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'Two-plus-One' Dialogue: UAE as a Bridge in Potential Trilateral Cooperation with China and India

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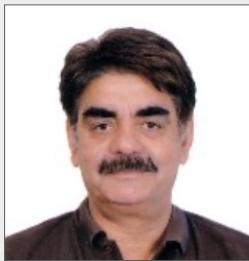
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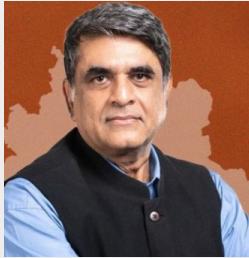
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Executive Summary

- The evolving global order has placed increasing importance on partnerships among emerging powers, particularly within the Global South. In this context, the potential for cooperation first between China and India (creatively referred to as 'Chindia'), and then extending this to a trilateral format with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) serving as a bridge between them, is a proposition that found resonance with a small group of strategists, which has been fleshed out in this AGDA Working Paper for further investigation.
- As global geopolitics evolves, emerging powers are exploring novel forms of minilateral cooperation. Once considered unlikely partners due to geopolitical tensions, China and India turned a new page in 2025 after five years of tension over a border skirmish with their heads of state meeting, throwing open the possibility of such trilateral cooperation, with the UAE serving as a potential influencer.
- To encourage these two most populated countries in the world and Asia's biggest economies to maintain harmonious relations, a Track 2 team of academics, think tankers and policy influencers from the UAE, China and India convened in Beijing and Shanghai in mid-2025 and brainstormed establishing a partnership that could serve as a potential model for South-South cooperation in the 21st century.
- Both China and India are strategic partners of the UAE, with extensive economic, diplomatic, technological, security, and cultural engagement. The UAE signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership deal with China in 2018¹ and its first Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with India in 2022.² The UAE is India's third-largest trading partner³ and China's second-largest trading partner in the Middle East.⁴
- Additionally, there are UAE-China and UAE-India investment footprints in Africa, spanning infrastructure, digital connectivity and renewable energy sectors, which serve as a potential platform for the proposed minilateral cooperation.
- Moreover, all three countries are important members of the Global South, as well as active members of minilateral platforms like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which was expanded to include the UAE, among others, in 2024 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
- Their membership in these platforms are driven by a shared aspiration – global governance reform, technological cooperation and inclusive development. However, while the potential for trilateral cooperation among China, India and the UAE does exist, strategic distrust – especially between China and India – remains a persistent obstacle.
- Without overlooking the challenges of such a proposition, this Working Paper makes a novel effort to emphasise the need for and value of the Asian giants working together in a spirit of 'coopetition' (cooperation and competition) rather than resorting to confrontation.
- To help this effort, the Working paper postulates the UAE serving as a 'bridge', by using its 'good offices' to encourage some confidence-building measures. Given the UAE's strategic neutrality and its global mediation role in recent times, the analysis argues that the UAE could informally minimize the trust deficit between two of its most important partners.
- Further, given the UAE's unique melting pot scenario where Chinese and Indians and their companies coexist, it has ample leverage to contribute towards promoting Sino-Indo ties. This Chinese-Indian interaction in the UAE also forms a real-world template for 'constructive coexistence'.
- The bottom line is that while the complexities of geopolitics present challenges, China, India and the UAE have an opportunity to collaborate, especially in the geoeconomic and geotechnological arenas, and potentially even in the security domain, especially in a slowly evolving collective security scenario in the Gulf region.
- Rather than succumb to the fatalistic view of China and India remaining uncompromising rivals, the analysis finds scope to explore trilateral collaboration based on two prevailing reasonings:
 - » one, a "two-plus-one" format for dialogue proposed by Beijing in 2018, where China and India could jointly conduct a dialogue with a third regional country (Nepal);⁵ and
 - » two, "rivalry partners," where countries could be partners while maintaining a modicum of rivalry,⁶ or a spirit of 'coopetition' (pursuing cooperation amid competition).

