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Russia, United States and China in South Asian Politics: Implications for Pakistan

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Headings

- [Introduction](#)
- [Geo-Politics Scenario of the Region](#)
- [Russia's Role in South Asian Development and Strategic Balancing](#)
- [United States' Hegemonic Role in South Asian Region](#)
- [China in South Asian Development and Strategic Balancing](#)
- [Russia as An Option for Pakistan](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

Abstract

End of the Cold War caused a paradigm shift in world politics by converting the bipolar world into a unipolar world with the emergence of the USA as a sole superpower in the field of international politics. Indo-US obnoxious nexus has put the security situation in perils in South Asia. America is in a full endeavor to contain China to halt her ever-expanding sphere of influence. Positive and proactive development in Pak-Russia relations, in the post-Cold War period, has caused ripples in the stagnant waters of political, economic and strategic areas of mutual interest. On the global level Sino-US rivalry in Indian Ocean Region (IOR). While, on the other hand, so far as a regional factor is concerned, Pakistan and China have evolved very cordial and cooperative relations in order to complete China's Belt and Road (BRI) and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pak-Russia relations would go on to enter, from both sides, into complete trust, confidence-building and mutual reliance on each other.

Key Words: India, IOR, Geo-Politics, Pakistan, Russia

Introduction

After the end of World War-II in 1945, South Asia started getting the United States' attention on a scale it has never been observed in the past. Washington had successfully been promoting the neoliberal ideas in various parts of the world and with its massive strategic influence in a number of Asian countries; the US hegemony started getting momentum in the continent. In the wake of massive US military presence in Afghanistan and the adverse effects of the "War on Terror"(WOT) in South Asia, leading the region to an economic and geopolitical crisis, there has been an upward trend in anti-U.S. sentiments in the masses, and not a single SAARC member nation viewed American presence of any significant help to maintain geopolitical and economic stability in the region, let alone China who is a direct competitor to the United States and whose expansionist plans to take over South Asia are being jeopardized due to US presence in the region (Myra Routledge, 364).

During last three to four decades, South Asia has been going through great turmoil due to the War on Terror and also the rising tensions between the key players, "India-China-Pakistan" in the region, owing to the territorial disputes, yet, this region has been a place of attraction for the regional as well as global powers due to its particular geostrategic importance and vast consumer market. The region has been subjected to decades-long proxy wars between the superpowers including the Afghan-Soviet war started from December 1979 to February 1989. It is said that the American involvement in Afghan-Soviet war was not merely based on blocking the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from reaching the hot-waters, but it was actually a part of much longer future plan of establishing American dominance in the region. However,

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the region was deserted by the United States after the dissolution of the Soviet empire, yet, America launched a massive military offence on Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 incident in 2001 which was perpetrated by the very terrorist outfits founded by the United States itself. This incident brought about a dramatic change in the trajectory of American foreign policy towards South Asia [\(Myra Routledge, 30\)](#).

Geo-Politics Scenario of the Region

The origin of global powers' geopolitical interests in South Asia can be traced back to the late 1940s, especially after the partition of the Sub-continent on 14th August 1947. At present, this region has become a strategic battlefield among China, Russia, the United States and India scuffling to take control of it. According to some experts, minus the role of a superpower, the region could become a war zone between the regional powers, India and China, to take control of the South Asian region [\(Hilali 2006\)](#). Same could be opined about the Soviet Union or later "Russia", playing an important role in keeping the regional nuclear-capable nations from engaging in a full-scale war. Washington's grip is weakening on this region as a result of its involvement in the North Korea and Iran, which in turn is favoring China in carrying out its imperialistic agenda in a much more aggressive way, using its proxy "Pakistan" and the Islamic fanatics to make India spend most of its resources on crushing the insurgency and thwarting the cross-border infiltration from Pakistani controlled Kashmir region. To cover this gap left by the US, Russia seems to be flexing its muscles to play a greater role in South Asia.

