
The Indo-US Nuclear Deal and its Regional Fallout: Pakistan's Strategic Response and Shifting Power Dynamics in South Asia

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The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal bears significant regional and international consequences, particularly for South Asia. This research paper examines the strategic consequences of the deal for Pakistan, concentrating on its implications for regional power dynamics. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology to analyze Pakistan's response to the growing Indo-US strategic partnership and the exceptional nuclear policy treatment extended to India by the United States. Findings exposes that the US-Indo deal not only disrupted the balance [of power] in the region, but also strengthened nuclear arms race in South Asia region. Moreover, the civil nuclear deal contributed to a shift in strategic interests of US, affecting U.S.-Pakistan ties that suggest Pakistan to explore new security alignments to counterbalance rising hegemony of India in the region. This strategic rearrangement, coupled with the U.S. countering strategy against China, has escalated insecurity and instability in the region that is witnessed not merely at the state level but at the societal levels too.

Keywords: Civil Nuclear Deal, Strategic Partnerships, Arms Race, Containment Policy, Pakistan Security Concerns, Non-Proliferation, Global Nuclear Governance, Regional Hegemony

Introduction

The exit of US from Afghanistan has spawned new debates on regional politics and situation of peace and security. Simultaneously, it has also set a new trend of balance of power as the exit of USA from Afghanistan reduced the importance of Pakistan in the regional politics. However, the shift of Indo pacific security strategy 2017 concentrated on India, particularly nuclear deal and launching of several mega projects related to it, arrested the attention of the international community, intellectuals, political analysts, sociologists and anthropologists. It is crystal clear in the South Asian region that if a big stakeholder is concentrating on empowering a country, which is already dominating the other neighboring states, it would further make vulnerable the small economies in the region.

This research paper is specifically discussing: (a) the power shift in the region owing to US concentration on India in the domain of civil nuclear cooperation; (b) the factors increasing the vulnerability of Pakistan against the India's hegemony in the region and further areas of cooperation to maintain the balance; and (c) discuss Pakistan's strategic move in the region to maintain its balance of power. Under the umbrella of these specific objectives, this research has responded the queries such as factors fascinating USA to strengthen its ties with India, US-India nuclear pact and vulnerability of Pakistan, and Pakistan's exclusions from USA blocs and space for China for extending its hegemony to maritime zones.

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has been significantly altered by the evolution of US-India relationship, particularly concerning its neighbors. In this context, Pakistan has become vulnerable in various manners as the joint military exercises and technology transfers between India and the US poses threat to regional security.¹ The hostility between India and Pakistan has been evident since 1947 when India became dismembered. India's conventional military capabilities exceed those of Pakistan. On the other side, the nuclear capabilities of both states have created a balance of power that has deterred full-scale war, the nuclear pact of year 2005 with the U.S. has disrupted this balance, making the region more prone to escalating tensions.²

After the independence of India and establishment of Pakistan, India followed non-alignment policy while Pakistan joined the western bloc. However, the Kashmir issue and war with China, 1962 made India to seek help from US in diplomatic and military sectors. The history of U.S.-India relations has been marked by periods of on-and-off engagements but the 21st century saw a significant shift in U.S. policy towards South Asia, leading to enhanced strategic, defense, and military relationships³ One of

the most significant factors bonding the U.S. and India is their shared interest in maritime security in the Indian Ocean and to counter the influence of other multipolar world powers, which has laid the foundation between US and India for cooperation.⁴

The primary focus of US Indo-Pacific strategy that is vigorously concentrate upon Pacific that is giving space to China for strategic maneuvering in the broader Indo-Pacific landscape.⁵ This context demonstrates the importance of Pakistan to respond China's outreach to the Indian Ocean that convinced the US Secretary of Defense (then) James Mattis to discuss the issues of regional security with Pakistan's Ambassador (then) Ali Jehangir Siddiqui at pentagon. On the other hand, the series of assertive statements, on four separate occasions within a single month, by Xi Jinping (China's President) demonstrating that China has begun rolling up his sleeves for potential conflict in the region. Such strategic move has started a new trend of militarization and strategic posturing by Beijing compromising the regional peace and security. It has also underscored the urgency and relevance of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) of United States. Since the IPS concentrates upon ensuring an open, free, and rules-based order in the region amid growing competition; therefore, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and India build a strategic alliance to making the regional stability. These countries are instrumental in deterring coercive interventions by China, specifically in contested maritime zones. This strategic alliance strengthens the IPS's capacity to maintain international norms, safeguard freedom of navigation, and promote inclusive security cooperation across the Indo-Pacific.⁶

Nevertheless, the main emphasis of the Indo-Pacific strategy adopted by the US has been on securing the maritime interest and containing China around the South China Sea at the expense of other areas where Chinese influence has been expanding. With initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has grown its influence in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, areas that Washington pays less attention to. The Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal has also raised worries that the exclusion of Pakistan from getting similar cooperation could disturb the balance in the region. However, the country's strategic location connecting South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East continues to be very important for regional connections, energy transportation and international trade. Overlooking Pakistan in security matters causes it to lean closer toward China while weakening U.S. plans in Asia.

