid heightened border tensions suggests either a lack of understanding of the security implications or a willingness to prioritize national security over political posturing [4].

Most worryingly, Rahul Gandhi tends to support positions that exaggerate India's strategic vulnerability to Chinese economic coercion. Following the Galwan Valley incident, he opposed government restrictions on Chinese applications while ignoring the serious concerns about data security and digital sovereignty raised by cybersecurity experts from various political factions [28][29].

The opposition leader's economic stance appears to stem more from a desire to oppose government policies than from a coherent strategic analysis. His criticism of the Production Linkage Incentive (PLI) program, which focuses on reducing

dependence on Chinese imports, demonstrates a lack of understanding of fundamental principles of economic security and industrial policy [30].

Rahul Gandhi's approach to economic relations with China also reflects a problematic pattern of prioritizing short-term economic interests over long-term strategic independence. His rhetoric often emphasizes the potential losses from reducing trade with China while ignoring the security risks posed by economic dependence on a hostile power. Strategic affairs analysts point out that this view reflects "a fundamental misunderstanding of how economic governance works in contemporary international relations" [15].

4.4 International Representation: Diplomatic Excellence versus National Embarrassment

Perhaps the most striking contrast lies in how Dr. Jaishankar and Rahul Gandhi shape India's image on the international stage. Dr. Jaishankar is widely recognized as one of India's most influential diplomats, successfully articulating India's position in complex international settings and forging strategic partnerships that enhance India's global standing [31]. His speeches on the international stage consistently demonstrate confidence, competence, and clear strategic thinking, elevating India's diplomatic image.

Rahul Gandhi's international image stands in stark contrast. His pronouncements often seem to confirm international criticisms of India or undermine India's stance on key issues. His penchant for criticizing India's domestic policies in international forums has attracted criticism from multiple political factions, who contend that he is providing ammunition for anti-India rhetoric [32].

Most worryingly, Rahul Gandhi's overseas pronouncements appear to be aimed at discrediting India rather than promoting national interests. His speeches at international universities and think tanks often focus on alleged deficiencies in India's democracy, economic policies, and social harmony, raising questions from critics about his understanding of the role a national leader plays in maintaining the country's international reputation [33].

Pakistan and China frequently cite the opposition leader's international pronouncements in propaganda campaigns against India, raising serious concerns about the potential national security implications of his statements. Intelligence analysts have noted that Rahul Gandhi's criticisms of Indian policy frequently appear in the media of hostile nations as evidence of India's internal contradictions and weaknesses [23][24][25].

Rahul Gandhi's engagement in international affairs often lacks diplomatic tact and strategic clarity. His frequent unprepared statements, requiring subsequent clarification, suggest either inadequate preparation or deliberate provocation, and these pronouncements do not contribute to advancing India's international interests.

4.5 International Representation: Diplomatic Excellence versus National Embarrassment

The issues of alliance politics and strategic partnerships are perhaps the most significant differences between the two leaders. Dr. Jaishankar has consistently focused on developing what he calls "issue-based partnerships," enabling India to cooperate with diverse countries while addressing specific challenges and maintaining overall strategic autonomy [16].

His concept of alliance politics embodies several key principles. First, he emphasizes that partnerships should be based on shared interests rather than ideological alignment. Second, he believes that diverse partnerships can enhance rather than limit India's strategic choices. Third, he believes partnerships should be reciprocal and respect India's decision-making process [34].

The Quad partnership reflects Dr. Jaishankar's concept of alliance politics within the context of India-China relations. He positions the Quad as a mechanism to promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific," while emphasizing that it is not a military alliance targeting any country [35]. This positioning allows India to pursue strategic cooperation while maintaining diplomatic flexibility.

Rahul Gandhi's stance on alliance politics reflects a greater skepticism towards strategic partnerships, particularly those perceived as anti-China alliances. He has criticized the government's participation in the Quad, arguing that such arrangements could provoke retaliation from China and limit India's diplomatic options [36].

