

INDIA-US STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR STRATEGIC BALANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

South Asia is the victim of regional politics between Pakistan and India, making it the least integrated region globally. The jostling between the two nuclear competitors negatively impacts the region's peace, security and development. Major Powers have exploited these fault lines to achieve their strategic objectives. India considers itself a significant regional power, and the US encourages it to be a net security provider in the region. India perceives Pakistan and China as obstacles in its hegemonic ambitions. It has moved closer to the US in its strategic initiatives, resulting in multiple socioeconomic, political and strategic implications for the strategic balance in South Asia, particularly for Pakistan. India is trying to push the region's strategic balance in its favour. It brings significant challenges for Pakistan and opportunities to counter them. This research paper aims to analyse the implications of the India-US strategic partnership on the strategic situation in South Asia, especially Pakistan. It explores the out-of-box way forward that Pakistan may adopt to create opportunities for itself.

Keywords: South Asia, Strategic Convergence, Strategic Balance, Pakistan, China, QUAD.

Introduction

The changing nature of international politics has made states interdependent on mutual interests. The US and India are portrayed as natural partners in regional and international politics. Relations between the two countries have faced ups and downs due to several systemic factors and the dynamics of their national and strategic interests. Mutual economic, political and strategic interests drive the current US-India partnership. In the Cold War era, India had adopted a policy of non-alignment but kept its alignment with the Soviet Union and the US wherever it suited India.¹ However, strategic convergence between the US and India emerged in the post-9/11 era due to the assumptions discussed under the paradigm of structural realism.² The nuclear deal between the two countries in 2005 set the stage for a more

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robust engagement. India joined the QUAD as the US encouraged it to proactively participate in its Indo-Pacific strategy as a net security provider. Bilateral relations currently range from cooperation in the military, defence, nuclear, cyber and space aspects to being part of the US policy to contain China.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute report, India is among the world's largest arms importers accounting for 11 per cent of total global arms imports.³ A sizeable chunk of these weapon systems comes from the US and Russia. The US and India conduct military exercises and maritime patrols in the Indian Ocean. The US's physical presence in Asia is plummeting, but that is not true with its diplomatic presence. The US needs India to counter China and for implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy. This strategic cooperation between the two countries shakes the power balance in South Asia. Pakistan is the other critical state in South Asia that considers the US-India convergence a threat to its security. The weapons systems India imports from the US create a security concern for Pakistan and become relevant to China.⁴ Both Pakistan and China are good economic partners. Still, the shifting balance of power in South Asia in favour of India makes it more like a strategic companionship as both countries are undertaking joint military exercises, and Pakistan imports military hardware from China.⁵ Pakistan can adopt different economic and strategic policies to counter the strategic convergence between the US and India.

Relatively, the US-India strategic cooperation does not only have implications for the strategic security of South Asia but also for international politics. Under the theoretical aegis of structural realism, this paper analyses the strategic cooperation between the US and India and its implications on the strategic balance in South Asia. How it impacts the strategic future of the region? Following the qualitative methodology, the paper provides an extensive theoretical understanding of the balance of power in South Asia and the role of significant forces, specifically the US and China, in shaping regional dynamics. Moreover, it investigates the impacts of US-India strategic cooperation on Pakistan and what policies the latter can adopt to manage these changing regional security dynamics.

This study considers the realist lens to analyse strategic convergence between the US and India and its implications for strategic balance in South Asia. Realism sees the world as it is and predicts the states' behaviour in the international system based on objective assumptions. Realists argue that no governing body exists in the international system, making the structure anarchic.⁶ This anarchic international system urges states to seek their survival on their own.

Relative to the significance of the US-India strategic partnership and its implications on the South Asian strategic balancing, defensive and offensive realism assumptions become relevant. India's interests in seeking an alliance with the US are based on punitive realism. India considers itself the net-security provider in the region, and to enhance this influence, it is aligning with extra-regional states. On the other hand, US interests in partnering with India are defensive and to balance the power against China.

From Strategic Indifferences to Strategic Cooperation

Strategic balance emerged during the Cold War in East-West nuclear contest. The strategic balance looks into three premises. First, nuclear deterrence among the participants; second, deterrence management through several bilateral, trilateral or other security alliances; and third, constructing a non-proliferation regime to maintain the order.⁷

Right after its independence from British colonialism, India started seeking power to project itself as a significant power—the Nehruvian policy aimed at making India a great power that would participate in international politics.⁸ The Non-alignment policy in the Cold War procured India's integrity. India got support from the USSR militarily as well as politically. With the US, India's relations remained at the bar because of the Pakistan factor. As Kissinger once said, "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests,"⁹ so India-US relations started easing in the post-Cold War era. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India internationalised its economy and started following the capitalist economic model, contrary to prior socialist inclination. It needed a security ally as Russia was not in a position to back India effectively as it had been doing before. 9/11 further strengthened the US-India partnership as the two countries found their way to strategic cooperation.

