



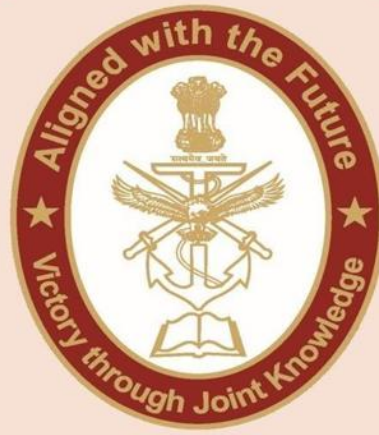
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RIVAL BLUEPRINTS: BEIJING'S EXPANSIONISM AND INDIA'S PARTNERSHIPS

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Introduction

As South Asia's geopolitical theatre reaches a critical juncture following the Pahalgam incident in Jammu & Kashmir on 22nd Aprilⁱ – where India leverages its strategic partnerships, most notably with Moscow,ⁱⁱ evoking echoes of 1971ⁱⁱⁱ – while China reaffirms its staunch support for Pakistan.^{iv} Consequently, this has opened a new crevice in the India-China dynamic.

In this context, it is essential to examine the roots of China's support for Pakistan, its growing relationship with Bangladesh and smaller regional countries, and the underlying intentions behind these ties – along with the imminent threat of the *China–Pakistan–Bangladesh nexus* in South Asia.^v Meanwhile, India's model of strategic partnerships^{vi} helps it remain relatively stable, even as opposing powers progressively encircle it.

This article presents a comparative analysis of both countries' approach to some of their major partnerships, contrasting their fundamental strategies and approach.

China's South Asia Playbook

Pakistan: The Keystone for China's Regional Ambitions

China's initial investments in Pakistan originated with the development of the Gwadar deep-sea port located in Balochistan, in 2002 – Pakistan's largest deep-sea port – which is a key project under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and a component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).^{vii} This was followed by major investments starting in 2015 with the formal launch of CPEC, initially a \$46 billion infrastructure project that has since expanded to \$62 billion.^{viii} CPEC aims to connect the Gwadar Port to Xinjiang.^{ix} While an increasingly precarious scenario for India,^x China's frustration over CPEC and its economic engagement with Pakistan has long been apparent: while stationed in Pakistan for CPEC's development, Chinese workers have been repeatedly targeted by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), with several such instances occurring over the years,^{xi} including recent ones,^{xii} for which the Chinese president Xi Jinping has faced considerable heat.^{xiii} Although China hasn't deployed official troops around infrastructure development sites, it has commissioned private Chinese actors to oversee the personnel's security,^{xiv} signalling mistrust and demonstrating awareness of Pakistan's limited capacity to constrain terrorism.¹

Moreover, Chinese workers have also been targeted by state-sponsored terrorist organisations^{xv} including ISIS-K (Islamic State – Khorasan)^{xvi} and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).^{xvii} Weapons exported by China have also been used by terror outfits operating in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK)^{xviii} – making it harder to ignore the fact that Chinese weapons are being leveraged by Pakistan in sponsoring terrorism and proxy wars.^{xix} However, China continues to practise a “look-away policy”,^{xx} propping

¹ It is important to posit that while terrorist organisations such as TTP and ISIS-K have a history of being sponsored by the ISI, thereby making them state-sponsored actors, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is not among them. The BLA pursues a separatist agenda and functions independently of state sponsorship. The BLA, in fact, stands in direct opposition to the Pakistani state.

up the very state that threatens its own workers. Therefore, there is something to say about Chinese hypocrisy in expressing regret^{xxi} over India's retaliation.

Rather than being a genuine investment for China – or merely an avenue for infrastructure projects – Pakistan is undeniably a strategic pawn, a recipient of high-interest loans designed to instil long-term dependence and advance Beijing's regional hegemony under the guise of development. It remains unclear whether Pakistan is unaware of China's intentions or simply in denial, driven by desperation for what is merely short-term development, or rather, an illusion of progress.

