

RECALIBRATING US POLICY IN SOUTH ASIA POST-AFGHANISTAN: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The United States of America has held a significant position in global politics as a superpower from the end of the Cold War to the present day. The geopolitics of South Asia has been of strategic importance to world powers due to their short and long-term security and economic interests. The United States (US) approach toward the region has been a cause of concern for states, particularly India and Pakistan. As US interests change, it alters its regional alliance strategies, impacting the bilateral relations of regional states. Despite being an important non-NATO ally of the US, Pakistan could not secure its vital interests during the Cold War and after 9/11, leading to a relationship marked by suspicion and mistrust. On the other hand, India, though not a Cold War ally and not a frontline state in the US campaign against terrorism, has enjoyed a special status with the US. The evolving dynamics of South Asia and China's increasing role in the region have brought India and the US into closer cooperation, resulting in deep and widespread strategic engagement. This paper focuses on the implications of the US changing role in the region, the complexities following its withdrawal from Afghanistan, and its continued close ties with India. It also suggests that Pakistan should analyse its new security, political, and economic challenges and develop a comprehensive policy to address them appropriately.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Frontline State, Comprehensive Policy, Post-Withdrawal, Widespread Strategic Engagement.

Introduction

The South Asia region has always been a center of attention for major powers. Its strategic location and human resource attract the world powers to maintain their presence and influence in the region. Moreover, a visible presence in South Asia enables the major powers to attain their interests, influence, and supervision in Central Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Western powers were interested in making their colonies in the colonial era while Great Britain remained successful. After decolonisation and during the Cold War, the US began to take interest in South Asia to contain the expansion of the Soviets in the region. The US foreign policy towards South Asia earlier focused on politics and economics. Recently, the US had to tackle the challenges related to terrorism and maritime security due to China's increasing involvement in the Indian Ocean.

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Since the mid-nineteenth century, global politics has revolved around the US as it holds a unique status. After the Cold War, it became a superpower and maintains it today. The historical analysis reveals that the US underwent several transitional phases before attaining this dominant posture in world politics. The US cornerstone strategy of protecting its decisive interests can be traced back to the Spanish-American War of 1898. Since then, the US has been practising an aggressive approach toward the Caribbean and the Pacific regions to achieve its national and corporate interests.¹ From the 1950s to 1990, the US adopted the policy of making alliances in South Asia to contain the ideological expansion of communism. Over time, the geopolitical scenario of South Asia evolved, bringing new challenges, such as curtailing Chinese influence, protecting vital maritime routes, and maintaining the regional balance of power. The US policy took an aggressive turn in securing its commercial and national interests even though the use of nuclear weapons was also exercised at the end of the Second World War. After the Second World War, the region of South Asia underwent a significant geopolitical shift. The British were ready to grant independence to the subcontinent, and as a result, newly independent states such as India and Pakistan came into being in 1947. The US was ready to take an interest in South Asian states, particularly India and Pakistan. Initially, the US tried to play a balancing role between the two states as both had vastly different postures and were experiencing hostile relations. India, even though a new state emerged with ample economic and military resources. While Pakistan, with a feeble posture and numerous political, economic, and security challenges, was facing the threat of survival from India. In this scenario, US policy toward South Asia evolved through several phases of engagements and disengagements, reflecting its changing priorities and interests over time. The US overall policy toward South Asia has profoundly impacted South Asia's regional politics. After the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the emergence of the Interim Afghan Government (IAG), this recalibration of US policy has profound strategic implications for Pakistan. In the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the recalibration of US foreign policy toward South Asia demands Pakistan's ability to balance its ties with the US and China to determine its strategic relevance to the evolving South Asian order. This article has tried to find implications of US withdrawal from Afghanistan on regional security and counter-terrorism efforts, the future of Pak-US bilateral relations, particularly the security cooperation between the two states, the role of the Sino-Pak alliance in addressing the regional strategic calculus of Pakistan vis-à-vis the US, potential threats of Indo-US close ties on the strategic balance of power in South Asia and Pakistan's strategic role in the US foreign policy framework in securing US interests in the region.

