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Beyond Rivalry: Lessons from China–India Trade For Pakistan–India Relations through Economic and Media Engagement

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Abstract

Owing to political rivalry, national security concerns, and the influence of hostile media narratives, relations between the two neighbors have become antagonistic. Meanwhile, the scenario of China-India relations is favorable despite having a long-standing territorial dispute. This eliminates the significance of economic bounds and good communication skills. The eye-opening lesson for Pakistan and India is to transcend zero-sum rivalry through economic engagement and the effective use of media diplomacy. Without a shadow of a doubt, there is distrust between Beijing and New Delhi, but they know the value of trade and a peaceful environment in the region. The same pattern can apply to the India and Pakistan case. These two neighbors can play such a vital role in the region. Through the media, construct new and peaceful approaches for future minds. Indeed, the press is a powerful way to connect people-to-people. Media can be utilized as a wonderful instrument to create a national agenda, build trust, and erode envy. This paper elaborates on the influence of media and economic engagement. In the current situation, the media of both countries play a negative role. The media often provokes the public against each other and spreads enmity. However, positive initiatives through the media can not only connect people-to-people but also encourage leaders to move toward a path of development. This article critically analyzes the comparison between China-India relations vs. India-Pakistan relations under the lens of the constructivism approach. Further, for accumulating historical data, quantitative and qualitative methods are used.

Keywords: Pakistan–India Relations, China–India Trade, Economic Diplomacy, Media Engagement, Regional Cooperation, Interdependence, Peacebuilding.

Introduction

The partition trauma and territorial disputes do not allow the two neighbors to be friends. Adding fuel to the fire, the media narrative also plays a negative role and deliberately fuels animosity. The two nuclear-armed neighbors in South Asia, India and Pakistan, have failed to

resolve their bilateral issues because there is little economic activity between them, and media propaganda remains the elephant in the room.

This paper works under the constructivism approach of international relations because it deals with ideas, interaction, norms, and behavior. This theory helps generate new behaviors to build better relations with neighbors and eradicate long-standing grievance. To draw the policy, historical, quantitative, and qualitative methods are under observation. While The ultimate goal of this paper is to resolve disputes and move toward a path of development through economic collaboration and the media. Indeed, this is the age of globalization, where connectivity between nations is at its peak, and the two neighbors are not availing themselves of these golden opportunities.

Constructivism and Its Relevance to South Asia

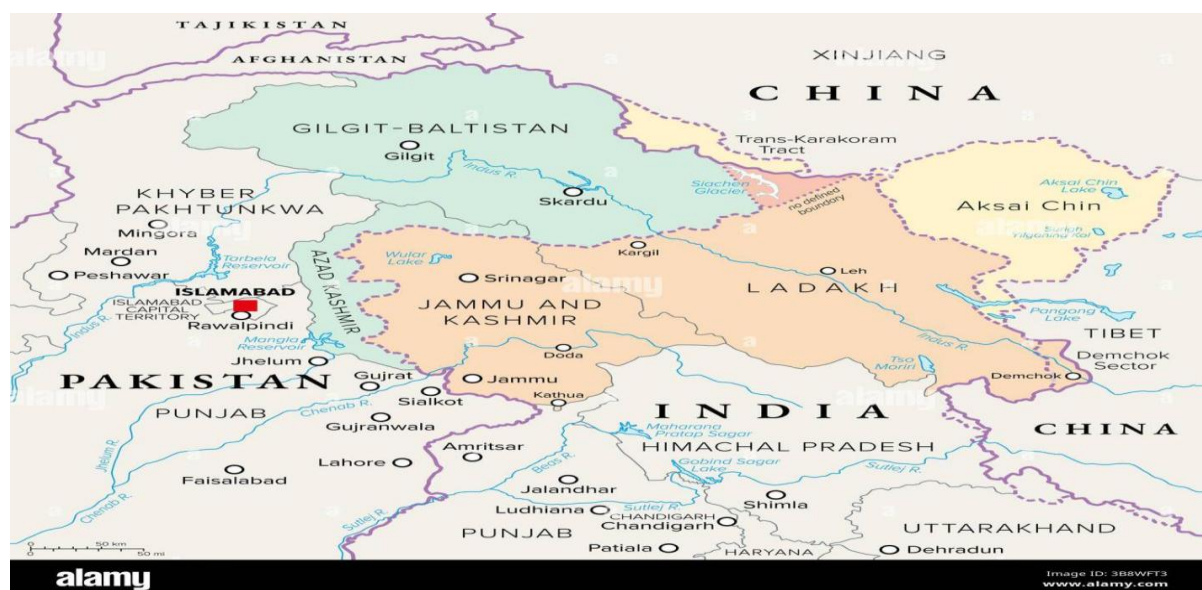
Realism believes in power and anarchy, liberalism emphasizes institutionalization, and constructivism takes care of the role of ideas, beliefs, norms, and social identities that help to modify the behavior of the state. According to Alexander Wendt (1992), states' behavior constructs their interaction with other countries. The steps conducted by a state indicate its intention toward other nations.

