

South Asian Quadrangular Conundrum: Pakistan, China, India, and the USA – Post-2024 Projections

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Abstract

South Asia, owing to its geostrategic importance, wealth of natural resources, major transport-hub connecting many parts of the world, and the presence of two nuclear powers, invites the attention of key global players who are keen to exert their influence in the region. The third decade of the 21st century has proved that both USA and China have taken great interest in the affairs of the region. This justifies the involvement of USA and China in the affairs of South Asia and involves both India and Pakistan, creating a situation, this study calls 'quadrangular conundrum'. This quadrilateral conundrum invites attention to offer prediction about future. This paper studies the past and current ever-evolving dynamics of quadrilateral relations among the four key players engaged in South Asian region: Pakistan, China, India, and the USA specifically underlining the prevalent challenges, concerns, and opportunities. We present a retrospective view of the bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral ties among the top actors relevant to Pakistan. We specify the spectrum of these multidimensional ties in the domain of diplomatic, economic, and security spheres and bring in the current picture. In the end, this paper submits politico-economic and security scenario with a number of predictions on probable cooperation, competition and confrontation. It particularly focuses on Pakistan's geostrategic, security, and economic concerns. We suggest that by pursuing a policy of cooperation and competition, Pakistan can attend all its domestic and foreign concerns by avoiding its engagement in any sort of confrontation.

Keywords: Quadrilateral relations, Pakistan, India, China, USA

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Introduction

Pakistan is an important entity on global stage. Domestically, Pakistan has been a democratic state, dotted with military rule, with multiparty system. It is in possession of nuclear and missile technology with one of the top militaries in the world. Regionally, it shares borders with India, Afghanistan, Iran, and China. Being a Muslim country, Pakistan maintains friendly ties with almost all the Muslim states. Pakistan, despite its low economic profile, has managed to seek entry into global politics since its inception in 1947. The Pakistani policymakers have opted to align with the Western bloc and address threats from the periphery (Kasuri, 2015). It has always taken up its assumed role of Muslim leader states and always raised voice for the rights of the persecuted Muslims, may they be Kashmiri, Palestinian, Rohingya, Serb, or belonging to any other ethnicity (Ali, G., 2022).

There have been scholarly debates and predictions, both positive and negative, about the current status and future of the Pakistani state based both domestic and foreign factors. The two extreme sides of the scholarship represent their respective viewpoints following “crisis discourse” or streamlining resilience respectively (Bajwa, 2012, p. 273). The Fragile States Index 2023 mentions Pakistan to be at “high warning” (Peace, 2023, p. 7). Some studies paint a positive image of Pakistan based on the premise of resilience and observe it as a gradually progressive and moderate state that encounters issues that may be dealt with the passage of time. Despite the fact that “Pakistan has faced more than its share of crises”; and many scholarly predictions about its failure as a state, Pakistan is still a living reality (Bajwa, 2012, p. 273). Both the extremely positive and exceptionally negative predictions about Pakistan from a progressively democratic state bringing positive influence to the extreme negative development to the fundamentalist takeover (Pande, 2011) have proved to be overstated or at the least miscalculated prophecies which have not come true. Despite all odds, Pakistan is neither likely to fail nor find means to achievement yet will manage to withstand and find a way through by stumbling and “muddling through” the odds domestically as well as externally (Paris, 2010, p. 5).

