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## **India, the Changing Security Environment, and the Regional Stability: An Explainer**



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# India, the Changing Security Environment, and the Regional Stability: An Explainer

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## Synopsis

*The Sino-Indian border clash in summer 2020 has a great impact on India's security discourse. It has brought a significant change in New Delhi's strategic calculus. To secure its national interests in a grossly unbalanced strategic environment India has sought US support. The US, on its part, is orchestrating more practical engagement with alliance partners in Asia to counter China's assertiveness in the region. The relationship with India is now entering into a new phase of cooperation where the US and India's policies toward Beijing appear to have converged. This strategic partnership between the two countries particularly in the post border clashes has a great impact on regional equilibrium as well. The decades-old structure of conflict and cooperation and the embedded network of bilateral relationships in the region are changing. Islamabad being a frontline partner of Beijing is confronting with the complex trajectories of triangular relations between the US, China, and India. Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, once balancing China and India, are now balancing between China and India-US, which is quite difficult. The Indo-US partnership however has its limits since there is a fundamental difference in both states' approach to push back China's assertiveness. India, in a renewed role, is all set to strengthen its strategic depths in bordering areas. The US, wants India to play an active role in Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in which New Delhi is extremely under capacity in terms of both military and technology. Given that, the recent convergence seems short-lived. Nevertheless, multi-sectoral cooperation would continue to grow.*

*Keywords: Sino-Indian border clashes, Indo-US partnership, China's assertiveness, Changing strategic environment, Balance of Power*

## Research Questions

The Indo-US strategic partnership is already there since the civil-nuclear deal between the two countries in 2005. So what significant breakthrough has taken place this time around? How US-India increasing partnership in the post Sino-Indian military face-off scenario is disturbing regional equilibrium? How is going to impact the embedded network of bilateral and multilateral relationships of the South Asian states? How the South Asian states are responding to the emerging developments? What are the spillover effects of conflict escalation between India and Pakistan, between China and the US, or between China and India?

## Methodology

This paper follows an interpretative approach to answer the above questions. Data is obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include statements, excerpts of speeches, official websites and social media accounts, published interviews, and discussions

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from open sources. The secondary data is obtained from reports, articles, books, newsletters, and magazines, from reputable sources. The paper attempts to infer different perspectives through a detailed analysis of the data. Later, combines those perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the balance of power in South Asia, China's increasing role, and the US-India nexus and its impacts on the regional stability. Central to the study is the theory of balance of power that provides the conceptual framework for analysis.

## **Functional Definitions**

The term 'changing security environment' literally means a security environment of South Asia after the border clashes between India and Chinese forces in Summer 2020. 'Chinese assertiveness', the term has been used in reference to Chinese behavior for last many years. But more recently the American and Indian literature is associating it with 'non-restrained China's foreign policy approach' which they claim the world has witnessed in Sino-Indian border clashes. In this context, the paper uses the recent definition to demonstrate the US and India's resolve to balance Beijing's increasing dominance. The term 'small states' (refers to Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka in this paper) is based on geographical division.

## **Argument**

Border clashes between India and China have always sensitized New Delhi's security asymmetries. While exploiting its security umbrella, New Delhi persuades, and often, forces small states of the region to take her side. China does have its influence on small states' foreign policies but the geographical proximity provides New Delhi a heightened opportunity to swiftly execute its strategies. The same is happening after the border clashes. Though the situation is under control now, yet it has led to the renewed evocation of decades-old hostility between the two countries. The border conflict cannot be viewed in isolation or as a localized border dispute between China and India. It appears to be a part of a larger strategic game in the South Asia and Indo-Pacific region. Thereby, South Asia, is now entering into a new phase of conflict and cooperation wherein the US and India increasing partnership is playing a pivotal role.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Balancing the powerful entity in the international system has always been central to the realist school of thought. In an anarchic, and grossly unbalance security environment, every state seeks to ensure its security either through forming a new alliance or join the existing power poles depending upon their capability and the existing world order. For instance, in a bipolar system, major powers particularly focus on internal military buildups. In a multipolar system, however, states usually form counterbalancing alliances.<sup>1</sup> This balancing mechanism or equilibrium of power manages the co-existence of states in international and regional settings.

