



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Navigating US-South Asia Relations: Strategic Interests and Future Trajectories**

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Sundas Khizar and <sup>2</sup>Wazir Zafar Hassan \*

1. Visiting Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Researcher, Fellow at Teach for Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author: [sundas.khizar@yahoo.com](mailto:sundas.khizar@yahoo.com)

**ABSTRACT**

The research article objective to explore the strategic interest of the US in South Asia, particularly after the 9/11 incident, which brought a change in the nature of strategic interests. The United States has maintained a strategic interest in South Asia since the Cold War, with the nature of the relationship evolving alongside geopolitical shifts. The US has several strategic interests in South Asia, including preventing security threats to the US, countering China's growing influence, and promoting cooperation through alliances and trade. To understand the nature of the relationship, the qualitative research methodology, drawing on secondary sources such as academic journals, news articles, and government reports are been used under the descriptive and analytical approach. The work concluded by discussing the future prospects of the US-South Asia relationship and the implications of relationship for the region and the world. Which emphasizes the need of continued cooperation and engagements to address the challenges and grab the opportunities at the diplomatic, economic and strategic ends that can ensure stability in the region.

**KEYWORDS** China, Cold War, Great Power Politics, South Asia, Strategic Interests, US

**Introduction**

USA has deep strategic interests in South Asia. In the past USA keen interest was to save South Asia from communist regime but after Cold War there are many geopolitical and strategic changes which attract USA towards South Asia (Muzaffar, & Khan, 2016). Currently, the United States' interests in South Asia can be divided into three categories: one, to maintain strategic balance and stability between the two nuclear-armed nations in the region; two to protect their own interests in the region due to China's expanding influence and impact on global order; and three, to protect the interests in Afghanistan. South Asia remained the significant region but emerging global competition added the regional importance and this comes up with many regional dynamics shift. The US shifted its attention from traditional concerns to contemporary dynamics. The US's most important South Asian strategy throughout the last decade of the 20th century was India and Pakistan's control of lethal weapons and their avoidance of any action that may undermine both regional security and global stability, meanwhile make significant peace efforts for Afghanistan and after Taliban 2.0 these concerns become substantial. This paper has focused these new dynamics and USA strategic interests in the region.

**Literature Review**

The writer explain after the Cold War, US foreign policy goals in South Asia were focused on economic liberalization, non-proliferation, and promotion of democracy. The 9/11 terrorist attacks, which killed around three thousand people, dramatically changed the US policy towards South Asia (Muzaffar, et. al., 2018). The US engaged both India

and Pakistan; India offered its full support to the US in counter-terrorism efforts, while Pakistan became the front-line ally of the US in the War on Terror. In response to Pakistan and India's commitment to support the War on Terror, the US waived sanctions previously imposed on them. In 2002, the US also extended \$624.5 million in development assistance to Islamabad, while New Delhi received \$164.3 million in development aid (Guihong, 2003)

The US started counterterrorism efforts in South Asia by launching a military campaign, Operation Enduring Freedom, in Afghanistan to dismantle Al-Qaeda and to oust the Taliban regime that gave shelter to Al Qaeda leadership, including Osama Bin Laden. The military presence in the region, especially in Afghanistan, increased significantly, and Washington increased its military and economic aid to Pakistan. The US-India relationship also saw a shift, and the strategic relationship between them was put on hold as the key focus of the US was on Pakistan at that time. However, when the US Navy Seals, in a secret operation, killed the Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the relations between the US and Pakistan deteriorated as Pakistan was called for playing a double game by supporting the terrorists (Guihong, 2003).

Cohen in his writing highlighted the another concern of the US was the presence of nuclear weapons in the region, as Pakistan and India both had become de facto nuclear powers. The US was focused on preventing nuclear proliferation and ensuring the nuclear weapons may not fall into the wrong hands, which could put the whole world in danger. The Kargil conflict was an incident where two nuclear powers were in direct confrontation, causing fear of nuclear escalation (Cohen, 2004b).

