

POSSIBILITIES FOR HUMAN-CENTRIC SINO-AMERICAN COLLABORATION IN PAKISTAN

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The implications of great power competition are becoming increasingly apparent across South Asia, which is home to around a quarter of the world's population.¹ Both China and the United States continue wooing smaller countries in the region, such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, and more populous states, such as Bangladesh. However, the contestation between these two great powers is most evident and consequential for India and Pakistan, the two largest nuclear armed nations in South Asia, which remain locked in a protracted rivalry. The varied implications of a growing Sino-American rivalry in South Asia are best contextualized by taking a longer view of American and Chinese relations with both of these nuclearized rival states.

Relations between India, Pakistan, China, and the United States

The United States has longstanding ties with both India and Pakistan that go back to the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Pakistan joined U.S. Cold War alliances such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in the late 1950s, while India decided to pursue a nonaligned policy.² Nevertheless, the United States continued to engage with India as well, which may have helped avert a gradual Indian tilt toward the Soviet camp. Despite its more explicit alliances with Pakistan, the United States tried to avert recurrent conflicts between India and Pakistan. It placed sanctions on both states after the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971, the latter of which led to the breakaway of the eastern wing of Pakistan and the creation of modern-day Bangladesh. The United States significantly ramped up aid to Pakistan during the 1980s, when Pakistan worked with the United States to train and arm the Afghan resistance known as the *mujahidin* to repel the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.³ Less than a decade after that war's end in 1989, the United States again briefly imposed sanctions on India and Pakistan because of their nuclear tests in 1998.⁴

Given the futility of its attempts to help the two regional rivals resolve their lingering dispute over the contested territory of Kashmir, the U.S. government under the administration of President William J. "Bill" Clinton decided to dehyphenate its relationship with India and Pakistan. The United States increasingly saw India, the "largest democracy in the world," as a natural ally with whom it could create a strategic relationship to curb growing Chinese influence in the broader region. Conversely, American support to Pakistan spiked again during the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, which followed the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Despite being a frontline state in the Global War on Terrorism, Pakistan's relationship with the United States remained strained due to the divergent national interests of both countries. Pakistan felt under-

appreciated for the human and economic toll it had to bear due to its decision to support the United States in Afghanistan, whereas U.S. assessments indicated that Pakistan was not doing enough to help defeat the Taliban. Pakistan played a vital role in nudging the Taliban to negotiate peace with the United States in 2020, but it was less successful in brokering inter-Afghan talks. Pakistan has been advocating for recognition of the Taliban regime, which retook control of Afghanistan after the exit of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in mid-2021. However, Pakistan's own relations with the Taliban have become increasingly strained due to the inability of the Taliban to curb cross-border terrorism, as well as contentions over the colonial-era border that separates the two countries.⁵

Relations between Pakistan and China have been much less turbulent. The two countries forged military and diplomatic ties after China and India skirmished in 1962 over a territorial dispute in the Himalayas. Subsequent Chinese support was instrumental in shielding Pakistan from international censure due to its alleged use of militant groups to support insurgents in Indian-held Kashmir as well as in terms of helping Pakistan maintain some semblance of conventional and then nuclear parity with a much larger neighboring rival state. In recent years, China and Pakistan have been able to build on their military relationship to create a geoeconomic alliance, with Pakistan becoming the flagship site project for China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India, on the other hand, has joined the U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (which also includes Australia and Japan) and increased cooperation with the United States on security and economic issues. While China and India maintain a robust trade relationship, there have been more Himalayan border skirmishes in 2020, 2021, and 2022. India fears a two-front war with Pakistan and China, while China is increasingly wary of India's alliance with the United States, as well as its ambition to check Chinese influence in South Asia with American support. Scholars have alluded to a strategic chain linking Pakistani insecurities to growing Indian military ambitions, whereby India in turn is trying to respond to Chinese military capabilities as China tries to achieve deterrence against the United States.⁶ This strategic interdependence is fueling an arms race and creating destabilization in an already extremely tense region. Besides exploring a range of conventional confidence-building measures to enable strategic stability, it is important that the United States, which serves as the highest link within this aforementioned strategic chain, simultaneously explores alternative measures to further its strategic interests. Pakistan can play a useful role in this regard.