In line with what is described above, the following study attempts to link the differing outcomes of the previous balancing acts to the distinct patterns of today's contestations to

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<sup>1</sup> Steven E Lobell, "The Balance of Power Theory", *Oxford Bibliographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0083.xml>

deliberate on the two striking factors; the nature and the structure of change that has been taking place and secondly how it is provoking India to rebalance the emerging security environment in South Asia as well as in the Indo-Pacific Ocean. In the later part, the study will focus on the key questions raised in the beginning.

## **India, and the Balancing Acts: Historical Background**

In South Asia, Indian dominance has always been a concern for small states of the region. Right after the partition of the subcontinent, Pakistan's partnership with the US, arguably, counterbalanced the Indian assertiveness. However, New Delhi's big-brother behavior with its immediate neighbors went unchecked as the US, as well as the Soviet Union, were least interested in India's neighborhood policy. Pakistan also failed to leverage the US role in subduing India's influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Bangladesh particularly. India's hefty presence in the aforementioned states as well as the geographical barrier kept Pakistan at bay.

Pakistan's pro-west policies with maximizing its security against New Delhi and India's non-alignment policy with strengthening its position in the immediate neighboring states, altogether, shaped the regional equilibrium right after the independence. This worked well until the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950. Later, the Sino-Indian war in 1962 vehemently sensitized the Indian strategic thinking. Pakistan being China's friend and the US's ally had gained immense importance in the region. Pakistan's role in the Sino-US rapprochement further strengthened its position. India was desperately seeking to rebalance the then-emerging situation. New Delhi's friendship with the Soviet Union to maintain a formidable military profile was an obvious outcome. It was a significant shift in India's position during the cold war era.

Though approaching the Soviet Union was an unhappy development, the US turned a blind eye primarily because of two reasons; the US didn't want to lose India, a big market in the region, and secondly, the US's focus was more towards Afghanistan to contain Soviet's influence in which China and Pakistan's cooperation was needed. It was not until nuclear tests in 1974, that led to a complete estrangement between the US and India. India's refusal to allow International Atomic Energy Commission to inspect nuclear facilities further deteriorated its relations with the US.

India's foreign policy vis-à-vis its neighbors, particularly after the 1962 Sino-Indian war, turned more interventionist. With the Soviet's backing in terms of arms supply, New Delhi was able to maneuver Dhaka's war of liberation that led to the dismemberment of East Pakistan after a deadly war between India and Pakistan on Dhaka's soil. Nepal and Bhutan faced rapid Indianization of their military and the economy. Being small and landlocked, both countries remained vulnerable to Indian strategic maneuverings. India's rush to sign the friendship treaty with Nepal in 1950 was nothing but to get a passport to Nepal's strategic locations. The Indian forces, since the 1962 war with China, are still stationed at the high altitude of Nepal's Kalapani area. In the case of Bangladesh, Indian support to Shanti Bahini in 1976, a secessionist movement in Chittagong Hills Tracts, was targeted at dismembering the nascent state. Likewise,

India also supported Tamil rebel groups to bring Sri Lankan government under its sway. India's neighborhood policy, in sum, has been exploitive and interventionist.

China's increasing footprints in South Asia, however, forced India to overhaul its foreign policy. From neighbors to 'neighborhood first' was an apparent shift seen in New Delhi's bilateral relationships. However, this policy has failed to deliver the desired outputs. More recently, the Nepali parliament's bold step to document territorial conflict with India; Bangladesh's entry into China's Belt and Road Initiative despite Indian pressure, and Sri Lanka's decision to put India and Japan sponsored projects at the back burner, have exposed the deep-rooted mistrust between New Delhi and its neighbors. Modi's extremist policies played a decisive role in it.

The enactment of the 'citizenship bill' for instance, has not only complicated its relations mainly with Bangladesh but also put a serious dent in India's own 'neighborhood first' policy. Rahul Gandhi, former president of Indian National Congress while expressing his dismay over the deteriorating situation said 'Modi has destroyed the web of relationships that Congress built and nurtured over several decades. Living in a neighborhood with no friends is dangerous'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, revocation of Article 370 of its own constitution which protects the autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, further deteriorated New Delhi's relations with both Pakistan and China.

In the given situation, the border clashes in June 2020 between India and China at Ladakh in which more than a dozen Indian soldiers were reportedly killed, has pushed New Delhi to a defensive position. With the deployment of 'an unprecedented number of soldiers (five divisions each), armored columns, missiles, air assets, other weapons, and platforms along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)', both India and China were all set for a major confrontation.<sup>3</sup> There have been sporadic flare-ups along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) for quite a long time, but last year's military assertion in Ladakh in the backdrop of revocations of Kashmir's special status and cartographic maneuvering of the Kalapani region along the India-Nepal border has served as an effective deterrence against New Delhi's hawkish moves. However, the incident has reversed the progress achieved in concluding India-China agreements since the 1990s for maintaining peace in LAC.

