

China's "Two-Track Approach" in South Asia: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Regional Power Shifts

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines China's 'two-track approach' in South Asia, focusing on the deepening security relations with Pakistan and the increasing economic diplomacy with Bangladesh. This approach, based on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), enhances China's regional geostrategic position and shifts the geopolitical landscape of the region. This paper employs qualitative methodology, examining secondary materials such as reports, documents, articles, government policy papers, and manuscripts on the triadic relations of China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The analysis finds that Pakistan remains the main strategic ally, while CPEC has become its 'mainland economic pivot' and the geostrategic fulcrum for courting China's entry into the Indian Ocean and the Gulf energy trade routes. Bangladesh, having transitioned from being peripheral to pivotal, now acts as a 'balancing state' in the region, enjoying Chinese support for infrastructure, trade, and defense, and also cooperation while managing relations with India. Together, these relations form a triangular configuration that weakens India's position, enhances Chinese influence, and alters the region's security dynamics. The analysis indicates that China's double strategy has evolved from bilateralism to an integrated approach that changes the fundamental dynamics of power in South Asia, employing a strategy of development and containment..

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, South Asia, Geopolitics, Strategic Alignment

INTRODUCTION

As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) forms an integral part of China's strategy to boost South Asian regional connectivity. CPEC continues to be academically described as multifaceted and transformative as it is an economic corridor, a transport network, an energy corridor, and several economic zones, what is to be constructed in Pakistan, and is expected to enhance Pakistan's economic fortunes as well as regional connectivity (Ismail et al., 2023). However, some contend CPEC will deepen Pakistan's dependency on China and lead to it becoming a client state (Sharif, 2023).

CPEC also provides China a vital land sea corridor to the Indian Ocean which will grant it a more secure and diversified access to energy resources beyond the Strait of Malacca where it is heavily dependent on sea lanes for its oil imports thus giving China autonomy in its energy and geopolitical considerations. At the same time, China's economic and military engagement with Bangladesh has also increased. More recent research attests military relations, and most notably, transfer of military equipment, as well as training cooperation and defence

agreements pointing to the growing strategic value of the bilateral relationship (Assenov, 2025). Wider studies also reveal that China's relations with Bangladesh are multidimensional – soft power, infrastructure development, people-to-people exchanges, and strategic diplomacy (Hossain, 2024). This dual relationship with Pakistan and Bangladesh is what has come to be termed as analysts have called the "two-track approach" a simultaneous deepening of strategic-military relations with Pakistan and an expanding economic, political, and defense engagement with Bangladesh.

This study provides a critical assessment of the implications of China's "two-track approach". It discusses how China's strategic culture that emerge through military integration with Pakistan and economic-diplomatic outreach with Bangladesh confluence and rewiring power dynamics in South Asia. Although bilateral dimensions have been probed in previous cases (Yasmin, 2023; Baghernia & Meraji, 2020), the trilateral dynamic has not been sufficiently explored in the literature; thus, the current study fills an important gap in comprehending new strategic partnerships. This article is based on the following questions: 1) What are the strategic dimensions of Bangladesh's relations with Pakistan and

China, and how do these relations affect the balance of power in South Asia? 2) What are the implications of CPEC and BRI for strategic balances and is China's friendly relationship with the Gulf states in terms of oil a relevant factor along with its increasing influence in South Asia? 3) What could the tripartite nexus of China-Pakistan-Bangladesh in military, political, and economic fields mean in terms of the region becoming another axis of regional dynamics as India – China competition worsens?

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research method, and is heavily based upon secondary sources to highlight the various facets of China's strategic relations with its South Asian neighbors, with a special reference to Pakistan and Bangladesh. The approach includes a review of the literature covering regional geopolitics, security studies and international relations in China, Pakistan and Bangladesh triangular interaction (Iqbal, 2024; Hoque et al., 2025).

In the research, Google Scholar and EBSCO has been used to find relevant peer-reviewed articles, and policy articles and reports authored by scholars associated with research institutes to provide insight on both the historical and contemporaneous dominant discourses on China's regional narratives, especially megaprojects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Younus & Jamil, 2024). Having read these materials, the paper intends to demonstrate how new geographies in South Asia are contributing to the broader regional matrix of power in the South Asia and its surrounding regions. While many of the scholarly discussions have uncovered paradigm shifts, there are still several grey areas, particularly in India's narratives on the regional partnerships that India seems to maintain in the backdrop of the current border conflict with China (Jahan & Shahwaiz, 2024). The methodology explains the triangular relationship in more regional context in the geopolitics of South Asia.