It is being anticipated by some global geopolitical experts that Russia's come back in the South Asian region could initiate an alliance between India, Russia, Bangladesh and some Afghan factions which, in turn, underpin a geopolitical and strategic balance between China and the United States. The former superpower "Russia" is now gaining momentum but in a very cautious way. In the course of time, the political, military and diplomatic influence of Russia is increasing in various parts of the globe. The recent endorsement of India's political stand on Kashmir dispute, particularly in the wake of abrogation of Article 370, is being considered as the demonstration of Russia's come back in the South Asian region. After reviewing closely, the steps Russia is taking in South Asia, particularly, its increasing diplomatic and military initiatives with India and political and economic policies for Afghanistan and Bangladesh, one comes to the conclusion that Moscow is gradually heading towards achieving the position of a decisive and dominant player, with enough political, military and strategic power to deter rapidly rising Chinese expansionist endeavors and counter the interference of United States in this region, simultaneously.

These moves from a country like Russia, who still holds the potential to challenge both US and China respectively, could help India in establishing its hegemony in this region which in turn would help in bringing stability and sustainable development [\(Hilali 2006, 86\)](#). United States' involvement in this region is seldom welcome by the majority of South Asian countries as the US does not have any territorial connection to this region. However, on the other hand, Russia is potentially the best candidate out of all global powers due to its deep strategic and defense ties with China, India, Bangladesh and several other Asian and South Asian countries and also for being a superpower in the past. The last two decades have seen a sharp incline in Chinese expansionism in the Asian continent, and the South Asian region took the brunt of this changing geopolitical situation. With respect to the question "Why does South Asia need superpowers" the ongoing US-China Cold-War offers a great opportunity to delve deep into this matter.

Moscow is also trying to keep Pakistan from becoming a subordinate state to China because of its increasing over-dependence on Beijing. Since India and China are the two regional giants trying to claim their respective dominance over the South Asian region, which eventually end up in an all-out war between the two, the role of superpowers, be it the United States or Russia "the former superpower", still holding enormous military and diplomatic sway across the globe

in maintaining peace and stability in the region and establishing a virtual buffer zone between the rival countries in the region, cannot be overlooked. While China is trying to destabilize India by extending its support to Pakistan's Kashmir cause, United States is playing a vital role in maintaining the peace in this region by rendering its support to New Delhi on the issue of Kashmir [\(Philip 2002\)](#).

The recent massive defense and strategic contracts signed between India and the United States are considered by many experts as a part of Trump Administration's efforts to mend for destabilizing the South Asian region by having created the ultimate trouble makers in this region, Pakistan, China and Islamic Jihadi outfits. In spite of all these efforts from the United States, the situation seems to be getting out of hands and desperately calls for the intervention of Russia, who is already on the move, though, in a very careful manner. Most of the South Asian countries, from Afghanistan to Bangladesh, are looking towards Moscow as a savior.

Russia's Role in South Asian Development and Strategic Balancing

It used to be the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) holding the title of superpower until its disintegration in the late 1980s, wherefrom United States of America (USA) emerged as a sole global superpower, rapidly spreading its socio-economic and diplomatic influence across the globe. Nowadays, People's Republic of China (PRC) seems to be emerging as a new potential candidate in the realm of global geopolitics which seems to be defying the global sway of United States in some parts of the world, including South Asia [\(Jan and Horák 2008\)](#). The superpowers, be it USSR/Russia, in the past, or the USA, in the present, hold profound importance in the geopolitical and economic stability in the South Asian region. Consisting of around 1.93 billion people, nearly one-third of the total global population, South Asia, offers the largest consumer market and immense opportunities for investment, in spite of the most complex and long-standing geopolitical and territorial disputes [\(Worldometers n.d.\)](#). South Asian region has been relying on the superpowers for both its economic and regional stability. On the one hand, where the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) has played a very important role in maintaining the regional peace, assisting in industrial and economic development in this region, on the other hand, the United States of America and regional superpower 'People's Republic of China' have been keeping a check on Soviet Union's increasing political and military influence in the region.

