

COMMENT 247

China, the US, and South Asia's connectivity gap

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South Asia is considered as the least integrated and internally interconnected area in the world.¹ Moreover, it is a divided realm when it comes to contemporary, great-power geopolitics. On one side, the United States of America (US) has entered the fray with a strong message of democracy and multilateral security agreements. On the other side, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is persistently enlarging its economic leverage, taking advantage of geographic proximity. By pushing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an international development initiative, Beijing attempts to ensure its national interests, especially to expand its sphere of influence in the South Asian region and beyond ([Wolf, 2020](#)). The PRC's increasingly [aggressive postures](#) in the Himalayas, combined with a deconstructive meddling into both domestic and bilateral affairs of South Asian states makes regional cooperation an even more difficult task and creates new challenges for peace and stability in this troubled area. Thus numerous observers describe the regional intergovernmental organization South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as '[dead](#)'. In consequence, South Asia once more stands at a crossroad. Having this in mind, one needs to ask what for the future holds for South Asia – considering the influence of China and the US? In order to approach this puzzle, one needs to recall some of the reasons why the above-outlined scenario could emerge.

To begin with, South Asia is featured by multi-dimensional asymmetries. India is not only the largest country but also the most central. This geographical Indo-

¹ This comment is based on a statement given by the author during a plenary session (8 + 2 TenT: the South Asian States, China and USA) at the [Bay of Bengal Conversation](#) on November 22, 2022, in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

centricity is accompanied by significant political and economic power asymmetries in the region. Additionally, regional integration is also hampered by domestic asymmetries. Each country in South Asia contains large areas known for being remote and underdeveloped. These geographical facts cannot be changed, yet one needs to navigate through the obstacles. When referring to Bangladesh's geographical location, Ali Riaz, Professor at the Illinois State University (US), noted the need to change perspective.² Instead of seeing Bangladesh as a state which 'is not surrounded by India', the country must be seen through the 'prism of the Bay of Bengal' – and the consequent opportunities must be identified. Of course, this is not true of all South Asian countries, especially not for landlocked countries Nepal and Bhutan, yet it stresses the fact that one needs to discover new venues for regional cooperation in South Asia.

The second major flashpoint concerns problematic bilateral relations. South Asia is perhaps the region with the highest level of inter- and intra-state conflicts in the world. However, it is crucial to understand that not all these conflicts are a result of the colonial past, and not tensions during the last decades were inflicted by non-regional powers. Some problems for regional cooperation are of indigenous origin, or "home-made". Most remarkable in this context is the phenomenon of the state-sponsorship of cross-border terrorism, as significant instrument in Pakistan's foreign policy ([Wolf, 2017](#)).

Unfortunate trajectories (the "burden of history") are another challenge for regional cooperation. The most dramatic example is the international context of the Bangladesh Liberation War, especially the unfortunate role of both the US and the PRC. More concretely, both Washington and Beijing continue to [ignore](#) the [genocide](#) conducted by West Pakistani occupying forces against the Bengali people. The then US administration of President Richard Nixon (advised by Henry Kissinger) wanted to [establish relations with the PRC](#), yet it faced a major problem. Even though China under Mao Zedong was also ready to open-up towards Washington - because it was confronted with a potential Soviet military aggression - the US had no direct access to the Chinese leadership at that time. This brought

² During a Speed Talk (Bangladesh-India Relations: Too Close for Comfort?) given by Dr. Ali Riaz at the [Bay of Bengal Conversation](#) on November 22, 2022, in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

(West) Pakistan into the picture. With the help of Islamabad and the strong support of the Pakistani military, a secret liaison between Washington and Beijing was facilitated. From today's perspective it sounds ironic but Mao's China was seen as an '[ally of convenience](#)' to secure US interests in South Asia (especially as regarded containing Soviet influence and avoiding Indian hegemony), and [Pakistan was identified](#) as the only possible conduit for achieving such goal. Obviously, the freedom struggle of the Bengali people was perceived as a threat to US interests. The fact that this US-policy was deeply embedded in a remarkable [antipathy](#) by the "Nixon-Kissinger duo" towards Indians in general and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in particular initiated another unfortunate development, the emergence of closer relations between New Delhi and Moscow. Until today, the constellation of international relations involving non-regional powers making ties between South Asian states, foremost India and Pakistan, is complex indeed.

There is a lack of sensitivity and "unbiased knowledge" in Washington as regards security and other national concerns of South Asian states. The latter is linked with a phenomenon which can be called '[Western Irrationality](#)' towards South Asia. The distortion between proclaimed policies and their concrete implementation by the current administration of President Joe Biden in the context of the *National Defense Strategy 2022 of the United States of America* is most noteworthy. The paper [stresses](#) the significance of India for national defense strategies in the Indo-Pacific region and states: 'The department will advance our Major Defence Partnership with India to enhance its ability to deter PRC aggression and ensure free and open access to the Indian Ocean region.' Yet the actual measures taken by US authorities are quite different. Instead of improving New Delhi's 'ability to deter PRC aggression', Washington continues to provide significant aid to India's arch enemy Pakistan, who over the years became Beijing's most crucial ally in Asia. One of the latest examples is the granting of a major [security assistance package](#) for the sustenance of Pakistan Air Force's F-16 fighter jet programme. The US also [delivered](#) new state-of-the-art radar systems (TPS-77 MRR). Interestingly, US radar systems were deployed just a few months after the IAF [completed](#) (in April 2021) its first squadron of the French Dassault Rafale multirole fighter aircraft. At the same time, Beijing not only [sent modern-radar systems](#) (YLC-18A) but also extended its cooperation with the Pakistani Air Forces, including the delivery and

joint development programs of new weapon systems. According to expert Michael Rubin, this US policy is not only ‘[bizarre](#)’ – it is ‘[foolish](#)’ as well, since ‘[Pakistan has repeatedly allowed China to access U.S. technology so that Chinese firms can reverse-engineer it.](#)’

Consequently, the US is helping China to build-up Pakistan’s military capabilities, which are obviously used to threaten India (and not as proclaimed to serve counterterrorism purposes) and undermine New Delhi’s security interests. The above-mentioned US “[defense paper](#)” also states that ‘The Department will support Ally and partner efforts, [...] to address acute forms of gray zone coercion from the PRC’s campaigns to establish control over [...] disputed land borders such as with India’. Also here, the facts on the ground are highlighting the inconsistencies in Washington’s approach towards South Asia. More concretely, U.S. Ambassador Donald Blome [visited](#) Pakistan-Administered (occupied from the Indian perspective) Kashmir (Azad Jammu and Kashmir/AJK). The visit of a US envoy in a disputed territory was [instrumentalized](#) by Islamabad as a statement of support. One must expect Beijing to do the same for areas of Kashmir its [illegally sized](#), namely Aksai Chin and Shaksgam valley.

In sum, one can state that there are several push-and-pull factors linked to the role of the US and the PRC in South Asia which are hampering regional integration. To start bridging the severe connectivity gap, one needs new platforms for dialogue and interaction. Yet they must be based on certain conditions: Firstly, non-regional powers need to respect that South Asian states will develop their own approaches towards global challenges. Secondly, the US needs to learn the lessons from the past and adapt not only its policies but also concrete political actions accordingly. Thirdly, South Asian states must break with deconstructive patterns of the past. Fourthly, there is an urgent need for a constructive dialogue without the “usual blame game” used to discredit neighbours in international forums. Finally, both the US and India, as well as other like-minded democratic South Asian partners, must find a common ground to face the growing Chinese challenge. Otherwise, regional cooperation becomes more difficult – and an “Asian Ukraine scenario” becomes even more likely!

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