



**GLOBAL INDIA PODCAST
The Brookings Institution**

“How India Sees China's Ties with Pakistan and Bhutan”

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Guest:

GAUTAM BAMAWALE
Distinguished Professor, Symbiosis International University
Ambassador of India to China (2017–18)
High Commissioner to Pakistan (2016–17)
Ambassador of India to Bhutan (2014–15)

Host:

TANVI MADAN
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for East Asia Policy Studies
The Brookings Institution

Episode Summary:

China-aligned Pakistan and India-aligned Bhutan are both neighbors of India and China. In this episode of *Global India*, Tanvi Madan speaks with Ambassador Gautam Bambawale, New Delhi’s former envoy to both Beijing and Thimphu and high commissioner to Pakistan, about India-China dynamics vis-à-vis Bhutan and Pakistan.

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MADAN: Welcome to *Global India*, I'm Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where I specialize in Indian foreign policy. In this new Brookings podcast, I'll be turning the spotlight on India's partnerships, its rivalries, and its role on the global stage. This season our conversations will be focused on India's relationship with China, and why and how China-India ties are shaping New Delhi's view of the world.

In our last episode, we discussed India-China competition in non-aligned South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. On this episode of the podcast, we'll continue our discussion of China and India's overlapping peripheries, this time looking at two countries that have been aligned, one with India and one with China.

Today, we'll focus on China's relationship with Pakistan, the second largest state in South Asia. It has been a partner to Beijing, but a rival to New Delhi. We'll also briefly discuss another country that, like Pakistan, borders both China and India: Bhutan. That Himalayan kingdom has a close partnership with its southern neighbor, India. On the other hand, it does not have diplomatic relations with its northern neighbor, China. But Bhutan has been exploring ties with Beijing recently, which will have implications for New Delhi.

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To discuss India-China dynamics vis-à-vis Pakistan and Bhutan, today my guest is Gautam Bambawale. He was India's ambassador to China between 2017 and 2018. Prior to that, he served as high commissioner to Pakistan, and between 2014 and '15, he was India's ambassador to Bhutan. He is joining us from Pune in western India, where he's a distinguished professor at Symbiosis International University. He's also co-author of the book, *Rising to the China Challenge: Winning through strategic patience and economic growth*.

Ambassador Bambawale, thank you very much for joining us on the *Global India* podcast today.

BAMBAWALE: It's great to be with you Tanvi.

02:11 What is the nature of the China-Pakistan relationship?

MADAN: Ambassador Bambawale, I want to start our conversation with China-Pakistan relations. We've heard Chinese officials and Pakistani officials, for that matter, talk about the China-Pakistan relationship as an all-weather friendship, described as higher than mountains, deeper than the oceans, stronger than steel and sweeter than honey. How would you describe the nature of the China-Pakistan relationship?

BAMBAWALE: That's a very interesting question, Tanvi, and I think I can only quote yet another saying which the Chinese and Pakistanis use apart from everything else, which you have already stated. And all of them are used by the Chinese definitely and the Pakistanis. But they describe the close relationship between the two countries as being similar to the relationship between lips and teeth. So, the relationship has been very close. It is getting stronger every passing day.

But, as you probably know, it was not always this way. If you go back to the time when Pakistan as a nation was created in August of 1947 and immediately in its aftermath in the

1950s, the India-China relationship was very strong. And conversely, the Pakistan-China relationship was not that strong. But as the India-China relationship started fraying at the edges, and tensions, especially on the unresolved border issue, cropped up in the late 1950s, starting somewhere in 1958, which eventually led to a border skirmish, a border war, let me put it that way, between the two countries in October and November of 1962.

So, as that happened and India-China relations deteriorated, you find that Pakistan-China relations improved. And in fact, they improved so dramatically in those years of 1961, '62, and '63, that the two countries, China and Pakistan, agreed on a border settlement, a border agreement between the two countries. And from there, there was no looking back.

To just add a little bit more of history, Tanvi. The highlight, of course, was in the year 1971, when Pakistan played an intermediary role, a very important intermediary role, in the rapprochement which took place between the United States on the one hand and China on the other. Islamabad played a very important intermediary role in bringing Beijing and Washington, D.C., closer together. And, in fact, it was on a visit to Islamabad that the then national security advisor and then later the secretary of state, or the reverse, Henry Kissinger, made a very quiet visit to Beijing on a Pakistani military aircraft, which led to the rapprochement where President Nixon of the United States visited China. And of course, then that led to the rapprochement between China on the one hand and the United States on the other.

