CHANGING GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The notion that unipolarity does not define the existing world order is a misconception. The United States sits comfortably above all others in every power metric. However, China's meteoric ascent, expanding outreach, and increasing assertiveness on the global stage have caused great consternation in Washington and is determined to uphold its primacy. Its interests converge with New Delhi's, which seeks to preserve its dominance in South Asia; therefore, the two countries have upscaled their diplomatic ties and deepened their defense partnership. In the face of escalating Sino-American competition, Pakistan is in a strategic straitjacket. It has a history of close relations with the United States of America and China is its all-weather friend. In recent years, Washington's shifting policy priorities, especially vis-à-vis India, have estranged Islamabad whose economic miseries have pushed it further into Beijing's orbit. This qualitative research conducted through the prism of neo-realism examines the existing balance of power at the international and regional levels and the consequences for Pakistan. Through a comprehensive analysis of various dimensions of structural power, it debunks the prevalent narrative about the dawn of a multipolar world. While this study acknowledges the indispensability of China's military, economic, and diplomatic support for Pakistan, it also presses for a re-set in Pak-U.S. relations to avoid the worst-case outcomes for the country and the region. In the context of South Asia, this paper cautions that Islamabad and Washington's overreliance on any one power will be detrimental to their respective interests. Pakistan in particular must strive to achieve domestic stability and broaden its foreign policy options to avoid falling into a debilitating dependency.

Keywords: Global Order, Unipolarity, Multipolarity, China's Rise, United States, Pakistan's Foreign Policy, Sino-Pak Relations

Introduction

For multipolarity has remained the norm for most of the history of modern international relations. This changed at the end of the World War II when the United States of America and the Soviet Union emerged as the two most powerful states in the system and carved up the rest of the world in their respective spheres of influence. The demise of the USSR left the U.S. in an unrivaled position as the sole superpower and ushered in an era of unipolarity.

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At that time, many observers opined that this across-the-board primacy of the United States was an aberration, and the world would soon find its balance. Fast forward three decades, the rise of China, especially in the economic realm, has begun to provide a semblance of that balance, leading to speculations that the unipolar moment is all but over. However, comparing various determinants such as military might, economic output and technological sophistication demonstrates that the balance of power remains skewed in America's favor. Nevertheless, the relations of power have changed. We are back to a world of great-power competition after a short interval and the main theatre of this competition is the Indo-Pacific. For the United States to preserve its dominance well into the twenty-first century, it must prevent China from attaining hegemony in this region. To do so, Washington is bolstering India's capacity to counter China and keep China out of the Indian Ocean region where it has made deep inroads in recent years. This great-power struggle presents a strategic opportunity for smaller states in the area who can exploit these rivalries while shielding themselves from fallout. But the same opportunity presents a predicament for Pakistan. Decades of economic mismanagement have made the country excessively dependent on geopolitical rents which have now stopped coming. Given its diminishing relevance and the United States' expanding defense partnership with its archnemesis, India, Islamabad has no option but to resort to China to ensure its solvency and continued robustness of its national security. It may be a temporary fix but excessive dependence will prove counter-productive in the long run.

This academic paper employs the framework of neo-realism to inquire into the distribution of power at the international level and its manifestation in South Asia. It deals with these queries using various qualitative data in the form of books, journal articles, official communiques, and press coverage. The central premise of this study is that the world order will likely stay unipolar for the foreseeable future. Based on that, it holds that Pakistan must not forego its long-standing partnership with the United States of America, notwithstanding its strategic ties with China. Doing so will not only upset regional stability by dividing it into two rival camps but will also reduce Islamabad's leverage with Beijing and further shrink its already meagre economic and diplomatic options. Likewise, Washington must accept that sole reliance on New Delhi may not be the optimum situation it finds itself in in South Asia.

The article is divided into three sections. It begins by comparing certain fundamental factors of international power to deduce the polarity of the system and the resultant world order.

Because changes at the systemic level are bound to yield changes at the regional level, the following part deals with the emerging alignment of states in South Asia. Pakistan's dilemma and potential policy recourse available to it in the face of this reconfiguration are discussed in the last section.

