

US-CHINA STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENTS IN SOUTH ASIA: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Tahir Mahmood Azad*

Muhammad Sadiq†

Abstract

This paper addresses the ongoing strategic competition between the USA and China in South Asia (SA). SA has always been considered one of the essential geo-strategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic regions for significant powers. US-China strategic competition in SA emerged after the Cold War era. The US found a new “strategic ally” in the SA region, India, to curtail China’s role in the region and beyond. The US accommodated India in various matters such as armed forces development, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) agreement, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), global economic cooperation, access to the nuclear market, supporting India in the UNSC, etc. Pakistan sees this US-India relationship with its prism, and China has its global aspirations. China offers similar, although limited, support to Pakistan to counter the Indian hegemony. Furthermore, China’s economic plan BRI engages all the South Asian states except India and Bhutan. This economic engagement offers more room for China’s global policies. Strategic competition between the US and China has also impacted the regional and domestic issues of South Asian states. Meanwhile, the US-NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan has also created several challenges for both states. This research highlights significant regional power policies during the last three decades and who has gained more weight in the SA region.

Keywords: US-China, South Asia, strategic competition, Pakistan, India, CPEC, BRI

INTRODUCTION

In a changing global security environment, the relations between two mighty powers, the US and China, are at the most uncomfortable levels. The US’s

*Affiliated Researcher, Visiting Research Fellow (2019-2022), Centre for Science and Security Studies (CSSS)War Studies Department, King’s College London, Email: tahir_azadpk@yahoo.com

†Assistant Professor, Department of Defence & Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Email: msadiq@qau.edu.pk

desire to maintain its “Superpower” portfolio and China’s aspirations to become a new “Global Leader” have put them in strategic competition. There are various reasons to believe that the US considers China a potential competitor which can replace her shortly. This competition is not limited to military development, trade, and technology. It also involves gaining dominance in outer space, cyberspace, nuclear forces, making new allies, building new economic zones, etc.

A recent crisis between the US and China started during the tenure of former President Trump and initiated a trade war with China. Trump openly criticised China’s growing trade influence and Chinese strategies and policies regarding technology transfer, intellectual property, and cyberspace.

South Asia plays a dynamic role in global politics. Its geostrategic location and geo-economic position make it a very prominent region. Extra regional powers have always tried to maintain strong diplomatic and trade relations. However, bilateral disputes among South Asian states, particularly between Pakistan and India, have made difficult choices for significant powers. China has developed solid diplomatic and geo-economic ties with all South Asian states except India and Bhutan. China’s BRI project has changed the strategic dimensions of regional politics. China’s aspirations to become a global power make unhappy to the US. The US has offered various agreements to India to counter China’s ambitions. On the other hand, the US strategic alliance with India creates problems for Pakistan. The US determination to indulge more with the Asian states to contain China could also lead to the resentment and renewal of another Cold War (Tehsin, 2017).

South Asian states are surrounded by various domestic and regional terrorism and bilateral issues, and in such situations, extra-regional powers are spoiling the environment. However, China has claimed that its BRI project will bring economic development, and no military objectives exist. However, the US administration observes China as a competitor and considers its economic project a “debt trap” and strategic challenge.

This study provides a comprehensive regional approach to the US-China strategic competition towards South Asia. This study addresses the ongoing massive engagements of the US and China with South Asian states, particularly India and Pakistan, in various domains. Furthermore, this study analyses the strategic implications of the developments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To thoroughly observe and understand the US and China’s strategic competition in the South Asian region, there are various concepts and

structures within international relations theory. Theory of Realism and Power Transition Theory (PTT) are renowned methodologies for studying the international political system. Theoretically, analyses have been carried out in this paper to understand the US-China strategic competition. It has already been predicted that the 21st century is the era of a shift in the power balance in global power politics. In 1958, A. F. K. Organski explained PTT, which describes the global order as a hierarchic configuration regulated by the mighty state. This sovereign power crafts the direction utilises its power to acquire the maximum part of profits and delineates the instructions to maintain the opportunities (Organski, 1958).

Supremacy or domination is established with coercive power and well-intended agreements. The PTT postulated disagreement is possible when an ascending or emerging power challenges or surpasses the established power, particularly when it desires to construct a novel global order. To test the execution of power pyramids at regional ranks, Ronald Tammen et al. put forth the power transition theory (Tammen & Ronald, 2000). The participation of the Great Powers has described competition at regional levels.

