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## The 'India Factor' and the Future Security Landscape in South Asia: Conflict, Competition, or Cooperation?

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### Abstract

*Pakistan's inception in 1947 coincided with the advent of an immediate and proximate threat from India resulting in a war on Kashmir, another war in 1965, the 1971 War that caused secession of Pakistan, and an armed clash in 1999. These substantial adverse developments have created what scholars call 'India factor' in the foreign and security policies of Pakistan. This paper aims to answer the question about whether the 'India factor' would continue to dominate the future bilateral and regional security landscape. The paper starts with an overview of the causes of the genesis of this factor, borrows theoretical insights from classical realism, and traces the historical development of this factor. The next main parts discuss the current state of affairs with respect to 'India factor' and submit future predictions. This paper argues that in the light of theoretical guidelines there are three likely key areas that would dominate the bilateral and multilateral ties of Pakistan i.e. a possible conflict, a probable competition between Islamabad and New Delhi, and a narrow possibility of cooperation.*

### Keywords

India, Pakistan, Foreign Policy, Security

### Introduction

The rise of two-faceted Asia has been at the forefront of global politics in terms of both security and economy (Feigenbaum & Manning, 2012). There has been struggle for supremacy by the great, regional, and rising powers for centuries to control the region in the shape of Opium Wars, Korean War, Vietnam War, and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Gulf Wars, and the current crises in Syria, Yemen, and Palestine. However, the region has defied these attempts and has consequently become a battleground for contending parties like the USA, Russia, Europe, and China (Bajpai & Parashar, 2020). Since the contending parties mostly engaged themselves in West and South Asia, the impact of the power-struggle is most visible in these sub-regions. In South Asia, apart from the traditional players such as the USA, Russia, and China, the economic growth of India has given her a special status. Based on the fact that India is a rival to its Pakistan neighbor, the advancement of India in its stature albeit her population and size, and geostrategic position has caused concern among the Pakistani policymakers. Because the ties between Pakistan and India are under severe tension, the threat that Pakistan has been receiving from India is asymmetric creating indispensable 'Indian factor' in its foreign and security policies.

India as an 'elephant' within the South Asian region carries a history of bellicosity, intimidation, meddling in internal affairs, and military interventions to her neighbors, and aims to show off her military might (Gill, 2020). Buzan and Waever (2003) contend that the sheer extent of its populace, its mammoth territorial property, economic development, and military strength have

disadvantaged the neighboring South Asian states and have rendered India to look upon itself as a regional hegemon especially with reference to Pakistan. The very structure of the current South Asian regional security complex suggests that Pakistan finds it quite difficult to ignore its larger neighbor (Malik, 2019).

### **Theoretical insights**

Humans shall continue to live in a constructivist environment with realist goals and objectives in our minds to be realized via liberalist tools. The history and development of IR would be incomplete and void without the outstanding influence and contribution exerted by realism with classical realism to be at the topmost layer – exceptionally lauded and widely criticized at the same time. Realism has dominated the discipline of IR for decades and still holds its prestige. It has managed to uphold its decent position as a central, if not most dominant, concept today (Acharya, 2008).

Classical realism dictates power to be at its foundation based on the negative Hobbesian perception of human nature. Power which is amassed, preserved and exercised for the sake of state-interest identified as national defense and materialized in the shape of physical capacities, sits at the centre of global politics (Morgenthau, 1948). “For realists, international politics is synonymous with power politics” (Mearsheimer, 2013, p. 77). This power-maximization mentality puts clash in the terrain of possibility and cooperation in the field of impossibility (Acharya, 2008) because classical realists like Morgenthau likened states with humans in their instinctive wish for domination of others thereby setting a ground for conflicts (Walt, 1998).

Neorealism, another close facet of classical realism suggests that states can engage in conflict and competition (Sridharan, 2020). For neorealist advocates, like its pioneer, Waltz, the structure occupies the prime role in the global system, which ultimately defines the relations between or among states in the domain of cooperation or conflict fading the role of humans (Mearsheimer, 2013). They argue that it is the incumbent upon states to balance against their perceived enemies because of the anarchic nature of global system and suggest that regardless of individual differences among states in terms of their political system and domestic conditions, they all function similarly (Walt, 1998).

