



**CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS REVISITED: CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN INDIA-CHINA STRATEGIC
COMPETITION**

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations (CoC) theory to examine how cultural and civilizational narratives shape the contemporary strategic rivalry between India and China. While existing analyses largely emphasize military, economic, and geopolitical competition, this study argues that the India - China relationship is also deeply influenced by competing claims to civilizational identity, historical legacy, and regional leadership. Drawing on secondary sources, including political speeches, policy documents, media discourse, and academic literature, the article analyses how both states mobilize civilizational themes to frame national resurgence, territorial claims, and foreign policy orientations. India's self-presentation as a Hindu civilizational state and China's narrative of national rejuvenation under the "Chinese Dream" reveal parallel attempts to assert cultural authority in Asia. The article finds that although the CoC theory oversimplifies complex interstate dynamics, it offers useful insights into how identity-based discourses reinforce tensions in the India - China relationship. Ultimately, the study concludes that civilizational narratives function as a complementary layer, rather than the primary driver of strategic competition, amplifying mistrust and shaping the symbolic dimension of rivalry in the 21st-century Indo-Pacific.

Key Words: Clash of Civilization, India, China, Rivalry, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

The India - China relationship stands today as one of the most consequential rivalries in the international system, shaping the strategic landscape of Asia and influencing global power dynamics (Bajpai, 2018). Much of the existing scholarship explains this rivalry through the lenses of geopolitics, military competition, economic asymmetry, and shifting regional alliances. Yet, beyond these material dimensions lies a powerful but less explored layer: the cultural and civilizational narratives through which both states imagine themselves, interpret each other, and articulate their foreign policy ambitions (Lysko, 2024). These narratives

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rooted in history, identity, and symbolic power play a significant role in shaping political discourse and influencing strategic behaviour. In this context, Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations (CoC) thesis, despite its limitations, provides a useful starting point for examining how culture and identity interact with geopolitical competition.

Huntington argued that post-Cold War conflicts would increasingly emerge along civilizational lines, driven not only by material interests but by deep-rooted cultural identities (Huntington, 1996; Hendrikson, 2018). Although his thesis has been widely debated and often criticized for essentializing civilizations, it usefully highlights how states mobilize cultural narratives to legitimize political agendas and project influence. Both India and China, as ancient civilizations with long historical memories, have increasingly positioned themselves not merely as nation-states but as civilizational powers reclaiming past status. This self-representation is evident in India's emphasis on Hindu civilizational heritage and democratic exceptionalism, and in China's articulation of national rejuvenation under the "Chinese Dream," which draws heavily on Confucian, imperial, and nationalist motifs (Prewitt, 2024).

These civilizational frameworks become especially salient in moments of strategic tension such as border disputes in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, competition for influence across South Asia, and the broader Indo - Pacific security environment (Sharma, 2024). Civilizational narratives influence how leaders justify foreign policies, how publics perceive rival intentions, and how each country interprets regional order. They also shape soft power projection, cultural diplomacy, and the symbolic contest over who represents the rightful leader of Asia. While material factors remain central to India-China competition, the discursive power of civilizational identity adds a unique and often under-analysed dimension to the rivalry.

This article argues that although the Clash of Civilizations thesis cannot fully explain India-China relations, it helps illuminate how identity-based narratives deepen mistrust and reinforce the symbolic battleground of their strategic competition. Using secondary sources including political speeches, media discourse, policy documents, and academic literature the study examines how both states invoke history, culture, and civilizational claims to frame their geopolitical ambitions. By analysing these narratives, the article demonstrates that cultural identity not only informs national self-perceptions but also shapes strategic behaviour, contributing to the complex and multi-layered nature of the India-China rivalry.



Ultimately, this article contends that civilizational narratives serve as a complementary layer, rather than the primary driver, of India-China competition. By revisiting Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* through a critical and constructivist lens, the study contributes to the literature by bridging cultural theory and strategic analysis in the study of Asian geopolitics. It moves beyond deterministic interpretations of civilizational conflict to demonstrate how identity-based narratives operate as discursive resources that amplify mistrust, legitimize policy choices, and shape perceptions of regional order. In doing so, the article advances a more integrated framework for understanding how symbolic power interacts with material competition in contemporary great-power rivalry.

From a policy perspective, recognizing the role of civilizational narratives offers important insights for conflict management and diplomatic engagement. If identity-based framings intensify threat perceptions and narrow space for compromise, then effective crisis management between India and China requires not only military confidence-building measures but also careful rhetorical and diplomatic signalling that avoids reinforcing civilizational antagonism. By illuminating this underexplored symbolic dimension, the article provides both scholars and policymakers with a deeper understanding of how cultural narratives shape strategic behaviour in the 21st-century Indo-Pacific, where shifts in material power are increasingly intertwined with contests over historical legitimacy and civilizational leadership.

BACKGROUND

Relations between India and China have historically oscillated between cooperation, cautious engagement, and open rivalry. Although both states share centuries of cultural exchange particularly through Buddhism and ancient trade routes their modern relationship has been shaped more sharply by territorial disputes, geopolitical competition, and differing political trajectories since the mid-20th century. The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and India's independence in 1947 placed two large postcolonial states side by side, each aspiring to assert regional leadership while navigating Cold War pressures (Testbook, 2024). The promise of early solidarity under the Panchsheel Agreement soon gave way to mistrust, culminating in the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which left deep scars and continues to influence strategic perceptions today (Kansal, 2022).



