

Focus
November 2022

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Introduction

The containment policy of the United States has been one of the most successful foreign policies in the past fifty years. The policy allowed the US to counter the Soviet Union in different regions and contain the spread of communist ideologies. The containment policy that started in 1947, has played a key role in blocking the expansion of power and eventually defeating the Soviet Union. After the cold war, the containment policy also came to an end as no state had the capability to challenge US supremacy and the spread of democracy around the globe. Many experts like Francis Fukuyama were referring to the defeat of the Soviets as the end of history and democracy as the sole political system to prevail for the coming centuries.

However, the rise of China as an economic and military power has given rise to several debates. The hegemony of the US is again being challenged by a non-democratic nation. Many experts have started to talk about the eruption of a new cold war between China and the US. The old containment policy of the US

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has also started to show up. Even though the scenarios and threats faced by the US are a little different this time, some version of the containment policy can be effective for the US in the coming decades. The US has already started working to contain the spread of Chinese influence by making multiple policies and alliances. The increase in US activities in ASEAN, South Asia, and the Pacific region shows clear signs of the new containment policy against China.¹

The South Asian region has been a vital part of the US containment policy against the Soviet Union during the cold war. It would not be wrong to say that South Asia played the most important role for the US in its containment policy.² Due to its important geostrategic location, South Asia has remained a centre of attention for global powers. These bullfights of superpowers, however, have intensively damaged the progress of the region. Countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan are still suffering from the wounds of the cold war.

With the end of the cold war, everyone thought that the region would now finally drift away from foreign interventions. But the US-China rivalry has again made South Asia an important arena for global powers to counter their rivals.³ Both China and the US have been actively working to bring the region under their influence. The US is again looking towards South Asia for its new containment policy to counter China's expanding global influence. But policies and allies this time could differ from old ones. The region also possesses huge importance for the US as it plays a central role in China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). Due to strong Pakistan-China relations and the situation in Afghanistan, the US is more inclined towards India for its new containment policy. The

US support for India will surely have consequences for Pakistan since both neighbours have a longstanding rivalry. But the biggest challenge for Pakistan would be to keep stable relations with both China and the US as both countries have been close allies of Pakistan for a long time.⁴

Role of South Asia in Containing China

The US has been involved in the South Asian region for multiple reasons in the past such as the Afghan wars, spying on the Soviet Union through Pakistan during the cold war, India-Pakistan nuclear tests, post-9/11 incidents, and now for the containment of China. South Asia has played a significant role in the containment policy of the US in past and will also have a major role in the coming years. The rise of China has again forced the US to get involved deeply with the South Asian countries to maintain its hegemony.⁵

The region shares a long land border with China which makes it the most ideal place for the US to keep an eye on its rival. Some authors argue that the US has clear intentions and aims to increase economic ties to bring stability to the region by developing stable relations with the South Asian countries.⁶ In reality, however, it is important for the US to have healthy relations with South Asian countries to maintain its global hegemony.⁷

Tackling the BRI

The BRI is one of China's strongest tools to maintain a sustainable influence over and relations with multiple states. The mega project is one of the biggest threats to American hegemony in global politics and trade. The BRI can cause many US allies to

move away from American influence and get closer to China. Many international relations scholars see it as the Chinese Marshall Plan.⁸ The Americans believe that China will convert its economic strength into its geopolitical clout. South Asia plays a central role for China in the implementation of its trans-continental project. The two main corridors of the BRI: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC) pass through South Asia. Also, the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) passes by the South Asian region. South Asia provides a short and secure route for China to the Middle Eastern and African states. China is aiming to use CPEC as its trade route to explore new markets in the African continent and the Middle East. Also, CPEC provides china with the safest route to import oil and export its goods.

Understanding the importance of South Asia for the BRI, the US has been working to drag South Asian states away from BRI. The US is encircling China through the militarization of the Indian Ocean as its counter strategy.⁹ Many experts believe that the US has intensified its worldwide, cross-regional, and all-out struggle with China in an effort to tightly integrate the latter's economic encirclement and technology blockade. The American media has been continuously criticizing the BRI and portraying it as a trap for partner nations. In the past, the US Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis was seen criticizing projects like CPEC by saying that the project undermines regional security.¹⁰ The US has also been pressurizing the states under BRI to be vigilant about Chinese investments.

