

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

Sino-Indian Relations: A Temporary Respite

By Sumit Ganguly

At the end of August 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India met with President Xi Jinping on the eve of the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Tianjin** in the People's Republic of China. At this meeting, the first since Chinese and Indian troops had clashed in the spring of 2020 in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, the two sides reaffirmed their interest in reaching a resolution of their outstanding border dispute. Despite this stated commitment to resolve the border issue, Sino-Indian relations remain fraught. The underlying sources of their enduring rivalry remain and are **unlikely to abate anytime soon**.



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The *China-India Brief* is a 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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Quite apart from the border dispute, the two states have self-images as great powers in Asia and beyond. The PRC, however, sees India as an **upstart** that should not aspire to be in the same league as itself. Furthermore, Beijing has long had a close set of diplomatic and military ties with India's long-standing adversary, Pakistan. In recent years, this strategic partnership has been strengthened owing to their **mutual discord** with New Delhi. Indeed, during the most recent India-Pakistan crisis in May of last year, Islamabad extensively relied on an array of Chinese-supplied weaponry. More to the point, there is evidence that Beijing **provided** real-time intelligence and surveillance capabilities to Islamabad during the height of the crisis. This Sino-Pakistani nexus, which clearly impinges on India's security concerns, is unlikely to end anytime soon as both states see much mutual benefit in sustaining it.

Second only to the unresolved border dispute, the Sino-Pakistani security link is easily the most troubling issue for India in its relations with the PRC. However, beyond this matter, the Sino-Indian rivalry has a host of other dimensions. At an international level, Beijing has been concerned about the growing closeness between New Delhi and Washington, DC over the past two and a half decades. Admittedly, this bonhomie, in recent months has frayed largely due to differences over **President Trump's ostensible role** in ensuring a ceasefire in May. **India's unwillingness** to concede that he played such a role has led to diplomatic row and even the imposition of punishing tariffs for other stated reasons.

Despite this public rift, there is little reason to believe that the US is about to abandon its security partnership with India. Even a cursory examination of the recently announced **United States National Security Strategy** underscores the importance that the US accords India within its Indo-Pacific strategy. It also highlights the continued salience that Washington, DC attaches to the Quadrilateral Security Initiative (QUAD), even as it exhorts India to assume greater burden sharing within the entity. Furthermore, planned **sophisticated weapons sales** are still under way. Most importantly, the two parties **extended** an existing defense cooperation agreement for another decade even as the issue of tariffs continued to roil relations. Beijing, which has watched the evolution of this defence partnership with concern, cannot be oblivious of these developments even as New Delhi and Washington, DC continue to wrangle over the contentious trade issue.

At a regional level, the Sino-Indian rivalry remains alive and well. Beijing has repeatedly and deftly exploited India's tensions with its smaller neighbours. For example, it has adroitly stepped into the breach in Indo-Nepalese relations. Ties between the two states have been bumpy since India resorted to an **informal blockade of Nepal** in 2015 over an issue related to the domestic politics of both states. New Delhi's ham-fisted tactics, which underscored Kathmandu's economic vulnerability quite understandably contributed to a layer of distrust within Nepal's foreign policy elite. Sensing an opportunity to widen this rift, **Beijing**

quickly entered the fray. Amongst other matters, it promptly provided Nepal with a substantial quantity of much-needed gasoline to ease the effects of **India's blockade**.

Beijing has also sought to extend its influence in Bhutan, a Himalayan kingdom where India has historically held sway. Unlike in the Nepalese case, however, the PRC resorted to arm-twisting in its dealings with Thimpu. This came about when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) units **made encroachments** in a disputed area in the Doklam Plateau in 2017. India came to Bhutan's assistance and temporarily stopped the PLA incursions. However, it was unable to prevent a **re-occupation** of the disputed areas, thereby underscoring the limits of its military capabilities. This episode reminded the Bhutanese that, despite their close diplomatic and security ties with India, New Delhi has limited ability to ward off Chinese efforts to infringe on what it deems to be its own territory.

