

Strategic Alignments in South Asia: Analyzing the China-Pakistan-Russia Troika and its Regional Implications

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Abstract - Today rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, strategic realities are undergoing a decisive shift, leading to the formation of new alliances. Since the end of the Cold War, a significant transformation has taken place in the relationship between Pakistan and Russia. Moreover, the escalating tensions in the South China Sea involving the United States and its allies have compelled China to seek allies who can foster a harmonious relationship between China and the US, ultimately influencing the global order. China and Pakistan have a longstanding alliance and form a formidable pillar of the China-Pakistan-Russia triangle. This triumvirate between China, Pakistan, and Russia is causing strategic repercussions for India and the US in the region. This research paper aims to analyze the practical developments in the foreign policies of China, Pakistan, and Russia, and explore their implications for regional geopolitics.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Strategic realities, Alliances, Pakistan-Russia relations, China-Pakistan alliance, China-Pakistan-Russia triangle, India, United States, regional geopolitics.

Introduction

Asia presents a multitude of opportunities and choices for global powers, making it a veritable gold mine. The strategically significant location of Pakistan attracts regional powers, and in the realm of geopolitics, relationships are subject to change based on available options, often leading to decisive shifts and dominance. Russia, in particular, is awakening to the prospect of becoming a regional hegemon. Despite the absence of a history of amicable relations between Pakistan and Russia, the current strategic realities have given rise to a positive shift that benefits both Islamabad and Moscow.

While Pakistan and Russia have previously been adversaries, they are now embracing the idea of building and strengthening their relationship. The China-Pakistan-Russia triangle is

beginning to make more sense as all three countries appear to be well-suited to one another. Not only are China, Pakistan, and Russia nuclear states, but China also wields considerable economic power, while Russia possesses advanced military technology. Pakistan, in turn, offers the advantage of the Gwadar Port to enhance their exports and imports. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has garnered significant investment, and Moscow, with its strategic partnership with Beijing, membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, and its commitment to the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), can contribute to enhancing China-Russia cooperation and facilitate multinational collaboration in the future. In the pursuit of regionalism and open diplomacy to maximize their respective national interests, both Islamabad and Moscow maintain friendly relations with Beijing.

China holds certain economic influence in the former Soviet Union region and is considered a stakeholder in CPEC, but it is unlikely to interfere in Pakistan-Russia relations due to Russia's reputation as an energy supplier to China's allies. Although Russia has cultivated a positive relationship with India, India is wary of Russia's involvement in CPEC, given the long-standing tensions between Delhi and Islamabad and its opposition to China based on historical border disputes. The inclusion of Russia in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor would assuage international concerns and India's unnecessary anxieties over perceived Chinese threats. Russia's involvement in the CPEC project serves its own interests in terms of economy, security, and geopolitics. This situation poses a challenge for India as a rising power in South Asian regional geopolitics and for the United States as a global power.

On one hand, India is concerned about the deepening ties between Pakistan, China, and Russia. On the other hand, India is actively expanding economic and commercial exchanges with China and Russia, thereby enhancing its defense capabilities. This paper seeks to comprehend and evaluate the emergence of the China-Pakistan-Russia strategic troika and its implications for regional geopolitics, particularly in relation to the interests of India and the United States.

Theoretical framework

Interest serves as a driving force for states to form global and regional groups that define specific areas and engage in integration studies, which are recognized as pluralistic security communities (Hyde-Price, 1997, p. 09). In comparison to European and North Atlantic states' political, economic, and security integration, the current attempts at regional collaboration in Asia and Eurasia are in their infancy. The efforts for multilateral cooperation in Asia and Eurasia, when compared to Europe, raise doubts about the possibility of success in building genuine communities (Yuan, 2022, p. 03). Regional organizations find themselves at the intersection of regional integration and international institutions in the literature. Neo-realists argue that international institutions are vehicles used by powerful states to promote their interests (Martin, 2013, p. 04). This implies that institutions are not autonomous and have limited influence on the world stage. On the other hand, neo-liberals contend that institutions address collective action dilemmas and facilitate interstate cooperation by providing mechanisms and reducing penalties for cheating (Keohane & Matin, 1995, p. 39). Constructivists, who prioritize the ideational over the material and focus on the transformative effects of institutions on a state's identity and interests, hold a different view (Moravcsik, 2008, pp. 2-3). Regional institutions and organizations are examined by various schools of thought through their own perspectives.

