

GROWING ENMITY BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

India usually considers itself a growing regional power, but a closer look exposes that it is in an adverse position vis-à-vis China in the South Asian region. China has always been economically more attractive and politically more reliable in its neighborhood, thus, presenting itself as a strong contender to become a great power and a key player in this region. On the other hand, especially during the post-Cold War era, the US has remained at the top position leading to a new symmetry, while restricting any other possible power to challenge its supremacy in this region. The 9/11 incident has further changed the security dynamics of South Asia. Today, the need to hold China's regional supremacy and economic cooperation in the region has shifted US strategic attention more towards India, which is, in one way or the other, stimulating Indian hegemonic aspirations under the umbrella of its Hindutva ideology. Furthermore, the presence of foreign powers in this region and their growing influence in shaping regional security settings have made the regional defence scenario more intricate. This study, therefore, highlights the strategic interests and goals of major powers in the South Asian region in order to examine the changing geostrategic dynamics of the region. The Regional Security Complex theory has also been applied as a theoretical framework to analyze the present-day regional developments and their impacts on this region.

Keywords: South Asia, Geopolitics, Power Competition, Securitization, Regional Supremacy.

Introduction

South Asia has always been a region of great interest and conflicts for major powers, particularly since the last four decades. It has been an area where superpowers have engaged themselves in various armed conflicts and proxy or indirect wars. The Soviet-Afghan war (December 24, 1979 – February 15, 1989) is the major example of a conflict of big players in this region. This war was ended with the victory for *Mujahdeen*, while the USSR disintegrated within a decade. After the war, the US left this region, leaving war-torn Afghanistan in gloominess. Later, the 9/11 incident changed the complete direction of US foreign policy towards South Asia and US-led coalition forces entered Afghanistan to thwart a preconceived threat. Meanwhile, Pakistan, being the frontline state, remained a close ally of the US, despite the fact that US security policy has more inclination towards India in this region, especially since the 1990s. Today, India is the

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pronounced strategic partner with the US to counter China's growing influence in the region.¹

The end of the Cold War has seen an exclusive power shift in the world with the US as a leading power, but its role in South Asia has always been argued strongly. In this context, the rise of China might seem to present a serious challenge to US administration, but increasing the US-India defense partnership is continuously disturbing the balance of power in the region. The recent Sino-Indian standoff at Ladakh, revocation of Articles 370 and 35A from the Indian constitution, year-long inhumane curfew in Indian occupied Kashmir (IIOJK), rapidly increasing ceasefire violations at LOC, and fragile Afghanistan Peace Process are the few examples of such disturbance, threatening peace in the region.

South Asia – A Regional Security Complex

Security is a social phenomenon; nobody can understand the national security of any specific state without understanding the global design of security dependence in which it is rooted. The notion of “amity or enmity” is conceived by factors, such as ideology, territory, ethnic line, and old patterns and it follows what is called security complex.² According to Barry Buzan, Regional Security Complex (RSC) is “a group of states, which are associated with the main procedures of securitization, de-securitization or both, are so interwoven that their safety challenges may not be rationally examined or determined separately from one another.” Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) combines “outside-in” and “inside-out” analysis by studying various characteristics between superpowers or major powers, which have exceeded to two or more regions and regional powers whose domain of actions are largely controlled within a single RSC. It focuses on security interdependency either negative (conflict formation) or positive (security regime, security community).³

RSCT provides intensified and extended security awareness. Security complexes can be examined by taking into view four levels: domestic, regional, super-regional, and global. RSCT aids in dividing up certain regional security complexes to study their structure and security dynamics, which depends on power division within the region as well as the effect of systemic power division.⁴ RSCT studies South Asia as a basic security complex and suggests that the region moves from closed inter-regional power division towards centralization of power based on the emergence of patterns of relation between major powers and provincial powers of the region. In this region, subsist clearly expressed patterns of enmity, therefore, countries have securitized against each other as a potential security threat.⁵

South Asia is emerging as an arena for major powers' new great game in the 21st century. Geo-strategically, South Asia connects China and Central Asia with the Indian Ocean. These states can enter the Indian Ocean through Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. China, besides China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), also tries to find a way to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); this project is called “Irrawaddy Corridor”. On the other hand, Pakistan and India being

nuclear States have increased the strategic importance of South Asia.⁶ The end of the Cold War has seen an exclusive power shift in the world with the US at the top leading into a new symmetry, but its loyalty and durability have been argued strongly. In this context, the rise of China presents a serious challenge to Washington as well.⁷

