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Strategic Visions of China and the United States in South Asia and Beyond

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China and the United States are the greatest strategic powers of the world today, where China is rising but the United States still remains predominant. Both have their grand strategic visions to shape and manage the world or regional political and security architecture. South Asia, being located in a critical and important geographical area, with players such as India, Pakistan, and others, is factored in their visions. It gives rise to a different combination of alignments and orientations of the states of South Asia and beyond. A kind of power game, along with its tangible manifestations, also seems conspicuous. This paper attempts to develop a broad framework of such developments, along with ramifications, both in place and projected, in the political power games of the relevant actors in South Asia.

Keywords: India, Pakistan, geopolitics, strategic partnership, entente, String of Pearls

Introduction

To put the arguments in perspective, China, as part of its long-term strategic goals, is seemingly putting its efforts into replacing the Cold-War paradigm of unipolarity with multipolarity, understandably to balance American power. China is arguably gradually tending to reassert itself to regain its central place on the world stage. To start with it is, first of all, developing its comprehensive national power, followed by consolidation of its land and maritime boundaries, and to “reunify” and “reclaim” its “lost” land and maritime territories, which it calls its “core interests.” Here, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjian, and the South China Sea may be relevant. On issues of vital national interests or core interests, for which any self-respecting nation is even prepared to wage a war, China is unlikely to budge. America, on the other hand, ostensibly, may not accept any region being dominated by any single power. As such it can reasonably be deduced that the United States is formulating a “Back Asia” or a “Pivot Asia” policy. America’s vital national interests entail ensuring uninterrupted supply of energy from the Persian Gulf, through the Indian Ocean, to the Pacific, as is true for China also. America has the declared policy that it would employ “any means necessary, including military” in order to protect this vital national interest. It also wants uninterrupted navigation and

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unimpeded commerce. Its strategies hinge on alliance-alignment-entente buildings in tandem. Containment, encirclement, and engagement are the other related strategies. Their applications are also visible in different combinations. Both the powers are employing all the means at their disposal—economic, military, diplomatic, and institution-building in a web—to realize and sustain their vital national interests.

Within this broader framework, China, being the second largest economic power of the world today, is also steadily sharpening its military wherewithal. It is the trend in history that any power that gets endowed with economic resources tends to go for military modernization or even military revolution. A comment by David C. Kang seems relevant here, “Rising power poses opportunities as well as threats, and the Chinese economic opportunity and military threats towards its regional neighbors are both potentially huge.”¹ Great historian Paul Kennedy makes an emphatic statement, opining that drawing analogies from different periods of history seems to substantiate the previous statement, “The triumph of one Great Power ... has also been the consequence of the more or less efficient utilization of the state’s productive economic resources in wartime, and further in the background, of the way in which that state’s economy had been rising or falling, relative to the other leading nations in the decades preceding the actual conflict.”²

However, the Chinese continually refute such allegations that they would ever pose a strategic threat to any neighboring country. That does not, however, preclude the possibility that China would ever compromise on its vital national interests, as could be true of any country. China is aware of its strategic competitors such as America, Japan, or India. And China seems to be active in its geopolitical game in the West Pacific, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the South China Sea. China can rightly be called a geopolitical player, similar to India, to borrow the term from Brzezinski, which is capable of influencing the policies and actions of the actors, whether middle or small powers, in its strategic backyard. It is on its way to muster the capacity to “alter the existing geopolitical state of affairs.”³

The liberalism-functionalism paradigm of international relations sees states as naturally cooperative when realism argues states are naturally competitive. Mearsheimer goes to the extent of saying that combining geopolitics and realism paradigms, an extreme form, is an obvious outcome in the strategic game plan. Thus said, Chung Ch’ien-peng argues that “even if the territorial disputes were resolved, India and China would still maintain a competitive relationship in the Asia-Pacific, being as they are, two Asiatic giants aspiring to Great Power status.”⁴ Geopolitics and realism, put together, are making their impacts felt. “The likely emergence of China and India as new major global players—similar to the rise of Germany in the 19th century and the United States in the early 20th century—will transform the geopolitical landscape, with impacts potentially as dramatic as those of the previous two centuries....⁵ The ripples, along with their impacts, are already felt in the wider Asia-Pacific.

America, although basically a Western hemisphere power, is inextricably linked with the geopolitical state of affairs in the Eastern hemisphere. Of late, especially after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States is getting closer to India to the extent of even forging a strategic partnership. In South Asia, India is definitely the predominant power that even aspires to assume a leadership role beyond the orbit of South Asia. India’s involvement in East Asia is triggered by its “unresolved territorial dispute in the Himalayas (with China), China’s relationships with India’s South Asian neighbors, and India’s fears of growing Chinese influence

in Southeast Asia and the Indian Asian region.”⁶ India and China are locked in geopolitical and geo-economic games, somewhat pronouncedly, in both South and Southeast Asia. The U.S. containment policy, if one may call it so, is also working here like it has developed alliance relationships with Japan and South Korea, ostensibly to contain China. This relationship is reinforced by alignments with India and Australia. On the other hand, China has the backing of Russia to modernize its military arsenal that may still fall short of Western technological standards. However, China is trying to catch up, just as India is doing.

