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China Strategic Diplomacy in South Asia: Navigating the India–Pakistan–China Triangle

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ABSTRACT

Background South Asia continues to be a difficult area in which China, India and Pakistan play the game of strategic triangle. With increased economic, military and diplomatic foothold in the region (CPEC + BRI), China's at-least-on-paper impartial aggression has shifted the balance of power on the ground. Finding an equilibrium between its alliance with Pakistan and more tentative approach toward India is a key element of China's strategic posture in the region (Hudson Institute, 2025; Chatham House, 2025). **Objective**: This article attempts to examine China's strategic diplomacy in South Asia, particularly its deal with the India-Pakistan-China triangle. It aims to probe into the incentives, means and consequences of China's policies with a view to ascertaining their potential impact on regional peace and stability. **Method**: We utilized a qualitative research design and included both primary sources (official discourse, bilateral agreements) and secondary sources (scholarly articles, think tank reports, policy analyses.) A thematic analysis was utilized in order to find patterns from China, India, and Pakistan's economic, diplomatic, as well as military interactions (ISDP 2025- Modern Diplomacy 2023). **Results**: Its findings suggest that China has progressively strengthened its economic and military relations with Pakistan but, at the same time, preserved trade and interaction with India. Chinese influence has been bolstered by diplomatic overtures through regional fora such as SAARC, SCO and trilateral dialogues. Tensions with India were kept in check by limited agreements and political dialogue, even as Pakistan grew more dependent on Chinese investment and military backing. **Conclusion**: Strategic Diplomacy of China in South Asia is a meticulously forged combination for increased influence on the region, regional stability and reinforcement of its geopolitical agendas. Through its balance of cooperation with Pakistan and engagement with India, China successfully manages the triangular dynamics in the region.

Keywords: China, Strategic Diplomacy, South Asia, India–Pakistan–China Triangle, CPEC, Belt And Road Initiative, Regional Security.

Introduction

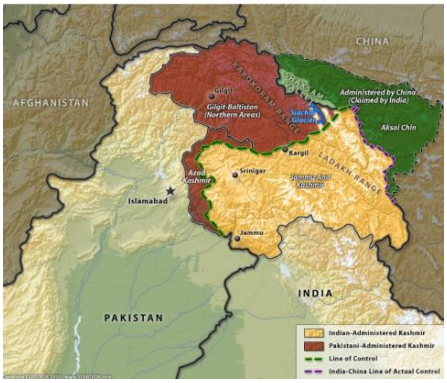
China's strategic diplomacy in South Asia is merely a calculated ploy to dominate the infamous India–Pakistan–China triangle. This strategic geometry is characterized by a complex matrix of historical animosity, territorial discord, and shifting alliances in which China is a key regional actor. The complicated dynamics between these three

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states are further complicated by China's efforts to maintain its traditional partnership with Islamabad while diplomatically engaging New Delhi to manage tensions and develop their bilateral potential. Relationship between China and Pakistan: China's relationship with Pakistan is based on a "deeper than the ocean and higher than the mountains" commitment slogan. The two countries not only share similar views but also complement their respective foreign policy objectives. For example, they both oppose India's





regional power and want to re-establish ancient trade routes. Therefore, CPEC, an important part of the BRI, connects China's main continent to Europe's torrid waters via Pakistan's strategic Gwadar Port. Consequently, China invests in Pakistan's infrastructure and also achieves its foreign policy goals via Islamabad. The dynamic between China and India is different: while both sides understand that their economic cooperation is essential, they are also realistic competitors. The current unresolved border dispute situation has again been strained, but the October 2024 Ladakh agreement indicates that the scientific agreement and robust good neighborliness have achieved the desired effect of significant de-escalation, and this trend is vital.

