



REVIEW PAPER

Bridging the Divide: India-China Communication Dialogue Charts New Pathways for Asian Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

The India-China Communication Dialogue held during the 31st AMIC Annual Conference marked a significant scholarly intervention aimed at addressing the deep communication deficit between Asia's two largest powers. Bringing together media scholars, journalists, and regional experts, the dialogue emphasized communication as a foundational tool for rebuilding trust, managing border tensions, and fostering regional cooperation. Speakers highlighted the need for an "Asian Voice," drawing on shared cultural histories and advocating for renewed people-to-people engagement, journalistic exchange, and academic collaboration. Key discussions underscored challenges in media representation, economic asymmetries, and water and resource security, while proposing concrete mechanisms such as journalist accreditation, joint research centres, intercultural studies, and Track II diplomacy. The session concluded by asserting that sustainable peace and cooperation in Asia depend on institutionalized communication platforms capable of countering misperceptions and supporting long-term bilateral understanding. The dialogue represents a vital step toward reimagining India-China relations for the Asian Century.

Keywords: AMIC, Awaara, China, Indian Communication Congress (ICC), scholars, crisis management

The 31st Annual Conference of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) marked a meaningful step in India-China relations with its pioneering plenary session titled "India-China Communication Dialogue". Convened on October 10, 2025, at SNTD Women & University in Mumbai, this session represented a crucial systematic attempt by communication scholars from both nations along with regional experts to address the profound communication breakdown that has characterized bilateral relations in recent years. Jointly organized in partnership with the Indian Communication Congress (ICC) and the Chinese International Communication Association, the

dialogue brought together leading media scholars and professionals to examine the critical role of communication in rebuilding trust between Asia's two largest powers.

The Imperative for Dialogue: Geopolitical Context

The session took place against the backdrop of a

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cautiously optimistic diplomatic climate, that has created a window of opportunity. It was within this context that the AMIC dialogue sought to explore how communication scholars and media professionals could contribute to sustaining and deepening this fragile *détente*.

The Case for an “Asian Voice”

Moderating the session, Dr. Kalinga Seneviratne, a distinguished media analyst and scholar, articulated the strategic imperative underlying the dialogue. He argued that the diplomatic stalemate between India and China has exacted a heavy geopolitical cost, not merely for the two nations but for Asia as a whole. “Mistrust between China and India has hindered the rise of Asia as the economic and political epicentre of the world,” Dr. Seneviratne stated, drawing an unfavourable comparison with European powers that maintain global influence through regular dialogue and unity despite their differences.

Dr. Seneviratne emphasized that the development of a coherent “Asian Voice” on the global stage is contingent upon improved India-China relations. “Greater coordination of an ‘Asian Voice’ cannot be achieved unless Chinese and Indian communication scholars start talking to each other. Asia’s middle powers can join in once they start talking,” he observed. This framing positioned the dialogue not as an isolated academic exercise but as a crucial step toward a broader regional realignment.

The moderator was forthright in acknowledging the limitations of the session, describing it as merely a ‘small beginning’ to a process that is long overdue. He proposed a more ambitious institutional framework: “We need to look at an Asian Peace Communication Conference with Chinese and Indian scholars taking a lead. We should not expect Westerners to start such a process and we tag along. We should leave behind that era and start our own processes.” This call for Asian agency in shaping regional discourse resonated throughout the subsequent presentations.

Historical Foundations and Cultural Resonance

Prof. Biplab Loho Choudhury, Chairman and

Managing Trustee of the Indian Communication Congress and Professor at the Centre for Journalism & Mass Communication, Visva-Bharati University, grounded his intervention in historical perspective. He invoked Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s vision from the 1930s of a ‘common Asian viewpoint’ arguing that contemporary India-China relations require a similar reimagining. Prof. Choudhury urged scholars to look beyond export figures and economic data, emphasizing instead the need to cultivate an ‘Asian way of thinking’ to build communities from within.