Can Pakistan Provide the Space for Great Power Cooperation?

While Pakistan's implementation of the \$62-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has encountered varied stumbling blocks, both countries continue to reiterate their desire to continue work on the project and expand the scope of their cooperation. Meanwhile, Pakistan's already stressed relations with the United States saw a major dip in mid-2021, when its prime minister, Imran Khan, flatly refused to provide the United States over-the-horizon capabilities to continue targeting global jihadi networks in Afghanistan, as well as due to Pakistan's seeming closeness to senior Taliban leadership, which had displaced the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Subsequent accusations by Khan of a U.S. conspiracy to topple his government due to his insistence on maintaining an independent foreign policy placed additional strain on bilateral relations.⁷

A new coalition government in Pakistan, and its powerful military establishment, seem keen to rebuild ties with the United States and to strike a balance in bilateral relations with China and the United States to lessen dependence on either of the great powers.⁸ The United States sees value in continued engagement with Pakistan both in the effort to contain jihadi influence in Afghanistan and to stem Pakistan's growing dependence on China. The U.S. government under the current administration of President Joseph R. "Joe" Biden Jr. also needs a broader spectrum of options in terms of contending with China than merely trying to bolster India's capacity to act as a bulwark against Chinese influence in South and Southeast Asia.

Senior officials in the Biden administration, including Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, have articulated the need for a multipronged approach to China that is flexible enough to be "competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be."⁹ However, China's growing alliance with Russia, strengthened by shared strategic goals in the Middle East and amid the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, have made it difficult for the United States to find ways in which it can operationalize a full-spectrum approach to contend with Chinese influence. The 2022 *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* notes that China remains the most significant strategic competitor for the United States in the foreseeable future and lays out varied means to contend with this challenge.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there remains a dearth of options for trying to test more collaborative approaches that can serve both Chinese and American interests. While it may not be practical for Pakistan to facilitate another Nixonian detente between China and the United States, Pakistan is still well placed to

provide the United States a neutral enough space to compete and possibly collaborate with China.¹¹ To do so, the United States needs to broaden the scope of its still largely security-dominated and transactional relationship with Pakistan. It is also important to identify feasible pathways for mutually beneficial collaboration that can serve to lessen Pakistan's dependence on China, while also offering prospects of the United States and China working together to achieve common goals. Economic cooperation, countering the threat of the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in Afghanistan, and contending with growing climate threats are three issues that merit closer attention in this regard.

Focusing on Human-Centric Security Considerations

The United States needs to go beyond focusing on traditional security imperatives and instead embrace a human-centric notion of security to engage with China. The United States put its weight behind the Group of 7's (G7) announcement of the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative in 2021, which aimed to leverage the private sector to generate \$40 trillion, primarily to compete with the BRI in addressing international infrastructure needs.¹² This initiative has yet to take off, so it is not yet clear whether countries such as Pakistan will also be able to participate in it alongside its economic collaboration with China.

China and the United States adopted a more cooperative approach to contending with climate change at the 2014 United Nations (UN) Climate Summit, but actual evidence of such bilateral cooperation remains scant.¹³ The U.S.-China climate working group was suspended on the heels of Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy P. Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022.¹⁴ However, a one-on-one meeting between U.S. president Biden and People's Republic of China (PRC) president Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Group of 20 (G20) Summit in Bali in November 2022 has enabled the resumption of formal talks on climate change, which offers another window of opportunity for collaboration to contend with a common threat. Besides curbing their own emissions, the United States and China can work together to help poorer countries facing the brunt of climate threats, especially within a country such as Pakistan, with which both great powers maintain significant bilateral relations.

