

Rising Powers: Perception of India-China Relations among Indian Students

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Abstract

In today's interconnected world, public opinions spread rapidly across borders through various media platforms. This can influence how international events are perceived and responded to by different populations. India and China have a complex relationship, including a border conflict in 1962 that harmed bilateral relations significantly. The two countries have had a long-running border dispute. Therefore our study aimed to assess the students' perception of India's bilateral relations with respect to China and the conflicts surrounding it. The study surveyed 320 voting-aged adults pursuing higher education in central and state universities in India. The results indicated that the students have negative views of China. Most participants showed concern regarding China's growing military power and territorial disputes with India. Comparatively, people were less concerned about China's economic impact and relationship with Pakistan. Moreover, participants seem to favour Prime Minister Modi's handling of India-China relations. These findings highlight the complexities and sensitivity of the India-China relationship, which remains a significant issue for Indian policymakers and diplomats.

KEYWORDS: India-China, bilateral relations, public opinion, rising powers

Introduction

Public opinion and views play a significant role in shaping international relations (Blondheim, 2002). It refers to the collective views and perceptions held by the citizens of a nation (Iyer, 2020). The significance of public opinion on international relations can be observed in several ways (e.g., conflict and cooperation, foreign policy decision-making). It can potentially influence the decisions made by governments and

policymakers regarding their country's foreign policy. Elected officials are often responsive to the preferences of their constituents, and if public opinion strongly favours or opposes a particular action or policy toward another country, it can sway government decisions.

Sentiments and views of citizens can affect a country's efforts in public diplomacy, which is the use of communication and cultural exchange to shape perceptions and build relationships with other nations. Positive public opinion in one country can enhance its soft power, making it more appealing and influential internationally. People's views and opinions can also affect the likelihood of conflict or cooperation between countries. When the public views another nation favourably, it can facilitate trust and cooperation—making it easier to find common ground and resolve disputes peacefully. Conversely, negative public opinion can contribute to tensions and make diplomatic solutions more challenging. People's sentiments and perceptions can also influence a country's willingness to provide humanitarian aid or foreign assistance to other nations. When there is strong public support for helping those in need, governments may be more likely to engage in humanitarian efforts and provide foreign aid.

In a democratic country like India, public perception is crucial for holding leaders accountable. If the public disagrees with the Government's approach to international relations, they can express their dissent through various means, such as protests, petitions, or voting in elections. In the Indian context, scholars have traditionally disregarded the significance of public opinion in shaping foreign policy decisions, opting to concentrate on the influence of elite opinion in limiting the range of potential foreign policy outcomes (Kumar, 2018). Researchers with a more cautious stance have posited that the connection between public opinion and foreign policy in India is, at most, "indirect." They argue that international policy holds less importance for the Indian public, diminishing the significance of investigations in this domain (Ganguly, 2004).

Supporters of the Prime Minister often view his handling positively, highlighting achievements such as strengthening India's global standing, enhancing international engagements, and building relationships with other countries and world leaders. Critics may question the effectiveness of foreign policy decisions or approaches, while economic concerns may focus on trade policies, foreign investments, and the impact of global events on India's economy. Perceptions of a leader's handling of world affairs can vary widely among the Indian population, and opinions can be influenced by factors such as political affiliation, ideological leanings, media narratives, and personal experiences. For instance, people leaning towards the right often view the Government's handling of world affairs positively. They may highlight achievements such as strengthening India's global standing, enhancing international engagements, and building relationships with other countries and world leaders.

Method

Participants

An online survey was administered using social media for data collection—all questionnaires were delivered through Google Forms. Participants answered the

questionnaires from May to December 2022. The study included 320 voting-aged adults aged 18 to 35 years ($M_{age} = 22.4$, $SD = 4.6$). Participants were voting-aged adults — pursuing higher education in a central and state universities were included in the study. Of the included individuals' gender, 45.9% were males, and 54.1% were females. Further detailed demographic information of participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants at baseline ($N=320$)

Baseline characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	147	45.9
Female	173	54.1
Religious Affiliation		
Hinduism	204	63.7
Islam	107	33.4
Christianity	5	1.6
Sikhism	2	0.6
Others	2	0.6
Political Leaning		
Left	86	26.9
Centre	122	38.1
Right	112	35.0

Measures

1. Views on India-China relations: Four questions based on prior studies (Pew Research 2016) assessing the perception of India-China relations—China's relationship with Pakistan, Growing Military Power, Territorial Disputes with India, and Economic Impact on India were included in the survey. The participants were asked to provide their response on "Not Serious", "Serious", and "Very Serious".
2. Confidence in Government's handling: One item used to measure the satisfaction with Government's handling (In general, how satisfy you are with Government's dealing with the India-China conflicts?). Responses were rated from "not satisfied" to "completely satisfied".
3. Political Orientation: Participants were further asked about their political orientation, ranging from "very left-leaning" (1) to "very right-leaning" (10) on a ten-point Likert-type response scale. However, we further categorised the responses into three significant categories, i.e., 1–4 as left, 5–7 as centrist and 8–10 as right.

4. Demographic questionnaire: A personal sheet of age, gender, occupation, domicile, and religion was used to obtain demographic information about the participants.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS-25. The frequency tables and graphical representation were used in the study.

