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# A China - led trilateral nexus as India's new challenge

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## Context

- Last week, **China, Pakistan and Bangladesh** held their first **trilateral meeting** in Kunming, China. The discussions focused on furthering cooperation and exploring the possibilities of deeper engagement.
- This meeting closely follows **another trilateral meeting between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan**, held in May, with the aim of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and increasing cooperation.
- These trilaterals, led by China, come at a time of Pakistan's little relevance to the region, India's increasing relations with Afghanistan, and New Delhi's deteriorating ties with Bangladesh.
- The use of trilaterals underscores **China's fresh attempts at making Pakistan a stakeholder in the region and keeping New Delhi preoccupied with immediate concerns.**
- The **1962 war** between India and China has largely shaped regional alignments and geopolitics. Following the war, **China found Pakistan to be an ally** that could keep India engaged with immediate threats and limit it from challenging Beijing's interests, security, and status.
- On the other hand, Pakistan deemed China to be a country that would unquestionably offer economic and military assistance to support its aggression against India.
- To date, **Pakistan is highly dependent on China for assistance, investments and infrastructure** development. In fact, by the end of 2024, Pakistan had a loan of over \$29 billion from China.
- It is estimated that over 80% of Pakistan's arms imports are from China. In addition, **China has also shielded Pakistan-backed terrorists at the United Nations Security Council** and other multilateral platforms.
- **India's pragmatic engagement** and domestic politics of the region **have slowed down China's momentum in South Asia.**
- In the **Maldives**, Beijing appears reluctant to trust President Mohamed Muizzu and the country's economy, despite his initial anti-India rhetoric. **Mr. Muizzu has now turned to India to keep the country's economy afloat.**
- In **Nepal**, despite signing the framework for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation, **major differences** in funding remain unresolved and the progress of projects has been slow.
- In **Sri Lanka**, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake is developing **close ties with India** by respecting its redlines.
- In the case of **Bangladesh**, despite differences, **India has not hindered the trilateral energy cooperation with Nepal.**

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- The developments in the region demonstrate, once again, that **China, and not Pakistan, is India's biggest challenge.**
- With both Pakistan and China confronting a confident India, China sees an opportunity to challenge India through the trilateral nexus.
- At a time when India is seeking support from South Asian countries to fight terrorism, Chinese efforts will create new setbacks.
- South Asian countries will thus have to learn to balance between India and China, as Beijing uses Islamabad to create new complexities in the region.
- On its part, Delhi will have to continue to express redlines and convey the point that any misadventures by its neighbours could have severe economic, military, and political costs