

Focus
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India: The Changing Security Environment, and Regional Stability

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Abstract

The Sino-Indian border clash in summer 2020 had a serious impact on India's security discourse, casting a significant change in New Delhi's strategic calculus. To secure its national interests in an unbalanced strategic environment, India sought US support. The US, on its part, orchestrated practical engagement with its alliance partners in Asia in order to counter China's assertiveness in the region. Its relationship with India has ever since entered into a new phase of cooperation, where the policies of both countries towards Beijing converge on mutual points of interest. This strategic partnership between the two countries, particularly following border clashes, had an impact on regional equilibrium as well. The decades-old structure of conflict and cooperation and the embedded network of bilateral relationships in the region began to alter. The complex trajectory of triangular relationship between the US, China, and India emerged as a challenge for Pakistan considering its role as Beijing's frontline partner. Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka,

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having balanced China and India, re-oriented their focus toward China and India/US. 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 its renewed role, is all set to strengthen its strategic depth in bordering areas. The US expects India to play an active role in Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in which New Delhi is uncapacitated in terms of both military and technology. In view of the aforementioned, the apparent convergence of interests seems rather short-lived. Nevertheless, multi-sectoral cooperation has the potential to grow.

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

Introduction

Balancing a powerful entity in the international system has always been central to the realist school of thought. In an anarchic and imbalanced security environment, every state seeks to ensure its security, either through forming new alliances or by joining 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.¹ This balancing mechanism or equilibrium of power manages the co-existence of states in international and regional settings.

Border clashes between India and China have continued to influence New Delhi's security asymmetries. While exploiting its security umbrella, New Delhi persuades, and often, forces small states of the region to take its side. Unlike China, India's geographical proximity with smaller South Asian states provides New Delhi an opportunity to swiftly execute its strategies. The

same situation seems to prevail following the border clashes. The border conflict cannot be viewed in isolation or as a localised border dispute between China and India. It appears to be a part of a larger strategic game in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. Thereby, South Asia is now entering into a new phase of conflict and cooperation wherein the increasing Indo-US partnership has a pivotal role to play.

In line with the aforementioned, this paper attempts to link the differing outcomes of the previous balancing acts with the contestations from the present day to deliberate on two striking factors, i.e., the nature and the structure of change that has been taking place and how it provokes India to rebalance the emerging security environment in South Asia as well as in the Indo-Pacific Ocean.

The paper seeks to explore the changes and breakthroughs that have occurred since Indo-US strategic partnership was cinched following the civil-nuclear deal between the two countries in 2005. It further aims to elaborate how US-India partnership in the post Sino-Indian military face-off has the potential to disturb regional equilibrium, and the impacts that such disturbance might have on the bilateral and multilateral relationships of South Asian states. Additionally, the paper also focuses on response of the South Asian states towards the said emerging developments. Lastly, the paper aims to explore the spillover effects of conflict escalation between India and Pakistan, between China and the US, and between China and India.

This paper follows an interpretative approach to answer the above questions. In doing so, data has been obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consulted for this paper include statements, excerpts of speeches, official

websites and social media accounts, published interviews, and discussions from open sources. The secondary data has been obtained from reports, articles, books, newsletters, and magazines. The paper attempts to infer different perspectives through a detailed analysis of the data. In doing so, it 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 in addition to its impacts on the regional stability. Central to the study is the theory of balance of power that provides the conceptual framework for analysis.

Indian 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 Indian assertiveness. However, New Delhi's big-brother behaviour with its immediate neighbours went unchecked as the US, as well as the Soviet Union, were least interested in India's neighbourhood policy. Pakistan also failed to leverage US role in subduing India's influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. India's hefty presence in the aforementioned states as well as the geographical barrier kept Pakistan at bay.

Regional equilibrium right after the independence was mostly shaped in view of Pakistan's pro-West approach rooted in maximising its security against New Delhi and India's non-alignment policy rooted in strengthening its position in the immediate neighbouring states. This worked well until the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950. Later, the Sino-Indian war in 1962 sensitised the Indian strategic thinking. Pakistan being

China's close counterpart and US ally had gained immense importance in the region. Pakistan's role in the Sino-US rapprochement further strengthened its position. India desperately sought 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.

Although approaching the Soviet Union was an unhappy development, the US turned a blind eye towards it primarily because the US did not wish to lose India, a big market in the region and also because the US focus was more on Afghanistan to contain Soviet influence, wherein Pak-China cooperation was integral. It was not until the nuclear tests in 1974, that a complete estrangement between the US and India took place. India's refusal to allow International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect nuclear facilities further deteriorated its relations with the US.

