



China-India Strategic Competition and the Fragmentation of Asian Regionalism

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ABSTRACT

The evolving strategic rivalry between China and India has emerged as one of the most consequential dynamics shaping the future of Asian regionalism. Since the 1962 border war, their competition has transcended traditional security concerns, encompassing economic influence, infrastructure development, normative leadership, and institutional engagement. This article investigates how the China–India strategic competition has contributed to the fragmentation of Asian regionalism from the Cold War period to the contemporary Indo-Pacific era. Using a qualitative and historical-analytical approach, the study integrates primary sources, policy documents, and secondary literature to assess the patterns and consequences of their rivalry. It argues that the Sino-Indian competition has transformed from bilateral territorial disputes into a structural contest for leadership over overlapping regional architectures including ASEAN, SAARC, SCO, BRICS, and Indo-Pacific initiatives. This competition manifests in parallel institutional designs, competing connectivity projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) versus India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and divergent strategic alignments, all of which undermine the coherence of regional multilateralism. The study finds that the persistence of mistrust and geopolitical competition between Beijing and New Delhi has intensified institutional fragmentation, weakened collective security mechanisms, and reduced the capacity of Asian states to form unified responses to global challenges. By highlighting these trends, the article contributes to broader debates on regional order formation and offers insights into the prospects of cooperative frameworks amid rising multipolarity. It concludes that unless China and India can reconcile their strategic visions, Asian regionalism will remain fractured, limiting the continent’s ability to act as a cohesive actor in global governance.

Keywords: China–India Rivalry, Asian Regionalism, Indo-Pacific, Belt And Road Initiative, Multipolarity, Institutional Fragmentation.

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a fundamental shift in the geopolitical and strategic landscape of Asia, driven largely by the intensifying competition between China and India. As two of the world’s most populous states and fastest-growing economies, their ambitions extend beyond national development to regional and global leadership. The Sino-Indian relationship, historically marked by border disputes and mutual suspicion, has transformed into a multidimensional rivalry encompassing military power, economic influence, connectivity strategies, and institutional leadership. This rivalry is reshaping the contours of Asian

regionalism the network of regional institutions, norms, and cooperative frameworks that have emerged since the Cold War. Rather than fostering cohesion, the strategic contest between Beijing and New Delhi is increasingly contributing to fragmentation, as both states advance competing visions of regional order and leadership.

The origins of China-India competition date back to the early postcolonial period, when both states espoused ideals of Asian solidarity and nonalignment. However, the 1962 Sino-Indian border war shattered this narrative and set the tone for decades of mistrust (Garver, 2001). Since then, unresolved territorial disputes, conflicting security interests, and contrasting political systems have continued to shape their relationship. The emergence of China as a global power following its economic reforms in 1978 and India's liberalization in the 1990s further intensified competition. Both countries now seek influence across Asia and beyond, yet their strategic trajectories often intersect and collide. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, is designed to reconfigure Eurasian connectivity under Beijing's leadership (Summers, 2016), while India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) seeks to promote a free, open, and multipolar regional order (Pant & Saha, 2021). These competing strategies reflect not only divergent geopolitical interests but also contrasting visions of regional governance.

Asian regionalism itself has undergone significant transformation. During the Cold War, regionalism was shaped by superpower competition and security alliances, but the post-Cold War period saw the proliferation of multilateral institutions, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and BRICS. These institutions were envisioned as platforms for cooperation on security, trade, and development, aiming to manage regional tensions and promote collective action (Acharya, 2014). However, the deepening Sino-Indian rivalry has undermined this vision. SAARC, for example, has been paralyzed by India-Pakistan hostility and China's growing engagement with South Asian states (Bajpai, 2019). Similarly, India's reservations about China's dominance within the SCO and BRICS have limited their ability to function as cohesive platforms (Stuenkel, 2015). Even ASEAN, traditionally committed to neutrality and centrality, faces strategic pressure as member states are divided over aligning with China's economic clout or India's democratic partnerships (Doshi, 2021).