The literature on regions can be categorized into four terms: regionness, regionalism, regionalization, and regional integration. Regionness refers to the fundamental characteristic that unifies a geographic area and shapes the notion of a region (Painter & Jeffrey, 2009, p. 161; Brass, 2005, p. 21). It explores how a region is tied together and bound in the collective imagination. Regionalism pertains to the emergence of regional cooperation through a state-driven political process, as opposed to market-driven regionalization (Reinalda, 2013, p. 431; Ocampo, 2004, p. 22). David Camroux argues against the formulation of a dichotomy between regionalism and regionalization, asserting that the state and non-state duality is valid for both phenomena. He proposes a relationship between regionalism and regionalization similar to that between nationalism and nation-building. In the 1990s, a new idea of regionalism emerged, and scholars categorized it based on multiple dimensions of economy, politics, and security for regional integration (Kim, 1998, p. 154). In the early literature on regional organizations, there was no distinction among these terms. The work of Hass, Schmitter, and Deutsch developed a

framework that incorporated attitudinal, economic, political, and security elements (Hass & Schmitter, 1964, pp. 705-737; Deutsch K. W., 1966, pp. 90-111). This was not surprising because post-World War II European integration resulted from political initiatives for regional collaboration based on the idea of a common European identity (Baldersheim, Haug, & Ogard, 2016, p. 02). The European integration process had its ups and downs, and initiatives were taken to establish institutions. In response to these developments, theoretical interest waxed and waned.

During the process of regional political integration, Haas focused on studying regional integration and the development of regional institutions. He presented "neo-functionalism" as an alternative to what he perceived as the excessive power-centered approach of realist thought and the uncertain basis for peace in liberal reliance on international legal order (Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 2021, p. 127). He also suggested that functional cooperation spillover creates a compelling logic for further integration. While Haas concentrated on regional integration efforts, Karl Deutsch emphasized community formation. According to Deutsch, communities emerge when groups of people with common characteristics are mutually responsive and share a collective identity (Deutsch K. W., 1966, pp. 05-07). Regarding pluralistic security communities, he argued that members of a region, divided into multiple sovereign states, possess pervasive expectations of peaceful conflict resolution. Deutsch assessed the strength of the community by examining instances of intra-group deals, which he believed characterized attitudinal support for a sense of common identity.

Haas acknowledged the short-lived support for integrative efforts that followed weak philosophical and ideological commitments, while Deutsch identified the existence of favorable conditions for the creation of institutional alliances as prerequisites for community formation. Haas argued that institutional amalgamation led to community formation because effective institutionalization allowed a refocusing of people's political attention and a shift in their loyalty (Puchala, 1998, pp. 204-5). Such studies and attention motivated the creation of integrative mechanism. The tentative and early efforts for multilateral cooperation in Asia, as well as the origins of European regional integration, provide valuable arguments for evaluation (Beeson, 2005, vol. 12, issue 6, pp. 969-985).

Strategic Prospect of Regional Powers of South Asia

South Asia holds immense importance due to its strategic location at the convergence of major global trade routes, namely the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. The region assumes a pivotal role in the global economy, with nations like India and Bangladesh serving as crucial manufacturing hubs and exporters of goods (Kurian, 2013, p. online). To meet the demands of its expanding population and growing economy, South Asia recognizes the imperative need for developing infrastructure on a large scale (ADP, 2014, p. 06).