This cultural dimension found powerful expression in Prof. Wang Xiangwei’s presentation. Wang, Professor at Hong Kong Baptist University and former Editor-in-Chief of the South China Morning Post, shared a poignant personal narrative that illustrated the depth of cultural affinity that once characterized India-China relations. He recounted how his generation remains captivated by Indian culture and Bollywood films, vividly recalling his teenage years in the 1970s when Indian cinema first reached Chinese screens. “The 1951 classic *Awaara*, or *The Vagabond* as it was known overseas, was the very first Bollywood film publicly shown in China, and it captured our imaginations like nothing else,” Wang reminisced. “To this day, we of that era can still hum the iconic song ‘*Awaara Hoon*’ with a nostalgic smile—its melody a timeless echo of shared human longing and joy.”

This cultural memory serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for renewed people-to-people connections, contrasting sharply with the current state of mutual suspicion and limited exchange. Prof. Wang’s narrative underscored that the foundation for renewed engagement exists within living memory, requiring only the appropriate institutional mechanisms to flourish once again.

The Multidimensional Challenge: Border Disputes to Economic Imbalances

Prof. Padma Rani, a senior professor at the Manipal Institute of Communication, provided a comprehensive analysis of the structural challenges that necessitate improved communication between

the two nations. She noted a paradoxical pattern in bilateral relations: while India and China often align on global governance issues in multilateral forums like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the G20, bilateral trust remains stubbornly low.

Prof. Rani emphasized the critical importance of communication in managing border disputes, noting that “Communication is essential to maintain peace along the 3,488-kilometer unmarked border, where military standoffs like the 2020 Galwan Valley clash have occurred.” She highlighted that established hotlines between ground commanders and ongoing working mechanisms are vital for managing incidents and preventing them from escalating into conflict. The October 2024 disengagement agreements in Depsang and Demchok, she argued, demonstrate that sustained military-to-military communication can yield tangible results, but continued dialogue is necessary to solidify these gains and pursue broader de-escalation.

Beyond security concerns, Prof. Rani addressed the pressing economic dimensions of the bilateral relationship. India’s significant trade deficit with China, which reached a record high of nearly \$100 billion in fiscal year 2024-25, underscores the asymmetry in economic relations. “Dialogue is needed to address this imbalance, market access barriers, and restrictive trade measures,” she observed. Communication is also necessary to navigate Chinese investments in India, manage India’s dependence on Chinese imports like Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients and rare-earth metals, and shape global supply chains in ways that serve mutual interests.

Prof. Rani further highlighted resource security challenges, particularly concerning trans-border rivers. China’s dam projects on the Yarlung Tsangpo, known as the Brahmaputra in India, raise acute water security concerns. “Communication is needed for transparent data-sharing and cooperation on managing trans-border river systems,” she stated, pointing to an area where technical cooperation could build confidence while addressing practical needs.

Discussing multilateral engagement, Prof. Rani

noted that “India and China communicate through multilateral platforms like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the G20, where they often align on global issues like climate change and economic development.” She emphasized that “Consistent dialogue helps both major Asian powers coordinate on global governance issues, amplify their influence on the world stage, and potentially counter-balance Western influence.”

The Media Dimension: From Negative Portrayals to Constructive Engagement

A substantial portion of the dialogue focused on the role of journalism and media in shaping bilateral narratives. Prof. Wang Xiangwei lamented the communication breakdown following the 2020 border clash, which he argued has ‘cascaded into deeply negative portrayals of the other in our media landscapes, along with a decline in people-to-people exchanges—from student programs to tourism—that once wove our societies closer’.

The near absence of accredited journalists in each other’s countries has created a vacuum filled by second-hand reporting and stereotypes. Wang offered concrete recommendations to address this deficit. First, he urged both governments to ‘prioritize resuming and streamlining the process of accrediting and facilitating journalists to be stationed in each other’s capitals and key cities. A free flow of reporters on the ground isn’t just about headlines; it’s about humanizing the narrative and countering misinformation with firsthand truth.’

