

## GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION IN SOUTH ASIA: ROLE OF CHINA AND THE US IN REGIONAL SECURITY

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Received: 15 November, 2023    Revised: 23 January, 2024    Accepted: 27 January, 2024    Published: 31 January, 2024

### ABSTRACT

The security dilemma in South Asia stems from the strategic decisions made by the major players in the region, namely Pakistan and India. Over the years, their conventional rivalry has intensified, marked by significant events such as both nations acquiring nuclear capabilities, navigating strategic competition within the framework of nuclear deterrence, and occupying crucial geostrategic positions recognized by global superpowers. China and America are strategic allies to Pakistan and India, respectively, not only enabling both superpowers to assert their competitive influence in South Asia but also exacerbating geostrategic concerns for the regional contenders. This study aims to elucidate how the competition among great powers and the rivalry between superpowers impact the geostrategic landscape of South Asia. Additionally, it seeks to look over the emergence of security dilemmas and concerns related to nuclear deterrence between Pakistan and India, influenced by their strategic alliances with China and America. The research will articulate how Pakistan and India have played pivotal roles in cultivating a nuanced understanding of strategic stability, nuclear deterrence, regional geostrategic preferences, and their overarching influence on the intricate security dynamics shaped by superpowers. A significant aspect of the study involves speculating on the behavior of regional contender India and Pakistan within a given security framework when influenced by a superpower engaged in peer competition. The study will also delineate the intricate nature and configuration of strategic postures in South Asia, particularly in the context of China and America adopting more assertive roles in the region.

**Keywords:** Geostrategic Competition, South Asia, Sino-US relations, regional security, India-Pakistan dynamics

### INTRODUCTION

Geostrategic competition in South Asia is of intensification since the United State declared China as a peer competitor on the world stage. South Asian states particularly India and Pakistan and their geographic significance further intensifies the importance of this region in the eyes of superpowers with having nuclear weapons. Robert D. Kaplan provides an analysis of South Asian geography and history in a broader context stretching from Afghanistan Southeastward towards Northeast India and highlights the pivot of India in South Asia. Robert Kaplan writes “as the US and China become great powers competitor, the tilt towards India would determine the faith of the geopolitics in the 21st century. The interstate affairs of South Asian countries have a direct spillover effect on other regions of the world and Great powers particularly” (Kaplan, 2010).

Geostrategic competition involves the strategic use of geography to achieve national objectives beyond borders. In the international arena, competition among major actors is based on three assumptions: the presence of incompatible or perceived rivalry, a desire for increased power over rivals, and a struggle for greater influence. South Asia, home to two nuclear-capable actors, India and Pakistan, sees these nations pursuing strategic goals through alliances with major powers such as the United States and China to further their national interests. Given Pakistan's advantageous geopolitical position, it has the potential to form alliances and partnerships with powers beyond the region. The policies of major powers, especially the United States and China, regarding South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, allow these influential nations to intervene in the region's security dynamics (Tehseen, 2018).

The regional security in South Asia is hypothetically based on three complex contours, first is the intricate geography of the region. In terms of physical geography, India is stretching from the Himalayas in the north to the vast Indian Ocean in the South. The second is the preponderance of India, which gained advantage over other states that become independent after colonization. The third is asymmetry and unequal distribution of power between India and other South Asian states creates fear and those in fear must border with great power. The unequal distribution of power and nationalism can combine and erode idea of a broader unified South Asia and shared security paradigm. Divided South Asia leaves three powers China, India, and the United States on the chessboard of South Asian geostrategic environment. South Asia is on the radar of Great powers to play akin for influence and such a game is traceable (Burgess, 2013).

Over the past four years, the US, under President Donald Trump, shifted regional dynamics by designating China as a peer competitor. Initiating a trade war in 2019 and altering the 'one China' policy, the US highlighted its economic interests in the Indo-Pacific through the 2019 Defense Department strategy. Reasons for US focus on the region include nuclear tensions between India and Pakistan, the Kashmir dispute, and the gateway to Central Asia. As a dominant extra-regional power, the US is forming strategic partnerships, particularly with India, to counterbalance China's growing influence. India's significant geography and economic potential have elevated its importance in US foreign policy, with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice terming it a linchpin in Asian affairs in 2002 (Anjum & Abbas, 2019).