- This trilateral possibility cannot be ruled out because of the goings-on in global affairs, especially US President Donald Trump's unusual 'non-rules-based' leadership style, which is forcing countries to recalibrate their strategies.
- Tying these propositions together, the Working Paper offers a collection of analysis by various experts from the three countries who were present at the trilateral meeting in Beijing. It offers the rationale for this novel idea, highlights the pros and cons for pursuing it, lists the numerous challenges that could stall it from acquiring a realistic tone, and offers some practical suggestions to make a modest start in what otherwise appears to be a herculean task.
- It concludes that in a fragmented world, this pragmatic coalition offers a blueprint for post-hegemonic cooperation, where diverse powers build trust through shared action rather than declarations. The vision is not utopian but strategic – anchored in complementary capabilities, developmental urgency, and the common cause of empowering the Global South.
- To turn this ambitious vision into reality, the Working Paper proposes the following recommendations:
 - » attempt creating Track 2 and Track 1.5 forums where the UAE can facilitate China-India interaction to resolve some of the outstanding issues, which could serve as confidence-building measures;
 - » consider initiating a 'China-India-UAE Strategic Economic Dialogue' to further common interests, with Dubai or Abu Dhabi serving as the secretariat, which could eventually lead to the establishment of a 'Trilateral Single Window for Digital Trade';
 - » set up platforms for trilateral diplomacy involving small projects, and informal, multi-track dialogue, in Africa, Tanzania for example, to advance the continent's knowledge economy;
 - » discuss dedicated 'informal' trilateral working groups that could be established in areas like clean energy (solar and hydrogen), artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure to help Global South countries;
 - » study the possibility of allowing China to join UAE-India collaborative efforts and India to join UAE-China joint projects in fourth countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, for example;
 - » survey opportunities for three-way development of climate-resilient farming techniques and promote agro-tech, and food security corridors and logistics networks in Africa and Latin America;
 - » prepare a feasibility report to establish a 'tri-twining' mechanism of the port cities and financial capitals of Shanghai, Mumbai and Dubai;
 - » find a common thread between and among the connectivity projects that the UAE is involved in with China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative and with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, especially at the intersection points of both the physical and digital infrastructure projects;
 - » promote creation of incubators of small and medium-sized enterprises and skills development;
 - » coordinate within the BRICS minilateral framework to promote the activities of the New Development Bank, as well as reforms in multilateral institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund;
 - » engage Chinese, Indian and Emirati youth in educational and cultural activities, especially in the UAE;
 - » explore potential for informal trilateral cooperation in maritime security to safeguard supply-chain mechanisms against piracy, in particular; and
 - » exercise caution and build a buffer against negative Western influence on China-India relations and its impact on the UAE.

The Issue – Understanding the China-India and South Asia Landscapes

Dr Wang Xu

As important representatives of the Global South, China and India face a complex future intertwined with competition and cooperation. They need strategic wisdom to balance bilateral relations and lead the progress of developing countries. The main competitive realities and challenges between these countries involve two dynamics. The first is geopolitical competition becoming explicit, wherein South Asia has become a focal point of competition, as seen in the contention over infrastructure projects in Nepal (e.g., the China-Nepal railway vs Indian alternative proposals)⁷ and the joint efforts by the United States and India to counter China's influence, reflecting structural contradictions.

The second aspect is Western provocation which is worsening the differences. This is evident in the US exacerbating Sino-Indo contradictions through think tank opinions and economic aid (e.g., the Millennium Challenge Corporation plan for Nepal), attempting to build an Indo-Pacific alliance to contain China.⁸

Nonetheless, China and India have a basis and several opportunities for cooperation. Two key aspects stand out. First is the shared identity between them. Both belong to the Global South and share converging interests in reforming the Western-dominated governance system and promoting a multipolar order. The expansion of BRICS⁹ and the 'Three Global Initiatives' (the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative introduced by President Xi Jinping to showcase China's solutions to global issues)¹⁰ also demonstrate the potential for cooperation.

The second is enlightenment from civilizational wisdom. The Eastern concept of "harmony and integration" and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence offer intellectual resources to transcend zero-sum games, as evidenced by the alignment between China's proposed "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind"¹¹ and India's "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"¹² (the world is one family) philosophies.

In fact, China-India competition is beneficial for the Global South, especially in promoting diversified economic opportunities for developing countries. In order to gain support from the Global South, China and India are competing to expand investment and trade cooperation with developing countries. For example, China launched high-speed rail systems in Indonesia, while India has expanded infrastructure assistance to Africa through its "development partnership". This competition objectively provides more options for Southern countries and promotes upgrading of their industrial chains.

Another benefit is the acceleration of the prioritization of Southern needs in international agendas. Both countries compete for discourse power in multilateral platforms like the G20 and BRICS, pushing Southern concerns such as climate finance and debt restructuring to the forefront of global governance. For instance, India promoted a G20 statement that de-emphasized the Russia-Ukraine issue and strengthened development financing, while China aligned with Southern development needs through its "Three Global Initiatives," forming a complementary effect in agenda setting.

The third benefit is the facilitation of technology-sharing and the diffusion of innovation. Competition in the scientific and technological fields leads to spillover effects in technology. China's new energy technologies are implemented in the Middle East through the Belt and Road Initiative, and India's digital payment systems are promoted in Southeast Asia, forming differentiated technology export paths. Competition between the two sides in aerospace, biopharmaceuticals, and other fields objectively reduces the cost of technology acquisition for developing countries.

Fourth, the enhancement of the strategic autonomy of Southern countries. The China-US-India triangular competition provides "balancing diplomacy" opportunities for smaller countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. For example, Nepal simultaneously introduced Chinese and Indian railway projects, obtaining better cooperation conditions through great power competition and effectively reducing dependence on a single country.

The fifth benefit is the exertion of pressure on Western countries to reform the international financial system. The competitive layout of China and India in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank has forced the World Bank to accelerate voting rights reforms. After the BRICS expansion in 2024, the demands of emerging markets for a greater share in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) received better traction.

