

INDO-US STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: CHALLENGES AND CHOICES FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This article examines the implications of the Indo-US strategic partnership for Pakistan's security and foreign policy choices. Because of their shared security interests, the United States and India have aligned to contain China's rise in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). This partnership raises India's power, status, and overall influence in the region compared to Pakistan. Considering the long rivalry between India and Pakistan—rooted in ideological, historical, and territorial disputes—this partnership raises the prospects of conflict in South Asia. Additionally, Pakistan-China-India and Pakistan-China-US triangulated relationships add layers of complexity, further diminishing the prospects for cooperation and peace, as a bilateral conflict between any two countries tends to involve the third. The complexities of the first triangle create a security dilemma, mutual distrust, and rivalry among the three regional powers, which, in turn, complicate the relationships within the second triangle. It is argued that the Indo-US partnership complicates Pakistan's security dilemma, heightens the arms race, raises the prospects of conflicts, and encourages Pakistan to align with China closely.

Keywords: GPC, Balance of Power, Security Dilemma, Indo-US Relations, Triangulation, Indo-US Alignment.

Introduction

The intensifying Sino-US Great Power Competition (GPC) is introducing significant changes in the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. The GPC is driven by the global shift in the balance of power and by the efforts of the two competing great powers to increase their relative power. As a result, both great powers seek alliances with key countries in the region to secure a favourable position of power.

Because of their shared norms, values, and strategic interests, the US and India have decided to collaborate as strategic partners to contain China in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR).

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Alongside containing China, this alliance also influences Pakistan's power position, causing shifts and realignments in the region. Furthermore, this relationship affects Pakistan's security calculations because of its long-standing rivalry with India.

This article examines key factors driving the Indo-US strategic partnership and its implications for South Asia's balance of power, especially its effects on Pakistan's strategic choices. This study investigates how the deepening Indo-US strategic ties affect Pakistan's security choices, security dilemma, and alliance choices. Additionally, the article explores triangular relationships among India and Pakistan, and between Pakistan and China and the US. Analysing these triangular interactions is crucial for understanding the region's complex dynamics. This research suggests that the Indo-US alliance will heighten tensions, increase the likelihood of conflict, including nuclear conflict, spark an arms race, including a nuclear arms race, exacerbate Pakistan's security dilemma, and draw China and Pakistan closer as strategic allies.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the Indo-US strategic partnership and assess how it shapes Pakistan's security concerns and foreign policy preferences. The study also considers the triangulated dynamics among Pakistan, China, and India, Pakistan, China, and the United States, which add further complexities to regional stability and make peaceful cooperation between India and Pakistan difficult. The study draws on both primary and secondary sources, including official policy documents, books, academic journals, and reports from reputable think tanks. The research applies the theoretical lens of structural realism, which explains state behaviour in terms of power distribution and security competition. Within this framework, the study examines how concerns over state security, the balance of power, and the alliance system help explain the Indo-US partnership and its consequences for Pakistan.

Literature Review

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union provided the Indian leadership with an opportunity to seek US assistance in addressing potential security threats from China. Similarly, the Soviet dismemberment coincided with the rise of China, which became a formidable challenger to the US hegemony in the Indo-Pacific. To counter China, the US needed new allies, as its traditional Cold War partners, NATO allies, were either unable or unwilling to confront China in a new Cold War or great-power rivalry.¹ Due to its size, military strength, and geographical position, the US chose India as its strategic partner to contain China.

Due to its shared territorial disputes, India also saw China as a challenge and a threat. Furthermore, the power imbalance between India and China, in China's favour, compelled India to secure the support of external great powers to mitigate the rising security threat.² More importantly, China's growing influence in the region impedes India's regional ambitions, while the US perceives its global dominance as increasingly challenged by China's rapid, unexpected rise. This shared concern has brought India and the US closer together to counterbalance China and safeguard their strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.³

The Indo-US alliance has generated considerable debate among scholars, strategists, and government officials regarding its theoretical basis, motivations, and consequences for South Asia. The end of the Cold War created conditions conducive to rapprochement between India and the US, leading to the signing of numerous security agreements and increased diplomatic exchanges.