Ever since the end of World War-II, the global powers are found to be increasingly interested in establishing their hegemony in the South Asian region, due to its geostrategic importance. On the one hand, the region has gone through the decades-long struggle between the superpowers to dominate the area and to get benefit from the trade routes, human resources, and enormous amount of minerals this region is abundant with, while on the other hand, the role these superpowers played in the industrial and economic development of this region is undeniable. Both superpowers, Soviet Union/Russia, and the United States have been contributing to the development of the South Asian region in their respective periods of global ascendancy. India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are those nations in this region which have been receiving a great deal of assistance from the Soviet Union in industrial, research and development, and military sectors. On the one hand, in order to counter Soviet Union's rising influence in the region, United States has been extending valuable cooperation to Pakistan, India and its allied factions in Afghanistan, on the other hand, it is bound to adopt the policy of containment against China. In other words, there has been a competition between the superpowers in this region, which in turn helped to a great deal in establishing new infrastructure and reviving the old one.

The ongoing race for power and control over South Asia has been proven helpful in the development of the South Asian region in a number of ways. Bangladesh, another country in the South Asian region, was bestowed with valuable assistance from the Soviet Union in its efforts to upgrade the infrastructure after its independence in 1971 as an outcome of Soviet Union's aspiration to increase its influence in this region. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow still continued to foster friendly relations in the countries

in this region, including Bangladesh. Bangladesh successfully made a potentially game-changing deal with Moscow in 2013 for the 2400-Megawatt Rooppur nuclear power plant [\(Researchgate n.d.\)](#).

Out of all SAARC countries, India is the nation which could be presented as an example to comprehend the need for superpowers for the South Asian region. India successfully defended its sovereignty and national integrity with the military and diplomatic assistance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War [\(Bakshi 2006\)](#). In the 1960s and 1970s, United States of America was rendering a considerable military and economic cooperation to Pakistan and, in fact, United States did threaten India of military intervention during the 1971 war, which could have quite devastating effects on the regional peace and political and economic stability. This is where the Soviet Union jumped in to save the day, and Bangladesh came into being. Had it not been the super power's intervention at that moment, the whole region could have plunged into decades-long regional and civil wars and total chaos. The strong military, diplomatic and economic relations between India and the Soviet Union also maintained the strategic counterbalance against the Chinese expansionism and after the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; this bilateral cooperation was held-up by Russia. Moscow extended its cooperation towards the South Asian countries, especially, India, to counter the after-effects of the Afghan war and the over-all deteriorating geopolitical situation thereof.

United States' Hegemonic Role in South Asian Region

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Moscow could not hold its position as a super power for long and the United States of America started emerging out of this chaos as the sole superpower. In order to establish its hegemony in South Asia, Washington started pumping huge number of resources in various geostrategic projects in the region and also launched USAID (United States Agency for International Development) initiative in Afghanistan and other underdeveloped and developing countries. After taking control of a larger portion of Afghan territory, a number of projects were initiated by the US government to help rebuild the country. In order to provide infrastructure, USAID (United States Agency for International Development) launched various initiatives to provide electricity, clean water, building new roads and repairing the old ones [\(Conor 2016, 2\)](#). Substantial spending was made in health and education sectors.

Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) is more than 300 Megawatts capacity Afghanistan National Power Grid built with the technical and financial assistance of United States [\(Shah, et al. 2017\)](#) USAID also constructed the Afghanistan Ring Road in addition to more than 2,000 kilometres length of roads. Over two million Afghans are provided with the facility of clean water since 2008. Other utility projects like the North East Power System (NEPS) and South-East Power System (SEPS) are also being completed by USAID. The construction of hundreds of kilometres long transmission line, from Ghazni to Kandhar, with approximately 220 Kilowatts capacity is under construction. More than 1.5 million Afghan citizens were provided facilities of improved sanitation with the help of USAID [\(Shah, et al. 2017\)](#). Hundreds of buildings are being constructed across Afghanistan by USAID, for hospitals, schools, universities, residence and government offices according to the international standards. United States has also provided substantial financial support to build the Afghan national army, which would play an important role in maintaining peace in the region after the US forces' withdrawal.

United States' presence in South Asia has also been helpful in stabilizing the region's geostrategic situation, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, when the whole region was threatened by Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. In spite of having close geostrategic and military ties with Moscow, New Delhi was not very much in favor of Russian Socialist system and was more inclined towards Western Capitalist economic system and politically preferred Democracy instead of Communism, considering it as a way to sustainable economic growth and a means to obtain access to the global market [\(Mohammad 2017\)](#).