Dynamics of International Ties

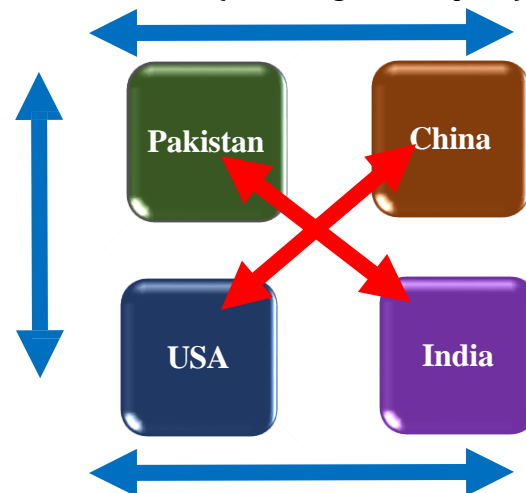
The study of ties between or among countries has always been a domain of vital import for researchers in the field of International Politics. It can be bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral or multilateral depending on the range of actors and domain of their influence in regional and global politics. Quadrangular relations represent an intricate relationship among four states involving the key spheres of diplomatic, economic, geostrategic, and security ties with confrontational, competitive, or collaborative domains. After the end of bipolar world, the globe has been dragged into multipolar reality where countries have sought encouragement to undertake multilateral ties while the great powers try to woo others. In the backdrop of South Asia, there has been always been the role of the USA, Russia, UK, and China. In the background of Indo-Pakistan ever-lasting tensions, these powers have developed vested interests in the region (Ali, G., 2022). Based on respective national interests, Pakistan has engaged with both USA and China to address its existential threat from India (Kasuri, 2015). The global politico-economic competition between the top two economic giants, USA and China, has its implications on Pakistan’s relations with China. On the global scene, India has

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always portrayed Pakistan on a negative canvass (Briskey, 2022). Pakistan is a friendly neighboring state to China, and a rival state to India in terms of regional politics. The strong ties between Islamabad and Beijing have forced Delhi to find common grounds against the Sino-Pak bond. As regards the global politics, Pakistan is tied to, willingly or otherwise, to the USA. Pakistan's dependence on the USA for economic and politico-diplomatic assistance has generated an old yet fragile bond between the two.

Quadrilateral aspect: Pakistan-China-India-US

Under the scope of the current study, it is argued that under the given Pakistan's geostrategic position, Pakistan has been engaged in implied quadrangular relationship with India, USA, and China (Pant, 2012). The Sino-Pakistan relations come across, directly or indirectly, with two other parties i.e. India and the US (Gul, Munir, Shafiq, & Imran, 2021). Pakistan is considered a "thorn" in China-India-US ties (Pant, 2012, p. 1). This is what some scholars call quadrilateral relationship where superpower USA attempts to wield its supremacy in the South Asian sub-region by forging close ties with India; while China responds to this policy by establishing strong relations with Pakistan (Pant, 2012). The bilateral Sino-Pakistan ties can only be accurately interpreted "in terms of a 'quadrilateral relationship' involving China, Pakistan, India, and the United States" (Dumbaugh, 2010, p. 15).



Pakistan-US relations

Pakistan's ties with the USA have been the dominant feature of her foreign policy. On account of the importance of the USA in global and regional politics and its leadership role, each piece of scholarship on Pakistan's foreign policy contains the mention of her ties with the USA directly or indirectly. After independence, the Pakistani policy elites chose to stay away from the Soviet bloc and allied themselves with the western bloc. The USA pursued Pakistan to join SEATO and CENTO and supplied financial assistance. After the 1965 Indo-Pak War, the ties came under cold water and 1971 Indo-Pak War, Pakistan felt divorced (Kronstadt, 2012). The ties rejuvenated after the Soviet intervention in late 1970s and stayed close and stable until the end of Cold War. The early 1990s saw sanctions imposed on Pakistan under the aegis of Pressler Amendment. The Afghanistan government captured by the extremist Taliban and

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subsequent acceptance of Pakistani state and American opposition to this stance caused great rifts in the ties (Kasuri, 2015). The post 9/11 again dragged Pakistan directly into the forefront on behalf of the USA as that of the 1980s through latter's War on Terror (WoT). Pakistan joined hands with the USA and received American assistance along with huge retaliation by the fundamentalist elements on account of her alliance with the USA (Abbas, 2004). The killing of Osama Bin Laden on Pakistani soil in 2011 estranged the ties between Islamabad and Washington leading to the distrust in the bilateral relationship (Kasuri, 2015).

