

Research Article

Navigating U.S.-South Asia Relations: Strategic Interests and Future Trajectories

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Abstract: The region known as South Asia refers to the Sub-Continent countries within South Asia, also called the SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Countries) entities. The geographic area defined as South Asia also includes the Eastern, Western and Northern neighbours to the Sub-Continent countries. The SAARC organisation is focused solely on the support and development of trade, commerce, industry and other economic co-operation in the SAARC region and consists of eight countries; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan as the main members along with the Maldives as the main member only for the purpose of this organisation. This region carries considerable significance for multiple nations, including the United States, China, India, and Pakistan. Its strategic importance is particularly relevant for all the countries mentioned, especially for the U.S. India and Pakistan are the dominant political forces in South Asia. The South Asian region is abundant in natural resources, which contributes to its political and strategic significance. This paper will analyse the operating factors which have attracted U.S. in this region. Since cold war period U.S. has tried to balance Pakistan and India both, it also tries to contain China. This study will give a reflection of U.S. presence in South Asia in post-cold war period and after 9/11. Finally, the paper offers a comprehensive examination of U.S.-South Asia relations, focusing on strategic interests, critical challenges, recent diplomatic shifts under President Donald Trump, and trajectories for the future.

Keywords: India, Pakistan, South Asia, Strategic Interests, U.S.

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1. Introduction

The core of South Asia includes Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, which were all part of the British Empire prior to 1947. Despite the fact that South Asia has never been a logical geopolitical region, it has a distinct geography with glaciers, rainforests, valleys, deserts, and grasslands, as well as three major bodies of water (the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea) and several different climate zones which makes it an attractive region. South Asia has been a political entity since ancient times; the landscape of U.S.–South Asia relations in 2025 is shaped by multifaceted forces like regional insecurity, renewed trade tensions, the enduring shadow of China, and shifting bilateral dynamics with India and Pakistan. The relationship between the United States and South Asia has evolved in profound ways since the early twentieth century, driven by shifting strategic interests, great power competition, changes in economic policy, and contestations over regional security. In 2025, the U.S. approach to South Asia is experiencing notable recalibration amid heightened major power rivalry, renewed engagement with both India and Pakistan, and new priorities in trade, defense, and energy.

Importance of South Asia

South Asia is a region where numerous neighboring countries share specific characteristics or areas of interest. This region encompasses a wide range of historical, geographical, economic, political, social, and cultural elements. Known as the cradle of



one of the earliest civilizations, it has been home to diverse racial and religious communities for centuries, emphasizing the intricate connections between geography, history, politics, and culture. The fusion of multiple cultures has created a distinctive identity that stands out in the global arena. Over the last seventy years, while India has successfully maintained its democratic framework, the rest of South Asia has experienced significant political instability, with numerous shifts in their democratic practices. The conflicts among the populations in this region can be traced back to historical empires and ancient societies. Key factors contributing to these tensions include religious, linguistic, caste, ethnic, and economic divides, along with unequal access to resources.

South Asia offers significant prospects for economic advancement and regional cooperation due to its abundant natural and energy resources, as well as the potential for cost-effective hydroelectric power. The Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra rivers stand out as the region's most crucial economic resource. After the Cold War, the U.S. began to focus on South Asia, acknowledging its strategic significance. It is becoming increasingly important for the United States to consider the Indian Ocean region and East Asia as interconnected. The establishment of this subcommittee to include both South Asia and East Asia reflects a significant recognition of this strategic need. This new outlook will empower the United States to address key challenges and capitalize on opportunities that will arise in this part of the world. The United States imagines a region where navigation freedoms are upheld, disputes are settled cooperatively, and the Korean Peninsula is free from nuclear dangers. A peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific benefits not only the people of the United States but also those in the region, allowing them to access the jobs and opportunities resulting from unimpeded shipping and trade, while raising their children without the fear of conflict. The swift economic growth experienced in both East and South Asia serves as a medium that invigorates these patterns of interaction. The growing economic interconnection between South and East Asia has enhanced the strategic importance of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as vital corridors for global trade and energy. India's increasing economic involvement in the Asia-Pacific and its implications for U.S. policy regarding an India that is economically linked with Southeast Asia further underscores the region's economic significance. China's presence also makes South Asia an important region for international states especially for US, after cold war and disintegration of Soviet Union the nearest competitor of US was no one but China, Presently US is inhibited by rising China and revitalized Russia which together pose a threat to its express design of World Supremacy. India The main actor of this region became strategically important for US to contain rising China.

