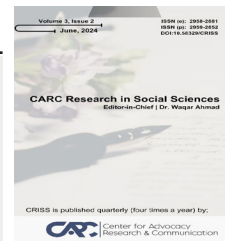




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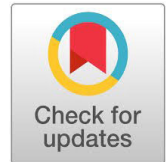
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The Strategic Importance of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Its Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

China intends to spend about \$62 billion on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the coming years as a part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC has both geoeconomic and geostrategic implications. This is a game changer for China globally as it wants to reach the Middle East, Europe, and Africa for trade and energy supplies via a shorter and alternate route. However, for Pakistan, this project not only helps in its economic development but also ensures its security against India. This study aims to examine India's reaction to Chinese investment in the region and its impact on strategic stability in South Asia. India fears encirclement of its territory because of China's presence in Pakistan, the Indian Ocean, and Myanmar. At the same time, the US is concerned that China is trying to revise the status quo in which the US sits at the apex. At this moment, the interests of the US and India seem to align, and they have already entered a strategic partnership. This study is qualitative in nature and relies on primary as well as secondary data available on CPEC and strategic stability. South Asia is becoming relevant to great powers' politics. China's investment in Pakistan will deter India from attacking Pakistan, and India will be helped by the US to prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon.

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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese President Xi Jinping, in 2013, presented a comprehensive roadmap for a mega project of Chinese investment covering more than half the globe, commonly known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ("President Xi", 2013). This mega project has two parts covering land (the Road) as well as waters (the Belt). The project is inspired by the ancient Silk Road (Sarwar, 2017) that was famous for its trade. The investment covering the waters is known as the 'Maritime Silk Road'. Most of this part covers the Indian Ocean. The second part is known as the 'New Silk

Road' covering the Central Asian countries, East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Collectively, the Belt and the Road will connect the East with the West (Seth, 2020). CPEC is an essential part of this mega project. CPEC has been described as a flagship project of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (Shulin, 2014). It is essential to the success of BRI because it acts as a bridge that connects the Belt with the Road at the Port of Gwadar. In 2013, China vowed to invest US \$46 billion in Pakistan, later increasing the amount to about \$62 billion (Afzal, 2020). Pakistan is fortunate enough because of its geographical location as it is situated at the junction connecting Central Asia and East Asia with the Middle East. Earlier, the Russians wanted to get access to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea but failed. China wishes to have access to these waters for three reasons, one economic, one security and the other strategic:

China's trade is currently conducted through the Strait of Malacca in the Indian Ocean, which is convenient for trade to Southeast Asia, East Asia, and other Pacific countries. However, this route costs China a lot, and the deep Port of Gwadar provides a shorter route to make transport costs

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more economical (Zahid, Khurshid & Rashid, 2018). China's industrialization and increased energy requirements have made it feel insecure, as it imports most of its fossil fuel from the Middle East through the Strait of Malacca. The US and India's presence in the Indian Ocean can block Chinese shipments, and piracy can affect shipments. CPEC provides an alternate route to ensure uninterrupted flow of shipments from its energy sources ("Chinese economy", 2020). CPEC also serves a strategic purpose for China. As the US is the superpower, China needs to be present in important and strategic locations, such as the Arabian Sea, specifically the Persian Gulf, to compete with the US at the global level. The region is crucial for oil production and global politics, and China is aiming to play an active role in global politics (Brewster, 2014). To protect its interests, China plans to deploy its navy in the Arabian Sea against its contenders.

Moreover, CPEC is also a part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which is directed at connecting the Asian economies with those of Africa and Europe (Chatzky & McBride, 2020; Markey & West, 2016). The BRI is a demonstration of the so-called Chinese "assertiveness" (Turcsányi, 2017) in global politics. China's projection of power at the global level is a challenge to current world order regulated by the US. Although China is status quo, it is not happy with its position in the current world order (Zhao, 2016). Sergio Miracola (2018) endorses the fact that China is spreading a net of naval bases around the Indo-Pacific to counter the encirclement of the region by the US. The US is perturbed with Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific (Bloomberg, 2021). To contain this development the US made a partner of the emerging power India. Under the notorious Indo-US Strategic Partnership, the frosty Indo-US relations took a warm turn in the new millennium (Gupta, 2005). These new geopolitical developments have serious ramifications for Pakistan.