US ties with Pakistan and Afghanistan

It seems that the two close allies of the US in the past, Pakistan and Afghanistan, will not play any major role in the containment policy against China. Pakistan has enjoyed friendly relations with China for several decades and the relations have grown stronger in past few years. China is investing billions of dollars in different sectors under CPEC. Both nations are collaborating in economic and now security sectors. The US has also been criticizing Chinese investment and termed it as a trap to gain access to countries' national assets. The US has been showing its concerns about the project. Alice Wells, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia stated:

It's clear, or it needs to be clear, that CPEC is not about aid, the corridor is going to take a growing toll on the Pakistan economy, especially when the bulk of payments start to come due in the next four to six years.¹¹

The series of events in the past have made Pak-US relations more difficult. The former Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan has mentioned that Pakistan will not join any US-led initiative or alliance against China.¹² Despite the tensions between the US and China, Prime Minister of Pakistan Mian Muhammad Shahbaz Shareef showed Pakistan's commitment to the One China policy and its support on the issues of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea during his official visit to China.¹³ Now it looks like the superpower will have to find new allies to implement its strategy against the Chinese rise.

Afghanistan has always been an important country for the US in the past for its containment policies. But the recent changes

in dynamics have removed an important US ally from its camp. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban coming to power have made it nearly impossible for the US to use it against China. Also, it seems that the new leadership in Afghanistan is closer to the Chinese than the Americans.

Strengthening India-US ties

Due to changing dynamics, it is clear that the US cannot hope for Pakistan and Afghanistan to help it in its containment policy. Afghanistan has leadership that is highly against the US and Pakistan has very deep relations with China. This makes India the most suitable and powerful country to tackle China. India has complicated relations with China and also has the resources and the potential to challenge the Chinese economic might. This makes it the best option for the US to have an ally in the Chinese neighbourhood to implement its policies. That is the reason that economic, security, and diplomatic collaborations between the US and India have increased by quite a margin. India has become an important player in the Indo-Pacific region against China. The US is providing substantial military and economic assistance to India. The relations that started to grow during Obama's tenure witnessed a boost during the Trump administration. Now it seems that the Biden administration is willing to further strengthen the relations between the two nations.

Defence Collaboration

A number of arms deals and security agreements have been signed between the US and India. The US is playing a major role in modernizing the Indian military so that it could counter Chinese military hegemony in the region. Arms sales between the

US and India were at zero dollars in the year 2008, but in the year 2020, they reached \$20 billion. In 2016, the US made India its Major Defence Partner and following that, in the year 2018, India was elevated to the Strategic Trade Authorization Tier 1 status. That allowed India to gain license-free access to a broad range of military technologies that are regulated by the US Department of Commerce. India also gained sophisticated defence systems, missiles, and aircraft from the US. Both states also signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility, and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). India is already a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad and it is also believed that it will also join AUKUS in the future. In addition, the military drills 'Yudh Abhyas', which are taking place just 66 miles away from the Chinese border clearly indicate the intentions of such collaborations.¹⁴ The Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean has increased significantly in the past few years. China has established its ports in the Indian Ocean that pose a threat to Indian supremacy in the region. The Chinese expansion in the Indian Ocean is explained through the 'String of Pearls' theory which refers to China's network of military and commercial facilities built in countries bordering the Indian Ocean between the Chinese mainland and Port Sudan.¹⁵

Economic Ties

The US is also assisting in expanding the Indian economy so that China's economic influence can be reduced in the region. Several US companies have shifted their operations from China to India in past few years. For example, companies like Apple and Google have shifted a major part of their smartphone production

from China. The US aircraft manufacturer Lockheed Martin also established its factory in India and aims to produce 'Made in India' fighter jets. The bilateral trade between India and the US reached a record high of \$157 billion in the year 2021. These steps will provide a great deal of assistance to India in its competition against China.¹⁶

After rejecting the US officials' remarks many times about their relations with Russia, India is still enjoying US support. India bought the S-400 air defence system from Russia despite resistance from the US, but the US still has not been able to place any sanctions on India.¹⁷ It seems that the US cannot afford to lose a strong ally in South Asia if it wants to deal with China.