In 1997, the then U.S President Clinton felt that US had neglected South Asia and hence he ordered an inclusive policy review of South Asia. Consequently, a number of elements were introduced into U.S policy towards South Asia; U.S realized that India is capable to emerge a major power in international system.

U.S interest in South Asia

Historically, U.S. engagement in South Asia has varied according to strategic imperatives, such as counteracting Soviet dominance during the Cold War, encouraging democratization and development, and addressing terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11. Strong security alliances with Pakistan, particularly during the Afghan conflict, have alternated with efforts to build closer economic and military relations with India. In recent years, increasing apprehension regarding China's ascent has elevated South Asia's importance on the U.S. strategic agenda. Till late 1930 U.S followed the Policy of isolation, U.S breaks its 100 years Isolation and interfered in World politics in World War first and World War second. To outline U.S. Interest in South Asia, a brief geopolitical overview is

needed. South Asia could be identified as a subsystem. The tensions, mistrust, mutual suspicion, and occasional warfare that typified the Troubles of South Asia are some of the more obvious reasons. After World War II, South Asia was neglected by U.S. foreign policy makers because, as Robert L. Hardgrave put it, "South Asia is not strategically vital to the United States, and U.S. involvement in the region has been episodic and derivative of other interests such as the containment of Communism, protection of oil in the Persian Gulf and access through the lanes of the Indian Ocean". After World War II, U.S. has been seeking new regions and allies to expand its influence in the international community. Its main objective has been to find allies to assist in its anti-Soviet and anti-Communist campaign, which led to the invitation to South Asia. After the collapse of Soviet Union and Fall of Berlin wall, a new strategic scenario was witnessed, superpower rivalry also disappeared with the end of cold war. The focus was on the policy of Containment of China and in order to contain China it was significant to have control over South Asia where 40% of world population lives.

After 9/11 the whole scenario was changed, there was a shift in American policy towards South Asia, National Security, combating terrorism and strengthening its military position in South Asia became the core objective of U.S. After 9/11, U.S. wanted to target Al-Qaeda and Taliban for which Pakistan's support was needed for political and operational reasons. In the 1990's U.S. considered Pakistan as a problematic country plagued by political and economic problems but after 9/11, U.S. hoped and expected to help Pakistan to overcome this mess. After 9/11, U.S. forced Pakistan to discard its Taliban allies in Afghanistan, allegedly using some undiplomatic talk. So, in order to take revenge of 9/11, South Asia became an important region for U.S. especially India and Pakistan which are the major actors of the region.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States began fostering closer relations with India, signaling its intent to lift all sanctions that had been imposed. The Bush Administration was actively engaged in developing and strengthening diplomatic and strategic partnerships with India. The events of September 11, 2001, became a new factor influencing global politics, particularly in South Asia; Stephen P. Cohen has noted that no region has been more impacted by 9/11 than South Asia. This pivotal moment marked a shift in U.S. foreign policy towards South Asia, where terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and the rise of China emerged as significant concerns, leading the U.S. to look to India as a stabilizing force in the region. Since 2004, Washington and New Delhi have been striving for a 'Strategic partnership' built on shared values and seemingly aligned political interests. During President Clinton's visit to South Asia in 2000, he remarked that "South Asia is the most dangerous place" on the planet, underscoring America's strong interest in the region. Historically, America's involvement in South Asia was minimal before World War II, but post-war, establishing connections with the newly independent states of South Asia became a primary objective for the U.S.