Indo-Pak ties

Pakistan's relations with India have been tense since her inception. Both were born as enemies and soon after their independence they went to their first of their four wars in 1947-48. The war on account of the state of Kashmir created anxiety from the much-bigger neighborly state and subsequently forced Pakistan to look upon India as a threat. India and Pakistan have engaged in four armed clashes in 1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999. After the third Indo-Pakistan war that caused the disintegration of Pakistan, the relations between the two neighborly rival countries reached their nadir and at the height of mistrust (Pande, 2011).

In South Asia, apart from the traditional players such as the USA, UK, Russia, and China, the economic growth of India has given her a special status. As a rival to the Pakistani state, the stature of India, based on her population, size, and geostrategic situation transmitted anxiety among the Pakistani policymakers (Gul et al., 2021). Indian state, under intoxication of its mammoth size and population has carved out a picture of itself that is of a South Asian demigod, and subsequently encouraged itself to interfere in the internal affairs of its neighbors and engage in armed conflict. By dint of India's growing stature in global and regional politics, and its economy, it has managed to look upon itself as a South Asian hegemon thereby exerting pressure on Pakistan (Buzan & Waever, 2003). In general, Indian policymakers have opted for a hawkish approach in South Asian region.

Because the ties between Pakistan and India are under severe tension, the threat that Pakistan has been receiving from India is asymmetric. As a result, Pakistan has attempted to pursue a foreign policy that addresses her biggest existential threat (Freddy, 2020). In this respect, one of the topmost priorities for Islamabad is to forge stronger ties with China and the USA for the sake of balancing. Scobell et al. (2014) argue that China's closer ties with Pakistan were in the backdrop of the unfriendly proximity.

Pakistan-China Ties

There is considerable scholarship on the argument that Pakistan-China relations are based the India factor which may aptly be called the foundational ground for the Sino-Pakistan ties (Beckley, 2012; Shukla, 2013; Small, 2015). Pakistan's geostrategic position compels China to seek friendly lasting relations (Feigenbaum, 2011; Rakisits, 2012; Tkacik, 2011). Strategically, Pakistan and China align with anti-India elements heartedly (Briskey, 2022). For Beijing, geostrategic vision to access Indian Ocean along with economic logic is the principal driver of its policy for the initiation of CPEC (Ranjan, 2021).

The experts on South Asian politics broadly fall into two main categories. One group favors, which is often referred to as all-weather friendship (AWF) stance (Hassan, 2020; Khokhar,

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2020; Siddique, 2014; Xiguang, 2016). The close ties between the two neighborly states have survived the trials of the time and both states have done their utmost to carry the bonds of good friendly relationship on despite odds from all directions (Ranjan, 2021). The AWF thesis is justified in the backdrop of security and economic aspects. In the security sphere of security, China is considered a top military supplier of Pakistan (Boni, 2019; Curtis, 2009; Faisal, 2020; Tkacik, 2011). Beijing has helped Pakistan attain self-sufficiency in defense and develop not only conventional weapons but also missile delivery systems and fighter jet planes like the JF-17 Thunder (Boni, 2019). Moreover, the two countries have cooperated in intelligence-sharing to fight terrorism (Joshi & Mukherjee, 2019) and conducted privileged joint antiterrorism exercises (Kabraji, 2012). In economic sphere, China is the top import and export partner of Pakistan today. Pakistan has the privilege to be the only South Asian state with Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and currency-exchange agreement with China along with US\$ 700 million investment in Orient Group (Siddique, 2014). The most promising and recent economic bond that has cemented the already solid ties is China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Ali, M. 2020; Hassan, 2020; Hussain, Khan, & Ayaz, 2021). Moreover, on diplomatic and political front, Islamabad and Beijing maintain strong ties.