The other context is specifically related to the nuclear deals between India and USA. The collaboration in the domain of the enhancing missile

technology and extending space cooperation further raises several concerns related to role of international community to ensure peace and security in the region. It is evident that if a big stakeholder like USA if concentrates only pouring more resources to already resourceful country, it would increase the vulnerability of neighboring countries and when it comes to south Asia, Pakistan is more vulnerable than any other country for Indo-Pak long standing rivalry since the independence in 1947.

This research paper calibrating the impact of Indo-us nuclear deal, in a broader way in the South Asia region. However, focusing on Pakistan's vulnerability in the region in terms of countering multiple challenges, specifically poverty, terrorism, corruption and fragile institutional setups. Simultaneously, this research paper further exposes the major shift in the regional politics and the role of major stakeholders to maintain the regional balance of power.

Literature Review

The importance of the strategic partnership between the United States of America and India has been widely examined by a number of authors and analysts. The research on the cooperation of both states have been carried out in the context of benefits received by them. However, there exists a minimum literature on the impacts of the United States and India cooperation on the South Asian region particularly Pakistan. In addition to this, the response of Pakistan due to the advancements of India's conventional and non-conventional military capabilities have not been examined critically by the academics and think tanks.

This research explores the various dimensions of the US-India strategic partnership emphasizing that significant factors contribute to the Indo-US strategic partnership, which include the threat of Chinese influence over the Indo-Pacific Ocean due to the Belt and Road initiative enabling China on the maritime and road linkages of the Asian and European regions and the navigation liberty of China in South China Sea restricting international naval capacities into these waters. Therefore, the US-India partnership will allow the American military presence in the region⁷

In a similar manner, the offensive realism framework is considered to discuss the various aspect of the research paper. The researcher has consulted the various scholars' work to explore the dynamics of strategic partnership between the states in the context of complex interdependence. Such dynamic survey of literature strategy helped defining the military strength that India gains from the civil nuclear pact with the United States of America. Additionally, the missile and space cooperation between India

and the United States – that have increased emphasizing on the enhanced civil nuclear cooperation between the states – also helped to check the Pakistan's stance towards new Indo-US ties. Thus, it holds the view that this partnership has led India to practice its external relations aggressively and the main agenda of the United States has been the containment of the influence of Chinese communism in the South Asian region⁸ It further analyses the control both India and the United States will have on the South Asian region due to the enhanced military alliance between the states. Moreover, the impacts of this on the nuclear policy of Pakistan has been discussed where the security vulnerability of Pakistan has been increased due to the military cooperation of America with India, compelling Pakistan to make changes in the defense capabilities, and shifts its foreign policy in the changing dynamics of geopolitical landscape of the South Asian region⁹

India is a key strategic partner of the United States in the South Asian region where both states share the same vision and school of thought related to democratic principle, aim to curb the influence of China in the South Asian and international level, increase their financial and strategic stronghold, and collaborate for each other strategic gains. This research paper specifically consulted the initiatives taken by both states to enhance their strategic cooperation including the 123 nuclear agreement, Next Step Strategic Partnership, transportation of missile defense technologies and the framework of 10 years defense pact. Similarly, the nuclear policy shift in the case of Pakistan was also considered from different research articles was also viewed in order to observe the extended ripple effects of this agreement and reaction of Pakistan to this accord¹⁰

The possibility of regional nuclear alliance between Pakistan and China in response to the US-India strategic alliance has been explored and the nuclear cooperation between China and Pakistan already been done in the shape of establishment of Chashma reactors and CPEC has been studied.¹¹¹² The indifferent and unconcerned behavior of United States of America towards Pakistan's nuclear capacity building, enabling Pakistan to be more inclined towards China to fulfill its nuclear energy needs.¹³ The proliferation of nuclear arsenals in the South Asian region has been amplified and the concerns of international nonproliferation regimes have been accelerated. The deal between India and the United States has the potential to destabilize the region and give rise to the arms race, deteriorating the regional cooperation, and change the dynamics of alliance formed in the region¹⁴ Similarly, the strategic shift of policies between Pakistan and China along with its repercussions for India and the South Asian region has been examined¹⁵ Pakistan has adopted a robust and

visionary foreign policy approach to fulfill its strategic interests in the rise of exceptionalist approach of US towards India and look forward to increase the regional and international alliances that would serve benefit for Pakistan in the changing geopolitical dynamics of the world¹⁶

Research Methodology

The research paper primarily assesses the influence of the Indo-US nuclear deal on Pakistan's foreign policy document. Simultaneously, the research paper has further peep into the rising trend and tendency of conflict and cooperation in the region, especially after the exit of the USA from Afghanistan and further after the National Strategic Security (NSS) 2017 of USA - particularly the portion that elaborates on Indo-Pacific Strategy.