Beijing and New Delhi manage their rivalry and take steps towards a peaceful and developmental path. Economic pragmatism is the key pillar between these two countries; further, the media does not play any negative role in this scenario. They both are also members of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). New Delhi and Islamabad need to take similar steps. To alter the envy environment into a peaceful scenario, people-to-people communication is necessary with the appropriate help of media. The power of adopting new ideas can modify the foreign policy of a state.

Historical Background and Border Issues

The existence of India and Pakistan came into being in 1947, while China established the People's Republic of China in 1948. The relations between China and India were not very good initially, due to the border dispute in Kashmir. In 1914, there was a Shimla Conference between the British government and the Chinese, who were under the influence of the British as well. Because the Western powers were not in favor of the dominance of communist and allied influence in the region, it created a buffer zone between India and China.

Indeed, Kashmir is the most disputed territory among the three neighbors: China, India, and Pakistan. Each of them claims that a specific part belongs to it while also making claims on others in that area. For example, China claims that 38,000 square kilometers on the western side of the territory belong to it, but India also claims the same area. Similarly, the eastern side of Kashmir is 90,000 square kilometers, which is under the occupation of India, as stated by China. The dispute between China and India does not belong to the Kashmir territory but to several other borders. Due to this, military conflicts between China and India occurred in the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the Nathu La and Cho La incident (1967), the Sumdorong Chu standoff (1987), the Doklam standoff (2017), and the Galwan Valley clash (2020). Similarly, three wars happened between India and Pakistan in 1948, 1965, and 1971. While the third one did not belong to Kashmir but Bangladesh.



Although after prolonged bitter relations, China and India formally began their economic relations in 1991 during the Manmohan Singh era in New Delhi, it was the liberal economic reforms led by the finance minister that opened a new chapter of regional cooperation. The early 1990s marked a decisive shift toward globalization, enabling both countries to expand trade, investment, and industrial linkages. Over time, energy security, territorial disputes, and regional defense concerns emerged as dominant themes in Sino-Indian relations, alongside commerce and technology (Ali, Aurangzeb, Uddin, & Farooq, 2025).

By the year 2000, the increasing participation of multinational corporations (MNCs) in both economies reshaped their bilateral dynamics, with more than 500 companies operating 4,500 factories, branches, and agencies in China (Multinational Corporations and Foreign Policy, 2025). This rapid globalization reflected the growing role of economic interdependence and market-driven diplomacy. During a meeting in New Delhi, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao set an ambitious yet realistic trade goal of US\$100 billion by the end of 2015, signaling Beijing's intent to strengthen economic ties with India.

Both nations, recognized as two of the world's largest emerging economies, continue to engage actively in trade, digital innovation, and foreign investment because of their mutual understanding of the long-term benefits of cooperation (Aziz, Uddin, & Aurangzeb, 2025). They also collaborate in key multilateral platforms such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where economic modernization and technological integration remain core priorities (Aurangzeb, Uddin, Farooq, & Ali, 2025).

Despite persistent trade imbalances, India continues to benefit from its engagement with China through increased foreign direct investment and technology transfers. In fiscal year 2019–20, India's trade deficit with China narrowed to US\$48.66 billion, showing gradual improvement compared to previous years. However, forecasts suggest the gap may widen again due to supply-chain dependencies and defense-oriented geopolitical strategies (Uddin, Irfan, & Aurangzeb, 2025). Nevertheless, both nations have managed to maintain diplomatic dialogue and pursue cooperative frameworks, aided by a media environment that remains relatively stable and non-aggressive, helping sustain a balanced public perception and preventing escalation (Uddin, Farooq, Ali, & Aurangzeb, 2025)."

Economic Interdependence as a Stabilizer

During the Deng Xiaoping era in China, economic opportunities opened; hence, bilateral trade between the two countries emerged. Initially, it was quite low, like in 2000, only \$2.9 billion, but it gradually improved to over \$136 billion in 2022. China has become India's second-largest

trade partner. They work on their constructive activity project, like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor. Indeed, trade is used as a strategic tool of diplomacy between countries to achieve national goals.

The Role of Media and Diplomacy

Chinese and Indian authorities control the media narrative to prevent uncontrollable situations. Rather than resorting to sensationalism, these countries rely on official statements and diplomacy. However, during clashes, both nations promote nationalism but avoid propaganda.

Lessons from the China–India Model

Economic interdependency creates a peaceful environment. The model of Beijing-New Delhi demonstrates it clearly. Shared interests and responsible media narratives can modify foe to friend.

