

Pakistan-China Bloc: A New Geopolitical Axis

Pakistan and China are reportedly engaged in advanced discussions to establish a new regional organization, which could potentially replace the dormant South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Both Islamabad and Beijing are convinced that a new platform is essential for boosting regional integration and connectivity, particularly given SAARC's inactivity since 2016. The last SAARC summit was held in Kathmandu in 2014, and the planned 2016 summit in Islamabad was called off after India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Afghanistan declined to participate following a terrorist attack in Uri.

Member Countries and Formative Discussions

The proposed new bloc is envisioned to foster greater regional engagement through enhanced trade and connectivity. A recent trilateral meeting between Pakistan, China, and Bangladesh in Kunming, China, on June 19, 2025, was part of these diplomatic efforts. The ultimate goal of this meeting was to invite other South Asian countries that were part of SAARC to join the new grouping. Specifically, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Afghanistan are expected to be part of this new group.

However, Bangladesh's interim government has publicly dismissed the idea of any emerging alliance between Dhaka, Beijing, and Islamabad, stating that the Kunming meeting was "not political" and at an "official level" with "no element of formation of any alliance". Bangladesh's foreign affairs adviser also indicated that Dhaka's relationship with New Delhi is in a "re-adjustment" stage, with "no lack of goodwill" from their side.

Beyond this, a high-level diplomatic engagement involving China, Pakistan, and the Taliban occurred in Kabul in May 2025, where they agreed to expand trilateral cooperation. This marked the first such meeting hosted by the Taliban under the framework of trilateral foreign ministers' talks.

Connection to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The emergence of this potential new bloc appears deeply rooted in China's broader strategic goals, particularly its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Kunming meeting, for instance, followed a China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral in May that focused on expanding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan. Sources indicate that all three sides (China, Pakistan, and the Taliban) supported the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan. This initiative seeks to enhance infrastructure, boost connectivity, and draw Afghanistan further into the economic and strategic range of Beijing and Islamabad. China has significantly increased its footprint in South Asia through the BRI and is perceived as a key driver behind this new forum. A new bloc would offer China and Pakistan another multilateral platform to align on CPEC, infrastructure financing, and shared climate and trade challenges, outside the traditional SAARC framework.

Geopolitical Implications

The potential formation of this new bloc carries significant geopolitical implications, particularly for India.

- **Geopolitical Reshuffle:** It could further sideline India in its own neighborhood, leading to a "geopolitical reshuffle". Indian officials are likely to view this initiative as an attempt to create a "China-led counterweight to India's influence in the region".
- **Shifting Balance of Power:** The trilateral alignment involving China, Pakistan, and the Taliban signals a shifting balance of power in South and Central Asia, effectively sidelining Western actors and diminishing India's regional outreach.
- **India's Role in Afghanistan:** A crucial understanding to limit India's role in Afghanistan strictly to diplomatic functions, was reportedly reached among China, Pakistan, and the Taliban. It aimed to restrict the Indian influence in Afghanistan's political and security landscape. The Taliban reportedly committed to a position of neutrality and agreed to steer clear of India-led regional initiatives.
- **Deepening China-Pakistan Military Cooperation:** The proposed bloc builds on a long-standing "all-weather friendship", described as an "iron brotherhood" and "strategic partnership". China has been Pakistan's primary arms supplier, accounting for nearly 75% of all Pakistan's imported arms since 2015. This cooperation is driven by factors such as:
 - Geographic proximity and Pakistan's geostrategic location providing China a route to the sea bypassing maritime choke points.
 - A common strategic rivalry against India that is, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend".
 - China's support for Pakistan through domestic crises, economic challenges, and international isolation, acting as a barrier against US pressure.
 - Modernization of Pakistan's armed forces, helping Pakistan sustain its arms race with India.
 - Current geopolitical events, including deteriorating US-China and China-India relations, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, have affirmatively prompted this new partnership.
- **Evolution of Military Capabilities and Interoperability:** Since 2002, China and Pakistan have conducted annual military exercises (land, water, and air), increasing in complexity and compatibility. These include the Shaheen (Air Force), Sea Guardian (Navy), and Warrior (Army) series, which also involve intelligence-sharing components.
- **Technology Transfer and Joint Production:** Their cooperation includes joint production programmes like the JF-17 aircraft, Al Khalid Tanks, Naval Frigates, and Hangor Class submarines (important for Pakistan's sea-based nuclear capability). China also supplies advanced weapons such as UAVs (CH-4, Wing Loong-1), Surface-to-Air Missiles (LY-80, HQ-9), and howitzer guns (SH-15) for use along the Line of Control (LoC). Pakistan also anticipates acquiring fifth-generation combat aircraft and additional long-range air-defence systems from China.
- **Space Technology:** China has integrated Pakistan into its BeiDou Satellite Navigation system, enhancing Pakistan's precision strike capabilities. China also supplied the SLC-18 radar for tracking satellites and ballistic missiles. Technical training for Pakistan's national geodetic datum further aids military cooperation by providing accurate geological data for strategic planning and joint operations.
- **"Threshold Alliance":** India's military leadership acknowledges this deepening military cooperation as moving towards a "threshold alliance" which is more advanced than mere defence cooperation agreements, but still not a formal military alliance.
- **Two-Front Threat to India:** India's military leadership often acknowledges the two-front threat posed by the collaborative and covert approaches from China and Pakistan. This implies potential for simultaneous conflicts or strategic diversions during India-Pakistan or India-China confrontations. The protection of Chinese interests in CPEC, particularly in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK), could trigger China's military involvement against India.