US think tanks and policymakers declared South Asia as the most important region in the world in terms of maintaining peace and security in the world and protecting US interests not only in South Asia but

as far as Middle East, Far East and mainland United States are concerned. Pakistan's joining of the U.S.-led alliance in the War-on-Terror is a telling example of American sway over this region, as Pakistan was not willing to be a part of this war but due to immense US pressure and offer of military aid pulled Pakistan towards this Anti-terror alliance. United States projected its military might in Afghanistan through intense air raids and Pakistan being the frontline ally of the US and sharing hundreds of Kilometers long border with Afghanistan was providing the logistic facilities to the United States and allied army [_\(Hilali 2006, 77\)](#). Although India did not join US alliance for War-on-Terror, the Indian officials were reviewing the developments in the region to make a final decision on this matter.

Historically, India has been far more inclined towards Soviet Russia than it has ever been towards the United States, yet, it did not look a favorable option for India to remain indifferent during the emerging geopolitical scenario in its neighboring countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan. An important fact needs to be noted that despite India's close military, economic and strategic relations with the Soviet Union, India has never been subject to an aggressive diplomatic or economic action by the United States. Instead, Washington has extended its diplomatic cooperation to India on a number of situations where India was in extreme need of support from the West.

With regard to increasing its ascendancy in South Asia, America tilted a bit more towards India and made the "Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP)" pact, in 2004. Barely two years after this considerable step, United States signed a Civil-Nuclear deal with India in 2006, which paved the way for the United States to spread its spell further in the region [_\(Mehmood 2017\)](#). United States' signing these significantly important strategic, economic and military deals with India regardless from the reservations and opposition of its frontline ally, Pakistan, who clearly demonstrated that Washington was more interested in dominance in South Asia than eliminating the Islamic terrorism. During the Presidency of Bill Clinton, Washington was increasingly tilting towards India, although the United States and Pakistan remained close allies since the 1990s. There are multifarious reasons for this critical shift in the US policy for South Asia, which could be found in the United States' decade's old policy to increase its sway in this region.

In an effort to deter Beijing's rapidly growing strategic and economic influence and the ambitions for territorial expansion, Washington had to make an alliance with a South Asian nation which is strong enough to handle Chinese antagonism, and diplomatic as well as military pressure. India is viewed by America as a huge market for its industrial products, including both civilian and military, and the fast-pace economic growth and over a billion of population, are also the factors in the US choosing India as its ally [_\(F and Kronstadt 2007\)](#). Another reason for the US leaning towards India is its Western democratic values which remove the obstacles of any ideological differences. Owing to massive support for the Taliban and other Islamic militant outfits by Pakistan, both on public and government level, United States administration was not willing to trust on Pakistani intelligence agencies and government officials. While on the other hand, the overwhelming general opinion in Pakistan and all the pillars of establishment held suspicions over the US army's presence in the region. On account of this mutual distrust, Washington tends to lean towards New Delhi for its regional dominance in South Asia.

In order to exploit India's geopolitical and geostrategic dominance in the South Asian region, in United States' own favor during its military presence in Afghanistan and even after the withdrawal, Washington has brought about a dramatic change in its foreign policy towards South Asia, especially towards India. American think tanks are suggesting to the Trump Administration to establish close economic, geostrategic and military ties with India and support the idea of helping India to become a global player to counter rising Chinese influence in the region. However, Washington's grand plan to maintain its hegemony in the region can be traced back to the year 2000, when a joint U.S.-India counterterrorism group was established. Since US considers India as the only country in the region which could counter the Chinese hegemony and help the US prolong its own dominance in the region, it has shown keen interest in building extended trade partnership with India.