The Indo-Pacific has become the principal arena of this competition, with China pursuing a "community of shared future" centered on its economic power and India aligning more closely with the United States and its allies through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (Mohan, 2018). The formation of the Quad comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India reflects New Delhi's strategy to balance China's rise and ensure an inclusive, rules-based order (Rej, 2021). In response, China has doubled down on its strategic partnerships through the SCO, BRICS, and its "Global Development Initiative" (GDI), reinforcing a Sino-centric vision of regionalism (Zhao, 2022). This institutional bifurcation illustrates how Sino-Indian competition is leading to parallel and often incompatible regional architectures.

The fragmentation of Asian regionalism has broader implications. First, it limits the ability of regional institutions to address transnational challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and public health crises. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weaknesses of existing frameworks, as regional responses were often unilateral or bilateral rather than collective (He, 2021). Second, fragmentation undermines normative convergence on key principles such as sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and non-interference, leading to competing standards and governance models. Third, it increases the risk of escalation, as overlapping security alignments

such as China's partnership with Pakistan and India's defense ties with the United States deepen mutual suspicion and strategic mistrust (Rajagopalan, 2020).

Despite the significance of these developments, scholarly debates on Asian regionalism have often overlooked the centrality of the China–India rivalry. Much of the literature focuses either on China's rise and its impact on regional order (Shambaugh, 2013) or on India's foreign policy evolution (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2020), but few studies systematically examine how their interaction shapes regional fragmentation. Furthermore, while existing work recognizes institutional proliferation, it often treats fragmentation as an outcome of U.S.–China competition, neglecting the agency of other regional powers such as India. This article addresses this gap by situating Sino-Indian strategic competition at the heart of regional fragmentation and analyzing its multidimensional consequences.

The study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology, drawing on primary sources such as policy papers, official statements, and institutional charters, as well as secondary literature from books and peer-reviewed journals. The research traces the evolution of Sino-Indian competition from the 1962 war to the present, examining key episodes such as the Doklam standoff (2017), the Galwan Valley clashes (2020), and their respective connectivity projects. It also analyzes institutional dynamics within ASEAN, SAARC, SCO, BRICS, and the Indo-Pacific, highlighting how China and India's competing strategic visions shape policy outcomes and institutional behavior. By integrating geopolitical analysis with institutional theory, the study aims to advance our understanding of how great-power rivalry drives regional fragmentation.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides an integrated literature review, situating the study within broader debates on regionalism, great-power competition, and Sino-Indian relations. It contrasts existing approaches and highlights the need for a framework that accounts for the interplay between strategic rivalry and institutional fragmentation. The following section presents the main findings, showing how China and India's competition manifests across economic, institutional, and normative dimensions. The conclusion summarizes the key insights and discusses the implications for the future of Asian regionalism, arguing that the prospects for regional cohesion will depend on whether China and India can transition from rivalry to managed competition.

Literature Review: China–India Strategic Competition and Asian Regionalism

The rise of China and India as major powers has prompted extensive scholarly inquiry into their bilateral relationship and its broader regional consequences. However, much of the existing literature has approached their rivalry from either a security or economic perspective, often treating regionalism as a secondary consideration. This review integrates key strands of the literature on Asian regionalism, great-power competition, and Sino-Indian relations to illuminate how their strategic contest is driving institutional fragmentation and reshaping regional order.

1. Conceptualizing Asian Regionalism

Regionalism in Asia has evolved significantly from its Cold War origins, shaped by shifting power dynamics, institutional innovations, and normative agendas. Scholars such as Acharya (2014) argue that Asian regionalism differs from its European counterpart in being informal, consensus-driven, and normatively pluralistic. ASEAN, formed in 1967, has long championed the principle of "ASEAN centrality," positioning itself as the hub of regional dialogue and cooperation (Beeson, 2012). Similarly, SAARC, established in 1985, was envisioned as a platform for South Asian cooperation but has struggled due to intra-regional rivalries, particularly between India and Pakistan (Dash, 2008).