Pakistan engages in a security dilemma with India. India is more powerful than Pakistan as it is an emerging world power (van de Wetering, 2020). The Indo-US Strategic Partnership shifts the balance of power in India's favor and helps India to obtain the status of major power (Tellis, 2005). Pakistan is concerned about its security vis-à-vis a potential hegemon. India will be in a position to subdue Pakistan into making compromises on its strategic interests. Pakistan wanted to escape this security dilemma and help came from its 'all-weather friend' (Akhtar, 2020) China in the shape of CPEC.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is beneficial both for Pakistan and China. For Pakistan CPEC is not only a cure for its economic woes but it has a strategic advantage as well. The civil population and the political leadership are thinking about the economic benefits of the project, whereas the military and strategic circles are keeping an eye on the strategic use of CPEC (Hassan, 2020). CPEC's strategic importance for Pakistan is tied with its significance for the Chinese. As per the data of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (as cited in Paszak, 2021) currently 60% of China's international trade passes through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow waterway in the Indian Ocean. However, the Indian Ocean is patrolled by the Indians and Americans (Miglani, n.d.). In a time of crisis or

confrontation they can disrupt the flow of Chinese goods. The most important of these goods is fossil fuel coming from the Middle East. So, to ensure its energy security, China needs a new and alternate route to the Middle East (Alam, Li & Baig, 2019). CPEC fulfills just that need of the Chinese. Further it is also said that, the Port of Gwadar can be used as military base for the Chinese Navy to counter its Indian and American counterparts. For that purpose China is investing in projects worth \$62 billion (Wolf, 2020). If CPEC is so important for China, it will be ready to defend it. This importance of CPEC to the Chinese seals Pakistan's security against India. The huge Chinese stakes in Pakistan will deter India from attacking Pakistan.

CPEC is therefore a 'leveling effect' (Katz, n.d.) for strategic stability in South Asia. As studies (Looney & McNab, 2008) suggest that when Pakistan doesn't feel a security threat vis-à-vis India, it could focus on its economic development instead of defence. The Indo-US Strategic Partnership caused an imbalance of power in South Asia; the CPEC will act as a strategic chip to restore the balance. When the balance is restored, Pakistan will be trapped no more in a security dilemma and hence no arms races (Glaser, 2010). Thus, the Indo-US partnership and the China-Pakistan alliance as two powerful forces will ensure that there is stability in South Asia although possibly the world is going to witness a new cold war between China and the United States at the global level. The following sections comprise the organized format of the paper: Literature Review and theoretical framework with its applications in section 2. The Research Methodology is explained in Section 3. The major findings are discussed in Section 4, while Section 5 brings the paper to a close.

Objectives

The Main objectives are follows as:

- To study the impact of the Indo-US Strategic Partnership on the balance of power in South Asia
- To analyze how the China-Pakistan partnership may ensure Pakistan's security and restore the balance of power

LITERATURE REVIEW

China is resuming its assertiveness after a protracted period of isolation, according to former US diplomat James Schwemlein. This is evident through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Comprehensive Economic Corridor (CPEC). He contends that the value of Pakistan to China will be diminished due to the presence of instability and terrorism in Pakistan. This, in turn, will heighten the risks faced by India and strengthen the alliance between the United States and India. Zahid Khan, Guo Changgang, Riaz Ahmad, and Fang Wenho (2018) discuss the reaction of India and the US towards CPEC and its influence on the distribution of power in South Asia. They contend that India and the US have shown their support to different extents. However, the absence of confidence between India and Pakistan, as well as the "strategic competition" between China and the US, would pose obstacles to the project's advancement. China's financial contributions to Pakistan are causing India to

