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Evolution of China–Pakistan Strategic Relations and Their Implications for India's Foreign Policy After 1990: A Balance of Power Perspective

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Abstract

The partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan is among the most durable strategic alignments in contemporary world politics, and its consolidation after 1990 has reshaped the security environment within which India conducts its foreign policy. This paper examines how the deepening of Sino-Pakistani cooperation across the military, nuclear, economic, and diplomatic domains has influenced the formulation and evolution of Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War period. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in documentary analysis, the study interprets scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed research, official government publications, and credible reportage through the analytical lens of balance-of-power theory. It traces the transformation of the partnership from a Cold War alignment of convenience into a comprehensive strategic relationship, and it reads India's responses as a coherent programmer of internal and external balancing encompassing defense modernization, the diversification of strategic partnerships, maritime engagement, and multilateral diplomacy. The analysis finds that the China–Pakistan axis operates not as a series of discrete bilateral cooperation's but as an integrated structural pressure whose cumulative effect has been to accelerate India's departure from non-alignment towards a more proactive, multi-aligned strategic posture. In advancing an integrated, theory-guided account of a relationship most often examined in fragments, the study contributes to the scholarship on South Asian security, Indian foreign policy, and the application of balance-of-power reasoning to a nuclearized regional triangle.

Keywords: China–Pakistan relations; India's foreign policy; balance of power; South Asian security; CPEC; strategic triangle

Introduction

The strategic configuration of contemporary South Asia cannot be adequately understood without reference to the enduring partnership between China and Pakistan. Over seven decades this relationship has matured from a limited diplomatic engagement into a consequential strategic alignment extending across defence, diplomacy, trade, infrastructure, nuclear cooperation, and regional security, widely described as an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership (Small, 2015; G. Ali, 2017). Unlike alignments sustained principally by ideological affinity or commercial calculation, the partnership rests upon converging strategic objectives and complementary security concerns, and its institutionalisation has given it a stability that survives changes in leadership (Mohsin et al., 2025). Indian policymakers have consequently come to interpret it less as a conventional bilateral alliance than as a structural factor conditioning the distribution of power in South Asia.

These concerns acquired a sharper character after 1990. The end of the Cold War dismantled the bipolar order that had governed South Asian alignments and compelled the states of the region to reassess their priorities (Faiz et al., 2025). For India, the economic liberalisation of 1991 and the gradual movement from non-alignment towards strategic autonomy coincided with the rapid rise of China; for Pakistan, the erosion of its value to the United States following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan deepened its reliance upon Beijing as a stable and unconditional partner. The nuclear tests of 1998 then institutionalised deterrence,

while the Kargil conflict of 1999 and the security realignments that followed the attacks of 11 September 2001 reinforced the strategic value of cooperation between Beijing and Islamabad (Sumbal et al., 2025). The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and its flagship component, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), carried cooperation into infrastructure, energy, and connectivity, transforming a security-oriented partnership into a comprehensive strategic relationship.

Despite a substantial body of scholarship, the cumulative influence of this partnership on India's foreign policy remains insufficiently understood. Much of the existing literature examines the political, military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of the relationship in relative isolation rather than as an integrated system whose effects upon India are cumulative (S. Ali & Khan, 2025), and much of it predates the constitutional reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019 and the Galwan Valley clashes of 2020. The research problem addressed here therefore concerns how the deepening strategic, military, nuclear, economic, and diplomatic partnership between China and Pakistan after 1990 has shaped the formulation and evolution of India's foreign policy, and whether that influence has produced continuity or change in Indian strategic conduct.