Strategic Diplomacy: China's strategic diplomacy in South Asia also spans wooing other regional players to focus on its position. China's efforts in engagement with other South Asian countries, especially Bangladesh and



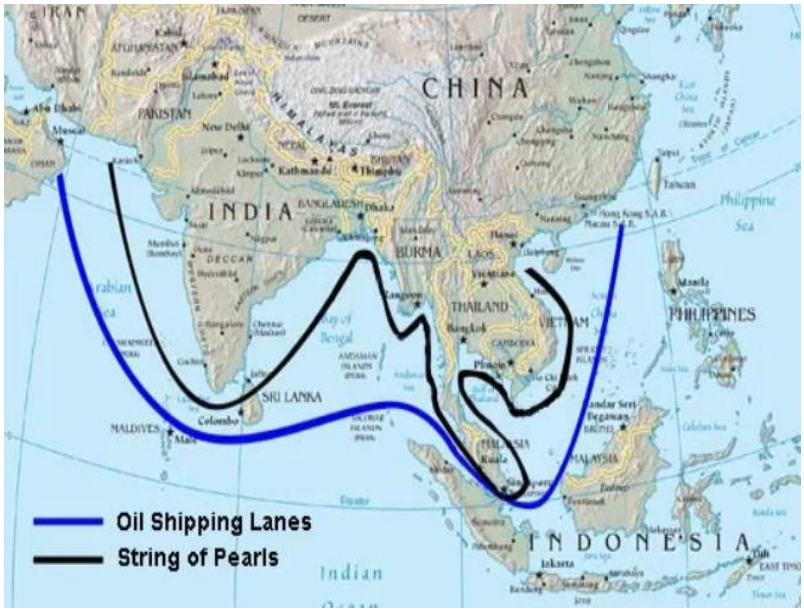
Afghanistan—earlier it was Pakistan – through trilateral dialogues demonstrate its desire to expand the influence beyond India-Pakistan. These engagements are part of this game plan to develop a web of alliances that can check India's regional hegemony and connect China's economic and strategic interests throughout South Asia.

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The implications of China's play are major, from regional security considerations to global geopolitical orientations. Growing closeness of China and Pakistan and China's expanding footprint in other South Asian countries could change the strategic equations for India and its friends. Moreover, involving Afghanistan in the BRI has also the potential to re-map regional trade routes and economic dependencies by extending the CPEC with for which it is alleged that these could intensify China's influence in region.



China's strategic diplomacy towards South Asia it is all about playing the India-Qatar-China triangle. By deepening ties with Pakistan, engaging cautiously with India and broadening its network of regional partnerships, China aims to exercise influence and to shape the geopolitical trajectory of South Asia in line with its broader strategic interests.

Problem Statement

The complex India-Pakistan-China triangle dynamics form thorny challenges of China's strategic diplomacy in South Asia. Provoking India Although China has strengthened ties with Pakistan over decades, including through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), its relationship with India is skeptical given historical grievances and territorial spats. This double-edged method requires a subtle comprehension of regional geopolitics and juggling between conflicting interests. The changing security dynamics, including events like the May 2025 India-Pakistan War highlights the imperative for China to play a savvy hand at these implications and ensure stability in its neighborhood while furthering its interests.

Significance of Study

The South Asian Perspective to China's Strategic Diplomacy Understanding China's strategic diplomacy, in the South Asian context is important as this will enable an assessment to broader geopolitical shifts that are taking place in Asia. The relationship between China, India and Pakistan shapes regional security structures, economic corridors and diplomatic ties. This article throws light on how China's developments and policy making in the region, not only have a regional effect in South Asia but global implications of power as well. In looking into the manner in which China has dealt with this strategic triangle, the study contributes to

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international relations studies by way of insights about conflict resolution and economic conciliation as well as regarding the role of rising powers in fashioning regional orders.

Aim of Study

The objective of this work is to examine China's strategic dip- lomacy in South Asia, specifically its relations within the triangle India-Pakistan-China. The study also aims to analyse both the reasons for Chinese engagement, drivers of China's diplomacy and results of its actions in the region. Through an examination of these factors, the research hopes to develop a nuanced portrayal of China's role in South Asian regional geopolitics and its impact on broader regional and global stability.

Method

In this article, we frame strategic diplomacy of the China–India–Pakistan triangle from 2021 to 2025 using a qualitative research design. The study draws on a mixture of primary and secondary sources to offer a rich picture of China's diplomatic activities, policy adjustments, and regional engagements.