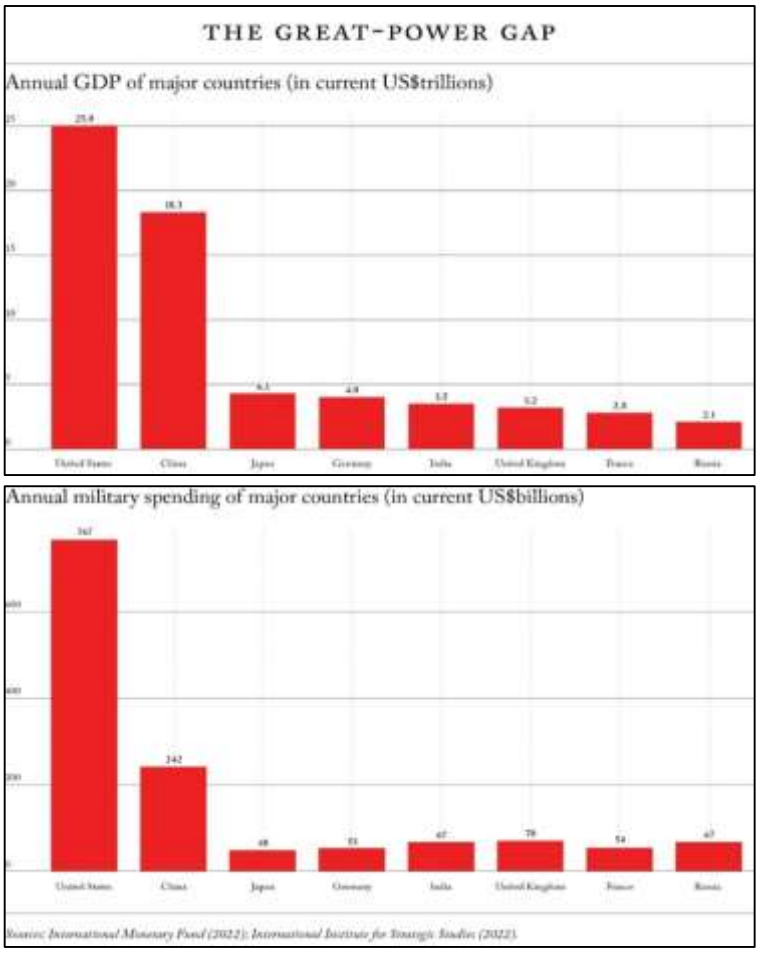
The Changing Nature of Polarity

In the second half of the twentieth century, the world was decidedly bipolar and defined by geo-political competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War and the subsequent disintegration of the USSR in 1991, America stood unrivaled at the top of the international pyramid. Its supremacy over everyone else in every metric of power was unquestionable; since the advent of the modern state system in the seventeenth century, no country had simultaneously enjoyed this level of lead in military, economic and technological domains. The world's wealthiest countries were its allies and bound together in a framework of institutions of Washington's making. With no other power able to challenge its dominance – individually or in concert – it operated under few external constraints. For Francis Fukuyama, this was 'the end of history'; according to him, the triumph of Western liberal democracy and capitalism over communism represented the apotheosis of humanity's ideological evolution. [1] Charles Krauthammer called it the 'unipolar moment' and surmised that it will last for another generation or so.[2] However, he also presaged that the emerging strategic environment, distinguished by the ascent of small, aggressive states possessing weapons of mass destruction and means of their delivery will mar upcoming decades with a heightened threat of war.

Less than a generation and American power already appears diminished. At the outset of the millennium, it has suffered two costly, failed military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, a devastating financial crisis and crippling political polarisation. The election of Donald Trump as the President also undermined the country's alliances and the credibility of its commitments.[3] On the other hand, China's meteoric ascent as the world's second-largest economy following years of unabated growth has added to China's military assertiveness and furthered its diplomatic outreach. Its ambitious connectivity and institution-building projects have given rise to notions of an alternative order. There is widespread consensus that the failure of the United States to inhibit the forces of revisionism in Europe as exhibited by Russia's invasion of Ukraine spells the end of its primacy and the arrival of an era of multipolarity. However, these assumptions belie hard facts and rest on an understanding of power that translates to influence, i.e., the ability to get others to do what you want them to do.

On the other hand, polarity relies on a quantifiable definition of power: power as resources – mainly military strength and economic heft. The international structure is based on the distribution of these resources among the most significant states in the system.