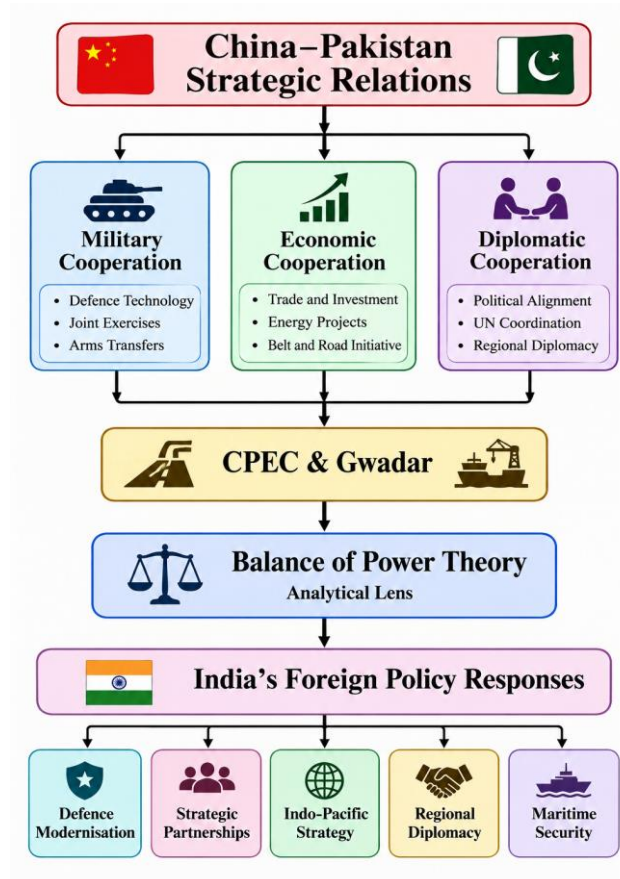
The study pursues four interrelated objectives: to review the evolution of Sino-Pakistani relations from 1990 onwards and the constraints that qualify them; to examine the economic, strategic, and diplomatic dimensions of the partnership and the impact of its military and nuclear cooperation on India's security; to assess the significance of China's presence in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir through CPEC and of China's growing influence across South Asia; and to explain the reasons underlying continuity and change in India's foreign policy towards both states. Correspondingly, it asks how the relationship has evolved after 1990 (RQ1), what its principal areas of cooperation are (RQ2), how these developments have affected India's strategic interests (RQ3), what measures India has

adopted in response (RQ4), and what future challenges and opportunities the partnership presents (RQ5).

The inquiry is guided by the realist balance-of-power approach, which holds that states in an anarchic system pursue security by preventing any rival from attaining preponderance and by forming partnerships to offset perceived threats. The China–Pakistan–India triangle is an instructive setting for this framework, since Pakistan's alignment with China may be understood as an effort to counterbalance India's growing capabilities, China's support for Pakistan as a means of sustaining a regional balance favourable to Beijing, and India's engagement with the Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as balancing responses of its own. The study's guiding proposition is that Sino-Pakistani cooperation operates not as a set of discrete bilateral engagements but as a cumulative structural pressure on India, to which India has responded through a corresponding programme of balancing.

The contribution of the study is threefold. Theoretically, it demonstrates how balance-of-power reasoning may be extended to a tightly coupled, nuclearised regional triangle rather than the great-power contexts in which the theory was originally elaborated. Empirically, it consolidates evidence dispersed across defence, nuclear cooperation, economic connectivity, and diplomacy into a coherent interpretation of India's strategic conduct. In policy terms, it clarifies the logic and constraints of India's post-1990 recalibration. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that organises the inquiry. The multidimensional partnership, comprising military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation and reinforced by CPEC and the development of Gwadar Port, constitutes the principal explanatory dimension; balance-of-power theory serves as the analytical lens; and India's responses in defence modernisation, strategic partnerships, Indo-Pacific strategy, regional diplomacy, and maritime security are interpreted as balancing strategies.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



Literature Review

The relevant scholarship spans diplomatic history, strategic theory, and military, nuclear, and policy analysis, and reflects divergent Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, and Western vantage points. It is reviewed thematically below.