This competition is essentially a positive game between development models and governance philosophies. Rwandan President Paul Kagame pointed out at the Doha Forum that the differentiated solutions offered by China and India enable Southern countries to “follow development paths that suit their national conditions.”¹³

China-India cooperation is also important in the context of the unusual policies pursued by US President Donald Trump. The US’s ‘shaping’ of South Asia serves its ‘grand strategy’ of competing with China. South Asian countries are aware of this and are unwilling to be pawns of the United States. This has led to a perception of decline in US strategic credibility in South Asia, which is likely to worsen in Trump’s second term. Trump’s ‘bullying and erratic’ style during the first term was alarming for South Asian countries, including India. In the second term, Trump’s policies have encouraged more doubts, even in India, about US strategic credibility.¹⁴

Using the garb of economic self-interest, Trump is, first, pursuing protectionism and mercantilism. South Asian countries are caught in a cycle of escalating trade frictions, conflicting interests and even slowing down of US outward investment and technology transfer processes.

Second, Trump’s ‘diplomatic bullying’ tactics is akin to ‘maximum pressure’ and relies on ‘hegemonic’ pressure, while being unwilling to bear corresponding ‘responsibilities.’ Smaller South Asian countries fear being ignored by Trump and becoming more isolated and helpless on issues of global governance.

Third, Trump’s relatively poor strategic vision has induced instability. This is evident in the security risks pertaining to Afghan refugees, Rohingya refugees and South Asian strategic stability. His anti-Iran and pro-Israel stance in the Middle East is blatant, which puts greater internal and external security pressure on South Asian countries.

Hence’ China-India relations must transcend their bilateral scope and be concerned about the overall rise of the Global South. Both sides need to replace zero-sum games with a “competitive balance” mindset – when two ancient civilizations join hands, they could contribute “evermore significant influence upon global politics”, even “dominate the 21st Century.”¹⁵

Developing an Effective Trilateral Partnership

Samriddhi Vij

The relationship between India and China is one of Asia’s great paradoxes. The two nations are continental neighbours and civilizational peers, and their bilateral trade in FY 2024-2025 amounted to approximately \$128 billion,¹⁶ signifying a deep economic co-dependence. Yet, this economic reality is built upon a foundation of growing amount of strategic distrust, frozen by the decades-old border dispute which rose to the fore again in the Himalayas in 2020.¹⁷

Indian scholars have often noted another source of friction as China’s strategic calculus perceives India as a South Asian power, not an emerging global one, leading to a persistent disconnect. These issues are further compounded by fundamental differences in foreign policy; Beijing often segregates political disputes from economic engagement, while New Delhi defines bilateral collaboration more holistically where a secure border is the non-negotiable prerequisite for a healthy economic relationship.

This Chinese approach is evident even in the US-China dynamic, where massive trade coexists without strategic trust. However, the situation is different with India, as India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has emphasized, the relationship “cannot be normal if the peace and tranquillity in the border areas is disturbed”.¹⁸ This principle, the primacy of the border, makes strategic trust an essential, not optional, ingredient for any meaningful deepening of India-China ties. Without it, the immense economic potential remains capped by political and security risks.

Instead of India and China pursuing a relatively uncertain bilateral relationship, a trilateral framework involving the UAE offers a more stable and pragmatic path forward. This model creates a new geoeconomic architecture where the unique strengths of each nation can be leveraged for mutual gain. India offers its vast and growing market, immense human capital and a rapidly scaling manufacturing base.

In this framework, it would secure access to UAE and Chinese capital along with Chinese technology for its development. China offers its world-class technology, advanced logistics and vast capital reserves. A UAE-based framework would grant it a de-politicized and reliable gateway into the Indian market. The UAE also offers its established neutrality, world-class infrastructure, sophisticated financial centres, and robust legal systems. As an economic hub connecting Asia's two largest engines of growth, it would further its ambition of being a global nexus for capital and trade.

It is precisely within the China-India deadlock that the UAE emerges as a unique geoeconomic player. Having successfully developed its foreign policy to one of strategic neutrality and business-first pragmatism, the UAE has cultivated deep, trusted and independent relationships with both Asian giants. It is positioned not as a political mediator, but as a geoeconomic guarantor, and its role extends beyond providing capital.

Given its formation of deep strategic and economic alliances with both New Delhi and Beijing, the UAE is uniquely positioned to act as a guarantor of trust. Both India and China have an interest in maintaining their strong relationship with the UAE, so they have a powerful incentive to honour agreements made under its aegis. This structure creates a 'trust-by-proxy,' where the UAE's credibility underwrites the commercial engagement, allowing the two South Asian powers to realize common geoeconomic interests.

Competitive Cooperation Boundaries

Dr Wang Xu

Vigilance is needed against Western attempts to 'divide and conquer,' such as the US trying to use the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to alienate China and India from Southern countries. In the future, China and India should explore "competitive cooperation boundaries" and form at least limited cooperation in areas like climate and poverty reduction to ensure that the dividends of competition continue to benefit the Global South.

