

1

Assessing the Dynamics of US-Pakistan Relations in the Evolving Geopolitical Landscape of South Asia

Assessing the Dynamics of US-Pakistan Relations in the Evolving Geopolitical Landscape of South Asia

Dr. Taimur Shamil¹

Historically, relations between Pakistan and the United States have been exceptional and often underrated. Much of the discourse on Pakistan-US relations focuses on the downside of their bilateral engagement. However, a careful assessment of Pak-US relations highlights the areas where Pakistan and the US collaborated in crucial ways. A study of historical events such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the Taliban-US deal in Doha 2020 highlights Pakistan's critical role as a strategic player and partner with the US. Pakistan is also an important country for the US in the sense that the latter has sought the former's backing in crucial times such as during the US War on Terror after the 9/11 incident and subsequently, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. In parallel, as the great power competition between the US and China takes a new turn, Pakistan seems to be playing an essential role in the evolving global geopolitics and regional strategic stability of

1. Dr. Taimur Shamil holds a PhD in International Relations from Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. He is currently an academic based in New York.

South Asia. In this process, China sees Pakistan as a key player in the region. Both China and Pakistan collaborate in several domains such as infrastructure development, energy, trade, and technology. In parallel, developments such as Indo-US defense deals, their increasing strategic partnership, and official US statements suggest that the US has put its relations with Pakistan on the back burner as it assigns India a net-security provider's role in the region. However, despite their strong partnership, US relations with India have faced challenges and downturns, especially after the planned killings of Americans and Canadians on their respective soil. Additionally, India is adhering to a policy of accommodation with China and is reluctant to get into serious confrontations against the latter. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that India's tendency to hedge its bets makes it an unreliable partner for the US. Hence, the US should create a balancing act by strengthening its relations with other regional states i.e., Pakistan. The paper suggests that Pakistan and the US reinforce their relationship on consolidated grounds by mitigating mistrust and strengthening shared understanding to achieve peace and stability in the region.

Keywords: Pakistan-US Relations, South Asia, Great power competition, Pakistan-China relations.

Introduction

Historically, the relationship between Pakistan and the United States has been exceptional and often understated in many respects. A thorough examination of their bilateral relations reveals a series of fluctuations, characterized by periods of both cooperation and tension. Their relationship

has been complex, alternating between close-knit cooperation resembling that of allies and tense periods where Pakistan has faced sanctions. Despite these trials, the relationship between the two states has demonstrated resilience and continuity. Recent geopolitical developments involving the great power competition between the US, and China, and the renewed Indo-US alliance have led to the understanding that the US has deprioritized its relations with Pakistan.² This perception may hold some validity, however, a more nuanced analysis grounded in *realpolitik* suggests caution in drawing such conclusions. The intensifying US-China competition and complex, and at times disorderly, alliance building between the US and India,³ creates new opportunities for both the US and Pakistan to retune their ties.

Pakistan has been an important country for the US in turbulent times in the South Asian region. From resisting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to participating in the War on Terror (WoT) and facilitating the American and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan has consistently played a crucial role in supporting US efforts to achieve regional peace and stability.⁴ The US President, Joe Biden's remarks to former Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, stating that "Pakistan is 50 times more important than Afghanistan," are widely cited.⁵ This statement highlights the comparative importance of Pakistan and provides insight into

2. Ali, Syed Mohammad. "Managing US Relations with Pakistan in Uncertain Times: Opportunities and Obstacles." Middle East Institute, December 2023. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/managing-us-relations-pakistan-uncertain-times-opportunities-and-obstacles>.

3. Tellis, Ashley J. "America's Bad Bet on India." Foreign Affairs, May 1, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>.

4. Steve Coll, "Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001" (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

5. Mazzetti, Mark, and Ismail Khan. "From the Afghan Peace Deal, a Weak and Pliable Neighbor for Pakistan." New York Times, March 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/world/asia/afghanistan-pakistan-peace.html>.

the perspectives of top policymakers in Washington D.C, regarding Pakistan's strategic significance in South Asia. However, recent trends have indicated a downturn in the strength of Pakistan-US relations, altering the discourse significantly. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of the bilateral relationship within the broader context of evolving geopolitical dynamics in the region.

