

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

India-China-US: A Triangle of Apprehension

By Harsh V Pant, Atul Kumar

If one were to distil the essence of the India–China–United States triangle at present, it would be apprehension: an enduring undercurrent of mistrust that shapes political, economic, and strategic interactions among the three. The India–China relationship, despite intermittent phases of cordiality, remains hostage to its deep-seated suspicion. History and geography continue to shape this mistrust. The India–US engagement, too, has


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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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oscillated between promise and disenchantment, with fragile mutual trust eroded in recent months owing to an overtly transactional approach by Washington. At the trilateral level, these layers of unease have stymied any meaningful convergence on long-term strategic issues. Each power remains wary of being outflanked by the other two. What emerges instead is a narrow, short-term pragmatism and incessant hedging that risks undermining the regional balance that the three actors would want to preserve in order to enhance their economic and security interests.

India-US Relations: A Stalled Alignment

The initial optimism in New Delhi over a perceived strategic convergence with Washington, framed by the “China-plus-one” logic, has quickly faded. Early hopes of a closer strategic alignment and economic partnership during the second Trump presidency have since given way to disillusionment. India now finds itself ranked among the **economies most targeted by US tariffs**, alongside Brazil. Key export sectors of India, such as leather, gems and jewellery, and textiles, are bearing the brunt.

The economic fallout may likely bring job losses, industrial contraction, fuelling frustration among India’s policymakers. The sense of betrayal is palpable. Even as New Delhi has adopted a cautious “watch, wait, and negotiate” posture, President Trump’s extractive transactionalism, amplified by his close associates Howard

Lutnick, Peter Navarro, and Scott Bessent, has left an acrid aftertaste in India.

After the tariffs, Washington went further. It **revoked the waiver** for India’s operations at Iran’s Chabahar Port, bringing all involved entities under sanctions. This came barely a year after New Delhi signed a ten-year agreement worth **\$370 million in March 2024** to develop and operate the port. The project is central to India’s access to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Simultaneously, the Trump administration **imposed a steep \$100,000 levy on new H-1B visa** applications, disproportionately affecting Indian professionals. The poorly timed announcement, coinciding with India’s festival season **triggered chaos** as visa holders rushed back to the United States paying exorbitant airfares to beat the deadline.

These measures could hardly be perceived as those of a “strategic partner.” If intended as coercive pressure on the longstanding deadlock over agriculture, dairy, or energy imports in bilateral trade negotiations, the US misread India’s limits. Instead, such unilateralism has begun to erode the fragile strategic alignment that the two democracies had painstakingly built over the past three decades. The structural realities of the Indo-Pacific will bring this relationship back on track, but significant damage has already been done. Indeed, questions over the reliability of the US as a strategic partner once again dominate political debates in India.

India-China: A Cautious Opening

In contrast, India–China relations, after five years of tense standoff, appear to be entering a tentative thaw across political, diplomatic, and societal spheres. Along the border, a new *modus vivendi* has emerged. It combines no-patrol and cross-patrol zones with troop disengagement. Full de-escalation, however, remains elusive. Moreover, Prime Minister Modi's 2024 visit to China for the SCO Summit and the **trilateral optics** with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin underscored India's evolving strategy of hedging and calibrated multi-alignment.

This thaw has facilitated the reopening of religious pilgrimages, tourist and business visas, and the **resumption of direct flights**. New Delhi is also signalling a cautious receptivity toward Chinese investment in its clean and green technology and other manufacturing sectors.

However, the India-China rapprochement is paper-thin. The underlying structural rivalry persists, as shown by **Beijing's comprehensive support** to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor. China continues to arm nearly all of India's neighbours. It supplies major weapon systems to Pakistan, **Bangladesh**, and Myanmar, while expanding its basing and berthing network from Hambantota and Chittagong to Gwadar and Djibouti. Its expanding naval presence across the Indian Ocean offers a revealing glimpse of Beijing's pursuit of sustained strategic encirclement of India.

Domestically, a strong policy discourse discourages the transfer of manufacturing

capacity to India or investment in critical sectors. **Promised relaxations** on fertilisers, tunnel-boring machines, and rare-earth magnets remain unfulfilled, whereas Chinese engineers aiding iPhone production **have been quietly recalled**. In short, despite cautious gestures toward normalisation, the entrenched competition endures. China remains India's foremost and most complex national security challenge.

Reducing India's External Overdependence

The United States and China are pivotal to India's economic trajectory. They offer critical technology, investment, and market access. However, both states pose distinct strategic dilemmas to India. Washington's **penchant for alienating key partners** and its **disregard for multilateral institutions** impose significant costs on New Delhi. Beijing's pursuit of regional hegemony, even as it talks of a multipolar world order, similarly threatens India's national interests.

New Delhi cannot afford a subordinate role to either power. India and the United States may reach a temporary understanding to pause high tariffs. Nonetheless, given Washington's deals with **South Korea** and **Japan**, a lasting resolution remains uncertain. By prioritising **homeland defence in the Western Hemisphere**, the US may **scale back its naval presence** east of Malacca and west of Guam. This would only allow China's influence to expand, threatening India's ability to pursue its security interests.

Against this backdrop, New Delhi is likely to prioritise its economic and security interests, diversify trade partnerships, and reduce excessive dependence on any single major power. India will likely expand partnerships with like-minded states in the region and across the globe. With per capita income at the lowest end of the G-20 spectrum, prioritising economic and security interests is both desirable and essential. By pursuing a disciplined, interest-driven foreign policy, India can safeguard its sovereignty while navigating the complex dynamics of great-power competition.

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