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Q6(b)

Does the idea of the 21st century as 'Asian century' continue to remain feasible given the growing friction between India and China?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · India and South Asia

India and South Asia: Regional Co-operation; South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; South Asian Economic cooperation; Impediments to regional co-operation; India and the Look East / Act East policy.

Core demand of the question

- State the Asian century claim (China plus India plus East Asian growth)
- Show how India-China friction (LAC, Doklam, Galwan, BRI) taxes that claim
- **Verdict:** economically still plausible; politically a contested, possibly bipolar Asia

Revision summary

The Asian century meant a shift of growth and weight to Asia with China and India as co-engines.

Doklam, Galwan, a hard LAC and Chinese Indian Ocean presence make China India's central strategic problem.

Trade can continue without a political concert; the **Quad** and BRI are rival organising projects.

Economically the shift to Asia can still happen; politically the century looks contested or bipolar, not harmonious.

Feasible as theatre of world politics, not as a Sino-Indian team.

Introduction

The **Asian century** is the claim that this century's growth, population and eventually security weight would sit in Asia, with **China and India** as co-engines beside Japan, Korea and ASEAN. **Growing friction between India and China** asks whether that co-engine still exists. The idea remains **feasible as arithmetic**. It is **less feasible as a shared political project**.

Body

Why it looked feasible

East Asian industrialisation, China's rise, and India's post-1991 growth produced a shift of GDP and manufacturing toward Asia. Demography, a middle class, and regional production networks (even after deglobalisation) still point east of Suez. An Asian century did not require India-China friendship. It required both to grow inside one world-economy.

What friction does

Doklam 2017, Galwan 2020, a militarised **Line of Actual Control**, and China's partnerships with Pakistan and in the Indian Ocean (**Hambantota**, other ports) turn China from a fellow

Asian riser into India's **principal strategic problem**. Trade remains large, but investment screening, app bans, and border deaths poison the political story of a joint Asian leadership. The **Belt and Road** is a Chinese order, not a Sino-Indian one. If Asia's security splits into a Chinese sphere and an **Indo-Pacific** coalition around the **Quad**, the century is Asian in location and **bipolar in structure**. That is not the harmonious Asian century of early 2000s speeches.

- **Friction also wastes resources:** both states arm the Himalaya; India must still grow with a two-front problem; China must still manage the United States. **Waltz** would say two large neighbours in the same system tend toward rivalry. **Kant's** pacific federation is not the LAC.

Verdict

The Asian century **continues as a feasible economic description** if China and India keep growing even while they quarrel - just as Europe's century of power included Franco-German enmity. It **does not continue as a feasible concert**. Leadership of Asia will be contested. ASEAN will try to avoid choosing. India's role becomes hinge of a multipolar Asia, not co-chair of a Beijing-friendly century. Feasible, then, with a **changed meaning**: Asia as the main theatre of world politics, not Asia as a team.

Flow diagram

Asian century claim -> China plus India growth
 India-China friction -> LAC Galwan Doklam Galwan Doklam
 India-China friction -> BRI Indian Ocean Indian Ocean
 LAC Galwan Doklam -> Bipolar Asian security
 China plus India growth -.still possible. -> Economic shift

Conclusion

India-China friction does not cancel Asian economic weight. It cancels the idea of a joint, peaceful Asian leadership. The Asian century remains feasible as a shift of wealth and attention. It is no longer feasible as a Sino-Indian partnership project.

Facts & figures

Galwan 2020

Deadly clash on the LAC that ended the political fiction of a quiet border and a joint Asian rise.

Doklam 2017

Trijunction crisis that linked the China-India-Bhutan map to the Asian security question.

Quad

Minilateral that organises part of Asia against a Sino-centric maritime order.