## **Post-Ladakh Regional Environment**

Following the Chinese strategic supremacy in the border conflict with India, Beijing's relations with India's neighborhood first countries have come under the spotlight again. In this grossly unbalance environment, New Delhi is desperate to regain its lost prestige. India is aggressively following a single-point agenda that is 'countering Chinese influence in its neighboring countries as well as in Indo-Pacific Ocean to sabotage bilateral or multilateral

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<sup>2</sup> Rahul Gandhi (@RahulGandhi), 2020, "Modi has destroyed the web of relationships that Congress built and nurtured over several decades. Living in a neighborhood with no friends is dangerous" Twitter, 23 September 2020, 8:36 a.m, available at <https://twitter.com/RahulGandhi/status/1308611097440600064>

<sup>3</sup> Abhijnan Rej, 'DS Hooda on the Lasting Impact of China-India Ladakh Standoff', *The Diplomat*, 1 March 2021, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/d-s-hooda-on-the-lasting-impact-of-china-india-ladakh-standoff/>

cooperation with Beijing'. For this reason, New Delhi is looking for enhanced cooperation with the US. The following section will briefly discuss the tug of war between India and China in the aftermath of the military standoff at Ladakh.

**Bangladesh:** Bangladesh is an important country for India. Both countries have been maintaining a close relationship since 1971. In the backdrop of reverberating geopolitical dimensions of South Asia, India has started ramping up its relations with Dhaka to neutralize Chinese influence. In late December 2020, India and Bangladesh signed a Framework of Understanding on cooperation in the Hydrocarbon Sector. The initiative was lauded by US State Department. Nevertheless, India's relationships with Dhaka remain on the lower ebb since the enactment of the Citizenship Act wherein a large number of Bangladeshi Muslims have been marginalized. This has seriously undermined people-to-people contact between the two countries.

Though India is cooperating with the government of Sheikh Hasina in several development projects, recently it has gifted 1.2 million doses of Covid vaccine, but the situation has not improved significantly. To argue, the recent visit of Prime Minister Modi to Bangladesh to celebrate 50 years of bilateral friendship was not as welcoming as was expected. The visit set off violent protests in the country that claimed at least 12 lives and left dozens injured. The demonstrators vehemently criticized Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for inviting Modi who is a hardcore anti-Muslim.<sup>4</sup> The US is equally concerned with this situation as Washington is looking for India's active role to reach out to Bangladesh since it is an important country in the Indo-Pacific region.

On the other hand, China, right after a month of border clashes, increased tariff-free export facilities for the Least Developed Countries in which Bangladesh was a major beneficiary. With the extended list, Dhaka can now export additional 5,161 products to China and the total number has reached 8, 256. China has also offered sister-city alliances with Dhaka's six cities to extend technical and financial support to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic and other diseases and also develop them like Chinese cities. Dhaka is also a member of China's BRI initiative and several projects are in the pipeline. China has been supporting Bangladesh in building the infrastructure of transportation, energy and electricity, telecommunications, and other fields.

**Sri Lanka:** Since there is a Rajapaksa regime in power that has traditional ties with China, India is aggressively countering China and Pakistan's influence in the country. After border clashes at Ladakh, New Delhi rushed to get assurance from Sri Lanka for not doing anything that can jeopardize New Delhi's strategic interests. Jayanath Colombage, Sri Lanka's foreign secretary in an interview while addressing New Delhi's concerns assured that Colombo will adopt 'India first approach' as the key to strategic security.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anbarasan Ethirajan, 'Why Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh led to 12 deaths', *BBC News*, 31 March 2021, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56586210>

<sup>5</sup> Jayanath Colombage's interview, *Daily Mirror*, available at <http://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/Time-ripe-for-deviation-from-Western-oriented-foreign-policy/231-194504>.

India is also concerned whether India, Japan, and US-based projects would keep their momentum under the pro-Chinese regime or not. If we look at the figures, what China has offered to many littoral states in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is much bigger than what IMF and other developed countries have lent so far. Recently Sri Lanka has decided to scrap the East Container Terminal (ECT) project which was supposed to be run jointly by India and Japan.<sup>6</sup> This has added to New Delhi's worries.