Fareed Zakaria, an eminent scholar and policy expert, argues that the Indo-US partnership is the result of a changing balance of power, the rise of China, and the relative decline of the US and the West.⁴ Experts worldwide unanimously agree that China and the US are engaged in a competition, often called a Great Power Competition (GPC). Contradicting the majority view, Michael Beckley asserts that "the US will remain the world's sole superpower for many decades, and probably throughout this century."⁵

Strobe Talbott, former US Deputy Secretary of State under President Clinton, extended engagement with India after its nuclear tests in 1998, and explains the strategic need for Indo-US partnership. In addition to a bilateral partnership with India, the US also included India in multilateral Indo-Pacific agreements. Additionally, the US National Security Strategy documents also mentioned India as a key partner and China as a serious challenger and a threat to the rule-based international order.⁶

From a theoretical perspective, Waltz's structural realism and John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, states' attempts to maximise power to seek regional hegemony, help explain the US' efforts to empower India as a counterweight to China.⁷ Moreover, Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory enhances understanding of states counterbalancing a threatening state rather than an established power.⁸ Walt's balance-of-threat theory helps explain India's attempt to counterbalance China (the threatening power) by aligning with the US (the established power). Moreover, Organski's and Modelski's seminal work on the power transition competition also explains the dynamics of the Sino-US GPC and the Indo-US strategic partnership.⁹

Many scholars and policymakers have analysed the Indo-US strategic partnership and its implications for South Asia, particularly how it intensifies Pakistan's security dilemma, accelerates the regional arms race, and limits Pakistan's ability to balance between China and the US. However, most of this research considers Pakistan's position in relation to India or China.

Despite extensive scholarship on this crucial topic, the complexities and overlapping effects of triangular relationships among Pakistan, China, India, and the US remain unexamined. This study aims to address that gap.

Historical Development and Key Milestones

Since India's independence in 1947, Indo-US relations have been marked by periods of uncertainty, occasional cooperation, isolation, and the current strategic partnership. In its formative years, Indian leadership chose to avoid bloc politics and remained largely nonaligned. Until 1962, Indo-US relations were largely stagnant because India did not fit into the US' overall strategic priorities. Additionally, India's growing inclination towards Moscow created a rift between India and the US.¹⁰

In 1962, Indo-US strategic interests converged due to the Indo-China War over territorial disputes in the Himalayas; in a short and brief war, India suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of China.¹¹ Under attack from China, India sought assistance from the US. The US openly sided with India and provided necessary weapons, equipment, and ammunition. Considering its size, population, and geostrategic location, the John F Kennedy administration regarded India as "a bulwark of stability in South Asia against Chinese ambitions."¹² This belief laid the foundation for the Indo-US partnership.

However, the Indo-US relationship experienced a brief period of cooperation before tensions emerged in 1971, when India signed the Treaty of Friendship with the former USSR, pledging mutual defence. This realignment significantly angered the US, marking a low point in Indo-US relations. Similarly, India endorsed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which further deepened the wedge between the two nations. The Russo-India pact was first invoked during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War, which drew sharp US condemnation. As a result, President Nixon's administration sided with Pakistan, including deploying a naval task force to deter further escalation.¹³ However, due to the Vietnam War, the US exercised restraint in aiding Pakistan against India and the USSR.

Another reason the Indo-US alliance failed was India's solidarity with Arab states, rooted in Cold War-era "Arab Unity." However, the 1991 US-led Gulf War shattered this cohesion, facilitating India to normalise relations with Israel and later strengthen its partnership with the US. Simultaneously, the collapse of the Soviet Union compelled India to reassess its foreign policy, aligning with the US and the West to counterbalance the growing threat posed by the China-Pakistan alliance and to secure economic growth.

A major turning point in the Indo-US partnership came when, in 2005, both states signed the New Framework for the Indo-US Defence Relationship. This document formalised the defence engagement between both nations.

Through this framework, both sides agreed to expand joint exercises, cooperate on defence technology, and further enhance intelligence sharing. Over time, these steps helped India appear to Washington as a trusted and dependable strategic partner.

Building on this framework, a series of more specific critical agreements followed. For example, in 2016, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) was signed. This agreement allows both nations to access each other's military bases for logistic support. Shahid Hussain Bukhari interpreted this as "preparation for any possible military confrontation in the Indian Ocean led by the US and assisted by India,"¹⁴ reflecting concerns among scholars about the shifting of the balance of power in the region.