This paper examines the contemporary contours of Pakistan-US relations in the backdrop of changing regional political dynamics. It focuses on the existing strategic environment in South Asia and aims to explore new dimensions and areas of cooperation between the US and Pakistan. This reassessment is integral for both states to adapt to the shifting geopolitical landscape and harness mutual benefits derived from bilateral cooperation and shared understanding.

Theoretical Framework

The paper utilizes the neo-classical realist theory to understand how systemic and sub-systemic undercurrents play key roles in bilateral relations and foreign policy formulation. This theoretical framework is employed to analyze Pakistan's stance and strategic importance, as well as the US approach towards the evolving geopolitical environment in South Asia. Through this lens, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Pakistan-US relations and the strategic decisions made by both countries.

While middle powers like Pakistan depend on systemic outcomes and changes to steer their foreign policy, great powers like the US also rely on middle powers at sub-systemic levels due to their strategically important roles. This interdependence fosters cooperation on important national issues to achieve desired outcomes in the region. Addition-

ally, this dynamic highlights how Pakistan and the US negotiate while pursuing their national interests. Negotiations are central to diplomacy, and it is crucial to recognize that nations evolve with systemic and sub-systemic changes. Finding common ground amid diverging interests requires prudence and strategic thinking. Understanding these dynamics is essential for promoting effective cooperation and achieving mutual objectives in the region.

Neoclassical Realist theory considers domestic and *Innenpolitik* approaches, in contrast to classical realist theory, which focuses solely on structural outcomes. In their seminal work "Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics," Jeffrey Taliaferro et al emphasize the "clarity of systemic signals," explaining that these signals are often uncertain and unclear. In such situations, the perceptions and misperceptions of leaders and bureaucrats play a crucial role in shaping policy responses to systemic signals.⁶ Taliaferro et al use the example of China and the US to argue whether the US should address the China issue through containment or an engagement strategy that can limit "China's risk-taking behavior."⁷

The US approach to containing China and its tilt towards India elucidates its strategy towards the South Asian region, including Pakistan. The article argues that, despite the ambiguity of systemic signals and the evolving geopolitical landscape, sustained and continued cooperation between Pakistan and the US is essential. Pakistan continues to play a significant role in regional affairs and is likely to play an increasingly vital part in the future dynamics of South Asian politics.

6. Taliaferro, Jeffrey W., Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M. Ripsman. "Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

7. Taliaferro et al. "Neo Classical Realist Theory of International Politics."

Pakistan-US Troubled Relationship: Who is Relevant for Whom?

Conventionally, Pakistan-US relations have primarily focused on the issue of Afghanistan for more than four decades. Through these definitive years, both states have experienced several ups and downs in their bilateral relationship.⁸ Afghanistan has been a significant concern for the US, particularly due to its prolonged military involvement in the Afghanistan War, one of the longest wars in its history.⁹ The prolonged engagement posed a significant domestic political challenge, primarily due to its enormous financial cost and limited achievements to present to the American public.¹⁰ Former American President, Barak Obama notably remarked that his predecessors had financed wars on a “credit card.”¹¹ Despite these challenges, the US conducted its longest war against terrorism with significant assistance from Pakistan, which bore considerable costs in terms of human casualties and extensive economic damage.¹²

In addition to this, Pakistan has faced occasional yet perpetual criticism from the US for not doing enough in the WoT.¹³ This criticism peaked during President Donald Trump’s tenure when he tweeted that Pakistan had offered

8. Kux, Dennis. “The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies.” Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

9. Ali, Idrees, et al. “America’s Longest War: 20 Years of Missteps in Afghanistan.” Reuters, August 16, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/americas-longest-war-20-years-missteps-afghanistan-2021-08-16/>.

10. “The U.S. War in Afghanistan Twenty Years on Public Opinion Then and Now.” Council on Foreign Relations. July 17, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-war-afghanistan-twenty-years-public-opinion-then-and-now>.

11. Obama, Barack. “President Obama on Inequality.” Politico, December 4, 2013. <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/12/obama-income-inequality-100662>.

12. “Pakistan Won’t Be a ‘Scapegoat’ in Afghan War, PM Abbasi Tells UN General Assembly.” Dawn, September 22, 2017. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1359305>.

