

Indo-US Strategic Partnership: Pakistan's Security Dilemma

(Maham S. Gillani)

Pakistan and India were part of opposing camps during the Cold War. While Pakistan was closely aligned with the US, India chose to side with the Soviet Union. However, following the demise of the Soviet Union, the US began to reorient its policies towards Asia Pacific and South Asia. China's rise on the global political chessboard was seen as a challenge to the status quo and a threat to the US hegemony. Due to Indo-China border disputes, New Delhi was seen as a natural partner with whom the US could develop convergences. It is in this context that the US is fortifying ties with India—a major South Asian power and China's arch rival. The Indo-US nexus is exacerbating Pakistan's security dilemma in its bid to pose a challenge to the mounting Chinese influence.

The US views India as an important democracy in South Asia that can be used to counterbalance the expanding influence of China. Washington has been systematically solidifying ties with India for the last two decades. Hence, the US-India relationship that began to develop since the mid 1990s has turned into a major partnership. A demonstration of this is that the two countries have entered into four foundational agreements, bolstering interoperability, intelligence sharing and exchange of geospatial information between their militaries: General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and more recently, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) have contributed to deepening military cooperation between the two countries.

It is also imperative to mention that there are certain factors that have contributed to this growing partnership. First, China's rise is the key reason that is drawing Washington and New Delhi into a closer alliance. Washington views New Delhi as a potential counterweight to Beijing which could play the role of a balancer in the region. Second, India has a burgeoning middle class that could serve as a lucrative market for the ever-expanding US exports. Third, against the backdrop of US-China trade war and the decoupling spurred by COVID-19, many companies are in search of alternative relocation sites. India, with its largely developed infrastructure and abundant cheap labour serves as an attractive destination for relocation of US firms. Hence, the two countries are set to further fortify their ties in the economic as well as in the strategic domain. Fourth, the imminent US exit from Afghanistan may leave behind a power vacuum which the US does not want China to fill. Beijing has already expressed its interest in bolstering [economic cooperation](#) with Afghanistan under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The US is loath to Chinese presence in Afghanistan; therefore, it is actively abetting Indian influence in Kabul.

Furthermore, Pakistan and India are arch rivals, having fought three border wars in their short history of about seven decades. The two nemeses came to the brink of a major conflict as recently as 2019. Owing to the hostility characterizing Pak-India relations, their ties are of zero sum nature. Policymakers in Islamabad have bristled at the growing warmth in Indo-US ties that have paved the way for various bilateral strategic agreements. Additionally, the Indo-US strategic and defence ties have increased the power asymmetry between India and Pakistan, intensifying Pakistan's security dilemma. In this context, Pakistan is compelled to forge alliances, acquire arms and fortify its military capabilities. By the same token, Pakistan has

moved closer to China. A manifestation of ironclad Sino-Pak ties is the \$64bn China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—the lynchpin of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Another ramification of Indo-US nexus has been the changing of gears in relations between Kremlin and Islamabad. The two countries have taken measures to significantly decrease their trust deficit in the last decade or so, for instance, Russia agreed to the membership of Pakistan to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017. SCO has served as a significant forum for Pakistan to manoeuvre against New Delhi's blunt diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan. Moreover, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia accounts for [6.6%](#) of the total arms imports of Pakistan over 2015-2019. This partnership could potentially be expanded and enhanced as Pakistan seeks to augment its defence capabilities.

The increasing closeness between India and the US has also irked Russia—the second largest arms exporter of the world—which may be looking for alternative defence partners in the region. When the US military support dried up in 2018, Russia and Pakistan inked the [“Security Training Agreement”](#) allowing for training of Pakistani military officers at Russian military training institutes for the first time. Hence, it is evident that relations between Islamabad and Moscow are on an upward trajectory, and Russia is willing to fill the void created by the US strategic tilt towards India.

Undoubtedly, the Indo-US strategic partnership is causing shifts in regional alliances. In this regard, Pakistan should continue to bolster relations with China and Russia. It must also remain engaged with the US to restore peace and stability in Kabul, and make concerted efforts to broaden relations with Washington beyond cooperation in the Afghan peace process.



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