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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

An Awkward Dance of the Dragon and the Elephant

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

linkedin.com/in/epicbharat

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Hindustan Times 12 August 2026 GS2

INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Joshi argues India's renewed China outreach is substantially a hedge against a troubled relationship with Washington, tariffs, erratic Pakistan policy, indifference to the Quad, rather than genuine trust in Beijing. If a diplomatic opening is driven mainly by trouble with a third country rather than a changed assessment of the second, how durable should India expect that opening to be once the third relationship stabilises?"

Source: Original editorial ↗ Hindustan Times

Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Not partnership, not conflict, a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen, useful to both capitals for reasons that have less to do with each other than with the world around them.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is a signed op-ed by **Manoj Joshi**, Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, published ahead of a specific, newsworthy event, President Xi Jinping's first visit to India since 2019, expected the following month. That timing detail alone makes this a high-probability current-affairs anchor. Its analytical value lies in refusing the binary of "tensions have eased" versus "China remains hostile": Joshi's own phrase, "managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen," precisely names the coexistence of tactical thaw and unresolved structural rivalry that most answers flatten into one or the other.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood relations; bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

CONCEPT	MEANING	SOURCE
"Managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen"	Joshi's own term for the current relationship, distinct from "partnership" or "conflict"	From the op-ed
Xi Jinping's visit, first since 2019	Specific, dated, high-probability current-affairs anchor	From the op-ed
Growing India-China economic asymmetry	China's AI/biopharma/EV lead outpacing India's self-reliance sectors	From the op-ed
Special Representatives, 24 meetings, no resolution	The border-talks mechanism's actual track record	From the op-ed
India's China outreach as a US-relationship hedge	Joshi's explanation for why the thaw is happening now	From the op-ed
Galwan clash date, casualty figures, LAC length	Institutional and historical detail	Ujiyari's addition

WHAT THE OP-ED ARGUES

(This section reports Manoj Joshi's own argument, as a named, credentialed author writing in Hindustan Times, not an unsigned editorial. Historical background he assumes the reader already knows is addressed separately below.)

Who is arguing this. Manoj Joshi is Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. This is his own signed analysis, not an institutional Hindustan Times editorial position.

From antagonistic cooperation to managed rivalry. Joshi opens by noting that in a world "torn apart by two wars and several other conflicts," India-China relations "occupy a category of their own." Both countries "continue to mass soldiers along the LAC," yet formally the relationship "is marked by a détente that has now endured for nearly two years." Given the border dispute's history and Beijing's use of Pakistan "to offset India," Joshi argues current ties "are hard to characterise with any single word," a difficulty sharpened by the US "visibly distancing itself" from its earlier policy of using India to balance China in the Indo-Pacific. He judges it worth attempting the exercise anyway, "not least because China's President Xi Jinping arrives in New Delhi next month for his first visit since 2019," with the choreography already under way.

The central fact: growing asymmetry. "Perhaps the most consequential fact about India-China ties today is the growing asymmetry between the two countries." Even as India's own growth direction "looks uncertain," China is "making rapid strides in AI, biopharmaceuticals and electric vehicles." It "exported more than 2.5 million EVs in 2025, more than double the previous year's figure, even as its own domestic market cooled," which Joshi reads as "a marker of a country converting technological lead into export leverage at a pace India has no comparable answer to." Looking past aggregates, "the sectors driving this dependency, APIs, electronic components, solar, are precisely the ones where India's stated ambition is self-reliance."

The military picture. That asymmetry "carries" into the military balance: China "continues to expand dual-use infrastructure in Tibet, roads, rail links, airbases, and border villages doubling as forward logistics," even as both sides describe the relationship as "stabilising." The October 2024 agreement "restored a broad patrolling status quo in eastern Ladakh" and produced "real, if modest, follow-through," the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra resuming in 2025 after a five-year suspension, and agreement in principle to restore direct flights and border trade. "But none of this has extended to the harder question, de-escalation. Neither side has begun drawing down the additional forces brought to the border in 2020."

The economic picture. "Economically, the story is similar." After attempting to check Chinese investment and trade post-Galwan, India "has largely resumed normal economic relations with Beijing, because decoupling never had a domestic industrial base to lean on." Imports from China "stood at $94.57 billion in 2021-22" and have "since risen to $131.63 billion, now accounting for nearly 17% of India's total imports." Over the same period, the trade deficit "has grown from $73.31 billion in 2020-21 to $123.16 billion in 2025-26."