1. China–Pakistan Strategic Relations and Their Historical Evolution

The strategic literature is anchored by Small (2015), whose account, drawing on field research and interviews across Beijing, Islamabad, and New Delhi, argues that the alignment has evolved from a security-driven arrangement into a comprehensive partnership spanning military, political, economic, and infrastructural cooperation. G. Ali (2017), writing from a Pakistani scholarly perspective, locates its durability in institutional cooperation and converging strategic interests. The two agree that the partnership rests on structural foundations rather than sentiment, but they diverge in emphasis: Small foregrounds its strategic instrumentality for both parties, whereas Ali stresses its institutional embeddedness and mutual trust. Recent journal scholarship reinforces this reading, showing economic and security cooperation to be mutually

reinforcing (Mohsin et al., 2025) and tracing the continuity of the all-weather friendship (Aman & Yaseen, 2025). Historically, Khan and Ilmas (2024) emphasise the formative significance of the 1962 Sino-Indian war and the 1963 boundary agreement in converting a cautious diplomatic acquaintance into a strategic alignment, while Ganguly (2001) shows that the India–Pakistan rivalry is rooted not only in territorial dispute but in competing national identities and a persistent security dilemma.

The limitations of this body of work are temporal and analytical rather than interpretive. Small's study predates the events of 2019–2020 and the maturation of the Quad; Ganguly's analysis, concluding around 1999, necessarily omits the BRI, CPEC, and the Indo-Pacific turn; and much recent journal literature remains descriptive and under-theorised, while historical accounts favour narrative reconstruction over explanation. The literature thus establishes that the partnership is durable and comprehensive, but it stops short of theorising how that partnership transmits pressure to a third party.

2. Military, Nuclear, and Economic Cooperation

On the military dimension, Hussain and Yasir (2025) document China's position as Pakistan's predominant supplier of conventional armaments and the progression of cooperation from finished-platform transfers towards co-production and defence-industrial collaboration, while Fair (2014) locates Pakistan's reliance on China in a strategic culture that regards India as a permanent rival. On the nuclear dimension, Sumbal et al. (2025) trace the nuclearisation of South Asia and the external assistance that shaped it, and Ganguly and Kapur (2010) frame the debate over whether nuclear weapons have stabilised or destabilised the subcontinent. On the economic dimension, Gholizadeh et al. (2020) advance a geoeconomic reading in which Pakistan's geography furnishes China with a strategic corridor to the Arabian Sea, and Imran et al. (2025) extend this argument to Gwadar and its dual-use potential.

This literature is strong on the internal mechanics of the partnership but comparatively weak on their external consequences. The military, nuclear, and economic strands are typically examined in isolation, so that the cumulative pressure they exert upon India is rarely assessed as a whole. Garver's (2001) interpretation of China's Pakistan policy as a long-term instrument for balancing India is a notable exception, though it too predates the corridor era.

3. India's Foreign Policy After 1990

The literature on India's foreign policy after 1990 documents a pronounced shift from non-alignment towards a more pragmatic and diversified strategic posture. Menon (2016), writing as a former practitioner, places the management of the China relationship, and by extension the China-Pakistan nexus, at the centre of India's post-Cold War dilemmas and interprets Indian policy as the product of deliberate choice rather than structural inevitability. Cohen (2001) traces the gradual displacement of Nehruvian idealism by an interest-based conception of national security and status. Recent scholarship examines its instruments: India's movement within the Quad from hesitation towards proactivity (Nga et al., 2025), its Indian Ocean strategy (Manikumar et al., 2023), and the deepening India-United States relationship within a broader diversification of partnerships (Banerjee, 2023; Yadav, 2025). The recurring interpretive thread is that India's strategic adaptation has been driven substantially, though not exclusively, by the China-Pakistan alignment. Yet the connection is more often asserted than demonstrated: the literature supplies rich evidence of what India has

done without explaining systematically how each phase of Sino-Pakistani cooperation elicited a corresponding response.