Rasheed has explain in his work that the US strategic interests in South Asia after 9/11 were also influenced by the rise of China as an economic and global power when China started to exert its influence in the region. China expanded its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Pakistan by launching the Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013. China's rising influence in the region and globally is considered a potential threat to the interest of the US. Washington sought to strengthen economic and defense partnerships with regional countries such as India to counter this challenge. Since then, the US-India relationship has seen new heights. India, Australia, Japan, and the US are stepping up defense ties under Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly known as QUAD, which is focused on countering China (Rasheed, 2020).

## **Material and Methods**

Research methodology is seen as a powerful strategy that helps to carry out right and accurate investigation of any problem. In this study, the researcher adopted a qualitative research methodology based on descriptive and analytical approach on the given issue and engaged secondary research to gather data. The type of sources used in this particular literature review comprises of journals, Newspaper articles and government publications and they are all secondary sources that enable the topic to be fully understood. The analysis of the dynamics shows that the identified qualitative approach enables conducting a critical assessment of the intricate processes at play and, therefore, offering a proper understanding of strategic interests in South Asia. Also, this method enables the researcher to discover patterns and trends that may not be easily recognizable through quantitative analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **US Presence in South Asia and Great Power Perspective**

The United States has maintained its strategic presence in the South Asian region for a long time, and the nature of interests changes with geo-political shifts (Muzaffar, et. al., 2017). The presence of the US in South Asia could be traced back to the Cold War era when the US wanted to establish ties with the newly independent states to counter the potential edge of communism. During that time, the US was focused on Cold War politics and aimed to contain the spread of communism in the region. Pakistan accepted the US bloc and became a military ally of the United States. This closeness resulted in India's moving towards the USSR (Kux, 1992). The Cold War era saw allied US and Pakistan against the Soviet Union and India in the subcontinent. In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the US saw it as an opportunity to counter the communist threat and increased its involvement in the region. The US provided military assistance and financial support to the Mujahideen with the help of Pakistan. After the dismantling of the USSR, there was limited engagement (Ansar, 2023).

However, after the 9/11 attacks 2001, the United States focus in South Asia dramatically changed. The US launched the War on Terror and started a military campaign to oust the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and to dismantle Al-Qaeda in the region. Pakistan became the frontline ally of the US in the war on terror. The US then focused on counterterrorism, regional stability, and economic development. Terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISKP are considered to be a threat to the United States. After the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in 2021, these terror outfits are gaining ground in Afghanistan (Kugelman, 2016).

Meanwhile, China's rise challenging the hegemony of the United States caught the attention of US policymakers. To counter the rising influence of China in the region, the US started to engage and strengthen ties with regional countries like India. For this strategic reason, The US has increased its economic and defense ties with India. The emergence of India as a regional power in South Asia lies in the interest of the United States. China is increasing its influence in the region by expanding economic ties with regional countries such as Pakistan regarding CPEC, the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Now, there is a struggle for dominance between the US and China in the region (Weitz, 2017).

The presence of the US in South Asia reveals the strategic interests at stake. The US wants to keep its influence in the region to counterbalance the newly emerged threat, China. From the great power perspective, China holds a significant place in the US Foreign Policy that forces the US to engage with other countries in the region like India. In the contemporary geopolitics South Asia and the Indian Ocean region holds a great significance and a major arena of great powers rivalry. In the era of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States were great powers who competed for dominance in the region. Today, the region's dynamics are shaped by the competition between China and India and China US rivalry. Beijing has increased its presence and influence in almost every South Asian country and the Indian Ocean, exacerbating China-India and China-US rivalry. These power completions will have the biggest effect on the region. There are some other global powers who have strategic or economic interests in the region such as Japan, Russia, and a few European Countries, such as France and the United Kingdom (UK). The great powers will seek to protect their interest by playing their respective roles in the power competition while smaller states in the region hope to take advantage of major power rivalries. The US from the great power perspective will likely to influence and shape the geopolitical landscape of the region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

As the great power rivalry between the United States and China intensifies, some experts of geopolitics speculate that a new Cold War has started but this time the USSR

is replaced by China. Like the Cold War era, the US cannot force Asian countries to choose sides but the US needs to engage with South Asian countries. Asia has become a major venue of Sino- American rivalry. South Asia's close geography to China has given edge to China to influence in the region. In the context of Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries have become economically interdependent on China. The US cannot afford to let China dominate the whole region. Since 2017, the administration of President Trump and President Biden have decided to use Washington's leverage in the region's government to distance from China. Biden through American diplomacy in the region has made new commitments of cooperation in economy and security (Brazinsky, 2024).