So, the China-Pakistan relationship has been close since 1963 and strengthened since 1971. But what is happening more recently we can talk about as we move ahead, Tanvi.

MADAN: In fact, it's interesting, as you mentioned it, a fact that often doesn't come up is because of that border agreement between China and Pakistan in the early '60s—which India hasn't recognized because it involved territory that's disputed with India as well—that in some ways, China is a party to the India-Pakistan territorial dispute as well. And so there have been times when people have called for honest brokers or mediators between India and Pakistan. And China comes up, but in fact, because of that boundary agreement, it has been for a number of years a party to that dispute, as you allude to.

06:20 How much has the China-Pakistan relationship been related to the trajectory of the India-China relationship?

I do want to ask you, given the description of the relationship, as well as how it was motivated in some ways or stemmed from India-China relationships deteriorating, how much has the China-Pakistan relationship and the development of that in your mind been related to the trajectory of the India-China relationship?

BAMBAWALE: I think it has tracked very closely. As India-China relations deteriorated from 1958 onwards and then led to the border war in 1962, the China-Pakistan relationship strengthened immeasurably and since then it has stayed very strong and steady. It has, of course, as I said earlier, strengthened because of the intermediary role that Pakistan played in bringing China and the United States closer together. But even since then, the China-Pakistan relationship has stayed strong and steady and has, in fact, always moved up a tick and has been on an upward trajectory.

If you look at the relationship today, there are several aspects to it. The first and foremost, of course, is the military aspect. There is very close military-to-military cooperation between

Pakistan and China. And the two militaries in fact work very closely together on several fronts. Pakistan buys a lot of its military equipment today from China. And one example is the Pakistan Air Force, where the two have combined together to produce a fighter aircraft called the JF-7 Thunder.

And today that is the mainstay of the Pakistan Air Force. It's the main fighter aircraft that the Pakistani Air Force uses, slowly replacing the F-16s that they had, and they do have, continue to have even today. So, this is just an example of how the two militaries have worked very closely together, and they continue to work very closely together.

I'll give you yet another example of the two air forces. We all know that pilots from the Pakistan Air Force are very, very good. In our estimation, in Indian military estimation, Pakistan Air Force pilots are excellent. And what they're doing today is the Pakistan Air Force pilots are training the pilots of the People's Liberation Army Air Force. So, this cuts both ways. It's not just a one-way street. The Chinese are learning a lot from the Pakistani Air Force. And this also stretches across the military, the army, and the navy. So, there's a very strong military-to-military relationship.

The second part of the relationship is, of course, political. So, there is a very strong political congruence between the two countries, and the political leadership of the two countries have worked very closely together, including after President Xi Jinping took over as the general secretary of the Communist Party of China in the latter part of 2012. So, all the way from 2012 to 2023, there's been a very strong political aspect to the relationship, irrespective of who's been the prime minister of Pakistan.

The third aspect, of course, is the economic relationship. And that is very strong indeed, especially because of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which has been announced as far back as 2013 and has moved ahead very steadily since then. And the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as you know Tanvi, and your listeners and viewers will also realize, is a very integral and important part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, or One Belt One Road Initiative. It's almost \$62 billion worth of investment. I think a lot of it, at least 50% of it, has already been put on the ground in Pakistan to build things like infrastructure, whether it's roads, railways, power plants—which are very important for a country like Pakistan, which needs a lot of power, doesn't have adequate power today. So, there's a strong economic relationship.

And of course, there's also a people-to-people relationship, which is the weakest link of the entire chain. Because though there are many Pakistani students studying in China, I don't think there's much tourism between the two countries. So, today there's a very strong relationship between China and Pakistan, which covers the entire gamut of military, political, economic, and also people-to-people ties.

11:01 Is China and Pakistan's economic relationship smooth sailing or has there been friction as well?

MADAN: I just wanted to follow up on the economic aspect that you mentioned, which is the more perhaps recent aspect or dimension of the relationship. Has the fact that the two countries are now dealing with each other economically, has it thrown up certain frictions as well or has that been all smooth sailing?