To analyse the nature of India-US relations, it is essential to investigate what both countries aim to achieve under their broader national interests. The US supports the narrative about India as a net security provider in South Asia.¹⁰ However, as offensive realism notes that states seek to enhance their influence in the region and abroad, so is India doing. India is dealing with regional challenges like China's struggle to become a regional hegemon. For this purpose, it is building strategic relations with the US.

On the other side, if the US's position is analysed, it just supports India in containing China. The US started seeking China as a potential upcoming threat in the 1990s.¹¹ John Mearsheimer says there has never been a global hegemon. The best a state can achieve is to be a regional hegemon and prevent other regional powers

from emerging as dominant.¹² He adds that only the US has been the regional hegemon in the current international order. It can only protect this hegemony by preventing the rise of other regional hegemons. For this purpose, it has to support the opposite powers to emerge and curtail the increase of possible dominant forces in the region.¹³ The US is supporting India against rising China, as later is portended as a potential threat to American interests in the US National Security Strategy-2017.¹⁴

The US and India have signed multiple defence and strategic agreements, from nuclear cooperation to military exercises. Bush administration viewed India as a strategic opportunity for American interests in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2004, Bush announced Next Step in Strategic Partnership, paving the way for cooperation in the nuclear and space program.¹⁵ In addition, the US started providing India with defence equipment and military hardware. In 2012, US and India signed Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI). The initiative transformed US-India relations from buyer-seller to strategic partners.¹⁶

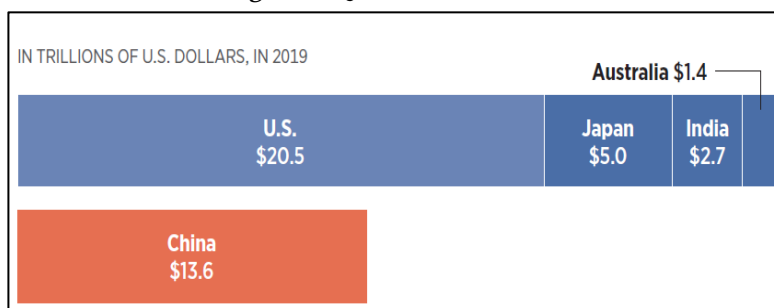
Besides these bilateral defence agreements, the US and India have signed security agreements also. These are as follows, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) signed in 2002 for the exchange of military intelligence, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed in 2016, according to which both countries can use each other's military bases for repairing and resupplying, and Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) for the exchange of information during exercises and operations.¹⁷ Furthermore, besides these three agreements, another significant security agreement, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, was signed in 2020 to exchange geospatial information between the two countries.¹⁸

QUAD was formed due to one of the deadliest tsunamis in the Indian Ocean rim, killing almost 230,000 people. The US, India, Japan and Australia are committed to providing humanitarian and social aid to the devastated Asia-Pacific region.¹⁹ These four countries' non-traditional gatherings became a formal security partnership in 2007. Initially, the QUAD members were reluctant to participate fully at a high level due to their relations with China. Australia has more special economic interests than China, as two-way trade stands at \$200 billion. That is why it kept promulgating that its decision to join QUAD was not against China.²⁰ However, the reality was not hindered by international observers. QUAD 2.0 emerged in late 2017 when all four countries committed extra efforts to free Asia-Pacific from transnational threats. Any aggression in the region will be countered through force. Although the official statements of member countries do not seem to be against China, the narrative, like maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea and

protecting allies in the region from aggression, clearly depicts that the target of these statements is China.

India contributes sufficiently to QUAD along with the US. Besides the US, no single country can match China in GDP, military spending or naval presence in the region. It is the strength of the alliance that four countries coalesced under one platform that can pose a challenge to China. The chart below shows QUAD countries' GDP and military spending against China.