With respect to it, to complete the analysis, a qualitative method has been adopted. This method allowed the researcher to deal with the theme conceptually and analytically for integrating qualitative research in light of local trends by elaborating on how, what, when, why, and whom. The data sources, including primary and secondary, are utilized in order to confirm the accuracy and dependability of the data as well as the superiority of the analysis. Furthermore, this method helped to collect, and analyze in a single paper to address the research problem. This approach consolidates qualitative exploration strategies to comprehensively comprehend the examination goals.

Results and Discussion

India-US Civil Nuclear Deal and Pakistan

Stability in the South Asian region has been disrupted by the conventional and non-conventional arms race between India and Pakistan. A comparative analysis of their military arsenals in the 1990s provides insight into the imbalance of power in South Asia. In 1997, India had superiority in all forms of conventional military weapons compared to Pakistan. India had 1,500 Armored Fighting Vehicles and 3,500 operational tanks, while Pakistan had 2,000 tanks, including 240 self-propelled guns and around 1,600 pieces of towed artillery. Additionally, India had a substantial number of personnel on duty, exceeding 1,145,000, whereas Pakistan's military personnel numbered around 587,000. This gave India a significant advantage over Pakistan in terms of conventional arsenal quantity. However, Pakistan's policy has always been to counter its quantitative shortcomings with qualitative superiority¹⁷

Therefore, the conventional military advantage has always been in favor of India. To counter this imbalance, Pakistan chose to develop nuclear capabilities to establish nuclear deterrence. This deterrence has allowed Pakistan to maintain a balance of power in South Asia despite the conventional disparity. Additionally, both states strive to develop areas where the other is advancing, reflecting a parallel and reciprocal approach. It is important to note the significant influence of the military on the politics of both India and Pakistan. While the Indian government has adopted a non-provocative defense strategy, marking a clear separation between politics and the military under the Sundarji doctrine of the 1980s, the military's involvement in Pakistan's politics has been highly apparent since the country's establishment.

The deal has significant implications not only for Pakistan but also for the entire South Asian region.¹⁸ It is important to note that nuclear energy accounts for only 7 percent of India's energy needs, highlighting that geopolitical considerations were the major driving force behind the nuclear pact that took place between US and India. A thorough examination of the deal reveals severe consequences due to its multidimensional aspects. As emphasized by officials from both nations, the deal has become a cornerstone of security and regional dynamics in South Asia. This suggests that the agreement serves a significant purpose in containing Chinese influence in the region, although both nations have denied this claim. Furthermore, it appears that the U.S.-India cooperation is intended to promote India's role as a regional hegemon.

One of the most concerning aspects of the deal is the potential for nuclear escalation in India, which has raised apprehensions among its neighbors, Pakistan and China. This has been widely recognized as a calculated step taken by the United States politically and India pays zero attention towards containing the fissile material production which has the potential to push the Chinese and Pakistan governments towards building up more fissile materials to manufacture atomic arsenals¹⁹ As a result, the deal implies significant repercussions on regional stability following the reaction of non-nuclear weapon states to this deal and the failure of the non-proliferation mechanism of the international community.

The nuclear non-proliferation system developed contentious details from the moment of the original nuclear agreement. India can exercise freedom to use and transport nuclear technology because it maintains non-NPT status. The exemptions India receives through its US nuclear agreement result in serious worries about Western states' dual standard practices that benefit their interests while bypassing India's NPT decision.

The existing principles established by nuclear states regarding nuclear technology proliferation are being challenged since the agreements have sparked doubts about global nuclear order integrity. The agreement faces criticism from certain parties because it risks non-proliferation frameworks and the NPT-established norms. Other states outside the non-proliferation regime think that American help to India could become a justification for their nuclear development objectives. The feared consequence of this agreement involves enabling newer states to obtain nuclear weapons through similar exceptions granted to India. The preservation of uniform non-proliferation frameworks remains difficult for multiple platforms, including NSG and nuclear weapon states, since the situation was reported by Pate (2020). The year has evolved attitudes toward responsible economic collaboration between India and the United States.