Thus said, interestingly, balance of power, an overarching strategy, between India and China is entwined with the geopolitical realities of South Asia. One may argue India is applying both balancing and bandwagoning while dealing with the United States. India can boast of its maturity while confronting a diplomatic dilemma due to U.S. preponderance and an Indian desire to also play an independent role in its foreign relations.

Related to balance of power, a note on the terms such as “entente” and “alliance” may be contextualized. India-U.S. relations, at this point in time, may be called an entente and it is unlikely to turn into an alliance in near future. Stephen Walt defines an alliance as “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.” Wolfers writes, revealing a narrower spectrum, “In the technical language of statesmen and scholars the term alliance signifies a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states.” Keeping these definitions in perspective, it can be argued that “the outstanding asset of an alliance is the military assistance expected in case of need and its deterrent effect on the enemy, even preceding any armed conflict.” Such definitional purviews would tend to show that the India-U.S. relationship tends to turn into a kind of alliance relationship. This would also imply that the present China-Russia relationship may be considered as being under the same category. However, Bruce M. Russett’s “fairly limited” definition may not imply these are alliances per se. He says an alliance is “a formal agreement among a limited number of countries concerning the conditions under which they will or will not employ military force.” Alliances can undertake an entire military chain of activities including “forward-deploy armed forces, conduct joint exercises, promote interoperability of forces, and send deterrent signals to potential adversaries.”

Alignment is more fundamental but somewhat more informal than alliance. India, Japan, and Australia have some kind of alignment relations, at least in the defense field. Formal alliances like America-Japan act as the core to buttress such alignments. Another form of alignment could be called entente. They are more loosely defined than alliance. They are relatively informal; and they do not reach to the level that may have international legal binding force. Ententes “lack the explicit military dimension inherent in alliance.” David T. Hagerty argues, “Ententes are alignments geared toward preparing for a wide range of possibilities, which might include joint combat operations, but also non-combat military-to-military cooperation such as peacekeeping operations and humanitarian missions.”⁷ He tends to categorize the India-U.S. relationship as an entente. Taking a cue from this proposition, the Pakistan-China relationship may also be categorized somewhat as an entente. The author would tend to accept the argument that the probability of entente formations is more likely, given the present context, in South Asia.

As an extrapolation, constructivism is also making its mark in South Asia, though regional integration, like that of the EU or ASEAN, may still be deemed as a

far-fetched idea in South Asia. However, recently both China and America have shown their interests in regional cooperation in South Asia as they have been granted observer status in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Deep-seated animosities between India and Pakistan are believed to be the main stumbling blocks to the integration process.

Thus said, geopolitics plays well when there is a convergence of interests between or among the actors. Based on the convergence of interests, polarizations are palpable in South Asia. U.S. and Chinese involvements are at least clearly pronounced in this sub-system of international relations. In South Asia, their strategic visions and goals do converge with the states they think serve their interests better. And South Asia has been a crisis region “because of the rivalry between Pakistan and India which began at the time of the founding of the state of Pakistan in 1947.”

A proposition may be formulated thus: Reflections on the strategic visions of America and China and their manifestations tend to foretell not a quiet, but rather a somewhat restless, South Asian geo-political architecture. Reflections on the security architecture that is unfolding in the wider Asia-Pacific may be appreciated since the fallout may lead to unimaginable consequences, especially in the area of arms-race and polarizations. As a follow up such questions as the following may be raised: What are the directions of strategic visions of these two powers in South Asia? How deep is the convergence of interests between India and the United States and between China and Pakistan? How are the strategic visions and their manifestations going to affect other smaller South Asian countries? In such a jigsaw state, how is the overall scenario, while reflecting, going to unfold along with their tangible outcomes and fallout even beyond South Asia?

Afghanistan will be kept beyond the scope of the core study, for convenience and organization. Moreover, Afghanistan has its own dynamics that may or may not necessarily fit well with the traditional subtleties of South Asia. This does not, necessarily, imply South Asian powers such as India and Pakistan are not deeply involved in shaping the geopolitical order centering on Afghanistan.

There is a necessity to reflect on and appreciate the implications of the visions and their manifestations in South Asia. This would also help one appreciate the power political game being played by the great powers in the wider area, especially in the Asia-Pacific. In the first part of the paper the strategic visions and their manifestations, so far, are covered. In the second part, the author reflects on the likely fallout and reshaping of the geopolitical chessboard within the wider Asia-Pacific.