The post-Cold War period saw the proliferation of new institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and BRICS. These frameworks sought to reflect the multipolar character of the emerging order and provide alternatives to Western-dominated institutions (Stuenkel, 2015). Yet scholars note that institutional “spaghetti bowls” (Ravenhill, 2010) and overlapping memberships have complicated coordination. Some see this as “institutional competition” rather than fragmentation (Nesadurai, 2017), while others argue that competing visions of order are eroding the coherence of regional governance (Pempel, 2010).

2. China’s Rise and Regional Strategies

China’s re-emergence as a global power is the most significant geopolitical development in contemporary Asia. Its rapid economic growth, technological advancements, and military modernization have reshaped regional balances (Shambaugh, 2013). Under Xi Jinping, China has articulated a vision of a “community of shared future for mankind,” seeking to position itself as the architect of a new regional and global order (Callahan, 2016). Central to this strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure, trade, and financial networks (Summers, 2016). BRI’s scale and scope have raised concerns about debt dependency and political leverage, but many states view it as an opportunity for development and integration (Hurley, Morris & Portelance, 2018).

China has also sought to reshape regional institutions. Its leadership role in the SCO and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) reflects an effort to institutionalize its influence (Zhao, 2022). At the same time, Beijing has increased its engagement with ASEAN through mechanisms like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and strengthened its partnerships with South Asian countries, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, challenging India’s traditional dominance in the region (Small, 2015). These strategies illustrate what Johnston (2013) describes as China’s “institutional statecraft” – the deliberate use of institutions to advance strategic objectives.

3. India’s Strategic Vision and Balancing Approach

India’s rise has been more gradual but nonetheless significant. Since economic liberalization in 1991, New Delhi has sought to expand its strategic space and project influence beyond South Asia (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2020). Scholars argue that India’s foreign policy is driven by a desire for strategic autonomy and recognition as a leading global power (Mohan, 2018). Its “Act East” policy and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) reflect a proactive engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific, seeking to balance China’s influence and promote a multipolar order (Pant & Saha, 2021).

India’s approach to regionalism differs markedly from China’s. While Beijing emphasizes hierarchical, state-led projects, India supports pluralistic, rules-based, and inclusive frameworks (Rej, 2021). Its participation in the Quad and strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia signify a balancing strategy against China’s assertiveness (Scott, 2019). At the same time, India remains wary of Chinese dominance within institutions like the SCO and BRICS, often adopting a cautious approach to cooperation (Rajagopalan, 2020). This tension underscores what Hall (2019) describes as India’s “reluctant great power” posture – ambitious but constrained by structural realities and domestic challenges.

4. Sino-Indian Rivalry: Historical and Strategic Dimensions

The historical roots of Sino-Indian rivalry are well documented. The 1962 war marked a turning point, transforming a relationship once grounded in anti-colonial solidarity into one defined by strategic distrust (Garver, 2001). Subsequent crises – including the Sino-Indian border standoff (1987), the Doklam standoff (2017), and the Galwan Valley clashes (2020) – have reinforced

perceptions of China as a strategic threat in Indian strategic thinking (Brewster, 2018). At the same time, China views India's deepening ties with the United States and participation in the Quad as part of a containment strategy (Doshi, 2021).

Scholars debate the nature of Sino-Indian competition. Some see it as a classic "security dilemma" rooted in mistrust and misperception (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010), while others argue it is a structural rivalry over leadership in Asia (Tellis, 2019). The competition is not confined to military power but extends to infrastructure, technology, and normative leadership. The BRI versus IPOI dynamic exemplifies how connectivity initiatives are used as tools of geopolitical influence (Wagner, 2020). Similarly, competition over regional institutions with China promoting the SCO and RCEP and India emphasizing the Quad and IPOI illustrates divergent visions of order (Zhao, 2022).