China's South Asian Strategy

China is a strong contender to be a dominant power and key player in this region. Although China is not situated in the geographical limits of South Asia, its influence on regional geopolitics is quite eminent. China's impact on the geography, demography, military, economy, and welcoming relations with nearly all the South Asian states is quite visible.⁸ Since the last two decades, China has been taking more interest in South Asia. Its South Asian policy pivots on various factors that are intentionally determined and politically and economically demonstrated.⁹ China remains an effective supporter of maintaining peace and cooperation in South Asia especially in the hostile relations between India and Pakistan.¹⁰ In general, if we observe the equilibrium of power between China and India, China is in a sound position based on its trade and military and Beijing wants to maintain this difference. China's economic and military strength is unmatched yet, but India aspires to influence South Asian countries under its misty hegemonic design. Farhan Siddiqi quoted Robyn Meredith's argument that "the rise of China and India has brought a major change in post-Cold War geopolitics, regarding the quest for oil and huge environmental changes."¹¹

Since China has increased its global trade and security interests in the Indian Ocean region, South Asia has become significant for Beijing as its oil imports pass through this region. Besides this, its long-time rival India and enduring friend Pakistan are also present in this region. China is trying to guard its economic and safety interests and, in this way, it can balance India. With growing Chinese influence in the region, the US cannot fall behind in the Indian Ocean. For this reason, the US supports the "Look East" policy of India towards the Pacific Ocean.¹² As a result, China perceives one more cause to hold India in control in its backyard.¹³

China is interested to stretch regional connectivity in a considerable way and for this, China has initiated the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) project.¹⁴ It is building up the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) on land and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in the sea. This project proposes to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa. China's geographical existence in the neighborhood of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka has an aim to increase its economic relations in this region.¹⁵ China's BRI has included four sub-projects in South Asia, i.e., CPEC, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), Trans-Himalaya Corridor, and China's cooperation with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives under MSR.¹⁶

According to recent reports, China has been executing \$10 billion worth of infrastructure projects in Bangladesh including economic and industrial zones, power plant, bridges, and international exhibition center. Further two ventures, i.e.,

Karnaphuli River Tunnel Project and Padma Bridge Rail Link Project are currently in progress under BRI.¹⁷ On the economic and trade front, there are talks of creating China-Bangladesh Free Trade Zone, which Beijing says will help to reduce Bangladesh's trade deficit of \$15 billion vis-à-vis China.¹⁸ In March 2016, Nepali Prime Minister K. P. Oli visited Beijing and signed agreements with China to accelerate cooperation under the framework of BRI and improve connectivity through trade, transportation, and telecommunications.¹⁹ Bangladesh has also assigned two main profitable areas for Chinese investors in Chittagong (a key harbor) and Dhaka (capital of the country).²⁰ India feels insecure over the Chinese venture in Bangladesh's seaport adjacent to the Bay of Bengal.²¹ Same is the case in Sri Lanka, where Chinese investment has created a sense of insecurity for India, and they feel threatened regarding their own regional hegemonic aspirations in the region.

China has also initiated CPEC that comes under the OBOR umbrella. CPEC intends to connect Kashgar in China's Xinjiang Province with Gwadar, situated near the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Sea. Gwadar has appeared as a key initiative for the Chinese monetary plan in the South Asian region, e.g., China imports its 80 percent oil from the Middle East and Africa traveling through the Strait of Malacca, therefore, CPEC possibly provides an alternative route to China.²² Gwadar is 72 kilometers away from Iran and at a distance of 400 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz, an important choke point which is the only sea passage to open sea for petroleum transactions from Iran and UAE.²³ Presently, CPEC is at the early harvest stage with more than 20 projects under completion. Among the milestones, Gwadar port has been made operational facilitating Chinese trade to the Middle East and Africa.²⁴ On the other hand, India is pursuing to develop Chabahar port in Iran because it feels insecure from China's OBOR project, particularly CPEC,²⁵ as it is focusing on Southeast Asian markets and energy-rich Central Asian States to support its economic development.²⁶

Apart from CPEC, China has multi-layered interests in the region. A Chinese analyst, Wang Jisi, mentioned that East Asia will remain significant for China but Beijing is interested to pay more strategic attention to its west. That is why, China is developing its western provinces and initiating new schemes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and all over the Caspian Sea region towards Europe. This new westerly policy can redesign China's geopolitical dream and the European landscape as well.²⁷ India is suspicious about "string of pearls",²⁸ but China claims that it would be used for commercial purposes. Dean Cheng, a senior research scholar at the Heritage Foundation, carefully stated that "military bases need larger investments, more explicit military presence including access treaties with host states. Indian Ocean docks facilities do not mean to encircle India."²⁹ However, doubts are still there in the minds of Indian experts.