13. Shepardson, David. “Trump Says U.S. Has Gotten ‘Nothing’ from Pakistan Aid.” Reuters, January 3, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1EQ114/>.

nothing but “lies and deceit” to the US.¹⁴ These accusations were damaging to Pakistan’s global image and were not well received in Pakistan, which issued rebuttals in official statements.¹⁵ Following this, their relations deteriorated further as the US called off military assistance and collaborations with Pakistan.¹⁶ Parallel to these developments, the war in Afghanistan continued to intensify, with the American military and NATO facing increased international criticism for failing to achieve their intended goals in Afghanistan. The publication of the “Afghanistan Papers” by The Washington Post revealed major flaws in American policy and its approach to the Afghan conflict. These documents highlighted the pitfalls and missteps that had plagued the US efforts in Afghanistan, further complicating the geopolitical landscape and influencing Pakistan-US relations.¹⁷

The next phase involved the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. To achieve this, the US relied heavily on Pakistan, which was uniquely positioned as the most suitable and reliable partner due to its consistent engagement with the US throughout the conflict in Afghanistan. Pakistan played a pivotal role in facilitating the peace deal between the US and the Afghan Taliban, which was signed in 2021, leading to the eventual withdrawal of US troops.¹⁸ It is pru-

14. Diamond, Jeremy. “Trump Slams Pakistan, Threatens to Cut Off Aid.”

CNN, January 1, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/01/politics/donald-trump-2018-pakistan/index.html>.

15. “Trump’s ‘Lies and Deceit’ Tweet Deeply Hurt Every Pakistani, Bilawal Tells US Media,” The Express Tribune, February 10, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1629563/trumps-lies-deceit-tweet-deeply-hurt-every-pakistani-bilawal-tells-us-media>.

16. “Trump Admin Cancels \$300M Aid to Pakistan over Terror Record,” NBC News, September 2, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-admin-cancels-300m-aid-pakistan-over-terror-record-n905786>.

17. Whitlock, Craig. “The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War.” Washington Post, December 9, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

18. Gul, Ayaz. “US Hails Pakistan’s Role in Advancing Afghan Peace Process.” VOA News, September 14, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central->

dent to recognize that Pakistan's engagement and support in this process were crucial.

Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington has been increasingly engaged in a broader strategic competition with Beijing in the Asia-Pacific region, although this competition was ongoing even before the US withdrawal, it intensified significantly thereafter. This competition encompasses various domains, including economic influence, diplomatic efforts, technological competition (such as chip wars), military build-ups, and ideological influence. The US focus on China is likely to intensify, thus involving the global community extensively. Both the US and China are vying to expand their influence in the Asia-Pacific, making countries like Pakistan crucial in this geopolitical contest. In this era of US-China competition, the support of the Global South and regional powers is vital for the US to implement its policy choices effectively.¹⁹ Even if Pakistan does not play a direct role, it remains a significant player in the region due to its strategic position and regional influence.

The US' Bad Bet on India

The US strategy to contain China encompasses cross-regional and cross-industrial dimensions, making a new "great game" played on multiple fronts. One of the main areas of concern for the US is the Asia-Pacific region, where it seeks India's support against China. However, New Delhi finds it difficult to assert itself against China, both militarily and economically. Recent humiliations faced by India at Doklam and Aksai Chin highlight its vulnerabilities and lack of competency.²⁰ India continues to grapple with out-

asia_us-hails-pakistans-role-advancing-afghan-peace-process/6195885.html.

19. Luce, Edward. "How America Can Win Over the Global South." *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-america-can-win-over-global-south>.

20. Wuthnow, Joel, Satu Limaye, and Nilanthi Samaranayake. "Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas." *War on the Rocks*, June 7, 2018.

dated military equipment, incompetent military personnel, an unstable economy, and growing religious intolerance at the domestic level. These domestic challenges hinder India's strategic ability to effectively manage internal affairs and project strength externally. The American urgency in containing China contrasts sharply with India's reluctance to commit to any future crisis vis-à-vis China. This divergence is a defining feature of Indo-US relations, complicating the strategic dynamics between the two states.²¹

In this context, the US finds it challenging to secure a reliable partner to contain China on its behalf. While India appears actively engaged in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and asserting itself in the Asia-Pacific region, its commitment remains largely limited to diplomatic statements only.²² Ashley Tellis in his latest article titled "America's Bad Bet on India," argues that the US should not expect India to align militarily against China in a conflict that does not directly threaten India's security. Tellis contends, "Washington's expectations of India are misplaced."²³ India cannot significantly undermine China, both militarily and economically. Nevertheless, India provides the US with rhetorical support and, in return, receives substantial technological, economic, and military assistance, in the form of defense collaboration aimed at strengthening its military capabilities for potential military engagements in the region.