RESULTS

1. China's Role in South Asia

The China-Pakistan-Russia strategic collaboration of 2013 made India to search for readjustment of its regional strategy. Its longstanding friendship with Pakistan, coupled with increased cooperation with Bangladesh, has enhanced its sway in South Asia at India's expense. As it has supported Pakistan on Kashmir, Beijing has also deepened economic and military links with Bangladesh, generating a triangular dynamic that nudges India toward greater engagement with Dhaka (Khan et al., 2024, pp. 1-9).

China's avenues of economy in CPEC and BCIM towards connectivity influence. With CPEC of almost \$60 billion investments on Pakistan's infrastructure, energy, and SEZs, Bangladesh has also been the recipient of huge Chinese funding in energy, ports, and textile, including a \$4 billion credit line (Cheema & Jathol, 2024, pp. 548-559; Lu & Iqbal, 2025, pp. 23-30). Along with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, these are projects

enabling China to build its power and distribute its goods, and guarantee its raw material access from across South Asia (Irshad, Siddique, & Qamar, 2016, pp. 200-207).

2. Pakistan's Strategic Interests

The security side of the Chinese two-track approach to South Asia is best illustrated by its association with Pakistan. One another flagship Belt and Road Initiative (CPEC: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) further cements Beijing's political, economic, and military presence. Pakistan It is one of the biggest recipients of Chinese investment and its major projects like Gwadar Port are located on its land and it provides security for Chinese interest. CPEC is more than a simple economic link, it mirrors Chinese regional ambitions, constrains Indian power and carries considerable risks (Ullah et al., 2024: 196-207).

Traded between China and Pakistan surged from \$12 billion in 2014 to the projected levels of \$20 billion (2017) \$40 billion (2022) and \$60 billion (2030). CPEC can turn Pakistan from a transit economy to a new industrial base for the region, with the potential benefits of a spill-over to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran (Rezapour 2025: 45-66). But India sees CPEC as an infringement on its sovereignty because it runs through Pakistan-held Kashmir. Former external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj rejected CPEC on the grounds that it violated India's territorial rights and would exacerbate the conflict because of Pakistan's support for terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir (Irshad et al., 7 May 2014, pp. 200-207).

3. Bangladesh's Strategic Role

The worst offender of all in the region has been Bangladesh, which has now kowtowed to China as a professed "trusted friend," the keystone of China's "two-track approach" to the region, in which infrastructure investment is underpinned by political integration. Despite its historical tensions with India, Dhaka's good relations with Beijing since 1976, as well as Kunming project in particular, exemplify Beijing's quest for connectivity (Chakma, 2019, pp. 227-239). This illustrates how China utilizes stable relations with Bangladesh as a counterpoise to Indian regional dominance.

China's involvement in Bangladesh is part of a wider picture in South Asia where five factors facilitate development: the central position in the region, education, large work force, energy and social security. These things make Bangladesh as one of the most important stakeholder to support the maintenance of an economy and regional integration under China's BRI (Chakma, 2019, pp. 227-239).

Bangladesh's relationship with India and China has diplomatic complexities. India's military and economic power are bigger, but India's military and economic power are bigger, but India relies heavily on China's infrastructure and military support. Border tensions with Bangladesh and rebel violence in the Indian Northeast fuel tensions with Bangladesh. This complicated balancing act in the region shows how China leverages local rivalries to increase local political power (Chakma, 2019, pp. 227-239)

4. China's Strategic Engagement with Pakistan and Bangladesh

China's relationship with Pakistan has been a crucial component in the implementation of countless joint initiatives, such as Gwadar Port and CPEC. The economic corridor increases Pakistan's connectivity to Central and West Asia, and China's reach to these regions. The relationship is based on mutual trust and a proper balance of pragmatism from both sides. China's engagement with Pakistan has been necessary to counterbalance India's power in the region (Makhdoom et al, 2014). Bangladesh has become the second largest buyer of military hardware from China after Pakistan which illustrates tightening of strategic relations. China's role as a development partner has expanded due to the BRI initiatives along with AIIB funding and zero tariffs leading to the transformation of the partnership to a strategic level since 2016. Such economic and military interdependence escalates competition with India in the Bay of Bengal (Choudhury, 2023).

DISCUSSION

China's expanding role in South Asia demonstrates a deliberately facilitated "two-track approach" which intertwines economic might with a pivot toward security partnerships. On one side, the Belt and Road Initiative allows Beijing to economically dominate the region through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor. On the other side, China maintains military partnerships with Pakistan and increasingly arms and collaborates with the military of Bangladesh. Together, these tracks reshape the geopolitical order while placing India in a position of strategic isolation.

