
Analyzing India-US Strategic Partnership and Security Dynamics in South Asia

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the India-US strategic partnership and its impacts on the regional security dynamics of South Asia. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States formed a strategic partnership with India to contain China. Since then, the US has been providing military support to India and strengthening its capabilities. The US has signed important bilateral agreements, civil nuclear deals, missile defense cooperation, space cooperation, and included India in the QUAD. The study examines the factors that contributed to the transformation of India-US relationships into a comprehensive strategic partnership. The findings of this research highlight that the US pursued this partnership primarily to counterbalance the rise of China and maintain its global primacy, positioning India as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific region. The study reveals the security implications, as the partnership has resulted in a shift in power dynamics favouring India over Pakistan, thereby impacting regional security. Therefore, Pakistan faces various challenges, including India's assertive policies in Kashmir, and military build-ups which are further complicating the region's dynamics.

Keywords: United States, China, Strategic competition, Asia, alliances, India, Pakistan.

Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR, the international system transitioned from bipolarity to unipolarity, with the United States emerging as the sole superpower. The clear power hierarchy in this unipolar world provided the United States with a significant advantage, allowing it to exert considerable influence with minimal opposition for an extended period. This circumstance led to the establishment of a global order that some have characterized as exhibiting imperialistic tendencies (Bayley, 2007). The United States remains the preeminent global power, yet China is progressively narrowing the gap. China now boasts the world's second-largest economy, exerting a more assertive influence in global affairs. Despite its historical aversion to formal alliances, China is gradually reconsidering this stance by cultivating relationships with nations, including allies of the United States (Deng, 2008).

To counterweight China and retain its status as the sole hegemon, the US has strengthened relations with like-minded countries, especially India which has emerged as a key country for the US against China's increasing influence in international politics (Khan, 2017). India and the United States formed a strategic partnership at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This partnership has witnessed the development of significant collaborations in areas

such as civil nuclear cooperation, missile defense, and space exploration. By raising India as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific region, the United States aims to bolster its interests and counterbalance China's influence (Dupont, 2021). While the United States' strategic partnership with India serves its interests, it has inadvertently affected regional security dynamics, particularly the balance of power between India and Pakistan. Pakistan faces multifaceted challenges stemming from India's assertive policies towards Kashmir, a deadlock in bilateral talks, and the emergence of hybrid warfare. These developments have heightened tensions and strained regional stability, necessitating a careful reassessment of Pakistan's strategy to effectively counter Indian designs.

The United States has designated India as a pivotal player in its new military strategy with a focus on the Asian region. This strategy aims to establish a strategic partnership with India based on two primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to bolster India's defensive capabilities in relation to China. Secondly, the United States perceives China as a revisionist power and aims to counterbalance it through its strategic alliance with India (Mukherjee, 2020). Consequently, the strategic partnership between the United States and India has diminished Pakistan's significance in U.S. foreign policy and widened the power imbalance between India and Pakistan.

The rise of China has led both countries towards a collision course and they are assumed to be in Thucydides trap. This intensifying rivalry has brought Pakistan to a crossroads, wherein, on one side it has a historic and ever-growing partnership with China; a rising power and on the other side is the US, an incumbent superpower. With the emerging multipolar world transcending from geo-politics to geo-economics and, developing rivalry between global powers, Pakistan ought to be on the right side of history (Paul, 2006). The security environment of South Asia is in a state of flux due to the unending enmity between the two nuclear-armed neighbours—Pakistan and India. The challenges to strategic stability in South Asia from domestic, regional, and global perspectives also explore how the interplay of these challenges is undermining South Asian strategic stability.

Theoretical Framework

Around 2,500 years ago, the renowned Greek historian Thucydides recognized the perilous trap that can ensnare both a dominant power and an emerging power. This treacherous dynamic emerges when an ascending power poses a threat to supplant the existing dominant power, increasing the likelihood of violent conflict between the two becoming the norm rather than the exception (Bartlett, 2023). At present, uni-polarity is weakening and US contestants are catching up in definite areas globally. Amongst these, China is the only country which is economically sound and can develop power projection capabilities essential for a superpower. Therefore, the two countries are heading towards a point of no return and the bitterness between them has permeated the realms of economics, politics and military. This escalating rivalry between the U.S. and China and political opposition by US parties to China has created a precarious situation for Pakistan. It is at the moment at the crossroads from where misreading these international developments could lead it to embrace an unnecessarily partisan foreign policy stance and force the powerful countries into absolute hostility. The threat of the Chinese rise to global prominence is likely to cause discomfort to the established superpower i.e. the US. Whether these two countries will fall into the Thucydides trap or manage to live in peaceful co-existence is open to speculation at this moment (Allison, 2017).