In essence, Tellis suggests that India-US collaboration often amounts to symbolic gestures from India without substan-

<https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/doklam-one-year-later-chinas-long-game-in-the-himalayas/>.

21. Tellis. "America's Bad Bet on India."

22. Miller, Manjari Chatterjee. "The Quad, AUKUS, and India's Dilemmas." Council on Foreign Relations, October 13, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/article/quad-aokus-and-indias-dilemmas>.

23. Tellis. "America's Bad Bet."

tial commitments. Despite its rhetoric and occasional alignment with US interests, India continues to maintain significant military ties with American rivals like Russia and pursues economic transactions, such as oil purchases from Iran, that contradict US sanctions policies. Despite these complexities, the US, eager to find allies in the Global South turns to counterbalance Chinese influence and overlooks India's engagements with Russia and Iran. This pragmatic approach allows the US to maintain the limited support it receives from India in its broader strategic efforts in South Asia and beyond.

Another point highlighting India's unreliability as a partner is the ongoing crises between Russia and the West since the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict, which has compelled other states to pick sides. India, despite its close strategic partnership with the US, did not align with the West, even though the US made efforts to persuade India to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and stop purchasing Russian oil. India has maintained a neutral stance on Ukraine while continuing to buy Russian oil, which has frustrated the US and led to portrayals of India as an unreliable partner.

In the context of China's competition, Indian stakeholders are aware that any confrontation with China would be devastating for India in terms of its economy and regional support, making India understandably cautious. India's current focus is primarily on enhancing its military-industrial ambitions with American support which is intensifying Pakistan's security dilemma. Whether these capabilities will be leveraged against China remains uncertain and will depend on future geopolitical developments.

Furthermore, India's recent rift with Canada over the killing of Canadian nationals has significantly tarnished its pres-

tige and global image.²⁴ This incident has strained India's relations with countries it has recently sought to align with. Statements from Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, followed by remarks from American officials regarding the planned killings on American and Canadian soil, have severely damaged India's international standing.²⁵ Indian External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar's recent visit to Russia, where he met with President Vladimir Putin,²⁶ signals India's annoyance against the criticism received from the Americans and Canadians. The visit to Moscow reflects innate anxiety on India's part, as it grapples with the complexities and pressures of its alliance with the US.

China's influence in South Asia

While China is garnering support across Asia, Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East, the US struggles to offer equally lucrative economic and financial deals, particularly to states in the Global South. In South Asia, where the US once wielded significant influence, its position appears to be diminishing as China emerges as the major patron of security, economic stability, and infrastructure development. This shifting geopolitical landscape presents challenges and opportunities for regional states as they navigate their roles and alliances in a rapidly evolving global order.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive investment in regional connectivity and infrastructure building that entails China's strategic goals in the South Asian region

24. "Canada Accuses India of Involvement in Sikh Activist's Murder." CBS News, September 18, 2023. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/canada-india-justin-trudeau-sikh-activists-murder-hardeep-singh-nijjar/>.

25. Herman, Steve. "India Alleged to Have Plotted Assassination on US Soil." VOA News, November 22, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-alleged-to-have-plotted-assassination-on-us-soil/7365996.html>.