Territorial Dispute between China and India

The history of the Sino-Indian relationship is much more complex. Their rivalry is strengthened by regional disagreements, border disputes, and political

resistance. The China-India territorial disputes are in the Himalayas on their shared borderline, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Aksai Chin. Over a period of time, these border disputes have become more intensified, revealing bitterness between both States. Indian anxiety regarding China previously surfaced in 1950 over the Tibet issue because it collapsed the barrier that had been created between the two countries by the British. The 1962-China-India war also worsened their relations.³⁰ Today, the Sino-Indian standoff in Ladakh has further deteriorated the security situation in this region. Mick Ryan³¹ and other political scientists have supported this notion that “China’s rise and its increasing rivalry with the US support to take up most of the planned discussion in the Indo-Pacific region. The concurrent advent of China and India and their rivalry can also overwhelm the geopolitics of the region.”³²

The hostility between China and India highlights their economic differences, strategic hold, and distrust. This animosity has serious effects on other South Asian and Central Asian States. In fact, India is striving to challenge China’s hold on Tibet and its rights on the areas next to border, especially Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, Beijing-New Delhi equilibrium of supremacy in the region is knotted with the geopolitically adjacent border areas.³³ China has deployed an advanced armed setup in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) adjacent to India for security purposes.³⁴ China is also providing economic aid for infrastructure development to India’s neighbors. In response, India has increased its linkages with the US, Japan, Australia, and East Asian nations.

On June 15, 2020, Chinese and Indian troops once again contested with each other in the disputed areas of the Himalayan region. The battle took place when China and India were engaged in resolving their latest border dispute, which started in May 2020. This border dispute has now become more intense as compared to other disputes taking place at various locations in eastern Ladakh including Galwan Valley, Hot Springs, Pangong Tso lake, and Demchok.³⁵ Nevertheless, this latest vicious backlash indicates that the peaceful solution of territorial disputes between China and India does not seem to be a near-term possibility. Apart from such disturbing developments in the region, India also has certain security apprehensions regarding China-led projects in the region. New Delhi is cautious about China’s leading projects at its front door.³⁶ On the economic front, there is a growing fear in India that Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) will deluge India with Chinese products.³⁷

US Interests in South Asia

The post-Cold War era has brought focus on a new power paradigm. The US is at the top position and leading to a new symmetry, which may manage the stability of the system on one hand but at the same time does not allow any other possible power to challenge US supremacy especially in Indo-Pacific region. Fear of militancy, the need to hold China’s regional supremacy, and economic cooperation in the high-tech sector have influenced the US relations with India.³⁸ It is quite evident that US-India strategic

partnership in South Asia is not because of the size of the Indian economy but to contain Chinese influence in the region.

During a visit to India in 2006, the former US President, George W. Bush, stated that “the US wishes to support India to rise as a global power.”³⁹ However, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema rightly pointed out that “every country is working for their national interests and US interest is to strengthen its allies to share the burden, but obviously, the US will not like India to go ahead of them. They will shower India with all kinds of concessions till the time India works on their terms, which will probably continue for the years to come.”⁴⁰ After the 9/11 incident, US-India military and tactical pledges posed serious security concerns in the region especially for China. Whereas articulating Chinese concerns after 9/11, a Chinese political analyst stated that “the US and India have a common concern regarding China as a possible threat and main enemy. It is their mutual interest to block China’s rise.”⁴¹ In order to keep China out of this region, the US is intended to give all possible support and incentives to India to cultivate its strategic interests in this region.