The South Asian region has already suffered a lot from terrorist activities and groups in the past few decades. Many terrorist groups which are mainly against the US are operating in the region for which the US needs support of nations other than India. Supporting India unconditionally can create an imbalance in the region. This could eventually affect the capability and efforts of neighbouring states like Pakistan to control terrorist groups.

The US is taking advantage of India's difficult relations with China. It is using India as a new ally in a new containment policy to block China to retain the status of the sole superpower of the world. India has the second largest population, one of the biggest militaries, and now a huge growing economy that can serve the American purpose.

Securing New Allies

Primarily, India is the partner in the new containment policy of the US. But India and the US are also trying to influence

the internal politics of other South Asian countries to create opposition to China's economic projects in these countries. Like Nepal has also been under the radar of the US for its containment policy against China due to its strategic location. The US has shown its interest in making the Himalayan state a part of its Indo-Pacific strategy. This has sent bells ringing in Beijing since China is working with Nepal on multiple developmental projects under the flag of the BRI. The US's MCC (Millennium Challenge Corporation) has also funded Kathmandu with \$500 million for Nepal's infrastructure development. Many see this step as the US attempt to distance Nepal from China and bring it under its camp.¹⁸ In addition, the US also wanted Nepal to become a member of its State Partnership Program (SPP). The agreement provides disaster management support to the member states by sending the US national guards and military personnel. China argues that it is an attempt of the US to have military presence in the neighbouring state of China. China-Nepal relations have seen many up and downs in the past. This provides an opportunity for the US to use it to diminish the increasing regional influence of China.¹⁹

Just like other South Asian states, Bangladesh possesses a huge importance for the US to counter China. Bangladesh now has the second-largest economy in the region and is also a part of China's Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC). Both China and the United States are pursuing Bangladesh because its closeness to the Bay of Bengal allows them easy access to the Indian Ocean, which transports a large proportion of the world's trade. The changing dynamics in the region have drawn renewed interest from the US. The US has

increased pressure on Bangladesh to join its Indo-Pacific military alliance to counter China. Bangladesh has been under US pressure since at least October 2020, when the US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen E Biegun visited Dhaka and publicly invited the South Asian country to join the group.²⁰ Dhaka has so far resisted due to threats from China, which is a major source of investment finance for Bangladesh. The US blamed Bangladesh's elite police unit RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) for serious human rights abuses and placed sanctions on them.²¹ The US also showed concerns about huge investments by the Chinese and their increasing influence in the country.

China-Sri Lanka relations have seen considerable progress in the past few years. As Sri Lanka plays an important part in China's Maritime Silk Route, China has made a large amount of investment in the island nation. Sri Lanka has also received a huge amount of debt from the Chinese government to stabilize its economy. The US has continuously criticized the Chinese investments and debt to Sri Lanka, referring to it as a debt trap for the nation. The former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said termed the *Chinese Communist Party as a predator* trying to acquire assets of developing states.²² The US showed its concerns when China leased the Hambantota Port for 99 years after Sri Lanka failed to pay the debt. The economic crises in Sri Lanka raised an opportunity for the US to bring the island under its influence. The US has also approved the USAID program for Sri Lanka named 'The Program for a Democratic, Prosperous Sri Lanka with the Ability to Survive Amidst Disasters'. The US describes itself as a 'friend' and 'partner' while China as a predator looking to grab the country's national assets.²³

Implications for Pakistan

The rivalry between the US and China has some serious regional and global implications. But for Pakistan, the impacts are far greater. Pakistan has maintained close relations with both China and the US in the past, but the current situation has made it difficult for Pakistan to balance its relations with both powers. In the past few years, the economic and security cooperation between Pakistan and China has increased significantly. The Chinese investments in Pakistan through CPEC has made both states even closer. Moreover, Pakistan is gaining substantial military technology from China that it used to acquire from the US.²⁴