Results and Discussion

In today's interconnected world, public opinions spread rapidly across borders through various media platforms. This can influence how international events are perceived and responded to by different populations. Therefore our study aimed to assess the perception of India-china conflicts among students. The participants were asked about their views on India-China relations, viz., China's relationship with Pakistan, Growing Military Power, Territorial Disputes with India, and Economic Impact on India (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Perception of India-China Relations*Political Orientation (N=320)*

Views on China's...	Left n(%)	Centrist n(%)	Right n(%)	Total n(%)
1. Relationship with Pakistan				
Not Serious	10(11.6)	2(1.6)	1(0.9)	13(4.1)
Somewhat Serious	36(41.9)	46(37.7)	18(16.1)	100(31.3)
Very Serious	40(46.5)	74(60.7)	93(83.0)	207(64.7)
Total	86	122	112	320
2. Growing Military Power				
Not Serious	1(1.2)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	1(0.3)
Somewhat Serious	36(41.9)	34(27.9)	22(19.6)	92(28.7)
Very Serious	49(57.0)	88(72.1)	90(80.4)	227(70.9)
Total	86	122	112	320
3. Territorial Disputes with India				
Not Serious	4(4.7)	0(0.0%)	2(1.8)	6(1.9)
Somewhat Serious	32(37.2)	29(23.8)	20(17.9)	81(25.3)
Very Serious	50(58.1)	93(76.2)	90(80.4)	233(72.8)
Total	86	122	112	320
4. Economic Impact on India				
Not Serious	6(7.0)	15(12.3)	4(3.6)	25(7.8)
Somewhat Serious	39(45.3)	53(43.4)	36(32.1)	128(40.0)
Very Serious	41(47.7)	54(44.3)	72(64.3)	167(52.2)
Total	86	122	112	320

The majority of the participants showed their concern regarding the growing military power and territorial disputes with India. Comparatively, people were less concerned about the economic impact and relationship with Pakistan.

Further, we run cross-tabulation with India-China Relations and Political Orientation. A person's political leanings have the potential to colour their perceptions of India-China disputes, which in turn can influence their perspectives on topics such as national security, diplomacy, and economic cooperation with the ruling administration. Individuals who reported themselves to have a political leaning towards the centre and right— see China's disputes as more serious than those with a left political leaning. It is possible that leftists are more open to understanding the perspective of China, and they might be critical of any policy that's too combative towards China.

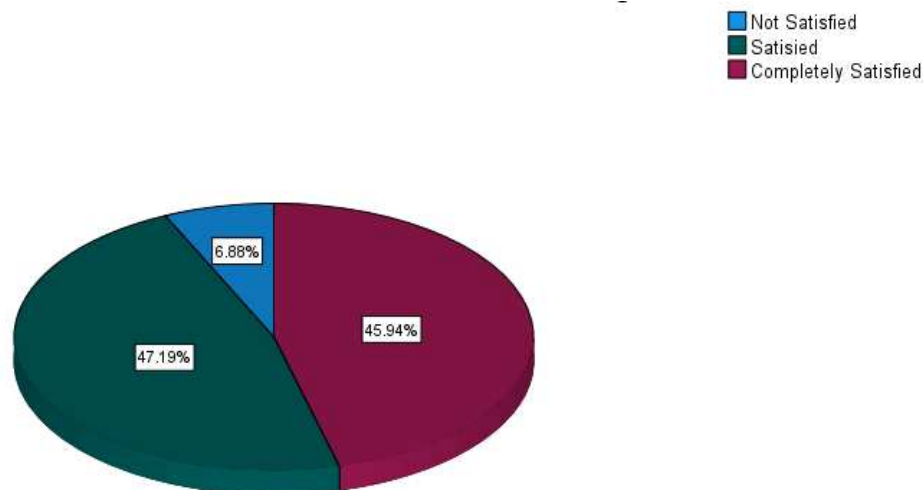
Table 3
*Confidence in Government*Political Orientation (N=320)*

	Left n(%)	Centrist n(%)	Right n(%)	Total n(%)
Confidence in Government's handling				
Not satisfied	19(22.1)	3(2.5)	0(0.0)	22(6.9)
Satisfied	45(52.3)	72(59.0)	34(30.4)	151(47.2)
Completely satisfied	22(25.6)	47(38.5)	78(69.6)	147(45.9)

Most participants showed confidence in Prime Minister Modi's approach to handling China's bilateral relations with India (see Fig 1). Moreover, the perception is greatly affected by the people's political leaning, i.e., Left, centrist and right. People with political views leaning towards the right reported complete satisfaction with Government's handling (69.6%). There can be various reasons; for instance—some Indians appreciate Prime Minister Modi's assertive and proactive approach in international forums. Moreover, The Prime Minister's emphasis on nationalism and India's sovereignty might resonate with certain sections of the population who identify themselves more leaned towards the right wing. However, there is an increasing divergence of opinions along political lines about the prime minister's performance in addressing India-china conflicts among leftists (Table 3). Students who leaned towards the left reported less satisfaction with the government way of addressing China's disputes.

Figure 1

Confidence in Government's Handling



The present study's findings are consistent with the Pew Research Center, 2016. The survey indicated that Indians have relatively unfavourable views of China, and they perceive various challenges arising from China's economic impact, military power, relationship with Pakistan, and territorial disputes with India. These concerns appear to be more pronounced among BJP adherents than Congress supporters. The perceptions of China in India's public opinion landscape are complex and may have implications for India-China relations in the future.

Implications

The study's findings provide a better understanding of the public sentiment and perceptions toward a foreign country. Public opinion can influence foreign policy decision-making, consumer behaviour and economic decisions. Boycotts or reduced trade with countries perceived negatively may affect economic relations between nations.

It is important to note that public opinion is diverse and can change over time based on unfolding events and the Government's actions in the international arena. Therefore, future studies should focus more on public opinions and perceptions from various contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors of this study declared no conflict of interests.

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