Furthermore, historically, foreign funds in volatile states have often fallen into the hands of militant groups – in states where state authority takes a backseat^{xxii} – a stark example of which is Pakistan.^{xxiii} Against this backdrop, India's recent destruction of China's HQ-9 air defence system deployed by Pakistan in Lahore^{xxiv} could be seen as a signal of India's evolving defence capabilities, far from its vulnerabilities of 1962. This can act as a deterrent, suggesting to Beijing that infiltrating Indian frontiers may no longer be a simple feat.^{xxv} China's support of Pakistan also sets back the limited progress Beijing and New Delhi had made in the recent past in normalising relations.^{xxvi}

Bangladesh, The Nexus, and Beyond

Following Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's ouster last year^{xxvii} and Muhammed Yunus' role as Chief Adviser of the interim government, Dhaka too, has hopped on the China bandwagon.^{xxviii} Most recently, he extended an invitation for Chinese presence in the Bay of Bengal,^{xxix} and has expressed substantial interest in improving ties with Pakistan, particularly in defence cooperation, where he has shown specific interest in acquiring the JF-17 fighter jets jointly developed by Pakistan and China,^{xxx} and has procured other defence equipment from Islamabad in recent times.^{xxxi} As bilateral relations between Dhaka and Islamabad improve,^{xxxii} China inevitably enters the equation, since any deepening of ties by a South Asian country with Pakistan often involves Beijing's implicit strategic presence. As Bangladesh and Pakistan improve ties with China's efforts,^{xxxiii} a potential military shift looms in South

Asia – signalled by Bangladesh’s participation in Aman-25, a naval exercise held in Karachi this February, where naval ships from all three countries were present.^{xxxiv}

China’s regional ambitions with Bangladesh become increasingly evident as a replication of the “debt-trap” scenario observed with countries such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan manifests in Bangladesh.^{xxxv}

Bangladesh has been a BRI constituent since 2016,^{xxxvi} and subsequently, the country has seen massive investment flows aimed at infrastructural development.^{xxxvii} As recent reports indicate a significant rise in debt owed by Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries to China, while speculative, logic suggests that Yunus’ growing ties, specifically in infrastructure and development projects with Beijing^{xxxviii} will likely worsen the situation for Dhaka.

Dhaka’s increasing closeness to Beijing driven is a strategic effort to sideline New Delhi in pursuit of greater economic gain, and further reaffirms the growing nexus.

For India, China’s ambition to connect Gwadar Port to Xinjiang, coupled with its involvement in Mongla Port, presents a precarious territorial scenario. Although India uses Mongla for transit and is involved in connectivity projects linking the port to its territory,^{xxxix} China’s engagement, though more recent, is much more substantial, and extends beyond Mongla to include development projects at Chittagong Port^{xl} and across the wider Indian Ocean region as part of BRI.^{xli}

Lastly, with Sri Lanka, the situation for India has grown increasingly alarming with Colombo having handed China a 99-year lease for operating the Hambantota port.^{xlii} The port’s close proximity to Indian territory and spotting of Chinese surveillance ships in the area signals potential militarisation and deepens concerns of encirclement along India’s maritime borders.^{xliii} Beijing’s rapidly advancing footprints in South Asia is bound to generate mounting anxiety regarding the region’s overall sovereignty.

India's Partnership Model

Strategic Autonomy: India's Win-Win Approach to Partnerships

Post-Pahalgam, Russia reaffirmed its decades-long support for India by continuing to supply advanced defence systems to the Indian armed forces.^{xliv} While parallels with 1971 are striking, the India-Russia partnership has deepened significantly over the years. Russia has emerged as India's largest arms supplier,^{xlv} while India has also emerged as Russia's biggest crude oil importer, surpassing China last year.^{xlvi} This sustained and growing cooperation, rooted in recognition of mutual benefit, has enabled India to maintain strategic freedom. By engaging Russia economically, particularly amid Moscow's increasing global isolation since its war with Ukraine,^{xlvii} India has preserved space to simultaneously deepen partnerships with the West,^{xlviii} without triggering pressure dynamics from the Russian side.