BAMBAWALE: No, it hasn't been smooth sailing. In fact, if you look at it from the Pakistani point of view, they felt that there was a lot of Chinese investment to come in. And there has been a lot of investment, which has actually come in, as I said, in infrastructure, whether it's roads, highways, power plants, et cetera.

And all of this is required by Pakistan because there's no other country or companies from other countries which are investing in Pakistan. So, it was much needed. So, this kind of investment, which is under the rubric of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, is welcomed by the Pakistanis.

But there is also the flip side of the coin that this investment comes at a fairly high price, which is a problem with the entire Belt and Road Initiative, the whole One Belt One Road initiative [for] other countries too. And Pakistan has become indebted to China and will in the future have to see how it will pay back all these loans that the Chinese have given them for building the infrastructure which is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. So, it's not been plain sailing.

In fact, when Prime Minister Imran Khan was voted to office, he took a good hard look, his government took a good hard look at how different projects under the CPEC, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, were doing. And on some of those projects they decided that they would go slow, on other projects they went ahead pretty quickly. So, there has been some kind of soul searching in Pakistan. But in a situation where there's very little economic assistance which is flowing into Pakistan, this kind of assistance under the CPEC has been welcomed by them.

Of course, it's coming at a very high cost because when you compare loans under the Belt and Road Initiative or the CPEC initiative, they're much higher than what the multilateral development banks give, and several fold. So, Pakistan will have to factor in this rising indebtedness under the CPEC program, and will have to decide whether they will go ahead with it and how quickly they will go ahead with it, and whether they're in a position where they can pay back those loans when they come due.

So, I think this is a problem that Pakistan is facing. It's a problem that other countries have faced too. But I think in this case, there is a political push, which is necessary and which is coming from both Beijing as well as Islamabad.

13:56 What are Beijing's motives for forging close strategic ties with Pakistan?

MADAN: It's interesting that you've had now a relationship that for China has changed in some elements, perhaps more complicated than it used to in the past. You mentioned one motivation for the countries to engage with each other despite these frictions, which is the strategic aspect that 'both have had key rivalries with India. And so, the other has been a counterbalance. And I remember once somebody said, for China, the relationship with Pakistan in some ways is about keeping India tied down in South Asia, so it can't actually move out beyond and play a larger role in the region. And so, you've seen, as you mentioned, in the military domain, even with Pakistan's nuclear program, facilitating that, that China has played a role.

Have there been other motivations besides needing to or wanting to balance India in South Asia and beyond? Have there been other motivations for the China-Pakistan relationship, particularly for Beijing?

BAMBAWALE: Tanvi, you are absolutely right. I think for Beijing and for Islamabad, balancing out India and Indian power was an important factor in building a closer relationship between the two countries. In the early '60s, once they had ironed out their border problem with a border agreement, I think the relationship moved ahead very, very quickly.

But today, I think it is a very important problem for India because as these two countries—China on the one hand and Pakistan on the other, one on a northern border, the other on a western border—and with both countries, India has unresolved frontier issues, unresolved boundary issues, unresolved border issues. It becomes a problem for us because increasingly we are looking at two-front situation, which is not entirely comfortable for us.

But I think from Beijing's perspective, which is what your question was about, there is little doubt that by making sure that Pakistan has a certain amount of heft in political and international relations they are keeping India on the back foot. Not much longer because of the fact that India today is already 10 times the size of Pakistan. Pakistan's economy is roughly \$300 billion. India's is roughly \$3.75 trillion. And India has increasingly played a role in international affairs and international politics, and is not being tied down to South Asia.

The recent G-20, which was hosted in Delhi, where India was the president of the G-20, is one case in point. But there are other indicators to show that India's comprehensive national strength is also growing by leaps and bounds. So, while that is a motivation, I think, I don't know if it is going to continue to be an important factor in keeping India back.

If you take three recent things which have happened where India is concerned: one is our successful Chandrayaan-3 experiment where we landed on the moon, on the dark side of the moon, and did it very successfully. The second was, of course, the successful hosting of the G-20 and a successful leaders' outcome, a leaders' statement from the G-20 leaders who had gathered in New Delhi. And the third is how well Indian sportspeople did at the recently held Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, where for the first time ever, we won more than one hundred medals overall, much less and much behind China, Japan, and South Korea, but we were lying fourth.

