

## United States Foreign Policy Towards South Asia; Analyzing Implications for Pakistan

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**Abstract** *The US foreign policy for South Asia has generally remained zero-sum for India and Pakistan. While Pakistan joined US camp immediately after independence and during the period of cold war remained part of the US alliance system and front-line state in the defeat of communism and now War on Terrorism. On the contrary, the US adopted a different approach towards India in terms of strategic partnership and different nuclear-related cooperation. US National Security Strategy of January 2018 has reprioritized national security preferences where India has been granted great status as a potential competitor of China and Pakistan has been marginalized to terrorist-related issues. The US foreign policy in its current form is perceived to be a destabilizing factor as it gives leverage to India at the cost of Pakistan. This article unveils the cardinal aspects of US foreign policy towards South Asia and its potential implications of Pakistan.*

**Key Words:** Foreign Policy, South Asia, Power Politics, National Interests

### Introduction

South Asian region is blessed with a strategically exquisite geopolitical location that has always attracted great power United States for the accomplishment of its national security priorities. The level of US engagement in the South Asian region has varied to different degrees that have affected the stability of this region. As per the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) explanation, the region includes seven states, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka and recently, Afghanistan has been included as the associate member. This region is strategically situated at the intersection of Asia and lies on the perimeters of China. It is divided by a slight strip of Afghan region called Wakhan corridor from Central Asia. It also connects the Middle East with Southeast Asia and occupies the resource, international shipping lanes and energy corridor of the Indian Ocean. In this context, the US has many stakes in the stability of this region. Starting from the oil crises of 1973 in the gulf, the revolution in Iran in 1979, USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and the US-led War of Terrorism (WoT) in 2001 and later Arab Spring and transformation in the Middle East has kept the US engaged in South Asia since last four decades. The evolving regional and global power dynamics have attracted the attention of great powers, where significantly, the US-led War on Terrorism in Afghanistan and the Middle East, Indo-US Strategic partnership, the civil nuclear deal and Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) waiver, and preferential treatment in National Security Strategy (NSS) 2018 has altered the strategic stability in South Asia, where Pakistan has

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been hyphenated with Afghanistan and de-hyphenated from India in US Af-Pak strategy. The Chinese initiative of common development and huge economic investments has increased stakes in South Asia which also has generated a turf war for influence between China and the US. Therefore, the US foreign policy towards South Asia as manifested since 2001 has been perceived as a destabilizing factor rather than bringing peace and stability to the region. The evolving situation in Afghanistan, China's peaceful rise and implementation of BRI and CPEC, rising status of India, increasing confrontation with Iran and transformation in the Middle East are some of the important factors shaping US foreign policy towards South Asia. The evolving regional order, where US-Taliban rapprochement and President Trump's decision of drawdown from Afghanistan by January 2021, renewed Indo-US engagement, increased US-China competition in the context of zero-sum (Loyd, Rudolph, 2006) and preferential treatment to India at the cost of Pakistan and a rival of China has increased tension in the already fragile security environments. US former National Security Advisor (NSA) John Bolton's tacit support to India (Bolton, 2019) on the unilateral altering of the status of Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IOJ&K) proves this assertion. The US, NSS 2018, reprioritizing major power competition with China and Russia as national security priorities have destabilizing prospects when viewed from South Asian perspective, as most of BRI projects are being executed South and Central Asian region. The article explores the evolving power dynamics in the South Asian region viz-a-viz the US foreign policy by using the theoretical lens of Balance of Power and examines its implications for Pakistan.

## Methodology

The article has been developed using a qualitative research method using primary and secondary data from government official documents, transcripts, websites and policy statements from time to time. Through content analysis of different policy document, articles and books, a well-connected pattern of US outlook towards South Asia has been analyzed.

## Research Questions

The research article provides answers to the following research questions;

- Q 1: What are the cardinal aspects of US foreign policy towards South Asia?
- Q 2: How US Foreign Policy towards South Asia has transformed over a period of Time?
- Q 3: How far US foreign policy caters the stability of the region?
- Q 4: What are the potential implications of current US foreign policy on the South Asian region in general and Pakistan in particular?