China's peaceful rise in South Asia, marked by President Xi's 2013 'Silk Road Economic Belt,' is noteworthy. Key objectives include securing the western frontier, accessing energy, establishing efficient land and maritime routes in the Indian Ocean, and addressing concerns about major global powers like the US, Russia, and India. Under Xi's leadership, a comprehensive agenda for regional integration and economic development has been outlined, with the flagship project being the 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative. Pakistan, responding to the Indo-US partnership, aligns with China, viewing CPEC as a transformative force. China's strategic

concerns heighten due to US partnerships in the region (Wuthnow, 2017).

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

To comprehend how the United States and China impact geostrategic competition in South Asia. To establish a framework for evaluating Pakistan and India's security challenges amid the strategic competition for regional dominance between major powers such as the US and China. To assess the depth of strategic partnerships between India and the US and between China and Pakistan within the regional power structure. To elucidate the path of strategic decisions and actions influenced by China and the United States in South Asia. To investigate the future implications of geostrategic peer competition between America and China and its impact on South Asia.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The geostrategic competition for dominance in South Asia, involving the roles of both China and the United States in regional security, carries significant implications for the balance of power between India and Pakistan, raising considerable concerns among scholars and practitioners alike. The literature on "Geostrategic Competition in South Asia: Role of China and the United States in Regional Security" delves into the complex dynamics shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region. Numerous scholars, including Muhammad Irfan (2014), have examined the strategic competition between the United States and China as they vie for political, economic, and security influence in the Indian Ocean. The literature underscores the United States' historical dominance in regional security affairs and its evolving role, juxtaposed with China's growing political, economic, and security clout. The implications of this competition extend to the strategic partnerships involving India and Pakistan with both the United States and China. The intricate interplay of these major powers has significant consequences for the stability and security of South Asia, with scholars highlighting the impact on the strategic choices and alliances made by India and Pakistan in navigating their relationships with the United States and China. The literature review offers valuable insights into the geopolitical shifts and their implications for regional security dynamics in South Asia.

Farhan Hanif Siddiqui's (2016) article, "Security Estimation in South Asia: Alliance Formation or Balance of Power," explores the changing strategic landscape shaped by the China-U.S. competition. Siddiqui emphasizes the U.S. rebalance to Asia's crucial role in regional security and discusses historical assistance from the U.S. and China to Pakistan during the Cold War and War on Terror, countering India's support from the Soviet Union and the U.S. The paper focuses on alliance formation and balancing dynamics between India and Pakistan, drawing insights from the U.S. Pivot to Asia strategy during Obama's presidency. Siddiqui contends that this policy heightens the U.S.-China rivalry in Asia, influencing South Asia's geopolitical situation. The author suggests that India and Pakistan's security environment may witness competitive shifts over seven decades, proposing the emergence of an alliance or balance between India and the U.S. against China and Pakistan in times of uncertainty or development.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodological framework for qualitative research on geostrategic competition in South Asia, focusing on the roles of China and the US in regional security, draws theoretical inspiration from Mearsheimer's Neo-realist theory and Kenneth Waltz's Balance of Power concept. The Neo-realist perspective in international politics underscores key principles such as anarchy, self-help, the state as a rational actor, the distribution of capabilities, ambiguous state intentions, and the significance of military forces. Employing qualitative research allows for a nuanced exploration of the intricate security dynamics and the myriad factors influencing geostrategic competition in South Asia, with implications for regional security concerning India and Pakistan. The literature utilized in the analysis is sourced from diverse outlets, including books, journals, articles, white papers, reports, and statements from state officials. This research aims to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on the geostrategic competition between the US and China within the South Asian security matrix.

Neo-Realism and the Regional Security Complex: Deciphering Struggles for Dominance, Security, and Competition.

Since it is primarily utilized by participants in political discourse, power is the notion in

international relations that is most frequently challenged. Power may be utilized for political or economic purposes as well as the traditional use of force or military force (Brown & Ainley, 2005). Power is sometimes referred to as military might by realist scholars and, in particular, by aspirants to the balance of power. Realists believe that power plays a substantial role in state foreign policy, and that the relative distribution of power across various state types generated results in international politics. According to Morgenthau, power is whatever that develops and sustains man's dominance over man (Brown & Ainley, 2005).

Kenneth Waltz, a prominent scholar, introduced a highly influential theory in contemporary international relations to comprehend the constraints imposed on actors within the global system. Waltz's fundamental premise asserts that nations, as significant players in international politics, pursue power either as a goal or as a means to other objectives, and their actions are driven by rationality. A central concept in Waltz's theory is the notion of balance. According to this perspective, states behave in a manner that fosters equilibrium, leading to either internal or external balancing. External balancing refers to a state forming external partnerships or alliances to enhance its relative power, while internal balancing involves strengthening military capabilities and economic power (Waltz, 1979).