Accordingly, two additional agreements further deepened the Indo-US partnership. The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), signed in 2018, allowed India to access secure American communication equipment, something that had remained restricted for decades.¹⁵ Then, the 2020 Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) enabled the sharing of advanced intelligence, which significantly strengthened India's targeting and situational awareness capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁶ These three agreements have enhanced operational integration of the militaries of the two countries.

The 2008 US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement was another turning point that significantly enhanced bilateral ties. This deal symbolised Washington's willingness to accept India as a responsible nuclear power, despite India's non-signatory status to the NPT.¹⁷ The agreement opened the doors for civilian nuclear trade and addressed India's long-term energy needs. It also contributed to a broader climate of trust, which encouraged deeper defence cooperation and sustained diplomatic engagements at the highest level.

Key Drivers of Indo-US Strategic Alignment

India's growing strategic partnership with the US is rooted in three key developments. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union forced India to seek another great power to address its security challenges, as it could not counterbalance China's rise through internal balancing. Second, the US saw China as a new threat and competitor and thus needed India to help contain it in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, Pakistan, a Cold War ally of the US, lost its utility to Washington due to the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, shifting Washington's focus toward India as a more viable regional partner.¹⁸

The deepening Sino-US competition has further fortified the Indo-US cooperation. India, recognising China's military and economic superiority, views the US as an indispensable ally to mitigate its asymmetric disadvantages.¹⁹ This partnership seeks to counterbalance China's dominance in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.²⁰ Weixing Hu and Weizhan Meng argue that "India is a significant sea power in the Indian Ocean.

It can help the US to balance China's expansion in the Indian Ocean and reduce the US burden in maintaining the security linkage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans."²¹ By leveraging India's naval capabilities, the US can redirect its resources to counter China in the Western Pacific, advancing a two-ocean strategy.

While the US views India as a valuable partner to contain China, for India, the partnership presents both opportunities and risks. Whereas the alliance enhances India's military and economic standing, it also complicates New Delhi's balancing act between Washington and Beijing. C. Raja Mohan outlines these challenges:

Like the United States, India seeks to prevent China from dominating Asia but wants to avoid the risks inherent in that strategy. India, however, has more difficulties than the United States in coping with a rising China. It is not only the weakest of the three powers but also confronts all the vulnerabilities arising from its geographic proximity to China... Whatever the public debate on India's options toward the changing U.S.-China relationship may be, India's policy trajectory has largely followed the realpolitik impulse of engaging both Washington and Beijing, strengthening India's strategic capabilities in collaboration with the United States, finding ways to close the gap with China, avoiding a premature confrontation with Beijing, and exploring the possibilities for altering China's approach to India.²²

India's policy has thus been characterised by strategic duality—deepening ties with the US while avoiding overt confrontation with China. This approach reflects India's need to maintain regional stability and economic engagement with Beijing while simultaneously bolstering its military capabilities through US cooperation.

Triangulation of Relationships

Triangular relationships among states with conflicting interests in the region and globally are often more complex to manage than bilateral relations. These relationships involve three nations with competing or overlapping interests, in which the alliance between two states is primarily aimed at the third. In such situations, cooperation between the two may not only enhance their security but may also threaten the security of the excluded country. Moreover, unlike bilateral engagements, triangular relationships influence regional security dynamics far more deeply. In South Asia, important strategic triangles include the Pakistan-China-India and the Pakistan-China-US.

Examining these strategic relationships can help assess whether triangular relationships build cooperation and positive engagement or lead to conflict and escalation. In South Asia's context, particularly in India and Pakistan, these triangular relationships increase conflict and limit the prospects for peaceful cooperation. The Pakistan, China, and India triangle is the most complicated, in which all three states share contested land borders, possess nuclear capabilities, and have a history of unresolved territorial disputes.

The Pakistan-China-US triangle highlights how Pakistan's survival strategy has pivoted around managing relations with China and the US. The following sections will examine these strategic triangular relationships in more detail.

Pakistan-India-China Triangular Relationship

Pakistan, China, and India share geographical proximity, entangled in territorial disputes, wars, and changing alliances. Their relationships form one of the world's most complex triangular relationships in global geopolitics.²³ Pakistan and China share adversarial relations with India. At the same time, India finds itself squeezed between two rival countries: Pakistan to the West and China to the North and East. Additionally, all three states maintain active military deployments along their shared borders, increasing the risk of escalation into full-scale conflict.