- **Non-Kinetic Warfare:** The racial and linguistic similarities between India and Pakistan, coupled with Chinese technological assistance, could offer a unique leverage for China-Pakistan in propaganda warfare against India.
- **Chinese Private Security Companies:** The increasing attacks on Chinese personnel and CPEC infrastructure in Pakistan may lead Beijing to push for fewer restrictions on its PSCs operating in Pakistan. This could result in an increased presence of Chinese security forces under the guise of PSCs, which India might perceive as a strategic encroachment, further escalating regional tensions.

Challenges to the Pakistan-China Military Partnership

Despite the deepening ties, several challenges could impact the sustainability of the China-Pakistan military partnership:

- **Bangladesh's Dismissal:** Bangladesh has already denied forming any alliance, which adds a layer of uncertainty to the proposed bloc's expansion.
- **Skepticism over CPEC Success:** The Chinese strategic community has shown little confidence in CPEC's success due to Pakistan's economic instability, security issues, and China's own economic slowdown.
- **Increased Instability in South Asia:** Pakistan's ongoing multiple crises have increased Chinese influence, potentially limiting Pakistan's ability to normalize relations with India, thus posing a challenge to regional stability.
- **Pakistan's Western Allies:** Pakistan historically seeks to balance its relationships between Western allies and China. This dilemma continues to pose a challenge to the "threshold" military alliance.
- **Pakistan's Growing Geostategic Irrelevance:** Shifts in global geopolitics, including US-China competition and Pakistan's strained relations with Afghanistan, have reduced Pakistan's geostrategic sway.
- **Economic Imbalances:** The vast economic disparity between China and Pakistan, coupled with potential trade conflicts and Pakistan's reliance on international financial institutions, could strain the relationship.
- **Anti-China Terrorism:** Security threats to Chinese personnel and CPEC infrastructure from jihadist groups in Pakistan could strain trust and potentially lead to China withholding advanced technology if Pakistan is unable to manage these threats.

India's Next Steps

The sources suggest several strategic responses for India in light of this evolving geopolitical axis:

- **Prepare for a Two-Front War:** India must seriously consider the possibility of a two-front challenge from China and Pakistan, both in the form of stealth or collaboration. This requires permanent semi-mobilization, including military buildup, increased troop numbers, and modernization to address vulnerabilities like insufficient ammunition and a shrinking fighter jets.
- **Intensify Diplomatic Engagement and Alliances:** India should strengthen alliances with other nations that are invested in maintaining stability in South Asia. This includes engaging with global and regional powers and exploring partnerships with countries concerned about China's

potential naval presence at Gwadar Port. In the past, when SAARC stalled, India turned to smaller sub-regional pacts like the BBIN corridor.

- **Strengthen Internal Security and Counter-Terrorism:** India needs to enhance its internal security measures and counter-terrorism efforts, addressing vulnerabilities and strengthening intelligence capabilities.
- **Reshape Deterrence Posture:** India needs to modify its deterrence position, especially after incidents like Doklam (2017) and Galwan Valley (2020). Reviving diplomacy remains a key component of a comprehensive deterrence strategy, even with limited or no diplomatic engagement with the hostiles.
- **Non-Kinetic Domain Collaboration:** India should explore and understand the extent of China-Pakistan collaboration in the non-kinetic domain (e.g., information warfare) to build strong defenses.
- **Establish Dedicated Research Teams:** A clear understanding of China-Pakistan military cooperation, including joint exercises, agreements, and technological advancements, is vital. A dedicated research team should continuously assess how this partnership might alter the regional balance of power and potentially target other regional countries.
- **Focus on Economic and Infrastructure Development:** Alongside military capabilities, India should focus on economic growth and infrastructure development, particularly in border areas, to boost economic resilience and gain strategic advantages.
- **Enhance Public Awareness and Policy Communication:** The Indian government should ensure clear communication of its national security policies and strategies to gain broader public support.

Conclusion

The proposed Pakistan-China bloc, in addition to deepening military cooperation between them, presents a significant reshaping of the geopolitical landscape in South Asia. This emerging axis which is driven by shared strategic interests and China's expanding regional influence via the Belt and Road Initiative, poses a diverse challenges to India's security and regional standing. The "threshold alliance" between Beijing and Islamabad, including advanced arms transfers, joint military exercises, and strategic coordination, signals a potential for coordinated actions that could compel India to manage a complicated two-front scenario.

To navigate this, India's strategic response requires a comprehensive and adaptable approach. This includes robust military preparedness, active diplomacy with regional and global partners, strengthening internal security, modifying its deterrence position, and developing a deeper understanding of its opponents' capabilities in both kinetic and non-kinetic domains. India must carefully plan its path in this shifting environment, ensuring that its national security interests are safeguarded while seeking stability. This situation seems similar to more of a chess game where the opponent has introduced a powerful new piece, forcing India to rethink its entire strategy, not just for the immediate move but for the whole game.

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