develop a stronger relationship with the United States. The authors express optimism that Beijing can play a role in reducing the hostility between India and Pakistan and easing the doubts that the US and India have about China's geopolitical motives. Yaqoob ul Hassan (2020) discusses the geopolitical and economic aspects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), pointing out that there are two schools of thought in Pakistan about it: military and civilian. The civilians are optimistic that the major project will contribute to the development of Pakistan's vulnerable economy, while the military establishment views it as a chance to counteract diplomatic and economic demands from the United States, thereby enhancing Pakistan's geopolitical and strategic position. According to the author, the project strongly benefits China and Pakistan will endure long-term negative consequences.

A different perspective on the CPEC is offered by Kashmiri author Shabir Choudhry (2018), who contends that because the project is really just a front for the notorious East India Company, it is harming the people of Pakistan-administered Kashmir and Balochistan and will eventually harm the people of the entire nation. China is leveraging Pakistan as a pawn in its geopolitical pursuit of global dominance, utilising its economic power to entice developing nations through economic diplomacy. The relevance of Pakistan's geographic location is explained by Fakhar Hussain and Mezhar Hussain (2017), who point out that the country serves as a bridge connecting China, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East and is situated at the intersection of energy-deficient and energy-rich countries. The discussion revolves around the strategic significance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for both China and Pakistan. However, it overlooks the fact that Pakistani labour lacks the necessary technical expertise needed for the Chinese projects, resulting in a sense of inferiority among Pakistanis. Brian Kenneth Hedrick's analyses the power dynamics in South Asia since 1947, focusing on the strategic interests of China, India, and Pakistan. The study explores various factors such as religious and ethnic nationalism, territorial claims, influence in the Indian Ocean, and nuclear proliferation. He asserts that the nuclear factor has garnered global scrutiny towards South Asia, and its conflicts have become noteworthy. Nevertheless, this research fails to address the correlation between the ongoing economic progress in China and Pakistan and its implications for geopolitical stability in South Asia.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the research examines the sub-system milieu of the South Asian region, focusing on the economic interdependence and balance-of-power theory. Economic interdependence between China and Pakistan has led to significant cooperation and peace,

proving crucial for strategic stability. The US perceives China as a threat to the US, and to counter China's gains, allies like India are needed. India, fearing security and Chinese encirclement, has shifted US and Indian foreign policies, resulting in a strategic partnership under the Indo-US Strategic Partnership. This shift has shifted the South Asian balance of power in favor of India. The CPEC, as a China-Pakistan alliance, is essential to restore the imbalance and maintain strategic stability in South Asia, deterring India from attacking Pakistan. This makes South Asia relevant to global power politics.

Application of the Theory

Polarity is one of the factors that define the anarchic international system (I.S.) of states (Jiang & Tasawar, 2013). The disintegration of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War and the international system transformed from bipolar to unipolar. With unipolarity came US unilateralism (Evans, 2003) and a world order emerged based upon neoliberalism (Teeple & McBride, 2011) supported by the West. The US was still enjoying the top position of a hegemon that a 'sleeping giant' (Lee, 2007) showed some movement at the turn of the millennium and it was realized that the world was going to see a multipolar order. China's growth gained pace in the 2000s challenging the US as superpower (Morrison, 2019). As a revisionist power (Jagannath, 2021), China's rise is seen as a challenge to the current status quo led by the US. China started the projection of its power from its 'backyard' (LaFranchi, 2021) i.e. the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific theater: Balancing China Offshore

