

## India and Pakistan: Coping with China's Geopolitics

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### Summary

*Even as the contrasting approaches of India and Pakistan to China came into sharp relief during the inauguration of the Winter Olympics in Beijing this month, the larger dynamic of great power politics among the United States, Russia and China is complicating the foreign policies of Delhi and Islamabad. Both India and Pakistan have significant challenges ahead in adapting to the reordering of major power relations in the international system.*

The opening of the Winter Olympics in Beijing on 4 February 2022 highlighted not only the deepening conflict between China and the West but also revealed the new dilemmas of India and Pakistan in dealing with the rapidly changing great power politics. If the United States (US) and Europe boycotted the Winter Olympics, the Indian and Pakistani participation in these games underlined the different geopolitical imperatives guiding Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Imran Khan. Yet, India and Pakistan – whose relations with China are vastly different – cannot escape the consequences of China's new geopolitics marked by deepening tensions with the US and growing alignment with Russia.

Despite Delhi's troubled ties with Beijing since the military crisis in the Ladakh region that erupted in the spring of 2020, and the boycott of the Winter Olympics by its new partners in the West, India chose to participate in the games. It ruled out a high-level political presence and ordered its diplomats in Beijing to be present at the opening and closing ceremonies.

This decision was in tune with India's strategy of sustaining diplomatic engagement with China, while it sought to resolve the military crisis in Ladakh and imposed new constraints on the commercial relationship with Beijing. China's decision to nominate Qi Fabao, a regiment commander in the Galwan clashes with India in Ladakh in mid-June 2020, as the torchbearer for the Winter Olympics forced India to review its approach.

Delhi asked its diplomats to [pull out of the opening ceremony](#) while leaving its lone athlete to participate in the games. If Chinese President Xi Jinping chose to play to China's nationalist galleries, Modi has his own nationalist constituency to manage. Even as the Modi government quickly responded to Beijing's unacceptable move, it had also to fend off the domestic criticism of its China policy. Speaking in parliament, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi criticised the [Modi government's "blunder"](#) in bringing China and Pakistan closer and thereby worsening India's security environment. He claimed that the Congress had always managed to keep Beijing and Islamabad apart.

India's External Affairs Minister [S Jaishankar shot back](#) by pointing to the long-standing Sino-Pak strategic cooperation dating back to the Nehruvian era. He referred to the 1963 agreement between Pakistan and China on Kashmir, the construction of the Sino-Pak Karakoram Highway and their cooperation on nuclear weapons in the 1970s and unveiling of

the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in 2013. The crux of Jaishankar's argument was that the Congress governments had presided over the deepening strategic partnership between Beijing and Islamabad. Compounding India's problem with the growing depth of the Sino-Pak partnership is the rapid expansion of China's strategic partnership with Russia.

If India has learnt to manage the impact of China's enduring engagement with its regional adversary, Pakistan, it has a bigger task at hand in dealing with Beijing's new bonhomie with its major strategic partner – Moscow. In launching what is widely being termed as a new “United Front” against the West, [Xi and Russia's President Vladimir Putin](#) declared that the “Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation”. This intensifying partnership inevitably creates problems for Delhi.

India, which has seen its partnership with the US expand due to their shared interests in limiting Chinese dominance over Asia, will find the prospects for an effective Asian balance of power diminish amidst Russia's backing for China. Worse still, the growing tensions between Washington and Moscow over Ukraine are beginning to [cast a dark shadow](#) over India's partnership with Russia. Put simply, the emerging triangular dynamic between the US, Russia and China has begun to constrict India's room for geopolitical manoeuvre.

India's troubles with great power politics seem to offer no relief for Pakistan, which finds its own strategic space shrinking as the tensions between China and the US sharpen. To be sure, while the Winter Olympics added to the negativity in Sino-Indian relations, Khan's engagement with the Chinese leadership underlined their [shared perceptions on the Kashmir question](#) as well as a strong commitment to deepen bilateral partnership.

However, the stronger the ties with China, the greater Pakistan's challenges will be in rebuilding ties with Washington, which is locked in an escalating confrontation with Beijing. Pakistan, which facilitated the normalisation of US-China relations at the turn of the 1970s, enjoyed solid partnerships with both the US and China. If Washington referred to Islamabad as a major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally, Beijing referred to it as its “iron brother”.

Today, Islamabad is struggling to navigate the emerging tensions in US-China relations. Few in the world view with any seriousness Khan's claim that he can [help mediate between the US and China](#). His decision to [decline US President Joe Biden's invitation](#) to join a Democracy Summit in December 2021 and [back Chinese criticism](#) against the US effort to politicise the Winter Olympics point to a continuing tilt towards China.

While Khan publicly celebrates Pakistan's special relationship with China, voices allegedly within the Pakistan Army worry about the [overdependence on Beijing](#) and the long term dangers of alienating Washington. But Pakistan's ability to rebalance its ties with the US is undermined by its [growing economic dependence on China](#). The humiliating US retreat from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power in Kabul with Pakistan's help appear to have [souring the mood](#) in Washington towards Islamabad.

Managing the consequences of the unfolding great power conflicts would be hard for both Delhi and Islamabad. One way for them to improve their bargaining power with the US,

China and Russia would be to normalise their own bilateral relations. Although attractive in theory, the normalisation of Indo-Pak relations remains elusive for the moment.

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