The Asian perspective on the US presence in South Asia encompasses many perceptions of the strength, presence, and strategic approach of the United States throughout the region. Several Asian nations place importance on America's economic and security involvement, yet there exists apprehension regarding the competition between the United States and China, as well as the potential risks associated with coercing countries to align with one side or the other. Asian countries do not want them to force to pick sides (Stromseth, 2019).

The United States possesses a diverse range of interests in the South Asian region, which encompass the promotion of democratic values and stability, the combating international terrorism, and the preservation of a favorable strategic environment (Rocca, 2004). Nevertheless, the escalation of the US-China rivalry has witnessed a substantial intensification in the Southeast Asian region over the last year, arousing concern among numerous Asian nations. Asian countries are observing with concern. To preserve its position as a prominent global power, Washington should be judicious in its approach to challenging Chinese influence in the Asian region, which is anticipated to serve as the primary arena for the emerging Sino-American conflict (Brazinsky, 2024).

China is growing its military capabilities, expanding its influence in the regional economy, and establishing strong diplomatic relationships throughout Asia. In many regions of Asia, there exists an underlying notion that the United States is now falling short in addressing the prevailing circumstances. The previously mentioned judgment is particularly evident in the context of economic matters, as the United States currently finds itself out of the two primary trade agreements in the region, namely the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016).

### **China Factor in US Interest in South Asia**

The growing influence of China in the South Asian region is currently causing significant transformations and impacting the strategic interests of the United States. Both the United States and China consider South Asia to be a crucial geopolitical priority. It is acknowledged that the strategic geography and increasing population of South Asia, along with the concerns of nuclear proliferation and terrorism, require significant attention and all resources. The region of South Asia holds significant importance in relation to the objectives of both Washington and Beijing. Washington aims to establish a free and open Indo-Pacific, while Beijing seeks to reshape the political and security dynamics of Eurasia and assert its dominance in Asia. The ongoing phase of strategic competition between China and the United States, with a potential duration exceeding many decades, is expected to have a significant impact on the evaluations and involvements of both nations in the South Asian region (USIP China-South Asia Senior Study Group, 2020).

The presence of bilateral competition and hostility in South Asia poses challenges to promoting cooperation in the region. The presence of mutual suspicion over the operations of each party in the region hinders the potential for long-term collaboration beyond just verbal expressions. In the context of crisis management, nonproliferation, and terrorism, the presence of opposing views of culpability is a significant obstacle to reaching consensus and effectively executing joint initiatives. Notably, China tends to align itself with Pakistan, while the United States frequently finds common ground with India. Consequently, establishing mutual agreement and successfully implementing collaborative measures becomes increasingly complex. In the context of Afghanistan, both China and the United States share mutual objectives of curtailing the spread of global terrorism and attaining a political resolution to end decades of armed hostilities. However, the approaches adopted to attain these objectives exhibit variations in practical implementation (USIP China-South Asia Senior Study Group, 2020).

Chinese President Xi Jinping, in his address during the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, expressed China's intention to enhance its relationships with neighboring countries based on the principles of amity, sincerity, mutual benefits, and inclusiveness. Furthermore, he emphasized China's commitment to fostering friendship and partnerships with its neighboring nations (Xi, 2017).

In the South Asian region, China is actively pursuing the expansion of its economic activities and exerting its influence. This includes efforts to strengthen its strategic presence, establish safe overland energy routes as alternatives to vulnerable marine chokepoints, and counterbalance India's growing prominence through strategic encirclement. Beijing primarily utilizes its economic strength to attain these objectives and strengthened its diplomatic and defence ties with nations across the region, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) significantly emphasizes South Asia as a pivotal region. Since taking office in 2013, Xi Jinping's leadership in China has facilitated the signing of investment contracts worth more than \$100 billion in South Asia, with Pakistan accounting for almost half of this amount. Beijing has an interest in maintaining stability in Afghanistan regarding the infiltration of extremism into its western region via the Wakhan Corridor. The Wakhan Corridor extends from Eastern Afghanistan to the border of China (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022).