26. "Russia Thanks India for Support on Ukraine, Criticizes West." Associated Press, January 1, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-india-foreign-minister-ukraine-e39aabac4ca459cd11efac6b1027572a>.

and beyond.²⁷ These goals, however, are subject to differing interpretations depending on the perspective. From the Chinese perspective, the BRI envisions a world with shared goals and shared destiny, aiming to enhance cooperation among states and nations. China promotes the initiative as a means to foster economic development, infrastructure growth, and mutual benefits, thereby creating a more interconnected and cooperative international environment. Conversely, the American view of China's BRI is markedly critical. The US asserts that the BRI initiative is a "potential debt trap" for smaller nations, wherein these countries become dependent on Chinese investment, making themselves vulnerable to economic and political exploitation by China.²⁸

Nonetheless, Chinese influence in the region is considerable, as China continues to expand its sphere of influence through economic diplomacy, rather than coercion. This approach has seen China forge strong relationships within countries including Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Afghanistan, and others. One of the most significant examples of this economic diplomacy is China's enormous investment in Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).²⁹ This economic corridor connects China's industrial zones with Gwardar, providing the shortest, most feasible, and secure gateway for China to access global markets. The relationship between Pakistan and China is exceptional. Both states share common strategic goals for regional stability and the balance of power, particularly about India.

27. Chatzky, Andrew, James McBride, and Noah Berman. "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative." Council on Foreign Relations, February 2, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

28. "China's Lending Practices Under Scrutiny as Developing Nations Struggle with Debt." Associated Press, February 21, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/china-debt-banking-loans-financial-developing-countries-collapse-8df6f9fa-c3e1e758d0e6d8d5dfbd3ed6>.

29. "China and Pakistan Celebrate Anniversary of CPEC Project." Associated Press, July 31, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-china-vice-premier-cpec-anniversary-f01295262a57f09c1d597f52b63d790c>.

Moreover, key South Asian states like Maldives, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have seen growing and strengthening relations with China in recent years. These relatively small states have become wary of Indian ambitions and regional dealings. For instance, recent statements by Maldivian officials and public officeholders have caused diplomatic friction, causing hindrances to Indian ambitions and goals.³⁰

Additionally, Afghanistan, following the American withdrawal, remains a key concern for regional powers like Pakistan and China. Both states share common concern about the growing influence of terrorist organizations like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan. In contrast, the US seems to have distanced itself from taking responsibility for Afghanistan, a country that was under its military, strategic, and economic influence for over two decades.

Afghanistan's neighbors, especially Pakistan, have little choice but to address the challenges emanating from Afghanistan. China, recognizing its strategic interests, has become a key stakeholder in Afghanistan, engaging diplomatically to address critical issues between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. By engaging with Afghanistan, China established itself as a major regional power committed to peace, stability, and economic opportunity. Nevertheless, meaningful economic cooperation with Afghanistan is contingent upon the Taliban government demonstrating inclusiveness and consistency in its governance.

From Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka; security, economy, and infrastructure

30. Samaranayake, Nilanthi. "As Tensions with India Grow, Maldives Looks to China." United States Institute of Peace, January 18, 2024. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/01/tensions-india-grow-maldives-looks-china>.

remain the top Chinese concern in the region. In this context, Pakistan emerges as a significant partner for China for several reasons.³¹ The CPEC is a flagship project under the BRI, signifying deep economic and infrastructural ties between the two states. Moreover, Pakistan's geographical position provides China with crucial access to the Arabian Sea, enhancing its trade routes and maritime presence. Additionally, the strong economic and diplomatic relations between China and Pakistan further underscore the strategic depth of their partnership.

China's investments in infrastructure projects across these countries aim to boost economic growth and serve to enhance regional stability, which is essential for maintaining secure trade routes and promoting sustainable development. As such, the strategic importance of Pakistan in China's regional calculus cannot be overstated, given its central role in China's infrastructure connectivity project.

Pakistan's Balancing Act

As Chinese and American interests in the region evolve, Pakistan finds itself in a world that is constantly changing. In this rapid evolution, the key to Pakistan's strategy and success lies in repositioning its strategic role. Pakistan's balancing act is based on adapting to the changing environment and circumstances. Its strategic goals focus on maintaining a safe environment and a stable neighborhood to pursue its broader objectives. Pakistan's definitive aim is to integrate itself into the regional economy, allowing its markets to flourish by realigning with states within and beyond the region. Pakistan's economic integration, however, is contingent upon regional security that has long been marred by protracted wars in Afghanistan, and hostility between Pakistan and India.