The Indo-Pacific's significance stems from its demographic heft, major trade routes, especially through the South China Sea, and the presence of four nuclear nations (Department of Defense, 2019). China, economically and militarily robust, seeks to expand its influence in this key region, posing a challenge to U.S. interests (Dorell, 2018). The U.S. Department of Defense advocates for preparedness, alliances with regional powers, and fostering interconnectedness to counter China's rise (Department of Defense, 2019), with India playing a crucial role in this strategy. The concept of offshore balancing, highlighted by Mearsheimer and Walt (2019), involves leveraging regional allies like India to manage potential threats, in this case, China. This approach allows the U.S. to optimize its military resources while maintaining influence, exemplified by joint naval exercises and India's involvement in the Quad Security Dialogue (Smith, 2021; "India, U.S., Japan", 2021). This strategic partnership and shared concerns over China's ascent reflect a broader geopolitical realignment in the Indo-Pacific, impacting regional power dynamics and strategic stability, with significant implications for South Asia (Das, 2019; USIP Senior Study Group, 2020). The two regions are closely connected as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Asia Pacific & Indo-Pacific Regions (Gopalaswamy & Ramachandran, 2017)

The South Asian balance of power: Equilibrium disturbed

Pakistan's security concerns stem from India's demographic, economic, military, and technological edge, with India's rise as a global power accelerated by the Indo-US Strategic Partnership (van de Wetering, 2020; Tellis, 2005). This partnership threatens regional balance, positioning India as a potential hegemon in South Asia. Historically,

balance of power strategies, including the role of a balancer to prevent dominance (Morgenthau, 1948; Sheehan, 1989), have kept peace. However, with the US favoring India, its traditional balancer role is compromised. Pakistan finds solace and strategic support in its partnership with China, especially through initiatives like CPEC, to counterbalance India's growing influence and the US's shifting allegiances (Akhtar, 2020).

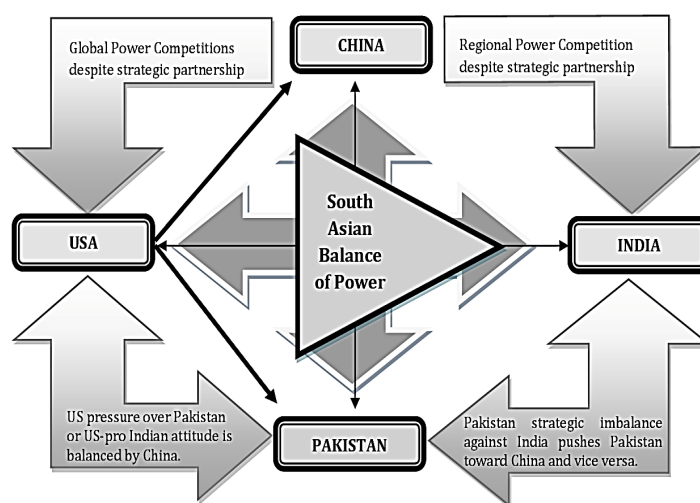


Figure 2. Changing dynamics of South Asian balance of power (Jahangir, 2017)

The balance-of-power theory as an offshoot of the realist paradigm predicts that states make alliances to further their national interests, the primary interest being security and survival (Spanier, 1981). These alliances will then be met by counter alliances until there is equilibrium in the system (Dwivedi, 2012). CPEC (being low politics) will act as a strategic chip (high politics) to forge an alliance between China and Pakistan, argues James Schwemlein (2019). Pakistan will provide China with a naval base to counter the Indo-US partnership whereas Pakistan gets a powerful ally in China which helps ensure its security against India. Figure 2 shows the complex dynamics of the balance-of-power system in South Asia. Once the balance of power is restored in South Asia, the strategic environment

will reach stability (Anderson, 2018). And where there is stability, Woodrow Wilson ("Woodrow Wilson quotes", n.d.) is quoted to have said, there is peace. Peace may reign given the high stakes involved due to the presence of nuclear weapons in the region.