Thus, US-China strategic competition in the South Asian region can cause destabilisation of regional stability and security-insecurity dilemmas, particularly between Pakistan and India. The US and China pursue reducing each other's influence and power using asymmetric warfare strategies. From economic engagement to strategic cooperation, China and the US are materialising their all-possible resources. China's BRI project and CPEC have been highly debated. Conversely, the US has rejuvenated its strategic partnership with India and created Quad to counterpoise China's ever-increasing power in the region and beyond.

It has been anticipated by the proponents of theories of power transition that a confrontation with US supremacy will likely come mainly from Asia in the 21st century (Kugler et al., 2001). The US Department of Defense admits in the 2018 National Defence Strategy document the return of far greater strategic competition among big powers. It submits that the rise of China as a superpower presents an economic, political, and military warning to the US's leading place (Summary, NDS, 2018).

It is a fact that the US is severely concerned about the corrosion of its influence and authority. This desperation has been revealed with the approval of the Strategic Competition Act of 2021 bill, which unequivocally emphasises China as the competitor.

Economic and social indicators between the US and China are exciting and reveal the factual progress of these states. China's GDP in 2020 was \$14.8 trillion, making it the second-largest economy after the US, whose GDP was \$20.9 trillion. In purchasing power parity standings, China is far from the world's largest economy, with a GDP of \$26.7 trillion. Its nominal GDP will likely overhaul that of the US by 2028 (Elliot, 2020).

China is very suspicious about the increasing role of the US in the Southern region of Asia as it is also confronting the US in other parts, such as the South China Sea. This cumulative trust deficit between the US and China is for many reasons, and it is extensively observed as an exertion by the US to curtail China's rising economic and political influence in the South Asian region. The counterplan being proposed by China is concentrated in the commercial area, which China is consolidating through Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and an offshoot plan with Pakistan in the form of CPEC (Foot, 2006).

It is a fact that the CPEC offers China a strategic door to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean through the Gwadar port (Yaser, 2012). It should be noted that the CPEC comprises multi-dimensional schemes, infrastructure, capacity building, and energy-related developmental projects. More projects, economic engagements, and access to Gwadar ports to other regional powers are also on the CPEC agenda. These outlays build Pakistan's economic capability (Ritzinger, 2015).

Understanding South Asia: Geostrategic Location & Regional Disputes

South Asia has vital geopolitical significance globally, and its geostrategic position has always attracted significant powers to establish alliances and partnerships with South Asian states. South Asia holds about 1.98 billion people, or about one-fourth of the world's population share (Review World Bank, 2022). The region comprises densely populated countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and Maldives. Due to colonised history and inapt political leadership, it has been continuously mired in varied political and social disputes for the last 60 years. The involvement of extra-regional powers has only aggravated the disputes contrary to their resolution.

There are numerous political and social challenges to the South Asia region, undermining the regional order and weakening the prospects of prosperity. Social and political rifts are significant sources of instability in all the South Asian conflicts. Societies of this region are socially stratified; social bigotry and political problems of a complex nature are threatening its peace and stability.

Pakistan and India are the two prominent players in the region, and their entitlement to nuclear states gives them an important role. Pakistan and India are the two large South Asian states tangled in crucial regional conflicts. The wars of 1948, 1965, 1971 and a small-scale war in Kargil were only fought between these two states of the region. Besides these significant state wars, other skirmishes and minor crises such as brass tacks, military standoff in 2001-02 and Mumbai attacks continued to deteriorate the relation between these two nuclear states. The unresolved outstanding issues, such as the territorial claims over Kashmir, which has also led to the scourge of militant uprisings in both states owing to the use of these militant outfits as proxies against each other, are still challenging the stability of Pakistan as well as India. Due to the troubled relations of these two states, the prospects of peace and development remain elusive in the region.

The politics of South Asia took a significant turn after the event of 9/11. Pakistan bore the brunt of this event heavily. Before this incident, Pakistan was already engulfed in a vicious cycle of never-ending political, social, and economic hardships. The 9/11 terrorist attack intensified and brought new dilemmas for Pakistan. The adverse relationships between both states have increased during the two decades. After the 9/11 incident, the USA, with its NATO allies, invaded Afghanistan in 2001. The invasion of Afghanistan and ensuing war has, bit by bit, cast a negative shadow on neighbouring states, particularly on Pakistan. Since then, this whole South Asian region has been directly or indirectly influenced by this war.