31. Andrew Small, "The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Countries do not evolve in isolation; they are products of their regional environments. Pakistan, in particular, faces a turbulent neighborhood. Situated next to Afghanistan, a country that has been embroiled in conflict for the last 40 years, Pakistan has suffered significant setbacks in its prospects for trade and development due to the wars and invasions in Afghanistan. Similarly, Pakistan's neighbor Iran has been under international sanctions for over 40 years, severely limiting the potential for trade and economic cooperation with a country struggling to integrate into the global economy. Consequently, these two key neighbors, despite their tremendous economic potential, fail to support Pakistan's vision for regional economic integration. Additionally, India remains an antagonistic neighbor, adopting an increasingly aggressive posture that undermines regional prospects for peace and stability. This challenging geopolitical environment necessitates strategic alliances, and China emerges as Pakistan's reliable partner.

China has consistently demonstrated extensive support for Pakistan, respecting its sovereignty and providing substantial economic investments when global alternatives were lacking. Despite this support, Pakistani policymakers do not rely on China to mitigate internal domestic, economic, and political crises. China's approach has been to encourage peaceful coexistence with India and cultivate friendly ties with the US, thereby creating room for Pakistan's economic growth. Beijing advocates for Pakistan to strike a delicate balance in its relations with both China and the US. This balance does not aim to achieve equality or maintain an identical distance; instead, it involves leveraging each relationship to serve Pakistan's national interests.³²

Against this backdrop, Pakistan needs to maintain its strategic patience. As a key ally of China, Pakistan can envi-

32. Chaudhry, Aizaz Ahmad. "Delicate Balancing Act." Dawn, February 22, 2022. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1676409>.

sion a region that is economically integrated and secure. Additionally, Pakistan has a seven-decade-long strategic relationship with the US, where both countries have shared common ground in resisting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, fighting the WoT, and signing the American-Taliban Doha agreement. These instances have been crucial for US interests in the region, with Pakistan serving as the regional ally.

As global geopolitical events unravel, foreign policy thinkers in Pakistan and the US foreign policymakers need to broaden their strategic horizons and imagination for future collaborations. This will require innovation and creativity in foreign policy thinking in both Washington and Islamabad, to address existing issues and envision future scenarios.

Potential Areas for Pakistan-US Collaboration

Shared Vision for Peace in Afghanistan

Following the withdrawal of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban interim government has been subject to substantial criticism both domestically and internationally due to its restrictions on human rights, women's rights, and girls' access to education.³³ The Taliban appear to have learned little from the past two decades of conflict, maintaining their traditional stance on women and human rights. Furthermore, the deteriorating human rights situation, coupled with the Taliban's political exclusivity and marginalization of other political stakeholders,³⁴ significantly impedes Afghanistan's integration into the

33. Ochab, Ewelina. "The Legacy of the Taliban: Poverty, Human Rights Violations, and Gender Apartheid." Forbes, August 14, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2023/08/14/the-legacy-of-the-taliban-poverty-human-rights-violations-and-gender-apartheid/>.

34. Ibrahim, Niamatullah. "The Taliban Need to Start an Intra-Afghan Dialogue, but with Who?" Al Jazeera, March 28, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/3/28/the-taliban-need-to-start-an-intra-afghan-dialogue-but-with-who>.

broader international community.

Afghanistan is a land, characterized by a diverse political and cultural spectrum, where each ethnic and political group holds a unique place in society. These groups, individuals, and parties have been sidelined with the advent of the Taliban government. For Afghanistan to stabilize its relations with the global community, it is imperative to mainstream all stakeholders, thereby expanding public participation in government matters. Pakistan has played an instrumental role in facilitating dialogues among various Afghan groups on multiple occasions.³⁵ For Pakistan, peace and political stability in Afghanistan are prerequisites for its economic integration with central Asian states. Therefore, the sooner Afghanistan returns to a stable trajectory, the better it will be for Pakistan and the region. However, Pakistan cannot achieve this alone; it requires the support of other international players and stakeholders. Given the significant investment of the US in Afghanistan, it can play a crucial role in this process. The US has leverage with various Afghan political groups that can be utilized to foster inclusive governance. Additionally, other stakeholders, including China, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Central Asian states, can be brought together to address the Afghan issue comprehensively.