Primary data is collected by conducting an in depth analysis of official government documents, bilateral agreements and public statements issued by Chinese, Indian and Pakistani officials. These papers provide first-hand accounts of the strategic end-games and foreign policy priorities of each country. Secondary data comes from academic papers and policy briefs as well reports issued by credible think tanks and international organizations. The latter by no means detracts from the former; instead, however, the diverse range of sources they represent allows readers to draw out nuanced insights into the geopolitical relationships at play.

The themes are extracted by thematic analysis, if the pattern recurs, referring to multiple strategies and changes in China's diplomatic strategy. This approach allows information to be framed in terms of themes, such as economic ties, security pacts and regional sway. Through the comparative study of these themes in diverse time periods and diplomatic episodes, the article is designed to reveal China’s underlying motivations and intentions driving its strategic diplomacy in South Asia.

Results

Table 1: Economic Engagement Between China, Pakistan, and India (2021–2025)

Year	China–Pakistan Trade (USD billion)	China–India Trade (USD billion)	Major Economic Initiatives	Key Observations
2021	21.5	92.7	CPEC phase II launch	Strong China–Pakistan infrastructure focus
2022	23.1	101.2	Gwadar port development	China–India trade grows despite border tensions
2023	24.6	110.5	Energy corridor projects	Pakistan dependency on Chinese investment increases

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2024	26.3	118.7	Industrial parks expansion	Trade imbalance with India persists
2025	28.0	125.3	BRI regional integration	China consolidates South Asian economic influence

China has continued to enhance its economic engagement with both Pakistan and India, focusing on mega-infrastructure and trade projects with the former while holding important commercial relations with the latter. This dual strategy enables China to reinforce Pakistan's dependence on Chinese investments and at the same time maintain trade leverage over India [Bajwa 2025; Hudson Institute 2025].

Table 2: Military Cooperation and Security Alliances

Year	China–Pakistan Defense Deals	China–India Security Initiatives	Key Observations
2021	$2.8 billion	Joint border talks	China strengthens Pakistan military capabilities
2022	$3.0 billion	Limited military dialogue	India remains cautious about Chinese presence in South Asia
2023	$3.5 billion	Peacekeeping support discussions	Pakistan–China alliance deepens amid India–China border tension
2024	$3.8 billion	Strategic dialogue resumed	China balances Pakistan support and India engagement
2025	$4.2 billion	Border management talks	Military cooperation remains a strategic lever

China has gradually bolstered its military collaboration with Pakistan, focusing on defence pacts and strategic alliances, while India is cautiously involved in security talks with them. This asymmetry exemplifies how China uses Pakistan as a strategic partner for power balancing purposes against India, with reluctance to edge home this cooperation into altercation (ISDP, 2025; Modern Diplomacy, 2023).

Table 3: Diplomatic Initiatives and Multilateral Engagements

Year	Bilateral Summits	Trilateral Dialogues	Regional Forums	Key Observations
2021	4	1	SAARC, SCO	China focuses on multilateral engagement to ease tensions
2022	5	2	BRI conferences	Strengthening Pakistan ties while maintaining India dialogue
2023	6	2	SCO, BIMSTEC	China leverages regional forums for influence projection
2024	5	3	SAARC,	Diplomatic balancing between

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			SCO	India and Pakistan continues
2025	7	3	BRI, SCO	Increased multilateral engagement enhances China's strategic footprint

Multilateral engagement and diplomatic initiatives have allowed China to enhance its regional influence with a minimum of antagonism. Through engagements such as SAARC, SCO and BRI Summits alike China not only manages its relations with Pakistan and India but also showcases it strategic footprint (Chatham House, 2025; Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Table 4: Border Tensions and Conflict Management

Year	India–China Border Incidents	China–Pakistan Border Status	Key Observations
2021	3 minor clashes	Stable	India–China tension remains localized
2022	2 minor standoffs	Stable	China mitigates escalation through diplomacy
2023	1 major skirmish	Stable	Border incidents prompt renewed dialogue
2024	0	Stable	Partial border agreement signed
2025	1 minor clash	Stable	Strategic management of tensions continues

Sino-Indian border: Management and Stability The interpretation is: China achieved an acceptable outcome on managing the border with India, whilst maintaining stability along the China–Pakistan border. Diplomatic work — negotiations, dialogue processes — have mitigated the risk of escalation while shielding strategic interests in the region (ThePrint, 2025; Toda Peace Institute, 2025).