A key aspect of this triangular engagement is the perception of strategic encirclement. Each country sees itself threatened by rival alliances and partnerships. China views India's increasing alignment with the US, along with its partnerships with Japan and South Korea, as part of a wider containment strategy. Similarly, India considers the China-Pakistan alliance as an attempt to encircle it from both the East and the West. Pakistan, in turn, interprets India's connections with Afghanistan and Iran as efforts of strategic encirclement. Furthermore, "deepening Chinese influence within other countries in South Asia—like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh is seen by India as part of China's 'string of pearls policy': encircling India by establishing a presence among its neighbours."²⁴

The strategic partnership between China and Pakistan serves as a critical balancing act in this triangle. China's strategic interests in South Asia and its shared security interests with Pakistan have strengthened their strategic alliance to counterbalance India. China provides Pakistan with military and economic support, ensuring that India remains strategically encircled and occupied on multiple fronts. Andrew Small notes that China's military and economic backing of Pakistan is aimed at ensuring that India's military remains primarily focused on the country's western border.²⁵ In turn, Pakistan's military forces effectively tie down a significant portion of India's conventional military capabilities, preventing their full employment against China.

India, on the other hand, perceives the China-Pakistan alliance as a direct threat, leading to heightened military readiness and strategic posturing along its borders with both Pakistan and China. The Doklam standoff and the ongoing skirmishes in Kashmir exemplify how tensions in one dyadic relationship can escalate and spill over into others, worsening regional instability. Moreover, India's efforts to modernise its military and enhance strategic partnerships with other nations, particularly the US, are driven by the need to counter this dual threat.

The Pakistan-India-China relationship perpetuates a cycle of continuous military build-ups and strategic balancing. Security actions by one state trigger reactions from the others. For example, Pakistan's military advancements receive prompt countermeasures from India, which, in turn, elicit a response from China. This interconnected security environment intensifies regional instability. Pakistan, facing an existential threat from India, developed a credible nuclear deterrent to defend its sovereignty. Einhorn and Sidhu describe Pakistan's security challenges in the following terms:

Pakistan's security threat comes from India. The longstanding unresolved Kashmir dispute, despite various U.N. resolutions, lies at the heart of tensions between India and Pakistan. India's political elite, with its growing economy, is pursuing an ambitious and destabilising military build-up to become a global power and regional hegemon. New Delhi, emboldened by a Western-supported military build-up, is less willing to pursue a negotiated and peaceful resolution of the historic Kashmir dispute, while the Kashmiri people continue to struggle for their U.N.-recognised right of self-determination. The absence of meaningful, sustainable, and results-driven dialogue, and the growing strategic partnership between India and the United States, are matters of grave concern for Pakistan.²⁶

Even after the nuclearisation of South Asia, India has not reduced its conventional military build-up. Instead, it has significantly increased its defence spending, outspending Pakistan by nearly 9 times. Most of India's conventional forces remain heavily focused on Pakistan, reinforcing Islamabad's sense of existential threat from India. Einhorn and Sidhu explain Pakistan-specific India's military posturing:

India's growing conventional and strategic capabilities are overwhelmingly poised against Pakistan. The Indian "Cold Start" doctrine aims to rapidly launch shallow thrusts inside Pakistani territory to capture and use it for coercing Pakistan. The large-scale Indian development of highly mobile and armoured mechanised formations, artillery, rapid airlift capabilities, forward displacement of troops and garrisons, supporting communication infrastructure, and massive spending provide compelling evidence of operationalisation of the "Cold Start" doctrine, despite Indian official reluctance to formally accept it.²⁷

To counterbalance India's superior conventional military capabilities and strategic aspirations, Pakistan aligns closely with China. At the same time, India strengthens its strategic partnership with the US and like-minded powers in the Indo-Pacific. This results in a continuous cycle of balancing acts, complicating disputes between Pakistan and India and between India and China.

Theodore Caplow's Triangular Relationship Model offers a useful insight for understanding the dynamics of the Pakistan-India-China triangle. Exploring and understanding the probability of alliances between three states with varying power levels, Caplow argues that in a triangular relationship where one member, Pakistan (A), is weaker and the other two, India (B) and China (C), are stronger, the weaker state (A) becomes a desirable ally for both stronger states.