Strategic Visions of the United States and India

The joint declaration (U.S.-India Relations: A Vision for the 21st Century) of India and America during President Clinton’s visit to India in March 2000 draws our attention to two statements, i.e. firstly the natural partnership of shared endeavors, and secondly, probably more penetrating is the statement that stipulates, “In many ways the character of the 21st century will depend on the success of our cooperation for peace, prosperity, democracy and freedom.” President Obama told the Indian Parliament in 2010 that “the relationship between India and the United States will be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century.” The U.S. Secretary of State’s remarks, during the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue in July 2011, echoed similar senti-

ments, when she said. "Much of the history of the twenty-first century will be written in Asia, and much of the future of Asia will be shaped by decisions not only of the Indian government in New Delhi, but of governments across India, and perhaps most importantly, by the 1.3 billion people who live in India." Apparently such statements may seemingly portray only rhetoric but their deeper implications and actionable projects are already visible. Such statements demand deeper reflections to uncover realistic inferences.

During the Cold War, the overall policy objective of the United States was basically to contain the penetration of communism in South Asia. Apart from this, U.S. involvement in the area was minimal. China made its inroads into South Asia especially after it fought a brief border war with India in 1962. America's ambivalent nature of support in the 1950s and 60s brought in China as a strategic partner of Pakistan. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review identifies China, as the only country that can compete militarily with the United States, which has articulated certain rationales for partnership with India that include, inter alia, "preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction, dealing with the rise of Chinese power and ensuring the reliable supply of energy from the Persian Gulf." Kei Koga identifies five elements in U.S. regional security objectives, which are in tune with its grand strategic visions in East Asia. These are: "(1) preventing the emergence of a potential hegemon hostile to the United States; (2) maintaining U.S. influence in the region; (3) maintaining U.S. power-projection capabilities; (4) promoting democratic principles; and (5) fostering political stability in the region." He argues that "the China factor should become the foundation of U.S. strategic planning on East Asia." He tends to prescribe hedging and engagement policies to deal with China and precludes containment that tends to identify a power as an enemy.⁸

Now keeping such objectives in focus, America appears to be firm in its commitment to be the strategic partner of India. Ashley J. Tellis argues that "the ultimate value of the U.S.-India relationship is that it helps preserve American primacy and the exercise thereof in constructing a partnership that aids in the preservation of the balance of power in Asia, enhances U.S. competitiveness through deepened linkages with a growing Indian economy, and strengthens the U.S. vision of a concert of democratic states by incorporating a major non-Western exemplar of successful democracy such as India. For India, the ultimate value of the U.S.-India relationship is that it helps New Delhi to expand its national power."⁹ His further argument is rather interesting. U.S. interest, at this point in time, as alleged, is not to contain China. It intends to realize "the complete and permanent revitalization of Indian strength." Two of the interests, among a slew of interests, are relevant here—as published in a joint study group report. These are "to promote a stable balance of power in Asia, as a hedge against a rising China; and to ensure maritime security in the Indian Ocean."¹⁰ In a roundabout way Ashley, however, contends that apart from containing China, the United States wants to assist India to become a major world power in the 21st century. This would help construct a stable geo-political order in Asia.¹¹ To put it in perspective, the U.S.-India relationship reflects "an American recognition that Central and South Asia today and in the future are as important as were Europe and East Asia in the Cold War."

True to its commitments, India's long-term goal of securing a permanent seat on the UN Security Council has been endorsed by President Obama during his Nov. 2010 visit to India. Earlier, the United States has been cool in accepting India's push

for a permanent seat or membership in East-Asia based regional organizations. Again quite interestingly, on India's persistence, contrary to India's professed policy of neither signing the NPT, nor the CTBT, the United States has agreed to support India's membership of four important instruments of the non-proliferation regime—the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Wassenaar Arrangement and the Australia Group. In the next decade, India is likely to field a candidate for the top positions in the World Bank and the IMF, which are presently the monopoly of the United States and Western Europe. It is a naive proposition that India can be left out of the issues the United States wants to handle globally or regionally. In reality, India is already a global power.¹² Moreover, it is perfectly clear that the world's "largest democracy," India, is, mostly for strategic reasons, interested in forging cooperation with the "most powerful democracy" the United States. The November 2010 joint statement between the American President and the Indian Prime Minister expressed their "shared vision for peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia, the Indian Ocean region, and the Pacific region."

As a matter of fact, as part of its grand strategy, the United States finds it essential to forge "broad-based and capable partnerships with like-minded states." The United States thinks India is "poised to shoulder global responsibilities in cooperation with the United States," as India figures prominently in U.S. foreign policy objectives in the next couple of decades.¹³ However, in materializing such concepts there may be contradictions such as the United States still seeking a unipolar world, while India may not go along with it. Another contradiction could be that the United States would continue to arm both Pakistan and India, two archrivals in South Asia. However, U.S. military support to Pakistan is likely to continue as long as Afghanistan keeps on burning and Islamist radicals keep on fomenting radicalization in the region.

