

Research Article

Special Emphasis of Chinese Politics behind COVID-19 and its Impact on India-China Relations

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global health crisis that revealed China's political strategies in intricate ways. This study examines the political aspects of China's response to the outbreak, focusing on its information management, domestic policies, and international diplomacy. By analyzing narratives surrounding the virus's origins and its global spread, the research also assessed the pandemic's impact on Indo-China relations¹ across diplomatic and economic dimensions. The pandemic period also coincided with a sharp deterioration in bilateral trust between India and China, highlighted by the Galwan Valley clash and subsequent tensions along the Line of Actual Control, which deepened strategic mistrust and hardened India's policy stance. The findings illuminate how political maneuvering has redefined China's geopolitical standing during this crisis, providing insights into the evolving landscape of Indo-Pacific relations. By uncovering these complexities, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of health geopolitics and the underlying power dynamics.

Keywords: Covid-19; Diplomatic & Economic Impact; Geopolitical Contestation; Health Geopolitics; Indo-China Relations.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, originating in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, transcended a mere public health crisis to profoundly reshape international politics, economic systems, and diplomatic relations, particularly exposing the intricate interplay between Chinese domestic politics and its repercussions for Indo-China ties. While the virus's origins, traced to a wet market cluster, remain debated China's political management drew global scrutiny for alleged opacity, early information suppression, and influence over the World Health Organization (WHO), which delayed its pandemic declaration until March 11, 2020, despite evidence of human-to-human transmission (Kupferschmidt & Cohen, 2020). This approach, echoing the 2003 SARS cover-up, prioritized Communist Party control, fueling mistrust amid Xi Jinping's framing of a "people's war" (Xinhua, 2020). Concurrently, the crisis exacerbated Indo-China frictions: the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash killed 20 Indian soldiers amid heightened patrols (Pubby, 2020). Following the Galwan clash, nationalist and anti-China sentiment surged sharply in India. This escalation prompted India to implement bans on TikTok and other Chinese apps, impose investment curbs, and advance the Atmanirbhar Bharat self-reliance initiative. This decision was based on national security concerns and fears that user data could be exploited for Chinese intelligence purposes (Palit, 2021)). This ban is also part of a broader strategy to reduce digital dependence on China's technology ecosystem, while responding to public pressure demanding firm action against Beijing following the Galwan incident (Verma, 2023). Investment restrictions are a further step toward weakening China's economic influence in India. The Indian government revised its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy

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in April 2020, requiring government approval for all investments originating from countries that share a land border with India—a move that effectively targets China (Palit, 2021).

Kaura's article "India's Relations with China from the Doklam Crisis to the Galwan Tragedy" discusses Indo–China relations emphasizing power, security, and strategic competition. The authors examine key events, such as the Doklam standoff and the Galwan Valley clash, and show how tensions increased despite both countries' efforts to build political trust at the highest level (Kaura, 2020). The situation worsened in 2020, when reports emerged that China was strengthening its military presence in areas such as Pangong Tso, Hot Springs, Galwan Valley, and Depsang Plains, regions long considered part of India. The violent clash on 15 June 2020 in Galwan Valley marked the most serious escalation in nearly a decade, resulting in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers, while Chinese casualties were not clearly disclosed. This incident sparked widespread public anger in India and signaled a major shift in how India's political leadership views China.

Building on this context, this paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic played an important role in shaping India–China relations during this period. It explores how China's domestic political situation during the pandemic influenced its international behavior, and how this, in turn, affected its relationship with India. The paper specifically analyzes the diplomatic, economic, and security impacts of COVID-19 on India-China relations, highlighting changes in policy and strategic responses. Thus, this study addresses three core objectives: (1) Examined Chinese politics behind COVID-19, analyzed censorship, delayed lockdowns, and narrative control; (2) studied coronavirus emergence, from initial Wuhan cases to global spread hindered by political interference; and (3) assessed COVID-19's impacts on Indo-China relations, encompassing diplomatic strains, economic shifts, and geopolitical implications. These objectives guide a classified analysis, retaining aligned data while excising extraneous elements, such as non-Indo-China aid.

2. Literature Review

This paper employs two core international relations theories, constructivism, and realism, as the primary analytical frameworks to explain the research objectives of this study. Constructivism provides the primary theoretical lens for examining Chinese politics behind COVID-19, analyzing censorship, delayed lockdowns, and narrative control. As a highly versatile IR theory, it emphasizes how ideas, identities, and socially constructed narratives shape state behaviour and international outcomes (Wendt, 1992), clarifying how the Chinese state "constructs" its political reality through official discourse, media framing, and information management, which is central to this study of censorship and narrative control. A realist approach is adopted to investigate the emergence of COVID-19 from its initial cases in Wuhan to its global spread, hindered by political interference, and to assess the pandemic's impact on Indo-China relations, including diplomatic strains, economic shifts, and geopolitical contestation.