The NSG waiver granted to India for the import and export of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes under the 2015 nuclear pact with the United States has had a significant impact on the South Asian region. The removal of sanctions on India has raised questions about the legitimacy of the NSG and global nonproliferation norms. This development has sparked discontent among non-nuclear states regarding the nonproliferation regime. Regional antagonism and hostility have deeply affected the South Asian region, particularly between India and Pakistan. Pakistan views the agreement as an action that increases India's military capacity, potentially escalating the arms race in the region. India's failure to clearly define the specific uses of the reactors under its supervision has cast doubt on the separation between civilian and military applications of nuclear facilities. This uncertainty has fostered distrust and concern in Pakistan about the true intentions behind India's nuclear program.

The implications of the pact on regional conflicts and nuclear nonproliferation have been far-reaching, significantly influencing efforts to mitigate enmity in the South Asian region. The collaboration between the United States and India has raised substantial doubts about Pakistan's role in regional politics. Pakistan believes that the nuclear deal was designed to counter China's influence in the region, potentially limiting its involvement in the evolving dynamics of political stabilization²⁰

The nuclear deal has created multifaceted challenges for Pakistan and the South Asian region. It has compelled Pakistan to advance its nuclear capabilities to maintain deterrence in the region. Such initiatives have the potential to undermine the international community's efforts to curb both vertical and horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons. If India gains membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), it will ease sanctions

and facilitate the swift and easy transportation of nuclear technology from the US to India. In contrast, Pakistan remains excluded from the NSG, which heightens regional uncertainty. Additionally, the consensus-based decision-making process in the NSG could prevent Pakistan's inclusion if India secures membership²¹ Pakistan contends that the deal allows India to potentially exploit domestic uranium deposits for weaponization, while Pakistan lacks the capacity to develop its own fissile materials which increased Pakistan's anxiety. International disarmament and nonproliferation talks continue to exclude Pakistan because the nation opposes cutting off its nuclear material production and refused to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in response to India.

Pakistan's Nuclear Policy Shift in Response to the Nuclear Deal

The strategic plan of action initiated by the United States in South Asia showcases the significance India holds in American foreign policy. Apart from fulfilling its energy requirements, India can gain the potential to build better defense systems against China and maintain the balance of power in the region. Consequently, such measures might compel Pakistan to enhance cooperation on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The government of Pakistan has been perturbed by the nature of this nuclear deal and its long-term impact on the stability and security of Pakistan in the region. This agreement has been marked as the backbone of the continued arms race in the whole Asian region, including Iran and North Korea. The relaxation provided by the United States under this nuclear pact to India has created an alarming situation for Pakistan. This is evident in the provisions of the deal that aim to benefit India from the major production of plutonium to be utilized in atomic weaponry. This has given India the capacity to establish around 100 atomic arsenals with 500 kg of plutonium production.

Furthermore, Pakistan has increased its military spending on defense and security by developing non-conventional weapons. In response to the agreement between the United States and India, Pakistan has opted to invest public sector funds into its nuclear program. The investment in military expenditure has risen from \$4.59 billion in 2005 to \$10.34 billion in 2022, illustrating the major changes in military spending patterns that the Pakistani government has endured²² However, India's military spending has been six times higher compared to Pakistan, posing a threat to the balance of power in the region. In response, Pakistan has strengthened its friendly ties with China to counterbalance India's influence. The strategic partnership deal between India and the United States has damaged Pakistan's image on the global stage.²³ India's enhanced security measures

and collaboration with the United States have not only disturbed the regional balance of power but have also further deteriorated Pakistan's relationship with the United States.

Pakistan has established its official position regarding "No First Use" (NFU) by refusing to embrace this nuclear doctrine policy. Pakistan decided against creating an established NFU policy because this decision provides the country flexibility to initiate nuclear weapon use against threatening neighbors. Indian conventional arsenal growth has forced Pakistan to develop a nuclear strategy as an asymmetric response for the region. Pakistan aims to maintain deterrence while denying its enemies major victory through nuclear power. The nation has chosen to avoid all nuclear testing activities since 1998 while consistently working on missile testing programs. The policy stands subject to change if India executes any nuclear tests in the future.