The interpretive approach has been employed to understand the recalibration of the US policy towards South Asia, its choices in the region, and its subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan. The content analysis of scholarly articles, books, policy documents, and security reports helped explore the strategic implications of Pakistan's security and economic challenges. Focusing on contextual understanding and thematic data exploration helped get an in-depth analysis of the underlying dynamics of the history of Pak-US and Sino-Pak relations. It also helped to understand

Pakistan's recurring approach towards the US and its extensive collaboration with China. The methodology provided an imperative framework to understand the broader geopolitical landscape of the US shifting regional policies. The textual analysis is a source of valuable insights for Pakistan to formulate a comprehensive policy approach to meet security and economic challenges.

The US Policy for South Asia, the strategic realignment, and its implications on Pakistan's security can be primarily analysed through realist and neorealist perspectives. According to realism, the pursuit of power, security, and survival are supreme interests of a state in an anarchic international order.² US withdrawal strategy and widening partnership with India increase Pakistan's security challenges. The tilting balance of power in favour of India and the expected insurgency from Afghanistan pose threats to the internal instability of Pakistan. Pakistan's response to these challenges by strengthening ties with China, increasing economic cooperation, and adopting a pragmatic approach towards Afghanistan for regional balance can be understood through a realist lens. According to neorealism, states adopt strategies under the system of relative gains in the anarchic international system. An act of a state gaining advantage becomes the potential loss of another state.³ In the case of Pakistan and India, India's military modernisation and robust economic growth through Indo-US defence and economic ties are tilting the regional balance of power in favour of India and posing a serious threat to Pakistan's security. Therefore, Pakistan's response in case of enhancing military capabilities and economic collaboration through CPEC and BRI with China are counterbalance approaches to restore the regional balance.

Historical Background of the US Approach towards Pakistan & India

US foreign policy focused on containing communism and promoting capitalism after the end of the Second World War. Throughout the Cold War era, the US, to pursue its national interests, has been involved in regional alignments, security, and economic alliances. At the same time, important developments were also taking place in Asia and Africa. There was a process of decolonisation, and several nation-states emerged on the world map through protracted national movements from European colonial rule. In South Asia, the subcontinent was a British colony, and there were political movements to attain independence. British was facing economic challenges after fighting a long war and was ready to quit the subcontinent by acknowledging their right of self-determination, and two countries came into being: India and Pakistan.⁴ It was a Cold War Era, and the US approach towards newly independent countries was somewhat considered balanced as two independent states were established with different socioeconomic postures; India was an established state with proper infrastructure and ample economic and military resources, while Pakistan was suffering from enormous problems in political, financial and administrative structure. Pakistan was also facing security challenges and threats from India, and it was compelled to have a strong alliance to fulfil its economic and security needs. The two political and economic ideologies were locked in a struggle for planetary

hegemony. Amidst combating that geopolitical chess game, Pakistan and India had to manoeuvre their way to secure their survival and stability. Pakistan, facing severe internal and external security challenges and economic woes, sought a powerful ally to ensure its survival and bolster its position against India. Initially, the US wanted to ally with India due to its size, leadership, and potential to serve US interests. However, Pakistan's geographic location and the need for an ally against Soviet expansion led to a shift in US policy. Here are some important points that solidified Pak-US relations.

- Pakistan's border with the USSR made it an ideal location for spy missions, air strikes, and covert operations.
- This region's strategic importance for oil resources made Pakistan a valuable ally.
- Pakistan's geopolitical location suggested a future role in Middle Eastern affairs, especially concerning US oil interests.
- Pakistan holds significant potential for political influence in Muslim Ummah.

So, in a bipolar international system, the antagonism between the US and the Soviet Union contributed to formulating Pakistan and India's security and economic strategies. Security became the dominant feature of the bipolar world order, leading states to maximise their strength through conventional and nuclear weapons. As a part of a broader strategy towards the South Asian region, the US also recognised India's strategic importance by acknowledging its stable political environment and significant market potential. The US approach towards South Asia oscillates in nature and consists of different phases. Each phase points out the changing US interests and strategies. The implications of this varying strategy have a profound implication on South Asia's politics and security environment.