In recent years, the United States has characterized China as its "greatest strategic competitor" and has implemented a more assertive approach in response to the expanding influence of Beijing. The increased assertiveness of Washington has received widespread approval from domestic audiences in the United States. However, the growing tensions between the United States and China pose a significant risk of becoming a security problem in the South Asian region. During the ongoing battle, it is imperative for both Washington and Beijing to exercise precautions to prevent exacerbating pre-existing rivalries in the region. The initial measure involves the prevention of a burgeoning weapons race (M. Khan, 2022).

Furthermore, the provision of Chinese aid to the Pakistani nuclear arsenal program, the shifting inclinations of Nepali political parties, particularly following the establishment of a secular republican system favoring China, and growing connections between China and neighboring nations (Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka) have raised concerns for the United States. In recent years, China has been progressively expanding its influence in the South Asian region. Many nations within the region have been struggling with political instability, leading to a gradual decline in their economic strength. Hence, all states actively seek opportunities to restore economic

and political stability. Due to the lack of favorable backing from other nations, they seek assistance from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beijing is ready to assist both verbally and via concrete actions (Adhikari, 2014).

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The competitive and contentious facets of international relations are the main emphasis of realism. It highlights how governments operate in anarchic international systems as logical players looking to maximize their security and power. US's operations in South Asia in order to neutralize China's influence, prevent security threats, and advance trade and alliances highlight the realist perfect over the new dynamics in the region. The US has strategically maneuvered to maintain its dominance and influence in the region.

A strong foundation for comprehending the US's strategic goals in South Asia after 9/11 is provided by realism, which emphasizes power dynamics and security concerns in anarchic international systems. The US has increased its military presence, launched counterterrorism initiatives, and forged strategic alliances, notably with India, to oppose China's expanding influence and preserve its dominance in the region. In order to increase its influence, this strategy balances power, stops nuclear proliferation, and develops economic relationships. The US wants to project influence, protect its interests as a nation, and preserve a stable power balance in an area of great geopolitical importance (Walt, 2018).

### **Pakistan's and Afghanistan as vital organ in US-South Asia Dynamics**

Pakistan and Afghanistan have a distinctive role within the United States' South Asia policy, primarily owing to their geographical proximity and historical ties with the US. The US-Pakistan relationship has been shaped by Washington's needs in Afghanistan over the past two decades (Gallagher, 2021). Following the military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the United States' focus on Pakistan has become constrained. The United States aims to guarantee that Pakistan refrains from officially recognizing the Taliban regime and effectively utilizes its influence to deter the provision of sanctuaries to terrorist organizations by the Taliban. The United States additionally persists in urging Pakistan to undertake resolute measures against terrorist groups, while concurrently exploring opportunities for collaborative engagement with Pakistan in domains of shared concern, such as counterterrorism.

The bilateral relationship between the United States and Pakistan has been characterized by a complex and often disappointing relationship since 1947, which underwent significant phases throughout the two-decade-long U.S.-led War on Terror in Afghanistan. The United States' considerations on the future of Afghanistan are of strategic importance. However, it is equally crucial for the United States to take into account the course and decisions made by Pakistan in the years to come. There exist multiple factors contributing to this phenomenon. Pakistan is classified as a nuclear-armed nation, and the existing hostility between India and Pakistan makes it one of the riskiest geopolitical hotspots globally. Furthermore, Pakistan has substantial religious, cultural, and economic connections with other Muslim nations, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. In addition, Pakistan's technology sector exhibits growth while encountering substantial political and economic challenges. The youthful demographic composition and global dispersion of Pakistani medical practitioners, scientists, scholars, and other skilled individuals have progressively assumed a significant role within the international community (Nagata & Votel, 2021). Since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1947, the United States has engaged in extensive collaboration with Pakistan

across a diverse range of areas. These include but are not limited to energy, trade and investment, health, energy, climate crisis, as well as efforts towards Afghanistan stabilization and counterterrorism. The trade and investment ties between the United States and Pakistan are experiencing steady growth. The U.S. government actively encourages this relationship through various means, such as arranging trade delegations between businesses, offering technical assistance, and facilitating business prospects for American companies to establish commercial partnerships with Pakistani counterparts (U.S Department of State, 2022). Pakistan has implemented measures to address militant groups and United Nations-designated terrorist organizations through its National Action Plan against terrorism, focusing on counterterrorism and internal security. Nevertheless, the enforcement of United Nations sanctions targeting these businesses exhibits inconsistency. The United States continuously urges Pakistan to adopt resolute measures against terrorist groups, while also exploring opportunities for collaboration with Pakistan in areas of shared concern, such as counterterrorism and border security (U.S Department of State, 2022).