If you put these different strands together from different fields, my argument has been that it is an exhibition of India's rising comprehensive national power. And I think that comprehensive national power has been rising despite anything that China has done vis-à-vis Pakistan, backing Pakistan, et cetera. So, I think that is something which is exhibiting diminishing returns for the Chinese and for Beijing.

18:04 What are the additional implications for India of deepening friendship between China and Pakistan?

MADAN: And you mentioned one of the implications nonetheless for India is that it does have to think about a two-front situation. What are the other implications for India as it's seen this deepening relationship, this all-weather friendship, develop between China and Pakistan?

BAMBAWALE: Look, from a perspective of international politics, it's not entirely comfortable for a country like India to have two other neighbors—I mean, neighbors of India and they're neighbors of each other also—to be against us, et cetera. We would like to definitely try to work with one of them to reduce the salience of each other. In today's world, if the government of Pakistan were to make some moves to reduce tensions between India and

Pakistan, I'm sure New Delhi would respond very, very positively to that, especially because, as you know, since the summer of 2020, Indian troops and Chinese troops have been face to face with each other in a certain part of a boundary, which we call eastern Ladakh, and have been in those positions with large numbers of troops facing each other since summer of 2020, which means that it's been almost three years plus now. And that's not a very good situation for two armies to be in.

So, if we were able to work with Pakistan to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan, I'm pretty sure we'll take an offer of that kind and work at it, at least work towards it. So, the two-front situation is not something which we are very comfortable with, or any country would be comfortable with.

19:45 Does the China-Pakistan economic relationship pose challenges for India?

MADAN: One of the things that you mentioned earlier was the economic dimension of the China-Pakistan relationship. As we were talking about, that is a newer dimension. Has that added particular complications for India? One, of course, I'm assuming you'll mention is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor itself and where some of those projects lie. But more broadly as well, are there other dimensions of that China-Pakistan economic relationship that pose particular challenges for India?

BAMBAWALE: No, I don't think it really poses a challenge to India. And I'll tell you why, Tanvi, because till very recently, till Pakistan managed to get yet another loan from the IMF and then it was backed by other countries, especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, et cetera, it was passing through a very, very difficult period where foreign exchange was so scarce, that there were several import items which Pakistan had to cut back on. So, Pakistan's economic situation till very recently, a few months ago, was pretty dire.

And I'd like to highlight to you, Tanvi, and to your audience that this is not the first time or the second time that Pakistan in its 75-year history has gone to the IMF for an adjustment loan due to shortage and scarcity of foreign exchange reserves. This is the 23rd time in a 75-year history that Pakistan has had to go to the IMF for a loan of this kind, which implies that they have had a cyclical pattern of foreign exchange running short, running scarce, and every time they've had to reach out to the International Monetary Fund for an adjustment loan.

So, there is something in the Pakistan economy which is ensuring that they do not earn the kind of foreign exchange that they need for the imports that they have. And this is a recurrent pattern. It's happened 23 times. And, therefore, it leads me to believe that if they don't focus on that issue, if they don't try to resolve that issue, they're going to get into this kind of situation. It's a cyclical pattern and this cyclical pattern will continue.

So, I don't think that's a real headache for India, it's a real problem for India. But we will continue to do our own thing. We have focused laser sharp on ensuring that India continues to be a high-growth economy. As the IMF has described, India is a bright spot in a global economy, which is looking quite difficult. We grew by 7.5% a year ago. We're expected to grow by 6.5% this year. And, therefore, I think this is the time where India has to focus on itself to ensure that it has high rates of GDP growth, not just for two years or three years, but for a long stretch of 15 or 20 years. And if we are able to do that, then India's economy will grow from the fifth largest in the world to the third largest in the world in a few years' time.

But more than just GDP and the size of the economy, we will also have to focus on per capita GDP, per capita incomes, so that we improve the living standards of our vast

population. And that's a very difficult job. And that's something which we are focused on laser sharp, rather than worrying about what China and Pakistan are doing together.

MADAN: In fact, one of the questions people used to ask when the Belt and Road Initiative was more popular and where you'd see more Western leaders and others appear at the Belt and Road Forum is why wasn't India part of the Belt and Road Initiative? And it would need it for growth, for its own growth, you'd hear from some analysts in Beijing. As you said, that has happened through other means, but also there is the issue that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is part of BRI, some of those projects do lie in disputed territory as well. And so, it's not something that India can sign up for. And when it objected to the Belt and Road Initiative when the first Belt and Road Forum was being held, it mentioned that it needed to respect territorial integrity, which India does have issues with both China and Pakistan on.