Territorial disagreements remain central to bilateral tensions. China's claims over Arunachal Pradesh, India's concerns regarding Chinese presence in Aksai Chin, and periodic military stand-offs most recently the deadly 2020 Galwan Valley clash have reinforced mutual suspicion. These border disputes are not merely geographic or strategic; they are intertwined with nationalism, historical memory, and civilizational narratives of rightful territorial inheritance. For India, contested territories are tied to democratic sovereignty and civilizational continuity, while China frames them within narratives of national rejuvenation and the rectification of historical injustices (SCMP, 2020).

Beyond borders, the strategic landscape of the wider region has intensified the rivalry. China's expanding presence in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure investments, and port development has been viewed by India as encroaching into its traditional sphere of influence. In response, India has strengthened partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia through platforms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), aligning itself with broader Indo-Pacific strategies aimed at balancing China's rise (Dutta, 2025). These developments reflect not only shifts in power but also competing visions of regional order China's preference for a hierarchical, Sino-centred Asia versus India's advocacy of a multipolar, rules-based Indo-Pacific (Mushtaq, 2025).

At the same time, both countries increasingly present themselves as civilizational states rather than merely modern nation-states. China under Xi Jinping promotes the narrative of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," emphasising Confucian concepts, imperial history, and national unity. India under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) highlights Hindu civilizational heritage, ancient wisdom traditions, and the idea of India as a "Vishwaguru" or global moral leader (de Estrada, 2023). These narratives influence foreign policy rhetoric, public diplomacy, and strategic decision-making, and often shape how each state interprets the ambitions of the other (Bajpai, 2018).

Understanding this historical and geopolitical backdrop is essential to analysing the symbolic and identity-based dimensions of India-China competition. While material power dynamics remain central, the growing prominence of civilizational narratives adds a deeper cultural layer that colours strategic perceptions and informs the broader rivalry in the 21st century (Lysko, 2024).



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article employs Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations (CoC) thesis as its primary conceptual lens, supplemented by insights from constructivist international relations theory and literature on civilizational states. Together, these frameworks help explain how culture, identity, and historical narratives shape the symbolic dimension of India - China rivalry.

Huntington's CoC thesis, introduced in 1993 and expanded in 1996, argues that post-Cold War conflicts will be driven less by ideology or economics and more by cultural and civilizational differences. According to Huntington, civilizations represent the highest form of cultural identity, and competition between major civilizational blocs becomes inevitable as states seek to defend values, expand influence, and reaffirm historical identities (Huntington, 1996). The India-China relationship exemplifies potential civilizational friction: China is situated within the Sinic civilization, while India is identified with Hindu civilization (Kumar, 2025). Although Huntington's categorisation has been widely criticised for essentialising identities and overlooking internal diversity, it provides a useful framework for analysing how states invoke cultural narratives to frame geopolitical rivalry.

To address the limitations of CoC, the analysis also draws on constructivist international relations theory, which emphasizes that state behaviour is shaped not only by material interests but by shared ideas, identity, and social meanings. Constructivists argue that states act according to how they perceive themselves and others, and these perceptions are formed through discourse, collective memory, and historical narratives. In the India-China context, constructivism helps explain how civilizational self-images such as China's "national rejuvenation" and India's "civilizational rise" shape foreign policy choices and influence interpretations of rival intentions.

A third lens informing this study is the concept of the civilizational state, increasingly used by scholars to describe countries that frame themselves not merely as modern nation-states but as inheritors of ancient civilizational legacies. Both India and China explicitly adopt this framing in their political rhetoric. China views itself as a 5,000-year-old civilization reclaiming historical greatness under the Chinese Dream, while India underlines its status as a Hindu civilization with a unique moral and spiritual heritage. The civilizational state framework helps



illuminate why identity-based narratives have become more prominent in strategic discourse and how they reinforce claims to leadership within Asia.

By combining these approaches, the theoretical framework acknowledges Huntington's contribution while critically situating it within broader scholarly debates. This allows the analysis to move beyond deterministic civilizational conflict and instead explore how cultural narratives interact with material power dynamics. In doing so, the article demonstrates that civilizational identity functions as a complementary, rather than primary, driver of India-China strategic competition, shaping perceptions, rhetoric, and the symbolic dimensions of rivalry.

ANALYSIS

The study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, examining political speeches, policy statements, and diplomatic rhetoric to identify recurring civilizational signifiers and narrative patterns. Rather than assuming civilizational identity as fixed or coherent, the analysis treats it as a discursive resource selectively mobilized by political elites. The focus is therefore not on whether India and China are objectively "civilizations," but on how civilizational language frames strategic perception, legitimizes policy choices, and conditions crisis interpretation.

India's Civilizational Narrative: Reclaiming a Hindu Civilizational Identity

India's contemporary strategic discourse has increasingly intertwined foreign policy with civilizational identity, especially under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This shift reflects a broader ideological project that seeks to reinterpret India not merely as a modern, secular nation-state but as the inheritor of an ancient Hindu civilization with a distinct moral, cultural, and philosophical heritage (Saleem, 2023). The prominence of this narrative marks a significant transformation in how India articulates its global role and understands its relationship with neighbouring powers, particularly China (Bajpai, 2024).