The U.S. Department of Defense warned in its 2014 *Quadrennial Defense Review* about the threat-multiplying impacts of climate change, which can be particularly acute in populous regions like South Asia, where rival states share increasingly stressed water sources such as the Indus River.¹⁵

The United States can try to help negotiate a revision of the World Bank-brokered Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) of 1960, which provides the basis of water sharing between India and Pakistan. While the IWT was able to survive several conflicts between the two hostile neighboring states, it did not envision the threat of ongoing glacial melt, which necessitates a much more comprehensive and cooperative approach to water sharing than envisioned by the current treaty framework. Given its independent bilateral ties with both India and Pakistan and the influence it enjoys with the World Bank, the United States is well placed to try to help climate-proof the IWT and avert growing water disputes from becoming another source of friction within this already tense nuclearized region. Such efforts could also provide valuable lessons for Chinese-Indian cooperation on the shared Brahmaputra and Indus basins.

Didactic attempts to caution Pakistan against predatory Chinese lending have been dismissed by both Pakistani and Chinese authorities.¹⁶ The United States lacks the will or need to outbid Chinese military and economic support to Pakistan. There is, however, ample room for the private sector of the United States to avail opportunities created by Chinese infrastructure investments to make financially beneficial investments in Pakistan. The U.S. private sector is also well positioned to help "green" CPEC projects and to enable Pakistan to climate-proof its vital infrastructure. American investment in newly created special economic zones in Pakistan would also offer the prospect of turning these zones into viable hubs for internally displaced climate migrants who otherwise end up in already overcrowded slums in megacities such as Lahore and Karachi. American and Chinese collaboration could even help clean up the air in major Pakistani cities.

The United States can also support efforts to increase economic cooperation between marginalized Pakistani and Afghan citizens that bypasses the need to work with the Taliban regime. U.S. legislators have tried to enact a Reconstruction Opportunity Zone (ROZ) straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, whereby jointly produced leather, textiles, and other goods could be provided duty free to the U.S. market, but domestic opposition within the United States did not enable this legislative effort to succeed. Another bipartisan bill aiming to reinvestigate this idea that was reintroduced after the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan has also lost traction.¹⁷ Exploring more targeted possibilities to source niche artisanal products made by Afghan women or Afghan refugees in Pakistan, in collaboration with Pakistani nongovernment organizations that have a lot of experience with such initiatives, would certainly not

encounter as much domestic opposition within the United States as a broader ROZ-type arrangement. To achieve a broader scale, the United States could support Pakistan effectively operationalizing nascent border markets with Afghanistan by improving their transport and logistical capabilities and by putting in place more effective border management tools to facilitate trade without undermining security concerns.¹⁸ Supporting these border markets adjoining Afghanistan would also allow the United States to invest in the long-neglected development of Baluchistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan, where the benefits of top-down CPEC investments have not sufficiently percolated to the locals.

The United States can also explore possibilities for partnering with Pakistan and China to contend with the growing threat of IS-KP, a group that all regional states, China, and even the Taliban view as a dangerous threat. Such counterterrorism cooperation should not only focus on degrading the ability of IS-KP to launch global operations but must also place emphasis on the need to protect the religious and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan who are currently facing the brunt of IS-KP attacks.

Conclusion

The United States cannot afford to rely primarily on India's ability to engage in adversarial competition with China and to also wean smaller South Asian states away from Chinese influence. While India has acquired significant affluence in recent years, it is not yet capable of effectively countering China. Bolstering India's military capabilities also triggers insecurity in Pakistan, which is leading Pakistan to increase its reliance on Chinese support to maintain strategic deterrence against India. The United States needs to invest in alternative strategies to contend with the growing Chinese footprint in South Asia. Pakistan is the only regional country with the potential to not only maintain a balanced relationship with both China and the United States but also offer opportunities for the United States and China to work together to promote human-centric security goals that are in the national interest of both the global powers and which can have a positive impact on badly needed regional stabilization within South Asia as well.

ENDNOTES

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