India may not be totally in tune with all relevant American foreign policy objectives such as with regard to Iran. India generally favors a "non-interventionist stance" within the UN system. But America's strategic, nuclear, and military collaboration with India has already taken a tangible shape (as shown in the later paragraphs), and will continue in the decades ahead. However, India's internal political dynamics and its resilience may be the restraining factors for becoming too dependent. "Currents of anti-Americanism and suspicion of U.S. imperialist agendas remain strong with India's main political parties, and nearly derailed the historic U.S.-India nuclear deal, to cite an example."¹⁴ It plays a fine game between bandwagoning and balancing America. Be that as it may, the China factor that would be compelling and overriding will keep on stimulating their partnership.

China's Strategic Visions

China once enjoyed a central position in world politics, especially in its surrounding region during its earlier history. But it suffered a "Century of Humiliation" (1839–1949) at the hands of different colonial powers—a blot in the Chinese national psyche. It, however, tended to regain its injured pride in 1949 after it defeated the occupation forces. Today, China is making commendable strides in the economic, nuclear, and military fields. China is also biding time to increase its national power comprehensively. Tuomo Kuoso indicates the trend candidly, "China is obviously the strongest player among rising economies and it has all that it takes to really become the world leader

in economy and world politics in the next 40 years.”¹⁵ However, it is now busy trying to keep its own house in order. But it is also spreading its influence in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South Asia and even in Latin America. Its economic vibrancy gives it enough punch to call the shots, at least economically. Meanwhile, it is also trying to reclaim its “lost territories” in Taiwan, the South China Sea, and South Asia. China seemingly wants a multi-polar world where its predominance may be felt—at least in its periphery. This may be viewed as part of its grand-strategy to sideline America, as already indicated.

The famed historian Wang Gungu is of the opinion that China is “one of the greatest supporters of the current world order” with the intent to deflect it to multi-polarity to restrain U.S. predominance.¹⁶ Foot argues in a similar vein: China is willing to accommodate a “U.S.-hegemonic global order,” but it follows a hedging policy by seeking solid relations with other partners to push for a more “egalitarian world system to dilute U.S. power.”¹⁷ However, Mearsheimer holds a completely different view, opining that China would not successfully become part of the existing international order and “China and the United States are destined to be adversaries as China’s power grows.”

The latter part of the statement apparently makes some sense since China is a strong proponent of power politics; as such it would never compromise on its vital national interests. In South Asia, China has huge geo-economic stakes especially with India and geo-political stakes both with India and Pakistan. Other smaller South Asian countries of the area are also relevant to China, both geo-politically and geo-economically. Other than India most of the South Asian countries receive substantial economic and military assistance from China. India has a hunch that China, by arming its smaller neighbors, especially Pakistan, is trying to keep India “boxed in” in the South Asian orbit. But India has the ambition and ability to become an Asian leader.

For the time being, China is expected to follow Deng’s cautious international relations strategy—to “conceal brilliance and cultivate internal strength” (*tao guang yang hui*). But there is probably a paradigm shift which is reflected in President Hu Jintao’s address to China’s senior diplomats in mid-2009 in Beijing. It stresses “to strive to make our country more influential politically, more competitive economically, and help ensure that our country has a more friendly image, with greater moral appeal.”¹⁸ Overall the trend shows, as portrayed by Paul J. Smith, that China is moving to “advocate the need to downplay the country’s ambitions in favor of building up the country’s power to maximize options for the future.”¹⁹ Comments in the Australian Defense White Paper 2009 are also relevant here, “China will also be the strongest Asian military power by a considerable margin ... here is likely to be a question in the minds of regional states about the long-term strategic purpose of its force development plans, particularly as the modernization appears to be beyond the scope of what would be required for a conflict over Taiwan.”

Although, at times, in its burgeoning international relations, China appears to be assertive (some call it non-confrontational assertiveness), it nonetheless reaffirms its commitment to the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty, and the norms such as non-aggression, and non-interference. Despite the colossal financial crisis that afflicted the Western economies, China is still willing to sustain economic development within the Bretton Woods system. The pivot of China’s global policy will continue to be based on its relations with Washington, although China is critical about the 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review that made accusations about China’s lack of transparency in military development and decision-making processes. China responded

negatively as the report welcomed India's rising profile "as a net provider of security in the Indian Ocean and beyond."

China's dependence on maritime commerce is growing; as such it has to be wary of growing Indian naval capabilities buttressed by American expertise and technology. Anyway, Kerry Dumbaugh's observation deserves attention here: China's new security concept called "pragmatic objectives" seeks to expand China's influence, to be viewed as non-threatening to its neighbors, and (thereby) try to "balance U.S. global power in a manner that serves China's interest."²⁰ China moves slowly but with steady and firm objectives. Realization may take decades but its objectives are clear-cut and focused.