US Fluctuating Policies Toward South Asia

Throughout the Cold War, US policy for South Asia fluctuated due to changing priorities. After independence, both Pakistan and India were in a complex relationship due to the Kashmir issue. Initially, the US allied with Pakistan and supported it through military and economic aid. Pakistan's weak economic, political, and military conditions demanded a strong ally to deal with all the problems.⁵ A Military Assistant Advisory Group (MAAG) was established in Rawalpindi in October 1954, where a group of US military advisors were sent to assist and train Pakistan's conventional armed forces with able military aid. Pakistan joined the Western bloc by concluding the security and economic pacts in 1954 and 1955, respectively. Pakistan and the US also concluded a mutual defence agreement in 1954 and became the 'Most Allied Ally in Asia. It was a Pak-US strategic partnership in 1956 that Pakistan became part of worldwide US air bases to get air supremacy over the Soviet Union. The US secretly got Peshawar air station on lease to check the Soviet Union ballistic missile system.⁶ Then, there came a turn in US policy for South Asia, and in 1959, President Eisenhower visited India. This visit acknowledged the US for India's strategic posture in the wake of securing its economic and political interests. In the meantime, Sino-

India hostile relations in Tibet and the unresolved border issues culminated in the War of 1962. India secured Western support against China, and President Kennedy's Administration assisted India by providing weapons and economic aid. However, its close ties with the Soviet Union were the reason for Indo-US cold relations. India's differences with China led to India and the Indo-US mutual collaboration. In 1965, a full-scale war was launched between Pakistan and India, and the US neutral stance was a point of disappointment for Pakistan. The US became neutral and refused to give weapons to both states.⁷

The Nixon Administration can be characterised as a mixture of support and opposition towards Pakistan. In 1971, India and Pakistan once again entered into war. Pakistan requested the US for assistance against India in return for joining the Western bloc. The US did not provide help on time, and when it sent its aircraft as a gesture to support Pakistan and to control the situation, it was too late, and Bangladesh was established. It was when Pakistan and India were not satisfied with the US. In the 1970s, during the Sino-US rapprochement, Pakistan again played a key role in normalising the diplomatic relations between China and the US. It facilitated President Richard Nixon's visit to China. President Jimmy Carter adopted a pro-Indian policy during his tenure and treated Pakistan high-handedly. Pakistan was facing criticism on its nuclear programme. The US took punitive actions against Pakistan and was ordered to step down its nuclear programme. In 1979, the USSR encroaching on Afghanistan initiated the era of re-engagement between Pakistan and the US. It was the era of the Zia regime, and Pakistan received an aid package of US\$3.2 billion. It was the climax of Pak-US relations, where both countries were assisting the Afghan Taliban against the Soviet forces.⁸ It was a time when the US shifted its policy again, and Pakistan became relevant according to its changing goals.

US as a Superpower and South Asia

With the status of a superpower, the US initiated new policies and reshaped its strategy for South Asia. The US announced a new world order with a pledge to understand international relations challenges with an optimistic approach and introduce democratic norms in international and national politics. The US policy shifted towards South Asia and concentrated in the Middle East, which became the focus of attention for the superpower. In a changing scenario, Pakistan was ignored and subjected to various economic sanctions through the Pressler Amendment. Later, the Brown Amendment lowered the tension, and both states agreed to cooperate in military and economic sectors. While the Clinton Administration preferred India, both countries established a 'Defence Policy Forum'. The nuclear weapons test of 1998, earlier by India and then Pakistan, faced severe opposition from the US. Nuclearised South Asia was sanctioned through the Glen and Symington amendments, followed by the Pressler Amendment to impose economic sanctions.⁹ In 1999, Pakistan and India entered clashes on the issue of Kargil. The US supported India's narrative, followed by the military coup of General Musharraf on 12 October 1999, increasing the distance between both states. Pakistan faced sanctions on military and economic aid. The end

of the Cold War is characterised as the era of disengagement between Pakistan and the US. Indo-US relations improved, and the US removed all the embargoes on India in 2000, which were imposed after nuclear tests. Several agreements were signed between both states. Hence, in the post-Cold War era, the US pro-Indian approach was the main factor in US foreign policy.