The Imbalance of Power in South Asia

The Indo-US Strategic Partnership reshapes South Asia's geopolitical dynamics, affecting Pakistan, China, and regional power balance. By aligning with India, the US supports India's rise as a global power and its efforts to counter China, thereby posing security concerns for Pakistan. Fani (2005) and Ashley J. Tellis's (2004) insights indicate this alliance enhances India's military prowess and

shifts the US's focus from regional stability to countering Chinese influence, impacting arms competition and confidence-building measures with Pakistan. While China sees India's ascent as both a challenge and an opportunity for a multipolar Asia-Pacific, as Z. Guihong (2005) suggests, the partnership primarily serves US interests in containing China, inadvertently threatening Pakistan's security. This strategic pivot from nuclear deterrence to technological superiority necessitates Pakistan to reevaluate its alliances, considering a closer relationship with China as a counterbalance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs an explanatory approach to investigate the strategic environment of South Asia, focusing on the relationship between strategic stability and the balance of power in the region. It combines qualitative

and analytical methods, with a supplementary use of quantitative data. Thematic analysis is employed to identify common themes and patterns in the collected data. The research also acknowledges the limitations of qualitative research in producing specific results but emphasizes the value of gaining insights of a different idea.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

On the Strength of Indo-US Strategic Partnership

Combined Capabilities

India ranks second and the US third in terms of population. Also, in manpower and in defense budget they are among the top three. They will be the strongest force on earth if they pledge themselves as allies because for now, they are just partners (Bhattacharya, 2019). Table 1 shows the combined power of the US and India.

Table 1

Combined strength of India and the US (2023)

Country	United States	India	Combined
Capabilities			
Available Manpower	148,430,460	653,129,600	801,560,060
Defense Budget \$	761,681,000,000	54,200,000,000	815,881,000,000
Airpower (Crafts)	13,300	2,210	15,510
Tanks	5,500	4,614	10,114
Armored Vehicles	303,553	100,882	404,435
Self-Propelled Guns	1,000	100	1,100
Rocket Artillery	1,339	3,311	4,650
Navy Fleet	484	295	779
Labor Force	147,000,000	523,000,000	670,000,000

Note: Taken from Global Firepower

Strategic Autonomy of India

Strategic autonomy is a concept that emphasizes the exercise of choice driven by sovereign considerations and interest (Sreemoy Talukdar as cited in Smith, 2020). India's foreign policy has evolved from 'non-alignment' during the Cold War to 'strategic autonomy', which combines realism and India's traditional non-aligned posture. This principle prioritizes self-sufficiency and independence. India's alignment with the US is based on this principle, but the question remains whether India can maintain its autonomy under the influence of a superpower like the US (Smith, 2020). Indian government officials, such as former PM Manmohan Singh, argue that the nuclear deal and Strategic Partnership with the US will not harm India's strategic autonomy in managing its nuclear weapons program. However, some Indians worry that a close partnership with the US might push India towards sacrificing its strategic autonomy, particularly on issues of nuclear weapons and Kashmir. In a divergence of interests, the US expects India to follow its lead, while India aims to maintain its principle of strategic autonomy.

The Pakistan factor in Indo-US relations

At the height of the Cold War Indo-US relations were defined by US-Pakistan relations. When the US allied

with Pakistan in its war against communism, India was estranged (Gupta, 2005). However, after the Cold War, the US is attracted by India thereby stripping Pakistan off its superpower ally. The US is more concerned about Chinese gains at the global level than about India's rivalry with Pakistan in South Asia (Cohen, 2000). In the whole scenario Pakistan fits in as a nuclear state and as potential challenger to Indian influence in the region. The US may not want to help India against Pakistan risking regional and global peace given the dangerous nuclear posture of Pakistan as Stephen Cohen (2000) laments that "Washington does not want to see a new regional crisis—whether initiated from Pakistan...or New Delhi". Therefore, if the US backs off from supporting India for the sake of crisis stability, this could endanger the Indo-US partnership.

Mutual rival

Perhaps the strongest link in the Indo-US partnership is their common rival—China. China threatens India's security and US's interests at the global level. Both are trying to contain China in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (Blank, 2007). Although China doesn't wish military confrontation (Blaxland, 2021) in the Indian Ocean, given the security of its trade, China may not give up its aspirations of becoming a superpower. As structural realists like Mearsheimer (2010)

comment, the US is balancing China offshore in the Indian Ocean through India as it is very difficult, both financially and militarily, for the Americans to balance China through its presence in the region.