Central to this narrative is the idea of India as a "Vishwaguru," or global teacher a nation that possesses unique wisdom rooted in Hindu philosophy, spirituality, and ancient knowledge systems (Desa, 2023). This concept appears repeatedly in political speeches, public diplomacy campaigns, and cultural initiatives, positioning India as a civilizational power whose



contributions to humanity extend beyond material achievements. The analytical significance of this framing lies less in its historical accuracy than in its political function. By grounding India's global role in civilizational antiquity, elite discourse indigenizes democratic legitimacy and reframes foreign policy ambition as moral stewardship rather than strategic assertion. Modi articulated this civilizational framing explicitly at the 2021 Summit for Democracy, where he stated "The democratic spirit is integral to our civilization ethos. Elected republican city-states such as "Lichhavi" and "Shakya" flourished in India as far as 2500 years back. This very democratic spirit and ethos had made ancient India one of the most prosperous. (Asian News International, 2021) By grounding democratic values in India's ancient past, Modi positioned Indian democracy not as a Western import but as an indigenous civilizational characteristic. Programs such as the International Day of Yoga, revived interest in Buddhism and Ayurveda, and increased focus on Sanskrit and Vedic traditions all form part of a soft power strategy that frames India as a moral and spiritual leader on the global stage (Ghosh, 2025).

This civilizational turn also influences India's interpretation of strategic challenges. For example, the long-standing border disputes with China, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh, are not presented solely as questions of geography or national security. Rather, political discourse often portrays them as challenges to India's civilizational integrity and historical continuity. Arunachal Pradesh referred to in Indian narratives as an integral part of ancient Bharat becomes symbolically significant as a frontier of civilizational belonging (Madhuri, 2024), reinforcing perceptions that China's territorial claims threaten not only national sovereignty but also India's cultural unity (Singh and Winter, 2023).

Similarly, India's engagement with South Asian neighbours draws on civilizational themes. The concept of "Neighbourhood First" is frequently framed in terms of shared cultural histories, religious linkages, and civilizational interconnectedness, particularly through Buddhism and Indic traditions (Simon, 2025). These references allow India to justify its leadership role in the region not as geopolitical dominance but as an extension of cultural stewardship. This perspective sharpens India's perception of China's expanding presence in South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and strategic port investments as an intrusion into a civilizational space that India believes to be historically and culturally its own. Here, civilizational language operates as a mechanism of symbolic securitization: infrastructure



competition is reframed as civilizational encroachment, raising the political costs of compromise and narrowing rhetorical flexibility.

Moreover, India's civilizational narrative reinforces its self-image as a counterweight to China. While China presents itself as a unified, harmonious, and hierarchical civilization rooted in Confucian and imperial traditions, India emphasizes its pluralism, democratic values, and openness, attributes that Indian policymakers argue make the country better suited to lead Asia's future (Junuguru, 2025). In his 2023 address to the Summit for Democracy, Modi explicitly claimed India as 'the mother of democracy,' asserting that elected leadership was common in ancient India long before the rest of the world, thereby establishing temporal precedence over Western democratic traditions (Haidar, 2023). This contrast is strategically significant; it positions India not only as a geopolitical competitor to China but as a symbolic competitor offering a different model of Asian modernity.

However, this narrative is neither universally accepted nor strategically determinative. India's continued participation in BRICS and sustained economic engagement with China suggest that civilizational rhetoric coexists with pragmatic strategic calculation. The narrative therefore conditions perception rather than dictating policy outcomes.

Thus, India's civilizational framing serves multiple strategic purposes across different levels of governance and engagement. Domestically, it reinforces nationalist sentiment by drawing upon shared historical memory and cultural pride, while simultaneously legitimizing political authority through the projection of the state as the guardian of an ancient and continuous civilization. Regionally, this narrative strengthens India's claim to leadership in South Asia by framing its influence as culturally rooted and historically justified rather than overtly hegemonic, particularly through references to shared civilizational and religious ties. Internationally, India's civilizational discourse functions as a soft power resource, enhancing its global cultural appeal and enabling it to project a distinct identity that contrasts with China's civilizational model (Singh and Winter, 2023). In doing so, India positions itself as an alternative center of Asian leadership, grounded in pluralism, democracy, and cultural continuity, thereby embedding symbolic competition within the broader strategic rivalry with China (Saleem, 2023).



In this sense, civilizational identity becomes a tool through which India interprets regional dynamics, evaluates China's intentions, and constructs its response to shifting power balances. It deepens the symbolic dimensions of India - China rivalry by embedding strategic competition within broader narratives of history, culture, and civilizational destiny.

China's Civilizational Narrative: The Chinese Dream and National Rejuvenation

China's contemporary self-representation as a civilizational state has become a defining feature of its domestic and foreign policy discourse, particularly under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. Central to this framing is the concept of the "Chinese Dream," which emphasizes the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" following what Chinese historiography describes as the "century of humiliation" inflicted by foreign powers (Prewitt, 2024). In his landmark 2021 speech marking the CCP's centenary, Xi invoked this narrative, stating that after the Opium War of 1840, "The country endured intense humiliation, the people were subjected to great pain, and the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness." And also, he declared that "national rejuvenation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation". This narrative situates the modern Chinese state as the legitimate heir to a 5,000-year-old civilization whose historical continuity, cultural sophistication, and moral authority justify its aspiration for renewed global prominence. By embedding national resurgence within a civilizational storyline, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) links its political legitimacy to the restoration of China's historical greatness. This civilizational framing should not be interpreted as culturally inevitable. It is institutionally reproduced through party doctrine, state media, and education campaigns, reflecting political consolidation under centralized leadership rather than organic civilizational consensus.