## Theoretical Framework

The Balance of Power Theory in the context of Realism has been applied in developing this article. This theory deals with power politics, domination and hegemony. The US being status quo power is trying to retain her preeminence in world affairs; therefore, articulating foreign policy suiting her national interest.

## Examining Pre 9/11 US Foreign Policy Towards South Asia

For building a comprehensive picture of US foreign policy towards South Asia and levels of engagements, wide-ranging review of literature has been carried out, which has helped in developing empirical data and incisive analyses. It must be appreciated that while South Asia contain seven countries but the most significant players, involving major power's attention are Pakistan and India, therefore, US foreign policy towards South Asia has been examined from these two key player's perspectives.

## During the Cold War

During the period of the cold war, US foreign policy relied heavily on creating a coalition of willing against Soviet expansionist designs and defeating the communism. In that context, Pakistan assumed a pivotal

position and US foreign policy relied upon Pakistan's support. Therefore, Pakistan joined US alliance system of South-East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954 and later Baghdad Pact of Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in 1955 ([Jabeen & Mazhar, n.d., p. 110](#)). However, Pakistan's perception of US alliance umbrella was avoiding a two-front war of highly aggressive India from the East and expanding USSR from the West, strengthening defence capability and economy and also the peaceful resolution of Kashmir Issue, but the US national security priorities focused on containing Soviet expansion only. While acting as a front line state in support of US anti-Soviet strategy, Pakistan sincerely supported US overtures and facilitated US operations at the cost of serious diplomatic backlash with USSR after U2 incident in 1960 ([Encyclopedia, 2020, p. 1](#)). However, the international response and outcome of 1965 and 1971 wars left Pakistan to review its policy of alliance partnership and later left SEATO in 1973 and CENTO in 1979 ([Khan, 2009, p. 2](#)).

### Anti-Soviet Alliance in 1979

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, attracted the world's attention towards South Asia with far more seriousness than ever before, as several hypotheses of Soviet expansion up to warm waters through Afghanistan were now appearing to be a reality. Pakistan, because of fear of its vulnerable Western Borders, decided to side with the international coalition against USSR as an esteemed national security priority. The US gave preferential treatment to Pakistan, and Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) became the battleground for coordinating the international fight against Soviet occupation ([Wriggins, 1984, p. 11](#)). Therefore, South Asia came in the international spotlight from neglected region to the fulcrum of major power's competition, where Pakistan assumed a pivotal role ([Baxter, 1985](#)). The strategic location, effective geopolitical position, resource-rich countries and their access to sea contributes greatly to the power potential of South Asia.

### Balancing Act Between India and Pakistan

Additionally, South Asia also presents the dilemma of international security in terms of unresolved Kashmir, overt nuclearization of India and Pakistan and Human Security challenges, as the region is considered significantly low in terms of Human Development Index (HDI). The demise of USSR was a huge victory for the USA and came at a very price for Pakistan as the region was left unstable, and the US abandoned Afghanistan, therefore, ensuing decade Pakistan was left to clean the infighting and was also put under nuclear-related sanctions. In the same breadth, India was rewarded with a strategic partnership, the civil nuclear deal and NSG waiver, which greatly affected the strategic stability in South Asia.

### Overt Nuclearization and Indo-US Partnership

Syed Sarwar Ali Naqvi explains the core aspects of US NSS 2000, which in the context of South Asia highlights nuclearization as a major concern for the USA ([Naqvi, 2010, p. 2](#)). Many scholars also indicate that the US position on Kashmir also acts as a destabilizing factor in South Asia as it implicitly favours Indian stance. Naqvi also explains that the opinion adopted by the US on Kashmir issue of respect of line of control, direct dialogue between India and Pakistan and opposing use of force diplomatically favoured India as it would never agree to reach to the solution of problem ([Naqvi, 2010, p. 5](#)). In the overall construct, from US national security perspective, the balance of relationship towards India and Pakistan has generally been demonstrated by the US, while in its manifestation it appeared to be favouring India while maintaining constructive engagement with other South Asian countries. However, it is widely believed that the end of the Cold War and the demise of the USSR disturbed the balance of power in the sub-continent that had triumphed during the Cold War era. India was aligned with USSR under a treaty of friendship and Pakistan had maintained its alignment with the USA since independence, so a fair degree of stability was observed in major power's approach towards South Asia. The US now got a new opportunity of extending friendship