According to John Mearsheimer, international politics represents a conflicted and competitive state of affairs, where governments vie for power at the expense of others. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism posits five fundamental hypotheses on how states interact in this anarchic system. Firstly, there is no global authority to restrain nations, making the international system inherently anarchic. Secondly, a state's primary goal is survival on the world stage, leading to the continuous enhancement of power and competition obstruction. Thirdly, the intentions of states are uncertain and subject to change. Friendships can turn into enmities, necessitating constant adaptation of interests and strategies. Fourthly, possessing formidable military capabilities is crucial for states seeking to outmaneuver rivals. Finally, states are rational actors meticulously considering their interests to achieve their goals (Mearsheimer, 2001)

### **Unveiling Regional Security Dynamics in South Asia: Applying the Centrality of Power in the International System**

The realist perspective in international politics emphasizes anarchy, self-help, the state as a rational actor, and distribution of capabilities, ambiguous state intentions, and the importance of military forces. South Asian governments, driven by regional conflicts, strategic alliances, and superpower influence, make rational decisions for survival. India's pursuit of military strength and regional hegemony creates tensions with neighbors. The United States' interest in containing China elevates India's regional leadership. Pakistan seeks to secure borders and prevent Indian dominance, aligning with China for parity. Neorealists assert that conflict is inevitable in a highly competitive and anarchic international society (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Prominent realist Mearsheimer identifies the United States as the sole regional hegemon in its western hemisphere, impacting the global balance of power. However, since 9/11, US hegemony has declined with the rise of major powers, particularly China and India. The War on Terror initially favored the US in South Asia due to its presence in Afghanistan, but the regional balance is shifting. China plays a significant role in South Asian security, contributing to a loose balance of power. The involvement of extra-regional powers like the US and China is a source of potential balance or imbalance in regional security (Paul, 2019).

Rising powers seek to change the status quo and shift the power balance. With China's ascent, realists expected a shift favoring China, possibly expelling the US from the region. This raises concerns about disrupting the current South Asian power balance maintained through deterrence and major power involvement. If deterrence fails and major powers contribute to instability, the risk of conflict between India and Pakistan rises. Analyzing major powers' roles, the security dilemma, and prospects for regional peace is crucial in managing evolving dynamics (Lippert et al., 2020).

The intense rivalry in South Asia, especially the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan and the Sino-Indian territorial disputes, with nuclear weapons, creates a complex security scenario. A peaceful resolution of disputes is crucial to prevent a nuclear arms race facilitated by external powers and a security dilemma. Major Powers like China

and the US, along with the international community, play a vital role in preventing nuclear escalation and maintaining the South Asian security status quo. To address these challenges, regional states adopted a co-opt strategy, focusing on denuclearization, demilitarization, and resolving disputes to mitigate threats in the security complex (Buzan & Waever, 2003).

### **Decoding Regional Power Dynamics: Analyzing the Indo-US Strategic Partnership**

After the Soviet Union's fall, South Asia shifted its geopolitical dynamics, favoring a bilateral alliance with India. The post-Cold War era saw the United States as the sole superpower, leading to a recalibration of foreign policies. In 1995, a transformative agreement between the US and India marked a new phase, encompassing military and trade activities. The development of nuclear weapons by Pakistan and India ushered in a new era, with the US perceiving them as contributors to regional and global concerns. The United States adopted a dual strategy, viewing Pakistan adversarial and acknowledging India as a responsible nuclear power. The threat from Indian nuclear weapons was not seen as a risk to US national security or as nuclear proliferation (Gupta, 2005).

To enhance bilateral ties, the United States aimed for a strategic partnership with India in its 2002 security strategy document. Post-War on Terror in South Asia, President Bush prioritized relations with India. In 2005, recognizing India's regional significance vis-à-vis China, the Bush administration initiated strategic cooperation, resulting in a ten-year defense deal. However, after the 2005 nuclear agreement, Indo-US relations faced significant deterioration. Despite this, the Bush administration viewed India as a responsible nuclear power deserving of similar benefits enjoyed by other governments (Jaspal, 2014).

The 2006 Hyde legislation marked India's growing nuclear influence, solidifying ties with the US through a pact signed during President Bush's visit. The nuclear deal aimed to advance India's strategic program in alignment with US foreign policy in the region, sharing technology with conditions due to concerns about potential military use. The Hyde Act, a key part of the 123 accords for nuclear trade, was signed in December 2006, following a separation plan agreement. The US Congress

scrutinized the previous nuclear cooperation strategy, emphasizing preventing WMD proliferation in line with US foreign policy. The New Delhi nuclear deal allowed by the US required India to adhere to IAEA requirements. Despite not being part of NPT, MTCR, NSG, or FMCT, India strengthened control over nuclear technology exports through the Prohibition of Illegal Activities Act of 2005 and a nonproliferation commitment policy, leading the US to ease restrictions as a special case (Chari, 2014).