24:11 How has India responded to the strategic and economic challenges of the China-Pakistan relationship?

I do want to ask you how you see, given this, at least from the strategic perspective, even if not economic perspective, that the China-Pakistan relationship does pose some challenges for India. How has India responded to this challenge over the last few years or even presently?

BAMBAWALE: As far as Pakistan is concerned, Tanvi, you know that several Indian prime ministers dating back several decades have always realized that we need a more normal kind of relationship and not an adversarial relationship between Pakistan and India. And several prime ministers have attempted to do so. The most spectacular effort was by Prime Minister Vajpayee when he took a bus from India to Lahore and had discussions with his counterpart, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Nawaz Sharif. The Lahore Declaration is very, very well known in India, Pakistan, not only amongst people like us who follow international relations, but also amongst ordinary people because of the spectacular effort and the political capital that was utilized by Prime Minister Vajpayee in reaching out to Pakistan.

Unfortunately, while the political leadership of Pakistan understood this move and even reciprocated it, and there was a guideline or a plan of action, which was chalked out on how the two countries would move ahead, the Pakistani army then took a hand in the relationship by creating the Kargil problem by marching Pakistani non-regular troops into parts of India. And that led to the Kargil war of 1999, which of course, at that point of time, all the efforts which were made by both prime ministers and both countries, both leaderships at Lahore came to an end.

And of course, as all of us in India know, the Kargil war eventually ended with India getting back the territory, which was taken over by Pakistani irregular troops. But it led to a heavy cost where 572 officers and men of the Indian Army had to lay down their lives because it was a tremendous military action where Indian troops had to climb high hills, mountains, which were under the control of the Pakistani irregular troops. And when an enemy is sitting on the heights, he of course controls all the movement up to the heights. So, there was a large price paid by the Indian army, by its officers and men in reclaiming those areas in Kargil and around Kargil.

So, since then, of course, there have been efforts made by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, efforts made by Prime Minister Modi. But none of them has really led to any kind of sustained effort to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan. And I think that is

unfortunate because today we are not even trading what most other countries would trade with each other, where it makes sense for Pakistan to buy from India and India to buy from Pakistan. We don't have normal trade relations between our two countries. And therefore you have to buy it from third parties or through third areas, which leads to higher costs.

So, unfortunately the Pakistan-India relationship has not normalized to the extent that we had wanted. And of course, there is always the problem of cross-border terrorism aided and abetted from Pakistan, which is something which is very, very important for India. We want that to end before we can move ahead another time. So, these are issues which bedevil the India Pakistan relationship. And as those continue, I think the China-Pakistan relationship stays strong as we had discussed.

28:10 Crises and the India-China-Pakistan triangle

MADAN: You mentioned the Kargil crisis in 1999. During that crisis or other India-Pakistan crises has China played a role and what, if any, role has it played during these crises over the last few decades?

BAMBAWALE: No, that's an excellent question, Tanvi, but during the Kargil crisis, I think the Chinese military kept a very low profile on the India-China frontier. They didn't stir up or they didn't muddy the waters by creating tensions on the India-China frontier. And even recently, from 2020, when the India-China frontier in eastern Ladakh has been fairly active, has been very active really, our military-to-military relations with Pakistan have been generally on an even keel. In fact, there's been a revival between India and Pakistan of keeping the India-Pakistan border relatively quiet. So, I think both countries have kept the relationship on an even keel.

And this is a question that you asked, Tanvi. So, let me also mention that in the past, there was a period, especially when there was some kind of better relationship between India and China, post- our then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988, that the Chinese leadership kept telling Pakistan that they should work towards a more normal and normalized relationship between Pakistan and India. So, when you had President Jiang Zemin in China and President Hu Jintao in China, both of them counseled Islamabad to try to attempt to build a more normal relationship with India. And that that would help in resolving any other issues that there were between the two countries, including the unresolved frontier or border issue.

So, there was a period when China did counsel restraint on Pakistan and did counsel a more normal or a normalized relationship between New Delhi and Islamabad. Unfortunately, that didn't come about because the most easy thing for two countries to do is to trade with each other and especially two neighboring countries. And if we had built some kind of trade relationship between Pakistan and India, I think the rest of the relationship would have looked easier to handle, better to handle, but that did not happen. So the rest, as they say, is history.