Second, Prof. Wang proposed that cooperation be widened to ‘supercharge people-to-people exchanges—through eased visa issuances, targeted facilitation measures, and more dialogues’ similar to the AMIC session. Most innovatively, he identified an opportunity for media cooperation in the context of both nations’ expanding global media networks. “As both India and China expand our global media networks to amplify our voices on the world stage, there’s immense untapped potential for collaboration between our outlets,” he argued, suggesting Hong Kong as the ideal hub for such partnerships.

Under the ‘one country, two systems’ framework, Prof. Wang explained, Hong Kong enjoys a more open information environment compared to the Chinese mainland, ‘creating a dynamic, neutral platform for cross-border interactions that feels both secure and innovative.’ He noted that most media organizations in Hong Kong still rely heavily on Western wire agencies for India coverage, largely due to budget and resource constraints. This presents an opportunity for media from both nations to collaborate and craft their own authentic voices on bilateral ties.

Prof. Wang proposed several practical mechanisms for media cooperation, including content-sharing partnerships where organizations could sponsor dedicated channels or pages on each other’s platforms, exchange programs to rotate journalists into each other’s newsrooms for several months, and annual journalist dialogues hosted in Hong Kong where the special administrative region’s unique status would facilitate freer exchange of ideas.

Prof. Ji Li, former Vice President of the China International Communication Association and professor at the School of Journalism and Communication at Wuhan University, complemented these proposals by discussing the responsibility of the next generation of storytellers. She highlighted recent projects encouraging young journalists to report on grassroots sustainable development, shifting the focus from confrontation to the concept of a ‘community with a shared future’—a framing that emphasizes common interests over competitive narratives.

The Role of Communication Scholars: Theory and Practice

The session devoted considerable attention to articulating the specific contributions that communication scholars can make to improving bilateral relations. Prof. Padma Rani outlined a comprehensive framework for scholarly engagement spanning multiple levels of intervention, emphasizing that scholars have a crucial role to ‘address the deep-seated trust deficit, manage public narratives, and facilitate constructive dialogue.’

Addressing the Trust Deficit and Public Narratives

Prof. Rani argued that scholars should ‘analyze and deconstruct the often nationalistic and sensationalist media narratives in both countries that create misperceptions and escalate tensions.’ By exposing biases and highlighting more balanced perspectives, communication scholars can encourage more responsible reporting and create space for nuanced public discourse. She emphasized the need to ‘combat disinformation campaigns, particularly those amplified on social media during border crises,’ noting that ‘communication experts are essential in identifying and combating disinformation campaigns.’ This work ‘involves tracing the sources of misinformation and educating the public on how to identify propaganda.’

Prof. Rani also stressed the importance of rigorous empirical research, stating that scholars should ‘investigate public opinion’ through research that can ‘provide policymakers with a better understanding of public sentiments in both India and China. Research can gauge the effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts and the impact of domestic propaganda on mutual perceptions.’ Furthermore, she advocated that scholars ‘promote strategic communication and crisis management’ by developing ‘frameworks for strategic messaging that help leaders and diplomats communicate effectively during tense situations,’ including ‘messaging strategies that prioritize de-escalation over nationalist posturing.’

Facilitating Multi-Level Dialogue

Prof. Rani advocated for scholars to ‘support Track II diplomacy’ by leading and participating in ‘Track II dialogues, which involve non-official exchanges between experts, think tanks, and civil society.’ Such dialogues can explore sensitive issues in less formal settings, potentially generating solutions that can later be adopted through official channels.

She called for efforts to ‘expand academic and student exchanges,’ noting that ‘academic institutions can foster cross-cultural understanding through student and visiting scholar exchange

programs.’ This creates networks of individuals with personal experience of the other country. Prof. K.G. Suresh, Vice President of the ICC, reinforced this point, emphasizing that perceptions are formed in classrooms and arguing that increasing academic exchanges is vital to preventing prejudices from taking root in the next generation.