The second group of scholars views Pakistan-China relations negatively holding the view that Pakistan and China share narrow interests and dubbed their ties based on fair-weather friendship (FWF) (Beckley, 2012; Faisal, 2020; Curtis, 2009; Curtis & Scissors, 2012; Kabraji, 2012; Pande, 2011; Rakisits 2012; Tkacik, 2011). They argue that China is an unaccommodating benefactor of Pakistan (Feigenbaum, 2011), and their ties are “fraught” (Kardon, 2011, p. 5) based on vested (Price, 2011), superficial and limited interests (Small, 2015). Kardon (2011, p. 4) and Rakisits (2012, p. 1) call the relationship “marriage of convenience”. Kemenade (2008) doubt the ties being an alliance. They cast reservations on the basis on China’s inability to assist Pakistan militarily always (Khan, 2022). Moreover, economically, China is accused of gaining more from Pakistan rather than the opposite, even from CPEC (Garlick, 2018). Scholars have cast doubts on the true potential, long-term potential and viable outcomes of the project (Faisal, 2020). They accuse that it is in response to China’s Malacca Dilemma and serves as one of the beads of strings of pearls (Reddy, 2016). Garver (2001, pp. 187-88) argues that Beijing’s ties with big powers like USA and USSR/Russia, and small states, for instance Albania, Vietnam, and North Korea have grown and latterly diminished; however with reference to Pakistan, the ties are extraordinarily robust.

China-USA relations

The opening up of Chinese economy late 1970s, the end of Cold War in late 1980s, and China’s gradual economic boom created its image as a competitor of American role in international economy and politics (Lixin, 2021). Since the dawn of 21st century, the ties between the two have gradually diverted towards competition and contending interests despite the global preference for interdependence (Khan, 2022). Both have their respective politico-economic interests that diverge on issues relating to Taiwan, South China Sea, Pakistan, India, Korea, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), trade imbalance, intellectual property, industrial espionage, debt-trap, and above all competition for influence in the global south (Khan, 2022). After the end of Cold War, regional hegemony was predicted to the global political norm. In this

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context, China has attempted to bring her charm to woo South Asia where Pakistan and India are important players (Khan, 2022). This took USA at the forefront to bring her influence in the region. South Asia, owing to its geostrategic importance, wealth of natural resources, major transport point connecting many parts of the world, and the important players in its periphery, invites attention of key global players who are capable of exerting their influence in the region. This justifies the involvement of USA and China in the affairs of South Asia and engages both India and Pakistan and creating what this study call a 'quadrangular conundrum'.

China-India relations

The two giants of Asian continent i.e. India and China have developed tense but cautious relations over the decades. Based on their respective conflicting border claims, the two neighboring states engaged in border war in 1962 and 2017. Both have gradually elevated themselves in terms of economic growth and political influence. Both Beijing and New Delhi consider South Asian region as their backyard, resultantly, they engage in a war for influence (Joshi & Mukherjee, 2019). Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Laos, Myanmar, and Iran are the major targets for exerting influence. China has succeeded in wooing Pakistan and has created a key alliance against India (Siddique, 2014). Moreover, Beijing has successfully developed strong ties with Sri Lanka, Laos, and Myanmar. India, on the other hand, has succeeded partly in keeping Iran, Nepal, and Maldives under its area of influence (Reddy, 2016). The economic elevation and political stature has incited competition between the two giants (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018).

In response to the initiation of CPEC, India has embarked upon by developing Chabahar Port in collaboration with Iran (Mukherjee, 2018). Pakistan's four wars with India, and India-China border dispute resulting in border wars has carved out a strategic triangle in South Asia, which is further exacerbated by the key role and continuous involvement of USA. This is what the current study calls as 'quadrangular conundrum', which invites scholarship to predict threats and opportunities in the post-2024 world.