In 2008, the Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement showed a turning point in the history of liaison between India and the US. This nuclear cooperation has changed India’s position from a nuclear outsider to a strategic partner while extensively affecting the regional security situation, mainly with concerns to India-Pakistan relations. Though the specified objectives of the Indo-US nuclear deal are to address India’s energy needs and blend it into the mainstream of nonproliferation, both countries evidently have concealed their geostrategic objective to offset China. To achieve this objective, the US has modified its domestic law and applied extraordinary force on the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to bend over its rules and free India from the obligation of full-scope to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This immunity lifted a years-old ban on India’s nuclear trade, letting it to sell and buy nuclear technology with the rest of the world. It also gave India *de facto* status as a nuclear weapon state without agreeing to concrete nonproliferation obligations. The exceptional concessions given to India under nuclear agreement have serious implications for Pakistan and the strategic stability of the region. These developments have considerably reduced New Delhi’s motivation to involve in serious dialogue with Pakistan.⁴²

The US has also offered huge investments to establish defense industries in India. Subsequently, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi revitalized Indian foreign policy and showed interest to develop strong relations with the US.⁴³ They have created a comprehensive strategic union in terms of dealing with the emergence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. Although the US has a tough stance over China’s growing influence in the South and East China Seas, it has given a comparatively tepid reply to China’s doings in South Asia, including CPEC, which India perceives as a violation of its territorial freedom. The India-US partnership would stay to focus on the strategic designs of both countries.⁴⁴ In August 2017, US President Donald Trump announced a new South Asia policy, in which he highlighted an unambiguous role for India as a

development and economic partner in Afghanistan. According to the policy, the US requires more support from the regional states.⁴⁵

In October 2020, the US and India signed a treaty to share sensitive satellite and map data. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who visited New Delhi along with Defense Secretary Mark Esper, said that both countries had to work together to deal with the threat which China poses to security and freedom.⁴⁶ In response, China rejected Pompeo's allegations and urged "to halt Cold War attitude, zero-sum mindset, and stop harping on the China threat."⁴⁷ This agreement has serious consequences not only for the region but also for Pakistan.

Pakistan's Concerns on Indo-US Growing Strategic Partnership

Subsequent to signing the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) between India and the US, Pakistan notified that the provision of sophisticated military hardware, technologies, and expertise to India might jeopardize regional stability and peace.⁴⁸ Pakistan's Foreign Office Spokesperson stated that "India's huge purchase of weapons and extension of its nuclear forces, including launch of new threatening weapon systems are developing serious impacts for peace and stability in South Asia."⁴⁹ He also included that the latest missile tests performed by India are a sign of serious Indian conventional and nuclear military expansion.⁵⁰ After signing BECA, India has got access to precision topographical, nautical, and aeronautical data and topographical images from US military satellites on a real-time basis. The data could be applied to missiles and armed drones. Since the US and India lodged on a strategic partnership in 2005, it is the eighth agreement signed by both states. Pakistan considers that the agreement would raise Pakistan's strategic difficulties, even though it is being shown as part of attempts to contain China.⁵¹

Kashmir Dispute

Kashmir is a longstanding dispute between India and Pakistan. The area was once a Princely State called Jammu and Kashmir, but in 1947, it emerged as a boiling point of South Asia. Pakistan and India have fought several wars on this burning issue since the partition of the Subcontinent. Most recently, in August 2019, India annulled the special status of Jammu and Kashmir granted under Article 370 of the Indian constitution, and put illegally occupied areas under vicious lockdown.⁵² Pakistan has raised the issue at all possible international forums to resolve the issue within the ambit of UN resolutions. However, India is consistently denying the Right of Self-determination to the Kashmiri people and Indian security forces are continuously killing innocent Kashmiris while violating ceasefire at LOC. India's action to abolish Articles 370 and 35A clearly indicates a lack of vision and shows that Indian leadership is totally unaware of the after-effects of such an unconstitutional and undemocratic move, which is having serious implications for the region. IIOJK has now become the most hazardous place in the world where the common man faces unjust and a cruel

atmosphere to live every single day at the hands of Indian forces, thus, jeopardizing the peace of the region.⁵³

Conclusion

South Asia is the region, where consequences of enmity among the existing geopolitical fault lines are gradually becoming evident. According to Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution, the region is moving towards a bipolar alliance system between the US and India on the one hand, and Pakistan and China on the other. While the Chinese are building an economic corridor in Pakistan that will attach its landlocked Xinjiang region to the Arabian Sea and allow it to bypass the strategic chokepoint at the Strait of Malacca. In response, the US is heavily investing in India as a counterbalance.⁵⁴ In short, the love and hate relationship has increased economic competition as well as security threats for the region in one way or the other.

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