Another third mainstream theory explaining international relations is liberalism that supports cooperation between and among nations (Walt, 1998). Liberalists regard global political economy as the main driving force in the international system (Acharya, 2008). The cornerstone of the classical form of liberalism can be found in three major developments in the globe: Growing popularity of democracy throughout the globe with oft-quoted democratic peace thesis, globalization or economic interdependence and the spread of IGOs along with the fashion in which these trio key developments collaborate and strengthen each other; and how they generate a bundle of norms and principles that endeavor at minimizing the occurrence of armed clash (Acharya, 2008).

### **The India factor**

Scholars have widely discussed about the dominant ‘India factor’ in Pakistani foreign and security policies (Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017; Lieven, 2002; Pande, A., 2011; Pardesi, 2018; Sareen, 1984; Shafqat, 2009). The initial armed conflict on the status of the State of Kashmir created alarm about the bigger neighbor and subsequently shaped what is appropriately termed as India factor with reference to the Pakistani external and security policies. The closeness between China and Pakistan in early 1960s was based on the premise i.e. India factor applicable to both China and Pakistan (Jacob, 2015).

India’s high-handedness can be inferred from its four military engagements with Pakistan in 1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999; a border war with China in 1962; military interventions in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971, in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990 and in Myanmar in 2015; border skirmishes with China in 1967 and 2017, with Bangladesh in 2001, with Pakistan almost on daily scale; and military standoffs with Pakistan in the mid-1980s and 2001-2002. New Delhi is alleged to have intervened in the electoral process of its small neighboring states, such as Bhutan Nepal and using unfair means to gain support for pro-New Delhi parties (Dixit, 2016). Generally, Indian government has opted for a policy based on assertiveness and hegemony in the South Asian region. More narrowly, the Indo-Pakistan conflict is called one the most over-extended in 21<sup>st</sup> century (Michael 2018). Despite sharing many historical and cultural similarities, both Islamabad and New Delhi are at odds ideologically leading them towards opposite claims on territory and divergent paths (Haider, 2021). Pakistan has this populist narrative about India that New Delhi is an expansionist and hegemonic country (Nicolson, 2022) creating ‘India factor’ in its policymaking bible (Pande, A., 2011).

There are multiple factors that have reinforced the Pakistani apprehensions on India factor from 1947 to 1971: Indian politicians’ extreme views about Pakistan, the notion of *Akhand Bharat* (Greater India), the first Indo-Pakistan War 1947-48, and the obstacles created by India during the early years i.e. asset-distribution, water-distribution etc., the 1965 War, and ultimately the 1971 War (Rajagopalan, 2017). This tense relationship and these problems which were partly based on historical legacy, the centuries old lack of homogenization and the concurrent bloody partition left ineradicable marks of the future course of Pakistan’s foreign relations and created antagonism and mistrust in the ties between the two neighbors (Malik, 2019). One of the many effects of the partition of British India was insecurity; and as a result, Pakistan’s external and security policies have been considerably engrossed with that insecurity that is centered on India (Lavoy, 2006).

The Indo-China border war in 1962 and the divorce from the US ally, improved relations between Washington and New Delhi, and the shifting regional geopolitical situation compelled Islamabad to embrace a changed and tangible path to release itself from the pressure coming through the India factor. The India factor has been the foundational ground for the Sino-Pakistan ties (Zeb, 2011). A significant majority of the scholars dealing with Sino-Pakistan ties agree that the turning point in the Sino-Pakistan ties was the 1962 Indo-China border war (Shukla, 2020).

Among other determinants, the India factor also pressed Pakistani policymakers to forge good relations with USA also. USA remained attentive to Pakistan’s concern regarding India as long as it had its vested interests linked to Pakistan; at other instances, Pakistani decision-makers faced betrayal from its US counterparts. US even forged improved ties with India based on latter’s stature, democratic values, and greater economic potential (Ghort, 2021).

