

## 9TH CHINA-SOUTH ASIA EXPOSITION – INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

NEWS: Bangladesh, China and Pakistan held an informal trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the **9th China-South Asia Exposition** and the 6th China-South Asia Cooperation meeting in Kunming.

### WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

#### Overview of the Trilateral Engagement

- **Recent Developments:**  
China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh recently held a trilateral meeting, exchanging views based on **mutual trust, understanding**, and a **shared vision** for **regional peace, prosperity, and stability**.
- **Identified Areas of Cooperation:**  
The countries outlined key collaborative domains:
  - **Infrastructure and connectivity**
  - **Trade and investment**
  - **Healthcare and agriculture**
  - **Information and Communication Technology (ICT)**
  - **Maritime cooperation**
  - **Disaster preparedness**
  - **Climate change mitigation**

### Why Are These Countries Coming Closer?

#### 1. China's Strategic Objectives

- **Expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):**  
China is integrating South Asian nations into the BRI by funding large-scale **infrastructure and trade corridors**, aiming to establish long-term economic and strategic influence.
- **Counterbalancing the Indo-Pacific Strategy:**  
The trilateral serves as a soft attempt to **counterbalance the Indo-Pacific security architecture**, including groupings like **QUAD** (India, US, Japan, Australia), which China perceives as containment.

#### 2. Pakistan's Motivations

- **Addressing Regional Isolation:**  
Facing growing **diplomatic and economic isolation** in South Asia and strained ties with many neighbors, Pakistan seeks to **deepen its alignment with China**.
- **Reclaiming Regional Leverage:**  
By including **Bangladesh**, Pakistan attempts to **dilute Indian influence** in the region and **reopen regional channels** where India–Pakistan tensions had stalled progress (e.g., SAARC).

### 3. Bangladesh's Calculated Hedging Strategy

- **Balancing Relations Between India and China:**  
While traditionally close to India, Bangladesh is adopting a **hedging approach** by **expanding economic ties with China**, avoiding over-dependence on either power.
- **Attraction of Chinese Investment:**  
China has become **Bangladesh's largest trading partner** and **top source of FDI**, especially in key sectors like **energy, roads, ports, and digital infrastructure**.

## Geopolitical Implications of the Trilateral

### 1. Rise of a Continental Bloc in South Asia

- The trilateral has the potential to evolve into a **China-dominated strategic bloc**, operating in **parallel** to India-led platforms such as **BIMSTEC, BBIN, and IORA**.

### 2. Chinese Maritime Entry into the Bay of Bengal

- If cooperation extends into **maritime domains**, especially in the **Bay of Bengal**, it could represent a **major strategic gain for China**, expanding its naval footprint into India's maritime backyard.

### 3. Erosion of SAARC's Relevance

- With **SAARC paralysed** due to persistent India–Pakistan tensions, China is positioning this trilateral format as an **alternative platform** to **shape regional cooperation** on its own terms.

### 4. Risk of Strategic Infrastructure Use

- China's investment in ports like **Chittagong (Bangladesh)** and **Gwadar (Pakistan)**, while civilian in nature, may support **dual-use military logistics** in the future — potentially contributing to a '**String of Pearls**' **encirclement strategy** targeting India.

## Way Forward for India

### 1. Revitalising Regional Multilateralism

- India must actively **strengthen sub-regional groupings** like:

- **BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative)**
- **BBIN (Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal)**
- **IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association)**  
These platforms can **promote economic integration, connectivity, and regional leadership**, reducing dependency on Chinese-backed frameworks.

## 2. Recalibrating the Neighbourhood First Policy

- A renewed strategic framework should involve:
  - **Predictable and timely economic assistance**
  - **Respect for sovereignty and partnership equality**
  - **Collaborative security initiatives**  
These steps can help counter China's **transactional and debt-driven diplomacy** in the region.

## 3. Enhancing India's Maritime Posture

- India should deepen its engagement in maritime affairs by:
  - Expanding the **Sagarmala Project** to strengthen port infrastructure.
  - Accelerating **Project Mausam** for cultural and maritime cooperation.
  - Strengthening **QUAD naval exercises** and partnerships with **Indian Ocean littorals** (e.g., Seychelles, Mauritius, Indonesia).
  - Investing in **maritime domain awareness** and **coastal surveillance systems**.

## Concluding Remarks

- The **China–Pakistan–Bangladesh trilateral** reflects **China's evolving strategy** to reshape **South Asia's geopolitical architecture** through infrastructure diplomacy, economic dependency, and soft strategic alignments.
- India must respond with a **balanced and multi-dimensional strategy** that blends:
  - **Principled diplomacy** (based on trust and mutual growth),
  - **Development-led partnerships** (including connectivity, healthcare, education), and
  - **Robust security cooperation** (especially in the maritime domain),  
to **preserve its strategic leadership**, uphold regional stability, and ensure **inclusive growth** in the Indo-Pacific.

Source: <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/bangladesh-joins-tri-nation-meeting-with-china-pakistan-in-kunming/>