Nepal: Before the border incident, Indian cartographic maneuvering the Kalapani region in 2019 renewed an old controversy between Kathmandu and New Delhi. India released its updated map that showed the Kalapani region as its part. The map also showed Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh as its Union Territories. Nepal, on its part, updated its map by including Limpiadhura, Kalapani, and the Lipulekh and subsequently approved it from the parliament. This came as a surprise for India since Nepal has always been under Indian influence. New Delhi strongly believed that Nepal took this bold step on the behest of China.

Nepal's firm stance on the Kalapani region heightened Indian security concerns since the Kalapani region serves as a buffer between China and India. Also, the area is said to be India's strategic depth. Amid uproar, New Delhi advanced its forces in the Line of Actual Control between China and India that resulted in the bitter clash in the Galwan valley of Ladakh in which more than a dozen Indian soldiers were killed. After the border clashes, the 'Indian-locked' Nepal is under immense pressure from New Delhi. It has further consolidated its position in the Kalapani region. China on the other is determined to safeguard its vital interests in the Tibetan and adjacent areas. Thus, Nepal being in the middle of ongoing and perhaps unending India-China border rifts is surviving through balancing their relationship.

In sum, the post-Ladakh situation has established a clear divide between India and China wherein the smaller states particularly Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal are struggling to overcome binary constraints. The US is equally concerned about China's rise in the region. This concern has increased manifold after the border clashes since Washington believes that New Delhi's downfall would eventually endanger its long-term geo-strategic and geo-economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Many American analysts mark China's actions in Ladakh as 'the end of Beijing's foreign policy restraint in which the world got a first sense of what a truly assertive Chinese foreign policy looks like.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, to counter China's rise, the new Biden administration has renewed its partnership with India.

In late October 2020, both India and the US inked the 'Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement' BECA. This defence cooperation has provided India access to American geospatial intelligence that will enhance the accuracy of Indian missiles, cruise, and drones. The rationale behind it is developing an 'inter-operability' between US and Indian forces and 'exchange of

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<sup>6</sup> S Narayan, 'India Loses the East Container Terminal: How Domestic Politics Rocked the Ship', *ISAS Briefs*, 10 February 2021, available at <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-loses-the-east-container-terminal-how-domestic-politics-rocked-the-ship/>

<sup>7</sup> Kurt M Campbell and Mira Rapp-Hooper, 'China is done bidding its time', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 July 2020, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-07-15/china-done-biding-its-time>

sensitive and classified information’.<sup>8</sup> Apart, the US is also reviving its relations with alliance partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent Quad virtual summit in this regard manifests the US’s resolve to handle common threats posed by China besides climate change, cyber technology, and terrorism in maritime domains.

Apart from taking resounding measures to counter the Chinese threat, India has launched disinformation warfare to discredit BRI, the CPEC, and Sino-Pak relationship. Debt Trap, Trojan Virus, the Chinese way of Colonizing are few examples of distorted narratives that India and the like-minded states are spreading. Pakistan being a partner with China is also facing a targeted disinformation war aimed at sabotaging its image abroad by projecting it as ‘unsafe country’. New Delhi is also lobbying to push Pakistan onto the blacklist at Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Moreover, the Sino-Pak relationship and the CPEC particularly have become a potential target of India’s propaganda. While doing so, India is actually following an Israeli approach to keep engaging the US in the region by exaggerating its role as a counterweight to China’s dominance.

These narratives are building pressure points for both China and Pakistan. Chinese treatment with Uyghurs, the question of Taiwan independence, human rights abuses in Tibet, the impact of Chinese projects on climate change, are once again in the limelight. Similarly, Pakistan is under pressure to deal with the terror financing though it has arrested top leaderships of banned outfits. Moreover, Pakistan’s effective role in Afghanistan has also been doubted. These narratives have a deepening impact on the key stakeholders in the China-led projects as well. Making it difficult for them to maintain balance between their economic prosperity and security. This, also narrowing the chances of economic integration in the region.

In the given situation, it is difficult to prognosis whether India will be successful in neutralizing the Chinese impact in the region but one thing is pretty clear that New Delhi’s offensive approach has significantly altered the regional peace contours.