towards India as well, and President Clinton was quite successful in getting India and Pakistan together in US influence first time in the history out of zero-sum. There was enthusiasm in Washington to build a relationship with India at the cost of Russia, which was now not a position to influence the global events. While India carefully traded in recalibrating its relations with the USA and also maintaining a degree of trust with Russia through marked diplomacy. The issues of India -Pakistan standoff over Jammu and Kashmir, nuclearization and nuclear proliferation and terrorism remained US primary national security concerns for South Asia which kept shaping its relations and level of engagement with India and Pakistan and the wider region.

### Crystalized US Interests for South Asia

The peaceful rise of China was also on US radar screens, while preferential treatment to India to act as a bulwark against China was carefully articulated by the US policymakers, which was willingly embraced by India. President Clinton was more assertive towards global affairs and wanted a multilateral approach for global governance. It is also worth noting that post overt nuclearization, both India and Pakistan were put under sanctions. However, the US kept all avenues open for India while Pakistan was denied such treatment and rather isolated regionally and globally. In essence, the US interests towards South Asia can be crystallized as under:

- Developing deep strategic and economic ties with India.
- Preserving national integrity of Pakistan as a state, while being put under sanctions and isolation.
- Containing the phenomena of terrorism in the aftermath of Afghan Jihad.
- Strengthening the Nuclear non-proliferation regime.
- Preventing the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and falling into the hands of terrorists.
- And containing the potential arms race, particularly the nuclear race in South Asia and promoting strategic stability.

### Investigating Post 9/11 US Foreign Policy Towards South Asia

The unfortunate incidents of twin towers on September 11, 2001, changed the global and regional environment with serious implications for South Asia due to proximity to the Middle East and Afghanistan, which became the battlegrounds for nearly two decades of US-led War on Terrorism ([Rudolph & Rudolph, 2006, p. 703](#)). Renewed engagement with Pakistan and removal all sanctions were welcome gestures which brought Pakistan into the limelight, and it was a repeat of 1979 role, with immense consequences for the national security of Pakistan.

### War on Terrorism

On September 18, 2001, President George W. Bush signed a law which authorized the use of force against the perpetrators of 9/11 hiding in Afghanistan. At that time, it was ruled by the Taliban, which was not a popular government outside Afghanistan due to a conservative outlook and non-reconciliatory approach inside Afghanistan. They were also indicted for hiding and sheltering Al-Qaida leadership responsible for 9/11 attacks (Dasgupta, I C.E., p. 1). The removal of the Taliban from Kabul did not take very long, and much of its leadership was either killed or apprehended, and few managed to flee. Grand reconciliation process followed for settling the state institutions which US financial support and mainstreaming of underprivileged areas began at a fair pace. The process is quite mature by now, and it is a reasonably functioning state, with reconstruction and mainstreaming of marginalized areas is going on at a steady pace with the support of other players as well.

## Renewed US Engagement with Pakistan and India

Pakistan emerged as Center of Gravity (CoG) for US designs for wider South Asian region where the defeat of Al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan were core US national interest ([Paracha, 2012, p. 3](#)). The removal of Taliban didn't mean an end to the conflict or to the Taliban backed Al Qaida operations within Afghanistan, due to the fact that as soon as the invasion started, the Taliban and the Al Qaida relocated to into the mountainous border region with Pakistan or melted in the population. The United States appreciated Pakistan's help and unstinted support for the fight against the terrorists in Afghanistan. It must be noted that right before the beginning of the War on Terror Pakistan was under sanctions of United States for testing nuclear weapons in 1998 but the War on Terror resulted in the lifting of all sanctions and making Pakistan a front-line non-NATO ally of United States, the subsequent years resulted in closer cooperation on the defence level and economic levels. This was not for the first time that Pakistan was rewarded for helping the United States at the time of need. However, the subsequent years proved that the status of front line ally this time turned out to be a very costly affair in terms of men and material and economic losses. Pakistan has lost 66000 personnel and economic loss to the tune of US\$ 126 billion, by siding with the USA ([Mustafa, 2018, p. 6](#)). Similarly, the USA lifted nuclear-related sanction from India where India also promised for refuelling and logistic facilities to the USA. A new phase of Indo-US strategic partnership commenced, and India was supported in all domains by the USA at the cost of Pakistan. Another factor of China's peaceful rise warranted a readymade India co-located with China for the fulfilment of future US designs. Therefore, the US engagement in South Asia with zero-sum manifestation was full of implications for Pakistan's national security.