Prof. Rani also highlighted the need to ‘assess digital communication,’ noting that ‘communication increasingly moves online, scholars must analyse how digital platforms are used by both official and unofficial actors to influence perceptions.’ This includes studying social media ecosystems, understanding algorithmic amplification of particular narratives, and identifying both risks and opportunities presented by digital platforms.

Bridging Cultural Communication Gaps

The session acknowledged fundamental differences in communication styles rooted in distinct cultural and historical contexts. Prof. Wang Xiangwei noted that ‘Chinese tradition prioritizes harmony and indirectness, while Indian tradition favours expression and rhetoric,’ but argued these differences should be understood as potential bridges rather than insurmountable barriers.

Prof. Padma Rani elaborated on this theme, calling on scholars to ‘conduct intercultural studies’ that ‘research the differences in communication styles between India and China, which are rooted in distinct cultural and historical contexts.’ Such research can help both sides better understand how messages are encoded and decoded across cultural boundaries, reducing the risk of misinterpretation. She further urged studies to help ‘identify the most effective cultural exchange programs—in areas like entertainment, publications, and tourism—that can strengthen people-to-people connections.’ The shared cultural heritage of both civilizations, including Buddhism, shared philosophical traditions, and historical trade routes, provides rich resources for constructive engagement. Communication scholars can play a crucial role in excavating and highlighting these commonalities, creating a foundation for contemporary cooperation that transcends immediate political tensions.

From Dialogue to Institutional Mechanisms

The session concluded with a strong consensus that the AMIC dialogue must represent the first step in a sustained effort rather than an isolated event. Participants proposed regularizing conferences for journalists and scholars, with Hong Kong suggested as a neutral venue for future deliberations. The unique status of Hong Kong under ‘one country, two systems’ makes it particularly well-suited for facilitating frank exchanges that might be more difficult in either capital.

The dialogue also underscored the importance of creating permanent institutional mechanisms for communication scholarship on India-China relations. This could include joint research centres, collaborative publication initiatives, and regular exchange of doctoral students and early-career scholars. By building institutional capacity and creating networks of scholars with expertise in both countries, the communication studies field can develop the sustained analytical capability necessary to support improved bilateral relations over the long term.

Conclusion: Communication as Foundation for the Asian Century

The India-China Communication Dialogue at the 31st AMIC Annual Conference represented a significant departure from the pattern of mutual suspicion and limited engagement that has characterized recent years. By bringing together scholars and media professionals from both countries, along with regional observers from across Asia, the session demonstrated the feasibility and value of direct dialogue even amid broader political tensions.

The presentations collectively made a compelling case that communication—understood broadly to encompass journalistic exchange, academic collaboration, cultural programming, and people-to-people contact—represents an essential foundation for improved bilateral relations. Without robust communication channels, misperceptions multiply, stereotypes harden, and the space for

diplomatic manoeuvring shrinks. Conversely, improved communication creates the conditions for understanding, empathy, and ultimately cooperation on shared challenges.

Dr. Seneviratne's vision of an 'Asian Century' predicated on India-China cooperation may still seem distant given current tensions. However, the AMIC dialogue suggests a pathway forward. By focusing on practical steps—resuming journalist exchanges, facilitating academic collaboration, promoting cultural understanding, and developing frameworks for strategic communication—communication scholars and media professionals can contribute materially to creating the conditions for sustained improvement in bilateral relations.

The success of such efforts will require sustained commitment from multiple stakeholders: governments must facilitate visa issuances and journalist accreditation; academic institutions must

prioritize exchange programs and joint research; media organizations must invest in cross-border partnerships; and individual scholars and journalists must engage in the patient, often unglamorous work of building understanding across national and cultural divides.

As Prof. Wang Xiangwei's recollections of 'Awaara Hoon' remind us, the foundation for India-China friendship exists within living memory. The challenge now is to create the institutional mechanisms and communication infrastructure that can translate nostalgic cultural affinity into contemporary cooperation. The AMIC dialogue represents a promising start to this essential endeavour, one that carries implications not merely for India and China but for the future of Asia and indeed the world.