Tangibles in the Strategic Partnership

United States-India

The U.S.-India relationship is now being billed as a new "strategic partnership" that has, inter alia, recognized the Indian Ocean region for the protection of its sea lanes of communication including the Strait of Malacca. India is also deeply concerned about the sea lanes along the South China Sea, since it has to transport oil from Sakhalin to Mangalore in southern India. Convergence of interests is discernible here since the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the last ARF meeting in Hanoi has termed the South China Sea as a "maritime commons," presumably servicing all important stakeholders especially transporting energy resources. A maritime commons is essentially the antithesis of a territorial sea, which is what China apparently claims. For a long time, the South China Sea used to be identified as a regional issue.

Thus said, in order to derive benefits from such partnership India had to pay a price in terms of shifting its paradigm from non-proliferation to brand name itself as a nuclear weapon power. India is neither a signatory to the NPT nor CTBT. The United States, having signed the nuclear deal with India, has, in fact, presumably provided the latter the capacity to produce more nuclear bombs. It would give India enough punch to compete with both Pakistan and China. As such, the non-proliferation regime has taken a nosedive in South Asia. The other area of strategic partnership provides a framework for economic cooperation, promotion of democracy, energy, and environmental cooperation, and high technology and space cooperation.

To substantiate, India and the United States signed a 10-year defense cooperation framework agreement that identified common strategic goals and means for achieving those. In the military field since 2002, India and the United States have conducted exercises such as "maritime interdiction, maritime search and rescue, naval aviation, anti-submarine warfare, air combat, airlift support, logistics transport, airborne assault, mountain warfare, close-quarter combat, jungle warfare, special forces operations, and peace keeping operations." "The U.S. military now conducts regular maneuvers with India's expanding armed forces, which now boasts the world's third-largest army, fourth-largest air force, and fifth-largest navy. In short, India is emerging as a U.S. military ally in all but name."²¹ India and America have conducted over 50 bilateral military exercises in the past six years.²²

In 1995, the U.S. Defense Secretary and his Indian counterpart signed an "agreed minute" which established a Defense Policy Group and a Joint Technology

Group. These provided frameworks for greater interaction among civilians, scientists and militaries of both countries. The 2005 Defense Agreement, that included provisions for multilateral operations, has been making steady progress in the maritime domain as well. India's 2009 Maritime Doctrine specifically added that "India may undertake counter-terrorism missions independently or in cooperation with "friendly" naval and coastguard forces." Similarly, the 2011 National Military Strategy of the United States explicitly mentions that Washington will seek expanded military cooperation with India on counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and safeguarding the global commons (the last of which includes maritime security)."²³

The U.S.- India Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement (June 3, 2010) expressed satisfaction "with the strengthening of defense cooperation in recent years," and stressed that "security dialogues, service-level exchanges and trade and technology transfer and collaboration on mutually determined terms were an intrinsic part of the strategic partnership and should be further strengthened." The statement also welcomed the "regular engagement" of the armed forces of both countries that includes joint military exercises. It also recognized the "enhancement of defense trade" between the two countries. In 1997, the United States sold some Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) to the Indian Air Force. The two navies also signed an agreement for submarine rescue facility. India is negotiating hard with the United States "to release one of its most advanced radars—the Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA)—as part of the United States offer of F-16 and F-18 fighter jets to the Indian Air Force."²⁴ India is reportedly buying ten C-17 Globe Master III Strategic Aircraft from the United States. The United States had entered into defense deals with India worth US\$8 billion in the past decade that include C-17 and C-130 J sales.

As a sort of departure, India's armory would also be filled with 126 Multi-Role Combat Euro-fighters. Here, the United States lost to Euro-fighters in selling its F-16 and F-18 fighter jets to India. India's cost-benefit analysis and a kind of balancing strategy could be the decisive factors. However, the United States is likely to pursue other major deals with India, as India plans to spend around US\$35 billion over the next five years as part of its "ambitious defense modernization campaign." Such tangibles are seemingly being replicated by China and Pakistan as well.

Tangibles in China-Pakistan Strategic Relations

China presumably needs Pakistan to take care of its western flank of South Asia or to contain Islamist fundamentalism in its Xinjiang province. China's overall South Asia policy may be reflected from two perspectives i.e. pro-India and non-India categories. And China mixes both soft and hard powers in differing combinations to tackle varied contingencies.