Even in the Indian Ocean where the Indian Navy should be able to hold its own, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has started to unfurl its flag. In recent years, Chinese naval vessels, some of them ostensibly research ships, have been **docking in Sri Lanka**. New Delhi has expressed its misgivings to Colombo about these developments, but to little avail.

All these developments at multiple levels highlight an uncomfortable truth: despite New Delhi's recent efforts to paper over its differences with Beijing, the two parties fundamentally remain at odds and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The unresolved border dispute, especially given the growing economic, military and diplomatic asymmetries between the two states, is a manifestation of the underlying sources of **discord**. Unless New Delhi proves willing to simply accept its subordinate status, the rivalry, despite the current relaxation of tensions, will persist.

Sumit Ganguly is a Senior Fellow and directs the Huntington Program on Strengthening US-India Relations at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

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.



Image Credit: Wikipedia Commons/Shakib Gilani

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.

Zhang Jiegen is the Director of the Pakistan Study Center and Associate Professor at the Center for South Asian Study, Fudan University, China.

News Reports

Bilateral Relations

President Xi says India, China 'friends, partners' in Republic Day message

Al Jazeera, January 26

Chinese President Xi Jinping described China and India as “good neighbours, friends and partners,” congratulating President Murmu on Republic Day. The remarks come amid warming ties after Trump’s tariff war shook global trade.

China reaffirms its territorial claims over Shaksgam Valley after India's objections

The Hindu, January 13

China reaffirmed its territorial claim over the Shaksgam Valley, rejecting Indian objections and underscoring Beijing’s position that its infrastructure activity in the area is lawful.

Congress accuses the Modi government of 'calibrated capitulation' to China

The Hindu, January 9

India’s Congress party criticised the government for easing limits on Chinese companies in public tenders, dubbing the move a “calibrated capitulation” and questioning the rationale behind the policy reversal.

India introduces new e-Business visa to facilitate easy travel for Chinese nationals

The Economic Times, January 5

India has rolled out the e-B-4 Visa for Chinese nationals to ease business activities like equipment installation and commissioning.

China and India in the Region

India beefing up space-based surveillance after border conflict

The Straits Times, January 21

India aims to deploy over 50 spy satellites with night-time imaging to bolster national security, following blind spots revealed in last year’s border conflict with Pakistan.

Chinese, Sri Lankan FMs meet on ties

Xinhua News, January 12

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stopped in Sri Lanka en route from Africa, meeting Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath. Wang pledged Beijing’s early support to help the country recover from the recent cyclone.

BRICS wargames: Why they matter, why India opted out

Al Jazeera, January 11

BRICS naval drills involving China, Russia and Iran have begun off South Africa’s coast, seen as a response to rising maritime tensions. India and Brazil did not participate, despite being founding members.

Pakistan setting up 'special protection unit' for security of Chinese nationals

Anadolu Agency, January 8

Pakistan plans a “special protection unit” in Islamabad for Chinese nationals and joint projects, Interior Minister Naqvi said, after meetings with Chinese Interior Minister Wang Xiaohong on counterterrorism and law enforcement cooperation.

Trade and Economy

India, EU strike 'mother of all deals' free trade agreement and defence pact in the age of Trump

The Straits Times, January 27

India and the EU concluded a major FTA, described as the “mother of all deals,” and signed related pacts on defence and mobility, promising lower tariffs on key European exports to India.

China halts import, sale of Sun Pharma's Alzheimer's drug after inspection

Business Standards, January 27

China's drug regulator has banned the import, sale, and use of India's Sun Pharma's Alzheimer's treatment. Inspections found lapses in contamination control and quality management.

It wasn't just a missed call: The currency clash behind the stalled US-India trade deal

The Economic Times, January 26

A missed call with Trump was said to stall the India-US trade deal, but analysts say India is prioritising sovereignty and investing in BRICS-led financial initiatives.