The Incident of 9/11 and US Counterterrorism Strategy

The incidents of 9/11 changed the nature of the international security environment. The terrorist attacks on America hinted at the clash of civilisations. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the US foreign policy shifted and left South Asia and Afghanistan alone. Afghanistan, a war-torn state, was struggling with the instability. The ignored region of South Asia became the focus of attention to the strategic security of the US after 9/11 in 2001. The US alleged Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda of the terrorist attacks and started airstrikes on Afghanistan. Pakistan once again seemed to be a befitting option for conducting successful operations in Afghanistan along with its logistic support, including land and air bases. Under US pressure, Pakistan also changed its approach towards Afghanistan and became part of the coalition against the Taliban.¹⁰

The US focus on South Asia in the 21st century is linked with the International War on Terrorism. Pakistan again became the central stage of US strategic interests in the region. However, this cooperation was short due to other developments in the area. Drone attacks, misunderstanding, and suspicions between the US and Pakistan bilaterally parted their ways. Also, the Osama Bin Laden Operation and Salala Check Post Attack brought more stiffness to Pak-US relations.¹¹ It was a time when China began to rise in the first decade of the 21st Century, and its active involvement in the Indo-Pacific region was a matter of grave concern for the US. The US needed India to scrutinise China's increasing involvement in the South Asia region and restrain it in the Indian Ocean. The US policy for South Asia comprises strategies related to short-term and long-term objectives. The short-term objectives were firstly to manage the situation in Afghanistan by curbing the extremists and terrorist elements. Secondly, it is important to formulate and maintain the pro-US Afghan government. It also included elevating Afghanistan's economic and infrastructural stature. The long-term objectives seem to be China, and South Asia should not be the source of China's increasing political and economic rise. For that purpose, the US started developing strategic ties with India. India and China are two neighbouring rival states, and the latter's increasing political and economic status is India's special concern because China's development is detrimental to India in pursuing the mastery role in the region. India wants to contain China with the help of the US and the Western powers. Here, the US and India's interests converge, and a visible shift can be seen in US policy for the South Asian region. South Asia is a fragile region with the least connected states. The US wants to keep South Asian states away from Chinese influence, not side with the Chinese economy and connecting infrastructural projects such as BRI and the CPEC. Pakistan's cordial relations with China and their widening strategic

partnerships in security and economic sectors are unacceptable to the US. The US and India are apprehensive about Pakistan's regional approach in case of a deepening relationship with China. US hard stance on China and Pakistan's extensive cooperation with China brought several differences in Pak-US relations.¹²

Overview of US Involvement in Afghanistan

Afghanistan officially joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2007. However, throughout history, its internal politics, geopolitical scenario, and relations with major powers have largely impacted South Asia. After the British and Soviets, US involvement in Afghanistan started in 1979 to counter Communism when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. In securing this vital interest, the US extended its partnership with Pakistan in training and providing logistic support to Afghan Mujahideen fighters to counter the Soviet invasion. The largest covert operation launched by the CIA is called 'Operation Cyclone'. Pakistan played a central role in this campaign by solidifying its strategic importance. Eventually, Soviet forces had to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, putting an end to the Cold War and paving the way for the victory of the US and its allies. The US became the superpower and diverted its attention toward other global issues by whistling over Afghanistan. The incident of 9/11 is the aftermath of the US evading Afghanistan, which once again diverted its attention back to South Asia, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan became the most essential ally in the US war on terror, receiving substantial aid and military support. Pakistan, as a crucial state in the war on terror, faced the greatest challenges to its security and the economy. However, it could not satisfy US demands, and there were various issues in handling the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The US expanded its alleged counterterrorism campaign across South Asia, consisting of drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas. From here, Pak-US relations began to deteriorate, and the relationship was fraught with challenges, including mistrust and differing strategic priorities. It was when US foreign policy for South Asia again took a turn, and Indo-US relations strengthened significantly due to the China factor. China, the immediate neighbour of South Asia, began to take an interest in South Asia and the Indian Ocean to secure its economic, security, and energy interests. In this scenario, the US needed a new partner to maintain its influence and counterbalance China's increasing role in the region. The US presence in Afghanistan lasted nearly two decades, but it could not resolve the conflict; instead, it created widespread frustration among the American public and policymakers that the US could not secure its interest and sustainable peace in Afghanistan. This campaign was launched at the cost of significant human and financial loss in Afghanistan and also in Pakistan. As a result, the domestic pressure both on Democrats and the Republicans to end this two-decade war and bring the troops home resulted in the US exit strategy. In this longest American war, the US and its allies used every possible effort to eliminate the Taliban factor as a persuasive and significant stakeholder in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's resilience and potency were unshakeable. This made the US acknowledge that without including the Taliban in an inclusive strategy towards the peace process, peace cannot be restored in Afghanistan. There was also a realisation that the military