China-US Strategic Competition

Across history, the decline of a dominant power has typically been succeeded by the emergence of a new hegemon, often in the aftermath of a transformative and disruptive war. However, the transition from British to American hegemony stands as a unique and peaceful exception in the past two centuries. This exceptional shift was largely facilitated by a sense of cultural and ideological alignment between the two powers, in stark contrast to the current state of relations between the United States and China. In recent years, the relationship between the United States and China has progressively evolved into an adversarial dynamic, resulting in a growing rivalry between the two nations. This rivalry has manifested in various ways, including territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. Additionally, economic competition between the two countries has had widespread ramifications, impacting numerous nations across the globe (Zhao, 2019).

The emergence of China as a global power has had significant implications for world politics, particularly in the Asian region and the Indo-Pacific. China's rise has led to the formation of new alliances and a shifting dynamic in the international system. Consequently, the United States has shifted its focus from counterterrorism in the Middle East to a renewed emphasis on great power rivalry, reminiscent of the Cold War, with China. Currently, China

boasts the world's second-largest economy, with a substantial presence in the global supply chain, particularly in critical technology sectors such as information and communications. Furthermore, China has undergone a comprehensive modernization of its armed forces, spanning conventional forces, space, cyber capabilities, and nuclear forces over the past two decades (Cheng, n.d). China envisions achieving full modernization and societal transformation by 2049, which they refer to as the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The country aims to achieve technological parity with or even surpass the United States in various fields, thereby enhancing its global influence (Zhou, 2006).

The rise of China has captured the attention of the United States, which increasingly views China as a competitor for global leadership. The relationship between the United States and China has significantly deteriorated in recent years, with both countries considering each other as adversaries and rivals. This rivalry is evident in various areas, including economic competition, which encompasses trade, resources, minerals, production, and manufacturing. Additionally, security and political issues such as the Taiwan dispute and territorial claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea are significant flashpoints that contribute to regional instability, uncertainty, and the potential for broader conflict involving other states.

With the increasing spending on military hardware and modern technologies, direct military confrontation between the US and China although remote but could be a possibility. Some observers remain concerned that maritime territorial disputes in the East China Sea/South China Sea or Taiwan issue could lead to a crisis or conflict between China and a neighbouring country such as Japan, Philippines and Taiwan. US has also forged alliances such as AUKUS and QUAD etc. to tighten its noose around China through regional countries surrounding China. Moreover, the US is transferring state-of-the-art weapons technologies to Australia, India and other regional countries to make them competitive against China (Khan, 2022).

Containing China and the Indo-US Strategic Partnership

The end of the Cold War, coupled with India's foreign policy recalibration and global economic integration, initially improved US-India relations. However, India's nuclear test in 1998 led to US-led economic sanctions. A pivotal shift occurred during President Bill Clinton's 2000 visit, continued by George W. Bush's administration with a defense agreement in 2005 and a significant civil nuclear cooperation accord in 2008. This positive trajectory continued through the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, reaching a culmination under President Joe Biden (Vijayalakshmi, 2017). The current U.S. stance appears increasingly accommodating

of India's emphasis on strategic autonomy in the post-colonial era. Despite the marked contrast between the Hindu nationalist Modi and his secular predecessor, Manmohan Singh, there is notable bipartisan support for strengthening ties, evidenced by five successive U.S. presidents and three Indian prime ministers. The shift can be attributed, in part, to China's geopolitical assertiveness under President Xi Jinping, marking a departure from his predecessors' commitment to the "peaceful rise" doctrine. The U.S. notably regards China as its principal adversary and is actively seeking regional alliances to counteract its expanding influence. The communication with China is evident. Despite India's assertion that it is a partner rather than a U.S. ally, it has progressively aligned itself with the democratic West in its escalating competition with communist China (Pant, 2015).