## **Key Takeaways**

Indian influence on the smaller states of the region has largely compromised with the rise of China in the region. India’s quest to neutralize Chinese influence in the region has resulted in a renewed Indo-US partnership. Washington, while acknowledging India’s role in its Indo-Pacific strategy has vowed a meaningful, working relationship with India to balance China’s influence. The US is seeking to further operationalize India’s “major defence partner status”.<sup>9</sup> In this partnership, however, India’s prime focus is the security of its borders and the protection of interests in the neighboring states. Knowing its strength, India needs the US’ support for military modernization. New Delhi is also seeking financial assistance to offer its neighboring states a ‘Marshall’ package to maintain its strategic depth.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘BECA: The Deal that will make Indian missiles deadlier has finally been signed’, *The Economic Times*, New Delhi, 27 October 2020, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/beca-the-deal-that-will-make-indian-missiles-deadlier-has-finally-been-signed/articleshow/78885862.cms>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/financial-task-force-decision-adds-to-stress-on-pakistan-us-relations/>



On its part, the US wants India's role as a watchdog in the Indo-Pacific region primarily to monitor Chinese advancements. Any major role concerning containment cannot be anticipated in the near future since Washington is not certain or perhaps not completely apprehended China's foreign policy approach. Secondly, the US's expectations with regard to India's role in safeguarding its interests in the Indo-Pacific region cannot be high as India is a difficult country. Its religious, ethnic, and social problems are deep-rooted and protracted. Contrarily, the US has a natural alliance with Australia and Japan in the Quad.<sup>10</sup>

The US and India's interests are fundamentally contrasting. For India, partnership with the US means an endorsement of New Delhi's own South Asia policy in other words 'India's Neighborhood First Policy' wherein New Delhi is looking for the US's continued support in its regional policies. For US partnership means compliance rather than an endorsement of its larger Indo-Pacific strategy. In this context, The Indo-US partnership is challenging since both states are following different approaches to their so-called shared goals.

What other states are responding to these emerging shifts? A collective response to neutralize the impact of US and China competition from the regional states is less likely, essentially because of the differing nature of bilateral relations between them as well as their relations with the US and China. All South Asian states are revisiting their respective policies to stay up to the mark and get the maximum benefits out of the evolving situation. But none of them has adopted a principled approach by drawing concrete boundaries of their bilateral relations, which again is not possible, considering their structural incapacities to do so. For instance, dealing with China amidst growing competition and friction between China and the US would not be a piece of cake for Dhaka. Bangladesh has been very calculated in dealing with China in the past. But with the deepening Chinese role in the region amidst US and India's opposition will constitute a severe blow to Dhaka's balancing approach.

In this challenging time where small states are struggling with binary choices, Pakistan is emerging as an interesting case study. Its foreign policy approach does not seem to be to a pick and choose between China and the US. Islamabad though a major partner of China's Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, is looking for a meaningful engagement with the Biden administration. Even with India, Pakistan wants a peaceful resolution of all conflicts. Pakistan's repeated peace overtures vindicate its stance. It has also offered Sri Lanka to be part of the CPEC project. With Bangladesh, Islamabad is all set to revive its bilateral relations. In Afghanistan, Pakistan is playing a proactive role to reach out to Taliban in pursuance of penning down the peace deal. With Iran too, bilateral engagements are increasing.

In sum, Pakistan is following a 'Just Regional Approach'. It is timely as the US's shift has diverted to the Indo-Pacific region, and India is struggling to get its lost hold in neighboring states. Also trying to stay relevant in the Quad. Nevertheless, these are peacetime policies that Pakistan is following. India's offensive foreign policy approach, the intense competition between the US and China, and between India and China, will significantly affect Pakistan's choices.

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<sup>10</sup> Quadrilateral is the security alliance of US, Australia, Japan and India.

Biden administration is not likely to undo Trump policies vis-à-vis South Asia in general, and China in particular. To further the US' foreign policy goals, Biden has renewed a commitment to work closely with its 'allies' which he termed in his first speech as 'America's greatest assets'. So the multilateralism has taken a special place in Biden's foreign policy. In relations to India and Pakistan, de-hyphenation policy can better serve Washington's interests in the region. With this policy, consensus on counter-terrorism mechanism between India and Pakistan might be possible; normalization between the two countries can be expected; with the good offices of Pakistan, peace settlement in Afghanistan can be materialized but again it entirely depends on how successfully Islamabad leverage its role in it. In the case of China, Islamabad has little to offer to the US. Washington is quite knowledgeable on China-Pakistan relations. But things can go tricky if Islamabad fails to de-hyphenate Beijing while engaging with the US particularly amid heightened controversy between the US and China. China will remain central to the US's South Asia as well as Southeast Asia policies.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the sustainability of recent convergence largely depends on future trajectories of the Sino-US relationship. The partnership between the US and India on the other hand cannot be said to be resilient enough to withstand all odds. The recent downgrading of India's status from 'free' to 'partly free' on account of India's deteriorating political and civil liberties rights by Washington based 'Freedom House' and 'Electoral Democracy' to 'Electoral Autocracies' by Sweden based 'Varieties of Democracy Institute' has affected bilateral relationships. To argue, Lloyd Austin, the US Defence Secretary of Biden administration raising the issue of deteriorating human rights situation with Indian ministers during his three-day visit to India was meant to convey a bold message to India to 'adhere to democratic values'.<sup>111213</sup>