For multipolarity to exist, the workings of the global system must be shaped by three or more countries possessing comparable capabilities. The United States and China doubtlessly top the charts in military spending and economic output. Still, for the world order to be multipolar, at least one additional country must be in the same league. This is not the case, no matter which metric of power one uses. Every state that could rank third – Germany, Japan, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, India – is of no match to the United States or China in any way. Short of complete collapse of either of the 'G2', the gap between them and others is unlikely to close anytime soon.[4] India, the most potent contender for the third spot due to the size of its population, is years behind China and is not expected to acquire This status before mid-century.



This leaves us with another possibility. If multipolarity is elusive, the world may be headed towards bipolarity. Most analysts invoke China's GDP, which is the world's second-largest in nominal terms and the largest in terms of Purchasing Power Parity, to make this point. Notwithstanding the unreliability of its official economic data, China remains a middle-income country. As its growth rate stalls, it has to grapple with a host of underlying conditions such as massive debt load, over-investment in the real estate sector, scarcity of natural resources including clean water and energy and a rapidly aging population.[5] [6] This makes it difficult for China to dislodge the United States as the world's largest economy shortly. The gap in the technological and military realms is even more glaring. Payments for using a country's intellectual property is one of the best means to measure its technological capacity. China has spent extensively on research and development in the past few years. Resultantly, its patent royalties increased to $12 billion in 2021 from $1 billion in 2014, less than one-tenth of the amount the United States receives yearly.[7] It also falls far short of Germany and Japan in this area, and notwithstanding the large-scale modernisation of its military forces, it has a long way to go before it can be seen as a peer of the United States. According to Barry Posen, the US derives significant advantage from its control of the open sea, air, and space (i.e., command of the commons).[8] Unless China can contest that dominance, it will only stay in the ranks of regional military power.

Another characteristic force that pervaded great-power politics in bipolar and multipolar systems but is largely missing in present times is balancing. No country can overwhelm the United States by simply building up its military or joining an alliance. While the existing structure of the global economy and the nature of military technology slow the aspirant's rise to the top, the only genuine partnerships that exist today and involve substantial security guarantees tie smaller states to Washington. Moreover, most US allies are advanced, wealthy countries that control many technologies required to produce modern weapons. However, this does not refute the variation in power dynamics over the past few years. With other countries, especially China, catching up, the unambiguous lead that the United States once enjoyed over everyone else across the board has narrowed down, but it is still significant, will take a long time to close, and not all elements of this equation will balance themselves out at the same rate. Even when they do, they will have to demonstrate their staying power. The consequent distribution of power at present, therefore, resembles unipolarity more than multipolarity or bipolarity. But this unipolarity is 'partial' as opposed to the complete unipolarity of the immediate post-Cold War years.[9] It also explains the willingness of powers dissatisfied with the status quo to test the waters.

Still, they face more significant constraints of being balanced against than the United States does, which further attests to the unipolarity of the system. Besides, the reach of any of the revisionist states does not extend beyond their respective regions; surrounded by neighbors suspicious of their motives, none of them is a hegemon in its part of the world.

The implications of partial unipolarity are nonetheless profound. The perception of decline has created paranoia about China in the United States and led to dog-whistling about a new Cold War in which the world's democracies are pitted against autocracies and those in the middle are forced to pick sides. However, most countries including China are not amenable to these binaries. For one, as the factory floor of the world and the largest trading partner of almost 120 nations, China is deeply entrenched in the international economic system.[10] Many underdeveloped countries consider Chinese investment crucial to meeting their much-needed infrastructure requirements. America's long-standing partners in the Asia-Pacific, apparently consternated by China's rise, also chafe at this pressure.[11] The complexity and interdependence of global politics means that cooperation and competition subsist. 'Swing' states such as India, Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey view themselves as autonomous actors catering to their independent interests, not as pawns in someone else's game. They are bidding for a world that is less polarised and more fragmented. A world in which power is dispersed and where they have a say. But this fragmentation comes at the cost of certainty and stability. The result is a 'G-Zero' world in which multiple actors, individually and in unison with others, are potent enough to disrupt the existing order – temporarily, locally, perhaps even regionally – but none can forge an alternative order that is universal and durable.[12] On its part, the Western liberal order underwritten by the United States of America faces a crisis of legitimacy. Given how easily the rules can be revised to suit the interests of powerful Western governments, the notion of a 'rules-based' order does not convince many in the Global South. Likewise, the institutions underpinning this order do not reflect changed political and economic realities causing discontent and dysfunction.