The Indian Cold Start doctrine against Pakistan and the development of ballistic missile defenses constitute two components of Indian strategy. The nuclear advancements and amplified fissile stockpiles from the nuclear pact provide India with the capability to strike at Pakistan's nuclear assets. India's continuous progress in maritime and aerial military infrastructure has bolstered existing threats to Pakistan. Pakistan adopted major counteractions against perceived threats where the government of Pakistan has modified national boundaries within its nuclear program as well as its external attack measures for securing national security. Pakistan established its military strength through the development of the Babur cruise missile for land attacks extending up to 700 km as protection against the ballistic missile defense system created by India. Pakistan introduced the Ra'ad cruise missile for aerial operations up to 350 kilometers to adapt to mounting national threats from Indian military developments. The Hatf-4 (Nasser) missiles, in combination with multiple independent reentry vehicles, serve to protect Pakistan against Indian nuclear dominance in the region. The government of Pakistan built maritime capabilities along with boosting its stockpile of fissile materials for nuclear weapons production. Pakistan officials consider these systems essential for maintaining nuclear deterrence against India since its aggressive behavior toward Pakistan and improved missile interceptor capabilities have made Pakistan fearful.

Pakistan has collaborated with military equipment to revise its nuclear policy framework. The utilization threshold for nuclear weapons remains low because the country uses a flexible strategy for responding to attacks. This means that, instead of massive and aggressive retaliation, Pakistan will pursue a targeted attack on the territory of its enemy. For

instance, the Shaheen-3 and Nasser missiles have been developed to target long-range locations, enabling Pakistan to adopt a counter-value target strategy instead of a counterforce one. This highlights the shift in Pakistan's nuclear policy in response to the nuclear pact signed between India and the United States²⁴

Apart from the military buildup, Pakistan has pursued a policy of strengthening its diplomatic and strategic alliances in the South Asian region. The relationship between Pakistan and the People's Republic of China began to emerge at the forefront in 1951. The geostrategic location of Pakistan has played a significant role in building its alliance with China. Both India and the United States are perceived to limit the influence of China in the South Asian region by strengthening their relationships in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Consequently, China has sought to build stronger ties with its neighboring country, Pakistan.

The friendly relationship between Pakistan and China took a new turn of cooperation after signing the Treaty of Friendship in 2006. Both states have since been engaged in a bilateral framework of cooperation under the provisions of Article 5 of this treaty. It further restrains the formation of alliances with states that have a significantly negative influence on the sovereignty of either country. The relationship under the norms of the treaty has been strengthened in the fields of economy, military trade, infrastructure, and transfer of nuclear technologies. This has led both states to enjoy crucial benefits from each other, including the rise of nuclear technology transport for Pakistan and the acquisition of military facilities from China²⁵ (Rehman, 2009). On the other hand, China gained the advantage of this cooperation in the form of control over the deep and warm water resources of Pakistan, including the Gwadar port, for a period of 40 years. This is the most significant aspect of the relationship, where the Gwadar port allows China access to the Indian Ocean and enables monitoring of military and naval activities by India and the United States under the nuclear pact signed by both states. Gwadar also serves as the shortest route to China for the transportation of energy supplies.

Thus, China has supported Pakistan in the matter of the Kashmir conflict. As the India and United States nuclear deal severely impacts the resolution of the Kashmir issue, China has maintained a stance to back Pakistan²⁶.

China, in particular, has ambitious plans to promote stronger ties with Pakistan to channelize the strategic partnership toward maintaining regional stability and countering Indian influence. China further sought to enhance Pakistan's credibility by increasing cooperation in nuclear

technology, notably by helping to build reactors in 2010 with the capacity to generate 300 megawatts of energy. These two reactors, established at the Chashma complex, aim to address Pakistan's energy shortfall. The access to Chinese fuel and nuclear technology will significantly bolster Pakistan's nuclear capabilities²⁷

Influence on the Region

The nuclear policy adopted by Pakistan has significant implications for the regional stability of South Asia. The modernization of nuclear technology by Pakistan and India has created a rift in the regional balance of power. With increasing cooperation of United states in the south Asian region has enabled India to acquire more fissile material for energy production and the advancement of nuclear arsenals of India has forced Pakistan to align with the regional super power to contain the influence of Indian hegemony in the region. China emerged as the sole supporter of Pakistan in matters related to enhancement of Pakistan's nuclear capacity. Thus, Pakistan has been increasing its nuclear facilities to curtail the influence of India, maintain the balance of power and ensure nuclear deterrence in the South Asian region.

In addition to the accumulation of nuclear arsenals by Pakistan, domestic politics with respect to nuclear power has notably impacted the South Asian region. The political situation in Pakistan has set the whole country towards destabilization, risking its nuclear facilities. It has the potential to make the government lose its command and control over the nuclear its nuclear capacities. The inconsistent relationship between the establishment of Pakistan with the civil and political officials have created a rift in the stability of the state. A surge of animosity has been evident during the civil attacks on the military installation in 2023 and has been considered a Black Day in the history of Pakistan political turmoil.²⁸ Thus, serious repercussions arise in case of major civil military upheaval takes place in Pakistan. This would have the potential to risk the nuclear facilities of Pakistan and bring chaos in the South Asian region.