India Surpasses Japan. When It May Overtake Germany As 3rd Largest Economy

NDTV, January 1

India has surpassed Japan to rank fourth globally by nominal GDP, reaching \$4.18tn, official data shows. The government says it aims to overtake Germany within three years.

Energy and Environment

India is electrifying faster than China using cheap green tech

Los Angeles Times, January 27

India is electrifying faster and using less fossil fuel per capita than China did at a comparable stage of development, a new Ember report finds. The trend challenges the idea that growth must be fuelled first by fossil energy.

India stops China's request for WTO dispute panel on car, renewables measures, says official

Reuters, January 27

India has halted a Chinese bid to set up a new WTO dispute panel challenging its policies on cars and renewable energy, according to a trade official in Geneva.

India, China cut electricity emissions, mitigating US coal overdrive

Reuters, January 27

India and China are cutting emissions from electricity generation by rapidly expanding clean energy. Their gains are offsetting rising coal use in the US and helping cap global growth in climate-warming pollution.

India signs \$3 billion LNG agreement with UAE, vows to double trade, as U.S. deal remains elusive

CNBC, January 20

India aims to double trade with the UAE to \$200 billion by 2032, seeking alternatives amid stalled talks with the US. Modi and Sheikh Mohamed signed a 10-year LNG supply deal.

Analyses

The India–EU trade deal is worth watching, but not overhyping

Atlantic Council, January 27

By Mark Linscott, Atlantic Council Nonresident Senior Fellow on India

The India–EU free trade agreement marks a diplomatic success but is unlikely to reshape global trade. Benefits will accrue gradually, and the deal could complement rather than undercut ongoing US–India trade negotiations.

India's renewed focus on free-trade agreements

International Institute for Strategic Studies, January 26

By Viraj Solanki, Research Fellow for South and Central Asian Defence, Strategy and Diplomacy

New Delhi's push for trade agreements with the EU, the UK, and the United States signals a cautious turn towards greater openness. These deals can support India's long term development, but only if matched by deeper structural reform at home.

America Must Salvage Its Relationship With India

Foreign Affairs, January 16

By Richard Fontaine, CEO of the Center for a New American Security, and Lisa Curtis, Director of the Indo-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security

US-India ties, forged over shared China concerns, are tested by Trump's policies on trade and Pakistan. India's measured approach to China shows continued rivalry with Beijing but growing wariness of Washington, making recalibration urgent.

When Faith and Geopolitics Collide

CSIS, January 9

By Henrietta Levin, Senior Fellow with the Freeman Chair in China Studies at the CSIS, and Alison Bartel, Former Senior Adviser to the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights

How the Dalai Lama's succession unfolds will shape Himalayan stability, US-China competition, and Beijing's bid to reshape regional order. By treating Tibet as a core interest, Xi is tightening political, religious, and technological control in anticipation of a contested transition.

China's Global Security Initiative in South Asia: An Assessment

Observer Research Foundation, January 2

By Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, Associate Fellow with the Strategic Studies Programme's Neighbourhood Studies Initiative, and Udit Lunawat, Research Intern at the Observer Research Foundation

The GSI is formalising China's long-standing defence relationships in South Asia, deepening its regional security footprint. Regional engagement is driven less by ideology than by efforts to strengthen ties with Beijing and offset Indian dominance.