Investing in modern transportation systems, such as highways, railways, and ports, can effectively facilitate both regional and global trade, thereby fostering economic growth, generating employment opportunities, and enhancing living standards (The World Bank, November 22, 2016). In addition, communication infrastructure, including high-speed internet connectivity, can significantly contribute to economic expansion and social cohesion. It empowers individuals within the region to access information, engage in communication, and actively participate in the digital economy (International Telecommunication Union, 2021). Furthermore, the establishment of renewable energy infrastructure, such as solar and wind power, can substantially reduce the region's reliance on fossil fuels, alleviate the adverse effects of climate change, and promote sustainable economic development (International Renewable Energy Agency, 2021). Water management infrastructure, encompassing irrigation systems and water treatment plants, plays a vital role in mitigating water scarcity and enhancing the quality of water resources, thus fostering agricultural productivity and sustainable progress (UN, 2021).

Effectively addressing poverty and inequality stands as a paramount strategic priority for South Asia. This objective can be achieved by fostering inclusive economic growth, ensuring access to fundamental services like education, healthcare, and clean water, and making substantial investments in infrastructure development and job creation (ADB, 2012, p. 04) (World Bank, 2021). Additionally, enhancing governance and reducing corruption are imperative for cultivating trust and fostering social cohesion. This can be accomplished by fortifying institutions, promoting the rule of law, and enhancing public participation in decision-making processes (EPS, February9, 2023). Recognizing that political instability and conflict hinder economic progress, promote instability, and undermine security, South Asia must concentrate

efforts on fostering dialogue, reconciliation, conflict prevention, and resolution mechanisms, as well as upholding human rights and the rule of law (United Nations, 2020).

Building resilience to climate change is another critical facet of South Asia's strategic outlook. The region is exceptionally vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, which exacerbate poverty, inequality, and hinder economic development. Therefore, investing in sustainable infrastructure and implementing environmentally conscious policies becomes imperative to mitigate the effects of climate change and cultivate long-term resilience (IMF, April 29, 2021). South Asia harbors significant strategic prospects in the domains of infrastructure development, renewable energy, and addressing socio-economic challenges. The realization of these prospects necessitates collaboration and cooperation among the region's countries, as well as with the international community (United Nations, March 21, 2019).

India-US agreements in South Asia

South Asia is a vast region and home to diverse and secondary powers. It comprises eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. With a population of over 1.8 billion people, it stands as one of the most populous and culturally diverse regions globally. China and India are considered potential regional hegemonic powers in Asia. However, Chinese influence in South Asia presents a challenge to India, as well as to ASEAN in Southeast Asia, Japan in Northeast Asia, and Russia in Central Asia. In the West, Washington and in the East, Beijing pose obstacles to Russia's aspirations of reclaiming influence in Central Asia and Eurasia. Both China and Russia oppose the presence of Western powers in Central Asia, seeking to limit their influence in the region. In Central Asia, China favors a weaker Russia over a stronger Western geopolitical influence. On the other hand, India aims to counter Chinese presence in South Asia and may receive support from the United States. These intricate interstate dynamics and strategic realities give rise to extensive multilateral cooperation, which also faces challenges such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and resource shortages.

The theories of geopolitics and geo-economics describe a state's attempt to leverage its geographical location to achieve political and economic objectives. These approaches shape a state's strategy to enhance its status and security through politics and economics. "Beginning

with the state's focus on safeguarding the sanctity of its self-defined territorial space primarily against external threats, and progressing towards broader goals of projecting regional and global influence, an emphasis on geopolitical considerations closely aligns with the assumptions and expectations of realism” (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 154). In the contemporary strategic environment, major powers utilize norms of violence to pursue national interests and implement state strategies through economic means, thereby shaping interactions between states. Industries and technology play a pivotal role in driving the emerging economy, energy resources attract foreign investments, and political leadership strives to achieve ever-increasing social and economic welfare (Lynch & Saunders, November 04, 2020). These accomplishments rely on higher GDP growth and geo-economic strategies that leverage state power to gain technological and commercial advantages.