Civilizational discourse in China draws heavily on Confucian philosophy, imperial governance traditions, and narratives of unity and harmony, which are mobilized to present China as a coherent and centralized civilization-state (Yang and Tamney, 2012; Yuqi and Ekanayaka, 2025). Xi became the first Chinese president to address an international Confucian conference in 2014, declaring that 'culture is the soul of a nation' and that without cherishing its thinking and culture, no nation can stand. He tied China's peace-loving nature to Confucian principles such as 'coordinate and seek harmony with all nations,' positioning traditional philosophy as proof of China's inherently benevolent character and non-hegemonic intentions (徐娉婷,



2015). Concepts such as harmony, order, and collective stability are emphasized to distinguish China's governance model from Western liberal democracy, which Beijing often portrays as fragmented, individualistic, and culturally alien. This framing also implicitly contrasts with India's pluralistic and democratic civilizational narrative, positioning China as a more disciplined and historically continuous model of Asian leadership. Through this lens, China presents itself not merely as a rising power, but as a natural and rightful centre of regional order in Asia.

These civilizational claims have significant implications for China's strategic behaviour, particularly in relation to territorial disputes and regional influence. In its border tensions with India, China consistently frames territorial claims as historically grounded and legally justified, reinforcing the idea that protecting territorial integrity is inseparable from the broader project of national rejuvenation (Langeh and Sudhakar, 2025). Challenges to these claims are therefore interpreted not only as strategic provocations but as affronts to China's civilizational dignity and historical sovereignty. The mechanism at work is legitimacy entanglement: territorial posture becomes symbolically tied to the broader project of national rejuvenation, increasing domestic audience costs in moments of crisis. This framing hardens negotiating positions and deepens mistrust, as compromise becomes symbolically linked to civilizational loss rather than pragmatic diplomacy.

China's civilizational narrative also extends beyond territorial disputes into its broader regional and global engagement. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are frequently presented as modern expressions of ancient Silk Road connectivity, emphasizing themes of mutual benefit, shared prosperity, and cultural exchange (Yujia, 2023). By invoking historical precedents, China frames its infrastructure investments and diplomatic outreach in South Asia and the Indian Ocean as benevolent and non-hegemonic, masking strategic objectives within a civilizational discourse of cooperation. This narrative allows Beijing to counter accusations of expansionism while reinforcing its soft power and normative influence. Yet China's history of negotiated settlements with other neighbours demonstrates that civilizational rhetoric does not eliminate pragmatic flexibility. Rather, it amplifies symbolic stakes when disputes intersect with domestic legitimacy concerns.

In this sense, China's civilizational framing serves multiple strategic functions. Domestically, it reinforces national cohesion and legitimizes CCP authority by linking political leadership to



historical destiny. Regionally, it underpins China's claim to leadership in Asia by positioning Chinese values and governance traditions as central to regional stability. Internationally, it enables China to project a distinct global identity that challenges Western dominance and competes symbolically with India's civilizational narrative. Consequently, China's civilizational discourse operates as a powerful complementary force that shapes strategic perceptions, legitimizes geopolitical ambitions, and intensifies the symbolic dimension of India - China rivalry.

Civilizational Friction: Competing Claims to Regional Leadership

Although India and China are engaged in visible forms of material competition ranging from military modernisation and economic expansion to infrastructure development and strategic partnerships their rivalry is also deeply embedded in symbolic struggles over civilizational authority and regional leadership (Bajpae and Jie, 2025; Root, 2024). Both states perceive themselves not merely as powerful nation-states, but as ancient civilizations with historical legitimacy to shape Asia's political and moral order. This overlapping self-perception produces what can be described as civilizational friction, a condition in which strategic actions are interpreted through identity-laden narratives rather than purely rational or material calculations (Ganguly, Pardesi and Thompson, 2024). Civilizational friction therefore emerges not from essential cultural incompatibility, but from overlapping leadership narratives that interpret strategic competition through identity-based lenses.

At the heart of this friction lies the belief, shared by both countries, that they are the natural leaders of Asia (Root, 2024). India's civilizational narrative emphasizes its role as the cradle of major philosophical and religious traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, and highlights its long-standing cultural links across South and Southeast Asia (Miksic, 2006; Sengupta, 2024). This worldview constructs South Asia as a historically interconnected civilizational space in which India occupies a central position. Consequently, China's expanding economic and strategic presence in the region through infrastructure projects, port development, and diplomatic engagement is often interpreted in Indian discourse as an intrusion into a culturally familiar and historically Indian sphere of influence (Bajpae and Jie, 2025). Such perceptions extend beyond immediate security concerns and are framed instead as challenges to India's civilizational status and regional primacy.



China, by contrast, approaches regional leadership through a civilizational lens rooted in imperial history and Confucian notions of hierarchy, order, and harmony (Phillips, 2018; Root, 2024). From this perspective, China's rise is viewed as the restoration of a historically central position in Asia, disrupted temporarily by Western imperialism. Beijing's engagement with South Asia and the Indian Ocean is thus framed not as expansionist but as the re-emergence of a historically legitimate regional order. India's resistance to this process, particularly through closer alignment with the United States, Japan, and Australia is frequently interpreted in Chinese discourse as an externally driven attempt to constrain China's rightful resurgence rather than as an independent strategic choice (Wang, 2021; Chen, 2020).