Moreover, in light of President Trump's strategies of pursuing protectionism, causing instability, and engaging in diplomatic bullying, it is important to:

1. establish crisis management mechanisms, which could involve prioritizing the resolution of border disputes and creating regular foreign minister-level dialogue channels to prevent local frictions from escalating into systemic confrontation;
2. create a model for Southern cooperation, such as co-investing in infrastructure projects in Africa and Latin America and exploring a 'China-India+X' trilateral cooperation model, like jointly participating in new energy projects construction in Bangladesh;
3. strengthen multilateral platform coordination, which could involve coordinating positions within the BRICS and SCO frameworks, promoting World Bank/IMF voting rights reforms, and jointly building a technology transfer platform for Southern countries; and
4. innovate public opinion guidance methods, such as by establishing a joint China-India media fund and producing documentaries showcasing common memories of colonial history to dismantle Western discourse traps.

Small Projects Diplomacy

Dr Tingyi Wang

The US remains a critical external actor shaping Asian security architecture. Through Indo-Pacific strategies, bilateral defence partnerships, and the promotion of technology alliances, Washington aims to contain China's rise in this region. Leading US scientists and security advisors emphasize strategic decoupling in sensitive technologies like semiconductors and AI. This places India in a precarious position, caught between its security ties with the US and its regional responsibilities in Asia.

India, in turn, faces immense pressures from both its northern and northwestern fronts—notably from China in the Himalayas and Pakistan across the western borders. As highlighted in books such as *How India Became Territorial*, India's national identity is increasingly shaped by border security and strategic autonomy.¹⁹ Its tensions with China go beyond territorial disputes; they reflect deep-seated civilizational competition and mutual suspicion.

Despite these disputes, the question remains: can China and India engage in “dragon-elephant dance” or are they doomed to rivalry? Being ancient civilizations, both sides used to learn from each other. Today, with the world’s largest populations and long-standing economic strengths, some people from both nations often look down on each other.

China views India as a secondary regional player, while India resents China’s dismissive posture and seeks global recognition on equal terms. Still, India cannot ignore China’s economic weight. China’s global infrastructure investments, digital reach, and manufacturing dominance inevitably influence Indian strategy, especially in areas like trade, regional diplomacy, and climate cooperation. As neighbouring countries with world’s largest populations, both sides recognize that prolonged confrontation is costly and unsustainable.

In today’s increasingly polarized global environment, the future of Asia—cooperative or divided—will largely depend on how key players like China, India, and the UAE manage growing geopolitical challenges and strategic divergences. The current dynamics reveal both rising risks and unprecedented opportunities for trilateral collaboration. Symbolically, cities like Wuhan, where early efforts at dialogue began, can again become future hubs for “small project diplomacy”—joint investments, cultural exchange and youth dialogue. By starting small, confidence can be rebuilt step by step.

The future also lies in multi-track and multi-party dialogue. Beyond formal summits, informal channels involving think tanks, youth leaders, and entrepreneurs are essential. The UAE, with its convening power and credibility with both sides, can host such multi-stakeholder dialogues that keep communication open even when formal diplomacy stalls. Additionally, engaging young people is important. A new generation of Indian, Chinese and Emirati youth must grow up not with inherited hostility, but shared aspirations for peace, innovation, and sustainability.

Moreover, amid the rivalry between China and India, the UAE emerges as a unique example and potential bridge. While not a major power by size, the UAE practices “big diplomacy”. It hosts large Chinese and Indian communities, where people from both countries coexist peacefully under UAE law and social frameworks. This offers a living model of coexistence amidst political tensions. The UAE’s neutrality and credibility position it as a platform for rebuilding trust between China and India.

In short, Asia’s future depends on strategic choices: whether to cooperate across divisions or to let rivalry define the region. China, India, and the UAE hold key roles in shaping this outcome.

Incremental Pathway Design

Dr Hu Shisheng

Based on the bilateral cooperation foundations among the three countries and their shared multilateral frameworks such as BRICS, China, India, and the UAE could adopt the strategy of “incremental pathway design + breakthroughs in low-sensitivity areas + strengthening the UAE’s mediation role” when constructing a trilateral cooperation mechanism. Although the three countries have established strategic partnerships to some extent, there remain significant strategic suspicions between China and India, further complicated by the impact of the US-China strategic competition. Therefore, the trilateral cooperation mechanism should be built incrementally.

Firstly, the existing similar or identical bilateral cooperation areas among the three parties should be used as the future common cooperation fields for the three countries to reduce the sensitivity of cooperation in new fields. Currently, China-UAE and India-UAE relations both involve extensive cooperation in fields such as finance, energy and digital economy. Therefore, dedicated working groups could be established in areas like clean energy (such as solar energy and hydrogen energy), artificial intelligence, and digital infrastructure.

Secondly, the trilateral working group for China-India-UAE cooperation could be established under the BRICS framework. For example, the BRICS Energy Working Group ²⁰ could be used as a platform to form more specialized industry alliances among the three countries, such as a trilateral association for solar energy companies, a trilateral hydrogen energy development and application alliance, etc. Informal consultations could be conducted by the deputy ministers and CEOs of leading enterprises.

Thirdly, after the above suggested mechanism has been in operation for a period of time, the mechanism could, depending on its maturity, become independent from the BRICS framework and form a 'China-India-UAE Strategic Economic Dialogue' (SED). At the same time, the scope of trilateral cooperation could be expanded, using the structure of the once functioning China-India SED working groups. The permanent secretariat for this trilateral SED could be located at the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) or the Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM), utilizing DIFC or ADGM's independent judicial system, technology-neutral regulation, and neutral data flow (i.e., no forced local data storage, allowing for free cross-border data transfer).

