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Comparative Study of the US and China's Policies towards South Asia in the 21st Century: Implications for Pakistan

Abstract: *Since as a hegemon, the US has dominated the world through its unilateral policies and put diverse effects on different regions. Since 2001, China is emerging as a powerful country on the world stage and increasing its influence in its neighbourhood, especially in South Asia, under Belt and Road Initiative. In South Asia, the US is exploiting Indian skepticism about Chinese policies to get its support against China. The Sino-US new Cold War is on the brink, and South Asia is a potential theatre. The competition has created a precarious situation for Pakistan, and it had to pick options with great care. This paper aims to analyze the US and China's policies in the economic, military and political spheres in South Asia and how their competition or cooperation will affect the region's stability, security, the balance of power and how it will affect Pakistan's policy options.*

Key Words: US, South Asia, Regional Security Complex Theory, China

Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, the US became the most powerful country, and the world's superpower has been taking every excellent and wicked measure to secure and strengthen its control over the world. It took action in every region whenever and wherever it felt compulsory for its hegemony. Most often, it exercises its hard power to control and direct the world according to its wishes and does not bother with the drawbacks of its policies in the world. Whenever it was in its interest to invade any country, it did by portraying it

as legitimate action but then pulled off after exploiting its resources, creating a mess and leaving that country alone to bear the harmful consequences. It was a time when the US had the power to take unilateral measures in any part of the world as it did in South Asia. With the commencement of the 21st century, the US policies towards South Asia evolved around the Global War on Terrorism (GWT) which was launched against Al-Qaeda in response to the 9/11 attacks. In that attack, four commercial airliners were hijacked and planned to crash with four prominent American buildings;

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the Twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a federal government building in Washington, D.C. Except for the planned attack on the last building, all attacks were successful.

On the other hand, at the start of the 21st century, the world observed China's abrupt and absolute rise in the global arena, which provided the world with alternative options to cooperate and work together. China proved to be altogether different from that of the US in its policies. When a comparison is made between the policies of both countries towards South Asia, there is a major difference between the approach of both countries.

The US policies towards the world, in general, and South Asia, in particular, are very hawkish, while Chinese policies are very clear, productive, and based on win-win cooperation. South Asia, the least interdependent and least integrated region, is home to almost 25% of the world's population living in severe poverty, which has been struggling for sustainable development for decades. With the manifestation of South Asia's enigma as it is called, the region is confronting the latest challenges succeeding the twists and turns of the world happenings, mostly in China, America and Europe. Conflict or cooperation at the international level always determines the internal situation of the region. India is the most developed and influential country in the region and trying to control the region according to its interests. The SAARC being the regional organization, is the least operational as India influences small countries and forces them not to join and cooperate with another leader of the region, Pakistan. In the current era, the international situation is changing, and new players are increasing their influence in regions like China. India is taking every measure to balance Chinese actions in South Asia with US support; this scenario makes the region more critical and

dangerous. Historically, regional countries could not create a consensus that realism or liberalism is the better way through which they can solve their issues and improve the living standard of their population.

According to the World Bank, a lack of interdependence and connectivity is the primary reason for the region's backwardness, for which China has launched several connectivity projects. Still, India is again on the wrong side of history and taking these measures as a counter against Indian policy and supporting opponents to undermine the BRI. India must understand the history that the US used some countries for its purpose and then left them to face the consequences, so it must act sensibly and think in terms of regionalism and make a united and coordinated policy with most South Asian nations. Pakistan understands the value of good relations with its neighbour; thus, it is not joining anti-China forces and tries to mediate between the US and China to minimize tension so that region can work for the betterment of its population. The research paper aims to highlight the difference in the US-China approach toward South Asia and how small countries can adopt better policies to deal with their issues. The article's theoretical framework revolves around the Regional Security Complex Theory of Barry Buzan and Ole Waever.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, in their book "*Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*", was written in 2003. Both belong to the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, which presents that security is historically a socially constructed phenomenon. In the current circumstances, security is not only considered traditionally; instead, under RSCT, non-traditional security is given equal importance (Buzan and Waever, 2003). According to the RSCT, international security must be examined

from a regional perspective rather than a domestic or global one. The security concerns of states are regional in nature which is different from the perception that security politics is a reflection of great powers at the international level. Regional circumstances influence the actions of states in international security. The states feel security threats from their neighbouring countries rather than from far countries. Therefore, the security of one state matches the security of other states, which creates security interdependence between those states. According to the theory, neighbouring states share common security threats, and threats move in proximity, so this gets countries into regional security complexes (RSC) as these are different from regions. The level of communication amongst members of the identical RSC is extreme in contrast to members out of the RSC.