MADAN: It's quite interesting in terms of China counseling restraint, because it has been the case that it's been part of China not wanting to see instability necessarily. It wants kind of that strategic balance that Pakistan helps provide vis-a-vis India, but it doesn't want instability, not least because that can spill over, including in terms of extremism from their perspective, from Beijing's perspective, into China as well.

China counseling restraint, I think, was also a difference from what you saw in the earlier wars that India and Pakistan fought. In 1965, when you actually did see China mobilize troops; there was even a clash in the Northeast in India, between China and India, just as

the India-Pakistan war was heating up. And in 1971, where China backed Pakistan, supplied it military equipment, but didn't, contrary to some perhaps expectations in Pakistan, actually intervene—not just expectations in Pakistan, but perhaps amongst President Nixon at that time and National Security Advisor Kissinger, who thought that China would be much more active in intervening on behalf of Pakistan against India. China didn't do so.

I have heard that China has in the recent India-Pakistan crisis in 2019, not been as helpful as it had in the past to try to kind of deescalate the situation by intervening with Pakistan but largely let things play out on their own. So, perhaps not as active counseling restraint. I don't know if that's been your impression or not.

BAMBAWALE: I think you're absolutely right, Tanvi, because we are looking at a different China, especially under the leadership of Xi Jinping. And I don't assign or attribute everything to just the leadership, but there is very little doubt that as China grew, and especially post- the 2008 global financial crisis, where Xi came out much stronger, and the West, the United States in particular, but the West also was weaker economically.

But in that period post-2008 and particularly since 2012 when Xi Jinping became the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, there's no doubt that China has been playing much more on the front foot, it's been much more aggressive in its dealings in international relations as well as on the ground, whether it's in the South China Sea, whether it's with countries like Japan, the Senkaku Islands/the Diaoyu Islands dispute, on the India-China border, with countries like Australia, where China has been very dominant in the economic field and has played on the front foot with Australia.

So, there has been a kind of aggressive streak and aggressiveness in China's foreign policy. Maybe it's because they have made an assessment that they have the power now to do that, or it could be just something which is attributable to a particular leader. But I think the fact is that there can be little doubt, as you rightly pointed out, that China has not played that kind of role that it played in Pakistan-India relations post-2012, 2013. And definitely this happened in 2019, as you rightly pointed out. And that is what, of course, makes us a little more apprehensive, a little more careful about what's happening between China and Pakistan.

But at the same time, of course, the India-U.S. relationship has kept getting stronger, has improved by leaps and bounds, has strengthened by leaps and bounds. And today, we are very, very strong partners of each other, both bilaterally as well as in groupings like the Quad, where we are together with countries like Japan and Australia.

So, there can be very little doubt that this kind of development in international politics has taken place post-2012, 2013, and definitely in the very recent past.

34:38 Does the U.S. factor into the India-China-Pakistan dynamic?

MADAN: You mentioned the U.S., and it's interesting whenever I think of triangles and relationship triangles—I wrote a book about one—and as I wrote about China-India-U.S., I always thought, there are always other actors that are involved in these relationships. And so if we think about the China-India-Pakistan triangle, you have had particularly the U.S., in the past, also the Soviet Union and Russia, involved or at least been around and affecting the shape of that triangle. As I think of Russia, I think of the JF-17 that you mentioned, the fighter aircraft, the China-Pakistan developed one, which has a Russian engine, even though Russia is one of India and has been one of India's closest partners.

And so we've seen in this case, the Russians have a certain angle, but I think the U.S. in some ways we've seen has also played a role in the China-Pakistan dynamic. I always think of the 1970s, '80s, where you saw, from India's perspective, China, Pakistan and the U.S. lined up together and complicating India's strategic interests.

Does the U.S. factor into the China-Pakistan dynamic today from your perspective?

BAMBAWALE: It does, obviously. I mean, given the fact that the U.S. is the biggest, big power, great power, superpower of the world, and particularly from a military aspect, it is the only superpower in the world. There is very little doubt that the United States does play a role, cast a shadow on the China-Pakistan-India triangle.