The Media's Role in Fuelling Mistrust

The destructive role of the media needs to be reformed. The two are engaged in a race of competition and sensationalism and political polarization. Especially during periods of tension, television and social media spread propaganda, arouse emotional sentiments, play blame games, and provoke nationalism. Pakistani media highlights India often blames Pakistan for aggression and extremism, while Hindu nationalism fuels hostility within India, and the Indian media accuses Pakistan of supporting terrorism. At this crucial time, public opinion is shaped by the media, which directly influences the minds of the people. Consequently, policymakers are staying away from peaceful initiatives. (Bajpai, 2020). Furthermore, hate speech not only halts peace but also creates chaos.

Missed Opportunities for Economic Partnership

According to the World Bank (2022), the annual trade between India and Pakistan is less than \$2 billion. This is because of political tensions, border disputes, and tariff barriers. Not to talk about the bilateral dispute, the two rivals make an organization restless, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The entire region is paralyzed due to the hostile relations between the two countries. Therefore, unless this behavior changes, the rivalry will continue endlessly.

Economic Engagement as a Peace-Building Tool

The underlying gap between China–India and India–Pakistan relations lies in their different approaches toward diplomacy, conflict resolution, and economic achievements. The mutual understanding between China and India reached \$130 billion in trade. Indeed, there are military standoffs between them, but the level of envy is under control. On the contrary, despite having a long history, the two neighbors have failed to avail themselves of economic activity. According to the World Bank (2022), trade between New Delhi and Islamabad could reach \$37 billion annually if relations between the two countries were normalized.”

Media's Contrasting Role

In China, the media is under government control, while in India, matters related to China are also handled with discipline. A similar approach is needed in the case of India and Pakistan. The media in both countries often adds fuel to the fire during times of crisis, such as the Kargil conflict (1999), the Mumbai attacks (2008), and the Pulwama–Balakot incident (2019), when it deliberately ignites antagonistic narratives and rhetorical warfare. As a result, the hostile relationship between the two neighbors remains the talk of the town.

Lessons for South Asia

The topic is clarifying here that if the state wants, it can discipline all its pillars, including the media. Therefore, maintaining the priority of peace and growth in the region is crucial. If Beijing and New Delhi can go for economic engagement in spite of border disputes, then New Delhi and Islamabad can do the same. The past cannot be changed; the future can be better through appropriate steps taken in the present. For that reason, positive sketches via media and

economic interdependency are the best solution to counter the prolonged enmity. This constructivist approach relies primarily on a treaty as the permanent solution, along with the sharing of norms and ideas.

Media as a Tool of Soft Power

In the era of globalization, media is used as a form of soft power because it influences attraction and builds narratives and national images. Through this tool, feelings of envy can be transformed into connectivity. History proves that media plays both constructive and destructive roles in any state. Due to the positive role of media in Europe and East Asia, the environment is peaceful. On the other side of the coin, rhetorical statements undermine security in South Asia.

Constructivism and the Reframing of Narratives

The key agent, media, molds a society's perspective. That being the case, the ideological barrier between India and Pakistan can be recycled through this powerful agent. According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2012), by emphasizing conflicts in news coverage, the loss of human lives occurs on both sides. Hence, to mitigate the bitterness, co-production and cultural exchange are necessary.

Global and Regional Examples of Media Diplomacy

Internationally, media played a vital role in resolving conflicts, such as during the US–China reconciliation of the 1970s through Ping-Pong diplomacy, which helped normalize relations between the two countries. Likewise, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) initiated peace-promoting programs to maintain tranquillity between North and South Korea despite political grievances. Correspondingly, the Aman ki Asha (Hope for Peace), the collaboration of *The Times of India* and *Jang Group* (Pakistan) in 2010, indicates media can fill the gap rather than focus on finding loopholes.

The Way Forward

Professional ethics are mandatory for preventing conflicts. It is essential, especially for cross-border programs and communications. Eventually, channels can switch a nation's energy from confrontation to cooperation and root a fruitful future for nations.

The Power of Economic Interdependence

Economic engagement is a key for mutual benefits in international relations. Through this bond, nations avoid wars and promote trade. India is the most populous country in the world, while Pakistan ranks as the fifth most populous. The collaboration of economic bonds can modify the entire scenario not only at the regional level but also internationally. The two nuclear power states could astonish the world through economic development.

Potential Sectors for Collaboration

Although there are countless sectors, only a few are discussed below.

Agriculture and Food Security:

Without a shadow of a doubt, the fertile lands of Pakistan and India, with the help of modern technological equipment, could perform miracles in the agricultural sector and impress the world. Not only could they fulfill their demand, but also they could play a significant role in the international market.