Relative Decline in the US Power

The 20th century was considered the American Century when the US became a superpower, but with the start of the 21st century, the world witnessed a relative decline in its power. Many events presented a picture of a relative decline in US power. The first significant event was the 2000 controversial presidential election in the US, where Republican contestant George W. Bush secured the election with a close margin. In this election, President George W. Bush bewildered the popular vote and became victorious in the election in a recount with a margin of 0.009%.

The second major event was 2008-09 financial crisis; and in the US, it was the most severe financial crisis since 1929. From this crisis, financial institutions suffered significant damage worldwide and touched a climax with the liquidation of Lehman Brothers and the following banking crisis at the international level. The crisis sparked the Great Recession, which resulted in significant unemployment and suicides.

At this time, the US was unable to influence its enemies like Iran to stop uranium enrichment, and it had to give concessions to Iran to stop the enrichment. It made a prospective nuclear deal with Iran which was not acceptable to its allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel, so its relations with both countries deteriorated.

In this era, the US lost its ability to influence its enemies and allies when it was unable to block the entry of Australia and Great Britain into the China-controlled Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The US showed its concerns for both countries for their entry but could not stop them from being a founding member of the bank.

The hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan without solving the problem in Afghanistan faced a lot of criticism from the world community. The withdrawal created chaos and many deaths in Afghanistan and reached the country on the brink of civil war and humanitarian crises.

The latest example is the US inability to handle the COVID-19 pandemic properly at the domestic level and was unable to provide the world community desired support to handle the pandemic. It faced almost more than 29 million cases and nearly 530,000 deaths, representing the US inability to have a robust response to the pandemic.

Absolute Rise in China's Power

In the 20th century, China was domestically weak, divided, and externally bearing pressure from many countries. Still, at the start of the 21st century, the world witnessed an abrupt absolute increase in Chinese economic, political and military power, which laid the foundation of a new era. The Chinese rise started in 2001 when it joined World Trade Organization (WTO), and after being a member, its worldwide placing of business in goods rose to 1st from 6th and

business in services has soared to 2nd from 11th (Huaxia, [2021](#)).

In June 2001, China started Shanghai Cooperation Organization with the help of Russia and four Central Asian states; Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It is the largest regional organization the world's which engulfs almost 60% of the area of Eurasia, 30% of the world's GDP and 40% world population and has been an official observer in United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) since 2004 (Serrikkaliyeva, [2017](#)).

China managed the financial crisis of 2008-09 very delicately by introducing the most extensive incentive bundle in the world and became 1st chief economy in the world to arise from the disaster (Wong, [2011](#)).

In a short time, China became the world's factory because several companies started to manufacture their products in China due to its low labour cost, robust business ecosystem and low taxes and duties.

China's economy rose so abruptly that in 2011, it became 2nd leading economy in the world by surpassing Japan. In late 2010, the worth of Japan's economy was \$5.474 trillion, but the Chinese economy was near to \$5.8 trillion due to its manufacturing boom. ("China to overtake Japan," 2011)

In 2017, China became the world's greatest economy in purchasing power parity by knocking off the US from this spot that it has been holding for more than 140 years since 1872, when it overtook the UK (Carter, [2014](#)). The Chinese economy was projected to be 16% larger than the US in 2020 and 40% by 2025 (Baker, [2020](#)).

China has eliminated 800 million people from poverty since 1990 with the progress of its economic system and grip on the global market. This is an excellent story in human history, and the world should get an experience from China, said World Bank

President Jim Yong Kim. (Press Trust of India, [2017](#)).