Due to the geostrategic location of Pakistan, it has always been a part of the great power rivalry. It seems now that again Pakistan is stuck in the rivalry between the US and China. Looking back to past experiences, it is clear that it is not in the interest of Pakistan to take sides again. But since the onset of the CPEC, Pak-US relations have been more turbulent. The US officials have continuously criticized the investments of China and showed that Pakistan is getting into the Chinese 'debt trap'. Since the end of the Afghan war, it looks like Pakistan's importance has again reduced for the US, as we have seen in the past that how after the end of the cold war Pakistan faced huge economic and security sanctions from the US. The controversies raised by the political leadership have made the situation even worse.²⁵

Threats from US Support to India

One of the biggest concerns for Pakistan in this containment policy against China is strengthening relations between India and the US. Substantial collaboration between both

states in the past few years has raised concerns in Islamabad. Being traditional rivals, American support for India can have severe security implications for Pakistan. The US is helping India in its military modernization by providing advance-level military technologies.²⁶ Also, several security agreements and alliances have been made in past few years between India and the US. This enables India to gain a military advantage over Pakistan and pose a greater threat to Pakistan's defence. Pakistani officials have expressed their concerns over the military support of India. This can result in a new arms race in South Asia and would further increase tensions between the two largest countries in the region. This feud between two nuclear powers would have consequences for regional as well as global security.²⁷

Public stance also plays a major role in the foreign policy of any country and it is also playing major role in the Pak-US relations. Pakistan has faced massive losses due to its alliance with the US. Especially after 9/11, when the US came to Afghanistan. This has caused billions in economic damages and the loss of thousands of lives. Moreover, the perceived US involvement in Pakistan's internal affairs, including internal politics, seems to have created an anti-American opinion in the Pakistani public. According to a recent survey, 72 per cent of Pakistanis see the US as the enemy.²⁸ This also restricts Pakistan from taking sides with the US. Getting into any alliance with the US against China or any other country can have serious consequences for the political stability of the country.

Conclusion

Despite several issues with the US, it is still necessary for Pakistan to maintain good relations with a superpower. Abandoning ties with the US means abandoning ties with most of the western world. Pakistan has strong economic ties with the Western world and damaging these relations could result in huge economic and diplomatic losses. Pakistan must act in its own self-interest in restructuring its relations with the US and China so that any rivalry does not have negative effects on Pakistan. It is important for Pakistani policymakers to shape foreign policy in a way that it can continue to strengthen its ties with China and also keep smooth relations with the US.²⁹

Pakistan once acted as a bridge between US and China back in 1971 during their secret talks. The Pakistani leadership has once again expressed the intention to defuse tensions between the two global powers.³⁰ But the situation has largely changed since the 1970s. China now has gained substantial power in the global system and has a significant influence on world politics. In the 1970s, China needed the support of the world but now the world also needs China. In addition, the situation in Pakistan has also changed. Now it would be extremely difficult for a country like Pakistan to act as a mediator between US and China.³¹

South Asia has proven to be a useful region for the containment policies of the US in the past and will continue to be an important region in the future. But the involvement of the US in South Asia can have serious consequences for regional countries. We have observed how in the past these policies have caused economic, security, and diplomatic problems for the region. The US policies for South Asia aimed at the containment

of China will increase the strategic competition among the states and can undermine their development. Increasing military support to India can start a new arms race with Pakistan. This will further harm the already troubled Indo-Pak relations. Bitter relations between two nuclear-armed neighbours can seriously affect regional and global security. It is the responsibility of South Asian countries to shape their policies in a way that the regional integrity would not be damaged but solidified. Moreover, the major stakeholders like China and the US should solve their conflicts in a diplomatic way rather than spilling their differences in other regions. The containment policy is causing bloc formation both at the regional and global levels that can spoil global trade and peace. South Asia should avoid any bandwagoning with any power that can hurt the regional integrity and economic development of this developing region.

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