After the events of September 11, President Musharraf strongly condemned the terrorist acts and expressed Pakistan's willingness to collaborate in the global efforts to combat terrorism. Hence, the Bush administration's appeal for Pakistan's assistance in the counterterrorism efforts was almost certain to be accommodated. Pakistan played a key role in Operation Enduring Freedom by collaborating on intelligence sharing with the United States, granting access to its air space, and offering logistical assistance, which includes the provision of three air bases. In his public statement on February 13, 2002, President Bush recognized the significant contribution of Pakistan, highlighting President Musharraf's exceptional leadership qualities and characterizing Pakistan as a pivotal ally in the worldwide fight against terrorism (Akram, 2002).

In a congressional testimony, General Frank McKenzie, the commander of U.S. Central Command, highlighted the strategic significance of the air boulevard, a term used to describe the aerial route employed by the United States over western Pakistan in the past two decades. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of specific landlines of communication in supporting military operations. In the upcoming days, collaborative efforts will be taken with the Pakistani counterparts to examine the nature and dynamics of the future relationship between the two entities. The military commander was referring to the air lines of communication (ALOCs) and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that Pakistan has extended to the United States throughout the past two decades of the War on Terror (Iqbal, 2021).

Pakistan and the United States collaborated in many aspects, including the provision of logistical support, intelligence sharing, and the capture and extradition of individuals affiliated with al-Qaida. According to Christine Fair's book titled "The Counterterror Coalitions: Cooperation with Pakistan and India," U.S. officials have acknowledged that Pakistan has demonstrated a greater level of support, captured a larger number of terrorists, and deployed more troops compared to any other nation within the Global Counterterrorism Force (GCTF). Additionally, Pakistan has implemented a policy of restricting access to its western border and has designated two navy bases, three air force bases, and its airspace as operational areas for the United States military (Hussain, 2005).

After its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States seeks to ensure that Pakistan avoids officially acknowledging the Taliban regime and effectively employs its influence over them to bring about compromises pertaining to the rights of women and girls' education, as well as the establishment of an inclusive government. However, it is

noteworthy that the provisional government formed by the Taliban consists solely of male members and lacks inclusivity. The United States' exit from Afghanistan may have provided an opportunity to reconsider a bilateral relationship that has been shaped by Pakistan's western neighbor for the previous 40 years. However, with the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, the relationship between America and Pakistan became uncertain and anticipated that there will be less interest in Washington to actively involve Pakistan on many issues in the future if Afghanistan remains engulfed in war. The U.S.-Pakistan relationship is currently facing significant challenges, indicated by apparent warning signs that the potential for collaboration between the two nations has lessened (Afzal, 2021).

Pakistan faces significant problems in developing policy towards Afghanistan, which is currently under the control of the Taliban. Despite Pakistan's ongoing support for Afghanistan, the Taliban's military takeover and subsequent diplomatic and economic isolation may potentially transform Afghanistan's new government into an enemy rather than an asset for Pakistan. The influence of Islamabad seems to have decreased subsequently to the Taliban's takeover of power in mid-August 2021. The measures taken by Pakistan to safeguard its border with Afghanistan, with the aim of preventing the entry of refugees and the infiltration of militants operating from Afghanistan, have already been a subject of disagreement. Islamabad is increasingly concerned about the Taliban's apparent unwillingness to cut ties with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, and its counterparts in Pakistan. The Taliban, initially, seemed to exert influence over Pakistan's policy decisions, compelling Islamabad to make some concessions regarding cross-border mobility and urging it to engage in negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban (Crisis Group, 2022). The primary objective of the United States in Afghanistan is to prevent the country from serving as a haven for terrorist organizations that pose a threat to the United States and its allies. Additionally, the aim is to mitigate the possibility of Afghanistan falling back into a state of civil conflict, as such a scenario would have destabilizing consequences for the entire region (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