This period of transition between complete unipolarity and bipolarity or multipolarity is fraught with danger. According to Professor Graham Allison, hegemonic wars almost always occur when a rising power threatens to displace an established power.[13] China is not in a position to do so, but exaggerated fear of the dragon can tamper with the eagle's vision and generate a self-fulfilling prophecy. This will set in motion a vicious cycle in which the impression of US decline engenders overreaction from Washington and miscalculation by others, bringing with it catastrophic consequences.

How China and the United States navigate these shifting power dynamics will determine the course of the twenty-first century. Great power competition is back but circumstances have metamorphosed. Many of the challenges presently faced by the world such as climate change, economic stability, cyber-security, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and pandemics transcend borders and cannot be dealt with without cooperation at the international level, especially among the most powerful states in the system. Cooperation entails leadership which is not just about deep pockets or military might. It is the leverage to coordinate collective responses to transnational crises, the influence to set the agenda on global issues and the ability and willingness to provide and bear the costs of public goods. With the United States increasingly unwilling to assume these responsibilities and others incapable of doing so, a partially unipolar world is forced to contend with a serious leadership vacuum.

The Changing Topography of Power in South Asia

To make sense of the developing dynamics of US-China rivalry, it is pertinent to refer to John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism which posits that great powers are not content with merely being the strongest states in the system.[14] Their ultimate ambition is to become the 'only' great power, i.e., the hegemon, by acquiring more power than everyone else. However, today, global hegemony is not feasible due to the difficulty of sustaining and projecting power across distant continents. The best a state can thus aspire for is to dominate its backyard by becoming the regional hegemon, a status presently enjoyed only by the United States of America in the Western Hemisphere. Regional hegemons have an additional goal – to prevent the rise of a peer competitor in another geographical region of the world by keeping it divided among different powers that can balance one another. In line with this, if China continues its remarkable ascent, it will try to maximise the power gap with its neighbors, especially Japan, Russia and India and strive for hegemony in Asia. This will allow it to dictate the parameters of acceptable behavior to nearby countries. An increasingly confident China will also seek to push the United States out of the region. President Xi Jinping's mantra, 'Asia for Asians' is viewed by many as an adaptation of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine that closed the door on European intervention in American affairs.[15] Meanwhile, big and small powers in China's proximity, threatened by its ascendance will do what they can do on their own to thwart its quest for hegemony or by joining a US-led coalition much like Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Japan and even China did during the Cold War to contain the Soviet Union. As historical records demonstrate, the United States is determined to maintain its singular status as the only regional hegemon in the world. It can go to great lengths to retain its leading position in the global balance of power.

Writing in *Foreign Policy* in 2011, Hillary Clinton held that a strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific was critical to securing America's primacy in the twenty-first century; a choice comparable to the foundation of NATO and rolling out of the Marshall Plan after World War II.[16] In the following years, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has been substituted for Asia-Pacific - a change not viewed favorably, particularly by China. As with the label Asia-Pacific that legitimised a significant role for the United States in Beijing's neighborhood, this idea is seen as a ploy to downgrade China's centrality by inviting in India, another substantial power.[17] It also signals that the security of waters connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans, including the South China Sea, is everyone's business. Therefore, 'Indo-Pacific' is not simply a new name for the region but reflects changes underway in strategic behavior, economics and diplomatic institutions. At the most basic level, the concept recognises that accelerating security and economic connections between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific have created a single strategic system – an Asian maritime super-region. However, it is a super-region in which sub-regions with their peculiar strategic microclimates still matter. Any meaningful cooperation to address its hottest security challenges will entail flexible coalitions.

South Asia is one such sub-region. Only a peripheral theater during the Cold War, the region is today the primary site of a significant power competition between India and China, which involves and is also affected by the great power competition between China and the United States of America. Of Asia's three great bays, two – the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal - lie in the Indian Ocean and India feels a similar sense of ownership towards them as China does for the South China Sea. Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first Prime Minister, was the first to espouse the Monroe Doctrine as a model for excluding hostile interests and powers from the Indian Ocean. India's maritime doctrine envisions the ability to control the entry and exit points to the Ocean and exercise sea command in concentric rings stretching south from the subcontinent and into the Indian Ocean.[18] The diplomatic counterpart of this doctrine comprises a permanent line of assistance to its neighbors coupled with disapproval of help from others. China's rise has provided them with an alternative source of development support which New Delhi cannot match. Therefore, notwithstanding India's geographical advantages in the Bay of Bengal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bangladesh are no longer willing to acquiesce to its command thereof and have welcomed Chinese expertise and investment for the construction of ports at Hambantota, Kyauk Phyu and Chittagong respectively. In the Arabian Sea, Beijing has invested in a deep-water port on the Pakistan coast at Gwadar, intending to connect it through pipelines, roads and railways to China's western provinces.