China, India, Pakistan, and Russia filter their national aspirations through the prism of geopolitics. Numerous factors contribute to the unfolding geopolitical competition in South Asia. China possesses the potential to challenge US influence in the region. The nature and extent of Chinese aspirations, in conjunction with Pakistan and Russia, undergo bargaining influenced by domestic politics and economics. The intense engagement between regional powers is evident through multiple partnerships between dyads and international and a surge in bilateral and multilateral military exercises that foster closer relationships between countries. China, India, Pakistan, and Russia are expanding their influence in Asia and Eurasia. Moreover, China deliberately and indirectly attempts to challenge US influence in the region. Under its economic might, China has compelled powers to accept the non-liberal norms underpinning the One China policy and has sought to penalize states that, from the Chinese perspective, diplomatically violate a wide range of unilaterally imposed Chinese prescriptions related to this policy (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 155). Each dyadic strategic partnership among China, Pakistan, and Russia embodies the fundamentals of hedging. All three countries aspire to expand their diplomatic agreements through strategic relationships with other powers aiming to safeguard themselves against containment efforts. China, Pakistan, and Russia seek to mitigate the influence of the United States and shape the balance of power in the regional geopolitical competition, while India and Russia endeavor to extend the reach of their respective spheres of influence in the region.

China and Russia seek to involve the United States and Japan in the region, while Pakistan and China also strive to minimize India and the United States' influence. The China-United States relationship strained due to economic interests and values. China's pursuit of regional and global economic power, combined with the United States' support for Taiwan, hinders their cooperation in the region. Moreover, the relationship between both countries has marred by various incidents, such as the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the downing of a United States aircraft in Hainan Island, and Beijing's refusal to allow the USS Kitty Hawk to enter the Hong Kong port.

By 2006, Beijing and Washington sought to move away from confrontation and to start establishing certain levels of mutual understanding, leading to initiation of joint maritime search and rescue exercises. Subsequently, land-based military exercises had been announced in 2008. Furthermore, Washington aims to maintain its military superiority in the Pacific region by forging partnerships with regional countries. The United States consistently harbors concerns regarding the long-term implications of Chinese influence in the Asian region. Although former Defense Secretary Robert Gates once stated that China and the United States would maintain a defense relationship and that China is a competitor rather than an adversary, the United States should not overlook the challenges posed by other countries. Strategic dialogues are necessary to comprehend the intentions of others (Fravel, Roy, Swaine, Thornton, & Vogel, July 3, 2019; Nadkarni, 2010, p. 156).

China has emerged as an economic powerhouse with significant political influence in the region. Despite the economic arguments favoring China, its rise poses a threat to regional stability due to the development of a strategic relationship with Russia and concerns over the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea. China does not adhere to the status quo but seeks to alter the regional balance of power in its favor (Park, Pempel, & Roland, 2008, p. 25). This situation demonstrates that Beijing is a strategic competitor rather than a strategic partner of Washington. Condoleezza Rice during the election campaign emphasized that Washington should pay attention to India's role in the regional balance, acknowledging that although India may not be a major power currently; it possesses the potential to emerge as one (Wetering, 2016, p. 131).

Since the end of the Cold War, Indo-US cooperation has consistently progressed, with economic reforms contributing to India's GDP growth. India's position has shifted from a

strategic backwater to a natural strategic partner in the eyes of the United States (Saran & Verma, June 25, 2019). Following the events 9/11, India and the United States expanded their collaboration in trade, environment, and energy sectors. They also established a defense relationship to pursue a strategic partnership. To achieve partnership, both the nations agreed to enhance cooperation and establish a defense partnership through regular and high-level political dialogue. This trajectory aimed to foster a global, bilateral partnership, and the United States expressed its readiness to lift restrictions on the sale of civilian nuclear technology to India. The Bush administration officials asserted that the United States would support India in becoming a great power in the 21st century through bilateral and global cooperation. Furthermore, they affirmed their commitment to selling civilian nuclear technology to India (Bush, 2006, p. 405; Bruno, June 26, 2008).