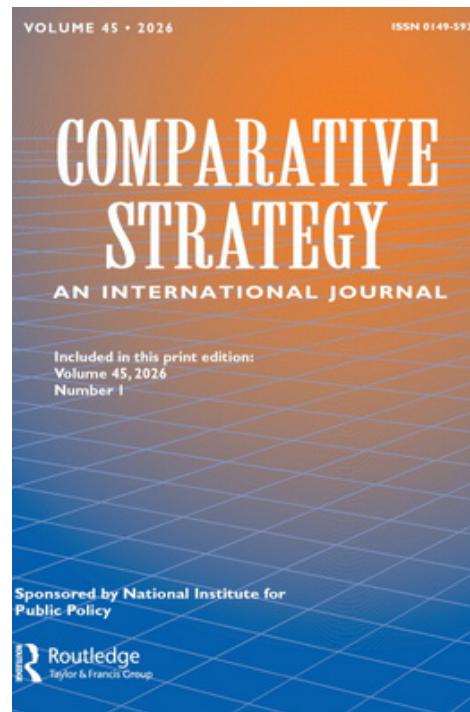
Books and Journals

Navigating India and Taiwan relations amid China's maritime modernization: Analyzing the dynamics of Alfred Mahan, offensive realism and English School Comparative Strategy, January 2026

By Neha Kumar, Head of Department (HoD) and Associate Professor, University Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities (UILAH), Chandigarh University, Mohali, India.

This paper contends that China's current maritime strategy is consistent with Alfred Mahan's theories and the logic of offensive realism, as evidenced in official PRC documents and public statements. Ongoing modernisation of China's naval forces reinforces this broader strategic orientation. China's emergence as a leading maritime power carries significant implications for India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. Although India has adopted various approaches to counter China's naval expansion, it has largely refrained from deepening relations with Taiwan, mainly because of its continued adherence to the One China Policy, despite shared democratic and cultural affinities.

Drawing on the English School framework, the study evaluates the scope for policy alignment between India and Taiwan within



the constraints imposed by the One China Policy. The Malacca Strait is used as a case study, given its geopolitical importance to India, China, and Taiwan. The findings offer a more nuanced perspective on regional security dynamics and India's strategic choices in the Indo-Pacific.

Capsule Review

India's China strategy after Galwan: minilateral and multilateral soft balancing in the Indo-Pacific

International Affairs, August 2025

By Ian Hall, Professor of International Relations at the Griffith Asia Institute at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia



Review

By Siddharth Anil Nair, student at the International Affairs programme at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

After months of uneasy calm, tensions between India and China have begun to heat up again. Hall's article is timely because it examines India's soft balancing strategy in minilateral and multilateral forums following the Galwan Valley clash. It analyses India's behaviour across four forums and identifies four tactics it employed to frustrate China's international interests.

Given the power disparity between the two sides and the standoff along the LAC, Hall argues India employed soft balancing to build international leverage without direct confrontation. Drawing on official statements, interviews, and media reports, the article describes how India used denial in the RIC, delay in the BRICS, trivialisation in the SCO, and exclusion in IBSA at the G20.

India's refusal to convene the annual ministerial-level RIC meetings in 2020 blocked China's ability to engage in regional diplomacy. After maintaining a restrained approach during its 2021 BRICS chairmanship, India dragged its feet in forum

deliberations, slowing its expansion under Chinese leadership. At the 2022 SCO, India shifted the forum's focus from high politics to softer fare, such as lifestyle issues, softening China's international agenda. Finally, in 2023, China's attempts to stymie India in the G20 led to the formalisation of the IBSA trilogue, which kept the former out of an important group of rising powers.

Hall concludes that India effectively leveraged the "abnormality" of the bilateral relationship on the world stage and kept China from setting the terms or controlling the narrative. A key problem, as he observes, is that these tactics resemble the routine behaviours of rivals in shared fora.

More to the point, the article would be better positioned if it had a clearer delineation of the four tactics, which seem to blur in practice, as well as an analysis of Chinese responses to demonstrate the true efficacy of India's strategy. As controversy over the Shaksgam Valley sparks yet another diplomatic kerfuffle, Hall's article provides a practical framework for India-China watchers to assess diplomatic behaviour in the months ahead.

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THE CENTRE ON ASIA AND GLOBALISATION

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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India* by Srinath Raghavan (Yale University Press, 2025)
- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2023)
- *Asian Conceptions of International Order: What Asia Wants* edited by Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana (International Affairs, 2023)
- *How Realist Is India's National Security Policy?* edited by Kanti Bajpai (Routledge, 2023)
- *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia* edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2022)
- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *India Versus China: Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)



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