Additionally, the UAE's friendly relations with both China and India would strengthen the trilateral cooperation in multiple areas—particularly in key fields required for embracing the Fourth Industrial Revolution, such as blockchain, digital currencies, AI, 5G/6G, clean energy, etc.

However, if the direct cooperation among the three countries mentioned above remains difficult in the short term due to the interference from the China-India and China-US relationship, indirect trilateral cooperation could be attempted in the following ways.

This could take three forms: 'China-UAE cooperation + India' (Sino-Emirati cooperation, but open to India); 'India-UAE cooperation + China' (Indo-Emirati cooperation, but open to China); and 'India-UAE + Sino-UAE cooperation, open to each other'.

Another possibility is the "China-India-UAE + N" model, where the three countries could work together in a fourth country to leverage their respective advantages and create a model for South-South cooperation. For instance, China, India, and the UAE all have energy projects in Sri Lanka, providing an opportunity for all three countries to collaborate there.

Need for Reimagination – Technological Trilateralism

Sanjay Anandaram

In 2022, UN Secretary-General António Guterres advocated for a "coalition of the world" to overcome turbulent times and drive transformative change.²¹ He could have added another word that would, in no small measure, both undergird the causes and the pathways to solutions – technology.

It is a truism today that technology impacts all aspects of not just our lives but also geopolitics and geoeconomics. The movement of ideas, people, goods, and information are all exponentially enabled and impacted by technology. Sovereignty, cybersecurity, finance, education, health, agriculture, water, energy, trade and climate are profoundly impacted by the development and deployment of technology and the consequent geopolitics.

The resulting impact on the people of the Global South is most significant in their inability to keep pace with the great changes taking place due to technology, especially with the advent of AI in the near term and quantum technologies in the medium term. This is leading to increased inequality around the world in terms of people's ability to afford, access, and benefit from goods and services, as well as enjoy human rights, which makes achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 a challenge.

Without technology, it would be nearly impossible to overcome the challenges of inequality. This would require a reimagination of how technology developed and deployed as a global human good or digital public infrastructure (DPI) can offer quick, low-cost, efficient, and effective solutions to the problems faced by people not only in the Global South, but also in developed countries.

This reimagination can be ignited and carried forward by the coming together of talent, institutions (existing and new), financial resources, expertise in building hard and soft infrastructure, policy, legal standards and regulations. Any reimagination requires us to collectively think of the possibilities presented by technology, nurtured by humanity and driven by shared purpose. AI offers such possibilities across a wide array of use cases.

Can China, India and the UAE, for example, come together to harmonise and reimagine their considerable collective capacities in AI as DPIS for solving challenges in areas like agriculture, health, and education that most of the world faces but lacks the ability to overcome?

As AI requires enormous energy, can it be permanently powered by innovative energy sources such as Small Modular Reactors, enabling small open-source multimodal models tailored for specific areas?

Can the movement of data in a secure and trusted manner be enabled by reimagining how data and models interact through a new digital architecture that empowers and protects citizens around the world?

Can new institutional architectures be reimagined by bringing China, India, and the UAE together to ensure governance, innovative funding methods, and the involvement of stakeholders, as well as to ensure and validate the development and deployment of safe, responsible, and culture-preserving AI and practices?

In short, the China-India-UAE coalition can offer DPI-based solutions to some of the most pressing challenges faced by most of the world, but it needs an open reimagination of possibilities.

Connecting Connectivity Projects

Dr Tang Zhichao

Cooperation among China, India, and the UAE can be pursued across multiple strategic dimensions. The first is China-India bilateral collaboration within the UAE. For instance, China and India could engage in joint economic, technological, and cultural initiatives in the UAE, such as establishing an 'Asian Cultural Park' that showcases Chinese, Indian, and Islamic heritage, or co-developing an integrated industrial park that leverages their respective strengths in manufacturing, services, and innovation.

The second is regional connectivity and infrastructure integration, which could involve the three countries collectively promoting transregional connectivity by linking South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, and East Asia through a multidimensional infrastructure network. This can include joint efforts in logistics corridors, energy grids, digital infrastructure, and transportation systems that enhance both physical and digital connectivity.

Another area of trilateral cooperation is coordination under the BRICS and SCO frameworks. Within such platforms, China, India and the UAE can cooperate on shaping a more inclusive and equitable global order. This includes contributing to regional stability, reforming global governance institutions, and deepening economic, technological, and security cooperation among Global South countries.

Thematic trilateral collaboration among the three countries could also be pursued. There is significant scope for trilateral cooperation in high-priority areas such as energy security, maritime and sea-lane safety, resilient global supply chains, green and digital economies, innovation-driven development, and the promotion of open and rules-based trade.

Lastly, UAE's role as a diplomatic and economic bridge is a possible dimension of trilateral cooperation. Leveraging its neutral posture and deep strategic ties with both Beijing and New Delhi, the UAE can play a vital mediating role in fostering dialogue, mitigating tensions, and facilitating pragmatic cooperation between China and India. Its position as a regional hub enables it to serve as a platform for trilateral diplomacy and confidence-building.