4. Theoretical Literature and Research Gap

The theoretical resources for connecting these bodies of work are well established: Waltz (1979) supplies the structural account of how states pursue security through internal balancing, the domestic accumulation of capability, and external balancing, the formation of alliances and partnerships. Mearsheimer (2001) extends this logic to explain how rising powers seek regional dominance while rivals respond through coalition-building. These works furnish a systematic basis for interpreting China's cultivation of Pakistan and India's countervailing conduct, yet neither engages the contemporary South Asian triangle in empirical detail.

Taken together, the literature exhibits a clear research gap. First, it examines the military, nuclear, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of the partnership largely separately, and therefore does not sufficiently integrate their cumulative effect on India. Second, it contains temporal gaps, since much of it is overtaken by the developments of 2019 and 2020. Third, it separates theoretically rich but empirically thin work from empirically detailed but under-theorised studies. Fourth, it does not systematically connect successive phases of China-Pakistan cooperation with India's corresponding foreign-policy responses. The present study addresses this gap by examining the partnership as a multidimensional phenomenon whose strands exert a cumulative effect upon India, by interpreting that effect through a sustained application of balance-of-power theory, and by integrating the partnership's historical development with recent geopolitical events on the basis of cross-verified scholarly, official, and documentary sources.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative, documentary methodology of the underlying doctoral research, oriented towards interpreting meaning, sequence, and significance in state behaviour rather than measuring statistical regularities.

1. Research Philosophy and Design

The study is situated within an interpretivist orientation, which proceeds from the premise that political phenomena acquire their meaning within a specific historical and strategic context and that the researcher's task is to reconstruct and interpret that meaning. It suits questions of how and why the partnership has influenced India's foreign policy, which call for interpretation of motive, perception,

and response, and it accommodates the realist framework, which is used here as an analytical lens rather than a source of predictive law. The research follows a qualitative, historical-comparative case-study design, treating the China–Pakistan–India strategic relationship as the single principal case. The historical component traces the partnership across successive phases, from the post-Cold War transformation through nuclearisation to the corridor era, while the comparative component assesses India's responses across these phases so that patterns of continuity and change can be identified.

2. Data Sources

The study draws on primary and secondary documentary sources, a combination that enables triangulation. Primary sources comprise publicly available official material, including policy documents, official statements, defence publications, treaties, and parliamentary records; representative of this category are the annual reports of the Ministry of External Affairs (2023) and the Ministry of Defence (2023), together with external assessments such as the report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (2023) on Chinese military developments and the strategic data compiled by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2023). Secondary sources comprise scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed articles, think-tank analyses, and reputable reportage. Preference has been given to recent and credible sources, material from different categories has been cross-verified before incorporation, and Indian, Chinese, Pakistani, and Western sources have been deliberately included to mitigate the national bias that any single perspective would introduce.

3. Documentary Analysis

The evidence is examined through qualitative documentary analysis supported by historical-

comparative interpretation. The material is first organised into thematic areas: the historical evolution of the partnership, its military and nuclear collaboration, its economic and connectivity dimension, China's expanding influence in South Asia, and the corresponding adjustments in India's foreign and security policy. The thematic reading is then combined with a historical-comparative interpretation that examines how each phase of the partnership elicited a corresponding balancing response from India. Evidence from independent sources is triangulated throughout, which, with the consistent application of the framework across all phases, underpins validity; reliability rests on the traceability of the documentary record. Because the study relies exclusively on publicly available material rather than human participants, formal ethical clearance is not applicable, though the obligations of accurate attribution and fair representation are observed. A documentary methodology nonetheless depends upon the completeness of the available record, and certain aspects of defence and intelligence cooperation remain outside the public domain; triangulation limits, but cannot wholly eliminate, this constraint.

Findings and Analysis

The findings are presented in two parts. Section 4.1 analyses the evolution of the China–Pakistan partnership across four interlocking phases, and Section 4.2 analyses India's corresponding responses. In each case the analysis connects a development in the partnership to its strategic implication, the pressure it placed on India, India's response, and its interpretation through balance-of-power theory. Figure 2 summarises the major milestones in the partnership between 1990 and 2025.