India has attempted to counter it by building Chabahar Port on the Iranian coast with further plans to reach out to Afghanistan and Central Asia through a north-south transport corridor.

These rivalrous dynamics are not limited to the bays but extend to the peninsulas that frame and divide them. Peninsular geography offers no strategic depth to which states can retreat if attacked from sea; a foothold in any area grants an enemy a base to launch attacks on the rest of it. Therefore, India's vulnerability to or potential rivals on the South Asian peninsula is understandable. Indian strategists continue to look at the entire subcontinent as a single strategic unit and decry its subdivision as a source of weakness and distraction. Repeated wars and seventy-five years of tension with Pakistan have engaged India's attention on its borders with its western neighbor and kept it from genuinely developing its maritime capabilities and projecting power beyond the subcontinent. New Delhi views deepening and expanding Sino-Pak military ties as an attempt to tie down its power, but China's relations with Pakistan are longstanding. What is more irritating is the gains Beijing has made elsewhere in South Asia. After India blockaded Nepal in 2015, China came to its help and has offered the landlocked country access to its ports.[19] It has also funded hydropower projects there and broken India's internet monopoly.[20] In recent years, China has become Bangladesh's biggest arms supplier.[21] Except Bhutan, all India's neighbors have signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative. Were China to gain significant allies or influence among South Asian countries and accomplish its frenetic infrastructure building from its western provinces to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan and its southern provinces to the Bay of Bengal through Myanmar, it would considerably allay its Malacca dilemma and allow Beijing to project power in the Indian Ocean region effectively.

The Belt and Road Initiative threatens to upend the traditional balance of power in the sub-region in China's favor. Therefore, New Delhi has been trying to convince the world that the project is part of a geo-economic strategy to dominate Asia. The large-scale modernisation of the People's Liberation Army Navy has led to fears that the ostensibly commercial seaports that China has funded throughout littoral South Asia could one day be converted into permanent naval bases. These concerns are shared by the United States of America, which has developed initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment to compete with the BRI. It also collaborates with India, Japan, the European Union, and Australia to fund development projects in the South Asian region. As the United States views China as a 'pacing challenge' to be countered militarily, economically, technologically and ideationally, its Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasises 'supporting India's continued rise and regional leadership'.[22]

To that end, Washington has deepened its defense partnership with New Delhi and expanded its access to cutting-edge technologies. At the same time, border frictions have circumscribed the parameters of Sino-Indian bilateral relationship. India's alignment with the United States through its participation in the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue which comprises the United States, India, Japan and Australia) imbues the result of these clashes with a strategic significance that extends beyond its effect on the two countries' standing in the Himalayas. Chinese analysts do not rule out the possibility of a 'nightmare scenario' of a simultaneous war against Taiwan and India. In fact, so prominent is armed conflict with India in Chinese military thinking that it is expressed in a campaign known as the 'Joint Border Area Operations (边境地区联合作战)' - one of China's five military operations that won't primarily take place in the air warfighting or naval domains.[23]

The Changing Terms of Pakistan's Relationship with the United States of America and China

According to Bruce Riedel, the Sino-Pak relationship and the U.S.-India partnership are the 'dual axes' which will be 'central to the global order in our times'.[24] For much of its history, Pakistan has managed to maintain robust ties with both, China and the United States of America based on shared political, economic, and security interests. This arrangement brought essential benefits for all three countries. However, Islamabad's relations with Washington seem to be unraveling recently. The ebb began in 2011. It was an eventful year marked by a series of killings – of two young men in Lahore by a contractor of the Central Intelligence Agency, followed by the May raid in Abbottabad carried out by the U.S. Navy SEALs that captured Osama bin Laden and finally, the attack on Salala border post by NATO forces that took the lives of twenty-four Pakistani soldiers. Islamabad responded to the latter by closing the NATO supply lines to Afghanistan and opening them after seven months, only after the Secretary of State apologised. Mistrust, however, continued to simmer. Successive U.S. administrations have scapegoated Pakistan for their country's failures in Afghanistan, accusing it of running with the hare and hunting with the hound. In September 2018, the Defense Department suspended military assistance to Pakistan.[25] In the same year, the United States spearheaded the move to place the country on the Financial Action Task Force's 'grey list' for failing to curb activities and financing of UN-designated terror groups.[26]