In 2016, the United States recognized India as a Major Defense Partner, leading to India's elevation to Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status in 2018. This designation grants India license-free access to a wide range of military and dual-use technologies regulated by the Department of Commerce. The defense trade cooperation between the United States and India has expanded with the implementation of various agreements, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Industrial Security Agreement (ISA). The PM Bureau, which supports defense trade, has played a crucial role in increasing the total defense trade between the two countries from nearly zero in 2008 to over \$20 billion in 2020 (U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

US Support to India in the Nuclear Domain

The US-India Nuclear Deal is a remarkable shift in the US approach towards India. It is marked by the intention to renew civilian nuclear technology trade. This move is widely perceived as a departure from traditional US nuclear non-proliferation policies (Ali, 2022). The agreement has primarily served to further the foreign policy objectives of the United States, with a particular focus on bolstering India's potential as a regional counterbalance to the rising power of China. In July 2005, former US President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh issued a joint statement outlining a framework for nuclear cooperation. On October 1, 2008, the US Congress granted final approval to this agreement. The agreement allows for the resumption of nuclear trade between India and the United States, ending a three-decade-long ban imposed by the US. Furthermore, it grants India the opportunity to request assistance from the US for its civil nuclear program and facilitates the expansion of bilateral collaboration in fields such as energy and satellite technology (Khan, 2020).

India has made persistent efforts to obtain membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), an organization established after India's 1974 nuclear test to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and nuclear technology (Bano, 2015). The signing of the US-India nuclear deal in 2008 opened the path for India to pursue membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) (Yeon, 2017). As a component of the Indo-US Nuclear Agreement, the United States aimed to secure an NSG waiver for India. On September 6, 2008, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, despite India's questionable record on nuclear proliferation, exempted India from the requirement of full-scope safeguards. The NSG had established the full-scope safeguards condition in 1992 and had consistently applied it to prevent non-NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) states from accessing nuclear trade benefits. The Indian exemption is an exception to this condition. After getting the waiver, India is now able to meet all of its energy needs through international cooperation, while freeing up home-grown fissile material for possible nuclear weapons development. In addition, the US has been lobbying for India to be granted full NSG membership. The Indian entry into the NSG as a full member would be detrimental to Pakistan because the group runs its affairs through consensus, and India would block any effort to grant Pakistan exemptions on sensitive nuclear technologies (Asif et.al, 2020).

India's Role in QUAD

Amidst the prominence of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, the Quad continues to be a focal point of global discussions. The Quad's inception traces back to a functional collaboration during the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, where the United States, Australia, India, and Japan jointly established the Tsunami Core group (Yang, 2022). The effective diplomatic coordination inspired optimism for a prospective collaboration among the four democracies to tackle regional challenges. Despite popular misnomers like the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue,' officially absent from documents since the Quad's revival in 2017, it is not a military alliance but rather a consultative group aiming to influence the Indo-Pacific landscape favourably for its members, particularly amid China's regional dominance aspirations. Debates surrounding India's role within the Quad have endured since its establishment in 2007 and resurgence in 2017. This discussion is unsurprising, given that India is the sole member without a formal alliance with the others. to elucidate the intricacies of India's foreign policy and assess the sustainability of its current approach, aligning with multiple partners with divergent interests in the long term.

While having a closer association with the Quad, India remains a cautious participant in traditional security matters. Despite the direct challenge posed by China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, India hesitates to characterize the Quad as an anti-China coalition. Instead, New Delhi consistently emphasizes that the group is not positioned against any entity but advocates for a specific set of principles and objectives. In contrast to endorsing a robust military alliance, India, and consequently, the Quad, opts to give precedence to non-traditional security concerns. These encompass maritime domain awareness, humanitarian and disaster relief, vaccine diplomacy, and collaboration on cutting-edge technologies. This approach enables New Delhi to influence the region, maintaining decisional autonomy, averting securitization, and diversifying relationships through numerous partnerships (Yang, 2022).

Analysis of Regional Security Dynamics

The Asia-Pacific region, particularly the Indo-Pacific, is poised to become one of the most significant areas in the foreseeable future. This region is currently experiencing rapid developments both in terms of economic growth and geopolitical dynamics, with emerging rivalries among former adversaries shaping the security landscape. Among the world's ten largest economies, five are located in this region: The United States, China, Japan, India, and South Korea the Indo-Pacific is a critical hub for global trade, with a substantial portion of international trade flowing through the region (Heiduk, 2020). It plays a crucial role in the global supply chain, particularly for technology-related industries that heavily rely on electronic components. This region also possesses valuable natural resources necessary for the production of these technologies. However, disruptions in the global supply chain have been witnessed in recent years, exacerbated by outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have profoundly impacted various sectors such as automotive, aerospace, and electronics (Rim, n.d.)