Figure 2: Timeline of Major Developments in China–Pakistan Strategic Relations (1990–2025)



Evolution of China–Pakistan Strategic Relations

1.1 Post-Cold War Period

The collapse of the Soviet Union produced a structural rupture that operated on both partners simultaneously. For Pakistan, the loss of its strategic value to the United States following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, compounded by the sanctions imposed under the Pressler Amendment, sharply intensified its dependence on China (Faiz et al., 2025). For China, the same period brought accelerated economic reform and military modernisation that expanded its capacity to project influence. This coincidence transformed the basis of the partnership: a largely defensive arrangement directed against a common adversary acquired the character of a vehicle for the projection of Chinese strategic interest across South Asia and towards the Indian Ocean. Read through the balance-of-power framework, this is the point at which the relationship began to function as external balancing in the fullest sense. Pakistan's deepening reliance on Beijing was not merely a passive consequence of American withdrawal but an active choice to offset India's conventional and demographic preponderance through alignment with a rising great power

(Waltz, 1979). This locates the origin of India's post-Cold War recalibration in a structural shift predating the corridor era, and refines the historical scholarship: whereas Khan and Ilmas (2024) emphasise the formative continuity of the relationship, the evidence of this phase suggests a qualitative discontinuity in which the partnership's strategic ambition expanded even as its institutional forms persisted.

1.2 Nuclear Period

The nuclearisation of South Asia, formalised by the tests of May 1998, is in some respects the most consequential phase, and the documentary literature identifies Chinese assistance as material to Pakistan's crossing of the nuclear threshold. The scholarship records assistance extending to scientific expertise, fissile-material technology, and, through the transfer of solid-fuel missile systems, a credible delivery capability. By enabling Pakistan to acquire a nuclear deterrent, China altered the structure of the South Asian security order entrenching a trilateral nuclear dynamic in which deterrence relationships became tightly coupled. Whether nuclearisation has been stabilising remains contested (Ganguly & Kapur, 2010), but the Kargil conflict of 1999, within a year of the tests, lends weight to the destabilising

reading and indicates that the nuclear dimension complicated rather than simplified India's deterrence calculus. Interpreted through the framework, Chinese nuclear assistance functioned as a decisive act of external balancing that constrained India's freedom of action and compelled a corresponding adjustment in its strategic posture; it became the hard core around which a broader architecture of cooperation was subsequently organised.

1.3 Strategic, Economic, and Diplomatic Cooperation

The partnership was then progressively institutionalised through formal designations culminating in the all-weather strategic cooperative partnership and accompanied by routine high-level exchanges (Mohsin et al., 2025). Its most consequential expression was the incorporation of economic connectivity into the strategic foundations of the relationship through the BRI and CPEC. Consistent with the geoeconomic readings reviewed earlier (Gholizadeh et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2025), the corridor offers China a route to the Arabian Sea that reduces its dependence on the Strait of Malacca, while Gwadar carries latent military utility. The significance of this phase is that it fused developmental and geopolitical objectives within a single framework, blurring the distinction between economic and strategic cooperation; the Indian documentary record accordingly treats the corridor as a sovereignty and security concern rather than a purely commercial matter. Because the project passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, it also introduces a territorial dimension that intersects with India's legal claims and bears directly on the Kashmir dispute. Institutionalisation also extended to diplomatic coordination, through which China has shielded Pakistan in multilateral forums (Section 4.2.1). Within the balance-of-power framework, this phase represents the maturation of the partnership from transactional exchanges into a durable structural alignment, whose comprehensiveness renders its pressure upon India cumulative rather than discrete.