Meanwhile, Pakistan has sought a more comprehensive partnership with its longstanding friend, China. Dubbing Pak-China relationship as a 'threshold alliance', Sameer Lalwani pointed out in a United States Institute of Peace report that by 2030, almost 50 percent of Pakistan's major military platforms would be composed of Chinese platforms.[27]

The two countries have also increased the frequency and complexity of their joint military exercises. While defense ties rooted in shared rivalry with India form the nucleus of the Sino-Pak relationship, they have been keen to add an economic dimension. To this end, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was launched in 2015. Worth sixty-two billion dollars, it was touted as the pilot project of President Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy venture, the Belt and Road Initiative. In its initial phase, it yielded great dividends for Pakistan in foreign direct investment – about twenty billion dollars – mainly in the power sector. CPEC became a boon for Islamabad when security risks kept foreign investors away. It was thought that addressing deficiencies in infrastructure capacity would enable Pakistani industries to increase their output and compete internationally for exports. Crucially, the CPEC presented an opportunity for economic growth and a framework for regional connectivity that was not tied to an India- or U.S.- centric strategic architecture. However, this chance was squandered by Pakistani elites by pushing forward pricey, poorly negotiated projects without any consideration for their viability or affordability. Besides, exclusive focus on Chinese FDI drove down foreign investment from elsewhere. As exports dwindled and CPEC-related imports ballooned, the country fell into a balance of payments crisis which is not likely to wither away even after its latest bailout of three billion dollars from the International Monetary Fund. Pakistan owes almost thirty percent of its external debt to China and its commercial banks; this does not include the financial obligations in the power sector.[28] It is logical to assume that increased demands from China may accompany Islamabad's requests for additional loans or revision of conditions. The paucity of choices available to Pakistan would leave it with no option but to accede.

India's usurpation of Jammu and Kashmir in violation of its constitution in August 2019 and subsequent clashes along the Sino-Indian border have given further impetus to the Pak-China strategic partnership. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy is primarily confined to cooperation in the maritime sphere to contain China. However, if it were to expand to assist India in dealing with its continental challenges, the implications for Pakistan could be profound. For instance, under the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), the United States agreed to share advanced topographical and satellite data with India for missile targeting and long-range navigation.[29] This pact for geospatial cooperation will likely benefit India greatly in a future conflict on Kashmir. Islamabad has been consistent in underscoring that the United States' provision of modern military hardware, knowledge and technologies to India would be detrimental to strategic stability in the South Asian region. A nuclear arms race is already in the offing.

It is driven by a strategic chain in which Pakistan strives for parity with India, India takes on both, Pakistan and China, and in turn, China contends with India and the United States of America. [30] Notwithstanding its military's preference for sophisticated equipment from the West, Pakistan's dire economic situation and Washington's indifference may significantly increase its dependence on China in the years to come. The United States' tilt towards India will further accelerate this transition, especially in the maritime and nuclear domains, leading to greater interoperability between Pakistani and Chinese forces. This division of South Asia into effectively opposite camps will impede the ability of the United States and China to act as third-party crisis managers in the event of an outbreak of hostilities between Pakistan and India.

Pakistan's overreliance on Chinese finance to keep its economy afloat and weapons systems to meet its critical national security needs could have resounding geopolitical ramifications. Snubbed by Washington, Islamabad may inexorably find itself reduced to a proxy of another great power's interests and unable to resist its demands in the future, such as Beijing's recent request for a port call at Gwadar.[31] China's unfettered access to Pakistan's naval and air facilities will adversely impact the United States' strategic interests in South and Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. The possibility of Chinese warships operating from Karachi or Gwadar is hypothetical, but the mere likelihood of such an eventuality threatens to undermine the efficacy of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Washington must reinstate its military ties with Rawalpindi to preclude such an outcome. Its resumption of the sale of F-16 sustainment and associated equipment to Pakistan indicates a defrosting of relations.[32] Doing so will keep a significant non-NATO ally from completely falling into China's orbit and enhance its leverage over a lukewarm India that continues to adhere to its traditional policy of non-alignment in the garb of strategic autonomy. While the highs of the Soviet-Afghan War and the war against terrorism may not be replicated, the potential and scope of the Pak-U.S. partnership in political, security, economic, and technological domains is still sizeable. Both countries must seize those opportunities by viewing each other beyond the lens of a third country. The United States is Pakistan's largest export market, and vigorous economic ties would broaden the latter's options. To that end, Pakistan must strive to boost bilateral trade with the U.S. through its Generalized System of Preferences scheme. It must also facilitate American and international firms to invest in green infrastructure by creating an enabling regulatory environment. Given Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change, this will help the country to shift away from coal-dependent energy projects, primarily through the transfer of technical equipment and expertise.