China, nonetheless objected to the so-called Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal, and thus recently concluded a similar deal with Pakistan. They have gone as far as co-production of the state-of-the-art Thunder fighter aircraft JF-17. In August 2011, China launched Pakistan's first satellite (PAKSAT-IR) on a Long March-3B carrier rocket. Its dual use facilities may provide strategic defense applications for Pakistan, apart from taking advantage of China's space program in all probability. China built a turnkey ballistic missile manufacturing plant near Rawalpindi and helped develop the solid-fueled Shaheen-1 ballistic missile.²⁵

The Karakorum Highway that links China and Pakistan runs along the northwestern part of India. The Highway ultimately links the seaport of Gwador in Pakistan, being constructed with the assistance of China (already invested about US\$200 million). And, if around 2020, a Chinese aircraft-carrier group starts operating in the Indian Ocean it may then provide multiplier effects upon the Pakistan Navy entering this port. The Chinese see the port as a strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It overlooks the Strait of Hormuz through which reportedly 80 percent of the world's energy exports flow. The port might accommodate a vibrant Chinese naval presence someday, as indicated by the Pakistani Defense Minister after the visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister to China last year. Indian observers view with suspicion the commercial purpose of the port, since Pakistan "already has sufficient civil port capacity at Karachi and Port Kashmir."²⁶ Pakistan, in fact, is bracing itself as an alternative energy corridor to support China's energy diversity strategy. The Americans are, maybe euphemistically, calling it a "string of pearls" policy.

Thus said, in another geopolitical stream, "U.S.-Pakistan cooperation in counter-terrorism operations has taken a dip over the issue of U.S. drone attacks and actions of CIA operatives. Such strained relations could have an impact on the war in Afghanistan."²⁷ Pakistan is seen to be desperately trying to play the "China card" to offset U.S. influence. Mention may be made here that America also desperately needs the critical strategic support of Pakistan in its fight against terrorism. As a matter of fact, America once called Pakistan the most allied non-NATO country. However, this relationship may not be sustained as and when the terrorists' threat diminishes. Strategic vision and cooperation may be long-term for China, as far as Pakistan is concerned, but this may not be so in the case of the United States.

China, India,²⁸ and other South Asian Nations

Chinese penetration in South Asia is age-old, but it is now taking a tangible shape. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has beefed up its forces, to take care of its southern flank, in the Lanzhou and Chengdu Military Regions bordering India. On the other hand, India has deployed two squadrons of Su-30 MKI fighter jets in Assam (an Indian Northeast State) and is raising two mountain divisions for deployment in Arunachal Pradesh.²⁹

China is reportedly constructing a deep-sea port in Myanmar's Sittawe region. Strategically speaking, China is concerned about the "unspecified hostile powers" that may obstruct or sabotage its oil shipments passing through the critical Malacca Strait. China signed a two billion US dollar gas and oil pipeline deal with Myanmar in 2010. These are definitely all smart geopolitical moves to materialize the strategic visions that are likely to outflank any U.S./Indian game plans. The United States, presumably as a counter-move, is constructively engaging Myanmar, even to the extent of upgrading its diplomatic relations to ambassadorial level.

Preempting this, China provides substantial military support to Myanmar. China is believed to have helped Myanmar in installing some kind of military facilities on its Coco and Hainggy islands. They are likely to oversee the important sea passage in the Bay of Bengal, close to India's Andaman Theater Command. Recently, the huge naval exercise of the four powers (United States, India, Australia, and Singapore), around the Andaman Islands, in the Bay of Bengal, close to the Malacca Strait,

vindicates Chinese apprehension of a “Malacca Dilemma.” The Chinese naval analyst Zhang Ming considers India as China’s “most strategic adversary” and “that New Delhi could use its ownership of the Andaman and Nicobar islands as a “metal chain” to block China’s western access to the Strait of Malacca.”³⁰

Both China and India are interested in gaining access to the Chittagong port in Bangladesh. China has shown interest in constructing a deep sea-port in Chittagong, which may be also viewed as part of its “string of pearls” policy. India’s interest in utilizing the facilities of Chittagong port is basically meant to beef-up the economic development of its insurgency-infested northeast—along with taking care of, as expected, its Chinese frontier in its northeast. It is deduced so because they fought a bitter war in 1962 along the same frontier. Moreover, China still claims most of the Arunachal Pradesh, to be its territories, a northeast Indian State (Province). Of late, Chinese commentators have begun to refer it as “Southern Tibet.” This is ostensibly quite ominous.

There is a kind of tug-of-war between India and China over wooing Bangladesh. Inter-state trade between India and Bangladesh is substantial, as with China. Again, military cooperation between China and Bangladesh is sizeable. There is an apprehension in Indian strategic circles that developing military cooperation between Bangladesh and China may go against the geopolitical interests of India. The famous geo-strategic restricted chokepoint called the Siliguri Corridor, that connects China’s Chumby Valley and Bangladesh and also India’s mainland with its northeast region, is a historical hangover for India. Over here, both India’s military and economic stakes are extremely high. This is one *raison d’être* that may propel India to get access to Bangladesh’s Chittagong port. Bangladesh has, in fact, already agreed, in principle, to provide such facilities.

Similar may be the *fait accompli* brewing among India, Nepal, and China. Nepal is one country, like Pakistan, that borders both China and India. And that gives rise to a geopolitical dilemma. It is perceived to be constrained by the “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” signed with India in 1950 which stipulates that it’s foreign and security policies are purported to be overseen by India.