Symbolism that changes nothing. Beijing "calls Arunachal Pradesh the Chinese territory of 'Zangnan'" and "has given Chinese names for its towns, villages, and rivers." India "recently" did "the same by clarifying the names of places in the state." But, Joshi argues, "none of this will actually make a difference," since "the Chinese never controlled the area, notwithstanding their current claim."

What the diplomatic choreography has actually produced. "It's worth recalling, finally, just how little the official choreography itself has produced." The Special Representatives, "whose specific mandate since 2003 has been a political resolution of the border question, have now met 24 times without one."

Pakistan remains the constant. "There is no sign Beijing intends to recalibrate its Islamabad relationship" on account of either the India-China détente or shifts in US-Pakistan ties. "China's view of Pakistan as an instrument for containing India remains unchanged." Reports suggest both sides have "largely worked out a framework of a settlement based on the 2005 agreement" on political parameters and border-settlement guidelines, "but the Chinese side is stalling because it continues to use the disputed border to destabilise India, as it did in 2020."

What to expect from the Xi visit. Joshi expects "a well-worn script, joint statements, photo opportunities, warm words about civilisational ties, and no movement on the substantive issues that divide the two countries."

Why now: the US factor. The larger force reshaping Indian foreign policy, and by extension its China calculus, "has been the state of the India-US relationship." Tariffs, "an erratic American approach to India-Pakistan issues," and "evident White House indifference to Quad" have "unsettled what New Delhi once treated as a load-bearing partnership." Layered atop this is "a US-China rapprochement complete with loose talk of a G-2." New Delhi's difficulties with Washington, Joshi concludes, "are, in effect, providing the incentive to hedge, by stabilising its own relationship with Beijing on terms it can control."

The closing verdict. “The present trajectory looks like something narrower” than the earlier “antagonistic cooperation”: “not partnership, not conflict, but a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen, useful to both capitals for reasons that have less to do with each other than with the world around them.”

Ujiyari’s addition begins below. Nothing past this point should be read as Joshi’s argument.

BACKGROUND THE OP-ED ASSUMES

The following is Ujiyari’s addition, not part of Joshi’s argument. He writes for readers who already know the Galwan clash’s date and toll, and the October 2024 agreement’s exact sectors; this background fills that in for a complete answer.

The current phase of border management traces to the **April-May 2020** military stand-off in eastern Ladakh, which escalated into the **15-16 June 2020 Galwan Valley clash**, killing **20 Indian soldiers** (Chinese casualties were never officially confirmed). The **October 2024 disengagement agreement**, announced **21 October 2024** and covering the **Depsang and Demchok** sectors, was endorsed by Prime Minister Modi and President Xi at the **BRICS summit in Kazan on 23 October 2024**. The LAC itself runs approximately **3,488 km**, un-demarcated and distinct from an internationally agreed boundary. The **Special Representatives mechanism** Joshi cites pairs India’s National Security Advisor with a senior Chinese counterpart and has operated since **2003**.

THE ANALYSIS

1. Joshi’s central move, distinguishing tactical thaw from structural rivalry, is precisely the analytical skill a strong Mains answer needs. He does not deny the genuine value of resumed pilgrimage, flights and trade talks, but he refuses to let those gains stand in for the harder, untouched question of troop de-escalation and the unresolved boundary itself. A reader who treats “détente” as a single, undifferentiated state misses this deliberate separation.

2. The economic-asymmetry argument is sharper than a simple “trade deficit is large” complaint. By naming the specific sectors, APIs, electronic components, solar, where China’s dependency leverage concentrates precisely where India has declared self-reliance its goal, Joshi turns an aggregate trade statistic into a targeted structural warning about where Indian policy is currently failing on its own terms.

3. The Xi visit detail is the piece’s most immediately testable current-affairs anchor, and it should not be missed in a rush to the analytical content. A visit explicitly described as “the first since 2019” is a dateable, high-probability Prelims and Mains reference that deserves to be flagged prominently in any answer citing this piece.

4. The Special Representatives’ “24 meetings, no resolution” statistic is a compact, devastating illustration of Joshi’s broader “choreography without substance” argument. It converts an abstract claim about diplomatic theatre into a specific, countable fact that a Mains answer can cite directly rather than paraphrase vaguely as “talks have continued for years.”