This divergence in civilizational self-understanding significantly shapes how each state interprets the other's strategic behaviour. India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is often portrayed domestically as a pragmatic response to China's assertiveness (Tarapore, 2023). However, from China's perspective, QUAD represents a deliberate effort to undermine China's civilizational and strategic ascent by embedding India within a Western-led containment framework (Wang, 2021; Da Wei, 2021). This interpretation reflects a broader assumption within Chinese strategic culture that opposition to China's rise is rooted in fear of its civilizational reassertion rather than in specific policy disagreements (Root, 2024). The key mechanism here is interpretive amplification: strategic initiatives are filtered through civilizational narratives, transforming policy disagreements into symbolic contests over legitimacy.

Civilizational friction also manifests in how both countries interpret norms of regional order. India tends to advocate a pluralistic, multipolar Asia grounded in democratic values, sovereignty, and rules-based governance principles that align with its self-image as a tolerant and diverse civilization (Bajpae and Jie, 2025; Miller 2020). China, in contrast, promotes a vision of regional stability based on respect for hierarchy, non-interference as defined by state authority, and centralized leadership (Phillips, 2018). These competing normative visions are not simply ideological preferences; they are embedded in broader civilizational narratives about how order, authority, and legitimacy should function in Asia (Root, 2024).

The consequences of such friction are particularly evident during periods of crisis, such as border standoffs or diplomatic confrontations (Verma, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023). During these moments, civilizational narratives harden perceptions and reduce space



for compromise. Actions that might otherwise be interpreted as tactical manoeuvres become symbolically charged, reinforcing narratives of historical injustice, civilizational threat, or moral superiority (Bajpae and Jie, 2025; Lamb, 2024). As a result, mistrust deepens, and escalation risks increase, even when neither side seeks outright conflict (Khan, Bhat and Ishfaq Ahmad, 2024; Verma, 2024).

Importantly, this civilizational friction does not operate in isolation from material power dynamics. Rather, it amplifies them by providing a symbolic framework through which strategic competition is understood and justified. Infrastructure projects become markers of cultural influence, alliances are framed as civilizational alignments, and territorial disputes are elevated into questions of historical destiny (Paul, 2018). In this sense, civilizational narratives act as force multipliers, intensifying rivalry by embedding it within deeper identity-based claims.

Thus, civilizational friction between India and China represents a critical but often underexplored dimension of their strategic competition. It reveals how identity, history, and symbolism intersect with geopolitics, shaping perceptions of threat and legitimacy. While material factors remain central drivers of the rivalry, civilizational narratives condition how these factors are interpreted, responded to, and politically mobilized. Understanding this symbolic layer is therefore essential to grasping the enduring complexity of India-China relations and the broader struggle for leadership in 21st-century Asia.

Border Disputes Through a Civilizational Lens

Border disputes between India and China, particularly in regions such as Aksai Chin, Ladakh, and Arunachal Pradesh, are most commonly analysed through strategic, military, and geopolitical frameworks (Verma, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023). These analyses focus on territorial control, military posturing, infrastructure development, and the balance of power along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). While such perspectives are essential, they do not fully capture the deeper symbolic and identity-based dimensions that shape how both states interpret and respond to border tensions (Bajpae and Jie, 2025). A civilizational lens reveals that these disputed territories are not merely strategic spaces but are deeply embedded within narratives of history, sovereignty, and national destiny (Abraham, 2014).



For India, contested border regions are closely tied to ideas of territorial integrity, postcolonial sovereignty, and civilizational continuity (Abraham, 2014; Wojczewski, 2019). The modern Indian state emerged from a history of colonial partition and territorial fragmentation, making borders a particularly sensitive marker of political and cultural unity (Kulke and Rothermund, 2002). Regions such as Arunachal Pradesh are framed in Indian political and public discourse as inseparable parts of the Indian civilizational space often referred to as Bharat with historical, religious, and cultural connections that predate the modern nation-state (Sengupta, 2024; Khosa, 2025). As a result, Chinese territorial claims are not perceived solely as strategic challenges but as threats to India's historical identity and civilizational wholeness (Abraham, 2014).

This framing reinforces a broader narrative in which defending borders becomes synonymous with defending civilization (Chacko, 2018). Political rhetoric frequently links territorial sovereignty to cultural pride and national resurgence, especially within the context of India's contemporary civilizational turn (Miller, 2020). Consequently, concessions or compromises in border negotiations are often viewed domestically as symbolic losses that undermine not only state authority but also India's civilizational dignity (Pattanaik, 2020). These dynamics limit diplomatic flexibility and elevate border disputes into emotionally charged issues with strong domestic resonance (Ganguly, Pardesi and Thompson, 2024).

For China, border disputes are similarly embedded within a civilizational narrative, though articulated through a different historical framework. Chinese territorial claims are frequently justified through references to historical maps, imperial-era boundaries, and the broader project of correcting injustices associated with the "century of humiliation" (Kaufman, 2010; Wang, 2020). Within this discourse, disputed territories are framed as historically Chinese lands that must be reclaimed or secured as part of the nation's rejuvenation (Carrai, 2019). Protecting territorial integrity is thus portrayed as a civilizational obligation, inseparable from restoring China's rightful place in history (Suzuki, 2017).

This perspective renders border disputes deeply symbolic for the Chinese state. Challenges to China's territorial claims whether through Indian resistance or international attention are often interpreted as attempts to undermine China's historical legitimacy and civilizational status (Lovell, 2011; Geaney, 2022). As a result, compromise is frequently portrayed as incompatible with national rejuvenation, reinforcing a rigid negotiating posture (Wang, 2020).