Supporting Regional Connectivity

Regional connectivity is a crucial area that requires deliberation between Pakistan and the US. In an increasingly interconnected world focused on shared energy needs and trade connectivity, the US needs to intensify its efforts to garner support from various regions. China, through its economic and trade strategies, is successfully expanding its influence by incorporating more countries into its sphere

35. "Afghan Leaders Begin Two-Day Peace Talks in Pakistan." Al Jazeera, June 22, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/22/afghan-leaders-begin-two-day-peace-talks-in-pakistan>.

of cooperation. Notable initiatives such as the BRI in Asia, the trans-railway projects in Central Asia,³⁶ energy cooperation with the Middle East³⁷ and various projects in Africa³⁸ are significantly enhancing China's leverage with regional powers. While China has been effectively cultivating its influence abroad, the US approach has been inward-looking, often becoming entangled in regional conflicts, such as those in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and Iraq etc. This inward focus has diverted attention from broader strategic initiatives that could enhance regional connectivity and cooperation. For the US to maintain and expand its global influence, it needs to adopt a more rational approach to promoting regional connectivity and collaboration, particularly in areas like energy and trade where mutual interests with countries like Pakistan can be aligned.

With the rise of China, geopolitical dynamics have shifted significantly, leading to the formation of new alliances, the emergence of new political phenomena, and the evolution of innovative approaches to geopolitics at a rapid pace. For the US, it is crucial to create new alliances and strengthen partnerships with existing allies to prepare itself for future developments. In light of these changes, the US needs to promote increased cooperation with Pakistan in economic, technological, and connectivity corridors. The US may consider focusing on enhancing trade ties not only with Pakistan but also with the broader region.

36. Donnellon-May, Genevieve, and Zhang Hongzhou. "Rail Link with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan Key to China Raising Central Asia Influence and Skirting Russia Sanctions." Asia Society, August 29, 2023. <https://asiasociety.org/australia/rail-link-kyrgyzstan-and-uzbekistan-key-china-raising-central-asia-influence-and-skirting-russia>.

37. "China Signs 27-Year Gas Deal with Qatar Energy to Secure Supply." Al Jazeera, November 21, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/11/21/china-signs-27-year-gas-deal-with-qatarenergy-to-secure-supply>.

38. Brautigam, Deborah. "China's Soft-Power Advantage in Africa." Foreign Affairs, December 23, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-12-23/chinas-soft-power-advantage-africa>.

Enhancing Counterterrorism Mechanism

Pakistan and the US have been addressing the issue of counterterrorism for over two decades, a collaboration that intensified after the events of September 11, 2001. Following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a crucial ally in the US-led WoT, providing support in intelligence, military operations, and regional stability efforts. Both countries have suffered from terrorism and its various manifestations globally, leading to a strong partnership focused on combating this threat. Terrorism remains the foremost concern for both states, in the region and worldwide.

Following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Pakistan's security concerns have intensified. The number of terrorist attacks has risen, undermining regional security; approximately 1,000 Pakistanis were killed in terrorist attacks in 2023 alone. Given the US' four decades of direct and indirect involvement in Afghanistan, it should not leave the issue of terrorism unattended.³⁹ Pakistan requires support from the US to combat terrorist organizations that find refuge and safe havens in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ On multiple occasions, Pakistan has raised concerns about Indian involvement in financing and supporting terrorist organizations like the Pakistani Taliban, formally called the TTP.⁴¹ For a stable and continuous relationship with Pakistan, the US needs to acknowledge and address these regional security needs and requirements.

Should the US decide to initiate its defense and security mechanisms with Pakistan, it would not be approached

39. Gul, Ayaz. "Report: Terrorist Attacks Kill Nearly 1,000 Pakistanis in 2023." VOA News, December 31, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/report-terrorist-attacks-kill-nearly-1-000-pakistanis-in-2023-/7419344.html>.

40. Shirazi, Iftikhar. "Army Expresses Serious Concerns on 'Safe Havens, Liberty of Action' Available to TTP in Afghanistan." Dawn, July 13, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1764711>.