5. The symbolic renaming exchange (Zangnan versus India's own place-name clarification) is worth citing carefully and precisely, given India's consistent position that Arunachal Pradesh is an integral part of India. Joshi's own argument, that Chinese renaming "will not actually make a difference" since China never controlled the area, is fully consistent with India's official stand and should be presented as such, not as a "both sides play symbolic games" equivalence.

6. The US-hedge explanation reframes the entire détente as instrumental rather than principled, and this is the piece's most important interpretive claim. If Joshi is right that India's outreach to China is substantially a response to turbulence in the India-US relationship rather than a genuine reassessment of China, the durability of the current thaw is tied to how the India-US relationship evolves, a testable, transferable point about hedging behaviour generally.

BEYOND THE OP-ED

This section is Ujiyari's addition: precise dates and figures Joshi's piece references only in passing or assumes as background.

The Galwan-to-2024 timeline. The sequence from the April-May 2020 stand-off through the June 2020 Galwan clash to the October 2024 disengagement agreement gives Joshi's "nearly two years of détente" claim its specific chronological anchor, useful for a Prelims-level date-sequencing question.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS, FROM THE OP-ED:

- Xi Jinping's visit: first to India since 2019, expected the following month (from this piece's publication)
- China EV exports: 2.5 million+ in 2025, more than double 2024's figure
- Dependency sectors flagged: APIs, electronic components, solar
- India's imports from China: $94.57 billion (2021-22) to $131.63 billion, now ~17% of total imports
- Trade deficit: $73.31 billion (2020-21) to $123.16 billion (2025-26)
- Special Representatives talks: mandated since 2003; met 24 times, no political resolution of the border question
- China's renaming of Arunachal Pradesh as "Zangnan"; India's own recent place-name clarification in response
- Proposed border-settlement framework reportedly based on the 2005 agreement on political parameters and guidelines

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS, UJIYARI'S ADDITION:

- Galwan Valley clash: 15-16 June 2020; 20 Indian soldiers killed
- October 2024 disengagement agreement: 21 October 2024; Depsang and Demchok sectors; endorsed at BRICS Kazan, 23 October 2024
- LAC length: approximately 3,488 km

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT THE OCTOBER 2024 AGREEMENT PRODUCED MILITARY DE-ESCALATION. JOSHI IS EXPLICIT THAT IT RESTORED PATROLLING ACCESS ONLY, "NEITHER SIDE HAS BEGUN DRAWING DOWN THE ADDITIONAL FORCES BROUGHT TO THE BORDER IN 2020," A SPECIFIC, QUOTABLE LINE WORTH USING DIRECTLY.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR reading this as a sober, accurate assessment. Joshi's specific evidence, the widening trade and technology asymmetry, the stalled Special Representative talks, China's unchanged Pakistan policy, and his own explanation for why the thaw is happening now (India's US troubles) together build a coherent, well-evidenced case that "managed rivalry" is the accurate description, not "improving partnership."

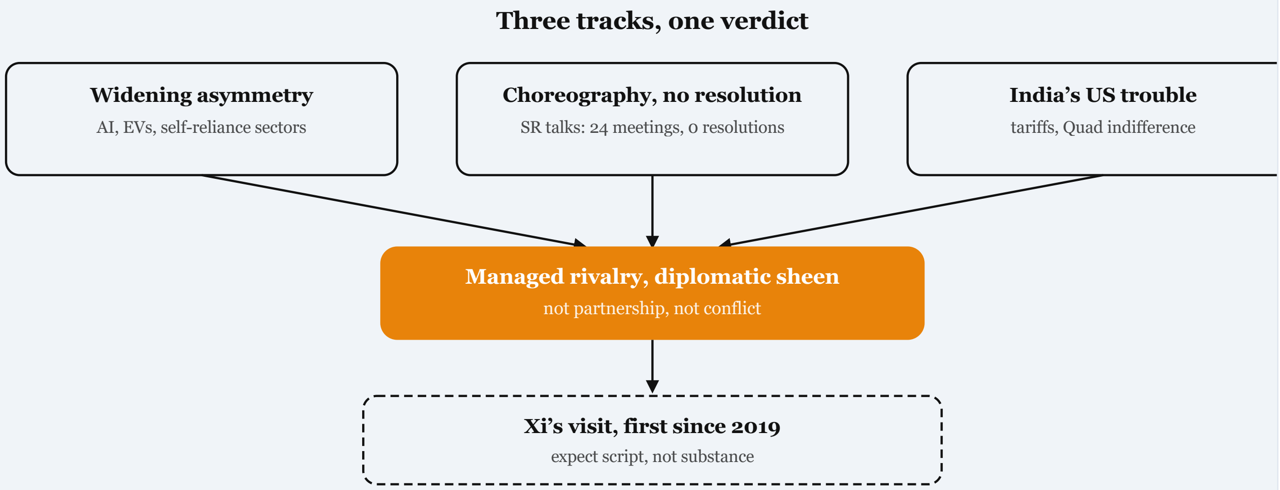
Argument AGAINST treating even limited engagement as worthless. Joshi does not himself dismiss the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra's resumption, restored flights, or border-trade talks as meaningless, they rebuild real administrative and civil-society channels. A reader should not extend his scepticism about structural change into a claim that the tactical gains have no value at all.