A recent example of China's rise is its efficiency in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic started in China, it was dealt with efficiently because it lacks the number of cases and deaths from developed western countries. It also provided protective equipment and vaccines to 117 countries around the world which could be expected from a leading power of the world.

The US Policies Towards South Asia

At the beginning of the 21st century, South Asia was the primary concern for the US because of the Taliban attacks of 9/11. After the attacks, the US started GWoT against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The US manoeuvred the regional countries according to the requirement of the war, as success in GWoT was the main strategic objective of the US. During that period, South Asian countries, especially Pakistan, remained at the centre stage of the US policy (Kugelman, [2016](#)). Pakistan has geographical infirmity with Afghanistan, and there was a possible threat of terrorism in Pakistan. At this point in history, both countries expanded their collaboration to counter-terrorism and increased coordination among intelligence agencies to trace out Al-Qaeda along the Pak-Afghan border. This Pak-US cooperation dented Indo-US relations for a short period, but still, both countries exercised commercial interest, joint trade and security cooperation. Under GWoT, the US tried to improve Indo-Pak relations but could not because it did not try to solve their perennial problems, and it focused on crisis management so that Indo-Pak relations did not deteriorate to a level where it started to create hindrances in its mission in Afghanistan. In the Complex situation of Afghanistan, the US witnessed the abrupt rise of China, so it adopted a short and long-

term strategy to handle existing threats in the shape of terrorism and future emerging potential threat in the shape of China.

Short Term Strategy

The US tried to use South Asian expertise to handle the Afghanistan issue in the short term. It took military support from small economies like Pakistan and Bangladesh to curb terrorism in Afghanistan and economic support from big economies like India to improve Afghanistan's infrastructure and economic situation. The US missed China's abrupt upsurge as a future threat in the process. The situation in Afghanistan did not allow the US to open another conflict with China, so the US expedited its Afghanistan mission but covertly supported India against China.

Long Term Strategy

In the context of countering terrorism, the US was planning to counter China in the long run as it was emerging as a future threat to its hegemony. In 2021, when the US felt a surge in China's threat and comparative decline in terrorism in Afghanistan, it withdrew forces from Afghanistan in a hurry. There is a perception in South Asia that the hasty withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan depicts an acceleration in its counter-China strategy. Although South Asian countries are hesitant to buy this narrative and do not want to indulge in this situation, the US is spreading this narrative worldwide. India has a central position for the US in its counter-China strategy as India and China have bilateral issues. The US also announced the launch of Build Back Better World (B3W) in June 2021 to lure weak countries against China's multi-billion infrastructure project BRI, which has taken a warm welcome from South Asian countries except for India.

China's Policies Towards South Asia

At the beginning of the 21st century, China

was emerging economically and was improving its relations with the west and became a member of WTO; its economy reached \$2.8 trillion in 2006 and rose to the 2nd largest economy of the world after crossing Japan and became the biggest economy of the world in purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2017. With the increase in China's power, it has started to increase its influence on the world, especially in its neighbouring region of South Asia. The region is fragile, and China shares the territorial boundary with five South Asian countries like Nepal, Bhutan, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan; therefore, it is an essential stakeholder in the region and intended to perform a decisive role (Khalid, 2013). China sees South Asia as its decisive part, taking vigorous steps to present itself as a dominant actor. China wants to access the South Asia region market and natural resources and secure its sea ways in the Indian ocean. These are crucial for China's success and stability. It has increased the presence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the region to secure its sea lanes of communication. In South Asia, there is competition and balance of power between Pakistan and India, but joining the US with India tilted the balance in favour of India, so China has provided a cushion to maintain that balance of power again to avoid war.

China always had a very soft approach towards South Asia and always tried to create peace, stability, and development. China, in 2013, launched BRI, which is a connectivity project globally, and significant focus is given to South Asia, where China launched CPEC, Trans Himalayan Economic Corridor, MSR, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor (BCIM) and 21st Century MSR. The corridors indicate the Chinese policy of cooperation and development towards the region. The lack of connectivity and interdependence are the primary reason for the region's backwardness, so China is providing support to overcome this problem.