Realism posits that, in an anarchic international system, states prioritize survival, self-help, and power maximization, constantly seeking to safeguard their sovereignty, manage external threats, and consolidate strategic advantage (Nau, 2019), which aptly explains the gradual erosion of trust and the intensification of mutual suspicion and antagonism in Indo–China relations as both countries recalibrated their foreign policy postures, security postures, and economic strategies in response to the evolving geopolitical environment and the strategic implications of the COVID 19 pandemic.

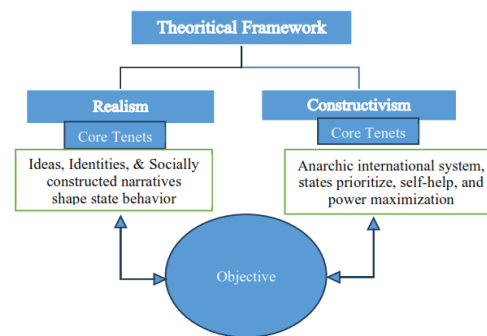


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework Illustrated by the authors.

The study's significance lies in bridging IR gaps in health geopolitics, illuminating pandemic-amplified rivalries, and offering policy insights into Indo-Pacific stability. It contributes theoretically by testing realism and constructivism in asymmetries, and practically by modelling objective, data-driven synthesis for the social sciences. Scope delimits the political, diplomatic, economic facets of China's response to Indo-China relations, Galwan, trade, evacuations (India's 324 citizens), and excludes biomedical details or peripheral cases. This focused lens yields well-rounded insights into how China's maneuvers reshaped regional power dynamics.

3. Research Method

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative design that analyzes secondary data, including government reports, academic journals, media coverage, think-tank studies, and statistical reports for the thematic content analysis. Data collection relies solely on these secondary sources, with ethical safeguards ensuring objective citations and no involvement of human subjects.

4. Discussion

Information Delays and Lockdown Strategies

China's political response to the COVID-19 outbreak exemplified the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) prioritization of regime stability and narrative control over immediate transparency, a pattern rooted in realist imperatives of state survival in an anarchic international system. The central government's delay in disseminating information about the virus's spread, despite early warnings from December 2019, delayed critical global responses, reflecting a calculated suppression to manage domestic perceptions and avoid accountability (Ruan et al., 2020). This section dissects these dynamics, integrating the whistleblower silencing of Dr. Li Wenliang, the belated Wuhan lockdown, and their alignment with Xi Jinping's authoritarian consolidation, framed through international relations theories.

The initial lack of transparency regarding the viral outbreak in Wuhan began with local authorities dismissing pneumonia cases linked to the Huanan Seafood Market as non-SARS-like, waiting until late December 2019 to issue internal emergency warnings without notifying the public (J. Zhang et al., 2020). Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, received an internal report concerning suspected SARS cases and privately urged colleagues to be vigilant; however, by early January 2020, local police formally admonished him and seven others for "rumor-mongering" and "making false comments" (Steensma & Kyle, 2022). Li eventually contracted the virus from an undiagnosed patient and passed away in early February 2020, an event that triggered widespread public anger and calls for "free speech" on social media platforms like Weibo before censorship was intensified (Steensma & Kyle, 2022). Although a subsequent inquiry offered a "solemn apology" to his family, critics noted that this reactive stance prioritized political stability over public safety, drawing parallels to historical management of the 2003 SARS epidemic and other domestic crises (L. Zhang et al., 2020).

Despite the early delays, the central government eventually mobilized a massive response, placing Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province under a strict lockdown in late January 2020, which confined over 50 million people (Lau et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Modeling studies have highlighted the efficacy of these non-pharmaceutical

interventions (NPIs). For instance, research estimated that the national emergency response, even with a slight delay, prevented hundreds of thousands of cases outside of Wuhan by mid-February (Lai et al., 2020). Similarly, a study involving 22 international scientists calculated that the travel bans alone averted approximately 202,000 cases nationwide, providing critical time for broader mobilization (Chinazzi et al., 2020). While the World Health Organization (WHO) praised the scale of the intervention, it also noted that the virus had been spreading unchecked since mid-December 2019 due to the initial tardiness in reporting (Amodio et al., 2020). President Xi Jinping later framed the containment effort as a "people's war," using the victory to articulate confidence that China's governance model saved the country while Western democracies struggled to manage the pandemic.

From a realist lens, these actions represent self-help power maximization: information suppression preserved domestic legitimacy amid economic stakes while lockdowns contained threats to hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2014). Constructivism reveals narrative construction. CCP media pivoted from denial to triumph, securitizing the virus domestically (Skidmore, 1999) via mass mobilization, desecuritizing origins internationally to evade blame. This duality strained India-China relations: India's evacuation of 324 citizens by February 1 heightened perceptions of Chinese unreliability, fueling mistrust in Galwan (PIB, 2020).