The role of China in exacerbating the nuclear tension cannot be overlooked. Since China has been regarded as the global and regional super power, China's nuclear facilities and ambitions have significantly left its influence on the stability of the region. As discussed above, the Chinese have been assisting Pakistan in the form of financial and technological advancements to counter the rising threat of Indian hegemony. China has always pursued a policy of countering the influence of America in the South Asian region and reciprocal efforts has been downplayed by the United

States of America. Amid the nuclear pact between India and the US and the nuclear assistance provided to Pakistan by China; the main goal of the Chinese government has been to counter the hold of America by utilizing India for its own interests. As the nuclear pact of India will allow American forces to be present at the South Asian region, there are high stakes for the negative interaction of both Chinese and American forces with each other.

Moreover, the strategic alliance formulated by Pakistan with China in the nuclear arms race enables Pakistan to contain the growing technological and nuclear advancements of India. This has generated unsteadiness in the south Asian region, as both India and Pakistan are depicting themselves as the hub of proxy wars between China and the United States. Thus, the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty prevails in the South Asian region. A toxic environment of competition has emerged between India, Pakistan as well as China owing to the missile technological advancements, expansion of counterforce capabilities and the efforts to formulate more and more nuclear delivery vehicles by each country. This has sparked a layer of complexities in the region, where each state looks upon the other as an enemy²⁹ The region depicts itself as the center of quadrilateral competition. China has been responding to counter United States measures, where India has been engaged in proliferation of its nuclear capabilities to counter China. Pakistan on the other hand had been maintaining good ties with China to curb the imbalance of power in the region and to maintain nuclear deterrence.

The nuclear policy shift of Pakistan in response to the India and United States nuclear deal has been significantly evolving in the 21st century. This has crucial and far-reaching impacts on the security of the South Asian region. Pakistan has always pursued an India centric approach to maintain the balance of power in the region. This approach might ensure the national security of Pakistan but escalates the chances of war, which consequently put the entire region at risk. It poses significant challenges to the nuclear nonproliferation efforts of the international regimes. The region has emerged as a critical topic due to the intensifying risks and effects of nuclear weapons competition in South Asian territory.

Developments in the US-India-Pakistan Relationship

The countries namely India and Pakistan operate as nuclear powers since they exist together within the South Asian region yet remain chronically hostile against one another. Kashmir has been a persistent dispute that has worsened Indo-Pakistani relations because this disputed territory touches both countries. Both India and Pakistan have experienced

multiple armed conflicts together with numerous armed standoffs because of their rivalry over Kashmir after achieving independence.³⁰ The two states have worked to create international power blocs since they need support from international bodies. Both states push forward their nuclear military programs as a countermeasure against each other, creating mistrust that hinders their relations from shifting toward normalization. China's rise to power status in Asia has made it harder for India and Pakistan to strike a diplomatic balance in their ties with America and China. The 21st century has been marked by high turbulence in world politics, with rising instability in the balance of power among states. Globalization has demonstrated a remarkable future for the population, having the potential to resolve multilateral problems at the regional and global levels. However, with its rising benefits, it also has the capacity to disturb the stability and peace of the world.

South Asia has been notable for incorporating fluctuating political dynamics with the rise of China as a military and economic power in the region. India regards China's power as a significant threat to its national security and policy. The relationship between India and China has seen striking discontent over the issue of Himalayan borders. On the other hand, India's relationship with Pakistan has been largely affected by military confrontations and targeted attacks. Pakistan views its security challenges through the lens of its neighbors' actions and activities. Pakistan is surrounded by Afghanistan on one side, with unsettled and unstable border issues, and by India on the other, with troubled and complicated relations. Pakistan maintains friendly relations with both the United States and China and must continuously navigate the emerging contest between the two. Thus, maintaining a balance in its relationships with both states poses a significant challenge for Pakistan.

Pakistan has always prioritized its diplomatic ties with China amid the changing trends of strategic alliances. China has emerged as a rising global power owing to the Belt and Road Initiative, which has changed China's regional and global position, making it a pivotal strategic counterpart to the United States. Pakistan aims to redevelop its relations with the United States, but its regional alliance with China complicates its efforts to align with Washington. Pakistan tries its best to stay away from proxy warfare generated by the strained relations between these states. As long as both states remain in a bitter relationship, Pakistan finds it hard to build a conducive environment for its relationship with the United States. The withdrawal of American military forces from Afghanistan, as well as its strategic partnership with India, has further widened the gap between the

United States and Pakistan. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the U.S. has significantly impacted the security dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

Several attempts have been made by India and Pakistan to resolve their disputes, but internal and global factors have restrained the possibility of developing a peaceful relationship between them. The attitude of Indian officials has evidently strengthened due to its strategic partnership with the United States and the West. In 2018, India made the unilateral decision to abrogate Articles 370 and 35A, taking away the autonomy of the Kashmiri people (Jazeera, 2019). This move has been regarded as a major rationale behind the increasing hostility between India and Pakistan, as it breaches the provisions of the Simla Accord as well as the resolutions provided by the United Nations Security Council.