## Indo-US Nuclear and Defence Deal

The US embarked on wide-ranging frameworks for expanding relations with India, while Pakistan's role as a front-line state in the US-led WoT has not receded even till today. Several working groups were formed for a new US policy towards South Asia, focusing on India as a new economic opportunity for the US and strengthening her defence capability against China. The US agreed for the sale of high-tech military hardware to India along-with comprehensive civil nuclear deal to boost energy security of India. It must be noted that civil nuclear deal was somewhat unprecedented on two accounts; one that NPT-signatory country was providing nuclear-related technology and material to a non-NPT signatory state. And secondly, the NSG waiver was sponsored by US congress against any such precedents in the past. India was being rewarded, while the front-line ally Pakistan was once again under stress from the US on doing more in the fight against terrorism. Such a policy of dual standards created great anxiety among Pakistani public who faced the brunt and onslaught of terrorist activities inside Pakistan since last two decades. While the US has tried to balance out its policy towards Pakistan and in the past, financial assistance package in the form of Kerry-Lugar bill was passed to the tune of US\$ 7.5, where economic development surpassed military assistance package. However, the strings attached to it created yet another friction in the bilateral relations which in fact favoured India in the obtaining environments.

## Consolidation of the War on Terrorism

The only time Pakistan's relation with the United States could breathe a sigh of revival when a United States drone strike eliminated Hakim Ullah Mehsud the head of Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who wreaked havoc in Pakistan. United States role throughout the period of War on Terror was not consistent in favour of Pakistan and didn't help Pakistan construct good relations with Afghanistan either, with its frequent doubts on Pakistan's ability and sincerity in the conduct of War on Terror and eliminating the terrorist's safe havens from entire former FATA and elsewhere from Pakistan ([Trump, 2017, p. 52](#)).

## South Asia and the United States National Security Strategy (NSS) 2018

The roller coaster ride of Pakistan-US relations has been a constant phenomenon since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Therefore, US tilt towards India or at least a favourable posture disregarding Pakistan's sacrifices being part of the US alliance system resulted in strategic instability for South Asia. On both occasions of front line ally in 1979 and 2001, the US Foreign Policy towards Pakistan was conditional, event-based and generally revolved around misperceptions and demands of doing more, while India always figured out as a strategic partner in the long term US interests for South Asia and wider Asia-Pacific region (Fani, 2009, p. 132). The US engagement with India is embedded in long term interest and mutual cooperation in economy, defence and people to people contacts, to name a few (Ali, n.d., p. 1). The US NSS 2018, which was issued by President Trump after taking over office provides a discriminatory assessment of South Asia where India has been granted the status of strategic partner, while Pakistan as always has been asked to do more on terrorism, nuclear security and positive role in bringing stability in Afghanistan (Trump, 2017, p. 53). The zero-sum approach by the United States between India and Pakistan has created and the element of cynicism for Pakistan and leverage to India, which enabled the Indian Government to unilaterally abrogate the status of IOJ&K and impose lockdown in entire Kashmir with the tacit approval of the USA, which is going on even today. Such a situation is not helping in the overall confidence-building and stability of the South Asian region, which is marred by poverty, COVID-19 and low HDI.