The civilizational framing also allows the Chinese leadership to mobilize domestic support by presenting border tensions as external challenges to China's historical destiny rather than as negotiable political disputes (Suzuki, 2017).

The interaction of these competing civilizational narratives significantly intensifies mistrust between the two states (Prasad, 2021; Verma, 2024). India often interprets China's infrastructure development and military movements along the border as evidence of expansionist ambition rooted in a centralized and hierarchical civilizational worldview (Bajpae and Jie, 2025). China, in turn, views India's resistance, infrastructural build-up, and growing strategic partnerships particularly with Western powers as deliberate efforts to contest China's historical legitimacy and constrain its civilizational resurgence (Hu and Wang, 2020). These interpretations go beyond rational assessments of threat and embed border tensions within broader narratives of identity and historical rivalry (Root, 2024).

Civilizational framing also shapes crisis dynamics. During border standoffs, such as the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, actions on the ground quickly acquire symbolic meaning (Chatterjee, 2024; Prasad, 2021). Military encounters are interpreted not simply as tactical incidents but as affirmations or violations of civilizational resolve (Verma, 2024). This symbolism heightens nationalist sentiment on both sides, narrows the space for de-escalation, and increases the political costs of compromise (International Crisis Group, 2023). Border management mechanisms, while important, struggle to contain escalation when disputes are framed as matters of historical destiny rather than pragmatic coexistence (Bajpae and Jie, 2025). In such moments, tactical incidents acquire civilizational symbolism. This symbolic elevation increases audience costs and narrows political flexibility, even when material incentives favour de-escalation.

Importantly, viewing border disputes through a civilizational lens does not negate the role of material factors such as military capability, geography, or strategic interest. Rather, it demonstrates how civilizational narratives amplify material tensions, transforming territorial disputes into deeply symbolic confrontations (Ganguly, Pardesi and Thompson, 2024). Borders become sites where history, identity, and power intersect, reinforcing the persistence and intensity of India-China rivalry (Paul, 2018). Nonetheless, subsequent disengagement negotiations illustrate that strategic risk calculations ultimately constrained



escalation. Civilizational narratives intensified emotional resonance but did not override material deterrence logic.

In this sense, border disputes function as a focal point where civilizational competition becomes most visible. They illustrate how identity-based narratives condition strategic behaviour, shape perceptions of legitimacy, and complicate conflict resolution (Root, 2024). Understanding these disputes therefore requires not only geopolitical analysis but also attention to the symbolic and civilizational meanings that both states attach to territory (Abraham, 2014; Bajpae and Jie, 2025). Such an approach helps explain why border tensions endure despite diplomatic engagement and economic interdependence, and why they remain central to the broader contest for leadership and legitimacy in 21st-century Asia (Paul, 2018).

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Symbolic Competition

Soft power has emerged as a crucial arena of competition in the India-China relationship, complementing military, economic, and strategic rivalry with a symbolic struggle over legitimacy, values, and civilizational appeal. Coined by Joseph Nye (2004), soft power refers to the ability of states to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. In the context of India-China relations, soft power operates not merely as a foreign policy tool but as an extension of deeper civilizational narratives, enabling both countries to project culturally grounded visions of leadership in Asia and beyond (Kochhar and Ulman, 2020).

India's soft power strategy is closely tied to its portrayal as a pluralistic, democratic, and spiritually rich civilization (Verma, 2023). Cultural resources such as yoga, Ayurveda, classical arts, and philosophical traditions are mobilized to construct an image of India as a peaceful and morally grounded society with universal appeal (Halsana, 2025). The global promotion of yoga most visibly through the United Nations recognized International Day of Yoga has become a central pillar of India's cultural diplomacy, reinforcing narratives of harmony, well-being, and ancient wisdom (Black, 2025). These initiatives allow India to present itself as a civilization whose influence flows organically through culture rather than force, aligning with its broader self-image as a benign regional leader (Chacko, 2012).



The Indian diaspora also plays a significant role in this soft power projection. Large, politically active diaspora communities across North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia function as informal ambassadors of Indian culture, democracy, and economic success (Mahapatra, 2016; Rani, 2025). Through festivals, religious institutions, media, and political engagement, the diaspora amplifies India's civilizational narrative globally (Verma, 2023). This diasporic influence reinforces India's claim to moral authority and cultural relevance, particularly in democratic societies, and contrasts with China's more state-centric approach to cultural diplomacy (Melissen and Kumar, 2024).

China's soft power strategy, by contrast, is more institutionalized and centrally coordinated, reflecting its broader governance model (d'Hooghe, 2015; Wang and Adamson, 2015). The establishment of Confucius Institutes across the world represents one of China's most visible efforts to promote language, culture, and civilizational values (Hartig, 2015; Trang and Dat, 2025). These institutions aim to familiarize foreign audiences with Chinese history, philosophy, and contemporary society, framing China as a sophisticated and harmonious civilization. Alongside educational exchanges, cultural festivals, and media outreach, China projects an image of cultural continuity and civilizational depth that supports its claim to global leadership (Kurlantzick, 2007).

At the core of China's soft power narrative is the concept of "harmonious development", which presents China's rise as peaceful, cooperative, and mutually beneficial (d'Hooghe, 2015). This framing draws on Confucian ideals of harmony and order, positioning China as a stabilizing force rather than a disruptive power. Through this discourse, Beijing seeks to counter perceptions of threat associated with its rapid rise and to legitimize its expanding global presence (Li, 2009). However, critics argue that China's soft power efforts are often constrained by perceptions of political control and limited cultural openness, which can undermine their attractiveness in liberal democratic contexts (Brady, 2015; Paradise, 2009).