1.4 Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation is the historical core of the partnership and, for India, its most consequential element. Hussain and Yasir (2025) trace the progression of cooperation from the transfer of finished platforms towards co-production arrangements, the joint establishment of ordnance facilities, and sustained technical assistance to Pakistan's defence-industrial base. This progression moved the relationship beyond dependency towards interoperability, enabling

Pakistan to modernise and sustain critical capabilities despite economic constraint, an arrangement whose durability Fair (2014) attributes to Pakistan's strategic culture. The strategic implication is the consolidation of what Indian defence planning treats as a two-front contingency, in which coordination between China and Pakistan during periods of regional tension can no longer be discounted. Defence cooperation is therefore the most direct mechanism through which the partnership transmits pressure to India. Taken together, the four phases indicate that the evolution of the partnership after 1990 was not a linear accumulation of bilateral cooperation but a progressive structural consolidation that steadily narrowed India's strategic latitude.

India's Foreign Policy Responses

India's foreign policy after 1990 is most coherently interpreted as a programme of balancing conducted across several mutually reinforcing domains, each corresponding to a dimension of the partnership analysed above.

2.1 Diplomatic Responses

India's diplomatic conduct shows a deliberate movement from the reticence of non-alignment towards assertive multi-alignment, targeted at the diplomatic dimension of the partnership. The documentary evidence records Beijing raising the status of Jammu and Kashmir at the United Nations Security Council following India's constitutional reorganisation of the territory in 2019 and repeatedly obstructing the designation of Pakistan-based individuals under the Council's counter-terrorism regime. India's sustained engagement at the United Nations, the Financial Action Task Force, and other forums to expose cross-border terrorism and contest the corridor's route through disputed territory is best interpreted as an effort to deny its adversaries the diplomatic returns of their alignment. Through the balance-of-power framework, this conduct represents external balancing pursued by diplomatic means, in which coalition-building and the pursuit of Security Council reform serve to enhance India's status and resist diplomatic isolation.

2.2 Defence Modernisation

India's defence modernisation is most persuasively analysed as internal balancing. The deepening of China-Pakistan military and nuclear cooperation reinforced the doctrinal premise of a two-front contingency and lent urgency to the modernisation of India's conventional and strategic forces, the expansion of its naval capabilities, and the consolidation of its nuclear deterrent. The evidence indicates that India increased its defence effort in

response to the alignment and recalibrated its strategic posture following Pakistan's nuclearisation. This response addresses the partnership where its effect is greatest, through indigenous capability, the instrument least vulnerable to diplomatic obstruction. Defence modernisation thus supplies the material foundation that diplomatic balancing presupposes. Whereas studies such as Hussain and Yasir (2025) examine Pakistan's modernisation as an outcome of Chinese assistance, the present reading treats India's countervailing modernisation as the reciprocal half of a single balancing dynamic.

2.3 Strategic Partnerships

Internal balancing has limits against a partnership that couples a rising great power with a determined regional rival, and India's cultivation of strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, France, and other partners constitutes the clearest instance of external balancing in its post-1990 conduct. Its logic is aggregation: India has sought a countervailing coalition to offset an asymmetry it cannot redress alone. The progression of the India–United States defence relationship through the foundational agreements, together with India's movement within the Quad from initial hesitation towards active participation, exemplifies this logic (Nga et al., 2025; Banerjee, 2023; Yadav, 2025). This is the archetypal external-balancing response that Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001) associate with states confronting a rising power and its regional partner. It also connects the maritime dimension of the partnership, particularly China's growing presence at Gwadar and across the Indian Ocean, to India's turn towards partners capable of contesting that presence, a connection the corridor-focused literature registers but rarely integrates with analysis of India's alignment behaviour.

2.4 Regional Diplomacy and the Indo-Pacific Dimension

India's regional diplomacy seeks to contest the partnership within the South Asian neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean, the spaces in which Chinese influence has expanded most rapidly. The documentary evidence records India pursuing counter-initiatives in connectivity, most notably the development of Chabahar Port as a riposte to Gwadar, alongside participation in regional groupings and the articulation of frameworks such as the Act East Policy and the SAGAR doctrine (Manikumar et al., 2023). These initiatives seek to prevent the strategic encirclement that a network of Chinese-developed facilities along the northern