But the fact is that the India-U.S. relationship has strengthened immeasurably over the past 10 to 15 years. And Tanvi, you have tracked this, I have tracked this. We know what a big, big difference it is in working together today in different parts of not merely the governments of the two countries, but also the firms, the companies, the businesses, ordinary people, universities across the board.

So, there's been a complete transformation of the India-U.S. relationship, I think which could play a balancing role in the China-Pakistan relationship. So, definitely the United States, given the fact that it is a great power, does have a role to play in the triangular relationship between India, Pakistan, and China.

MADAN: Indeed, I think today the U.S. and India share a concern about China-Pakistan relations. I do wonder though sometimes, if in some ways that the response might be one area of at least difference: where India sees China-Pakistan ties as problematic, whereas there are, I think, occasionally some in the U.S.—not voices that were as loud as they used to be—but some who say that one of the reasons the U.S. should try to deepen ties with Pakistan is to wean it away from China. And that's been tried before. It was tried during the Cold War and it didn't succeed. Partly because of the depth, I think, of the China-Pakistan relationship today, Pakistan might want to diversify.

But it's hard for it to separate from China in a way that some might think it should or could.

37:46 Trends in the China-Pakistan relationship that Ambassador Bambawale is watching most closely

I do want to ask you about the future of the China-Pakistan relationship, but also as you think of the road ahead, what trends in that China-Pakistan dynamic would you be watching most closely?

BAMBAWALE: I think, Tanvi, the fact of the matter is that where the China-Pakistan relationship is concerned, it is the Chinese military and the Pak military which play the lead role. They are the main drivers of the China-Pakistan relationship, not merely the military relationship, but also going beyond that, the political relationship, the economic relationship, et cetera.

So, if the militaries are the main drivers, and in Pakistan you know that the Pak military literally runs the country, they can decide who is going to be the prime minister of Pakistan, and they have been able to do that in the recent past. So, if the drivers of the China-Pakistan relationship are the two militaries, I think that is something which is a big worry for India, because it means that there's a very close tie, a close nexus between the militaries of the two countries. And it indicates that there will be a stronger military-to-military relationship as we move ahead.

Of course, in the case of Pakistan, that has to be backed up by some economic muscle too. That seems to be lacking today. But if they're able to stabilize their economy and get some kind of positive economic growth over the next few years, then the relationship does become problematic for India.

So, I think the fact of the matter is that the very nature of the China-Pakistan relationship, which is where the main drivers are the militaries of the two countries, is problematic for us in India.

MADAN: And for that reason, that's what I often think about the road ahead, that one thing the U.S. needs to be thinking about is, if there is a future India-China crisis, is the U.S. going to be willing and able to play a role to counsel that restraint on Pakistan in terms of not intervening? This was a role the U.S. played during the 1962 war, where there were very tough messages sent by the Kennedy administration to Pakistan saying, "do not intervene," as India and China engaged in this war. And that's something perhaps in the future, if, as you mentioned, the China-Pakistan military ties get closer, and there is perhaps even not demand, but a request from China that Pakistan takes certain actions, that the U.S. might need to be more aware of what it might need to do in that instance.

40:25 On India's special relationship with Bhutan

We've talked about China's special relationship with Pakistan. I do want to ask you, given your experience and expertise—you've served in Thimphu, in Bhutan—I want to ask you about that special relationship for India, the India-Bhutan relationship. What is the nature of the relationship between India and Bhutan?

BAMBAWALE: It's a very tight, strong relationship. But I think where I'd like to start, Tanvi, is a little bit of history. So, when you take a nation like Bhutan, where its origins and its religion basically came from Tibet and Buddhism, et cetera. So, when you look at a country like Bhutan, it has always historically and even today seen that the threat to its existence comes from its north and not from its south. That is something which you have to be able to understand.

And even during the period when we had British India, over 200 years, and certain parts of Bhutan were captured by British India, even then, and it continues now with independent India, Bhutan and the Bhutanese people always think that the threat to their very existence comes from their north and not from their south.

So, they know where their bread is buttered. It's buttered on the southern side of their Himalayan Kingdom. And, therefore, over the decades they have built a very strong relationship with independent India. It continues even today. I am sure that Bhutan would like to settle its boundary issue with China, so there have been recent moves and we have seen them—there have been expressions of that interest from the Bhutanese government too, that they would like to settle and have a settled boundary with China. But eventually the strong partnership with India is something which is very, very important to the Bhutanese people and to the Bhutanese government and to the kings of Bhutan.