US history of betrayal

The US-India partnership is based on shared economics, technology, and strategy interests. However, concerns arise that the US may abandon India if it no longer aligns with US interests, potentially shifting its focus towards China. This is rooted in the US's historical foreign policy approach, which prioritizes allies over allies. During the Cold War, the US prioritized building a relationship with India over Pakistan, despite Pakistan's alignment with US interests. After the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a key US ally but faced

criticism for alleged terrorism involvement. If a divergence of interests occurs, the US may shift its focus towards China, potentially leaving India at a disadvantage.

On the Strength of China-Pakistan Friendship

Combined capabilities

Pakistan is very small as compared to China in terms of population, territory and military. However, still there is potential in Pakistan because it has fought three wars and spends a good portion of its annual budget on defence. Despite being small and having a slow economic growth, Pakistan is precious to China due its geostrategic location and its willingness to contain Indian influence in the region. Table 2 shows the combined capabilities of China and Pakistan.

Table 2

Combined Military Strength of China and Pakistan (2023)

Country	China	Pakistan	Combined
Capabilities			
Available Manpower	761,691,469	104,457,253	866,148,722
Defense Budget \$	230,000,000,000	7,500,000,000	237,500,000,000
Airpower (Crafts)	3,166	1,413	4,579
Tanks	4,950	3,742	8,692
Armored Vehicles	174,300	77,771	252,071
Self-Propelled Guns	2,795	1,226	4,020
Rocket Artillery	3,145	1,838	4,983
Navy Fleet	730	114	844
Labor Force	774,710,000	61,710,000	836,420,000

Note: Taken from Global Firepower

4.2.2 Geographical proximity

Pakistan's location gives it a strategic edge. It is situated at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (Khetran, 2016). Asad Tahir Jappa (2020), writing for Daily Times, argues that China needs Pakistan

for connecting these regions. Pakistan shares a border with China, see Figure 3, which makes it more likely that Pakistan will not be abandoned. Figure 4 shows that the distance of the US from India is very long. This is strength of the China-Pakistan alliance.



Figure 3. China-Pakistan geographical proximity (Hali, 2010)



Figure 4. US and India on the world map (Mac Milan International Inc.)

Common enemy

China and Pakistan both have a common enemy in India. China is a rising power that feels a threat from an emerging India and its partnership with the US (Sun, 2020). Pakistan, on the other hand, has a security dilemma when it comes to India (You, 2019). It is perceived by the Pakistanis that the Indians will stop at nothing to reverse the 1947 partition of India.

Mutual Economic Benefits

Pakistan's economy is struggling. China is an aspirant of becoming a hub for international trade. CPEC, under BRI, helps both nations to reap economic benefits and cooperation. As the theory of economic interdependence predicts, once trade starts, it is very unlikely that states stop cooperation or turn to rivalry or war because the stakes are then high (Copeland, 1996). Chinese economic stake in Pakistan and Pakistan's economic benefits make the China-Pakistan alliance very strong (Munir, 2018).

The US factor in China-Pakistan relations

Pakistan wants an alliance with China in order to contain India. On the other hand, China is happy with the alliance not only to contain emerging India but also to alter the US-led status quo (Zhao, 2016). This is a weakling of the alliance. Pakistan is concerned about its security vis-à-vis India. Tauqir Hussain (2010) argues that although there is a trust deficit, Pakistan doesn't want to offend the other superpowers as it is not in its interest. Most of Pakistan's military assistance has come from the US, e.g. as President Trump's tweet (2018) showed from 9/11 till 2018 Pakistan got \$33 billion, which actually stopped once the US realized that Pakistan was not serving US interests. Further, the US has always played the role of a balancer in the South Asian balance of power and doesn't want a regional crisis (Cohen, 2001). Now the US is losing interest in playing that role anymore.