Collective Maritime Security

Dr Hu Shisheng

India, China, and the UAE could cooperate in the area of new energy and green economy. For instance, they could co-develop a 'China-India-UAE Green Energy Corridor', collaborating on solar, hydrogen and energy storage projects to promote energy transition. Another potential area of collaboration is digital silk road integration.

The three countries could deepen cooperation in 5G, AI, smart cities, etc., and explore the construction and application of digital currencies, blockchain technologies, cryptocurrencies, and local currency settlement (payment) systems.

For example, a 'Trilateral Single Window for Digital Trade' could be established, with pilot programmes at one port in each of the three countries. Studies have shown that this mechanism could reduce traditional cross-border document processing times from three-five days to under four hours, lowering compliance costs by 30%. The UAE (with the US) plans to build a super AI centre,²² while China and India are both AI powerhouses, with China excelling in electricity and telecom infrastructure. The trilateral AI cooperation could potentially lead the Fourth Industrial Revolution, focusing on digitalization, AI, automation, and big computing power.

China, India, and the UAE can also collaborate in the field of supply chain security and infrastructure, such as by co-building a 'North Indian Ocean Economic Corridor' involving the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, enhancing port, logistics, and energy network infrastructure to secure supply chain stability. Currently, COSCO Group holds shares in Khalifa Port,²³ and there is cooperation between India and the UAE at Kochi Port,²⁴ which demonstrates the feasibility of such an initiative.

Lastly, security and counterterrorism is a possible avenue for trilateral cooperation. This could involve the establishment of an intelligence-sharing mechanism to safeguard the Indian Ocean sea lanes, including anti-piracy, maritime disaster relief, and more. This could involve setting up an 'Indian Ocean Piracy Warning Information Sharing Platform' and possibly creating a 'Trilateral Maritime Security Coordination Room.' Specific tasks could be divided as follows: China could provide BeiDou satellite monitoring data, India can share data from its 'Indian Ocean Information Fusion Centre', and the UAE can provide logistical support for the coordination room (similar to the India-China anti-piracy coordination model at Duqm Port in Oman).

Combining the Best of Three Worlds

Mohammed Saqib

The idea of India-China-UAE trilateral cooperation suggests a possible shift in cooperation among developing countries. The initial Track 2 meetings in Beijing and Shanghai have introduced possibilities to combine resources, skills and funds to address critical development issues in other regions, such as Africa. To transform these fruitful discussions into action, we must focus on specific and achievable projects.

The foundation of this trilateral partnership lies in the unique combination of strengths from India, China, and the UAE. India's experience in developing cost-effective solutions and enhancing human capacity, China's expertise in large-scale infrastructure projects, and the UAE's significant financial resources and logistical capabilities create a strong synergy. Africa, with its vast potential and clear development needs, presents an ideal environment for this collaboration.

Although a formal trilateral dialogue remains conceptual, the groundwork for such cooperation is being laid through various bilateral and plurilateral forums. Moreover, the recent thaw in India-China relations following the 2020 conflict²⁵ indicates a renewed effort to restore their relationship to a healthy and stable track. Both nations, along with the UAE, are active members of BRICS, and India and China are key stakeholders in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB),²⁶ conveying a shared interest in reforming global governance and financing development. Additionally, the UAE has strong and unique economic and strategic bilateral relationships with both India and China.

The potential for this trilateral partnership already has a strong footing. The UAE and China are expanding their cooperation through joint investments in Africa, with the UAE having invested \$10 billion in a joint China-UAE investment fund for the continent.²⁷ Their collaboration extends to infrastructure projects, including ports and industrial zones, often linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

India and the UAE's development cooperation in Africa combines India's skilled workers with the UAE's financial resources and expertise in energy and logistics. The two countries have also cooperated on the Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, port project.²⁸ Additionally, India has partnered with Japan to build a cancer hospital in Kenya and with the UAE to set up an ICT centre in Ethiopia.²⁹ These efforts show India's adaptable approach to working with multiple countries. India's engagement in Africa is extensive, primarily through concessional loans, with a focus on capacity-building and human resource development. The Pan-African E-Network project, providing digital connectivity for tele-education and tele-medicine,³⁰ is a flagship example of India's engagement in Africa.

There are various potential initiatives that use the unique strengths of each country to support sustainable growth in Africa. The first is in green energy and digital transition – the joint development of a 'Green Energy Corridor' in East Africa. This project would harness China's leadership in solar panel manufacturing, India's expertise in software and digital payment systems, and the UAE's substantial financial commitments to clean energy in Africa. The UAE, through its renewable energy company Masdar, could provide critical capital to address Africa's urgent need for investment and bridge its energy access gap. A pilot project could be launched in Tanzania, where both India and the UAE are already cooperating.

The second initiative is the development of agro-tech and food security corridors. Africa, a continent with 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land,³¹ could benefit from a trilateral initiative that establishes integrated agricultural value chains. This would involve the development of climate-resilient farming techniques, drawing on India's expertise, as well as the construction of modern food processing and storage facilities, utilising China's infrastructure capabilities. Additionally, developing efficient logistics networks would be essential. The UAE's DP World, with its extensive logistics network, could play a crucial role in this effort, building on its existing collaboration with India in promoting food security.