India's foreign policy vis-à-vis its neighbours, particularly after the 1962 Sino-Indian war, became more interventionist. With the Soviet backing in terms of arms supply, New Delhi was able to manoeuvre Dhaka's war of liberation that led to the dismemberment of Pakistan. Nepal and Bhutan also faced rapid Indianisation of their respective militaries and the economies. Being small and landlocked, both countries remained vulnerable to Indian strategic manoeuvrings. Indian readiness to sign the Friendship Treaty with Nepal in 1950 was nothing but an effort to enter 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 Tracks, was targeted at dismembering the nascent state. Likewise,

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

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

The enactment of the 'Citizenship Amendment Act' for instance, has not only complicated its relations with Bangladesh but has also dented India's own Neighbourhood First policy. Rahul Gandhi, former President of the Indian National Congress (INC) 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 neighbourhood with no friends is dangerous.²

Moreover, the revocation of Article 370 of its own constitution which protects the autonomous status of the Indian

Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK), 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, armoured columns, missiles, air assets, as well as other weapons and platforms along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), both India and China were all set for a major confrontation.³ There have been sporadic flare-ups along the LAC for quite a long time, but last year's military assertion in Ladakh in the backdrop of the revocation of Kashmir's special status and cartographic manoeuvring of the Kalapani region along the India-Nepal border has served as an effective deterrent against New Delhi's hawkish moves. However, the incident has reversed the progress achieved in concluding India-China agreements since the 1990s to maintain peace along the LAC.

Post-Ladakh Regional Environment

Following Chinese strategic supremacy in its border conflict with India, Beijing's relations with India's 'neighbourhood first' countries have come under the spotlight again. In this imbalanced 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 neighbouring countries as well as in Indo-Pacific Ocean to sabotage bilateral or multilateral cooperation with Beijing. For this reason, New Delhi is looking for enhanced cooperation with the US. The following section briefly discusses 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 maintained a close relationship since 1971. In the backdrop of reverberating geopolitical dimensions of South Asia, India began ramping up its relations with Dhaka to neutralise 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 the US State Department. Nevertheless, India's relationships with Dhaka remained on the lowest ebb following the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act which targeted a large number of migrant Muslims from Bangaldesh. This has seriously undermined people-to-people contact between the two countries.

India is cooperating with Sheikh Hasina's government on several development initiatives. Recently, it sent 1.2 million doses of Covid vaccine as a goodwill gesture, but the situation did not improve significantly. Arguably, Modi's recent visit to Bangladesh to celebrate 50 years of bilateral friendship was not as welcoming as expected. The visit set off violent protests in the country that claimed at least 12 lives and left dozens injured. The demonstrators vehemently criticised Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for inviting Modi who is a hardcore anti-Muslim.⁴ The US is equally concerned with this situation as it seeks India's active role in reaching out to Bangladesh considering it as 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 Bangladesh's six cities to extend technical and financial support to tackle the Covid and other diseases and also to develop them like Chinese cities. Dhaka is also a member of China's BRI initiative and several projects between the two are in the pipeline. China has been supporting Bangladesh in building infrastructure, transportation, energy and electricity, telecommunications, and other fields.

Sri Lanka

Rajapaksa regime in Sri Lanka has traditional ties with China. This puts India in a position where it is aggressively countering China and Pakistan's influence in the region. After border clashes at Ladakh, New Delhi rushed to get assurance from Sri Lanka for any actions that could potentially jeopardise 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 an 'India first approach' as the key to strategic security.⁵

India is also concerned about whether India, Japan, and US-sponsored projects would keep their momentum under the pro-Chinese regime or not. Statistics and figures in this regard reveal that 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 them 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.⁶ This has added to New Delhi's worries.

Nepal

Before the border incident, Indian cartographic manoeuvring of 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 IIOJK and Ladakh as its Union Territories. Nepal, on its part, updated its map by including Limpiadhura, Kalapani, and Lipulekh and subsequently got it approved from its 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 with support from 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. Amidst uproar, New Delhi advanced its forces along the LAC that resulted in the bitter clash in the Galwan valley of Ladakh, killing a dozen soldiers. After the border clashes, the 'India-locked' Nepal is under immense pressure from New Delhi. It has further consolidated its position in the Kalapani region. China, on the other hand, 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 its relationship with both sides.

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 heightened 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 restrain in which the world got first sense of what a truly assertive Chinese foreign policy looks like."⁷ Thus, to counter China's rise, the new Biden administration has renewed its partnership with India.