According to the estimate provided by Asian Development Bank, between 2016 to 2030, developing Asia will require to consume \$1.7 trillion per annum to construct the infrastructure mandatory to "maintain its growth momentum, eradicate poverty, and responds to climate change." (<https://www.adb.org/news/asia-infrastructure-needs-exceed-17-trillion-year-double-previous-estimates>). Chinese can be assessed by looking at its policies individually towards India and Pakistan and then towards other small countries in the region.

Comparison of the US and China's Policies

There is a significant and vital difference between the policies of China and the US towards South Asia. The US policies in South Asia are focused on the divide and rule policy by creating division among member countries (Song, [2021](#)). The US primary purpose in the current scenario is to minimize rising Chinese influence in the region and to force small countries to step back from the developments, they had made towards BRI. The US is existing power, so it uses every region according to its requirements on the international stage; for example, in the case of World War II, it gave importance mainly to Europe to counter Germany and Japan and then used Muslim countries to work against the USSR. In this situation, when China is an emerging threat to the US, it is increasing its influence in Southeast Asia and South Asia as both regions are neighbours of China and can help the US to counter it. The US uses India in South Asia to influence small players, not to side with China and work with the US. The US and India have one common objective – countering China, as India sees China as a threat to its regional hegemony and the US to its world hegemony. India is trying to control small South Asian countries according to its wishes but not

fulfilling the responsibility of big power by providing aid or assistance. The entry of China into the region has provided small countries with an alternative to work for development which India does not like.

On the other hand, the US has the same problem from China on the international stage. The US has spread the narrative in India's military and political elite that the Chinese BRI is part of a string of pearls strategy to counter later influence in the region. However, China has multiple time cleared that their project is not against any country and believe in a win-win situation. The Indian military elite is buying and spreading this narrative as it will provide military aid from the US, but they must understand that people cannot live by eating military equipment; they need food. Almost two-thirds of people live in poverty in India, and nearly 68.8% of Indians earn less than \$2 a day. Therefore, India must change its approach and think about regionalism to work together with China to eliminate poverty, as China is the country that has raised 800 million people out of poverty. There is a basic disparity amongst India's attitude towards China as the former thinks of later as a significant threat, but China thinks otherwise. Although security is the top priority of a state, but complex interdependence can solve their outstanding problem as both already have \$125.7 billion in bilateral trade. The US is spreading its narrative in the weak South Asian countries by portraying BRI as debt-trap diplomacy of China to influence the small countries to stop them from joining BRI as few people in these countries started questioning their governments.

The Chinese projects are providing member countries with economic and political support to improve the livelihood of their people. South Asia is the second most poor region of the world. China is providing a platform to countries to increase interdependence, minimize bilateral conflicts, and lessen their poverty level,

representing the importance of the project. The Chinese policy focuses on a win-win situation where every country is provided with an opportunity to choose its sides independently. India being the top criticizer of the Chinese initiatives in the region, is creating hindrances. However, China had invited it to be a part of BRI projects and use the initiative to improve its economy. India did not join CPEC as it claimed that it passes through controversial territory in Pakistan, which is a lame excuse. BRI project is creating 200,000 jobs for China's neighbouring countries which is a considerable amount, and unemployment is a major problem for the poverty as they are unable to find such a vast industry that can create a massive number of jobs.

Thucydides Trap

It is a concept given by an American political scientist Graham T. Allison in his book "*Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?*". It is a concept historically coined by Athenian military general Thucydides. In this concept, Thucydides described that when one emerging power threatens to displace the hegemony of existing power than war is inevitable. Thucydides studied the "Peloponnesian War" between Athens and Sparta to understand that war between them was inevitable due to Spartan fears of Athens growth. In this current situation, Graham Allison described that China is emerging power which is trying to displace the hegemony of existing power, the US; therefore, there are ample of chances of war between the two countries. China's economy, military and political power is increasing exponentially, which is creating doubts in the mind of Americans about Chinese intentions. Graham Allison described that historically in 500 years, 16 times the situation emerged when there is a Thucydides trap between countries and 12 times states finished in war (Allison, 2017). China and the US are both nuclear weapon