The third initiative is creating SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) and skills development incubators. To support local entrepreneurship, the partnership could create a network of 'Trilateral Tech and Innovation Hubs'. These centres would provide training, mentorship and access to capital for SMEs. This plan would draw on India's success with startups, China's skills in vocational training, and the UAE's support for SMEs to empower young people in Africa.

Tri-twining of Shanghai, Mumbai and Dubai

Mohammed Baharoon

One of the major tools of UAE foreign policy today is the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The UAE has signed a total of 27 CEPAs, six of which – with India, Israel, Indonesia, Türkiye, Cambodia and Georgia – have already been implemented, while 14 – with Vietnam, South Korea, Chile, Australia, Jordan, Serbia, Colombia, Morocco, Malaysia, New Zealand, Kenya, Ukraine, Central African Republic, and Republic of Congo – have been signed but are awaiting ratification. Seven more are being negotiated, including one with the EU, which has long maintained that it will only sign a trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council as opposed to a single member state.³²

The first CEPA signed by the UAE was with India in 2022, and it is considered to this day to be the golden standard since it was negotiated and signed in under 90 days. By 2024, it had already managed to achieve 75% of its goal of increasing UAE non-oil trade with India to \$100 billion annually by 2030.³³ The origin of the CEPA is the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement, which the UAE signed with India in 2017 and with China in 2018. However, all these agreements are bilateral. The UAE has been the major convergence point for all these CEPAs, thus creating a space for exchange between the countries involved, but none of the CEPAs have converged into a trilateral or minilateral CEPA.

The Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy-led UAE-China-India Track 2 trilateral initiative demonstrates that the UAE is not only seeking to build bridges of economic cooperation with its two major trade partners, but also building tunnels of quiet economic diplomacy to ease the tension between the two biggest economies in Asia. Since the two countries have made progress in their bilateral ties since this initiative was conceived, with the heads of state meeting in person in 2025 and both countries set to resume direct flights in early 2026, prospects for trilateral cooperation are more conceivable in the future.

Projects such as tri-twining among the port cities of Shanghai, Mumbai and Dubai could become a major contribution to the global supply chain, not only in the shipment of goods but also in the fluidity it can bring to the financial markets of the three cities and the synergy among capital, industry and digital transformation.

As the discussion among the Emirati, Chinese and Indian experts quickly revealed, which is documented in this Working Paper, the opportunities outweigh the risks. The adoption of geoeconomics and its tools of cooperation showcase a different picture than that seen through the lenses of geopolitics where the calculus of zero-sum is the dominant arithmetic.

Coopetition and Cold Peace

Dr Narayanappa Janardhan

As China and India experienced their gravest border crisis in four decades in 2020, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including the UAE, were indeed concerned but remained diplomatically tight lipped. This deft approach on matters related to the two Asian giants highlights a brewing foreign policy conundrum for the UAE and the GCC bloc in the future. While the economic strategies of the Asian giants have gelled well with the UAE's 'Look East' policy over the last 25 years, the continuing China-India competitive relations bring to the table a set of uncertainties and opportunities for the UAE.

The discourse on a potential Sino-Indo rivalry playing out in the region in the future remains, which portends replication of the insecurity facing the UAE in dealing with US-China superpower rivalry. These factors make Sino-Indo ties with the UAE and the GCC comparable to an incongruent triangle, posing the question: will China and India cooperate, compete or confront on bilateral issues and matters of common interest to the UAE?

From an optimistic perspective, while competition is inevitable in meeting economic, political and strategic objectives, there is nothing stopping the two countries from cooperating and avoiding confrontation to maximise not only mutual but also plurilateral benefits. The UAE should exploit these coopetition openings by continuing its pragmatic and multi-aligned foreign policy.

While India is loath to mediation in its own or other's bilateral affairs, China's economic interests are encouraging it to explore unique diplomatic tactics in the region that could help strengthen Beijing's developing global role. These involve mediation to defend commercial rather than security interests; conflict 'management' instead of 'resolution'; and promoting a harmonious relationship of 'cold peace' among China's strategic partners.³⁴

Beyond diplomacy, both countries bring distinctive security strengths to the region. While the United States is still the chief security guarantor and largest arms supplier in the region, Chinese and Indian security footprints are growing with their navies having a presence in Duqm, Oman, among others.

Even though India is part of the US-promoted Quad, which also includes Japan and Australia, India has resisted formal affiliation to the bloc to avoid antagonising China. Equally, however, India and China are now conducting joint naval exercises with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Amid these commonalities and contradictions, it is important to stop viewing the developments in mere India-versus-China terms and take an optimistic India-plus-China approach that guarantees a win-win situation for all, including the UAE. As the global economic balance shifts towards Asia, despite differences between the two

countries with “oversized egos”, there are sufficient reasons to believe that they could engage in cooperative and competitive engagement, avoiding confrontation.