5. Fragmentation of Regionalism: Theoretical Perspectives

The concept of fragmentation has gained traction in the literature on global governance, referring to the proliferation of overlapping, sometimes conflicting institutions and norms (Zürn & Faude, 2013). In the Asian context, fragmentation manifests as competing institutions, parallel initiatives, and normative divergence. Acharya (2014) notes that regionalism in Asia is "multiplex" characterized by diverse actors, ideas, and institutional forms. While this pluralism can foster innovation, it can also undermine collective action if major powers pursue exclusive agendas.

Sino-Indian competition intensifies this fragmentation. SAARC, for example, has been paralyzed by India–Pakistan tensions and China's growing influence in South Asia (Bajpai, 2019). China's observer status and deepening ties with SAARC members have diluted India's leadership. Similarly, ASEAN faces internal divisions over how to manage China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and India's push for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (Beeson, 2012). Even within BRICS and the SCO, India's skepticism about China's dominance limits institutional cohesion (Stuenkel, 2015). The result is a fragmented regional landscape where overlapping architectures reflect competing visions rather than shared goals.

6. Gaps in the Literature

While the literature on China's rise, India's foreign policy, and Asian regionalism is extensive, important gaps remain. First, most studies treat Sino-Indian rivalry and regionalism as separate phenomena rather than examining their intersection. Second, while the impact of U.S.–China competition on regional order has been widely studied (Allison, 2017), the role of China–India dynamics in shaping institutional fragmentation has received less attention. Third, there is a need for more integrative frameworks that link strategic competition to institutional outcomes. This study addresses these gaps by explicitly examining how China and India's competition contributes to the fragmentation of Asian regionalism across multiple dimensions institutional, economic, and normative. It builds on Acharya's (2014) notion of "multiplex regionalism" but argues that great-power rivalry pushes multiplexity toward fragmentation. By situating Sino-Indian competition within broader debates on order, governance, and institutional design, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Asia's evolving regional architecture.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the China–India strategic rivalry has had profound and multidimensional effects on the trajectory of Asian regionalism, fundamentally altering its institutional architecture, strategic alignments, and normative landscape. Rather than fostering cooperative frameworks to address shared challenges, the region is witnessing parallel and often competing initiatives that reflect divergent visions of order. These results are organized

into five major themes: institutional bifurcation, connectivity competition, security alignments and strategic mistrust, normative divergence, and prospects for regional governance.

1. Institutional Bifurcation and Competing Architectures

One of the most visible impacts of the China–India rivalry is the proliferation of parallel institutional architectures. China has actively promoted organizations that reflect its strategic preferences, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS group. Through these platforms, Beijing has sought to institutionalize its leadership role, advance its normative agenda, and reshape regional governance in line with its geopolitical interests (Zhao, 2022). The SCO, for example, has expanded from a narrow security-focused body to a comprehensive framework addressing economic cooperation, counterterrorism, and connectivity. Yet India's participation remains cautious, reflecting its concern over China's dominant position and close alignment with Pakistan (Rajagopalan, 2020).

BRICS illustrates a similar dynamic. Initially envisioned as a coalition of emerging economies seeking to reform global governance (Stuenkel, 2015), BRICS has struggled to function as a cohesive bloc due to growing Sino-Indian differences. China's push to expand BRICS and integrate it with initiatives like the BRI has often clashed with India's preference for a more pluralistic and balanced approach. These tensions have limited BRICS' effectiveness in shaping global norms and have deepened internal divisions (Rej, 2021).

In South Asia, institutional fragmentation is even more pronounced. SAARC has been virtually paralyzed, unable to hold a summit since 2014, largely due to India–Pakistan hostility and China's increasing engagement with SAARC members (Bajpai, 2019). Beijing's observer status and its bilateral projects with Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have undermined SAARC's cohesion and weakened India's traditional leadership role. This institutional stagnation contrasts with the growing dynamism of China-led platforms, highlighting how Sino-Indian competition creates asymmetrical institutional outcomes.