China in South Asian Development and Strategic Balancing

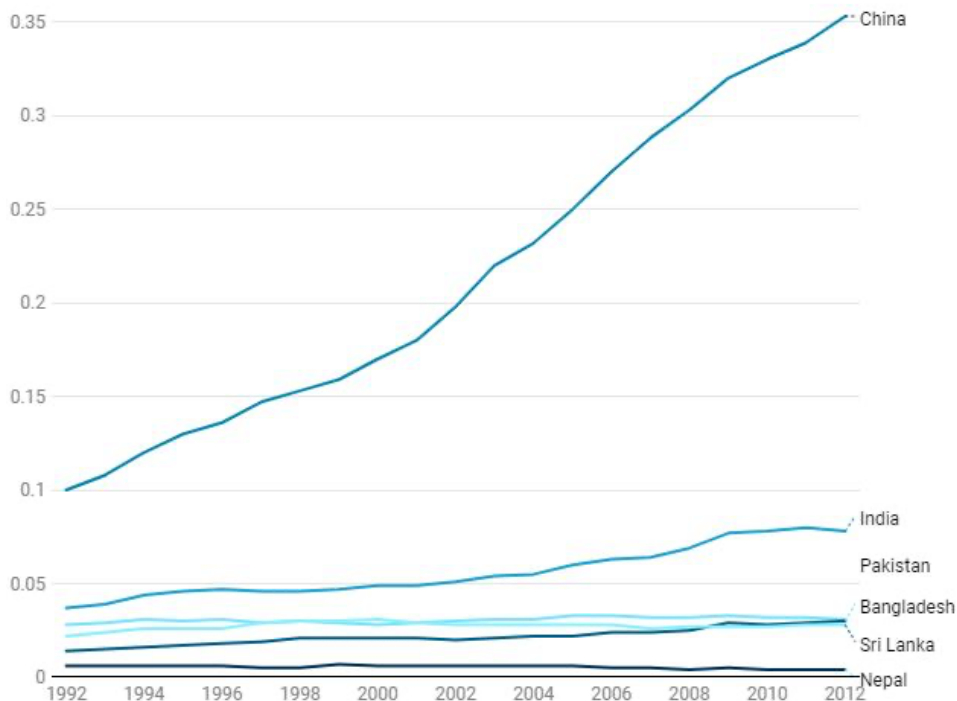
Sharing its borders with most of the South Asian countries, China does have a profound impact on this region in the economic, social and geopolitical sphere, though it is not situated in the geographic bounds of South Asia. There is not a single South Asian nation which is not linked to China in some way, be it trade, economy, military, geostrategy or geopolitics. Chinese influence in this region is up to the extent that it has a huge volume of bilateral trade with India despite a decade long intense border disputes and a series of military confrontations [\(T. V. Paul 2019\)](#). A number of South Asian countries share their borders with Communist China, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bhutan which paves the way for China to impact this region and intervene in the regional geostrategic and geopolitical matters. South Asia is taking the brunt of China's vehement expansionist policy, just like the countries situated in the South China Sea. China's apparent and conceivable strategy regarding South Asian region seems to be revolving around increasing its influence in the region through the trade, economic and military relations with the regional nations and thereby increasing its influence to such a level to become the main dominant power of the region. The valuable mineral resources, massive consumer market and direct access to the Sea routes involving the least natural and strategic risks to access the international oceans for trade and economic activities are the apparent motives behind growing Chinese interest in this region.

The economic reforms made by the Chinese establishment, particularly during the last three decades have significantly impacted its economy, and its effects are being noticed all across South Asia. The scale of Chinese economic and industrial development and the pace of it achieving this economic pinnacle is not, merely, transforming China but its signatures can be found in the economic and commerce domains across South Asia. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China back in 2013, holds the potential to play the role of a bridge between South Asian nations linking them with one another in deep, profound, beneficial and sustainable economic and trade relations, eventually, bringing long-lasting peace, harmony and stability in the region. The geographical significance of South Asia is of the core value for China, and in order to avail the benefits of it, Beijing has planned to extend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) all across the South Asian countries [\(T. V. Paul 2019, 52\)](#). A large-scale geopolitical turmoil or a territorial dispute or any sort of economic instability in this region conflicts to Beijing's interests. To exploit the geostrategic benefits of this region and to scoop-out, the advantages of one of the fastest-growing markets in the world, political and economic stability in this region are imperative and are in the best interest of China.

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is being projected by Beijing of holding the same level of importance for all the countries in South Asia as China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) holds importance for Pakistan. The Chinese government has been portraying this project as a game-changer for trade and economic development of the region. As claimed by Chinese establishment, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC) is going to perform as the backbone of future economic and trade growth for these countries hosting this corridor [\(Arifur, et al. 2020\)](#).