Although Nepal may be hobbled, it nonetheless wants to diversify its foreign policy management. It also wants to keep China aligned toward it. “The recent Sino-Nepal friendship draft treaty re-emphasizes China’s policy of “non-interference” and “non-aggression,” as well as its respect for Nepal’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Keeping the rhetoric aside, both China and India tend to influence this strategically important country.

Somewhat similar to Nepal, Sri Lanka’s location is also strategically important to India, Japan, China, and the United States—mainly because the critical energy resources pass from the Persian Gulf through the Indian Ocean, Malacca Strait, South China Sea, and onwards to Japan and China. Sri Lanka is located close to India and away from China, and as such it may not be propitious for Sri Lanka to extricate itself from any Indian influence altogether. India and Sri Lanka have signed a Free Trade Agreement which has proven to be a win-win outcome for both countries. Again, China’s long-term goal is likely to have Sri Lanka in its projection. China provided considerable military support to Sri Lanka to fight its decades’ long insurgency. In return, China is reported to be building a port at Hambantota in Sri Lanka that may, in the long term, contribute to furthering Chinese strategic goals. This again goes well with China’s strategy of a “string of pearls” policy. The Indian Navy is also,

understandably, quite crucial in the Indian Ocean to take care of any eventuality. India is also pursuing a “string of pearls” policy in its offshore islands in the Indian Ocean.

It is also reportedly known China has struck a deal with the Maldives for a naval base in Marao. An airbase at Gan in the Maldives is also on the horizon. Both India and America are also interested in gaining a foothold in the Maldives. There is also a report that China is going to build a base in the Seychelles for resupply and logistics support to the PLA Navy. Tangibles are substantial that flow out from the visions. Here one needs to reflect to assess their future direction and implications.

Reflections

The United States and India are strategic partners already, most likely, one may surmise, to contain Chinese supremacy in South Asia. They are proceeding with long-term objectives. Pakistan’s status may be seen more as a swing state, at least at this point in time. India may also be called a swing state as it tends to follow policies of both balancing and bandwagoning. The United States needs Pakistan at this point in time mainly to fight terrorism in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. But there would be no letup in Chinese long-term strategic cooperation with Pakistan. This is likely to gain further momentum as a reaction to the development of a strong strategic relationship that is underway between India and the United States. Other smaller countries in South Asia may waiver to take sides due mainly for the sake of their physical and human security.

However, China and India will likely continue to follow a dual policy of “hedging and engaging” each other—similar to the policies between the United States and China—to walk the narrow path between remaining friendly and protective against any eventuality.³¹ Apart from hard politics, that in an implied and muted way may bedevil the relations between India and China, seemingly China acts as a balancer in the strategic game plan in South Asia. China and India have set a target to boost their bilateral trade to US\$100 billion by 2015. Even the Americans are coming forward for more economic cooperation with India. Does it necessarily imply that it would cancel out the strategic or geopolitical ambitions of the actors concerned? The answer is probably negative. Historical evidence suggests economic interdependence, although it contributes immensely to regional integration, does not necessarily preclude the possibility of geopolitical ambitions becoming distracted or blurred.

This is borne out by the fact that China has not given any commitment to India about its aspiration to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. C. Raja Mohan thus succinctly states, “China and India remain deeply divided over the critical issues of territorial sovereignty, regional security, and global governance.”³² Such a state of affairs will probably continue in the foreseeable future.

The U.S. defense budget is still the highest, although it intends to trim its military, which caters for its state-of-the-art military machine and cutting-edge technologies. China has increased its defense to only around US\$110 billion this year. India has almost doubled its defense budget last year. India is probably the largest importer of foreign advanced military equipment from many sources. Such trends do indicate the probability that strategic competition would continue unabated in the foreseeable future. However, more economic collaboration and more political and diplomatic

interaction definitely may restrain the manifestations of geopolitical ambitions.

Related to this, regional cooperation or integration can be the other way forward. But in South Asia such a process has not made any substantial headway. To start with, both India and Pakistan have to settle their scores. There is a serious lack of trust among the actors of South Asia. Such trust can be engendered by providing the political energy and goodwill being generated from within. But such a possibility is a far cry, at least at this point in time. Geopolitical games seem to be perennial, and they often may not allow developments to take a “business as usual” direction.

The next logical question is: are the United States and India in any way less deliberate? The tripartite relations of China-India-Pakistan, proctored by the United States, make South Asia a fertile ground for geopolitics to thrive. That is almost an inexorable trend. The Indian military establishment perceives Chinese influence in South Asia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf as a strategy of “encirclement of India.” Having said so, India, as a countermove, would continue to carve out its influence in Southeast Asia as well. India is rumored to have increased its political, and to some extent military cooperation with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore to get a slot in the leadership rung in East Asia also. Alignment with Japan is already clearly visible. Such trends are also evident in the case of Central Asia, especially Afghanistan.