Critically, delays were not mere incompetence but systemic; local incentives favored concealment to avoid central reprimands, with Xi's early January internal directive prioritizing control. Comparative analysis shows that, post-delay, authoritarian efficiency: China's cases peaked earlier than India's, yet at the cost of transparency, eroding soft power (Tian et al., 2020). Ethical lapses, like reprimanding eight doctors, echoed prior crises, reinforcing global skepticism. This reveals CCP politics as a double-edged sword: effective containment masked by opacity, with ramifications for bilateral trust.

COVID-19 Global Spread, Evacuations, WHO Dynamics, and Political Opacity

The emergence of SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 marked not just a zoonotic spillover, likely from the Huanan Seafood Market's wildlife trade, but a politically mediated crisis whose containment and international communication were shaped by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) priorities, delaying global awareness and response (L. Zhang et al., 2020). The virus's timeline from initial clusters to pandemic declaration, highlighting how information suppression intersected with international evacuations, WHO interactions, and narrative battles, is framed through constructivist lenses of identity construction and realist power plays. While China's eventual scientific contributions were lauded, early opacity fueled geopolitical mistrust, with direct implications for India-China relations as India evacuated citizens amid rising suspicions (Pal, 2023).

(Chinazzi et al., 2020) quantified how travel restrictions delayed the national epidemic peak by 3-5 days while substantially reducing case exportations. (Lai et al., 2020) demonstrated that non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) collectively prevented a dramatic surge in cases across mainland China. However, global spread necessitated evacuations, revealing alliance fault lines. Major powers acted swiftly with chartered flights cleared by Beijing: US (195 citizens, Jan 29), Japan (359, Jan 31), UK (110, Jan 31), India (324, Feb 1), Germany (124, Jan 31), France (180, Jan 31), South Korea (368, Jan 31). India's operation, via Air India, underscored bilateral wariness post-Wuhan opacity, repatriating amid Galwan precursors.

Organizing countries	Citizens Evacuation	As of (date)
America (U.S.A)	195	29-01-20
Japan	206	29-01-20
United Kingdom & EU	124	31-01-20
India	324	01-02-20
Germany	128	31-01-20
France	180	31-01-20
South Korea	368	31-01-20

Figure 2. Major countries First evacuation of their Citizens from China.

Source: (Şencan & Kuzi, 2020)

Contrastingly, Pakistan refused Wuhan evacuations despite family pleas, citing "larger regional interests" and its alliance with China via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

(CPEC), allowing non-Wuhan evacuees to return only to stranded citizens, fearing a geopolitical sacrifice to avoid embarrassing Beijing (Ameer, 2020; Ellis-Petersen & Baloch, 2020). This "all-weather friendship" highlighted realist bandwagoning by weaker states, while ASEAN partners sealed borders despite ties. Critics like (Thayer & Han, 2020) lambasted WHO Director Tedros for echoing Beijing, sending advisor Bruce Aylward to Wuhan (Feb 2020) and decrying bans as "stigma"; Japan's Taro Aso dubbed WHO the "Chinese Health Organization. "WHO's mandate, "Better Health for All," clashed with its endorsement of dubious data, eroding credibility as cases surged.

China countered "mask diplomacy" by delivering masks, ventilators, and medical teams to Italy from March 12, 2020, prompting Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio to thank Beijing amid EU aid delays, framing it as "all-weather friendship" and solidarity (Marino, 2021). This pivoted narratives from origin blame to benevolence, amplified by the Global Times state media (Moscadelli et al., 2020). Bot-driven amplification flooded Twitter with pro-China hashtags—#forzaCinaeItalia (Come on China and Italy) and #grazieCina (Thank you China), deflecting Wuhan origins and softening criticism (Zeneli & Santoro, 2020). Meanwhile, Global Times misquoted nephrologist Giuseppe Remuzzi to falsely claim an Italian emergence a claim Natasi (Marino, 2021; Moscadelli et al., 2020) exposed as disinformation. This BRI linked-propaganda aimed to recast China as a leader amid US rivalry, but backfired amid revelations in the November 2019 case (Jones, 2026; Zhao, 2021).

Scientifically, milestones redeemed: (Zhou et al., 2020)) and the WHO report (WHO, 2020) sequenced the genome openly; (Huang et al., 2020) detailed clinical features in *The Lancet*, earning praise from editor Richard Horton as an urgent warning. Hong Kong teams advanced vaccines/diagnostics, fostering global data-sharing post-opaque start. Realism interprets emergence delays as self-preservation: CCP shielded legitimacy, leveraging anarchy to control narratives while Western protectionism (e.g., manufacturing repatriation) loomed (Kristof, 2020). Constructivism reveals identity contests; China's "victor" framing clashed with India's securitized view, amplified by evacuations and the Galwan incident. Securitization (Skidmore, 1999) domesticized the threat via lockdowns, desecuritizing blame abroad.