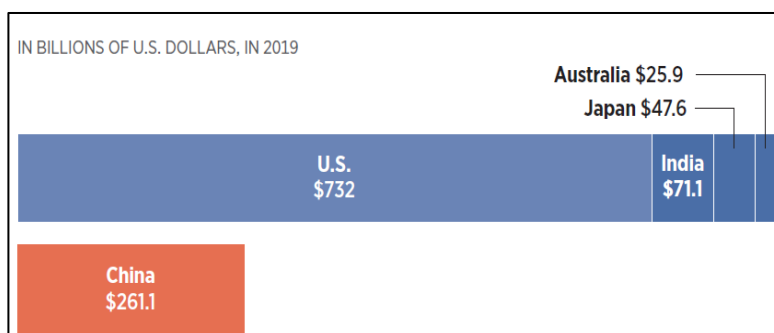
Figure-1: QUAD vs China GDP



(Source: <https://www.heritage.org>)²¹

India, which wants to be a regional hegemon, is far below China in GDP. So, QUAD is crucial in the India-US strategic partnership in fulfilling mutual interests of curtailing China's rise. However, on the other hand, the same trend is depicted by the defence spending by QUAD countries compared to China.

Figure-2 QUAD vs China Defence Spending



(Source: <https://www.heritage.org>)²²

The US is the largest defence spender, and China follows the trend. However, India-US strategic convergence benefits the two countries by strengthening their arms muscles in the region against rising China. It shows that

QUAD is very central to India-US strategic cooperation. In the recent QUAD summit in Japan, all four leaders, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese of Australia, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and President Joe Biden of the US, aimed at making the region free of Chinese aggression and joining hands in the time of troubles.²³

The official document by the White House on the Indo-Pacific strategy notes the US interests in making Asia-Pacific accessible by establishing connections within and beyond the region, regional prosperity, Asia-Pacific security and enhancing the regional states' capabilities to counter transnational threats. At the QUAD Leaders' Summit 2021, Biden said, "The future of each of our nations, indeed the world depends on a free and open Indo-Pacific enduring and flourishing in the decades ahead".²⁴ The report blatantly calls the PRC a potential threat to peace in the region to counter, in which the US and its allies are taking the leading role.

Implications for Strategic Balance in South Asia

Pakistan and India are the major stakeholders in the regional stability in South Asia. The India-US strategic cooperation impacts South Asia, but not all the countries directly, rather just Pakistan. The reason is that all other South Asian countries are economically, strategically, or socially linked with India and see it as a net security provider.²⁵ It is just Pakistan that has challenged India's hegemonic aspirations. Both are the only nuclear weapon states in the region. India and Pakistan see each other as rivals; this is where the second part of the theoretical understanding of defensive realism takes place.

a) Increasing Power Asymmetry between India and Pakistan

The theory proposes that a continuous power struggle remains among the states because they must fend for themselves. Against any power maximiser, the other state feels power deprived under the security dilemma. Power maximisation by India is taken as a threat to Pakistan. To counter this threat, Pakistan increases its power not to balance the regime but to the danger. So, the first implication of US-India strategic cooperation is the increasing power asymmetry between Pakistan and India that will keep the region indulged in realist realpolitik.²⁶

b) A Privileged India

The US's support to India has made the latter a state carrying out its interests with impunity. Human rights violations in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), a standoff with China and so-called surgical strikes inside Pakistan are prime examples of Indian hostility in South Asia. Besides using the foreign policy realm, India has also been indulging in an offensive against its own

religious and ethnic minorities. Under the BJP government, the country is suppressing religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. Still, the West has shown little interest in condemning human rights violations by a state against its citizens. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has repeatedly recommended to the State Department to place India under a country of particular concerns but to no avail.²⁷ Against Islamic extremism, the West has been vocal for decades, but it has remained silent about India because of its own economic and strategic interests.

c) Belligerency in Indian Nuclear Posture

India is becoming more aggressive in nuclear proliferation and nuclear doctrines. With the support of the US, India unquestionably threatens Pakistan and China with its nuclear posturing. Under the BJP government, not only the events of nuclear theft have been reported, but government officials have also shared their perspectives regarding an expected shift from a no-first-use policy. Former Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar (2016) questioned India's adherence to no-first-use. He said, "Why should I bind myself? I should say I am a responsible nuclear power and will not use it irresponsibly."²⁸ Analysts have found India becoming more belligerent in its nuclear posture. Antoine Levesque, a Research Fellow for South Asia at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), acknowledged during a workshop in Islamabad in September 2022 that although India promotes its 'no-first-use policy, in reality, the policy has been very vague.²⁹ As a result, the possibility of nuclear escalation remains alive. Incidents like the BrahMos launched from India deep into Pakistan's territory, which India claimed to be accidental is, a proof of India's irresponsible, unprofessional and vague Command and Control system of India, which could have triggered an active conflict. The world must hold India accountable for such adventures.