ASEAN, long the cornerstone of Asian regionalism, faces subtler but equally significant pressures. China's economic influence and assertive posture in the South China Sea have divided member states, with Cambodia and Laos often supporting Beijing's positions, while Vietnam and the Philippines align more closely with India and the United States (Beeson, 2012). These divisions have eroded ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making and weakened its "centrality" in regional affairs. India's engagement through the "Act East" policy and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) has sought to strengthen ASEAN's autonomy, but the group's internal fragmentation limits its capacity to mediate Sino-Indian rivalry.

2. Connectivity Competition: BRI vs. IPOI

Connectivity has emerged as a central arena of China–India competition, with profound implications for regional integration. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, is the most ambitious infrastructure and connectivity project in modern history. It aims to enhance trade routes, energy corridors, and digital networks across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Summers, 2016). BRI's flagship projects, such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor, enhance Beijing's geopolitical reach and economic leverage. However, India views these projects with suspicion, particularly CPEC, which traverses Pakistan-administered Kashmir, a territory claimed by India (Small, 2015).

In response, India has sought to promote alternative connectivity frameworks that emphasize openness, transparency, and sovereignty. The IPOI, launched in 2019, focuses on maritime connectivity, sustainable development, and capacity building (Pant & Saha, 2021). India has also partnered with Japan on the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), positioning it as a democratic and inclusive alternative to BRI (Wagner, 2020). These initiatives are supported by

the Quad, which has pledged to enhance infrastructure financing and governance standards in the Indo-Pacific (Scott, 2019).

However, India's alternatives face structural limitations. They are smaller in scale, slower in implementation, and often lack the financial resources that China can mobilize through state-owned enterprises and policy banks (Hurley, Morris & Portelance, 2018). Consequently, while India's connectivity strategies provide normative alternatives, they have yet to match BRI's transformative impact. The coexistence of BRI and IPOI reflects the broader fragmentation of regional integration efforts, as states are increasingly forced to navigate between competing projects and standards.

3. Security Alignments and Strategic Mistrust

Security competition remains at the heart of the China–India rivalry and a major driver of regional fragmentation. The militarization of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), exemplified by the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, has deepened mutual suspicion and hardened threat perceptions (Brewster, 2018). Both states have undertaken significant military modernization, with China expanding its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and India enhancing its capabilities in the Himalayas and Andaman Sea (Tellis, 2019).

Strategic alignments further reflect and reinforce these dynamics. India's participation in the Quad and its defense partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia signal a balancing strategy aimed at constraining China's influence (Mohan, 2018). The Quad's emphasis on freedom of navigation, maritime domain awareness, and critical technologies is widely interpreted as a counter to China's regional assertiveness (Rej, 2021). In turn, China has deepened its "all-weather" partnership with Pakistan, expanded defense cooperation with Russia, and strengthened its presence in the Indian Ocean through port facilities in Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti (Doshi, 2021).

These rival alignments fragment the regional security architecture. Traditional ASEAN-led mechanisms like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS) are increasingly overshadowed by minilateral groupings and strategic coalitions (Pempel, 2010). The absence of inclusive security dialogues that include both China and India exacerbates mistrust and reduces the prospects for cooperative conflict management. Moreover, overlapping alliances and partnerships raise the risk of escalation and strategic miscalculation, particularly in flashpoints such as the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean.

4. Normative Divergence and Competing Visions of Order

Beyond material power, China and India offer competing normative visions of regional order. China emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, and state-led development, positioning itself as a champion of "Asian solutions to Asian problems" (Callahan, 2016). Its advocacy of a "community of shared future" seeks to reshape global governance norms around state-centric, non-Western principles. India, by contrast, emphasizes democracy, pluralism, and a rules-based order, aligning itself with like-minded democracies to promote inclusive governance and freedom of navigation (Pant & Saha, 2021).