South Asia has always remained in a state of security dilemma. The US-India strategic partnership is another blow that has increased the competition between India and Pakistan, which has had a negative impact on South Asian strategic stability. The Indian dream of regional hegemony and innovations in the development of the latest evolving technologies have worsened the security dilemma with Pakistan. Pakistan is trying its best to maintain the role of a balancer in the South Asian context. The changing environment in South Asia is a serious threat to regional stability, while the presence of nuclear deterrence avoids the possibility of military conflict. Emerging and evolving technologies are posing a serious threat to South Asian strategic stability.

The security dynamics of South Asia are very different from the rest of the world, where Pakistan and India achieve nuclear capability for different reasons. Pakistan, being a security-conscious state went nuclear to meet the challenges posed by the regional environment. Furthermore, the strategic environment is very fragile between the two states due to their past strained relations thus further aggravating the deterrence model they hold against each other. The security environment of South Asia is characterised by the unending rivalry between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, India and Pakistan (Ali, 2022). Over the past seven decades, India and Pakistan, having engaged in three wars, including the Kargil conflict and frequent border skirmishes, reflect complex geopolitical dynamics. India's pursuit of regional and global power status has led to an arms race, manifested in the development of ballistic missiles, while Pakistan's security landscape is influenced by political, economic, diplomatic, technological, and military factors, subject to global, regional, and national events. India's quest for great power status is evident in substantial investments surpassing regional security requirements to enhance both conventional and strategic forces (Kakar, 2022).

According to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in the past ten years, India has spent almost \$100 billion to advance its military capabilities. In the 2017-18 budget, India has increased its military budget to \$53.5 billion. The author of the article argues that this modernization of the Indian military aptitude is likely to create a scenario of imbalance in South Asia and will compel Pakistan to opt for nuclear weapons in case of any misadventure between the two. India's purchase of the S-400 missile system from Russia will put Pakistan's air force in a vulnerable position due to its highly advanced capabilities (Khattak, 2019).

The ongoing rivalry between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific region is significantly impacting the stability of strategic dynamics in South Asia, particularly concerning India and Pakistan's regional rivalry (Younus, 2020). The grand strategy of the US is to contain China by giving leverage to India in terms of the US-India strategic partnership and providing them with evolving technologies in the military domain. China's grand strategy, as exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative, clearly improves geo-economics and geostrategic relations with Pakistan to counter its adversary. The tussle between US and China may bring both opportunities and challenges to Pakistan and India. If the situation in the Asia-Pacific between both global powers intensifies, it will have a spill over effect on both Pakistan-India rivalry (Hrabcová, 2019).

Conclusion

In countering China's rising influence and maintaining its hegemonic position, the United States has strengthened ties with like-minded nations, notably India, which has become pivotal in the geopolitical landscape. The strategic partnership between India and the United States, initiated in the early twenty-first century, has evolved through collaborations in civil nuclear cooperation, missile defense, and space exploration. The U.S., by promoting India as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific, seeks to safeguard its interests and counterbalance China, inadvertently impacting regional security dynamics, particularly the power equilibrium between India and Pakistan. Pakistan grapples with diverse challenges arising from India's assertive Kashmir policies, stalled bilateral talks, and continuous military modernization efforts.

The question of whether India can be relied upon to support the U.S. remains open. Historically, the relationship between the two nations has been characterized by profound distrust and significant differences. Presently, the U.S. exhibits a greater willingness to accommodate India's post-colonial emphasis on strategic autonomy. While the Hindu nationalist Modi contrasts sharply with his secular predecessor, Manmohan Singh, there has been notable bipartisan backing for strengthening ties, involving five consecutive U.S. presidents and three Indian prime ministers. The U.S. unequivocally regards China as its main rival and actively seeks regional alliances to counter its expanding influence. Despite India's muted criticism of the war in Ukraine and its close partnership with Russia, there are indications that New Delhi is gradually aligning itself more closely with the West. India's foreign policy, while striving for strategic autonomy and a multipolar world, recognizes the importance of balancing this autonomy with the need to align with like-minded partners on key geopolitical matters. The escalating tensions with China have prompted India to realize the importance of forging alliances with Western nations to achieve a delicate equilibrium between strategic autonomy and shared geopolitical interests.

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