### **India' Rising Economic Profile and US Interests**

Before the late 1990s, the United States often ignored India, perceiving it as a regional power in South Asia that held limited significance on the global stage. India's economy, which was characterized by its fragility and protectionist measures, resulted in little impact on global markets. Additionally, its nonaligned foreign policy occasionally led to strained relations with the United States. When the United States focused its attention on India, it frequently focused primarily on India's military competition with Pakistan. From 1991 onwards, India adopted a series of economic liberalization measures, which facilitated the inflow of foreign investment and resulted in substantial economic growth. Currently, it holds a significant role in global economic decisions as a member of both the G-20 and the G-8 + 5 (consisting of the G-8 nations along with the five prominent developing countries). Furthermore, there is a possibility that it may secure a permanent position on the United Nations Security Council in the future. The trajectory of India has significantly diverged from that of Pakistan (Feigenbaum, 2010).

India's economy has seen significant growth in recent years, ranking it as one of the most growing economies globally. Moody's, a prominent global rating agency, has revised its growth projection for India in the year 2023, increasing it from 5.5 percent to 6.7 percent. The economic expansion of India may be attributed to several key factors, such as a growing middle class, a young and well-educated labor force, and a conducive



business environment. India's geopolitical location at the crossroads of the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, along with its growing population that has overtaken that of China, renders it an important player for the United States within the broader Asian region (Yaseen, et. al., 2023). The United States has a vested interest in India due to its potential impact and influence on worldwide (Cohen, 2004). As a result of its economic expansion, India has gained the capacity to address matters of vital geopolitical and economic importance to Washington. The United States has increasingly been invested in the ongoing process of Indian reform and achievement, particularly due to their contributions to global economic growth, advocacy for market-oriented economic policies, efforts to protect the global commons, and maintenance of a mutually beneficial balance of power in the Asian region. New Delhi, in its pursuit, desires a collaborative relationship with the United States that would assist in facilitating India's rise as a significant global power (Feigenbaum, 2010a).

India continues to pursue measures to enhance its presence in Southeast Asia, enabling nations to counterbalance China's dominant influence within the region. India has recently shown a greater degree of commitment in its engagement with Southeast Asia. According to Harsh V. Pant, the Vice President for Studies and Foreign Policy at Observer Research Foundation, a think tank located in New Delhi, it is indisputable. The inception of India's 'Look East' policy can be traced back to 1991, before the emergence of China's increasing assertiveness as an important problem in Southeast Asia (Bala, 2023).

The ongoing strategic confrontation between the United States and China, which has attracted significant attention in foreign policy discussions, is accompanied by another significant struggle that holds strategic importance for the United States. The rivalry between India and China in South Asia, extending from the Himalayas to the islands in the Indian Ocean, is of vital significance for the success of Washington's plan to maintain a "free and open" region, protecting it against Chinese exertion. Currently, it is encouraging to note that New Delhi, a closer ally of the United States, has mostly achieved success in countering the growing influence of Beijing in the region. The primary concern of New Delhi is that Beijing, with whom it has experienced repeated conflicts along its contested land boundary in the Himalayas, intends to establish a network of alliances in order to strategically encircle India both on land and at sea. Ultimately, China aims to replace India as the prevailing force in the South Asian region (Grossman, 2023).

The growing geopolitical significance of India is seen in its increasing standing both within its regional context and on the global stage. For example, the bilateral relations between the United States and India are currently stronger than at any previous point in history. The duo has progressively come to perceive themselves as "two pillars of a free and open Indo-Pacific." There is an apparent rise in the strategic significance of numerous new alliances in critical defense domains, with a notable proportion being instigated by the United States. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin said these collaborative endeavors with India are "operating and coordinating more closely together than ever," emphasizing their importance (Kumar, 2019).