More recently, India's abstention from voting the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution on Sri Lanka's War Crimes further accentuated the difference between the US and India's approach to human rights issues.<sup>14</sup> But realistically speaking, US would continue to pay lip service for holding India accountable for gross human rights violations both at home and in Illegally Occupied Kashmir (IOK) as long as New Delhi serves the US interests.

The US's policy of ignorance towards India's human rights violations and maneuvering in bordering areas along the LAC and LOC has its implications on regional stability and its relations with India. This policy is also discrediting Washington's image as a country of 'liberal

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<sup>11</sup> India's scores in 'Freedom in the World 2021' stands at 67 out of 100. Complete report is available at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021>

<sup>12</sup> India is among the top ten decliners in 'democracy report 2021'. Complete report is available at <https://www.v-dem.net/files/25/DR%202021.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> 'Discussed Human Rights Issues with Indian Ministers, US Secretary Defence', *New Delhi Television Ltd*, 20 March 2021, available at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/discussed-human-rights-issues-with-indian-ministers-says-us-defence-secretary-2395223>

<sup>14</sup> Resolution alleges human rights violations by Sri Lankan government in the final days of Tamil war in 2009. On 23 March 2021, in 46<sup>th</sup> UN Session, the UNHRC adopted a resolution with 22 voted in favor, 11 against and 14 abstained, out of total 47 countries.

and democratic values'. India's offensive foreign policy approach vis-à-vis China or Pakistan on the other hand, can potentially undermine Washington's peace efforts in Afghanistan and also weaken the Quadrilateral alliance's efficacy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Having said, how the internal situation develops in Afghanistan; how China deals with New Delhi in the coming days; how Beijing's relations take shape in Colombo, Kathmandu, and Dhaka the strongholds of India, and finally how the situation in Kashmir evolves in the near future, all these factors will certainly force Biden administration to overhaul its partnership with India and its relations with China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

In a nutshell,

- **China:** The China factor will continue to shape up Indo-US relations. The growing nexus between China and Pakistan, and China's increasing footprints in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh will continue to push New Delhi towards the Washington camp. The US, on its part, will continue to support New Delhi in neutralizing China's influence. Resultantly, the region will remain virtually divided between the US and China.
- **India:** New Delhi with its renewed role will accelerate its efforts to undermine Pakistan's endeavors to help to bring peace in Afghanistan as well as its fight with homegrown extremism, money laundering, and terror financing. While doing so, New Delhi will invest more in the religious/sectarian divide in Pakistan. India would continue to warm up its forces along its borders with both China and Pakistan. To regain its lost prestige, New Delhi may attempt to strike back with surprising moves.
- Apart, India's role in pursuing US' China policy has its limitations as New Delhi does not have the capacity as well as the privilege of choosing between the US and China. Sooner or later, India will have to review its policies to manage the rise of China since the Chinese-owned development projects can potentially dilute the US role in the region.
- **Pakistan:** In a time of intense competition between China and the US, Pakistan will be under tremendous pressure and if Islamabad's de-hyphenating China policy fails, the relationship with the US may revert to 'do more' mode.
- **Smaller States:** The smaller states of the region are comparatively in a better position in terms of getting maximum benefits from major power competition. However, it would be difficult for them to manage in a time of severe crisis that may force them to take a side.
- **Regional Peace and Cooperation:** Multilateral economic cooperation would remain a pipe-dream, even the bilateral relations in the region will run under the shadow of the strategic divide between the US and India on one hand, and China and Pakistan on the other. India and Pakistan being central to this divide can play a decisive role in leveraging their relationship with China and the US respectively towards bringing peace in the region as there is no clarity of the future course of Sino-US bilateral relations. Chances of cooperation on 'rules-based order' in the Indo-Pacific cannot be ruled out.