Strategic visions of the United States and China will, in all probability, be reflected mostly in the geopolitical dimensions in South Asia. The United States and China are in a race to assume leadership roles. Concurrently, China and India are also in a race. Both countries are becoming economically stronger, which facilitates transforming their military power to a higher trajectory. Moreover, Pakistan and India remain at loggerheads, which has made the two powers nuclear archrivals. Complexities abound, but strategic missions are clear-cut. Alignments or alliance building or entente formation are natural and obvious outcomes in such a conundrum. In such a diplomatic riddle smaller South Asian countries may have to walk the tightrope while selecting their alignments, basically to survive as self-respecting nations and for human security.

However, there is an increased perception that the developing U.S.- India entente may “impel the smaller countries of the region to move closer to China as a counter-balancing measure.” This is palpable with Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Thus said, there would also be no letup in India’s efforts to woo over the smaller countries, excluding Pakistan. Even the United States is getting engaged in such an exercise. India has to, in the meantime, sort out the “neighborly problems,” as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged. She anticipates that India will emerge as a “benevolent leader.” Recently, India appears to be paying more attention to mending fences with its smaller neighbors. This is, indeed, an encouraging trend.

Strategic visions of the powers in South Asia will have their impacts in forming alignments/alliances in East Asia also. India is already aligned militarily with Japan, presumably to counter Chinese influence in the region. The United States and Japan are already in an alliance relationship, and one that is likely to gain further momentum, again to counterbalance China. Such visions also impact on the geopolitical state in Central Asia, especially in Afghanistan. Pakistan looks for a strategic depth in Afghanistan that conceivably contributes hugely in its geostrategic game against India. Again, India, on the other hand, is directly involved, even militarily in Afghanistan, to counter the influence of Pakistan. U.S. strategic involvement there along with

India, in the long run, is presumably meant to counterbalance China.

The geopolitical competition will continue unabated in South Asia. Military modernization and military cooperation, both in the form of joint forces exercises and armament developments including nuclear, will continue with unimaginable implications. Recently, India's successful test flight of its ICBM *Agni-5*, capable of hitting the northern cities of China, has been reciprocated by Pakistan's test flight of another version of ballistic missile. "Leading American experts have welcomed the test as a 'major step' in deterring China and noted that the United States is comfortable with Indian progress in the nuclear and ballistic fields."³³ Diplomacy may find it difficult to tame this burgeoning trend toward building hard power.

However, economic interdependence will continue to increase, with China's economic growth directly proportionate to consumption in the United States. Although geo-economics and geopolitics are interrelated, it is possibly difficult to restrain geopolitical ambitions when there are many intractable issues in the region. It is ultimately geopolitics that may rule the roost. It will keep on impacting the visions of countries in the region; and such visions will continue to become more focused and nuanced to take care of the emerging contingencies. But the basic premise and direction will remain unchanged in South Asia. China will continue to view India as America's "quasi-ally."

Be that as it may, unless China turns aggressive, India and the United States are unlikely to move overtly toward balancing Chinese power. Successful engagement of China would be the preferred option for the United States as opposed to containment. This will enable "the United States to preserve its vital interests (national) without incurring either extensive short-term costs of heightened tension or the future costs of international instability and hegemonic war."³⁴ Geo-economics is also going to weigh heavily on the Americans, since there is huge economic interdependence between the United States and China. The stakes are too high there. But again, China's long-term goal, to increase its influence in order to marginalize the United States, to whatever degree possible, remains steady. It will continue to seek greater national power and a more vibrant multipolar world.

Concluding Remarks

It can be surmised that there are trends toward a restraint-regime, because of economic compulsion, from all these stakeholders—at least for the time being. The international community should avail itself of this opportunity to divert all these key players for better confidence and security-building measures. Diplomacy, or for that matter soft power, should prevail over the trends toward hard power. This should be further redirected or redesigned to institutionalize the confidence-building measures. Certain moves are already under way, both in South Asia and in the greater Asia-Pacific region. The SAARC is one such institution where both China and America are showing strong interest. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a confidence-building mechanism that fosters dialogue and communication among the actors that contributes immensely toward diffusing tensions and resolving contentious issues. Many of the South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, along with the United States and China, are members of this Forum.

If these important players play their roles, even as catalysts, in supporting

regional cooperation or integration in South Asia, it may help the teeming millions in addressing endemic poverty in this part of the world.³⁵ What South Asia needs to emphasize more is to address human security and better regional cooperation. Efforts by South Asian nations to improve regional cooperation stumble time and again—mainly because of the intractable issues that linger between India and Pakistan. To overcome such rivalries, the United States and China can greatly contribute to smoothing differences among these South Asian nations. They could assist the South Asians in forging better regional cooperation/integration. Strategic ideas will always be envisioned by the stronger powers; but what is critical is to hold those back, given an opportunity, by the application of soft power.

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