He posits that “A may strengthen his position by forming a coalition with either B or C, and will be welcomed as an ally by either B or C.”²⁸ In this scenario, Caplow explains that “if B joins C, he does not improve his pre-coalition position of equality with C and superiority to A.”²⁹ However, because both B and C prefer alliances with A, the most probable coalitions are AB and AC.

When applied to Pakistan’s relationships with China and India, Caplow’s model suggests that Pakistan (A) could theoretically ally with either China (C) or India (B). However, given historical context and geopolitical realities, the natural alignment between Pakistan and China becomes clearer. Drawing on Balance of Power and Balance of Threat theories, Pakistan’s strategic interests have consistently been aligned with China, especially in countering India’s regional dominance. These triangular complexities reduce any probability of a Pakistan-India alliance and increase the prospects of a Pakistan-China alliance.

The triangular relationships among Pakistan, China, and India add layers of complexity to regional security dynamics. The complex and interconnected relationship limits states’ foreign policy choices, such as forming alliances or maintaining neutrality, because a decision by one country often draws reactions from other countries, often adversarial. Furthermore, the presence of nuclear weapons, persistent unresolved border disputes, and ideological differences further complicate the security situation in the region. The cumulative impact of these complexities makes the security situation volatile and unpredictable.

Pakistan-China-US Triangular Relationship

Fearing existential threats from a powerful neighbour, India, Pakistan has regularly turned to external powers such as China and the US to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Until the end of the Cold War, Pakistan maintained balanced relations with both great powers. However, since the early 2000s, China’s rapid economic rise and its expanding GPC with the US have complicated Pakistan’s traditional diplomatic approach. Today, the relationship among Pakistan, China, and the US is complex and fragile.

Pakistan has depended on China for its economic, military, and diplomatic support since 1947. Pakistan and China have remained strategically aligned.³⁰ However, Pakistan has also maintained a friendly relationship with the US because of Pakistan’s economic dependency on the US and the West. This dual dependency has complicated Pakistan’s foreign policy choices in a triangular setting, in which both great powers tend to seek an alliance with Pakistan. While this enhanced status strengthens Pakistan’s bargaining power, it also exposes Pakistan to pressure from China and the US to choose a side. Under pressure from these two great powers, whatever decision Pakistan takes will have serious ramifications.

To avoid dependence on any single power, Pakistan needs to steer this triangular relationship skillfully. Pakistan must carefully manage its alliances with both great powers, aiming to maximise benefits, limit risks, and make necessary compromises. Comparing Pakistan's relations with China and the US, Waqas Ahmed contends that Pakistan's relationship with China has remained consistent, resilient, and harmonious and stable. In contrast, its engagements with the US have been transactional and driven by short-term strategic needs, such as during the Cold War and the Global War on Terrorism. He claims:

While Pakistan has often experienced periods of strategic convergence and divergence in its relations with the United States and the West more generally, it has maintained a harmonious relationship with China. Not only has China continued to politically support Pakistan despite the changes in the international order which have followed from the Cold War to the War on Terror, it has also persistently supported Pakistan in building and maintaining an indigenous arms industry.³¹ The triangular relationship presents Pakistan with overlapping security challenges. The existential threat from India pushes Pakistan closer to China. The China-Pakistan alliance fulfils Pakistan's military and economic needs to survive against India's superior conventional military power. However, this relationship triggers complex competition, increasing the likelihood of conflict and making the peaceful resolution of disputes difficult. Similarly, Pakistan's simultaneous balancing act between China and the United States has complicated its foreign policy preferences.

The triangular relationship shows that Pakistan's security challenges and choices cannot be viewed in isolation. Any state provokes responses from multiple countries, affecting others' policies. Pakistan faces several issues, including overdependence and isolation, that shape its security strategy. Additionally, triangular complexities diminish opportunities for cooperation and increase the likelihood of conflicts.

Implications for Pakistan and South Asia

The following section examines the implications of the Indo-US alignment for Pakistan's security and its relative power position in South Asia. The analysis will help Pakistan's policymakers to steer foreign policy under a challenging regional environment.