The prospects of China becoming a key player in the economic and industrial development of South Asia are considerably high. The interrelated industrial and economic features between China and South Asia seem to be laying the foundation for this. The industrial sector in South Asia is fostering due to the cheap raw material and machinery available in the Chinese market on competitive prices. China is keen to assist South Asian economies in boosting its industrial sectors, and there is definitely an enormous space for investment in this sector. The rate of industrial growth in South Asia, except India where the industrial growth is on a satisfactory momentum, was considered to be quite far from what it should have been according to the World Bank's Competitive Industrial Performance Index (CIP) statistics, accumulated from the date consisting of a period from 1992 to 2012.

CIP Index, 1992-2012



In the above graph, it can clearly be seen that India is on the top of rest of all the South Asian nations in terms of industrial growth, whereas, the industrial growth of China in the same graph seems to be extraordinary as compared to entire South Asian region. South Asian countries can obtain a great deal of technical assistance from China in terms of the manufacturing industry as China is going through the problem of excess manufacturing capacity. This overcapacity of Chinese industry can be made use of to stimulate the slow-paced South Asian industry. Beijing seems to have plans to shift some excess portion of its industry to South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to elevate the industrial growth in South Asia. We can take Pakistan as a lucid example who has benefited from Chinese investment accumulating to 20.9 percent of Pakistan's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the financial year 2016-17 ([Tribune 2017](#)).

Russia as An Option for Pakistan

Russia has been trying to take his place in the global geopolitics after the fall of the Soviet empire. A variety of suggestions and recommendations were made by the Russian think tanks and intellectuals regarding the future course of conduct that could help Russia in gaining prominence in international politics. Three policy features, in addition to various others, attained the attention of the Russian establishment with regard to the revival of Russia as a global player. Owing to the lack of trust between the Washington and Islamabad, the bilateral relations between the two countries always remain in perils. Pakistan's failure in achieving its goals in the fields of economy, security and geopolitics, is blamed on this mutual mistrust. Pakistan should have chosen a balanced approach in its decision to be an ally with either Soviet Union or the United States, instead, it went for a radical one, choosing the United States and standing totally against the Soviet Union. Pakistan should follow along with the changing global and regional geopolitical circumstances and revive its foreign policy aligning with its socio-economic interests.

The New Great Game in South Asia: Implications for Pakistan

A few decades ago, South Asia used to be the epicentre of the great game between the West and the Soviet Union. However, the end of the Cold War brought hopes for sustainable peace and harmony in the region, which would not last long. The 21st century is unfolding new political and strategic challenges and scenarios not only in global theatre but also on regional stages. The constant change in world politics is bringing in new players and modifying the vested interests of the previous global players with the passage of time. South Asia has always been a battleground of the global as well as regional powers. The struggle to dominate the South Asian region, to attain the optimum benefit of the strategic character of the region has spurred a new power struggle in the region between India and China. Both nations with their massive manpower, huge military might and economic foundations seek to secure a stronger foothold in the region to gain more strategic and economic advantages, which in turn, seem to compromise the regional security and political stability in multiple ways. This strife is not confined merely to the land; rather, it has spread across the maritime territories, including the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) [\(T. V. Paul 2019, 53-57\)](#).

Conclusion

The rising tensions between China and the United States and, India's increasingly U.S.-tilted foreign policy, are going to determine the fate of this continent. Most of the countries in South Asia are facing a dilemma of not being in a position to choose between the two global giants, the United States and China. In other words, there is a Cold War-like situation between the United States and China, and South Asia is the battleground, but unlike Cold War-era Europe, these South Asian Nations are not clearly aligned either with China or the United States, rather, they are following the policy of dual-phase diplomacy through which they want to draw maximum economic and military benefits from both the rivalling powers. The South Asian Nations hold several justifiable and reasonable reservations regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which China has to deal with in order to win the confidence of these countries. Over the years, China has been making rapid progress in the domains of industry, economics, trade, and technology, and it has achieved the level of total independence in the defence sector. In recent years, China has started reflexing its military muscles in several parts of the world, including the South China Sea (SCS) and in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It seems that China is gradually moving towards the level of might where it would be able to replace more than half-century-long US dominance in South Asia [\(Kassim 2019\)](#).

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