Thus, it is clear that South Asia has gradually gained importance for the U.S. over time. The principal aim of U.S. foreign policy in this region is to fulfill its broader strategic and political aspirations. The objectives of the U.S. in South Asia are less about the well-being of the individual states and more about leveraging these nations against China and Russia. To this end, the U.S. has started providing economic assistance to South Asian countries as a means of implementing its foreign policy. The remarkable rise of China has not only alarmed the U.S. but also its allied nations, since a powerful China poses a potential challenge to U.S. global dominance. Over the past twenty years, the U.S. involvement in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq has allowed China to expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. In light of the events following 9/11, a key objective



for the U.S. in the region is to ensure the protection of its citizens from extremist threats. To address this issue, American military forces have been stationed throughout the area to fight terrorism that jeopardizes regional stability. Most importantly, the U.S. seeks to “balance power” in response to the rising challenge presented by China, whose economic and diplomatic strength could undermine America’s position as the predominant global superpower. This potential threat has prompted Washington to strengthen its alliances with countries such as South Korea, Australia, Japan, Thailand, and the Philippines in order to address these issues. On a political level, the United States has consistently supported democracy. Its dedication to democratic principles has led the U.S. to involve itself in the domestic matters of smaller nations in the region, such as the Philippines. Additionally, the U.S. aims to maintain its sphere of influence by continuing its diplomatic and military presence, as well as by employing various multilateral approaches to advance its agenda of countering China and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

The global attention on South Asia has significantly intensified in recent years. Following the events of September 11, the detonation of nuclear weapons by both India and Pakistan, the exposure of an illegal nuclear proliferation network operating out of Islamabad, regime changes in the volatile Afghanistan and India’s emergence as an economic power have all driven unprecedented global interest in the region. The initial concentration on counterterrorism and Afghanistan since 2001 is evolving into a wider spectrum of concerns. Washington recognizes India’s global status and is collaborating closely with New Delhi on various regional and global matters. Politically, the main challenges influencing U.S. policy in the South Asian Subcontinent include international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, proliferation, Islamic extremism, state collapse, nation-building efforts, and the advancement of democracy.

Future Trajectories: Challenges and Opportunities

India–U.S.: Continued and sustained collaboration on defense, addressing China’s influence, diversifying supply chains, along with occasional trade and governance disputes. India and the United States have consistently had valid motivations to collaborate, yet it is evident that the oldest and largest democracies can experience periods of estrangement. This scenario could potentially reoccur. India and the United States are expected to have a generally cooperative and strategically significant relationship; however, there will be ongoing tensions regarding trade, strategic autonomy, and democratic principles, which means that their relationship will not follow the kind of smooth “alliance-style” trajectory typical of many Western nations.

Factors Supporting Cooperation:

Security cooperation between India and the United States will continue as a result of China’s increasingly dominant and aggressive presence in the Indo-Pacific region; this will compel both nations to enhance their defense, intelligence, and maritime cooperation (Quad, exercises, defense sales, co-production). The relationship will continue to develop along multiple domains: nuclear and space cooperation, cybersecurity, counterterrorism, human-assistance and disaster-relief, and infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific will all be significant long-term anchors of cooperation between the two countries that are not dependent upon political leadership in either Washington or New Delhi.

Key Future Opportunities:

Defense industrial cooperation: The co-development and co-production of weapons systems (air, maritime, and unmanned); long-term logistics and interoperability; and a ten-year defense framework will create opportunities for India to develop advanced technology while maintaining sovereignty.

High-technology and innovation: Working collaboratively in AI, quantum computing, space (TRUST Initiative), biotechnology, and digital infrastructure (AI infrastructure roadmap, INDUS Innovation) could ensure a high-tech-based partnership that supports Indian economic development.

Pakistan–U.S.: The increase in security and diplomatic initiatives positions Islamabad as a mediator, crisis resolver, and a counterbalance to instability in the region. The progress Pakistan has made in its relationship with the United States is noteworthy. Previously, Trump criticized Pakistan for its duplicity during the war on terror, yet Pakistan has now obtained a favourable 19% tariff rate and secured multi-billion dollar trade agreements. How did Pakistan accomplish this? What concessions did its negotiators offer in Washington, and how feasible are these promises for multi-billion dollar oil and mineral agreements, especially considering China's significant presence in the area? It is indeed remarkable. The relationship between the US and Pakistan has experienced fluctuations, so it was not entirely unreasonable to anticipate some improvement in their relations. Following the US exit from Afghanistan in 2021, the course of US-Pakistan relations has generally been negative. The relations between Pakistan and the US will be limited and centred around security, but the relationship will have stronger economic links to Pakistan, as it is becoming more geostrategic in mineral extraction, transportation routes and counterbalancing China.