The opposition leader's criticisms often emphasize the dangers of engaging in great power competition. His remarks suggest a concern that close cooperation with the United States could drag India into conflicts not directly related to its own interests. He advocates maintaining the Congress Party's traditional principles of non-alignment and strategic autonomy [37].

Rahul Gandhi's stance on alliance politics also reflects his concern for sovereignty and decision-making autonomy. His comments frequently question whether strategic partnerships would undermine India's ability to make independent foreign policy decisions based on national interests rather than partnership obligations.

5. Conclusion

Comparative analysis reveals not only a difference in political preferences but also a fundamental discrepancy between professional competence and political opportunism in foreign policy leadership. Dr S. Jaishankar's approach embodies the essential qualities of effective diplomatic leadership: strategic vision, tactical flexibility, and a firm commitment to national interests. His management of India-China relations demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of great power dynamics and has successfully strengthened India's strategic position while managing complex challenges.

In contrast, Rahul Gandhi's approach raises serious questions about his suitability for national leadership roles related to foreign policy and national security. His consistent pattern of undermining national positions during sensitive periods, making statements that provide ammunition to adversaries, and displaying clear gaps in strategic understanding points either to a fundamental incompetence or to related priorities that place political expediency above the national interest.

	Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar	Rahul Gandhi
Strategic Worldview	Professional Competence	Opposition Opportunism
Border Control	Strategic Leadership	Undermining National Unity
Economic Relations	Strategic Vision	Populist Opposition
Diplomatic Strategy	Diplomatic Excellence	National Embarrassment
Alliance Policy	Strategic Partnerships	Non-Alignment

The implications extend beyond India-China relations to broader questions about democratic accountability and responsible opposition behaviour. While democratic debate on foreign policy is essential, Rahul Gandhi's approach often crosses the line between legitimate criticism and potentially damaging undermining of national positions. His tendency to justify international criticism of India and make statements that are later exploited by opponents raises questions about whether his oppositional role serves a constructive democratic purpose.

Perhaps most troubling is Rahul Gandhi's apparent disconnect from the realities on the ground and the strategic complexities that shape foreign policymaking. His positions often reflect a superficial understanding of issues that require careful analysis and careful consideration of multiple variables. This pattern suggests his unsuitability for leadership roles that require strategic judgment and crisis management capabilities.

This inconsistency also highlights broader challenges in Indian democracy, where dynastic politics and a culture of entitlement can produce leaders who lack the competence and commitment necessary for effective governance. Rahul Gandhi's approach to foreign policy appears to be shaped more by inherited political positions than by a genuine understanding of national interests or strategic analysis.

The evolution of India-China relations is expected to benefit from the continued professional leadership embodied by figures like Dr S. Jaishankar, while the Gandhian approach poses potential risks to national security and international standing. Indian voters' assessment of these divergent leadership styles will have profound implications for the country's strategic trajectory and democratic accountability on foreign policy matters.

The future evolution of India-China relations is likely to be influenced by the broader trajectory of Chinese policy, regional developments, and India's strategic choices. The contrast between Dr S. Jaishankar and Gandhian approaches provides a deeper understanding of the range of options available to Indian policymakers and the trade-offs associated with different strategic choices. As India continues to

navigate this complex relationship, the debate between these alternative approaches will remain relevant to policy formulation and democratic accountability.

The study's findings also point to areas for further research, including a more detailed analysis of the outcomes of specific policies under different approaches, an examination of public opinion on Chinese policy alternatives, and a comparative analysis with other democracies facing similar challenges. As the India-China relationship continues to evolve, understanding these different strategic visions will remain crucial for scholars, policymakers, and citizens engaged in foreign policy debates.

Ultimately, comparing Dr S. Jaishankar's and Rahul Gandhi's approaches highlights the complexity of managing great power relations in an increasingly multipolar world. Both their approaches are significantly different, hence the debate between their approaches reflects a broader challenge facing Indian foreign policy in managing complex international relations.

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