

## The Epiphenomenal and Ephemeral Social Capital in IR

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### ABSTRACT

*This study has examined the nature of trust and social capital in the India-China dyad and argued that trust in the relationship is both epiphenomenal and transitory. Trust is epiphenomenal in that it is basically a function of favourable strategic circumstances, not a separate variable that steers action. But its ability to affect decisions or stop escalation in a situation of growing security awareness is limited. Trust is a fragile commodity as repeated interactions, trust building processes and institutional structures have not been able to create lasting social capital. Trust is precariously rooted in conventions, rituals and institutional memory and is prone to catastrophe. Hence, India-China relations are a partnership of managed co-existence, not of genuine reconciliation. There is co-operation, there is competition. But neither has built enough social capital to turn strategic rivalry into stable cooperation. More broadly, this study contributes to ongoing debates by showing that trust is a fragile and contingent resource in world politics. Trust can tolerate temporary arrangements and procedural cooperation in unequal and strategically competitive relationships, but rarely goes beyond the seriousness of power politics and strategic uncertainty. The primary task of the international order, then, is not simply to generate opportunities for connection but to create institutions, norms and shared expectations that can translate episodic confidence into long-term social capital. Trust in relationships such as the India-China dyad will likely remain institutionally fragile in practice, a transient mediator within deeper mechanisms of rivalry and insecurity, while counting politically in rhetoric until such conditions are met.*

**Keywords:** Trust, Social Capital, India-China Relations, International Relations, Security Alignment, Strategic Rivalry.

### Introduction

The status of trust has been fuzzy in International Relations scholarship. International politics takes place in an anarchic setting, with no central authority to enforce or ensure compliance. Intentions are unknown. Main aims of states are survival and security. But international politics is also about expectations of cooperation, of reciprocity, of moderation. This leads to the paradox that trust seems to be a necessary factor for the maintenance of stable relations between states, yet the structural constraints of world politics make the construction of trust fundamentally fragile. (Acharya, 2001)

The India-China relationship is a telling example of this dilemma. Both are ancient civilisational states, nuclear powers, growing economies and important players in the emerging world order. They have a long border, many multilateral institutions and a lot of economic cooperation. But in their relationship, there is an undercurrent of mistrust, strategic competition and episodic crisis. (Bajpaee & Jie, 2025)

The fragility of cumulative diplomatic engagement was revealed in the June 2020 clash in the Galwan Valley. The rapid emergence of myths of “strategic partnership” and “mutual trust” and “peaceful coexistence” showed how brittle decades of trust had become. The experience throws up a basic

question: if so many confidence-building measures, diplomatic channels and growing commercial links cannot prevent such a crisis, then what exactly is the nature of trust in India-China relations?(Chatterjee, 2011)

Theoretical approaches provide different answers. Classical and neorealist scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz emphasise power and security considerations over trust. For realists, such cooperation is ephemeral, grounded in strategic calculation rather than a sincere belief in the other state's intentions.(Morgenthau, 1945) In anarchy, states resort to self-help, and are cautious, even when there is apparent goodwill, because of uncertainty.

Liberal institutionalists are more hopeful. Repeated engagement, transparency and institutions can reduce uncertainty and provide incentives for cooperation, say Robert Keohane and Robert Axelrod. Trust is incrementally built through iterative reciprocity and rule-governed engagement.

Constructivist scholars go one step further and focus on norms, identities and common meanings. Alexander Wendt's assertion that 'anarchy is what states make of it' underscores the potential of trust to transform the character of international relations via intersubjective understandings and collective identities.(Wendt, 1999) Nicholas Wheeler also stresses the significance of empathy and communication in transforming antagonistic relationships into cooperative ones.

But even with the progress in theory, a large gap remains. Current research has paid more attention to the building and disintegration of trust than to the issue of why trust is often not developed into durable social capital. It accounts for why trust waxes and wanes, but less so for why trust so often fails to institutionalise into stable norms, routines and expectations of behaviour.(Sen Gupta, 1974)

This is an especially important topic to talk about in the India-China relationship. The bilateral relationship has been a rollercoaster of optimism and hostility. Stories of Asian unity and peaceful coexistence were born in the Panchsheel age. (Sen Gupta, 1974)There was normalisation, more trade and a number of confidence building accords in the decades after the Cold War. But each stage of cooperation was fraught with crises and strategic anxiety.