Pakistan shares nearly 2500 km of extended border with Afghanistan. Pakistan claimed that Indian connivance in Afghanistan was a serious security challenge for Pakistan. Afghanistan had been a stage for regional rivals since the Cold War era, where countries such as Pakistan and India backed different political figures, militant groups, and parties with their favourites to expand their influence and pursue goals of national interest. The role of India intensified particularly after the arrival and invasion of USA and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Pakistan accused India of using Afghanistan's soil to pursue its rival interests against Pakistan. India was also found preparing local militants and using them to harm Pakistan.

Nuclear weapons are the most critical factor in South Asian strategic stability. Both Pakistan and India are armed with nuclear weapons, and their nuclear programmes have faced tremendous global pressure. From non-proliferation to the safety and security of nuclear assets, both states are under global radar. South Asia is often considered the most sensitive and threatening place on earth and is characterised by unevenly high levels of

security dilemmas at inter-state and intra-state levels. There are also apparent insecurities in both traditional and non-traditional security threats.

The states of South Asia are facing the menace of multiple security challenges due to ever-increasing extremist and terrorist activities. The flawed national policies of South Asian states can be linked to the rise in violent and politically motivated extremist activities in the region. There could be many reasons for the terrorist and extremist penetration in South Asia, such as reasons, like governments handled by tyrannical and extremist rulers and undue favours given to groups of rebels, the perpetuation of strict and oppressive cultural rules and norms, social and civil injustices, ideological confusions, application of stern religious beliefs and to some extent interference of foreign forces.

South Asian states have a dark history of indulging in many intra-state and inter-state conflicts. South Asia's strategically distinct location leaves it involved in many extended and brutal intra-state (internal) and inter-state (external) conflicts. Till yet, the work done to ease the tension between warring South Asian states through variable means (including the use of force) has, by and large, proven unsuccessful (Hussain, 2018). In every conflict, the subsequent parties consider themselves as threatened ones. The most challenging problems faced by South Asian countries are insecurity by other states and instability due to unfriendly relations between South Asian countries. Many of these complicated inter-state conflicts have led to the underdevelopment and backwardness of this wider region.

There is no denying the fact that illiteracy, poverty and overpopulation are the huge snags in South Asia. South Asia comprises more than half of the illiterate populace and nurtures a third of the impoverished people in the world (Kiprop, 2019). In addition, this region's literacy rates, particularly adult literacy rates, are the worst-performing indicators in the world.

US's Engagement Approach with India

The end of the 20th century marked a vital development in the relationship between the US and India when former President Bill Clinton visited India. Then, followed by the Bush administration, it remained in power for two long terms. The existing US and India settlement has been labelled "irreversible" and recognised as a Strategic Partnership.

The US and India have established a close relationship during the last three decades. In his recent visit to the White House on September 24, 2021, Modi and Biden signed various strategic agreements such as "making a strategic partnership and working together with regional groupings, including

ASEAN and Quad members, to promote shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.” Furthermore, the two leaderships reiterated their direct defence engagements in military-to-military cooperation, logistics sharing, information providing, reinforcing relations in advanced military technologies, and broadening engagements in many other multilateral frameworks, including regional parties. To face off China’s growing military technology and advancement in air space, the US offered immense cooperation to India. In this framework, “they noted the recent project to co-develop air-launched unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) under the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative, and encouraged more such joint efforts.” Aided in Congressional Research Service Report,

However, the US-India strategic partnership is multidimensional and has long-term agendas. There is a general perception that all these efforts are to curtail China and its growing influence in the region and beyond. The US and India made various proposals that helped them foster a solid strategic partnership. This strategic partnership encompasses broader bilateral cooperation sectors, including economic, trade, space, nuclear technology, missile technology, and defence cooperation.

In 2005, the US and India inscribed a decade-long defence framework agreement defining calculated partnership in numerous zones, including multifarious operations, broadening double-way defence trade, and levelling up opportunities for transfer of technology and co-production. In 2015, the agreement strengthened and recommenced for a further ten long years and called for an existing bilateral Defense Policy Group (DPG established in 1995) to be in service as the “primary mechanism to guide the US-India strategic defence partnership” through quadratic(4) subgrouping arrangement. However, Trump’s administration did not engage in the DPG mechanism.