The recent notable instance of such a balancing act has come to light through India's International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) with Russia,^{xlix} and its recent engagement with America on the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC).¹ While India's bilateral relationship with the United States gained significant momentum during Trump's first administration – with the historic Quad revival, along with key agreements such as LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement), and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement), along with the launch of the 2+2 ministerial dialogue, it experienced even greater momentum under the Biden administration. This was marked by initiatives such as I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE and the US),² cooperation in AI through platforms like US-India Artificial Intelligence Initiative (USIAI), the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) framework, the India-US Strategic Trade Dialogue (IUSTD), Indus-X (India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem), and expanded space cooperation agreements between NASA and ISRO.^{li}

² Focused on initiatives including water management, energy efficiency, infrastructure and connectivity between member states, space collaboration and innovation, healthcare, agriculture and food security.

The highlight of US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting in Washington, D.C. this February was the announcement of new defence agreements and discussions around the likeliness of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). India was designated as the United States' Major Defence Partner (MDP) in 2016, and is the only country to retain this title.^{lii} During the meeting, the leaders announced plans to renew the US-India Major Defence Partnership agreement for the next ten years.^{liii} Another notable development was the launch of the India-US TRUST (Technology and Research in Emerging and Ubiquitous Strategic Technologies) initiative, with fundamental focus on research and development (R&D) and technology cooperation.

The Rafale fighter jets and India's growing defence relationship with France have also come to light in the aftermath of Pahalgam.^{liv} EU-India dynamics have also seen pivotal highs this year, with an FTA set to be signed by the end of the year.^{lv} However, a comprehensive defence partnership remains to be seen, which, however, might not materialise just yet, given the Russo-Ukraine war and India's closer ties with Russia. Nevertheless, India's more-than-strong ties with both parties stand as a stark example of forming partnerships based on pragmatism rather than ideology, keeping mutual benefit at the forefront of the relationship.

Subsequently, there appears to be a growing, through unpronounced, recognition among Western nations of India's strategically autonomous manoeuvre through partnerships, as the US^{lvi} and EU^{lvii} remain among India's major oil importers – oil which is procured from Russia. With this approach, India has increasingly positioned itself as the West's and the world's gateway into the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, India's maritime outlook has remained focused on inclusivity and joint infrastructure development, a contrast from China's coercive diplomacy. Its investments into Iran's Chabahar Port^{lviii} exemplifies this difference – built through a grants-based approach and mutual cooperation, it enhances regional connectivity without creating debt dependencies, along with its other projects in the Indian Ocean region with neighbouring and Indo-Pacific countries.^{lix} India has extended \$8 billion worth lines of credit for development and energy projects to Bangladesh – notably more

generous than China's financial coercion tactics, offering favourable terms and promoting local capacity-building over dependency.^{lx}

A sharp contrast in approach further comes to light with Sri Lanka: India has extended humanitarian aid and \$4 billion in economic assistance,^{lxi} largely with minimal conditions, unlike China's coercive financing and takeover of the Hambantota Port.

Lastly, apart from the Quad and as part of its Act East Policy,^{lxii} India maintains trilateral engagements such as the India–France–Australia^{lxiii} and India–Japan–US dialogues,^{lxiv} a blend of regional with international partnerships, with an emphasis on upholding multilateralism, thereby maintaining an image of a reliable partner with a collaborative approach to partnerships. In contrast, where India's approach remains collaborative, China has been perceived as a dominant force in global and regional economic engagements.^{lxv}

In conclusion, as the contrast between China's and India's distinct partnership models comes to light, it remains to be seen how their relationship will evolve in the times ahead. China and India are shaping South Asia through starkly different geopolitical strategies. China's assertive model, marked by debt diplomacy, militarisation, and opaque alliances, seeks to encircle India and expand its influence, especially through ties with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. In contrast, India promotes strategic autonomy and inclusive development, offering transparent partnerships across infrastructure, defence, and energy. Its balanced ties with both traditional allies and emerging powers position it as a stable regional anchor. As South Asian nations navigate these competing approaches, their choices will define the region's strategic landscape for years to come.

DISCLAIMER

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