Balance of Power and Regional Stability

A delicate balance is maintained between India and Pakistan due to Pakistan's internal balancing and credible nuclear deterrent. The US' strategic alliance with India, though focused on China, will create a substantial imbalance between Pakistan and India, as US-India cooperation would enhance India's communication, surveillance, and net-centric capabilities, thereby weakening Pakistan's conventional deterrence by denial against India.

This change would encourage India to become more aggressive and get involved in minor conflicts against Pakistan, leading to major conflicts, including nuclear escalation due to miscalculation or misunderstanding.

Accordingly, this explains the fragile security environment in South Asia, where two dominant powers, Pakistan and India, maintain stability. Any significant shift in the power balance between the two neighbours will seriously undermine regional peace and stability. Bukhari further explains India-Pakistan relations and regional peace:

The entire security structure of the region [South Asia] depends on the nature of the mutual relations between these two states. The rise of one of them as a regional power is meant to destabilise the region. In this context, India's and the United States' cooperation on high-tech defence equipment has raised concerns in Pakistan, which may compel it to seek advanced weapon technology. Such compulsions may create a path towards destabilising the strategic balance in the region.³²

Additionally, the Indo-US alignment would upset the regional balance of power and seriously undermine Pakistan's position. According to Shahid Hussain Bukhari, the Indo-US strategic alliance would have "far-reaching implications for Pakistan's security because the emergence of India as a counterweight to China will not only tilt the balance of power between China and the US in favour of the US but it will also tilt power equilibrium in favour of India over Pakistan in the South Asian region."³³ Bukhari argues that "Indo-US Strategic Partnership may bring 'transition' in the existing power structure of South Asia that will destabilise the prevailing strategic equilibrium, and may create an opportunity for war to occur between India and Pakistan."³⁴

Enhanced Reliance on Nuclear Weapons

The Indo-US strategic alignment is likely to significantly weaken Pakistan's conventional military capabilities relative to India, further increasing Pakistan's reliance on nuclear deterrence as its primary defence strategy. This growing dependence on nuclear weapons heightens the risk of conflict, as both countries may feel compelled to respond more aggressively to perceived threats. Furthermore, the Indo-US strategic alliance would cause a nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan and between China and India. This arms race would impede economic growth and development, destabilise the region, and lead to conflicts and wars.

Pakistan's Security Dilemma

Because of its economic and military dependence on China and the US, Pakistan faces a serious dilemma in maintaining neutrality amid intensifying great-power competition between the two. The intricate nature of Pakistan's ties with both countries raises concerns about Pakistan's ability to remain neutral, especially given the historical rivalry with India.

Pakistan's archrivalry with India, rooted in language, culture, religion, ideology, and territorial disputes, complicates its strategic choices. Aligning with the US against China would diminish Pakistan's significance in the eyes of its historical adversary. Conversely, joining forces with China would mean opposing the US, which may have serious consequences given the complex geopolitical landscape and Pakistan's traditional dependence on the US and the West. Additionally, Pakistan's key allies in the Middle East maintain strong ties with the US. Any significant shift in Pakistan's alignment away from the US could negatively affect its relationships with these friendly nations.³⁵

The Indo-US alignment aims to contain China economically and militarily in the Indo-Pacific region. Being China's ally, Pakistan finds it hard to join the anti-China alliance. For Pakistan, the situation is complex, as aligning with China carries geopolitical, economic, and military consequences. The limited number of countries in partnership with China, such as Iran, Russia, and North Korea, adds to the complexity. Pakistan also considers the long-term implications of a Chinese defeat in the ongoing Cold War-like battle with the US. Moreover, Pakistan's dilemma will be further exacerbated in case China surpasses the US-led alliance in the current Sino-US GPC. If Pakistan remains indecisive, it will forego the benefits of China's rise and the subsequent advantages that come with China's dominance.

Pakistan's Policy Choices under Indo-US Alignment

To mitigate the negative impact of the Indo-US alliance, Pakistan faces three complex and challenging choices. Each of these options has benefits and disadvantages. These choices will significantly impact Pakistan's security, foreign policy, and overall strategic trajectory, requiring a well-thought-out strategy.