Buddhism has emerged as a particularly significant and subtle arena of symbolic competition between India and China (Scott, 2016). For India, Buddhism represents a powerful civilizational resource rooted in its historical identity as the birthplace of the Buddha. Sacred sites such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar are central to global Buddhist heritage, allowing India to claim spiritual primacy within the Buddhist world (Ramachandran, 2017).



Indian diplomacy frequently emphasizes Buddhism as a unifying cultural bridge across Asia, reinforcing narratives of peaceful influence and shared civilizational history (Scott, 2016).

China, however, has increasingly sought to position itself as a new center of global Buddhism (Wank, 2013; Scott, 2016). Through investments in Buddhist institutions, sponsorship of international Buddhist forums, and promotion of cultural tourism, China presents itself as a contemporary hub of Buddhist practice and scholarship. This effort is closely linked to China's broader civilizational narrative and to its political interests, particularly in managing religious authority within its borders and countering Tibetan Buddhist influence (Rao, 2025). By aligning Buddhism with state-led cultural diplomacy, China attempts to integrate spiritual heritage into its geopolitical strategy (Scott, 2016).

The symbolic competition over Buddhism illustrates how soft power becomes intertwined with civilizational legitimacy. While India emphasizes authenticity, historical origin, and spiritual continuity, China stresses institutional capacity, global outreach, and modern infrastructure (Scott, 2016). This contrast reflects broader differences in how both states conceptualize civilizational leadership India's decentralized, pluralistic approach versus China's centralized and state-managed model (Bajpaee and Jie, 2025). The effectiveness of these symbolic strategies, however, varies significantly across audiences. China's centralized cultural diplomacy faces skepticism in liberal democracies, while India's soft power projection is constrained by material capacity and institutional coordination. This variation indicates that civilizational appeal interacts with governance perception and economic capability.

Importantly, this soft power rivalry does not operate independently of material power dynamics. Cultural diplomacy often accompanies infrastructure projects, strategic partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives, reinforcing broader geopolitical objectives (d'Hooghe, 2015). For example, China's cultural engagement in South Asia frequently coincides with Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments, while India's cultural outreach aligns with its "Neighbourhood First" and "Act East" policies (Kochhar and Ulman, 2020). In this way, soft power functions as a force multiplier, enhancing the legitimacy and acceptance of strategic influence (Nye, 2004).

Ultimately, the symbolic competition between India and China in the realm of soft power deepens the civilizational dimension of their rivalry (Root, 2024). It shapes how both countries



are perceived by regional states and global audiences, influences normative debates about leadership and values, and reinforces identity-based interpretations of strategic behaviour (Bajpae and Jie, 2025). While neither country's soft power efforts alone determine regional order, they play a critical role in constructing legitimacy, amplifying influence, and embedding strategic competition within broader narratives of civilizational destiny (Paul, 2018).

Evaluating Huntington: Utility and Limitations

Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis offers a provocative and influential framework for understanding post-Cold War international politics by foregrounding culture and identity as central sources of conflict (Huntington, 1993; 1996). In the context of India-China relations, the thesis captures certain important dynamics, particularly the role of civilizational self-perceptions, historical memory, and symbolic narratives in shaping strategic mistrust. The persistence of tension between India and China despite deepening economic interdependence, diplomatic engagement, and participation in multilateral forums suggests that material incentives alone are insufficient to overcome deeply embedded identity-based suspicions (Bajpae and Jie, 2025). In this sense, Huntington's emphasis on culture provides a useful corrective to purely materialist or realist explanations of the rivalry (Root, 2024).

Huntington's framework is especially valuable in highlighting how civilizational identity shapes perception rather than directly causing conflict (Ganguly, Pardesi and Thompson, 2024). In the India-China case, cultural narratives influence how each state interprets the intentions and actions of the other. China's rise is not viewed by India solely in terms of shifting power balances but is often framed as the resurgence of a centralized, hierarchical civilization with expansionist tendencies (Chacko, 2018). Conversely, India's strategic autonomy and growing partnerships with Western democracies are interpreted in Chinese discourse as civilizational incongruent with China's vision of Asian order (Wang, 2021). These mutually reinforcing perceptions deepen mistrust and render strategic reassurance difficult, even when both sides profess peaceful intentions (Bajpae and Jie, 2025).

However, while Huntington's thesis helps illuminate the symbolic and discursive dimensions of rivalry, its deterministic assumptions significantly limit its explanatory power. Huntington treats civilizations as relatively fixed, coherent, and internally homogeneous entities whose interactions are predisposed toward conflict (Sen, 2006; Seif-Amir Hosseini, 2006). This



approach obscures the internal diversity, contestation, and evolution within civilizations themselves (Chiozza 2002). Both India and China encompass complex social, political, and cultural pluralities that cannot be reduced to singular civilizational identities. Moreover, the fluidity of identity narratives actively constructed and strategically deployed by political elites' challenges Huntington's assumption that civilizations are static and inherently antagonistic (Ozyurt, 2020; Lemke, 2019).

More importantly, the India-China rivalry demonstrates that material factors remain the primary drivers of conflict, with civilizational narratives operating as amplifiers rather than root causes (Verma, 2024; Paul, 2018). Territorial disputes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), competition for regional influence, concerns over military modernization, and broader great-power dynamics provide the structural foundations of rivalry (International Crisis Group, 2023). These factors would continue to generate strategic tension even in the absence of civilizational rhetoric. Identity-based narratives gain salience precisely because they are layered onto existing geopolitical and strategic contests, lending them symbolic depth and emotional resonance (Root, 2024).