The US acknowledged India as a “Major Defense Partner” (MDP) of the US during the Indian PM’s visit to DC in 2016. It is a fact that MDP is a distinctive title generated by the Congress of the U.S.A for India and is planned “to advance defence trade and technology sharing with India to a level commensurate with that of our closest allies and partners,” simultaneously “institutionalise deviations made by the US to certify robust defence trade and technology collaboration.” The title was shaped to support the former administration’s consent for export licenses to India. In 2021, the Defence Secretary affirmed an intent to “further operationalise” India’s MDP status.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, is a strategically vital

security dialogue between the US, India, Japan and Australia sustained by meetings between fellow states. In 2007, the Japanese Prime Minister started the dialogue with the assistance of the Australian Prime Minister, the Indian Prime Minister, and the US Vice President (Bajoria & Pan, 2010). The deal was associated with combined military exercises of an exceptional scale, and it was titled Exercise Malabar. The military, together with diplomatic planning, was generally observed as a reaction to the enlarged economic and military might of China, and the Chinese government reacted to this dialogue by issuing formal diplomatic complaints to its members, calling it "Asian NATO" (Bajoria & Pan, 2010).

On July 18, 2005, the US and India formally agreed on a three-year plan for civilian nuclear energy and outer space collaboration. According to this deal, the US would help India establish its civilian nuclear energy program. Besides this, the expansion of the US and India in maximising energy and satellite technology was also slowed down (Bajoria & Pan, 2010).

Later on, the final endorsement of this deal was stated by the US Congress on October 1, 2008, to facilitate nuclear collaboration between India and the US. The deal has been considered a milestone in US-India relations. However, there was much criticism from regional and extra-regional powers because it violated the non-proliferation regime, as India is not a signatory of NPT.

According to this agreement, India will be free to purchase US dual-use nuclear technology, nuclear fuel for its reactors, and many potentially harmful equipment and materials that are mainly used to enrich Uranium or in the reprocessing of Plutonium, maximising its capabilities of forming nuclear bombs (Bajoria & Pan, 2010).

Furthermore, the US support for India to become a member of the NSG group is also an exciting area of debate. India is not a signatory of NPT and possesses nuclear weapons. As per the NPT agenda, India cannot become a member of NSG if it is not a signatory of NPT; it cannot become a member of NSG. However, due to its strategic relations with India, the US advocates for the NSG group to give membership to India.

It is a fact that both the US and India have gradually increased their trade cooperation and enhanced their trade volume during the last two decades. For example, in 1999, trade between the two states was \$16 billion and \$146 billion in 2019 (Batra, 2021). Furthermore, US-India economic cooperation will increase in the next few years. There is a fact that US- India economic engagements are beyond their normal trade relations. Many various regional and global factors compel them to keep active, long-lasting relations between

themselves.

China's Engagement Approach with Pakistan

The relationship between Pakistan and China is the essence of a long-term bond despite diverse belief systems and cultures. China and Pakistan have made various efforts to transform their association as strategic partners constructed based on shared principles and benefits. As the most-heard saying of a renowned Chinese philosopher goes, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". The history of Pak-China friendship dates back to 1950, when Pakistan, against all odds, recognised China as a free and independent state. Later, in April 2005, both states took a significant shift in their bilateral relationship, founded strategic partnerships and underwrote a treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-neighbourly Relations (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015).

Pakistan and China are known as "all-weather strategic partners". They have worked hard to establish an intricate relationship and an illustration of neighbourly coexistence notwithstanding their dissimilar and diverse social, political and economic systems. China has supported Pakistan whenever it needed help. The main features of their strategic cooperation are as follows:

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multibillion-dollar scheme, is a critical milestone between states and a chief development project in China's rapidly progressing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). One of these initiatives is the USD 62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which connects China's BRI land and maritime components. BRI is perhaps the all-inclusive of this project's six infrastructural and economic corridors on the land. CPEC has geostrategic, socioeconomic, socio-political, and environmental implications. Due to its regional and extra-regional connectivity, CPEC confronts numerous challenges from other regional and international powers.

The leading venture of CPEC design comes under energy projects, including special economic zones, Gwadar's deep sea port, and communication infrastructure. It invites stockholders of numerous arenas who can share a significant interest in the region's economic actions and development. There is a fact that communication linkages will create connectivity and also offer a chance to elevate the economic status of cities in the whole country.

China relations have moved towards a new age of longstanding strategic partnership, which includes diverse categories of collaboration in diverse arenas, as their strategic relations have a significantly important impression on regional and global security. The strategic relations between Pakistan and

China are being measured as valuable in the region. Their collaboration continues to develop, and they are getting more robust and reliable partners.