### **Nuclear threats from South Asia and the US interests**

Over the past decade, there has been an ongoing trend of escalating hostility and aggression between the nuclear-armed nations in South Asia, resulting from longstanding conflicts. These regional shifts serve as indicators and triggers for significant geopolitical transformations, initiating a worldwide strategic conflict between China and the United States. The bilateral relations between the United States and

Pakistan in South Asia have become strained, while simultaneously witnessing the strengthening of ties between the United States and India, as well as between China and Pakistan. The current situation in the region is characterized by an intensifying and increasingly complex polarization. The presence of global competitiveness worsens regional conflicts and limits the availability of crisis mediation alternatives.

The emergence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime poses a significant risk to strategic security in South Asia, alongside other regional events. In essence, the convergence of these catastrophic dynamics manifests in an unpredictable manner. The ongoing problems between India and Pakistan, the instances of border conflict between China and India, and the resurgence of terrorist threats have been subjects of worry. The United States has expressed apprehension regarding the nuclear threats emerging from South Asia, mostly driven by the potential risk of nuclear weapons being acquired by unauthorized entities. The current state of affairs in Afghanistan has added a layer of complication to the matter, as the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 provided safe havens for terrorist groups (F. H. Khan, 2022). The United States has strategic interests in the region, including countering the threat of terrorism, maintaining stability, and avoiding the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Pakistan, a nation possessing nuclear capabilities, has been a subject of concern for the United States as a result of its historical record of political instability and its association with terrorist organizations. The United States has maintained a longstanding presence in the region, with an important instance being its support of the Afghan Mujahedeen throughout the 1980s in their resistance against the Soviet Union. The United States has actively participated in efforts aimed at establishing stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan, using both military and diplomatic strategies (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2010). India, a nation possessing nuclear weapons, has emerged as a significant actor in the United States' strategic pursuits inside the South Asian region. India possesses an impressive conventional military capability, which provides a significant level of security against potential threats from China and Pakistan. Consequently, the utility of nuclear weapons for India may be subject to debate, as their importance could be diminished. Nevertheless, India continues to perceive the necessity of maintaining its nuclear arsenal as a result of the existence of neighboring states equipped with nuclear capabilities. The United States has recognized the imperative of addressing the menace of terrorism as a significant strategic concern inside the area. The presence of militants in Pakistan and Afghanistan presents a significant and immediate danger to the United States and its allies. Furthermore, it poses a potential risk to the stability of Pakistan, a nation possessing nuclear capabilities, which now maintains distrustful relations with its rival, India.

### **Conclusion and**

The strategic goals of the United States in South Asia have changed dramatically over time, from counterterrorism and balancing China's influence after 9/11 to the containment of communism during the Cold War. In order to preserve regional supremacy and counterbalance China, the United States has reinforced its military and economic relations with India. This is an example of how realism emphasizes the significance of power dynamics and strategic alliances. The United States of America is aware of the geopolitical and economic importance of Pakistan and India, is working to resolve the complications in its relationship with Pakistan, and have great interest to utilize the Pakistan's to sort out Taliban crisis. In order to protect its interests and maintain regional peace, the United States must take a strategic and nuanced approach to South Asia because of its importance and geopolitical significant in the emerging dynamic.

## **Recommendations**

Here are some recommendations

- Promote and strengthen economic cooperation based on trade liberalization, investments, and joint projects to increase economic development and security in the region.
- Sustain and strengthen cooperation with SA nations to meet the security threats, balance contradicting big powers.
- Favour policies that enhance the peace, security, and stability of South Asia including conflict management and counter terrorism.
- Participate in different international organizations and call for cooperation in regard to shared problems and views on the prospective gains.