Realistic Foreign Policy

China-Pakistan relations are based on realistic principles. As the realists argue that in an anarchic system where states pursue their national interests driven by the desire to maximize their power, moral considerations are of little importance (Morgenthau, 1948). Pakistan was created on the basis of Two Nation Theory which divided people into two identities i.e. Muslims and non-Muslims. The Uighurs are a Muslim ethnic community in the Western Chinese province of Xinjiang who want a separate homeland for themselves (Shesgreen, 2021). By the yardstick of the Two Nations Theory, Pakistan should speak up for the Uighurs the same way it supports the Palestinian and the Kashmir causes, however, Pakistan is ignoring them (Siddiqui, 2021).

As realists recommend prioritizing tangible national interests over ideological considerations (IvyPanda, 2020), Pakistan expects that it could solve its economic woes with Chinese help and going against the Chinese on the Uighur issue will sure damage bilateral ties. Nevertheless, the plight of the Uighurs is an issue that is exploited by the US, calling it a genocide (Wong & Buckley, 2021), and the Indians who condemn Pakistan for its silence (Mishra & Cogan, 2021), to woo Pakistan and the Muslim world away from China.

The China-Pakistan alliance is a significant strength due to its history of cordial relations, with famous quotes like "A friendship higher than Himalayas, deeper than ocean, sweeter than honey, and stronger than steel" indicating China's commitment to Pakistan (Tharoor, 2015). Unlike the US, which used Pakistan when needed and abandoned it afterwards, China has always been there for Pakistan through its thick and thin, making it Pakistan's 'all-weather friend' (Akhtar, 2020).

Strategic Stability in South Asia

"Strategic stability," a concept emerging from Cold War discourse, chiefly concerns nuclear deterrence and its implications for both nuclear and conventional arms, especially in the context of South Asia (Jilani, 2019). It aims to ensure a nation's nuclear capabilities are secure against adversaries' actions, fundamentally defined by the lack of incentives for preemptive nuclear strikes (Trenin, 2019). Originating from US-Soviet negotiations, it embodies efforts to coexist amid ideological differences and global dominance ambitions (Saghal, 2019), with "first strike stability" highlighting the balance necessary to deter preemptive actions. The notion has broadened over time to address contemporary challenges like nuclear proliferation and military technological advancements (Saghal, 2019).

In South Asia, this framework is adapted to explore India-Pakistan dynamics, considering the Indo-US Strategic Partnership and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as key factors affecting regional strategic stability, including deterrence, crisis management, and arms race dynamics (Gregory & Sultan, 2005). Deterrence stability is pivotal in averting conflict by making the costs of aggression exceed its benefits, requiring credible deterrence and clear strategic pillars (Narang, 2010). The stability-instability paradox suggests that strategic-level stability may lead to lower-level instabilities, as seen in India and Pakistan's engagement in limited conflicts despite their nuclear deterrence (Rauchhaus, 2009). Crisis stability, defined as maintaining equilibrium during crises without escalating to armed conflict (Colby & Gerson, 2013), is threatened by sub-conventional attacks and policy ambiguities, particularly India's NFU stance. These factors introduce crisis instability potential between India and Pakistan, with superpower dynamics possibly influencing crisis stability outcomes. Arms race stability concerns the competition for military superiority, with stability achieved when technological or quantitative arms advancements do not threaten either party. The China-Pakistan alliance serves as a counterbalance to India's military enhancements, driven by security concerns regarding Chinese presence and leading India to strengthen ties with the United States. This dynamic suggests a challenging future for arms race stability in the region, with India's security dilemma vis-à-vis China and Pakistan potentially fueling an arms race instability.