But that's the way that Thimphu looks at things.

And, therefore, it has built a very strong relationship with India and doesn't have much of a relationship with China.

42:43 Would India be concerned about a China-Bhutan boundary settlement?

MADAN: And a particularly strong India-Bhutan military relationship that's very close. Just a couple of follow-ups perhaps. You mentioned the Bhutan-China boundary dispute. There've been several rounds of talks between Bhutan and China. China often says it's settled most of its boundary disputes. It hasn't settled the ones with either India or Bhutan. There have been talks between the Bhutanese and Chinese recently. We've seen the Bhutanese foreign minister go to Beijing. How closely does India watch these Bhutan-China dynamics? And would India be concerned if there was a settlement between Bhutan and China on the boundary or is that something India would accept and move on with?

BAMBAWALE: The fact of the matter is that the Bhutan-China boundary and where it lies also has implications for India and for the India-China boundary. And therefore, I think India and Bhutan have worked very closely with each other on a final settlement of both boundaries with China.

I think even today, as the Bhutanese move forward in their discussions and negotiations with China on their own boundary settlement, they will factor in the concerns of India. And these have been shared with the Bhutanese people, with the Bhutanese government and with Thimphu. And they will factor those concerns in, and especially the implications of a China-Bhutan boundary settlement for India, and the India-China boundary. Those are matters where I am very confident that the Bhutanese government would factor in Indian concerns. And let's see where the boundary discussions lead to.

I couldn't agree more with Thimphu that having a settled boundary would be better. In the case of the India-China boundary also having a settled boundary would be better. But I think at this point in time, India is not ready to concede or settle the boundary on the kind of discussions that we have had between us, that is India on the one hand and the Chinese on the other. So, let's see where the boundary negotiations between Bhutan and China move. And we will take it from there.

MADAN: Just a brief follow up for those of our listeners who aren't aware, you mentioned kind of the implications for any Bhutan-China boundary settlement for India. Why exactly does that Bhutan-China border matter, or even the Bhutan-China-India tri-junction, why does that matter so much for India in terms of how that might end up?

BAMBAWALE: So, what you said Tanvi is absolutely critical that there is a tri-junction point between what will be a Bhutan-China boundary and India-China boundary and an India-Bhutan boundary. And that tri-junction point is very, very important where India-China boundary negotiations, discussions are concerned, because the fact is that at that point where the tri-junction lies is very close to what we call the crow's nest, which is a little bit of territory which joins the rest of peninsular India with its northeast. And it's very critical for us for the defense of India, for the defense of that territory of India, and for communication lines to India's east and northeast. It is very, very critical.

So, where that tri-junction point lies between the three countries and how we negotiate that tri-junction point is critical for the defense of India.

MADAN: In fact, in 2017, the military standoff that took place between India and China was not an India-China boundary standoff, but actually a Bhutan-China one in which India was involved as well, and it took place at Doklam in 2017 for those unaware.

46:33 Lightning Round: What is the biggest myth in India's view about China-Pakistan relations

Ambassador Bambawale, you've taken us from Pakistan on one side to Bhutan on the other, one of South Asia's largest states to one of South Asia's smallest states, and the China-India dynamics there. But I want to end our conversation with a lightning round question that we ask all our speakers, which is this question of what is the biggest myth or misunderstanding you have heard about China-Pakistan relations or about India's view of China-Pakistan relations?

BAMBAWALE: I think this whole thing, you know, about being higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans, I think is a myth. And the reason why it's a myth is that there is little doubt that the two countries do have congruent interests. But the fact of the matter is that at a deeper level, at a level of values, and at a level of people-to-people interaction, there's not much common between the two countries. So, yes, while interests are congruent, I think values and the people-to-people aspect of the relationship, which are very important for any two countries, are still a far cry from being deeper than the oceans and higher than the mountains.

[music]

MADAN: With that, Ambassador Bambawale, thank you so much for joining us for this conversation and really taking us on this long journey across northern India from Pakistan to Bhutan and China as well. Thank you so much.

BAMBAWALE: Great pleasure to be with you, Tanvi.

MADAN: Thank you for tuning in to the *Global India* podcast. I'm Tanvi Madan, senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. You can find research about India and more episodes of this show on our website, Brookings dot edu slash Global India.

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