In 2005, the "New Framework for Indo-US Defense Relationship" was expanded for ten years, and the 2006 Maritime Security Cooperation Agreement obligated both countries to safeguard the free flow of trade and counter threats to maritime security (Team, June 11, 2015). India's acquisition of six C-130J Hercules transport helicopters for \$1 billion in 2008 exemplifies the growing defense ties between the two nations. Additionally, the United States has been actively pursuing an Indian contract worth \$10 billion for 126 new multi-role combat aircraft (Parpiani, July 2, 2020, pp. 01-02).

The enduring nature of the "close and cooperative relations" with India can be attributed to the convergence of democratic values and vital national interests. Three fundamental common goals have been outlined: promoting peace and freedom in Asia, combating international terrorism, and reducing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Amineh & Houwling, 2004, p. 202; Nadkarni, 2010, p. 159). Furthermore, India's aspirations for great power imply that New Delhi will not be satisfied with a subordinate position to the United States; it will be inclined to join an overtly anti-China alliance.

The United States, India, Australia, and Japan signed an informal security dialogue known as the Quad on September 24, 2023. They agreed to coordinate their strategic goals, including donating more than 1 billion COVID-19 vaccines globally and creating low carbon. They were convinced for joint military exercises as well. On January 31, 2023, Washington and Delhi have jointly announced to establish initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies

(iCET), a comprehensive agreement aimed at bolstering bilateral cooperation in technology and defense. This initiative encompasses key areas such as weaponry, artificial intelligence, and semiconductors. Subsequently, the US-India Strategic Business Dialogue was launched with the objective of implementing the iCET (Council on Foreign relations, January 31, 2023).

China-Pakistan-Russia Troika

The Cold War period (1945-1991), the equilibrium between the Eastern and Western blocs was maintained, served as a prime example of the balance of power. Within the South Asian region, the five nuclear powers (China, the US, Russia, India, and Pakistan) employ various strategies and countermeasures to maintain balance. China, Russia, and Pakistan felt the need to form an alliance to counter the growing Indo-US relations (Biswas, 2021, p. online).

Russia has played a significant role in shaping China's military capabilities since the early stages of the Cold War, leading to a strong strategic partnership between the two Cold War allies. Russia and China established diplomatic ties shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, although the international community did not pay serious attention to Sino-Russian relations until Russia explicitly declared its support for China's stance on the disputed South China Sea (Bhattacharjee, 2019, p. 227). Additionally, China and Russia have agreed to conduct regular joint naval exercises in the contested South China Sea region. Recent credible sources confirm that both parties have indeed carried out such exercises. China and Russia entered into a strategic partnership in 1996 and signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 200 (Kumar, September 25, 2026). The emerging comprehensive mutual trust between China and Russia can also be viewed as a reaction to the expansionist approach adopted by the United States in the South Asian region.

China and Russia have developed relationship since their military exercise in 2003, incorporating multiple exercises. According to some experts, these exercises have played an important role in building mutual trust and confidence among the participating soldiers. Conversely, there are those who argue that the exercises are more important in terms of the message to the US and European countries than their tangible operational benefits. In May 2022, China and Russia further structured their strategic partnership in a highly visible demonstration, where bombers were flown near Japan while the US and other leaders of the Quad countries

visited Tokyo. Notably, the event is their first joint military exercise since the start of the war in Ukraine (Maizland, June 14, 2022).