option was not the solution to Afghanistan's problems. For this purpose, an agreement was concluded in 2020 at Doha, and a framework was designed to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. Once again, the US shifted its policy from Afghanistan to another global impact generated by China's emerging posture in South Asia and beyond. In this changing scenario, Pakistan's role is narrowed for the US as Pakistan is part of several economic and security partnerships with China. At the same time, the US considers India the most favourable state in South Asia for containing the increasing involvement of China in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.¹³ Over the past two decades, US policy toward South Asia has focused on Pakistan and Afghanistan for the fulfilment of its vested interests in the region. After the exit of the US troops from Afghanistan, the US focus on Pakistan seems to be so much confined. The US seeks to ensure that Pakistan should not recognise Afghanistan's Taliban government, and that Pakistan should exert its influence on the Taliban's government for not providing safe havens to the terrorist organisations in Afghanistan.¹⁴

US Shifting Priorities: From Counterterrorism to Great Power Competition

In the post-withdrawal scenario, the US long-term strategy of counterterrorism for South Asia redirected towards countering the rising influence of China in the region. This shift requires a reevaluation of US alignments in South Asia. The US finds Pakistan's geostrategic location both a boon and a burden. Traditionally, Pakistan, from its position as a crucial ally for the US, receiving substantial military and economic aid, could not secure its vital status in the US new strategy of pivoting towards great power competition. As the US revised its policy, this new approach brought a significant shift in the regional dynamics of South Asia. In this scenario, Pakistan must reassess its policy and alliances within the region and beyond. US new priorities have political, security, economic, and humanitarian implications. The power vacuum left by the US in Afghanistan has led to increased instability and security challenges for neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan and India. An abrupt withdrawal and absence of an inclusive government, the political and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has resulted in a surge of refugees seeking asylum in neighbouring countries, particularly in Pakistan. In addition to this, there were potential fears of Afghanistan becoming a haven for terrorists and extremists like al-Qaeda and ISIS, which can undermine regional security, particularly causing a serious threat to Pakistan's security. Since 2021, there has been a wave of terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The frequent terrorist attacks in Baluchistan and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) point out Pakistan's concern about TTP's consolidated position in Afghanistan during the Taliban's government. Pakistan is also concerned that TTP's potential alliance with Al-Qaeda will endanger Pakistan's security. Despite Pakistan's requests for action against TTP, the Afghan Taliban advised negotiations, which failed. Consequently, TTP launched lethal attacks in ex-FATA and other regions, leading to Pakistani reprisals in Afghanistan. The UNSC noted many terrorist groups, including TTP, using Afghan training centres. Pakistan needs comprehensive, intelligence-based operations and regional collaboration to counter TTP's growing threat.¹⁵

The US focus on countering China and strengthening ties with India has further complicated Pakistan's strategic environment. This implication includes regional power dynamics in the case of the increasing influence of China, Russia, and Iran in restoring the power vacuity in Afghanistan left by the US. Regional countries might engage in new economic and political alliances, which were earlier with the US. US withdrawal has created a dynamic situation in South Asia requiring careful diplomatic and security strategies from regional and global powers to manage the evolving challenges and opportunities.