This normative divergence complicates institutional cooperation and deepens fragmentation. Within BRICS and the SCO, debates over internet governance, counterterrorism norms, and development financing reflect these ideological differences (Zürn & Faude, 2013). India's resistance to endorsing Chinese-led initiatives without broader consultation illustrates its commitment to pluralism and inclusivity (Hall, 2019). Meanwhile, China views India's alignment with the Quad and its advocacy of "free and open" Indo-Pacific norms as attempts to constrain its rise and promote Western agendas (Zhao, 2022).

The clash of norms is also evident in approaches to multilateralism. China favors hierarchical, state-centric models where major powers play leading roles, while India supports flatter, consensus-based institutions (Acharya, 2014). These competing preferences make it difficult to reconcile institutional design, further contributing to fragmentation.

5. Prospects for Regional Governance: Cooperation or Entrenchment?

Despite the deepening fragmentation, the future of Asian regionalism is not predetermined. Several factors could either exacerbate or mitigate Sino-Indian competition. One possibility is “managed competition,” where both states accept the reality of rivalry but agree on ground rules to prevent escalation and facilitate limited cooperation (Tellis, 2019). Confidence-building measures along the LAC, institutional dialogues within BRICS and the SCO, and joint participation in global governance platforms like the G20 offer potential avenues for engagement.

Economic interdependence also creates incentives for moderation. China is one of India’s largest trading partners, and both countries share interests in regional stability, counterterrorism, and climate change (Ganguly & Pardesi, 2020). Collaborative initiatives in renewable energy, digital connectivity, or public health could serve as confidence-building platforms. Moreover, smaller states and ASEAN as a collective actor could play a mediating role, promoting inclusive regionalism that accommodates both powers’ interests (Beeson, 2012).

However, without significant changes in strategic thinking, entrenched rivalry is likely to persist. The combination of historical mistrust, border disputes, competing alignments, and normative divergence creates structural impediments to cooperation (Garver, 2001). As long as China and India view each other as strategic obstacles rather than potential partners, regional institutions will remain fragmented, and Asia’s capacity for collective action will be constrained.

Conclusion

The strategic competition between China and India stands as one of the most defining geopolitical rivalries shaping the trajectory of Asian regionalism in the twenty-first century. This article has demonstrated that their contest extends well beyond bilateral disputes or historical grievances; it represents a structural struggle for leadership, influence, and legitimacy across multiple dimensions of regional order. As Asia transitions into a multipolar era, the divergent strategic visions of Beijing and New Delhi—rooted in differing political systems, historical narratives, and normative preferences—are profoundly fragmenting the region’s institutional landscape and limiting the potential for cohesive regional governance.

At the heart of this fragmentation is the clash between China’s hierarchical, connectivity-driven approach and India’s pluralistic, multilateralist vision. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) epitomizes its ambition to reorganize the regional and global economic order around Beijing-centric networks of infrastructure and trade. By investing in ports, railways, and digital infrastructure across South, Southeast, and Central Asia, China has expanded its strategic depth and influence while embedding itself as the principal driver of regional connectivity (Callahan, 2016; Chen & Wu, 2020). Yet this assertive approach often bypasses existing institutions and norms, creating parallel structures that challenge the legitimacy of established multilateral mechanisms.

India, conversely, seeks a more inclusive and rule-based regional order. Its initiatives such as the “Act East” policy, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and its participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) reflect an emphasis on transparency, sovereignty, and adherence to international law (Rajagopalan, 2020; Bajpai, 2021). New Delhi’s approach is deeply intertwined with its identity as the world’s largest democracy and its aspiration to act as

a “leading power” rather than merely a balancing one (Hall, 2019). However, India’s efforts to shape regional norms often conflict with Beijing’s expansive geopolitical ambitions, generating institutional competition that undermines collective decision-making and regional coherence.