The relationship between Russia and Pakistan has experienced numerous fluctuations during the Cold War era. However, as a countermeasure to the deepening ties between India and the United States, Russia had reached out to Pakistan. Pakistan has long been a rival, while Russia has been a reliable partner to India. In 2015, Russia and Pakistan signed a significant \$2 billion agreement for the North-South gas pipeline from Lahore to Karachi (Dawn, October 16, 2015). Furthermore, Russia agreed to sell Mi-35 'Hind-E' attack helicopters to Pakistan through a landmark defense deal signed on August 19, 2015 (Singh, Khan, & Thokar, 2022, p. online). Reports indicate that Pakistan has approved a route for Russia to become part of the Chinese-dominated port of Gwadar. The most notable development in the bilateral relations between Russia and Pakistan occurred in September 2016 when the two countries conducted joint military exercises for the first time (Mahajan, 2022, p. 31). Interestingly, India initially dissuaded Russia from participating in these exercises but subsequently withdrew its demand. This clearly demonstrates that Russia prioritizes the strengthening of its strategic relationship with Pakistan. The role of geographically important Central Asia has also been significant as this region is the main focus of Halford Mackinder's analysis. These three nuclear powers possess approximately 7,620 nuclear warheads, may posing a significant challenge to the US and India. China has recently justified Russia's military operations in war-torn Syria. Russia's general support and military cooperation with Pakistan primarily aim at countering the US and its allies in the region (Carpenter & Wiencik, 2000, p. 249). In other words, Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan and China will continue until the US actively engages in the South and Central Asian regions (Zaheer M. A., April 07, 2021). Despite India's severe criticism, Russia continues its policy of rapprochement with Pakistan and China.

China and Pakistan share a longstanding relationship that has progressively strengthened in recent years. The convergence between these two nations holds considerable significance for South Asia and the broader region. The primary areas of convergence between China and Pakistan lie in the economic realm. China has made substantial investments in Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a component of China's comprehensive Belt and Road Initiative. CPEC aims to develop vital infrastructure, including highways, railways, and

ports, while fostering trade and investment between China and Pakistan. These efforts have the potential to enhance Pakistan's economic growth and improve connectivity between South Asia and China (Zaheer, January 25, 2023)

China has provided Pakistan with a firm assurance of its complete cooperation in the event of any foreign aggression. China has been the primary supplier of arms to Pakistan and has also been involved in the construction of multiple nuclear reactors within the country. On the other hand, while Moscow has not guaranteed full military support to Pakistan during times of crisis, it has clearly indicated its support for China. Consequently, the formation of a potential nuclear power tripartite alliance appears imminent. The primary objective of this alliance is to exclude the United States from regional affairs (Hanif, 2021, p. 84; Ahmad, 2017, p. 14). Consequently, India aligned itself with the US in the region, may encounter numerous challenges. India, a significant power in South Asia, has recently demonstrated a growing inclination towards the global superpower. India's arms trade with the US has considerably increased compared to its trade with Russia. The Indo-Russia strategic gap has further widened due to the promotion of Indo-US engagement. In contrast, Russia has reached out to China and Pakistan, not only to express their discontent but also to prevent further US intervention in the region. Undoubtedly, New Delhi has conveyed its concerns regarding the promotion of Russia-Pakistan geostrategic cooperation to Moscow (Roy, June 29, 2021). Russia has strongly refuted allegations that it developed relations with Pakistan under the guise of China. Conversely, there are different views within various segments of Indian society regarding the rapid strengthening of India-US ties. A significant portion of Indian society views India's increased proximity to the US negatively and prefers revitalized relations with long-standing ally Russia (Thokar Ahmad & Singh, 2017, p. 72). Furthermore, India's geostrategic objectives in the Central Asian region can be achieved through active cooperation with Russia. Thus, under these circumstances, India's success or failure in prioritizing the US over Russia will have significant consequences for its overall development.

Pakistan and China have various reasons for the rivalry with India, including border disputes, the growing India-US relationship, regional power dynamics, cross-border terrorism and other factors. In this regard, Russian alignment with the China-Pakistan group may have a negative impact on India. China has consistently provided comprehensive support to Pakistan

through political, military, and economic means. Russia is also engaging in military cooperation with Pakistan, which could exacerbate hostility and animosity between Pakistan and India. China has openly invited India to participate in various development projects in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia (Naseem & Mehkari, May 18, 2023). It is undeniable that Russia once viewed Pakistan as a disruptive force in Afghanistan. However, it has now recognized the importance of Pakistan in achieving peace and stability in the country (Bhatti, February 15, 2023). Both China and Russia have recognized that Pakistan has become a frontline state in the US-led war on terror and it can play significant role for the regional peace and prosperity.