Energy and Infrastructure:

Both New Delhi and Islamabad are blessed with four distinct seasons. These opportunities can be utilized for the development of renewable energy. Through solar and hydroelectric power, the energy shortage could be mitigated on a large scale.

Textiles and Manufacturing:

To capture a larger share of the international market, partnership is better than competition. Both nations have strong textile industries but require significant improvement, which could be achieved through joint ventures.

Information Technology and Services:

The IT sector of India is praiseworthy, while Pakistan is on the way to achieving its national goals. The alliance of both countries could experience a new era of technology in South Asia. However, these two nations are members of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the BRICS New Development Bank. These platforms allow numerous opportunities to reduce the bilateral sensitivities.

Regional Development and Connectivity

Unfortunately, due to the nuclear power rivalry, South Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. The level of trade among the regional states is below five percent. The stagnated communication between these two states does not let the South Asia region to be developed like other regions like Europe, East Asia and so on.

Policy recommendations

1. Institutionalizing Media Diplomacy

Local and national-level media should be separated, and both should receive proper training grounded in ethics and discipline. The government must also monitor national media and immediately curb the spread of negative sentiments. The Joint Media Council (JMC) should be established with the collaboration of government and media. Channels must highlight the importance of a peaceful society.

2. Promoting Economic Diplomacy and Trade Normalization

Political disputes and trade should be treated separately. Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) must be prioritized, and lessons should be drawn from the pragmatic approach of China-India relations. A few recommendations are presented below to promote economic diplomacy.

The Wagah-Attari border and the Karachi-Mumbai sea routes should be opened for trade under appropriate policies and with comprehensive security measures in place.

To address the barriers between both countries' trade, an **India-Pakistan Joint Chambers of Commerce and Industry (IPJCCI) should be established.**

Permit business personnel to strengthen their economic ties in other countries.

Take advantage of institutions like BRICS, SCO, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to resolve disputes.

5. Encouraging Constructivist Reframing in Policy Circles

The constructive approach can mitigate the rivalry between the two nuclear powers. Through dramas, films, and advertisements, cultural values can be promoted and mistrust among people reduced. Not only this, but policymakers, think tanks, and foreign ministries should work jointly, emphasizing the transformation of relations.

Conclusion

Under the international system, no country can change its neighbors—they are, in essence, God-given. Therefore, instead of living in hostility and perpetuating conflict that destroys the peaceful environment, it is wiser to sign appropriate treaties and pursue the path of development. The European Union serves as the best example of such cooperation.

Therefore, India and Pakistan must learn a valuable lesson from this. The web was woven by the British rulers to prevent this region from developing; therefore, they deliberately created boundary conflicts between the newly formed nations. These disputes continue to serve as a major bone of contention. After the two great wars, the continent of Europe developed, but the continent of Asia was lacking. One of the major reasons is that these states are involved in boundary disputes, which waste time and energy and halt growth. If these nations were not busy in wars, they would have been well-developed countries.

An examination of China-India relations reveals that economic interdependence serves as a stabilizing force between nations. Beijing and New Delhi exemplify this dynamic, demonstrating that trade can continue despite political disagreements. This is an unneglectable example for India and Pakistan. Through diplomatic dialogue, a new path of friendship can be

discovered. Rather than moving around an antagonistic cycle, it is better to enhance social interaction for a tranquil environment.

In this entire scenario, even amid rivalry, economic activities must continue for the development of the nation. China and India can manage their border conflicts, so why not India and Pakistan? A peaceful environment is the key factor in any development. Imagine if there were no boundaries or limitations among three neighbors, like in the situation in Europe. What would the development level be?

If the Japanese can trade with the USA, which destroyed her two major cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in 1945, why do India and Pakistan not avail themselves of the opportunities? However, political stability remains the need of the hour in Pakistan. Without which to talk about development, there is no chance of survival. Because leadership determines the direction of a nation.

We have seen the best example of Singapore, such a small country but well developed due to her appropriate policies and actions. The country that adopted Pakistan's five-year plan is now at the top of the list of developed countries, and unfortunately, Pakistan is still stuck in its rudimentary issues. The world has changed. In international relations, there are no permanent friends or foes—only permanent interests. Every state seeks its own national interest.

Pakistan and India should similarly prioritize diplomatic channels to address concerns and foster cooperation. Engaging in international forums can present chances for communication, collaboration, and tackling shared issues. For example, forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can play a significant role in fostering regional cooperation. Building trust and understanding between nations may be facilitated through people-to-people interactions, educational partnerships, and cultural exchanges. Such strategies can help reduce misconceptions and promote goodwill across communities. Moreover, constructive and positive regional connections can be strengthened through effective diplomacy, a commitment to dialogue, and a focus on shared interests.

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