In this paper I argue that trust in India-China relations may be best understood through two inter-related premises.

First trust is ultimately an 'epiphenomenon'. It is not an independent causal force that can mould state behaviour, but a derived situation caused by good strategic circumstances. Trust increases where security interests coincide and trust decreases where geopolitical objectives diverge. "In crisis settings, there is no independent power in trust to limit behaviour.

Secondly, trust is very 'ephemeral'. A raft of diplomatic initiatives and institutional reforms have failed to turn trust into enduring social capital. It is loosely embedded in norms, routines and institutional memory, and therefore open to strategic shocks.

The key question this study therefore asks is:

*Why is trust in India-China relations epiphenomenal and transient despite the recurrent meetings, institutional frameworks and diplomatic engagement?*

Trust, as a notion of social capital, is supposed to feed into larger discussions of collaboration, order and relational stability in international politics.

### **Methodologies**

The present study is based on a qualitative, interpretivist, processual research approach. Trust is invisible. It's difficult to quantify. It is spoken in language, read in behaviour, clearest under stress and uncertainty. Quantitative tools are therefore not well-suited to understanding the relational and contextual factors that make up trust in international politics.

The study employs a single-case study methodology, restricted to the India-China dyad. The case is of theoretical importance because it combines extensive interaction and collaboration with persistent strategic rivalry. The case is particularly suitable for the study of the relationship between trust and social capital, as both involvement and distrust are present.

### **Three complimentary approaches are pursued.**

First, tracing processes re-construct the chronological order in which security alignments produce confidence and crises reveal its limits. The approach allows the analysis of the rise, functioning and fall of trust at different stages of a bilateral encounter.

Second, discourse analysis is about how trust is spoken and done in diplomatic language. Trust as rhetoric and trust as behavioural restraint are examined in official statements, declarations of the summit, briefings of the foreign ministry, speeches and words of the leaders.

Third, a historical and archival analysis gives the analysis temporal depth. Major historical incidents are examined in relation to their significance in bilateral agreements, confidence building measures and diplomatic memoirs and official records.

The key sources are border agreements, joint declarations, summit communiqués, official speeches and policy documents. These include academic monographs, journal articles, think tank publications and policy studies.

Methodological triangulation increases analytical rigour by reducing dependence on a single source or method. It allows for the analysis of trust as a relational phenomena situated between security architecture and behavioural consequences.

### Findings

Four important findings are produced by the empirical study.

- **Appears Strategic Convergence Trust**

There has always been trust in India-China ties when there has been a positive strategic convergence. The Panchsheel era was an instance of post-colonial aspirations aligning with anti-imperialist collaboration. Both countries have cast themselves as champions of a rising Asian order, espousing the principles of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

Similarly, Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988 was followed by normalisation based on common developmental imperatives and the realisation that prolonged hostility was strategically costly. (Sidhu & Yuan, 2001) Trade growth, border agreements and cooperation within the likes of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation helped push engagement along.

But these examples suggest that trust was built largely under acceptable strategic conditions, not through substantial moral change.

- **Trust has Little Causal Power**

The evidence suggests that trust has had little independent effect on the behaviour of states in crises.

The optimism of Panchsheel was soon shattered in the Sino-Indian war of 1962. The Doklam crisis and the Galwan Valley clash also highlighted the lack of earlier trust-building measures and assurances to avoid confrontation. (Pant, 2016)

Security imperatives always took precedence over diplomatic agreements. In both states strategic signalling, military preparation and territorial concerns were more important than established confidence. (Pant, 2016)

Thus, trust did not exert much power in constraining escalation or affecting decision-making *per se*.

- **Trust Not Yet Institutionalised**

India and China have evolved many confidence building tools and institutional systems. Agreements in 1993, 1996, 2005 and 2013 defined broad parameters for border management and communication. (Jaishankar, 2020)

But these systems gave procedural confidence, not trust. The official language is often about the need to "restore confidence" and "rebuild trust." Trust doesn't seem to be built up over time so much as it's kind of negotiated.

Institutional processes have not created deeply embedded expectations of restraint or high social capital that can survive strategic shocks. (Möllering, 2006)

### Historical Memory gives Birth to Strategic Suspicion

Historical memory was an important obstacle to building trust.