Consequently, the formation of a strategic Troika among China, Russia, and Pakistan appears to be emerging in the region. Russia and Pakistan, in conjunction with China, are exploring new avenues to counter the US and India in this environment. In short, the consolidation of the strategic triangle of China, Pakistan and Russia could have significant implications for India as well as the entire region (Topychkanov, January 16, 2017).

A New Game in the South Asian Order

The strategic troika of China-Pakistan-Russia troika has the potential to reshape geopolitical dynamics. It represents the strategic balance of US influence in the region. By forming a troika may lead to changes in power dynamics and the restructuring of alliances in the region. The primary catalyst for the escalating geopolitics in South Asia appears to be the rivalry between India and Pakistan. Due to its status as a prominent neighbor, China is widely recognized as a key player in regional affairs. This acknowledgment stems from China's longstanding association with Pakistan, which was further solidified after the Sino-Indian War in 1962. The Sino-Pakistani bond was further fortified when Russia joined the duo, forming a triple alliance to counter the burgeoning Indo-American ties. China always challenged India's diverse tactics and strategies in the region and it strategically utilizes Pakistan to effectively counter India's maneuvers.

Since the 1947, India and Pakistan, as rival South Asian nations, have been embroiled in numerous unresolved disputes. These conflicts have resulted in four major wars between the two countries, which not only weakened their respective economies but also greatly destabilized regional peace and prosperity. However, it is important to note that the focal point of these major

wars has consistently been the unresolved Kashmir issue. Both India and Pakistan have incurred substantial losses in terms of civilian and military casualties, property damage, and other economic setbacks.

The Kashmir issue has also been attributed to the escalating arms race in the region, as both countries live to acquire the latest weaponry. Both the countries recognize the importance of peace not only at the regional level but also for its own development in ensuring security and stability in South Asia. However, the challenging issue of Kashmir poses numerous obstacles and contributes to the emergence of terrorism in the region (Shanty, 2012, p. 99). Pakistan has consistently raised this issue in various regional and international forums. Thus, it is accurate to assert that the Kashmir dispute plays a major role in increasing power politics in South Asia. The persistent rivalry between India and Pakistan has compelled successive governments to contemplate advanced nuclear technology as a means to safeguard their territories. Regional security is at stake in the event of a future conflict between India and Pakistan, which would inevitably be a nuclear war rather than a conventional one (Crocker, Hampson, & All, *Diplomacy and the Future World Order*, 2021, p. 11). China, concerned with India's comprehensive development and its rise as a major Asian player, has provided extensive nuclear and military support to Pakistan as a deterrent against India. India's recent inclination towards the United States, particularly following the India-US civil nuclear deal in 2005, has been perceived by China as an effort to curtail its regional hegemony (Hussain, 2017, p. 15). China has also played a significant role in obstructing India's bid for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Notably, the growing alliance between China and Pakistan, as well as Russia, serves as a countermeasure to impede the flourishing Indo-American ties (Haider, June 08, 2016).

Though Russia has been a longstanding ally of India, particularly during the Cold War era, its alignment with Pakistan and China raises considerable concerns. As a consequence of the United States' proximity to India and its increased regional engagement, Russia supports Pakistan and China. The region is currently witnessing a situation characterized by a balance of power, with the formation of alliances and counter-alliances. The two emerging economic powerhouses, India and China, play pivotal roles in the evolving geopolitics of South Asia.

Despite China being India's largest trading partner, it consistently favors Pakistan over India under equal circumstances.

China is anxious about the emerging cooperation between India and the United States in the South China Sea dispute, a key maritime conflict in Asia. Furthermore, various bilateral border issues, particularly in the regions of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and Aksai Chin, contribute to the mutual animosity between China and India. New Delhi has consistently advocated for Aksai Chin to become a part of Indian Occupied Kashmir, which Pakistan unlawfully ceded to China (Dar & Ahmad, 2014; Muttreja & Tarapore, March 28, 2023).