In the early 2000s, Pakistan initiated a proposal for Gwadar port by emphasising its strategic importance and convincing China to invest. Later on, after 2013, that project became a BRI project. Every Pakistani civil and military leadership endorsed this project, and all governments over the last two decades have fortified China's contribution to Gwadar. Pakistan and China have marked this port as a strategic asset and China's entrance point to the Indian Ocean.

Pakistan and China endorsed an understanding of friendly and good relations in 2005. The most vital thing in this treaty is the word "strategic", which both states use for the first time in their bilateral relations. One of the sections of this bilateral treaty states that "both countries shall actively develop and consolidate their bilateral strategic ties of good neighbourly friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation". Furthermore, China also guaranteed Pakistan that it would defend Pakistan's dominion autonomy. Additionally, it also undertook to come to the rescue and back Pakistan whenever border disputes with India intensified (Treaty, 2005).

Pakistan and China decided to reinforce their bilateral relations. Thus, in line with International Law and the UN charter, both states collaborated strategically. One of the most vital areas of strategic cooperation is helping Pakistan by providing advanced military technology. Military development and modernisation are constant processes, and Pakistan has received tremendous support from China. Recently, Pakistan received a J10-C fighter jet from China.

The nuclear energy cooperation between China and Pakistan dates back to 1986 (Garver, 1996). During the last four decades, China has applied for official contracts to provide Pakistan with nuclear technology and materials for nuclear energy. Pakistan-China Nuclear cooperation is intended to develop the country's civil nuclear programme under IAEA standards. Pakistan is pursuing a nuclear deal with China mainly to fulfil its domestic energy requirements. Nuclear collaboration between these two nations helps in the development of Pakistan's energy potential and the accomplishment of long-term as well as short-term development goals. Pakistan sought support in developing its embryonic nuclear programme to deal with its energy issues in the early 1970s. On the path to developing Pakistan's nuclear energy technologies and building and supporting Pakistan's nuclear power grid stations, China has played a vital role.

Subsequently, after the 1986 agreement, in 1991, China determined to hand

over its locally produced Qishan-1 named nuclear power plant. In 2000, the Chashma Nuclear Power plant's leading building site, which produces 300 MW, became operational. Later on, in 2005, Pakistan declared the erection of Chashma-2. Then, Chashma-3 (2016) and Chashma-4 (2017) nuclear reactors started functioning. Each of these nuclear plants strictly operates by the guidelines and safeguards laid down by the IAEA. On September 8, 2021, the Framework Accord on Deepening Nuclear Energy Cooperation was endorsed by Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) and China Zhongyuan Engineering Cooperation.

Afterwards, the nuclear relationship further stretched to the Karachi Nuclear Power Plants K-2 and K-3, which share a joint capacity 1014MWe. Moreover, the total energy capacity of 1318 MWe is added by the other five fully operational nuclear power stations. Furthermore, with the aim of installation of K-2 and K-3, Pakistan is all set to generate 3346 MW of nuclear energy by 2022.

CONCLUSION

The expansion of China's trade market and the constant growth of its global economic, technological, and military power make it an emerging superpower that challenges the US. The US has enjoyed superpower status since 1945, and after the dismemberment of the USSR, it became the lone superpower. However, the US leadership, policymakers and social scientists have projected the rise of China and its challenge to US supremacy. South Asia has become an active stage of competition for both states. The US unconditionally support India and provides it access to the global nuclear market, helping India in its military modernisation, QUAD agreement, BECA agreement, global economic cooperation, advocating membership in UNSC, etc.

In contrast, China is augmenting Pakistan's security, strengthening its navy and air force and supporting its civil nuclear programme. BRI and CPEC are a cause of concern for the US as these projects are crucial for China to strengthen its economy, and ultimately, this economic interdependency would lead them to security cooperation to maintain the trade balance. The strategy to be followed by the USA in this strategic competition is to dissociate from China so that the latter is denied vital access to major technologies and markets. On the other hand, China believes that through its BRI and CPEC, it will engage Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Eurasia, and the Asia-Pacific to build its economy and alliance.

India and Pakistan, on the other hand, are engaged in an arms race as they

are continuously developing their conventional and unconventional forces. The US-China strategic competition directly impacts South Asian traditional rivals Pakistan and India. Troubled relations between China and India have allowed the US to engage India in its strategic race against China.

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