COVID-19 and Its Impact on Indo-China Relations

The pandemic period coincided with a sharp deterioration in bilateral trust between India and China, epitomized by the 2020 Galwan Valley clash and subsequent border standoffs along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This violent confrontation, described as the first deadly skirmish along the LAC in over five decades, effectively shattered the fragile sense of political improvement that had been cultivated through high-level summits in Wuhan and Mamallapuram (Kaura, 2020; Stimson Center, 2020);. The incident entrenched a deep trust deficit within India's strategic community, reinforcing perceptions of China as an assertive and unreliable neighbour, and prompting a hardening of India's China policy across security, economic, and diplomatic domains (Kaura, 2020).

At the same time, Chinese state media and online discourse during the pandemic were marked by an increasingly assertive "wolf warrior" style rhetoric, which presented Beijing's handling of the virus and its overseas behaviour as disciplined, scientifically driven, and strategically confident (Sullivan & Wang, 2023). This discursive posture, combined with criticism of India's early pandemic management and its restrictions on Chinese investments, generated intense counter narratives in sections of the Indian strategic and political establishment, which framed China as a revisionist power seeking to exploit the crisis for geopolitical advantage (Stimson Center, 2020; Sullivan & Wang, 2023). Controversies over China's initial handling of the outbreak and the opacity surrounding early data, alongside the instrumentalization of "mask diplomacy" to project benevolent leadership, further fueled suspicion in India and reinforced domestic narratives of Chinese strategic opportunism (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021; Stimson Center, 2020).

Economically, the pandemic laid bare India's deep dependence on Chinese imports, particularly in pharmaceuticals, electronics, and critical intermediate inputs, even as Indian policymakers sought to recalibrate supply chain linkages under the banner of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* and de-risking from China centric-value chains (Palit, 2021; Sun, 2020). In 2020–21, India introduced a series of ad hoc restrictions on Chinese investments and imports, including tightened FDI screening rules that Beijing explicitly interpreted as targeting Chinese capital (Sun, 2020; Verma, 2023). Yet empirical analyses of bilateral trade flows indicate that, despite

this political and regulatory friction, total trade volumes rebounded and even surpassed pre pandemic levels by 2021, suggesting that formal or informal decoupling has remained more rhetorical than structural, a pattern consistent with broader regional trends in which economic interdependence persists even amid heightened geopolitical rivalry (Verma, 2023).

Geopolitically, COVID-19 reshaped competition in the Indo-Pacific through rival forms of pandemic diplomacy and alliance-like coordination. China's "mask diplomacy" and subsequent vaccine diplomacy, channeled through the "Health Silk Road" and Belt and Road Initiative linked projects, were designed to project Beijing as a responsible provider of global public goods and to deepen its influence in Southeast and South Asia (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021; Biyani & Graham, 2021)). In response, India positioned itself as the "pharmacy of the world" by exporting vaccines bilaterally to neighbors and through multilateral platforms such as COVAX, while simultaneously aligning its health diplomacy outreach with the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) framework (Prakash, 2021). This alignment allowed India to combine soft power signaling with a broader strategic pivot toward the Quad, thereby transforming the pandemic into a vehicle for competitive regional influence and reinforcing the securitization of economic and health-related cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021; Prakash, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged not only as a global health emergency but as a critical inflection point in international politics, particularly in shaping the trajectory of China's domestic governance and its external relations with India. The analysis of Chinese domestic politics during the pandemic reveals a profound interplay between governance efficiency and information control; while early-stage delays and censorship reflected systemic political incentives prioritizing stability, the subsequent large-scale containment measures demonstrated significant state capacity in crisis management. This duality underscores how political structures shaped both the initial vulnerabilities and the eventually robust response. Furthermore, the study of the coronavirus's emergence highlights the extent to which political considerations influenced early responses and international communication, where delays in dissemination and evolving narratives affected the global trajectory before shifting toward scientific engagement.

The pandemic's impact on Indo-China relations was significant and multidimensional, as the 2020 Galwan Valley clash during the height of the crisis intensified strategic distrust and shattered previous diplomatic efforts. This period saw the securitization of health and economic policies, where India's "Vaccine Maitri" and China's "Health Silk Road" became tools for competitive regional influence. From a theoretical perspective, these findings validate the relevance of realism in explaining state behavior under uncertainty, while constructivist insights clarify how identity and narrative formation fueled mutual suspicion. Simultaneously, the framework of complex interdependence explains why bilateral trade volumes remained resilient despite heightened political and military tensions.

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