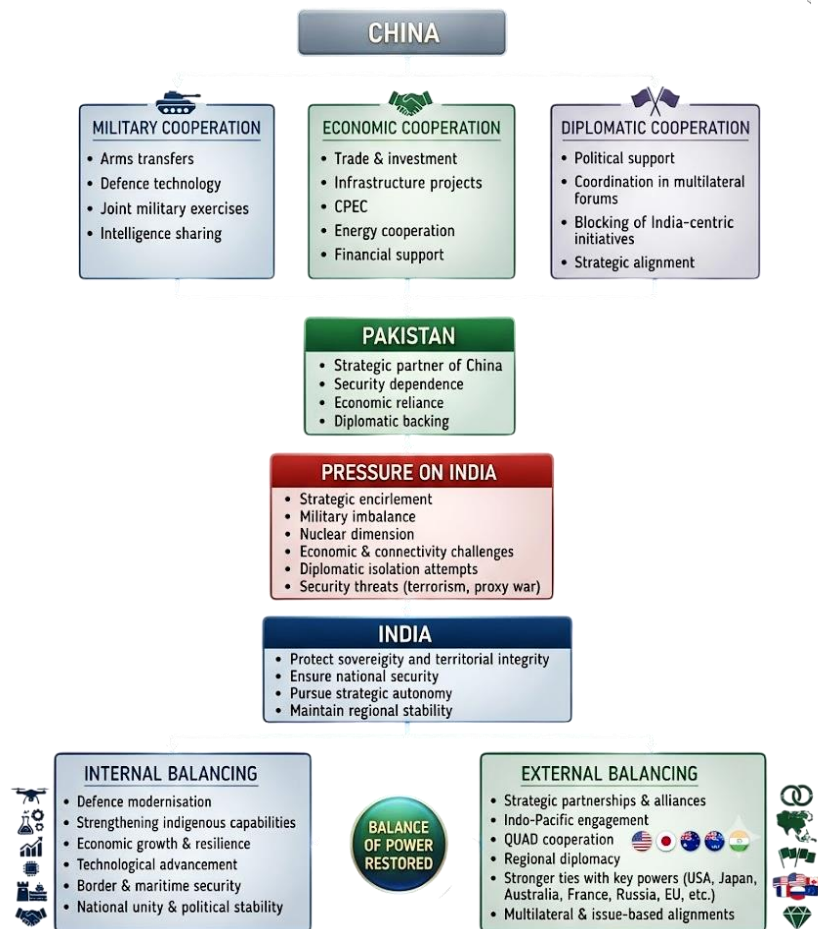
Indian Ocean littoral would otherwise impose. They offset the corridor by constructing alternatives rather than by direct opposition, and they combine internal and external balancing, since alternative corridors extend Indian capability while regional partnerships enlist the cooperation of others. Taken together, the four domains indicate that India's foreign policy after 1990 is not a collection of ad hoc measures but a coherent, multidimensional programme of balancing in which diplomatic, military, partnership, and regional instruments operate in concert.

Discussion

The findings yield a single integrated interpretation: the China–Pakistan partnership and India's foreign policy after 1990 are best understood as two halves of one balancing dynamic, in which a cumulative structural pressure and a coherent response are reciprocally constituted. The influence of the partnership is cumulative rather than additive. An additive account would pair each dimension with a separable Indian response; the findings resist that reading: India's responses operate in concert because the pressure they answer is itself integrated, its dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an effect that exceeds their sum.

Theoretically, the findings confirm the explanatory power of the distinction between internal and external balancing while refining its application. India's conduct maps closely onto Waltz's (1979) categories, and the aggregate pattern is consistent with Mearsheimer's (2001) expectation that a rising power and its regional partner will provoke countervailing coalition-building. Yet the South Asian case qualifies the theory in an instructive respect. Classical balance-of-power reasoning was elaborated for a great-power system of broadly comparable units, whereas this triangle couples a global power with a regional state against a third party that is itself rising, under conditions of tightly coupled nuclear deterrence. That Chinese nuclear assistance constrained India's conventional latitude while the corridor fused economic and territorial pressure suggests that balancing here operates across a wider range of instruments than the theory's original formulation anticipated. The framework is thus supported but extended in reach. Figure 3 synthesises this interpretation, showing how China's military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation strengthens Pakistan's strategic position, generates pressure on India, and elicits internal and external balancing.

