

## Guest Column

# China-India-Pakistan Trilateral Relations amid Changing Regional Dynamics

By Zhang Jiegen

The China–India–Pakistan relationship is less a partnership than a durable strategic triangle shaped by rivalry, asymmetry, and managed restraint. China’s alignment with Pakistan offsets India, India balances against China, and Pakistan remains locked into India-centric deterrence, producing stability without trust.

The world is currently undergoing **profound changes unseen in a century**, with the geopolitical landscape of South Asia experiencing deep restructuring. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and cooperation on the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, Beijing has significantly expanded its footprint across South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. This expansion has heightened vigilance in the United States, the global hegemon, and India, the regional major power. Under the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Washington and New Delhi have increasingly aligned to counterbalance Beijing’s influence in the region. The great-power coordination that once centred on counterterrorism in Afghanistan has unravelled following the US withdrawal, giving way to an intense geopolitical rivalry. Pakistan, China’s "All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partner," is deeply entangled in this shift.



## Trends Shaping South Asian Regional Dynamics

The contemporary South Asian geopolitical landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, predominantly shaped by four interconnected trends.

The first trend is the intensifying great power competition over the international order, with South Asia emerging as a central theatre. On one hand, the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy has introduced a framework of power politics and maritime security, aiming to balance China’s growing regional influence. China’s BRI articulates a different approach, centred on "extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits." This competition places South Asian states in a precarious position, forcing them to navigate between bloc-based strategic competition and the promise of win-win economic cooperation.

The second trend is the widening power imbalance between regional powers.

South Asia's traditional power structure is shifting toward greater asymmetry. India's position as the region's sole major power is reinforced by robust economic growth and closer strategic alignment with the West.

This shift has widened the gap between India and Pakistan, placing Islamabad in an increasingly constrained strategic position. The deepening US-India partnership, in particular, has reshaped the regional power dynamics, compelling neighbouring states to reassess their security dependencies.

The third trend is an emerging structural bifurcation within South Asia. The region is increasingly dividing into two distinct blocs with diverging priorities. Northern South Asia, centred on Afghanistan and Pakistan, is re-emerging as a volatile security complex characterised by the resurgence of transnational terrorism and deterioration of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. Southern South Asia, encompassing India and the littoral states, is moving in the opposite direction, with economic integration and connectivity accelerating under the Indo-Pacific Strategy framework and sub-regional integration initiatives, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

A fourth trend is the convergence of security threats. The boundary between traditional and non-traditional security challenges is increasingly blurring. Transnational terrorism remains a primary spoiler in bilateral relations in South Asia, particularly among nuclear-armed neighbours. Allegations surrounding

domestic terror incidents often trigger retaliatory diplomatic or military responses, creating a dangerous cycle in which local crises risk escalating into wider regional confrontations. This pattern has been evident in India and Pakistan relations and is increasingly visible in Pakistan-Afghanistan interactions.

### **Structural Features of the China-India-Pakistan Trilateral Relationship**

India and Pakistan, China's vital neighbours, are trapped in chronic hostility, creating a highly complex and constrained trilateral dynamic. Against shifting regional conditions, the China-India-Pakistan trilateral relations now exhibit four distinct structural features.

First, geopolitics and traditional security logic have revived. As the global centre of gravity shifts eastward, South Asia's role as a bridge between the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific has gained strategic salience. Consequently, military deployments, border standoffs, and alliance-building have once again become dominant features of the regional landscape. These security pressures have forced China to adjust its development-oriented regional integration initiatives like BRI.

Second, the Indo-Pacific framework has reinforced the bloc-based regional binary. Washington's positioning of India as a "net security provider," including through mechanisms like the Quad, aims to build a containment architecture against China. This has strengthened the strategic alignment between the US and India on one

side, and China and Pakistan on the other. Pakistan's reliance on Chinese technological and diplomatic support has increased, whereas India has managed to offset this by expanding intelligence cooperation and defence procurement ties with the US.

Third, India and Pakistan are increasingly divided, complicating China's dual-track diplomacy. Rising nationalism in India, combined with Pakistan's domestic economic and security pressures, has made reconciliation between the two neighbours almost unlikely. China's efforts to maintain an "All-Weather" strategic partnership with Pakistan while pursuing economic engagement with India is therefore coming under rising strain. Any visible tilt toward one side will inevitably trigger a sharp response from the other.

Finally, risks linked to proxy warfare and security entrapment are mounting.

**Terrorist and separatist** groups are increasingly deployed as instruments in great-power competition. China therefore faces a dilemma: increasing its security presence to protect CPEC assets may be interpreted as military intervention, while restraint exposes Chinese personnel and projects to escalating security threats.

### **Diverging Strategic Approaches**

Overall, as geopolitical dynamics in South Asia shift, China-India-Pakistan trilateral relations are increasingly unstable and prone to confrontation. Each state, guided by its strategic interests, has adopted differentiated approaches to navigate the complex environment.

China continues to pursue a dual-track strategy that seeks to combine strategic stability with development priorities. In its interactions with India, Beijing maintains the principle that "border peace is the foundation," responding to Indian military confidence-building initiatives in early 2026 while simultaneously strengthening infrastructure to safeguard sovereignty. With Pakistan, China has deepened the "All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership" during the seventh Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue in January 2026, where economic recovery and security capacity building were emphasised.

India has adopted an "offensive-defence" posture to counter perceived strategic encirclement. In May 2025, New Delhi lowered its threshold for retaliation, noting that "any terror attack is an act of war." Beyond military build-ups, such as the acquisition of S-400 systems, India has also leveraged non-military instruments. For instance, New Delhi has weaponised the part of transboundary water within its territory by controlling river flows and sought to decouple economically from China while imposing a trade blockade on Pakistan.

Pakistan's strategy is characterised by asymmetric engagement and diversified balancing. Faced with India's conventional superiority, Pakistan has accelerated the deployment of Chinese-supplied defence systems and enhanced its nuclear deterrent to deter military adventurism.

Diplomatically, Islamabad has sought to diversify its partnerships, notably with Russia, Turkey and Iran, while using

international forums to highlight what it terms India's "information warfare" and unilateral sanctions.

In conclusion, the current China-India-Pakistan trilateral trajectory is moving toward increased instability. The future of South Asian stability depends on whether these three nations can move away from zero-sum competition and return to a track of dialogue and crisis management.

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