The legacy of 1962 still looms large over strategic thinking in India and casts a wary eye at Chinese intentions. China's anxieties over competition and containment are driven by India's perceptions of its strategic partnerships and regional ambitions. (Ye, 2020)

Thus, the historical narratives are active determinants of present behaviour, not passive recollections of the past.

### **Discussion**

The findings provide strong backing for the claim that trust in India-China relations is conditional and transient.

This is a particularly telling data from an empirical point of view. The trust was there when the strategic conditions were good and not when security concerns increased. The pattern implies that trust is not an independent quantity but instead the product of the geopolitical context.

These findings therefore support the proposition that power and security still matter in important ways in interstate interactions. Cooperation was more when strategic incentives were aligned and less when they were misaligned. No, it was these advances that bred trust, not vice versa.

The study also reveals major limitations of liberal institutionalist aspirations. India and China have put in place an amazing number of interaction mechanisms and confidence-building measures. Yet institutions alone could not create trust that would last.

Institutions lowered transaction costs and provided a means of communication but did not fundamentally change threat perceptions or eliminate strategic rivalry. Repeated interaction led to familiarity with methods but did not build social capital.

The problems with constructivist ideas are also serious. In both governments, narratives of civilisational kinship and Asian solidarity are sometimes drawn on, but these identities are weakly institutionalised and inadequately shared.

Unlike the Franco-German reconciliation after the Second World War, India and China have not rewritten history through significant societal integration or moral convergence. Border disputes, mismatched strategic objectives and different views of regional order have made collective identities elusive.

The finding also supports sociological concepts of social capital. Durable social capital is based on ingrained norms, routinised expectations and persistent networks of co-operation. Such conditions are still largely absent in India-China relations.

Trust is therefore weak and reversible. It is reset after each crisis, not slowly deposited by repeated encounters. In diplomacy, the phrase "rebuilding trust" is often repeated. That is a reflection of the cyclical, not cumulative, nature of confidence.

The findings have wider implications for the international relations theory.

They argue that trust is not to be taken lightly nor assumed to be inherently transformative. Trust is important because it allows communication, and it allows cooperation in a limited time. But the effect remains heavily conditioned by structural factors.

Second, the study questions the assumption that repeated engagement necessarily builds lasting social capital. Continued interaction in asymmetrical, strategically competitive relationships may be associated with persistent suspicion and recurrent crises.

Third, the findings suggest that trust in international politics has to be contingent. Its durability rests not only on institutional structures but on the existence of common expectations, normative convergence and relative confidence in future intentions.

Thus, social capital in world politics is inseparable from power, identity and strategic uncertainty.

### **Conclusion**

Trust occupies a strange place in International Relations (IR). It is frequently highlighted as a precondition for cooperation, stability and peace, but its analytical status is disputed. (Adler & Barnett, 1998) Liberal and constructivist approaches see trust as transformative, while realist approaches see trust as secondary to the structural imperatives of power and security. This paper explores the nature of trust and social capital in the India-China dyad. I think that trust between the two states is an epiphenomenon and a passing phase. It is epiphenomenal, the consequence of largely positive security alignments and strategic convergence rather than an independent force that might affect state behaviour. transitory, because the many meetings, diplomatic engagements and institutional processes have not produced trust into durable social capital grounded in norms, routines and institutional memory.

This research adopts a qualitative single-case study methodology triangulating process tracing, discourse analysis and historical-archival methodologies to explore critical moments from the Panchsheel period and the 1962 conflict to post Cold conflict normalisation and the crises of Doklam and Galwan. The results show that confidence is built up episodically in the context of strategic accommodation and periodically deteriorates with increased security concerns. Bilateral agreements and confidence-building measures have created procedural confidence, but not the substantive trust that could limit behaviour in crises.

In this paper, we contribute to the ongoing debate on trust and social capital by arguing that trust is not a stable basis for cooperation but rather a fragile and reversible mediator of geopolitical interaction in asymmetrical and strategically competitive interaction. It concludes that the India-China relationship is one of managed co-existence not genuine reconciliation and that social capital in world politics is still deeply influenced by power, identity and strategic uncertainty.

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