Despite historical tensions, defense cooperation stands as a pivotal aspect of the Indo-US strategic alliance, with India now recognized as America's Major Defense Partner (MDP). This designation enables India to access advanced military technology and capabilities. Leveraging this opportunity, India has initiated the Make in India project to enhance co-production and co-development. Aligning with the Trump administration's continuation of Obama-era policies, including support for India's fighter aircraft production, India seeks to expand its defense trade with the US. The collaborative effort addresses fundamental issues in India's defense inventory, emphasizing key military hardware and software for potential areas of cooperation to bolster India's defense industrial base (Khan, 2018).

At the core of political, economic, and strategic efforts lies a win-win collaboration between India and the United States. Since assuming office, President Trump has prioritized India, emphasizing strengthened strategic cooperation. The June 2017 summit marked a significant moment in their relationship, with Trump expressing the view that their strategic collaboration is at its peak (Casolari, 2019). The Naval Malabar Exercise and subsequent events, including joint military efforts and a multi-billion dollar defense deal, underscore the commitment to enhancing ties. Despite other global priorities, such as North Korea, climate issues, and Iran's nuclear program, the Trump administration remains dedicated to sustaining and reinforcing the US-Indian alliance, emphasizing long-term benefits over short-term objectives (Jaishankar, 2017).

The 2017 National Security Strategy from the Trump administration depicted India as a significant, non-threatening partner and the most powerful country globally. Describing India as a rising global force and crucial ally in commerce, security, and military matters, the NSS reinforced

India's role as a major defense partner and a supporter of US principles worldwide. This strengthened relationship comes amid strained US-Pakistan ties, attributed to issues in Afghanistan and the rise of China. The US, adopting an Indian-centric approach, shows a greater strategic, political, and economic inclination toward India in modern politics. Indo-US initiatives, influenced by concerns in Afghanistan and the Sino-Pakistan axis, have strained ties with Pakistan and China (White House, 2017).

### **Sino-Pakistani Strategic Partnership amidst Regional Influence Competition between China and the US**

Sino-Pakistani ties, dating back to the 1950s when Pakistan recognized the PRC, are described as stronger than the Himalayas and deeper than the ocean. Pakistan endorsed China's UN Security Council bid, ceding part of Kashmir to China after the 1948 Kashmir War, reciprocated with diplomatic support. China aided Pakistan in the 1965–1971 Indo-Pakistani Wars, repatriating prisoners of war and supporting Pakistan's mediation for China-US ties. Post-9/11, President Musharraf's 2003 and Premier Shaukat Aziz's 2005 visits reinforced ties amid Pakistan's frontline role in the War on Terror. In 2010, Foreign Minister Qureshi emphasized China-Pakistan collaboration against India's UNSC bid. Amid the War on Terror, the US pivot to India strained Pakistan-US ties, aligning Pakistan and China against perceived sovereignty infringements (Javaid, 2018).

The US decision to supply military hardware and pursue nuclear cooperation with India escalated the South Asian balance of power, fostering nuclear collaboration between China and Pakistan. This set a precedent encouraging China and Pakistan to engage similarly. Due to longstanding animosity with India, China supported Pakistan's strategic program. Pakistan, like India, rejects participation in the NPT, NSG, and IAEA. China aided Pakistan's strategic weaponry development, subtly communicating with Washington. The US breaking nonproliferation norms for India, a Chinese rival, may lead to reciprocal cooperation from China (Hilali, 2020).

Shen Dingli, a nuclear researcher at Fudan University, accuses Washington of breaking the nonproliferation framework, as India might redirect resources to nuclear weapons development (Lashari,

2017). He questions the possibility of nations collaborating with allies in energy development. Conversely, despite India's nuclear cooperation with the US, Foreign Minister Nirupama Rao emphasized at Harvard University that global considerations, rather than just local ones, should be taken into account regarding the threats of terrorism and nuclear security. Recognizing China's growing influence, Pakistan strategically collaborated with China to enhance deterrence against India (Lashari, 2017).