In future, the power struggle between China and India, accompanied by numerous unresolved bilateral issues, prompts external powers to align themselves with either side. Both the countries, gather support from their respective allies, participating in what can aptly be described as a game of power politics. Considering the escalating geopolitical rivalry among the five nuclear powers United States, China, India, Russia, and Pakistan the formation of alliances and counter-alliances serves as a valid foundation for a new order in South Asia (Topychkanov, January 16, 2017, p. 75; Thokar Ahmad & Singh, 2017). The United States has actively engaged in the region to achieve its diverse goals and objectives. Pursuant to the Asia Pivot Policy, the United States has reinforced its strategic partnership by augmenting its air and naval presence in the region. In this context, noteworthy developments include recent U.S. involvement with major Asian players such as India, Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and South Korea (Khithei, 2015, p. online; Snedden, 2016, p. 21).

Russia, Pakistan, and several pro-China Asian member states have fully endorsed the rising dragon's firm stance on various issues, particularly the South China Sea Dispute. On the other hand, these pro-China countries have encountered strong opposition and criticism from the United States, its allies, and supporters. Nevertheless, the manner in which the US alters the Asia Pivot policy will be intriguing which the Obama era has concluded (Blackwill, January 16, 2020). As the 21st century progresses, energy security will undoubtedly dominate to keep pace with rapid industrial growth worldwide. Since the post-Cold War era, the three major powers the United States, Russia, and China have actively pursued their respective geostrategic interests (Ahmad, Markey, Mohan, & Xu, May 4, 2016).

The South Asian region witnesses shifting geopolitical trends with the formation of power blocs for instance SAARC. India and Pakistan, the two main players in SAARC, exploit the platform to further their vested interests. China and the United States, along with their respective alliances, are diminishing each other's roles. The burgeoning rivalry between these great powers and their competition within the South Asian region has overshadowed other pressing issues such as poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, terrorism, drug trafficking, and weapons proliferation (Andleeb, April 04, 2018).

The United States and China have played significant roles in regional power politics. Recently, the close alignment between China-Russia-Pakistan or the possibility of a trilateral alliance, and the burgeoning closeness between the United States and India, are reshaping the power dynamics in South Asia. The United States has reoriented its foreign policy towards the region and actively cooperates with India, the leading power in South Asia. In response, the enduring friendship between China and Pakistan is reaching new heights with Russia's involvement. A notable benefit of this new order is the maintenance of a balance of power in the region, whereby the belligerent stance of one side is counterbalanced by the other (Snedden, 2016, p. 21).

Conclusion

The strategic troika among China, Pakistan, and Russia represents a significant development in the region, carrying far reaching implications for the strategic developments of India and the United States. In today's interconnected world, the cause and effect relationship is not confined to individual states alone. Present governments prioritize economic progress and, consequently, seek cooperation with other nations worldwide. Similarly, security concerns in one country or region tend to have spillover effects. The troika is forging a triple alliance against the growing partnership between India and the United States. Both China and Pakistan consider India their collective adversary, given the historical Sino-Indian conflicts. Although China has been India's largest trading partner, it openly challenges India and urges it to abstain from intervening in various China-centric regional and global disputes. China and Pakistan are forming an alliance to collaborate with Russia in safeguarding their respective interests. India's inclination towards the United States, particularly in the post-Cold War era, has prompted Russia to counter the growing bilateral relations between India and the United States. This has given rise

to a new regional security framework as Russia aligns itself with Pakistan who is India's rival. Thus, China, Russia, and Pakistan share a collective strategy against the United States and its overall alignment with significant regional players such as India. The Troika staunchly opposes substantial advancements by the United States in the region. India has struck in difficult choice of equally significant partners, the United States and China. Both the global powers are equally important for India's overall development.

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