d) Pakistan: Mired in International Limitations

Due to India's relations with the US, it seeks privilege against Pakistan in international politics. Former Secretary of Pakistan's Ministry of Defence Production, Zahid Latif Mirza, said that Pakistan, multiple times, has been warned of sanctions under Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) whenever it tried seeking defence equipment from Russia.³⁰ On the other hand, India has sought an exemption from these sanctions under CAATSA.³¹ According to *The Hindu*, one of the leading Indian newspapers, Pentagon has agreed to India using the missile defence system to protect itself from Pakistan and China.³²

e) Indian Politicization of FATF against Pakistan

In 2021, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar disclosed while addressing a virtual meeting with the BJP politicians that Pakistan is on the FATF grey list due to

the US-India efforts. He stated, "We have been successful in pressurising Pakistan, and the fact that Pakistan's behaviours have changed is because of pressure put by India by various measures."³³ Pakistan has been taking extraordinary measures to resolve the observations by the international body, but Indian propaganda and its relations with the US have caused systemic discrimination against Pakistan.

f) Pakistan Seeking Cooperation with China

With the power balance shifting in favour of India, Pakistan has sought closer relations with China, further instigating negativity in the Indian policy sphere. Pakistan and China see each other as close friends, and CPEC is just one example of China-Pakistan bonhomie. With the economic development, China also supports Pakistan in building its naval capabilities.³⁴ India does not consider CPEC a promising opportunity but rather horrendous strategic planning against itself. Pakistan considers China a dependable partner to counter possible strategic threats from India.

g) Role of Smaller States in Region

Lastly, besides these empirical implications, there are some probable impacts of the India-US strategic partnership. The US-India partnership and China-Pakistan partnership creates a dilemma for the smaller state in South Asia. One potential impact can be the increasing value of the smaller states if well manoeuvred. India's posturing to be a net security provider threatens China and Pakistan. If not Pakistan, China will try to lessen India's influence in these countries and enhance its own, encouraging them to make more independent foreign policy choices vis-à-vis India.

Way Forward for Pakistan

Kenneth Waltz unearths the significance of balancing in international politics in his masterpiece, "Theory of International Politics."³⁵ There are two kinds of balancing, internal as well as external. Internal balancing is to facilitate national capabilities, while external balancing is to make alliances against a possible threat from a state or a hegemon. A country must prioritise internal balancing first to project itself more effectively in international politics.³⁶ Therefore, Pakistan must also focus on internal balancing.

The Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC), formulated by J. David Singer for the Correlates of War Project in 1963, provides six components for measuring the power of any state. These six components are military personnel, energy consumption, iron and steel production, military expenditure, total population and urban population. The latter four are related to the latent power of

the country's socioeconomic development.³⁷ This latent power increases the state's internal balance. Hence, Pakistan should focus on improving its latent ability to balance the state internally and pursue its interests externally.

a) Follow a Robust Geo-economic Policy

As the National Security Policy of Pakistan evinces a transformation from geo-strategic preferences to geo-economics, the country has realised the significance of non-traditional security aspects.³⁸ One of these significant non-traditional security aspects is to prioritise the blue economy. Although there have been a lot of discussions at the policy-making level and in academia about the aspect, on the ground level, little work has been done. Starting after the initiation of CPEC, Pakistan began to avoid sea blindness. Although the subject matter became a security issue, it was politicised and not securitised. As the second phase of CPEC projects has started, Pakistan should focus more on seeking economic benefits from sea-based opportunities.³⁹

b) EU: An Opportunity Beyond China

China is a perfect partner of Pakistan and has helped in the country's socioeconomic development, but Pakistan must look beyond for more expansive opportunities. The government should enhance its trade with the EU. In 2004, a cooperation agreement was signed between Pakistan and the EU that governs the economic trade relations between the two entities. Further, the EU-Pakistan 5-year Engagement Plan was also initiated in 2012. Currently, the EU is the second most important trade partner of Pakistan. "In 2021, the EU-Pakistan bilateral trade increased by 78% to €12.2 billion in 2021 from €6.9bn in 2013."⁴⁰