states and having good economies, so if there is a war between them; it will be very destructive. If both countries ended in war then it will bring undesirable consequences for them and the world. The US has adopted anti-China policies which are creating distrust between the two countries. On the other hand, China has multiple times clarified that, it had no intention to displace American hegemony and adopt win-win policies but American hawks are spreading the wrong narrative in their country and abroad to the opponents of China. Americans are good in military strength than the Chinese, so they are using this narrative and pushing India, Japan and Australia to adopt anti-China policies to halt its growth and push it back from a point where China becomes a danger to the US.

Implications for Pakistan

The US-China tension is increasing on the world stage with every passing day in the current situation. South Asia is not the exception in this situation, so both try to influence the regional countries for their benefit. Pakistan being a nuclear power, is not oblivious of their rivalry and its potential for impacts on its economic, political and security situation. Pakistan had maintained good relations with America through its coordination in Afghanistan and largest export market for Pakistani goods. Moreover, China is its largest arms supplier and provides unprecedented economic cooperation in CPEC. In this context, Pakistan wants to maintain cordial relations with both powers, but the US is putting pressure on Pakistan to adopt an anti-China stance as the US is pursuing a counter China strategy (Flippo, 2021). Pakistan is part of CPEC and BRI, so the US is putting pressure on Pakistan to roll back these projects, but the former is unwilling to do it as the project provides a lifeline to its economy. Pakistan has adopted a cautious approach to managing its relations with both countries and was not swayed to pick a side. Pakistan

is also trying to mediate between both countries to minimize tension as it did in Cold War, although things are different now. In growing the US-China tension, Pakistan had to move cautiously and adopt a careful approach. In future, if Pakistan has to choose only one side, then it would bring many constraints, so it is better to avoid such situation. Pakistan has been trying to diffuse tension between big giants, but its success is doubted (Ali, 2020).

Conclusion

The US had a hard stance towards China, which is creating instability and panic in the world and especially in South Asia. Both the US and China should start a mutual dialogue to solve their bilateral issues so that small countries can independently make their own choices. The US must change its approach towards China as later is a very peace-loving country and not working against any other nation but for the betterment of its people. Even China has invited the US to join BRI, which indicates China's inclusiveness. The South Asian countries must work in unity as they have to bear the effects of their choices. The population of India must raise their voice; for the last 74 years, their leaders have been on the wrong side of history and putting the region in extreme poverty. Suppose South Asia could not find a mutual consensus to work for the region's prosperity. In that case, South Asian countries except India must hold this golden opportunity provided by China in the shape of BRI to improve livelihood of their people.

Being the top military power globally, the US always used the concept of security threat view to influence small countries easily. It is doing the same in South Asia by portraying China's rise as a security threat and joining like-minded countries to counter China's peaceful initiatives. The smaller countries of the region remained under Indian influence and acted according

to its interest, but China's presence in the region has provided them with a option to choose their sides. The focus of member countries on strategic relations with foreign powers had kept the region poor, so they must learn from history and now focus on the opportunities that unite them, not divide as the former will keep them in darkness. India must learn from history that the US, after using other countries for its purpose, view that particular country as a security threat as it did with Radical Islamic terrorists after using against the USSR. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/graphics/attack/investigation_5.html). The US policy towards South Asia is to provide India with the best economic, political and military support to counter China and minimal support to other countries to stop them from moving toward the Chinese side.

On the other hand, China is providing every country with full support and opportunities where they can improve their economic situation and the well-being of their people. The future cooperation and conflict between South Asia depends upon cooperation and conflict between the US and China. If their relations improve, as both are big economies and cannot delink themselves, India will be in an odd situation.

Way Forward

1. Smaller South Asian countries must come out of the Indian influence and work together to force India to side with the Chinese supported BRI. This will bring prosperity and minimize poverty in the region.
2. Suppose India does not respect the majority's opinion in the region; in that case, they should make a common organization of the regional countries with Chinese inclusion except India to work for the region's well-being.

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