Figure 3: Balance of Power Mapping in the China–Pakistan–India Strategic Triangle



Positioned against the literature, the account corroborates the structural readings of Small (2015) and G. Ali (2017) and is consistent with Garver's (2001) interpretation of China's Pakistan policy as a long-term instrument for balancing India. It departs from prevailing scholarship by integrating the military, nuclear, and economic strands usually examined in isolation, thereby recovering an effect that disaggregated analysis cannot register. It also advances beyond the practitioner-centred account of Menon (2016) and the emerging-power narrative of Cohen (2001) by showing that India's strategic choices, though genuine choices, were structurally conditioned by the partnership. The tension between agency- and structure-centred accounts is thus addressed by showing how agency operated within, and in response to, structural pressure. The policy implications follow from the same logic and bear on RQ5. If the partnership exerts cumulative pressure, Indian responses conceived in isolation, whether a single defence acquisition, diplomatic initiative, or connectivity project, are unlikely to suffice unless coordinated within a coherent balancing strategy. The analysis suggests that the effectiveness of India's post-1990 conduct

has derived from its multidimensionality, and that preserving strategic autonomy depends on maintaining coordination across the diplomatic, military, partnership, and regional domains. Because the corridor fuses connectivity with territorial and maritime concern, India's counter-initiatives, including Chabahar and its Indian Ocean partnerships, should be assessed for their contribution to the wider balance rather than on commercial grounds alone. More broadly, India's movement from non-alignment towards multi-alignment is best explained as sustained structural balancing rather than a series of discrete policy shifts.

Conclusion

This study examined how the deepening strategic, military, nuclear, economic, and diplomatic partnership between China and Pakistan after 1990 has influenced the formulation and evolution of India's foreign policy. Using a qualitative documentary methodology and the lens of balance-of-power theory, it finds that the partnership has evolved from a Cold War alignment of convenience into a comprehensive strategic

relationship whose military, nuclear, economic, and diplomatic dimensions operate as an integrated whole; that these developments have narrowed India's strategic latitude and consolidated a two-front contingency; and that India has responded through a coordinated programme of diplomatic activism, defence modernisation, strategic partnerships, and regional diplomacy. The influence of the partnership is therefore cumulative rather than additive, and India's post-1990 conduct constitutes an integrated programme of internal and external balancing rather than a series of ad hoc measures.

Theoretically, the study confirms the explanatory value of the internal and external balancing distinction for the South Asian triangle and extends balance-of-power reasoning from the great-power system for which it was elaborated to a nuclearised regional configuration. Its principal contribution lies in integrating evidence dispersed across defence, nuclear cooperation, economic connectivity, and diplomacy into a single theory-guided account that is more current than much of the existing literature, thereby treating the triangle as a coherent analytical unit and explaining continuity and change in Indian foreign policy as functions of structural balancing.

The study is subject to limitations. Its reliance on publicly available documents means that its findings depend on the completeness of the accessible record, and aspects of defence, nuclear, and intelligence cooperation remain outside the public domain. Developments after the completion of the research may modify the picture presented, and the interpretive character of documentary analysis admits alternative readings of the same evidence. Future research might incorporate interview evidence, where access permits, to test these documentary findings; extend the analysis to other regional triangles to examine the applicability of balance-of-power reasoning to nuclearised configurations beyond South Asia; and track whether the balancing dynamic identified here persists, intensifies, or gives way to alternative patterns of engagement. India's strategic conduct after 1990 and the China-Pakistan partnership are, in the end, best comprehended together as a single balance-of-power dynamic.

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Conflicts of interest

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