The critical point is that the EU granted Pakistan a Generalized Scheme of Preferences in 2014.⁴¹ According to the scheme, Pakistan must keep ratification of the 27 international conventions on human rights, good governance and environmental protection. In return, Pakistan's export to the EU will be duty-free. According to the report of 2018-19, the EU has shown satisfaction with the steps and legislations made for human rights protection but has shown concerns regarding media freedom, registration of NGOs, illegal abduction, cases of missing persons, and lack of implementation of Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Therefore, Pakistan must focus on these developments for good trade relations with the EU and better social stability.

c) Engaging ASEAN

ASEAN is another economic opportunity that can benefit Pakistan financially and politically. In 1993, ASEAN gave Pakistan the status of Sectoral

Dialogue Partner (SDP) in industry, trade and commerce, banking and finance, education and culture, and infrastructural development.⁴² In 2003, Pakistan initiated its 'Vision East Asia' to better its relations with ASEAN, ASEAN+3, and oceanic countries. However, Pakistan's focus on security issues and the strategic environment at its borders kept the country mired in resolving these issues instead of focusing on economic development. As Pakistan's policy is shifting from geo-strategic to geo-economics, its relations with ASEAN can be fruitful. Pakistan's trade with ASEAN is \$6.3 billion compared to India's \$200 billion.⁴³

d) Enhance Bilateral Relations with Central Asia

Regarding Central Asia, the government lacks a transport infrastructure plan for trade relations. The government on both sides must work to develop a complete procedure regarding trade and logistics. Pakistan should subsidise and incentivise transporters to run freight services between entities. Pakistan must make Gwadar port and other economic facilities available for CARs so that these countries can move to other South and East Asian countries. It will enhance transit trade and interdependency between both entities.

A significant hurdle in bilateral economic relations between Pakistan and CARs is the lack of connectivity, banking channels, high-level contacts, and language barriers. Separate agreements with each CAR to operate branches of Pakistani central banks will go a long way to assist and enhance trade and commercial relations. Furthermore, the Trade Development Authority of Pakistan must hire language professionals to teach exporters English, Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek, and Russian language for ease of trade in CARs.⁴⁴ In addition, a Pakistan-Central Asia Chamber of Trade and Commerce would provide an institutional platform for strengthening trade ties with Central Asia.

The connectivity issues will have to be resolved by completing projects under CASA 1000, such as the Mazar Shareef-Kabul-Peshawar rail network that was agreed upon in 2021 that became a victim of instability in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Pakistan and Uzbekistan are cooperating to get the project jump-started. In addition, collaborating with CARs to address the Afghanistan humanitarian crisis will improve its regional standing and influence. Pakistan may also cooperate with China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to complete Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement.⁴⁶

e) Strengthen the Untying-knot with the Gulf

Pakistan's relations with the Gulf countries can also be an excellent opportunity to somehow cater to the increasing Indian influence in the whole Asian region. Pakistan has based its foreign policy towards these countries on ideological

grounds. In international relations, ideology serves only the broader interests. So, to be relevant in regional politics with aegis coming from these ideological partners, Pakistan should also acquire something to bargain. With the world flowing towards economic reforms, Pakistan should prioritise signing Free Trade Agreement with Gulf countries.⁴⁷ Both sides have agreed about an FTA's significance in boosting economic cooperation.

Conclusion

East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe are the regions in which India already has strong economic and political influence. Entangled in security issues, Pakistan faced slow development. Policy measures are required to manage the country's relevance in the developing international order. The India-US strategic partnership must urge Pakistan to think beyond its limits. The cooperation has benefitted India in becoming more aggressive and pursuing its national interests keenly. Under the defensive realistic policy options, Pakistan must follow internal and external balancing. National cohesion and political stability are the first stages of a solid and united nation. An internally stable Pakistan can enhance its latent power by aligning with regional and extra-regional countries. Pakistan must look towards Russia, Europe, ASEAN, Gulf countries and Central Asian republics for economic development. These entities will boost Pakistan's economic potential eventually to counter India's growing influence due to its strategic cooperation with the US.

Lastly, Pakistan should invite India for bilateral talks and economic relations. For both countries, the other is not a normal state. As Ambassador Aizaz Chaudhary writes, building economic ties with the other state is not just economic relations but a change in the whole policy.⁴⁸ If Pakistan invites India to better their links, and if India does not follow suit, that will benefit Pakistan in improving its image as a peace-loving country not just in the region but internationally. Pakistan must draw red lines in its foreign policy domain. No state should be allowed to interfere beyond these lines. Pakistan must seek its interests, following peace and stability in ultimate neighbour and international politics.

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