India-USA Ties

India and the USA developed good partnership during the days of Cold War. India's insistence on non-aligned status allowed it to keep warm ties with both the Western and the Communist blocs. The post-Cold War period witnessed the warmth of Indo-American ties gradually in the face of India's strained relationship with Pakistan and China (Medeiros, 2019). As soon as China sought became the second biggest economy in the world, India started titling in favor of American influence, which ultimately developed into a partnership. The South Asian security triangle consisting of Pakistan, China, and India forced both India and the US to work together for diminishing Beijing's influence in the region (Medeiros, 2019). It also served as another large frontier to engage China apart from its encounters in East China Sea, South China Sea, and the global economic market. India and the US have collaborated on the global scene to counter Beijing's influence such as the Quad, comprising US, India, Japan, and Australia. The Quad works as a security partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. Both India and the US enjoy robust economic bond. Currently, the two countries enjoy cordial relationship, which is based on geostrategic considerations, aimed at countering Beijing's influence in

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South Asia and the Indo-Pacific regions.

Pakistan in regional and global politics

Pakistan's foreign policy, since her inception in 1947, has undergone multiple significant transformations in view of the contemporary global, regional and peripheral circumstances, geopolitical demands, and domestic situation. Rizvi (2004, pp. 10-21) has divided Pakistan's foreign policy into various periods. He calls the first phase 1947 – 1953 as “exploration and friendship with all”, the second phase between 1953 and 1962 as the one when Pakistan opted to align itself with the western bloc; third phase between 1962 and 1971 of “transition”; 1972 – 1979 as “bilateralism and non-alignment”; the period between 1980 and 1990 was dominated by Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the consequent rejuvenation of Pak-US ties; the period between 1990 and 2001 was marked by “post-Cold War era and Pakistan's dilemmas”. The first decade of the new century was overshadowed by 9/11 and the consequent WoT which Pakistan joined. The second decade witnessed the Sino-Pakistan ties taking a more concrete shape by more than \$ 60 billion Chinese investment in Pakistan and the initiation of CPEC, a part of BRI project (Hassan, 2020).

Projections of Quadrilateral Ties

The quadrangular relationship among the four key players involved in the political, economic, and security spheres in South Asia presents both great opportunities and colossal challenges for the globe and the region. The projections, keeping in view the past experiences, policies, and the current trend of the four actors i.e. Pakistan, India, China, and the USA, may be divided into two broad categories of prospects and constraints. The prospects segment suggests the development of healthy, positive growth of ties among them in economic, politico-diplomatic, and security spheres; while discussing restraints portrays the areas that might pose threat to the existing phenomena.

Prospects

Politics, whether domestic or international never allows hope to die. Despite the fact that the international system is anarchic and based on realist-oriented hard power, there are liberal-centered avenues of cooperation on all scales: bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral, and multilateral. The first and foremost is the status of South Asia as the nuclear flashpoint. The nuclear capability of India and Pakistan has been a cause of real concern not only for the region but also the entire globe. Though complex, the interplay among the four has resulted in the deterrence and avoidance of a major armed clash between India and Pakistan as well as India and China. The involvement of China and the USA has resulted in restraint and ensured that the region, despite its wealth and poverty, and nuclear capability of both Pakistan and India, experiences relative calm and order (Khan, 2022). It can be predicted that in near future there does not seem to be the threat of full-scale conflict between China and India or nuclear war between India and Pakistan. The ties, though strained, between Pakistan and India, and China and India, are likely to be either at the status quo or move towards improvements. The USA may also play important part in this probable détente.

What can be resolved through war, can be achieved through improved economic opportunities and better vistas. The liberal thought of knitting the world into globalization

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and interdependence has been partly effective. Another potential prospect for future of South Asia involving the four major players in economic development and interdependence. The more they are interdependent, the more they are likely to avoid confrontation, although they would engage in competition (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018). There are many vistas that can offer this opportunity, for instance CPEC that aims to offer connectivity and economic dynamism (Hussain et al., 2021; Xiguang, 2016). The technological wealth of the US, the workforce of China, the booming IT sector in India, and the agriculture and services sector in Pakistan are potential areas (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018).