China and Pakistan's strategic alliance in South Asia centers on defense and security cooperation, driven by their shared adversary, India. This collaboration supplied Pakistan with weaponry, including JF-17 Thunder, Karakoram 8 jet aircraft trainer, submarines, frigates, Al Khalid battle tank, and Al-Zarrar armored personnel carrier. In 2015, President Xi announced the joint Marine scientific research Centre. China supported Pakistan in counter-terrorism, and Raheel Sharif's visit led to a memorandum focusing on defense and security. Chinese aid strengthened the Pakistani navy. In 2015, President Xi's visit resulted in a joint declaration covering defense and security consultation, military training, technical exchange, and research and development. China assisted in developing Pakistan's missile program, extending the Hatif-II short-range missile from 200 km to 600 km, testing the Hatif-III in 1997 for deterrence capabilities. China supports the construction of jet fighters and training aircraft at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, enhancing Pakistan's security (Malik, 2016).

China significantly strengthened defense ties with Pakistan through joint military technologies, expanding Gwadar port, hosting drills, producing fighter planes, and nuclear cooperation. Xi Jinping's 2015 visit marked a new phase in their alliance, emphasizing defense and security. Military hardware investment surged from \$394 million in 2014 to \$66 million in 2015, with annual increases around 70%, according to Stockholm Peace International. Chinese military equipment deliveries to Pakistan started in 2017. The sixth round of joint exercises in 2019 further enhanced defense cooperation. General Bajwa's 2018 visit to China addressed regional and national security, defense, and economic issues, highlighting the evolving defense partnership with plans for collaboration on

security aspects, including ballistic missiles and tanks (Yuan, 2011).

During Imran Khan's 2018 visit to China, topics like security, defense, economics, extremism, and terrorism were discussed. Pakistan, considered China's closest friend, receives significant defense assistance. China supports Pakistan's position on Kashmir, aids in global initiatives, and helps achieve strategic goals in Afghanistan. The China-India-Pakistan link is delicate, and the long-term alliance is crucial. China provided Covid-19 assistance to Pakistan, including vaccines. China's support for Pakistan aims to alter the balance of power in South Asia, countering the comprehensive alliance formed by India and the United States. China and Pakistan share a strategic partnership (Jamshad et al., 2023).

### **Afghanistan's Role in Shaping Sino-US Relations and the Strategic Landscape of Indo-Pak: An Analysis of Regional Security Dynamics**

Afghanistan's strategic importance lies in its tri-junction role linking South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. From 1918 to 1979, relative peace prevailed, but the establishment of independent India and Pakistan in 1947 and the Cold War rivalry from 1979 to 1990 invited foreign involvement. The US, from Bush to Obama to Trump, consistently countered the global threat of Al-Qaida after ousting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite reducing Taliban power, their resurgence as "Taliban 2.0" followed Obama's exit plan. Post Abdullah-Ghani election, the US initiated a political settlement for Afghan stability, supporting Ghani and Abdullah. The US actively develops Afghan security forces against potential insurgency. Despite Taliban dominance, Trump vowed to curb their rising influence, continuing counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and nearby Pakistan (Siddiqi, 2016)).

The joint South and Central Asia strategy, coupled with the 2017 National Security Document, aimed to prevent terrorist groups from regaining ground in Afghanistan and Central Asia, eliminating their safe havens to deter attacks on the US homeland. The Trump administration pursued an inclusive plan for reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban to end the prolonged conflict. Seeking collaboration from regional powers like Pakistan, India, and China, the US aimed to contribute to a stable future for Afghanistan and the broader South and Central Asia region. To address the Afghan

issue comprehensively, the Trump administration invited the Taliban to negotiations in Doha, Qatar, in 2020, involving Pakistan in the process. Acknowledging the absence of a military solution, the US pursued a peace agreement to peacefully resolve the longstanding conflict, leaving a power vacuum (Tariq et al., 2020).

### **Mapping India's Strategic and Economic Imperatives in Afghanistan**

Post-Balakot, US-Pakistan distrust soared. India and the US, strategic allies, accused Pakistan, linking it to terrorism in Kashmir and Afghanistan. The Indo-US alliance aimed to portray Pakistan as the main cause of Afghanistan's crisis. India sought to delegitimize the Kashmir dispute by highlighting Pakistan's alleged sponsorship of terrorism. Global attention on incidents like the Mumbai attacks fueled India's blame on Pakistan. The Pathankot incident led to blaming Pakistan for the 2016 Uri event, prompting US calls for Pakistan to 'do more' against terrorism (Trump tweet, 2017). Indian PMs Singh and Modi aligned closely with the US to weaken Pakistan. Post-Pathankot, Modi pursued aggressive measures against Pakistan. BJP leaders hinted at using terrorism to counter Pakistan, reflecting India's intentions (Kaura, 2017).