The China Factor

The strategic competitive standpoint of the US and China is significantly shaping the US foreign policy. The US National Security Strategy 2022 identifies China as a competitor to be countered at multiple levels. This competition influences US relationships with South Asian states. The China factor is the main reason for the Indo-US multidimensional collaboration. The increasing differences between Pakistan and the US, particularly concerning Pakistan's policies towards the Afghan Taliban, have led Pakistan to strengthen its relationship with China. Sino-Pak widespread engagement is not welcomed by the US, and it is narrowing its focus towards Pakistan. Pakistan's strategic and economic standing demands a major partner, and it is finding China a suitable option. This included significant economic and infrastructure development agreements and military and weapons technology advancements. Gwadar Port and CPEC projects are vital for Pakistan's economic and energy requirements. These Sino-Pak joint projects are mutual concerns of the US and India. For the US, Pakistan is paving the way for China to increase its influence in the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. The US and India oppose China's economic and connectivity project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which will increase Chinese penetration in Afghanistan and Central Asia. After getting evacuated from Afghanistan, the US is continuously monitoring Chinese activities in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. So, Sino-Pak joint ventures are a source of Pak-US sour relations. This situation requires a balancing approach for Pakistan towards China and the US to meet its regional and global vested interests.¹⁶ The US considers the Indo-Pacific region crucial for its national security. Therefore, it employs the cooperation and competition approach with China. The US National Security Strategy 2022 calls China a strategic competitor by pointing out leveraging measures and forming new alliances to counter China's regional influence. Therefore, the Biden administration favours India in securing its interests in the Indo-Pacific region and the US in deepening its cooperation to contain China by adopting a two-pronged strategy. This strategy includes forming bilateral partnerships and multilateral alliances to maintain its regional dominance and contain China's power. The formation of notable alliances includes the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) involving Australia, India, Japan, and the US, and the AUKUS (Australia & UK) pact to check China's naval activities in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁷

Indo-US Strategic Relations & Implications for Pakistan

In the post-withdrawal scenario, increasing Indo-US strategic ties is one of the most significant aspects. Historically, US strategy in South Asia has favoured India, with significant strategic convergence, but since its exit, this convergence has been boosted. There is a series of military and logistics support arrangements between India and the US consisting of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and Basic Change and Cooperation Agreement (BECA).¹⁸ All these agreements aimed at enhancing military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and technology transfer, significantly increasing India's defence capabilities. Pakistan is concerned about the implications of these agreements on regional power dynamics, fearing enhanced Indian military capabilities could lead to a more aggressive stance towards neighbouring states. Indian and US companies are directly connected through satellite communications, bypassing India's poor telecommunication system. Many Indian American computer specialists in the US have helped outsource software programming and research activities to India. Big US computer firms like Microsoft, Intel, IBM, Sun Microsystems, Adobe, Oracle, and Texas Instruments have established and expanded their operations in India. During a recent visit, Bill Gates announced that Microsoft would invest an additional US\$400 million in India. Indian IT revenues have grown the fastest in a decade, reaching US\$227 billion during the pandemic, with more than two-thirds of foreign sales going to the US.¹⁹

In response, Pakistan has sought closer ties with China, including cooperation in satellite systems for military applications. Meanwhile, the US has ignored India's military purchases from Russia and its stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, showing a clear strategic preference for India over Pakistan. The US-China strategic competition creates a dilemma for Pakistan, which, in the changing scenario, enjoys more substantial strategic convergence with China compared to the US. The Indo-US collaboration is weakening Pakistan-US relations and undermining the foundation of their security cooperation. US counterterrorism expectations from Pakistan conflict with regional realities, complicating bilateral relations. The current low in Pakistan-US relations requires rethinking to create a narrowly defined yet functional relationship based on mutual interests rather than transient strategic needs.