Friendly relations with the United States will assuage Pakistan's international isolation and make other countries more amenable to investing in the country to supplement or balance the CPEC. Another enduring area of Pak-U.S. cooperation is counter-terrorism. With the Taliban back in power in Kabul, Islamabad and Washington must work side by side to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground for international terrorism once again. Most importantly, the United States can support Pakistan's quest to shift from a security-centric policy paradigm to a geo-economic one by helping reduce tensions with India and promoting economic reforms. This will foster external peace and much-needed internal stability for Pakistan and prevent it from embracing Beijing fully.

Conclusion

The United States is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. It stands at the summit of the global hierarchy – comfortably above China and well above all others in every metric of power. There is no grave, systematic balancing effort to dislodge the United States from its position. In addition to its preeminence, the international norms and institutions established by Washington and its allies continue to restrain potential revisionists. While it cannot be denied that the gap between the West and the rest is shrinking, and the U.S. faces limits to its power that it did not right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the prevalent global order can be described as anything but unipolar. However, this unipolarity is only partial. The world is undergoing a period of transition, and what comes after it is uncertain. Nevertheless, lines have already been drawn in the sand. While Beijing ostensibly insists on positive-sum, win-win cooperation instead of holding on to the Cold War mentality, periodic assessments of the U.S. defense priorities have pinned down the People's Republic of China as the country's most consequential strategic rival in the decades to follow. There is concern that the PRC's aggressive efforts to reshape its neighborhood and the international system to further its interests threaten the liberal international order. The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy aims to tackle this challenge by bolstering India's capabilities to balance China, particularly in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. To that end, it has deepened defense cooperation with India and expanded its access to highly advanced military technologies while overlooking its discrepant foreign policy choices and erosion of democracy. However, as Daniel Markey has pointed out, India's readiness to work with the United States is born not out of conviction but convenience. It wants to shore up its capacity to contain China on its own. Alongside a multipolar Asia, India desires a multipolar world with greater freedom of action as opposed to a U.S.-led unipolar world or a world divided between the U.S. and China in which India is pressured to pick sides or consigned to geopolitical margins.

Pakistan is justifiably alarmed by increasing defense and intelligence cooperation between the United States and India. Ostracised by its longstanding ally, Islamabad turned to its all-weather friend for military and economic support. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was launched amidst much fanfare that it would alter the country's development trajectory by bringing in huge investments, new jobs, and sustainable growth. While the CPEC has alleviated many of Pakistan's infrastructure shortcomings, it has not been able to deliver the expected growth. Instead, the country's economy has been saddled with unserviceable debt taken to finance those projects. Due to its economic woes and international isolation, Pakistan may find itself increasingly dependent on China in the coming years and, consequently, more pliable in granting it concessions that could enhance Chinese power projection capabilities in the Gulf. Besides, deteriorating relations between Pakistan and India on one hand and the United States and China on the other threaten to aggravate the arms race in South Asia and worsen its security dilemma. A re-set of Pak-U.S. ties is crucial to avoid the worst-case outcomes for Pakistan and the region. Several areas of convergence do not necessarily conflict with Islamabad's partnership with Beijing. These include but are not limited to environmentally sustainable economic development, regional connectivity, and stability in Afghanistan. While Pakistan must address imbalances in its relationship with China and diversify its foreign policy choices, none of its endeavors will succeed unless it makes tangible efforts to move beyond a rent-seeking state. It cannot shield itself from emerging geopolitical divides without establishing its house by focusing on human development and domestic economic reform. For the fifth most populated country in the world, the consequences of failure will be catastrophic.

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