Ashraf Ghani's preference for Pakistan over India surprised Indian strategists. Nawaz Sharif assured Ghani of shared adversaries, and Pakistan pledged to invite the Taliban for discussions. Ghani sought Indian assistance in negotiating with the Taliban but was unsuccessful. Modi's 2015 visit to Kabul provided security aid, aiming to prevent the Taliban's rise and counter Pakistan and China's geopolitical objectives in Afghanistan. Modi's strategy to isolate Pakistan in Afghanistan faced challenges due to the reestablished Pakistan-Russia ties in 2016. The collaboration included military exercises in 2015 and a friendship pact in 2017, adding to China's existing cooperation in Afghanistan. President Karzai emphasized the need for US and Indian support, predicting the ANDSF's disintegration without it. The Trump administration granted India a more advantageous position in Afghanistan to prevent potential strategic blunders and maintain regional stability (Bajpai, 2017).

India, eyeing Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asia, is concerned about Pakistan's influence and the impact on the CPEC. The contested Indian-Pakistani border and India's sway in Kabul could

disrupt the CPEC, according to India. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis criticized CPEC in a congressional hearing, echoing Indian opposition. India fears China's access to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan and its Belt and Road initiative's continental and maritime aspects. The US renamed its Pacific Command to Indo Pacific Command in 2018 to counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean. Jim Mattis highlighted the growing geopolitical conflict in the Indo-Pacific, fueled by China's rising influence in South Asia, sparking concerns in the US and India (Baruah, 2018).

### **Pakistan and China's Stakes in Afghanistan: Navigating Strategic Competition with India and the US**

Before his 2014 state visit to China, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani lauded China's strategic partnerships and regional cooperation. Ghani foresaw China playing a more active role in Afghan peace efforts, highlighting China's systematic approach. As a steadfast ally to Pakistan, China is a crucial partner in the Belt and Road initiative. Institutions led by China, such as the Asian Development Infrastructure Bank, Shanghai-based BRICS, and Silk Road diplomacy, contribute to regional infrastructure and economic growth. China's role in fostering development and peace in South and Central Asia, particularly Afghanistan, is contingent on its strategic interests (Cohen, 2016).

China should shift focus to its Western region, per Wang Jisi, an expert in Sino-US relations. Historically centered on the East, he argues for a careful approach to the Western boundary, involving South Asia, Central Asia, and Eurasia due to improved communication links. Wang Jisi believes this shift enhances China's geostrategic outlook in both Asia and Europe. To advance economic objectives, he suggests China should "March west." Scholar Wang Yiwei emphasizes China's intent to build strong ties with Eurasian nations through Silk Road diplomacy, marking a geostrategic shift in foreign policy toward the Western border. Despite trade statistics focusing on East Asia, Europe, and the US, Wang Jisi sees security, resource access, and regional power consolidation in South Asia as key strategic goals (Jisi, 2014).

CPEC, an ambitious project addressing Pakistan's energy needs, connects China's Kashgar to Gwadar's deep-sea port, crucial for oil imports. Initially estimated at \$46 billion in 2013, CPEC's

current cost is \$63 billion. The Gawadar port provides a vital Strait of Hormuz connection for importing oil from Iran. Both China and Pakistan prioritize CPEC for trade and energy. However, concerns are raised by the US and India due to its passage through disputed regions. CPEC enables China to maintain a smooth energy supply, bypassing the Indian Ocean during potential conflicts where India holds a commanding position (White, 2020).

The NATO summit in Lisbon (2010) focused on transitioning Afghanistan to Afghan leadership. Pakistan fears an Afghan power vacuum post the US pullout in 2014. In support of US peace efforts, Pakistan cautiously engages with the Taliban. The Murree Talks in 2015 brought together Taliban and Afghan government representatives. The Trump administration viewed Pakistan critically, linking it to the Afghan crisis. Seeking a peace agreement, Trump urged Pakistan's cooperation during Prime Minister Imran Khan's 2019 visit to the US (Chiacu, 2019).

Since ISAF's 2014 pullout, Pakistan's security concerns have risen due to terrorism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Indian-occupied Kashmir. Baluchistan's separatist movement and Indian-controlled Kashmir intensify Islamabad's worries. Pakistan engages with the Taliban to influence Afghan affairs, opting for negotiations since 2013, contrary to the military's stance. TTP, based in Pakistan, aims to destabilize and impose its version of Islam. Political changes and economic development in exFATA are prioritized, followed by combating the Taliban in Pakistan to prevent their operations. Internal unrest hinders Pakistan's counter-insurgency operations against terrorism (Chaudhry, 2021).