China's economic engagement within the region exemplifies the country's position as the 'catalyst' for enhanced regional connectivity. The nearly \$60 billion investments of CPEC within the energy, infrastructure and industrial zones of Pakistan indicates the ambition of Beijing's long-term vision for Pakistan to become a critical node of connectivity between Central Asia and the Middle East (Cheema & Jathol, 2024; Irshad et al., 2016). Beijing granted loans, port investments, and credits to the textile sector in Bangladesh, catapulting Dhaka into one of China's leading regional partners (Lu & Iqbal, 2025). Researchers say the projects not only spread China's exports across the globe but also helped Beijing to secure energy supplies and markets as the two countries' global Belt and Road Initiative (Choudhury 2023).

China's military partnership with Pakistan, so deep seated, is the cornerstone of its strategy in South Asia. Since the 1950s, the Chinese have provided arms, missile technology and nuclear assistance to Pakistan, especially in response to India's 1974 nuclear test (Makhdoom et al., 2014). The relationship was then formalized with projects such as the Karakoram Highway and Gwadar Port and became long-term security partnership that advances China's naval and land presence in the Indian Ocean (Benvenuti, 2022). Since 2016, Bangladesh has been recognized as China's second-largest arms customer after Pakistan, likely due to the burgeoning relations between

the two nations fostering a firm reliance on the deep friendship described by Choudhury (2023).

Bangladesh is the most important strategic partner to China's "all-weather" friend, Pakistan, reflecting China's strategic balancing paradigm. Beginning in the 1970s until the present, China has been able to exploit the Indo-Bangladeshi conflict, thereby entrenching Pakistan's dominance over the region (Chakma, 2019). This has resulted in the formation of a China-Pakistan-Bangladesh strategic triangle, which will test India's ability to vault the leadership role in South Asia. Some scholars cite China's influence on the region as a detrimental consequence of India's bilateral alliances aimed at countering China, specifically the 2015 Bangladesh-India Strategic Cooperation Agreement, which, according to Rather (2014), has increased Bangladesh's dependence on China for military and infrastructure support.

Even after the consolidation of the China's dual-track policy, India's regional policy continues to be based on the principles of cooperation and economic integration. The benefits of the 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' for Pakistan, especially the Kashmir section, challenges India's sovereignty and makes the 'China-Pakistan' nexus more antagonistic towards India – further isolating India from China and Pakistan (Irshad et al., 2016). Bangladesh's pivot, however, as a pragmatist, signals to New Delhi not only the failure to contain Chinese influence in its historical backyard but also the geostrategic reality of South Asia's geopolitics that, in its current configuration, India's 'anchor' power does not exist (Chakma, 2019). In South Asia, the more aggressive stance taken by China continues to exacerbate the already existing and unresolved conflicts on the South Asian region.

Besides the economics and the defense sector, border disputes and terrorism also stress the part China plays as a security actor. Since 2013, the increasing jihadist activity in Bangladesh and Pakistan's internal unrest has stressed the need for security cooperation with China (Ashraf & Islam, 2023). Also, the unresolved Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan conflicts ensure the preservation of a mistrust cycle, providing the precise focal points for cooperative and allied approaches between Pakistan and China (Afridi & Khan, 2015; Tasleem, 2022). By embedding itself in such contentious issues, Beijing positions itself as a provider of stability for its client states while providing a counter to India's regional ambitions.

CONCLUSION

This analysis indicates that the dual approach being taken by China in South Asia represents a strategic reconfiguration of the regional geopolitics of power being exercised by Beijing, rather than an exclusive extension of the Belt and Road Initiative. From a security standpoint, China will "K-keep" an alliance with China, while for the development front, China will "K-keep" an alliance with Bangladesh. Bangladesh will thus become a key pivot for geopolitical and strategic realignment of relations in South Asia. Bangladesh geopolitically re-aligns the Chinese strategic map of relations in South Asia, in a manner that has not received the attention it merits in literature. Unlike the studies that analyze these bilateral

relations in isolation, this study highlights the manner in which Geoeconomics draws China into military stranglehold around the Indian subcontinent, enhances India's encirclement, and expands Beijing's footprint militarily across the subcontinent. The findings depict the manner in which Bangladesh, previously considered peripheral, has transformed into a crucial balancing entity in the South Asian geopolitical theater by engaging China in a defense collaboration and infrastructure development while maintaining a strategic ambivalence towards India. Conversely, Pakistan has emerged as a strategic 'geopolitical plank' that provides China with access to targeted geopolitical areas like Kashmir, secures energy corridors from the Arabian sea, and expands China's military influence to the Arabian Sea. Viewed together, the triad of China, Pakistan and Bangladesh is reshaping the security and geopolitical order of South Asia by shifting the locus of power and attention from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal, while deepening China's involvement in the region's historical rivalries. China's two-track diplomacy, now integrated into the coordinated structure, shifts the balance of strategic realignments in China's favor, while offering new avenues for cooperation and growing instability within the emerging geopolitical order. As a result, this study advances the discourse on China's regional strategy from a bilateral to a triangular convergence approach...

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