In late October 2020, India and the US inked the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). This defence cooperation has provided India access to American geo-spatial intelligence that will enhance the accuracy of Indian missiles and drones. The underlying rationale here appears to be development of an inter-operability between the US and Indian forces and exchange of sensitive and classified information.⁸ Additionally, the US is also reviving its relations with alliance partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent Quad Virtual Summit in this regard manifests Washington'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 the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and, Pak-China relationship. Debt trap, trojan virus, the Chinese way of colonising are few examples of distorted narratives that India and the like-minded states continue to spread. Pakistan, being China's close ally, also faces a targeted disinformation war aimed at sabotaging its image abroad by projecting the latter as an 'unsafe country'. New Delhi is also lobbying to push Pakistan onto the blacklist at Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Moreover, the Pak-China

relationship, particularly the CPEC have become a potential target of Indian propaganda. While doing so, India is actually following an approach similar to that of Israel to keep engaging the US in the region by exaggerating its role as a counterweight to China's dominance.

These narratives serve as pressure points for both China and Pakistan. Chinese treatment of Uyghurs, the question of Taiwan's independence, human rights abuses in Tibet, and 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 despite the systematic arrests of top leadership of several banned outfits. Moreover, Pakistan's effective role in Afghanistan has been made rather questionable. These narratives have a deep impact on the key stakeholders in China-led projects as well, making it difficult for them to strike a balance between their economic prosperity and security. This, in addition to other factors continues to narrow the chances of economic integration in the region.

In the present situation, it is difficult to decide whether India will be successful in neutralising Chinese impact in the region or not. Nevertheless, it is clear that New Delhi's offensive approach has significantly altered the contours of regional peace.

Conclusion

Indian influence on the smaller states of the region has largely been compromised with the rise of China in the region. India's quest to neutralise 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 the latter to balance

China's influence. The US is seeking to further operationalise India's "major defence partner status."⁹ In this partnership, however, India's prime focus is the security of its borders and protection of its interests in the neighbouring states. Realising its potential, India needs US support for military modernisation. New Delhi is also seeking financial assistance to offer its neighbouring states a 'Marshall' package in order to maintain its strategic depth.

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 does not appear certain. Secondly, Washington's expectations with regard to India's role in safeguarding its interests in the Indo-Pacific region cannot be high as India is, after all, 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 Qaud.¹⁰

Furthermore, the US and Indian 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 continued support of the former for 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.

The responses of other states over the aforementioned emerging shifts in policy orientation are noteworthy to discuss. A collective response to neutralise the impact of US-China competition from the regional states remains 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 maximum benefits out of the evolving situation. However, 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 a pick and choose between China and the US. Islamabad, though a major partner of Beijing's BRI, 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 a part of the CPEC. With Bangladesh, Islamabad is all set to revive its bilateral relations. In Afghanistan, Pakistan continues to play a proactive role to reach out to the 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 shift has diverted to the Indo-Pacific region and India is struggling to get its lost hold in neighbouring states. 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.

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'. Apparently, multilateralism has taken a special place in Biden's foreign policy. In relations with 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. In case of China, Islamabad has little to offer to the US. Washington is quite knowledgeable on China-Pakistan relations. However, things can get tricky if Islamabad fails to de-hyphenate Beijing while engaging with the US particularly amidst heightened tensions between the US and China. China will remain central to Washington's South Asia as well as Southeast Asia policies.

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 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’.¹¹

More recently, India’s refusal to vote at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) over a resolution on Sri Lanka’s war crimes, further accentuated the difference between the US and India’s approach to human rights issues.¹² However, realistically, US would continue to pay a lip service for holding India accountable for gross human rights violations both at home and in IIOJK as long as New Delhi serves the US interests.

Washington’s policy of ignorance towards Indian human rights violations and manoeuvring in bordering areas along the LAC and LOC, has its implications for regional stability and its relations with India. This policy is also discrediting Washington’s image as a country of ‘liberal 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 may also weaken the efficacy of the quadrilateral alliance in the Indo-Pacific region.

However, Biden administration’s approach with China, Pakistan, and India depends on how the internal situation develops in Afghanistan, how China deals with New Delhi in the coming days, how Beijing’s relations take shape with Colombo, Kathmandu, and Dhaka, i.e., the strongholds of India, and, finally, how the situation in Kashmir evolves in the near future.

China will continue to shape 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 neutralising

China's influence. Resultantly, the region will remain virtually divided between the US and China.

New Dehli with its renewed role will accelerate its efforts to undermine Pakistan's endeavours to help 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.

Additionally, India's role in pursuing America's 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.

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.

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.

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 the 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 over the future course of Sino-US bilateral relations. Chances of cooperation on ‘rules-based order’ in the Indo-Pacific cannot be ruled out.

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