CONCLUSION

Significance of South Asia in Global Politics

South Asia holds significant importance in global politics for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, it houses roughly 25.2% of the global population, marking it as a region

with a substantial demographic footprint (“Population of Southern”, 2023). The area is characterized by high levels of poverty and rapid population growth, notably in Pakistan, which is projected to reach a population of 285 million by 2030 (Zahid, 2022). Table 3 highlights some figures that make South Asia important in world politics. Such demographic challenges lead to political instability, necessitating interventions by international financial

institutions (DeSilva-Ranasinghe, 2012). Secondly, the region's stability is compromised by issues like terrorism, disputed borders, and governance concerns, with tensions over Kashmir attracting global focus (Panda, 2014). Thirdly, the nuclear capabilities of Pakistan and India, coupled with their historical hostilities, present a grave risk of nuclear conflict, posing a threat to global peace (Khan, 2003).

Table 3
Statistics of South Asia

Country	Surface Area (Th. km ²)	Population in US\$ Millions (2022)	Density per km ²	National Income		GDP Growth 2021 (annual %)
				Gross \$billion (2021)	Per capita \$ (PPP) (2021)	
Afghanistan	652.2	41.1	62.98	14.6	363.7	-20.7
Bangladesh	147.6	171.1	1160	460.2	2,688.3	7.1
Bhutan	38.4	0.78	20.31	2.5	3,266.4	4.1
India	3,287.3	1,417.1	431.12	3,385.1	2,388.6	7.0
Maldives	0.3	0.52	1.733	6.2	11,817.5	12.3
Nepal	147.2	30.5	207.19	40.8	1,336.5	5.6
Pakistan	796.1	235.8	296	376.5	1,596.7	6.2
Sri Lanka	65.6	22.1	336.89	74.4	3,354.4	-7.8
Total	5,314.7	1919		4,360.3		

Note: Taken from the World Bank website. The figures signify the importance of South Asia.

Fourthly, India's economic growth and strategic partnership with the United States, due to its rivalry with China, underscore its emerging global significance (Moschella & Atkinson, 2021). Lastly, the proximity of South Asia to China accentuates its geostrategic value, as the region could become a central arena in the potential cold war dynamics between the United States and China, influenced by China's ambitions for global influence and its role in regional stability (USIP Senior Study Group, 2020; Ali, 2010). This convergence of demographic, political, and strategic factors underscore South Asia's pivotal role in international affairs.

Future of South Asia

A large population, presence of nuclear weapons, terrorism and unstable borders, and an emerging power are some factors that will influence the future of South Asia. This region is going to be the field for superpowers rivalry as China is acquiring bases in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2018) and the US entered a partnership with India to counter China (Shelbourne, 2021). The influence and involvement of the superpowers can be both beneficial and dangerous for South Asia. The US and China will invest immensely in the region for gaining influence which is good for economic and institutional development. Further, the South Asian nations, especially India and Pakistan, will have a say in the new world order that is going to emerge. Another implication on the future of South Asia will be with regards to regional integration. South Asia is one of the least integrated regions of the world (Dossani, n.d.). With rival superpowers vying for power, the trust deficit and gaps between the nations will widen. As per the need of the time the world is going towards regionalism (Barbieri, 2019; Enderwick & Buckley, 2020) whereas in South Asia

the superpowers rivalry will add to the factors responsible for disintegration.

As South Asia is an unstable region, the presence of two superpowers may bring an element of stability (van der Putten, Rood, & Meijnders, 2016). If a war occurs between India and Pakistan, it could very well spiral into a nuclear confrontation endangering the peace of the whole globe (Khan, 2003). Both the US and China are aware of the consequences of such a possibility. Therefore, they will make sure that such an occurrence is avoided. Then there is the possibility of clashes between China and the US themselves, however, these crises will be stable because both countries know each other's abilities. Professor Hussain S. Soherwordy University of Peshawar (Personal communication, February 27, 2024) thinks that the world is moving towards a cold war. China is very docile towards the Taliban government after US withdrawal from Afghanistan and there is already a trade war going on between China and the United States. Professor Soherwordy predicts that in about five years we will see who is siding with whom. To conclude, if the world is going to witness a new cold war between the US and China, South Asia will be one of its focal points.

Conflict of Interests

The authors has declared that no competing interests exist.

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