One way out is to consider de-hyphenating India-China ties from the US, which would also address the India-Pakistan issue. Despite the recent events, this could help Chindia progress from “Inch (India and China) towards Miles (Millennium of Exceptional Synergy).³⁵

Yes, there are problems between Asia’s ‘dragon’ and ‘elephant’, but they exist between India and Pakistan too. In fact, the Indo-Pak dimension was, is and will remain more complicated than Sino-Indo relations can ever be. Again, unlike the Iran-Israel relationship, where ideology determines geostrategic interests, there are no ideological factors deterring Sino-Indo ties, leaving them to just worry about geostrategic interests.

The future of China-India bilateral ties and their roles in the Gulf region will, no doubt, be influenced by the United States. While Washington would desire a unipolar world and a multipolar Asia, China would prefer a multipolar world and a China-centric unipolar Asia. On the other hand, India would like to see a multipolar world and a multipolar Asia. While this may intensify Beijing-New Delhi competition, the new dynamic UAE and GCC foreign policies are capable of circumventing diplomatic barriers.

The point is that China, India and other principal Asian players will sooner or later be forced to stop riding ‘piggyback’ on US naval presence in the region’s waters and find their own means of securing their sea lanes. Since this aligns with the security requirements of the Gulf and “the major conflicts in the world have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own,” it opens the possibility of a collective security architecture in the region, an idea that remains a work in progress despite the raft of deals that the US has signed with the GCC countries in 2025.³⁶

Conclusion

This Working Paper has incorporated the views of key academics/experts involved in a Track 2 initiative to promote China-India-UAE trilateral cooperation. It outlines the importance of a trilateral partnership among them, the areas in which collaboration is possible, and the steps that could be taken to achieve the desired goals.

It is a no-brainer that China-India relations are strained, shaped by significant distrust and political tensions that are further exacerbated by the US’s interference in the region, which often serves its political objectives. Nevertheless, China and India have a shared civilisational background and mutual interests, as evident in their joint membership in platforms such as the SCO and BRICS. They are also the most proactive in demanding changes in global institutions and advancing the interests of the Global South. Moreover, both countries have deep strategic partnerships with the UAE in various fields.

The central question that scholars and policymakers address in this publication is how to evolve from parallel bilateral relationships into a functional trilateral mechanism. It could be surmised that this is possible via the UAE’s role as a guarantor of trust between China and India. From here, trilateral cooperation should be implemented incrementally by focussing on areas where bilateral convergence already exists.

The China-India-UAE trilateral framework is still nascent, but the intellectual and policy groundwork is well underway. Rather than seeking to solve geopolitical disputes directly, this publication prioritizes functional cooperation, geoeconomic alignment and shared development goals. The UAE’s ‘neutral’ infrastructure and trust capital make it an ideal host, while the convergence of Chinese and Indian strengths—if properly managed—can yield broad benefits for the Global South. In a fragmented world, this pragmatic coalition offers a blueprint for post-hegemonic cooperation, where diverse powers build trust through shared action rather than declarations. The vision is not utopian but strategic – anchored in complementary capabilities, developmental urgency, and the common cause of empowering the Global South.

Policy Recommendations

This Working Paper has explored, using the analysis of various academics/experts, the potential and significance of a China-India-UAE trilateral partnership. It has examined the methods that could be implemented to achieve this collaboration and the areas in which the partnership could manifest. The following is a summary of policy recommendations from the Track 2 deliberations:

- » attempt creating Track 2 and Track 1.5 forums where the UAE can facilitate China-India interaction to resolve some of the outstanding issues, which could serve as confidence-building measures;
- » consider initiating a ‘China-India-UAE Strategic Economic Dialogue’ to further common interests, with Dubai or Abu Dhabi serving as the secretariat, which could eventually lead to the establishment of a ‘Trilateral Single Window for Digital Trade’;
- » set up platforms for trilateral diplomacy involving small projects, and informal, multi-track dialogue, in Africa, Tanzania for example, to advance the continent’s knowledge economy;
- » discuss dedicated ‘informal’ trilateral working groups that could be established in areas like clean energy (solar and hydrogen), artificial intelligence and digital infrastructure to help Global South countries;
- » study the possibility of allowing China to join UAE-India collaborative efforts and India to join UAE-China joint projects in fourth countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, for example;
- » survey opportunities for three-way development of climate-resilient farming techniques and promote agro-tech, and food security corridors and logistics networks in Africa and Latin America;
- » prepare a feasibility report to establish a ‘tri-twining’ mechanism of the port cities and financial capitals of Shanghai, Mumbai and Dubai;
- » find a common thread between and among the connectivity projects that the UAE is involved in with China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative and with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, especially at the intersection points of both the physical and digital infrastructure projects;
- » promote creation of incubators of small and medium-sized enterprises and skills development;
- » coordinate within the BRICS minilateral framework to promote the activities of the New Development Bank, as well as reforms in multilateral institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund;
- » engage Chinese, Indian and Emirati youth in educational and cultural activities, especially in the UAE;
- » explore potential for informal trilateral cooperation in maritime security to safeguard supply-chain mechanisms against piracy, in particular; and
- » exercise caution and build a buffer against negative Western influence on China-India relations and its impact on the UAE.

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