## US-Afghan Taliban Rapprochement

The United States had been in peace talks with the Afghan Taliban since the beginning of the year 2019 under President Donald Trump. The Doha process of talks was hosted by Qatar and facilitated by Pakistan, who was blamed for playing a double game by the US (Ismail, 2019, p. 3). The successful signing of peace agreement provided a sigh of relief to this war-torn region and cleared the way of calibrated US withdrawal. The US-Taliban rapprochement was followed by intra Afghan dialogue for a comprehensive peace agreement and power-sharing arrangement. Pakistan's role is pivotal and has been appreciated by all the stake holders (Siddiqui, 2020, p. 4). On the optimistic side, the peace process will eventually help to build strong Pakistan-US ties (Jaffery, 2020, p. 12). The current debates surround on the possible impact of US withdrawal on the South-Asian region. The direct victim of the destabilization in Afghanistan is no doubt the South Asian region which is vulnerable not only due to its close proximity to Afghanistan but also because of almost shared cultures, values and religious sentiment. The implications of US withdrawal can be categorized into two categories which are as:

Firstly, the United States withdrawal after a comprehensive peace process within Afghanistan and a post-withdrawal political framework and secondly, the United States withdrawal without a tangible political framework. In the case United States decides to pullback its forces from Afghanistan after political deliberations and compromises by Afghan Taliban and Kabul administration, the implications would be minimal. That should obviously be the primary focus for the US draw down which would not be only beneficial for rebuilding and reconstructing Afghanistan and countering the threat of any remanent non-state actors (NSAs). Peace in Afghanistan is core national interest for Pakistan (Lucas & Karim, n.d., p. 1), which will help in actualizing trade and energy corridors like, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), CASA 1000 and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipe lines. No regional or global power is interested nor can afford to risk the hard- earned stability in Afghanistan at cost of hasty US drawdown, therefore, comprehensive strategy involving all stake holders will help in enduring peace after US exit.

## Recommendations for Pakistan

Since the trajectory of Pakistan-US relations had been dwindling from font line ally to untrusted partner, and have been affected hugely from the evolving situation in Afghanistan, therefore, to optimize on the

current status of relations and upward trends since US-Taliban rapprochement, following recommendations are proffered for enduring relations with USA and stability of South Asia:

- Pakistan must continue its policy of constructive engagement with the United States out of zero sum with other major powers like China and Russia.
- Pakistan must diversify its foreign policy and remain relevant to all regional and global powers by pursuing pragmatic foreign policy of win-win cooperation.
- Pakistan must engage and build good relations with all SAARC countries, as such a situation will provide diplomatic space and leverage for Pakistan.
- Pakistan has to make good relations with its neighbors including India as well as with all the other countries in the world to seek more stability in the region.
- Pakistan has suffered a lot since hyphenation of Af-Pak; therefore, it is the right time now to get it de-hyphenated.
- Pakistan should continue to seek good office of USA, China, Russia and UN for their support in resolving Kashmir issue and alleviating sufferings of people in the aftermath of Indian imposed lock down since over a year now.
- Pakistan should also focus internal stability and issue like poverty, inflation, illiteracy, low infrastructure, bad governance and unemployment to make the country strong and prosperous.
- Pakistan is located at the epicenter of energy and trade corridors, therefore, diversify its relations and make CPEC, TAPI, CASA 1000 and IP pipelines and means for regional integration and eventual prosperity.

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, the stability of South Asia has remained narrowly focused on situation in Afghanistan and India-Pakistan tension due to Kashmir and Indian aggressive designs. The region has two important players; India and Pakistan which are nuclear armed, therefore, maintaining regional stability is in the interest of all the countries and the region at large. While there is huge asymmetry in population, development and economy of South Asian countries, therefore, major powers like the United States, China and Russia should be engaged for their support and balancing acts, which should help in actualizing the trade and energy corridors. If preferential treatment is given to India at the cost of Pakistan, certainly it is going to disturb the strategic stability in South Asia. Similarly, Pakistan should not be indicted for situation in Afghanistan as it is sovereign country and has governance structure and defence capability to run its own affairs, therefore, de-hyphenation of Af-Pak will help Afghanistan to survive on its own capabilities without any future blame game which is essential for trust building. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan without making a stable government may also be seen as a de stabilizing factor as India wants Afghanistan to be on its side to have more regional influence, while Pakistan thinks that peaceful Afghanistan is necessary for peace in Pakistan. For lasting stability, balanced approach is the need of hour and US, Russia and China can complement their policies for uplift of this impoverished region.

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