The second concern is India's interference in Pakistan's internal affairs, with RAW engaging with Baluchistan separatists. Kalbhushan Jhadav, an Indian spy captured in 2016, is suspected in terrorist attacks in Karachi and Baluchistan. Recent events reveal Pakistan's substantial losses in the fight against terrorism, including 70,000 lives and \$134 billion in economic damage. The primary worry is Afghanistan's unrest potentially spreading to Pakistan. Ethnic tensions arise as both countries share Pashtun ethnicity, fueling movements like PTM. Pakistan shifts its strategy, adopting federalism for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, implementing

reforms for stability and development in the region (The Express Tribune, 2021).

Racial tensions surface as Pakistan and Afghanistan share Pashtun ethnicity. Afghanistan supports Pashtun movements like PTM for a larger Pakhtunkhwa. Pakistan reevaluates its tribal regions and mainstream Pakhtunkhwa, reversing its stance on extremism. Shifting to federalism, Pakistan implements reforms for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's stability. China's involvement prioritizes Afghanistan in Pakistani trade. CPEC gains significance, connecting Pakistan to Central Asian republics. It fosters interdependence, enhancing Afghanistan's commercial ties and reducing reliance on foreign powers (Elahi, 2017)

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China can address Pakistan's energy shortages. Central Asia, rich in resources, aligns with China's import strategy. Initiatives like the Trans Afghan pipeline can benefit Pakistan by linking to Central Asian countries, improving energy imports. CPEC's passage through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan benefits both nations. Gawadar port offers economic opportunities for Kabul in transit commerce and energy. Stable Pakistan and Afghanistan are crucial for regional integration, preventing disorder across South and Central Asia (Hamza & Khan, 2020).

### **Analysis of the Indian Ocean Strategic Theater from the Perspectives of China, Pakistan, the US, and India**

India strategically eyes the Indian Ocean, aiming to control vital choke points in the Asia-Pacific, Malacca, and Persian Gulf regions. It collaborates with the US navy to maintain influence across greater Asia. China, challenging conventional maritime dominance, alters geopolitics in the Indian Ocean through PLA-N advancements. Amid geopolitical tensions, China and India foster economic ties and participate in strategic forums. President Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative in Kyrgyzstan in 2013, emphasizing a comprehensive economic strategy for South Asia (Nguyen et al., 2022).

BRI aims to enhance China's economic influence across South, West, Central, and East Asia. China, as the only other powerful nation bordering South Asia, raises concerns about security threats in the Indian Ocean and Strait of Hormuz due to Chinese strategists in Gawadar. India rejects CPEC as a

primary force in regional integration, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticizing it. New Delhi strengthens ties with the US to counter expanding Chinese influence. The president proposed a maritime economic belt, emphasizing the Indian Ocean, shortly after declaring BRI (Barah, 2022). Since the Cold War's end, the US, with its globally dominating navy, pursued regional objectives, fostering a close naval relationship with India. Discussions on the Malabar exercise consider potential inclusion of Australia and Japan, creating a quadrilateral situation. Chinese involvement in the Indian Ocean was driven by the Obama administration's Asia rebalance, seen by China as containment in the Asia Pacific. The US, fostering alliances like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, intensified geostrategic rivalry with its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy 2018. The Trump administration's departure from TPP and tougher stance against China heightened the rivalry. China's force projection and the ability to balance the US in the Indian Ocean concern treaty allies. India, losing strategic independence to China, turns to the US to counterbalance and monitor Chinese activities in the Indian Ocean (Shah, 2020).

Indo-US concerns in the region include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), viewed as a catalyst for deeper regional integration, promoting economic stability and prosperity. China sees CPEC as crucial for strengthening ties with South Asian and Indian Ocean littoral states. Chinese efforts, centered on Gawadar, aim to access the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. For India, Gawadar is part of the Chinese "String of Pearls," encircling India. China's long-term presence in the Indian Ocean benefits from countering India's strategic location at Asia's crossroads (Khan & Wenhao, 2018).