Pakistan comes across several challenges in managing its relationship with India. This is owing to the deadlock between India and Pakistan. Moreover, developments in trade and communication have been banned. In addition, diplomatic representation by both states has been severely damaged due to India's unilateral actions in 2019, which have been considered illegal by Pakistani authorities. The 2021 backchannel interactions between the two states also proved unsuccessful due to the lack of progressive actions on both sides. The only platform on which both states have interacted is the observance of a ceasefire on the LoC in the disputed area of Jammu and Kashmir. This has been the only significant progress made by both states since the Balakot crisis two years ago. These measures highlight the uncertainty in the relationship between India and Pakistan, where the unresolved Kashmir dispute continues to fuel negative and cold relations. Furthermore, public sentiment against Pakistan has consistently been used by the Indian government to gain electoral advantage, making it difficult to initiate peace talks between the states.³¹

The relationship between Pakistan and the United States has been strained due to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and its growing ties with India. Pakistan was a significant ally of the United States during the War on Terror after the 9/11 attacks, but the power dynamics have since shifted. After its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. relied on Pakistan to counter the threat of the Taliban, but the refusal of then-Prime Minister Imran Khan to provide military bases to the U.S. further strained relations. Additionally, the regime changes allegations made by the former Prime Minister against the United States have further eroded trust and confidence between the two countries.³² Moreover, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has put fuel to the fire of relations with the United States that perceives China as its counterpart and has further distanced the United

States from Pakistan. Such developments further complicate South Asia's strategic landscape by making Pakistan more aligned with China and India with the United States. The rising influence of India and the United States to counter terrorism in Afghanistan has further isolated Pakistan in the region, making it more inclined towards China to fulfill its strategic needs. Thus, the instability in the region of Afghanistan creates a security challenge for the region, including the terrorist threat and issues of refugee influx.³³

Opportunities to Extend Diplomatic Alliance in the Region

Notwithstanding the long-standing hostility between India and Pakistan, the potential remain exists for meaningful progress in diplomatic relations. There are high probability exists in both countries for initiating a new era of bilateral cooperation if the political leadership act prudently. By promoting a national consensus, political leaders can set the discourse ensuring peaceful engagement to maintain the regional peace and security. There is no doubt, to realize this distant dream an inclusive and un-failed efforts to engage all key stakeholders – including ruling and opposition parties, media, state institutions, and technocrats – are imperative. In addition, the role of third-party mediation – particularly by influential actors like the United States and the United Kingdom – cannot be ignored as these two major stakeholders in international politics could play a productive role in thwarting the tensions and encouraging the dialogue. Such endeavors have the potential to ensure stability in the region by reducing animosity and building trust among the populations of both nations.

One of the most essential elements with the potential to engage India, Pakistan, the United States, and China on one platform would be advancements made in the field of the economy. The impact of the pandemic on the South Asian region and Europe has significantly affected food and energy production, and the states in these regions demand support and financial aid from international monetary forums. This has provided a wide opportunity for the nations of South Asia to cooperate in crisis management to stabilize the region. In addition, the ceasefire agreement between India and Pakistan must be upheld to curb the rising threat of militants and insurgents from both nations. Furthermore, it would be crucial for India and Pakistan to adopt a softer approach towards each other and move their populations away from harsh and negative sentiments to promote cross-border and cultural trade.³⁴

With the rising power of social media and the rapid spread of news and information, it has become essential for the international community to

promote regional integration and support regional alliances. They must advocate for the elevation of peaceful and security-related approaches by the states of South Asia. China, being a global power with its roots in South Asia, plays a significant role in maintaining regional stability. It has the opportunity to mitigate the hostility between India and Pakistan due to the authority it enjoys at the international level. The mediatory role played by China to address the imbalance of power between India and Pakistan and to mend its relations with India could create the possibility of a more friendly and stable region. Russia, being a Eurasian country, would likely utilize this opportunity by participating in reconciliatory measures, as it has done before during conflicts between India and Pakistan.³⁵ Therefore, outside powers can play a significant role as diplomatic partners to compel India and Pakistan to restart their peace dialogues. As both India and Pakistan increasingly acknowledge that economic trade and connectivity between them would bring prosperity to the states, there is a possibility that the tensions between them are starting to ease.