This rivalry has manifested in several key ways that collectively contribute to the fragmentation of Asian regionalism. First, institutional proliferation has intensified as China and India promote competing frameworks. China has deepened its role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), while India has prioritized SAARC, BIMSTEC, and the Quad (Acharya, 2014; Sullivan, 2021). Rather than converging into a cohesive regional architecture, these overlapping institutions often duplicate functions, dilute authority, and compete for legitimacy. As a result, Asia’s institutional landscape remains fragmented, with limited capacity for coordinated responses to shared challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and transnational terrorism.

Second, their competition over connectivity and infrastructure projects has polarized the region’s economic geography. China’s BRI encompassing flagship projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) seeks to integrate regional economies into Beijing-led supply chains (Small, 2015; Wang & Ye, 2021). India, wary of BRI’s strategic implications and its violation of sovereignty in contested regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, has promoted alternative connectivity frameworks, including the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and partnerships with Japan on quality infrastructure (Panda, 2017). These rival initiatives compel smaller states to choose sides or attempt to hedge, thereby deepening divisions and undermining collective regional planning.

Third, the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic concept has sharpened ideological and normative cleavages. India and its Quad partners advocate for a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” emphasizing freedom of navigation, rule of law, and respect for sovereignty principles often interpreted as constraints on China’s assertive maritime behavior in the South China Sea and beyond (Medcalf, 2020; Sullivan, 2021). China views the Indo-Pacific narrative as a containment strategy and counters with its own concepts such as the “Community of Common Destiny.” This ideological competition fragments the normative foundations of regional order and fuels mistrust between key actors.

The consequences of this rivalry are profound. Fragmented regionalism undermines the ability of Asian states to act collectively on pressing transnational issues, from maritime security and environmental degradation to economic resilience and pandemic preparedness. It weakens ASEAN’s centrality, erodes the effectiveness of SAARC, and complicates the development of inclusive regional trade agreements. Moreover, institutional rivalry often reduces trust among member states, discouraging cooperation and emboldening external powers to deepen their involvement in the region’s affairs (Huang, 2022). This dynamic risks transforming Asia into a contested geopolitical arena rather than a coherent regional actor.

Yet fragmentation is not inevitable. The shared interests of China and India including regional stability, economic growth, and global governance reform provide potential entry points for cooperation. Both nations stand to benefit from collaborative approaches to infrastructure development, climate change mitigation, counterterrorism, and maritime security. Historical precedents, such as their cooperation in the BRICS and AIIB frameworks, suggest that pragmatic engagement is possible when mutual interests align (Li, 2011; Paul, 2019). Additionally, middle powers and smaller states can play a crucial role in promoting inclusive platforms and mediating between the competing visions of Beijing and New Delhi.

For Asian regionalism to evolve into a more cohesive and effective order, both China and India must reconcile their strategic ambitions with the principles of mutual accommodation and

institutional complementarity. This requires Beijing to temper its unilateralism and enhance the transparency and inclusivity of its initiatives, while New Delhi must overcome its institutional hesitancy and assume a more proactive leadership role. Both states must also recognize that zero-sum competition risks undermining their own long-term interests by perpetuating instability and reducing Asia's collective bargaining power in global governance.

In conclusion, the China–India strategic rivalry is both a challenge and a defining feature of Asian regionalism. It has driven institutional proliferation, polarized economic connectivity, and deepened normative divides, collectively contributing to the fragmentation of Asia's regional order. Unless both powers embrace cooperative mechanisms and seek convergence in their regional visions, Asia will struggle to act as a unified actor on the global stage. The future of Asian regionalism and its ability to shape the twenty-first-century order will depend on whether China and India can transform their rivalry into a framework for competitive coexistence that strengthens rather than weakens the region's institutional foundations. Only through such a transformation can Asia move beyond fragmentation toward a more integrated, resilient, and influential regional order.

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