The first option is to fully align with China and gradually reduce dependence on the US and the West. This alliance provides Pakistan with a clear strategic focus, fortifying relationships with China and building long-term economic, military, and strategic cooperation. China's geographic proximity enhances Pakistan's security against Indian aggression, specifically in Kashmir. More importantly, aligning with China enables Pakistan to pursue multilateral agreements with other South Asian nations, thereby reducing the negative influence of India and the US in the region. However, overdependence on China could restrain Pakistan's flexibility in international relations and its impact on the global stage. Additionally, this option may distance Pakistan from the West, leading to diplomatic and economic setbacks. Closer ties with China might also heighten tensions with India, making prospects of peaceful dispute resolution even more difficult.

The second option is to maintain balanced relationships with the US and China. Historically, Pakistan has successfully managed this balance by hedging against both major powers. This strategy can also prevent overdependence on any single country, thereby allowing some independence in foreign policy decisions.

However, the intensifying GPC between China and the US and its allies makes this balancing option unsustainable. Both China and the US would increase pressure on Pakistan to choose a side. Moreover, this balancing strategy presents significant risks, as it could annoy both the great powers, leading to a loss of trust and support.

The third option is to ally with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific: India, Australia, and Japan. This alignment can open considerable economic opportunities for Pakistan, including increased trade, investment, and access to advanced technologies. This alignment might also bring stability and economic aid by resolving longstanding disputes with India, such as those over Kashmir, Siachen, Sir Creek, and water resources. In addition, Indo-Pak cooperation could reduce defence spending, enabling both countries to allocate more resources to socioeconomic development and poverty alleviation, thereby improving living standards in the region. However, given Pakistan and India's enduring rivalry and complexity arising from mutual distrust, this choice is the most difficult to pursue. Any rapprochement with India without resolving the core issue of Kashmir would provoke a strong domestic reaction, leading to internal instability. Additionally, aligning with India and the US could also severely impact Pakistan's sovereignty and national interests.

In essence, all three options present advantages and challenges. Every policy option will have consequences to navigate. Managing relations with both great powers appears ideal, but is challenging to navigate. Likewise, allying with either China or the US seems straightforward and clear, but comes with significant risks. Likewise, balancing relations with both China and the US may seem ideal, but is fraught with difficulties given the current global context. Eventually, Pakistan's policy choice will determine its future worldwide role and standing.

Conclusion

The Indo-US strategic alignment, driven by their common interests of countering and containing China's expanding influence, has changed the geopolitics of South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. Because of China's superior conventional forces and the persistent threat it poses to India, specifically in regions like Ladakh, India views the US as a critical ally that can help India defend its sovereignty against China. The US, in turn, views India's geographic advantage and strong military as an essential component of its Indo-Pacific strategy, especially when its traditional NATO allies are unable to support the US in its GPC with China. Thus, based on shared norms, democratic values, and strategic security interests, the US views India as a key player in its efforts to preserve the regional balance of power.

The implications of the Indo-US alliance are particularly significant for Pakistan, which views India as its primary adversary due to a history of conflicts and unresolved territorial disputes, particularly Kashmir. The deepening Indo-US ties have raised Pakistan's sense of insecurity and fears of strategic encirclement.

India's growing influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia further exacerbates these concerns, pushing Pakistan to strengthen its strategic and economic ties with China as a counterbalance. This dynamic has intensified the rivalry between India and Pakistan, with the potential for escalation in a region where both nations possess nuclear weapons, making the stakes of their competition extraordinarily high.

India's alignment with the US also complicates its relationship with China, adding another layer of complexity to South Asia's security environment. Periodic military standoffs along the Line of Actual Control, such as the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, underscore the ongoing border disputes that aggravate India-China rivalry. India's active participation in initiatives such as the Quad, alongside the US, Japan, and Australia, is perceived by China as a direct challenge to its regional ambitions. This perception heightens the risk of miscalculation, as China seeks to counterbalance India's growing influence through its own strategic partnership with Pakistan, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region.

The triangular relationship between India, Pakistan, and China creates a fragile and volatile security situation in South Asia, where any conflict between the two can escalate into a broader regional crisis. Pakistan's reliance on China, both as a strategic ally and an economic partner, fortifies Beijing's foothold in the region while challenging India's security calculus on two fronts. As the Indo-US partnership continues to deepen, driven by shared concerns over China's rise, it reinforces India's position as a regional power but also amplifies tensions with both Pakistan and China. In a region where nuclear capabilities loom large, the need for careful diplomacy and a conflict resolution mechanism is paramount to prevent destabilising escalations.

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