International cooperation is another prospective agency that aims to bring about collaboration among state-actors. By virtue of organizations, such as BRICS, SCO, SAARC, and other forums, the actors can be engaged and encouraged to collaborate. These international fora provide a platform where states can engage in diplomatic connections, improve economic ties and resolve security-related issues through dialogue. It is predicted that the potential of BRICS and SCO, and the possibility of rejuvenation of SAARC, the possible future issues may be resolved through negotiation. The bilateral ties between Pakistan and China are expected to stay strong (Allauddin, Liu, & Ahmed, 2020).

The third prospective area may be public diplomacy. With the expansion of internet connectivity and rise of social media as a driving force, it can be predicted that in future, people may not be held back from major decisions. Moreover, the world of today is witnessing the growing and revolutionary power of people's voice through social media platforms. It is likely that people, the main stakeholders living in a state shall have a greater say in the affairs of the state, which is likely to avoid confrontational situation and might force the governments to engage in constructive dialogue (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018).

Constraints

This study suggest that the possible post-2024 scenario might bring in a number of constraints in the South Asian region. The four main players, despite the active role of interdependence and international cooperation, live in a realist world and their decades-long experience can teach them to be ready for conflict. The asymmetry in hard power capability between India and Pakistan, and US and China may lead the four actors to the path of conflict. The foremost constraint shall be the inability of the four key players to avoid conflict, conventional or nuclear. The close ties between China and Pakistan, and USA and India can trigger armed conflict in the region at point of time. The American policy of furthering ties with India and repulsing China on economic front, may cause confrontation in future (Lixin, 2021). Washington's preference for India over Pakistan in the recent years is only pushing Pakistan further towards China. This drastic policy shift may have negative implications. The border dispute between China and India, and Pakistan and India is likely to dominate the regional politics (Joshi & Mukherjee, 2019). China shall continue to look upon Pakistan being under its area of influence, while the USA would submit the same treatment to India.

While there is great potential for CPEC, a part of BRI, the project is viewed negatively by India and the USA (Gul et al., 2021). In future, despite the advantages of the project, there may be hurdles from New Delhi. In 2018, India took control of the Chabahar Port situated in Iran to compete with the Gwadar Port of Pakistan, a main hub for CPEC. The insurgency activities in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces of Pakistan are blamed on India. The

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Gwadar Port is in Baluchistan province, any law and order situation there is detrimental to CPEC. This may carve a negative picture of the South Asian landscape.

Moreover, while the social media and larger internet connectivity has enabled people to raise their voice without bothering to engage in any physical political participation. It has created the existing and much-abused fake-news, misinformation, and disinformation (Hauter, 2021). The same medium that can work wonders for bringing good governance, conflict-avoidance, and problem resolution through peaceful means, may also be used for opposite purposes of creating fake content, news, information that is capable to even initiate an armed conflict. In future, the social media may be used as a tool and weapon for proxy wars (Hauter, 2021).

Conclusion

In view of the geostrategic and politico-economic importance of the South Asian region, the quadrilateral ties among Pakistan, India, China, and the USA are of vital importance. This paper suggest that the strong Sino-Pakistan ties and growing Indo-US bond in the face of Sino-American economic rivalry and competition for regional influence are likely to leave their mark on the post-2024 scenario. There are both opportunities and challenges ahead. It is predicted that while the American influence on India and Chinese influence on Pakistan can deter the threat of war, the rivalry between the USA and China can further aggravate the situation in the region and the globe. The current paper suggests that international cooperation through existing institutions, for instance, BRICS, SCO, and SAARC, and interdependence may bring positive change in South Asia. The power of people's voices through social media may serve as a major tool to avoid armed conflict; however, at the same time, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation may yield the opposite disastrous outcome. This paper submits that divergence of interests and negative competition among the four key actors may also cause adverse consequences.

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