Balanced verdict. Joshi's own framing already holds both readings together: genuine, if narrow, tactical progress coexisting with an unchanged structural rivalry. The analytical error to avoid is treating "managed rivalry" as either complacent dismissal of real gains or naive acceptance of a genuine reset; it is neither.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: when assessing any bilateral thaw, separate what has actually moved (patrolling access, civil-society channels, trade dialogue) from what has not (troop levels, the underlying dispute, third-country alignments like China's Pakistan relationship), and ask what external pressure, not necessarily a change of heart toward the other party, might be driving the visible movement. Joshi's own explanation, that India's China outreach is substantially a hedge against US turbulence, is a specific instance of a general diplomatic pattern: engagement driven by pressure elsewhere tends to be more reversible than engagement driven by a genuine reassessment of the bilateral relationship itself.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



Joshi's three evidentiary tracks, widening asymmetry, stalled diplomatic mechanisms, and India's own US-driven hedge, converge on a single verdict ahead of Xi Jinping's first visit to India since 2019.

TAKEAWAY BOX

Not partnership, not conflict, a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen, useful to both capitals for reasons that have less to do with each other than with the world around them.

Author **Manoj Joshi** *(Observer Research Foundation); Xi Jinping's visit,* **first since 2019***; China EV exports* **2.5 million+ (2025)***; India's China imports* **$131.63 billion**, **~17%** *of total; trade deficit* **$123.16 billion (2025-26)***;* **Special Representatives**, **24 meetings***, no resolution; China's Arunachal renaming,* **"Zangnan."**

Galwan clash, 15-16 June 2020 *(20 soldiers killed);* **October 2024 agreement** *(Depsang, Demchok; endorsed* **BRICS Kazan, 23 Oct 2024***); LAC* **~3,488 km**.

Joshi argues India's China outreach is substantially a hedge against US turbulence rather than a genuine reassessment of Beijing. Is it diplomatically honest to publicly frame such a hedge as "normalisation," or does foreign-policy communication legitimately require some ambiguity about true motives?

UPSC has repeatedly tested India-China boundary mechanisms (Special Representatives, LAC disengagement) and India's great-power hedging (GS2); this piece's "managed rivalry" framing and its US-relationship explanation for the current thaw are directly citable for either theme.

"India-China relations are best described as a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen, not a genuine partnership." Examine this claim with reference to the growing economic asymmetry between the two countries and the unresolved border question ahead of President Xi Jinping's 2026 visit to India.

Sources: Hindustan Times, "An awkward dance of the dragon and the elephant" by Manoj Joshi, Ministry of External Affairs

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in Hindustan Times ahead of President Xi Jinping's first visit to India since 2019, Manoj Joshi, Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, argues India-China relations have settled into "a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen," neither partnership nor conflict, sustained less by genuine trust between Delhi and Beijing than by both capitals' reasons that have "less to do with each other than with the world around them," chiefly India's troubled relationship with Washington.