The deterministic logic of the Clash of Civilizations thesis also underestimates the capacity for strategic pragmatism and cooperation across civilizational lines. India and China have demonstrated periods of collaboration in trade, climate negotiations, multilateral institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and global governance forums (Pandey, 2025; Quadri, 2025). These interactions reveal that civilizational difference does not inevitably lead to conflict and that state behaviour remains contingent on strategic calculations, domestic priorities, and international constraints (Prasad, 2021). Huntington's framework struggles to account for such pragmatic engagement, instead privileging conflict as the dominant outcome of civilizational interaction (Haynes, 2019).

A more nuanced reading of Huntington emerges when his thesis is combined with constructivist insights. Rather than viewing civilizations as fixed and conflict-prone entities, civilizational identity can be understood as a discursive resource mobilized by political actors to frame interests, legitimize policies, and shape public perception (Ozyurt, 2020; Lemke, 2019). In this interpretation, civilizational narratives do not cause rivalry but condition how rivalry is understood and politically managed (Cox, 2017). They influence the language of diplomacy, the symbolism attached to territorial disputes, and the domestic framing of



foreign policy choices. This approach preserves Huntington's emphasis on identity while rejecting civilizational inevitability (Mace, 2019). Civilizations do not act; political actors mobilize civilizational language to frame interests and shape perception.

The India-China case thus suggests that civilizational identity functions as a complementary layer within a broader matrix of geopolitical competition. It reinforces existing tensions, legitimizes strategic postures, and deepens mistrust, but it does not independently generate conflict (Ganguly, Pardesi and Thompson, 2024). Civilizational narratives become most powerful when they intersect with material disputes, transforming strategic disagreements into questions of historical destiny, moral authority, and cultural legitimacy (Root, 2024). In doing so, they raise the political and symbolic stakes of rivalry, making compromise more difficult and confrontation more emotionally charged (Bajpae and Jie, 2025).

Ultimately, this evaluation demonstrates that while Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis cannot fully explain India-China relations, it remains analytically useful when applied critically and selectively (Gregg, 2021). Its greatest value lies not in predicting inevitable conflict, but in drawing attention to the cultural and symbolic dimensions of power politics (Paul, 2018). By situating civilizational identity as an amplifying rather than determinative force, this article advances a more balanced understanding of how culture, identity, and material power interact in shaping contemporary strategic competition in Asia.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine the India-China strategic rivalry through the lens of civilizational identity, revisiting Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis to assess its relevance in the contemporary Indo-Pacific context (Huntington, 1993; 1996). By analysing political discourse, policy narratives, border disputes, and soft power strategies, the study demonstrated that India and China increasingly frame their geopolitical ambitions through civilizational narratives rooted in history, culture, and identity (Bajpae and Jie, 2025; Root, 2024). These narratives shape how each state understands itself, interprets the intentions of the other, and articulates claims to regional leadership in Asia (Ganguly, Pardesi and Thompson, 2024).

The analysis shows that both India and China actively mobilize civilizational discourse to legitimize foreign policy choices and reinforce domestic political authority (Chacko, 2018;



Tellis, 2016). India's portrayal of itself as a pluralistic, democratic, and spiritually grounded civilization contrasts sharply with China's centralized narrative of national rejuvenation and Confucian harmony (Ford, 2016; Miller, 2020). These competing self-images deepen symbolic rivalry and influence perceptions surrounding border disputes, regional influence, and normative leadership (Narvenkar, 2025). In moments of crisis, such as border confrontations, civilizational narratives intensify mistrust by elevating strategic disagreements into questions of historical destiny and cultural legitimacy (Verma, 2024; Chatterjee, 2024).

At the same time, this study critically engages with Huntington's thesis and highlights its limitations. While civilizational identity clearly shapes discourse and perception, the evidence suggests that material factors territorial disputes, security concerns, power transitions, and regional alignments remain the primary drivers of India-China competition (Paul, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2023). Civilizational difference alone does not determine conflict, nor does it preclude cooperation, as demonstrated by periods of pragmatic engagement in trade, multilateral institutions, and global governance (Pandey, 2025; Mohan, 2025).

The study therefore concludes that civilizational narratives function as a complementary layer, rather than the primary driver, of strategic competition, amplifying mistrust and shaping the symbolic dimension of rivalry in the 21st-century Indo-Pacific (Tellis, 2016; Khoo, 2023). These narratives do not independently produce conflict, but they condition how strategic interactions are interpreted, justified, and politically mobilized (Narvenkar, 2025; Bajpae and Jie, 2025). By embedding geopolitical competition within broader stories of identity and historical purpose, civilizational discourse raises the symbolic stakes of rivalry and complicates efforts at conflict management (Root, 2024).

Understanding India-China relations thus requires moving beyond purely material explanations to incorporate the cultural and symbolic dimensions of power politics (Tellis, 2016; Pye, 1985). A nuanced approach that recognises the interaction between identity and strategy offers deeper insight into the persistence of mistrust and the evolving dynamics of Asian geopolitics (Ganguly, Pardesi and Thompson, 2024; Khoo, 2023). Such an understanding is essential for interpreting not only India–China relations, but also the broader patterns of competition and cooperation shaping the Indo-Pacific in the 21st century (Mohan, 2025; Hall, 2023).



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