Structural context: After the US military exit from Afghanistan, the US will no longer consider Pakistan a top-tier priority amongst its impelled states. However, with a large military, an advanced capability of delivering nuclear weapons and being located in a dangerous region, the US cannot afford to ignore Pakistan. The US's increasing rivalry with China and the economic ties the Chinese government is developing with Pakistan through CPEC will cause Pakistan to move further toward China and influence how the US approaches and treats Pakistan. Major challenges will arise when balancing the respective roles of the US and China for Pakistan's needs for both financing from China through CPEC investments and trade and the US's role in countering terrorism and maintaining stability in Afghanistan. Additionally, as the US continues to build stronger ties with India, especially in defence cooperation (including sales) and trade, it will place limitations on how far the US can expand its ties with Pakistan. Pakistan's immediate future will be impacted by US–Pakistan cooperation on issues relating to counter-terrorism and Afghanistan. However, because of "past behaviours" by both countries and the issue of safe havens, US and Pakistani relations are not conducive to broad-based cooperation. Pakistan's continuing civil-military instability and political crises/uncertainty within the country will hamstring the development of a broad-based US–Pakistan partnership.

ASEAN/South Asia: The growth of digital technology, clean energy, and infrastructure initiatives is positioning Southeast Asia as a crucial economic and supply chain center while communicating the significance of protecting supply chains in Southeast Asia for U.S. interests and the region's economic well-being, the United States must develop an economic strategy that minimizes reliance on any one country. Instead of a dominant China, ASEAN wants a China that is economically involved. America needs a strong

economic plan to support its security measures, even as Southeast Asia loves American security guarantees. The United States should also support policies that allow it to profit from the economic growth of the region. In both Democratic and Republican administrations, this element has been a major oversight. The digital economy, which is expected to add an extra \$1 trillion to Southeast Asia's GDP by 2025, is one particular area for strengthening economic linkages. The United States has an opportunity to deepen its commercial ties in this exciting field over the coming decades as ASEAN develops its region-wide Digital Economy Framework Agreement (ASEAN DEFA). Southeast Asia's commitment to cleaner energy as a way to combat climate change presents another important opportunity. Every nation in the area has pledged to become net carbon neutral within the next few decades, but their lofty objectives are severely hampered by a lack of funding and poor governance. They are looking to the United States and the international community for help and support, and Washington has already made significant promises to offer this. Fulfilling these pledges and stepping up efforts to support the region's clean energy transformation would not only open up significant opportunities for American workers and companies, but it would also strengthen American influence by demonstrating the country's ability to satisfy vital energy and economic demands.

Major Power Rivalry: The competition with China and Russia continues, affecting security, economic ties, and political relationships. The rivalry among major powers has resurfaced in Asia. Addressing Chinese access to cutting-edge technology and ensuring deterrence in Taiwan present significant technical and military challenges for American leaders. Nonetheless, the most intricate political obstacle for policymakers is developing an effective strategy towards the numerous nations in the region that do not fully align with China, the United States, or India. Navigating relations with such neutral states was a vital consideration during the Cold War in Asia. Today, major powers are attempting to sway these third-party countries to deter them from leaning toward their geopolitical adversaries. Although these swing nations might be smaller than the dominant nations vying for their influence, they often remain substantial, possess expanding economies, and sit in strategically important areas of Asia. Major power tensions intersect with complex internal politics in these third-party states. Their domestic political disagreements frequently do not align neatly with the aspirations and objectives of external entities, and local leaders' priorities are often much more centered on domestic matters than on international rivalries.

2. Conclusion

South Asia is a region where about 23% of world's population resides; it is both politically and strategically important for US. The rise of China is the fearing factor for US and in order to contain China, US need to execute some strategies through which it can easily contain China. In order to Contain China, US needs to have cordial relations with other South Asian Countries like India and Pakistan. After Disintegration of Soviet Union, Rise of China was only concern until 9/11, 2001, but after 9/11, priorities were changed, more focus was given on combating of terrorism; National Security became an important issue and matter of concern. So, in order to combat terrorism controlling South Asia became significant.

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