✓ SUPPORTING

- The most consequential fact about the relationship today, in Joshi's reading, is a growing asymmetry: China is making rapid strides in AI, biopharmaceuticals and electric vehicles, exporting more than 2.5 million EVs in 2025, more than double the previous year, even as its own domestic market cooled, converting technological lead into export leverage at a pace India has no comparable answer to, concentrated precisely in sectors, APIs, electronic components, solar, where India's stated ambition is self-reliance.
- The October 2024 border agreement produced real but narrow follow-through, the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra resumed in 2025 after a five-year suspension, and both sides agreed in principle to restore direct flights and border trade, but neither side has begun drawing down the additional forces brought to the border since 2020, and the harder question, de-escalation, remains untouched.
- Economic decoupling attempted after Galwan has effectively been abandoned because it "never had a domestic industrial base to lean on": India's imports from China rose from $94.57 billion in 2021-22 to $131.63 billion, now nearly 17 per cent of India's total imports, while the trade deficit grew from $73.31 billion in 2020-21 to $123.16 billion in 2025-26.
- Special Representative-level talks, whose specific mandate since 2003 has been a political resolution of the border question, have now met 24 times without producing one, and China continues to view Pakistan as an instrument for containing India, with no sign Beijing intends to recalibrate that relationship on account of the India-China détente.

⚠ COUNTER

Even narrow, tactical de-escalation carries genuine value: resumed pilgrimage, flights and border trade rebuild administrative and civil-society channels that a prolonged freeze erodes, and Joshi does not argue these gains are worthless, only that they have not extended to the harder question of troop de-escalation or the underlying border dispute.

→ **WAY FORWARD**

Joshi's own framing suggests India should expect the Xi visit to "follow a well-worn script", joint statements, photo opportunities, warm words about civilisational ties, and no movement on the substantive issues that divide the two countries, and should read India's own China outreach honestly as a hedge against turbulence in the India-US relationship rather than a genuine strategic reset, since Beijing's Pakistan policy and its stance on the border dispute show no corresponding change.

MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

Manoj Joshi describes India-China relations as "a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen," not partnership, not conflict, ahead of President Xi Jinping's first visit to India since 2019. Examine this characterisation with reference to the growing India-China economic asymmetry and the unresolved border question. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Ahead of President Xi Jinping's first visit to India since 2019, expected the following month, Manoj Joshi, Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, writes in Hindustan Times that India-China relations have moved from what he calls an earlier period of "antagonistic cooperation" to something narrower still: "not partnership, not conflict, but a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen."

BODY

Joshi grounds this in a widening structural asymmetry: China's rapid advances in AI, biopharmaceuticals and electric vehicles, including EV exports exceeding 2.5 million units in 2025, more than double the previous year even as its domestic market cooled, are converting a technological lead into export leverage concentrated in exactly the sectors, APIs, electronic components, solar, where India has declared self-reliance its ambition. Militarily, China continues expanding dual-use infrastructure in Tibet, roads, rail links, airbases, and border villages doubling as forward logistics, even as both sides describe the relationship as stabilising.

The October 2024 agreement restored patrolling in the affected sectors and enabled real but narrow follow-through, the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra resuming in 2025, flights and border trade agreed in principle, but neither side has begun drawing down the additional forces massed at the border since 2020. Economically, India's attempted post-Galwan decoupling has effectively been abandoned: imports from China have risen from $94.57 billion (2021-22) to $131.63 billion, nearly 17 per cent of India's total imports, while the trade deficit has widened from $73.31 billion to $123.16 billion over the same period, because, in Joshi's words, decoupling "never had a domestic industrial base to lean on." He also notes a largely symbolic front, Beijing's renaming of Arunachal Pradesh places under the term "Zangnan," met by India's own recent clarification of place names in the state, which he argues changes nothing since "the Chinese never controlled the area." Most tellingly, Special Representative-level talks, mandated since 2003 to politically resolve the border question, have met 24 times without a resolution, and China's use of Pakistan to contain India remains, in his assessment, unchanged.

Joshi situates India's own China outreach within a larger shock: a troubled India-US relationship, tariffs, an erratic American approach to India-Pakistan issues, and visible White House indifference to the Quad, that is "providing the incentive to hedge" toward Beijing on terms India can control.

CONCLUSION

Joshi expects the Xi visit to "follow a well-worn script," joint statements, photo opportunities, warm words about civilisational ties, without movement on the substantive issues dividing the two countries. His verdict, a managed rivalry wearing a diplomatic sheen, useful to both capitals for reasons that have less to do with each other than with the world around them, treats the current thaw as instrumental rather than a genuine strategic reconciliation, and a Mains answer citing this piece should preserve that scepticism rather than reading the détente as evidence of resolved tensions.

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

linkedin.com/in/epicbharat

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