Table 5: Regional Influence and Strategic Outcomes

Indicator	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Key Observations
Economic Leverage	Medium	Medium-High	High	High	Very High	CPEC and trade projects strengthen influence
Military Presence	Medium	Medium	Medium-High	Medium-High	High	Defense cooperation with Pakistan expands
Diplomatic Reach	Medium	Medium-High	High	High	Very High	Multilateral engagement increases strategic footprint
India–China	Low	Low-	Medium	Medium	Medium	China maintains

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Strategic Balance		Medium				cautious engagement with India
South Asia Integration	Medium	Medium	Medium-High	High	Very High	BRI and regional initiatives consolidate influence

The evidence is clear that in economic, military and diplomatic terms China's stake in South Asia has grown, especially with its CPEC and regional integration projects. Simultaneously, cautious engagement with India is maintained by China to keep the strategic balance intact as well as its regional imprints alive (Hudson Institute, 2025; Modern Diplomacy, 2023).

Discussion

China's strategic diplomacy in South Asia has embodied a mixed approach, walking an economic-military-diplomatic tightrope with the India–Pakistan–China triangle. China's signature project the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is pivotal to China's strategic investment in the infrastructural development region and also benefitting bilateral trade. At the same time, China has been careful in terms of economic relations with India, indicating a more ambivalent approach to regional diplomacy (Hudson Institute, 2025).

Military Induction China's military support to Pakistan has strengthened and it has handed over major arms, including shipping of Hangor-class submarines, along with joint defense projects. Global implications These developments have global impact including on regional security dynamics, most notably India's (Reuters, 2025). On the other hand, China's interaction with India has mainly been a process of tension management; as is illustrated in the signing of a half measure border agreement back in October 2024 with intention to play for time and bring stability into the bilateral relationship (Chatham House, 2025).

Diplomatically, China has built rapport with other SA countries like Bangladesh and Afghanistan through the prospects of trilateral dialogue and infrastructure development. These undertakings represent China's desire to enhance its regional role and certainly offset the rise of India (Economic Times 2025). Nevertheless, China's deepening engagement with Pakistan is a matter of growing concern to India and it has been pushed to strategic adjustments and efforts at strengthening cooperation with other regional players (Le Monde, 2025).

China's regional balancing act was exposed once again in May 2025, when India and Pakistan went to war. China has traditionally mediated between the two parties in conflict in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, so its inability to help was part of an underlying theme about China's limitations as a mediating power—and how complicated or asymmetrically distributed China's relationship with both India and Pakistan (Belfer Center, 2025). This incident highlights the higher risk of instability in South Asian geopolitics, and is a test for China's diplomacy.

Beyond, it can be expected that China's strategic approach towards South Asia will evolve with the changes in its regional environment. Owing to the results of May 2025 conflict and post-conflict diplomatic initiatives, China's policy is contingent on

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shifting dynamic which requires adaptive strategies of connectedness-cum-separation that can serve its interest and stabilize the region (Pande, 2025).

Future Direction

Subsequent research should consider developments in Chinese South Asian relations, particularly as China becomes more active in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative and engagement with regional actors. When analyzing Chinese policies toward the emerging markets, especially its reactions to Indian regional initiatives, deeper insights into the current trends of power politics in this region are likely to be gained.

Limitations

The use of publicly available papers and secondary sources by this project could have restricted the richness of analysis, although it not premium classified documents or personal accounts. Further, the evolving geopolitical context may leave some of these changes out of reach within the time covered in the study.

Conclusion

China's strategic diplomacy in South Asia is a multidimensional activity which takes different forms depending on its ties with India and Pakistan. Although China has dramatically grown its influence through both economic and military activities, it is dealing with ongoing instability in the region. Ongoing surveillance and analysis is necessary to assess the consequences of China's moves for regional stability and global security.

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