## Reference

- Adhikari, R. P. (2014). China in South Asia. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issue*, 18(2), 144–151.
- Afzal, M. (2021). *Post Afghanistan, US-Pakistan relations stand on the edge of a precipice*. Brooking Institute.
- Akram, Z. (2002). Pakistani-US Relations after 9/11: A Pakistani Perspective. *Geo. J. Int'l Aff.*, 3, 115.
- Ansar, A. (2023). Great Power Rivalry in South Asia. *Defence Journal*, 25(09), 57.
- Bala, S. (2023, August 14). *India is a rising force in Southeast Asia as region seeks to counter China's dominance*. CNBC.
- Brazinsky, G. (2024). *US-China Rivalry in Asia and Africa: Lessons from the Cold War*. United States Institute of Peace.
- Brooks, S. G., & Wohlforth, W. C. (2016). *America abroad: The United States' global role in the 21st century*. Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, S. P. (2004a). *India: Emerging power*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cohen, S. P. (2004b). Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear War in South Asia: Unknowable Futures. *South Asia in the World: Problem Solving Perspectives on Security, Sustainable Development, and Good Governance*, Edited by Ramesh Thakur, and Oddny Wiggen. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 39–57.
- Council on Foreign Relations. (2021, October). *Major Power Rivalry in South Asia*, Council on Foreign Relations.
- Council on Foreign Relations Press. (2010, November). *U.S. Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan*. Council on Foreign Relations
- Crisis Group. (2022). *Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban* (Asia Report N°326). Crisis Group
- Feigenbaum, E. A. (2010a). India's Rise, America's Interest: The Fate of the US-Indian Partnership. *Foreign Aff.*, 89, 76.
- Feigenbaum, E. A. (2010b, March 1). India's Rise, America's Interest. *Foreign Affairs*, 89(2).
- Foreign Affairs Committee. (2022, November 14). *China Regional Snapshot: South Asia*. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Foreign Affairs Committee
- Gallagher, A. (2021, July 8). *U.S., Pakistan at 'Convergence' on Afghanistan, Says Pakistani Envoy*. United States Institute of Peace.
- Grossman, D. (2023, August 16). *India Pushes Back Against China in South Asia*. RAND
- Guihong, Z. (2003). US security policy towards South Asia after September 11 and its implications for China: A Chinese perspective. *Strategic Analysis*, 27(2), 145–171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160308450081>
- Hussain, K. (2005). *Pakistan's Afghanistan policy*. NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL MONTEREY CA.

- Iqbal, A. (2021, September 29). US generals express concern over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in wake of Taliban takeover of Afghanistan – World, *Dawn News*
- Khan, F. H. (2022). *Subcontinent Adrift: Strategic Futures of South Asia*. Cambria Press Amherst, NY.
- Khan, M. (2022). *The Emerging Indo-US Alliance And Its Politico-Economic Implications For South Asia*. [PhD Thesis, Quaid I Azam university Islamabad]
- Kugelman, M. (2016). *US policy in South Asia: Imperatives and challenges*. U, S Politics.
- Kumar, S. (2019). Balancing Russia and the United States: India's Foreign Policy Challenges. *Think India Journal*, 22(4), 1046-1063.
- Kux, D. (1992). *India and the United States: Estranged democracies, 1941-1991*. Diane Publishing
- Muzaffar, M. & Khan, I (2016). China-Russia Relations after the Cold War, *Orient Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 1 (II), 151-169
- Muzaffar, M., Hanif, I., & Khan, I. (2018). United States Foreign Policy towards South Asia: A Critical Analysis, *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 2 (2), 121-132
- Muzaffar, M., Yaseen, Z., & Rahim, N. (2017). Changing Dynamics of Global Politics: Transition from Unipolar to Multipolar World. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal*, 1 (I), 49-61
- Nagata, M. K., & Votel, J. L. (2021, July 28). *The future of US cooperation with Pakistan*. Middle East Institute.
- Rasheed, Z. (2020). What is the Quad and can it counter China's rise? *Al Jazeera*
- Rocca, C. (2004). *New Horizons in United States Relations with South Asia*. Center for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania.
- Stromseth, J. (2019). *Don't make us choose: Southeast Asia in the throes of US-China rivalry*. Brookings Institution Washington, DC.
- U.S Department of State. (2022, August 15). *U.S. Relations With Pakistan*. United States Department of State
- USIP China-South Asia Senior Study Group. (2020). *China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia*. United States Institute of Peace.
- Walt, S. M. (2018). US grand strategy after the Cold War: Can realism explain it? Should realism guide it? *International Relations*, 32(1), 3-22.
- Weitz, R. (2017). *Promoting US-Indian Defense Cooperation: Opportunities and Obstacles*. United States Army War College Press.
- Xi, J. (2017, November 4). Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress. *China Daily*
- Yaseen, Z., Muzaffar, M., & Shahbaz, K. (2023). Defensive Strategies of Central Asian Republics: From Bipolarity to Multipolarity, *Asian journal of International Peace and Security*, 7(1), 143-156