PLA-N actions and Chinese investments in Gawadar, Djibouti, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the Maldives enhance China's IOR presence. Chinese involvement secures oil supply chains, trade, and energy through the maritime economic belt. China views Gawadar as a vital access point to the Arabian and Indian oceans, ensuring power balance in naval conflicts. CPEC reduces strategic risk, positioning China to dominate the Indian Ocean. Sushma Swaraj acknowledges India's concerns about CPEC's disputed passage but believes in its long-term regional integration benefits, as argued by China and Pakistan (White, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

South Asia, a geopolitical chessboard for major powers like the US and China, witness's dynamic power balances. India and Pakistan disturb the regional equilibrium, prompting concerns. Deterrence initiates with India and counterbalances through Pakistan. An ongoing arms race shapes regional security, fueled by US aid providing arms, missile defense systems, aircraft, and military technology. China's crucial role in South Asia involves an enduring friendship with Pakistan, supplying arms, missile technology, aircraft, and advanced technology. US strategies, declaring China a global competitor, disrupt the regional power balance by reviving alliances and partnering with China's adversaries in South Asia.

US upset South Asian balance by aiding Delhi in nuclear tech. Pakistan, India rivals, faced setbacks with strained US ties, ignored Kashmir rights abuses, and regional abandonment. Power balance involves internal strength, arms race, and external alliances. Pakistan, India armaments race, risking conflict amid bloc politics and alliances to thwart rivals.

Major Powers like the US and Soviet exploit South Asia in the past to serve national interests. China's regional integration, military modernization, and naval buildup raise concerns for India and the US. China shapes a ground favorable to its strategy, sparking geostrategic competition with the US and India for regional security dominance. In the words of Mearsheimer China cannot rise peacefully, as he argued that the United States is dominated the Western hemisphere and China will dominate Asia to exclude the latter.

South Asia grapples with a security dilemma, hindered by competitive relations between India and Pakistan and China-US dynamics. Lack of regional interdependence is fueled by mutual distrust, with perceived threats shaping the security complex. India faces dual threats from Pakistan and China, while China perceives threats from the US and India. Major Powers play a role in advancing their national interests, contributing to the intricacies of the regional security landscape. India and Pakistan constitute a regional security complex, where one's security is the other's insecurity, highlighting their interdependence in security matters

Buzan underscores security interconnectedness in an anarchical environment. Trade between Pakistan and India holds little value, and its potential closure

has minimal impact. Strategic interdependency demands determination, developmental will, and mutual trust, lacking in South Asia. Agreements like SAFTA under SAARC are non-functional, jeopardizing geo-economic interests. The tense security environment leads India and Pakistan to forgo opportunities for regional integration, hindering economic strength crucial for military buildup and power projection.

The US-China geostrategic competition in East Asia and the Pacific significantly impacts South Asia's balance of power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the US and China played a blame game, leading to a trade war initiated by the Trump administration. The Russian invasion of Ukraine adds to global tensions. While the US and China avoid direct confrontation, their relations are competitive and conflictual, particularly regarding China's presence in the South and East Seas, Indian Ocean, and Taiwan. China responds cautiously to these developments to safeguard its regional integration project (BRI) and national interests

The US pressures China, prompting states to choose sides. India is tasked with becoming a major player and an offshore balancer in the region. Both India and Pakistan have strategic partnerships with China and the US, demanding a balanced approach for regional peace. The collapse of Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa government raises concerns for South Asian economies, requiring urgent driving forces. Pakistan's economy teeters on collapse, relying on aid from China and the IMF. A stable balance of power and economic development are critical for South Asia.

In the Realist world view, South Asia pursues Real-Politik, relying on hard power to counter each other. Non-traditional threats like terrorism, economic challenges, climate change, water scarcity, and human security are current concerns. South Asian states should prioritize comprehensive security over narrow perceptions. Stable deterrence maintains the balance of power, avoiding war. The ultimate goal should be mutual trust, information sharing, technology cooperation, connectivity, and understanding of strategic compulsions.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Foster increased diplomatic dialogue and cooperation between India and Pakistan, urging both nations to prioritize communication and conflict resolution. Encourage regional institutions,

such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), to play a more active role in mediating disputes and fostering collaboration.

Advocate for a more balanced distribution of power within South Asia, recognizing the influence of major players like China and the U.S. Encourage regional states to collaborate on initiatives that promote stability and equality, mitigating potential imbalances that could lead to heightened tensions.

Emphasize the economic potential of regional collaboration by promoting initiatives such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). Encourage economic partnerships between India, Pakistan, China, and the U.S., fostering mutual benefits and reducing economic dependencies that could contribute to geopolitical tensions.

Propose confidence-building measures in the security domain, urging India and Pakistan to reduce arms race tendencies and maintain open lines of communication to avoid misunderstandings. Suggest the establishment of regional security forums to address common threats and concerns collaboratively.

Recommend that the United States takes a proactive and balanced approach in its strategic alliances with India and Pakistan. Encourage the U.S. to act as a stabilizing force, fostering cooperation and engagement rather than contributing to potential imbalances in regional power dynamics.

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