Conclusion

This research paper has examined Pakistan's security challenges amid the evolving strategic relationship and politics of nuclear deals in South Asia. It exposes that international strategic alliances are set under the influence of shifting interests rather than permanent friendships or hostilities. The post-Cold War era witnessed the United States concentrates on India, promoting deep defense and strategic cooperation. Such gesture has affected the regional balance – marked military modernization, preferential nuclear waivers, and growing influence in international forums by India.

The Indo-U.S. partnership, driven largely by mutual interests in countering China's rise, has marginalized Pakistan, pushing it closer to China. The 2005 Civil Nuclear Deal, enhanced defense collaborations, and U.S. support for India's UN Security Council ambitions have further strained the regional power equilibrium. While India gains access to advanced military technology, Pakistan faces restrictions and must rely on its limited resources to maintain deterrence through its nuclear program.

Such imbalance escalated regional insecurity. Yet, Pakistan's dependence on nuclear deterrence to offset disparities [conventional] demonstrates the consequences of an unchecked strategic partnership. Additionally, Pakistan's attempts to improve its defense infrastructure could strain its economy and divert resources compromising social development sectors.

In order to cope with these challenges, it is inevitable for Pakistan to enhance its regional and international diplomatic alliances, invest in technologies related to defense mechanism, and advocate for equitable treatment in global non-proliferation regimes. Strategic recalibration is essential to safeguard Pakistan's national interests while contributing to a stable and secure South Asian region.

Recommendations

To prevent worsening possibilities of the deal and help South Asia achieve real cooperation and sustainable peace, the researcher suggests the following multi-tiered steps:

Revitalization of Regional Institutions and Multilateral Forums

- Restore and boost SAARC and other regional forums that can facilitate discussions, help sort out conflicts and promote development.
- Make use of the UN or IAEA to organize a Nuclear Dialogue Forum for South Asia so that important issues about stability and arms control can be talked about consistently.

Equal Access to Civilian Nuclear Technology

- Pakistan should actively engage at international platforms to highlight the asymmetrical power balance in the region and should advocate at IAEA and NSG for equal treatment for civil nuclear projects.
- Policies made by the IAEA and NSG should be updated to ensure the distribution of nuclear energy for peaceful use is focused on fairness, rather than political interests.
- Encourage agreements among nations in the region, so Pakistan may join in regulated nuclear trade under control.

Use of Confidence-Building Measures to Address Strategic Imbalance

- India and Pakistan should negotiate and sign arms control treaties to put a brake on their arms competition.
- Introduce a proven halt on nuclear testing and production in the region to cut the risk of disputes and build more trust.

Restrain Proxy Warfare and Militarization

- Stimulate openness in spending on defense and descriptions of military doctrine through impartial inspection teams.
- Ensure countries in the region agree not to indirectly back groups outside the state by creating a code of conduct to be supervised by third parties.

Inclusion of Human Security in Strategic Discourse

- Instead of making security plans centered on states, make them focused on health, education and the ability to deal with climate change.
- Allow people outside government or political parties to have a say when regional policies are being developed.

Promote Inclusive Economic Growth and Linkages

- Support the growth of economic corridors that unite several countries and parties to cut down on polarization and raise cooperation.
- Support efforts that link smaller countries like Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh to the world market.

Reconstruct International Diplomatic Relations

- Donor countries and international financial institutions are advised to handle both India and Pakistan in a neutral way to prevent their strategic exclusion as well as large economic differences.
- Pakistan should consider developing stronger ties with South Asian and European powers like China, Russia and European Union to maintain balance of power in the region.
- The countries in the South Asian region must be provided with assistance to engage in peaceful diplomacy, rather than promotion of opposition, with a main goal of peaceful collaboration for improved governance and growth.

Improve the Legal and Normative Rules

- Reinforce the role of international law in nuclear governance to limit the accumulation of nuclear weapons and ensure that treaties are observed.
- Renovate and broaden non-proliferation rules to include everyone who possesses nuclear weapons and make them legally responsible.

Use of Track-II Diplomacy to promote strategic realignment

- Introduce constant communications among people from different sectors, organize academic meetings and facilitate collaborative projects by journalists to help close the gap between different beliefs and promote understanding.
- Ask think tanks and strategic institutions in both India and Pakistan to jointly produce policy documents that suggest ways for the region to become more secure.

Establish a Regional Peace and Security Commission

- Set up a special regionally appointed South Asian Peace Commission so that it can follow disputes, report findings, help resolve issues, keep watch on arms transfer and propose practical solutions.
- Choose people from civil society, academic organizations, business environments and minority groups to ensure inclusive decision-making.

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