US Post-Withdrawal Course of Action

The US course of action in post-withdrawal from Afghanistan is critically imperative toward South Asia for its vested interests in the region. China's role influences this course of action in the Indo-Pacific region. The US has serious concerns over China's emerging posture, which it alleges is China's 'seize and lead' approach to potentially play a leadership role in the Indo-Pacific region. In this situation, the US prioritises its Indo-Pacific strategy to counterbalance China's role by strengthening its partnership with India. The US views the region of South Asia as part of the larger

Indo-Pacific region, where the US finds Pakistan a close ally of China with long-term economic and security collaboration, contributing to China's advancing roles in the region. This situation makes India the focal point of the US recalibration policy towards South Asia, deepening its military, economic, and technological partnerships with India. This widespread cooperation is detrimental to Pakistan as it is enhancing India's regional dominance. India's elevated status is further complicating the regional balance of power, raising the security interests of Pakistan, complicating the Kashmir issue, and also the regional arms race. There has been a considerable reduction in Pakistan's financial assistance from the US, and Pakistan has been directed to seek IMF support. The US also discouraged Pakistan's involvement in CPEC and Chinese access to Gwadar Port.²⁰

Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, Pakistan-US relations are influenced by the US strategic interests in India and Afghanistan, posing challenges for Pakistan. There is a history of the US approach toward Pakistan: the US did not consider Pakistan an independent strategic partner. Instead, it was subjected to its interests and concerns relating to the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, India, and China. The article suggests that for a sustainable relationship, the US should independently recognise Pakistan's strategic value rather than address other regional concerns. In post-withdrawal South Asia, Pakistan is facing challenges in its policy toward Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Pakistan also faces challenges in adopting a balancing approach toward the US and China. Indo-US increasing military and security cooperation also poses challenges to regional balance, which is tilting in favour of India. Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan are also troublesome due to border disputes and cross-border terrorism, which are affecting the internal situation of Pakistan. Even though Pakistan has been continuously supporting Afghanistan in the dialogue process of all stakeholders' prior withdrawal scenario. Pakistan supported establishing an inclusive Afghan government. Since September 2021, even in a post-exit situation, after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Pakistan has been concerned about Afghanistan's subsequent measures to control the refugee influx, and the infiltration of militants has caused friction between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan is not satisfied with Afghanistan's strategy of taking strict measures against Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its affiliates. Meanwhile, the US is also pressuring Pakistan to have a check on Taliban rule so that Afghan territory cannot turn into a haven for the militants. All these developments are so sensitive that Pakistan fears turning the Afghanistan government into a potential adversary rather than an ally in the region.

The study suggests the following actionable recommendations for Pakistan:

- Pakistan may prioritise its regional and global challenges and alliance-making to achieve its economic and security challenges. Pakistan's concerns in securing the power calculus in South Asia and ensuring collective self-defence with the neighbouring countries are necessary.

- Pakistan may adopt a considerate and tactful diplomatic approach regionally and globally. Pakistan may engage in a constructive dialogue process at bilateral and multilateral platforms to convince the stakeholders of shared challenges.
- Pakistan is facing economic challenges. It relies on China for its economic requirements, which is unacceptable for the US-led West. Pakistan must diversify its economic partnerships to balance its regional and global requirements. Pakistan also needs to invest in its technology and infrastructure sectors, as they are necessary to complement its economic interests and meet global standards.
- Pakistan's geostrategic location grants it leverage for trade and economic activities. For trade and economic partnerships, it may build relations with neighbouring countries, including Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. This will reduce its dependency on a single power and help it achieve regional alignment beyond China. Apart from CPEC, the Transit Trade Agreement with Afghanistan and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) should also be given attention to generating economic growth in the region.
- Pakistan may also revise its security and defence policy by increasing its defence cooperation with Turkey, Iran, and Russia, including military ties and arms procurement. It will diversify its security needs and alliances.
- Pakistan may seek and engage in targeted diplomacy with the West, particularly with the European Union, to combat terrorism and increase regional stability.
- Pakistan is in dire need of restoring its internal stability through bringing political stability and governance. A conducive environment for investment and economic development will only be possible by ensuring the rule of law and democratisation of its institutions.

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