41. Iqbal, Anwar. "Backed by 'Rival', TTP Free to Attack Pakistan, UN Told." Dawn, March 17, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1799803>.

from an entirely new perspective. Its involvement in Afghanistan, in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion and during the WoT, provides the US and Pakistan with a substantial foundation upon which to construct a shared security vision. This vision is crucial for curtailing and eliminating future terrorist threats. Therefore, the persistent terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan necessitate sustained US engagement with Pakistan. Moreover, given India's newfound relevance to the US in its policy of containing China, it would be imprudent for the US to sideline its relations with Pakistan and downplay Pakistan's security concerns. However, the recent downward trend in Pakistan-US relations has caused significant damage to their bilateral relationship, particularly at a time when strong co-operation is most needed.

Taming Indian Aggression

Countries do not progress in isolation; their development is intertwined with their regional surroundings. Pakistan's regional environment is particularly hostile due to India's military posture, its conventional and nuclear doctrines, and its hegemonic ambitions in the region and beyond. Due to India's provocative strategies, the security environment in South Asia remains fragile and tense, exacerbated by the rise of ultra-religious nationalism in India.⁴² Under the Modi government, tensions between India and Pakistan escalated significantly in the aftermath of the Pulwama incident, bringing the two countries to the brink of war.⁴³ Nonetheless, India appears to have miscalculated the changing regional dynamics by demonstrating increased aggression towards Pakistan, particularly through the alteration of the status of the occupied territory of Jammu and

42. Gentleman, Jeffrey, and Suhasini Raj. "Modi's Policies Echo Trump's in India's Elections." *New York Times*, April 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/11/world/asia/modi-india-elections.html>.

43. Khan, Iftikhar A. "Pulwama Attack Revelations Vindicate Pakistan: FO." *Dawn*, April 11, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1748095>.

Kashmir (IIOJK).⁴⁴

India's aggression is likely to grow if it receives unrestrained support from the US, enabling its hostility in the region. To assist South Asia in achieving lasting peace, the US needs to balance its level of cooperation with regional players. If the US continues to pursue one-sided military, technological, intelligence, and trade deals with India, it will leave Pakistan and other regional countries with no option but to counter Indian aggression by strengthening their cooperation with China. Therefore, the US should address the issue of regional strategic balance with India and encourage restraint in its hostile posturing in favor of one against the other for the sake of larger regional peace.

Conclusion

The evolving dynamics of the South Asian region necessitate a renewed approach to Pakistan-US relations. Pakistan's strategic geographical position and its role within the region render it a significant ally for both China and the US. As a prominent regional state with distinct strengths and limitations, Pakistan possesses the capability and potential to strategically position itself in both regional and global contexts. To effectively leverage these capabilities and advance its regional and global aspirations, Pakistan should adopt innovative foreign policy strategies.

In international relations, states typically engage in cooperation based on self-interests. Therefore, the US and Pakistan should collaborate on shared interests in a rapidly evolving global landscape, aiming for mutual benefit. By realigning their strategic priorities and leveraging their respective strengths, both states can contribute significantly to regional stability and international peace.

44. "Clear Threat: Kashmiris on India Top Court Upholding Removal of Autonomy." Al Jazeera, December 12, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/12/clear-threat-kashmiris-on-india-top-court-upholding-removal-of-autonomy>.

Afghanistan, with two decades of American involvement, demands the attention of the US. The imminent issues in Afghanistan, like terrorism, women's rights, refugees, and connectivity, require regional cooperation to achieve lasting peace. Counter-terrorism remains paramount in Pakistan-US relations, requiring heightened cooperation and concerted efforts. Over 1000 Pakistanis have lost their lives in several attacks emanating from Afghanistan. This issue needs to be emphasized to the Afghan authorities and the international community.

India's persistent aggressive stance in the region is destabilizing South Asia's strategic equilibrium. The US should not allow India to pursue its unchecked ambitions, as seen in past incidents such as planning executions in Canada and the US. Any actions by India that infringe upon the sovereignty of neighboring states could jeopardize peace prospects in South Asia.

As competition between China and the US evolves, Pakistan has identified new avenues and opportunities that warrant exploration. This competition should not merely be viewed as a constraint for regional countries, but also as an opportunity to capitalize on new openings in the international arena. Pakistan and the US should prioritize strengthening their relations during these transformative times. By enhancing cooperation and understanding shared interests amidst global shifts, both states can promote greater stability and prosperity in the region and beyond.