India and Pakistan were born as enemies to each other in 1947. The newly established Indian State did not like the appearance of Pakistan as separate country (Arshad, 2019). The scale of two neighbors’ enmity has been very high to the level that they have engaged in multiple wars. This situation may be observed through the realist lens where there exist distrust, uncertainty, and lack of commitment to resolve fundamental problems between the two countries (Shukla, 2020). Quoting the statement of the Defense Secretary of India speaking before Defense Standing Committee in 2014, a recent Brookings Institution project report maintains that domination of Pakistan remains the main security approach of New Delhi (Robert Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017).

The uneven balance between India and Pakistan, based on area, populace, economic potential and growth (Shukla, 2020), military power and defense-expenditure (Robert Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017), forces the Pakistani policymakers to engage in a pragmatic approach or a policy based on the premises of the realist theory of IR. Pakistani state has been facing a pentagonal direct threat from India: 1) conventional war, 2) limited clash or proxy terrorist actions, 3) nuclear war, 4) sabotage activities, 5) “cyber and space-based threat” (Ali, 2017, p. 36). Simultaneously, Pakistan also faces a number of indirect Indian threats: India’s growing ties with Afghanistan, her increasing defense ties with Iran and Japan, and “the nuclearization of the Indian Ocean” (Robert Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017, p. 8), and Indo-American closer contacts following the American policy of pivot to Asia. As a result, Pakistani policymakers have been compelled by the geostrategic inevitabilities to regard as India as a threat.

“Pakistan's historical roots, experience in losing Bangladesh and losing three wars to India, and fear of internal separatism tend to create feelings of insecurity” (Fuller, 1991, pp. VIII-IX). Since inception, the Pakistani leaders have viewed the “regional environment through a realist lens albeit with an ideological tint. It was an anarchical Hobbesian world wherein Pakistan envisioned a mortal threat from its larger neighbor, India... [and this view has] reinforced the ideological rationale for Pakistan’s security concerns” (Pande, 2011, p. 2) with “India [as] the chief strategic antagonist to Pakistan... [forcing her external policy rotating] primarily around the issue of defense and security vis-à-vis India” (Fuller, 1991, pp. 28-29).

The Pakistani fears vis-à-vis India were not baseless or void of common wisdom. “Right from day one as an independent state, Pakistan perceived itself as a state under severe threat from India – and evidently India acknowledged Pakistan’s sovereignty quite grudgingly” (Abbas, 2009, p. 12). The policymakers in Pakistan were sure “that those who ruled in New Delhi had not resigned themselves to Partition and craved for what the Hindu nationalists called *Akhand Bharat*—a (re)unified India” (Pande, 2011, p. 29). This tense relationship and these problems which were partly based on historical legacy, the centuries old lack of homogenization and the concurrent bloody partition left ineradicable

marks of the future course of Pakistan's foreign relations and created antagonism and mistrust in the ties between the two neighbors (Rizvi, 2004, p. 10). The very fear of Pakistani policymakers were in no doubt "that those who ruled in New Delhi had not resigned themselves to Partition and craved for what the Hindu nationalists called Akhand Bharat" (Pande, 2011, p. 29). One of the many effects of the partition of British India was insecurity; and as a result, Pakistan's external and security policies have been considerably concerned with that insecurity that is centered on India (Lavoy, 2006). Moreover, "India's active support for the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 reinforced Pakistan's view that New Delhi aspires to re-unify the Indian empire under its control, or at least reduce Pakistan to a position of weakness and subservience" (Lavoy, 2006, p. 9). Defense Threat Reduction Agency report suggests that the civil and military elites in Pakistan are unanimous to oppose "Indian hegemony as a basis for a peaceful and durable regional order (Lavoy, 2006). After gaining independence, the Pakistani elites have treasured their hard-won sovereignty and resisted every Indian effort to curtail their freedom of action" (Lavoy, 2006, p. 12). There can be no doubt that the secession of East Pakistan in 1971, although consequent of the domestic tensions, was greatly assisted by the Indian military intervention; as a result, "Pakistan's fear of India drives its domestic as well as foreign policies and was responsible for provoking Pakistan's pursuance of nuclear weapons" (Abbas, 2009, p. 14) and the consequent continual search for a balanced against Indian hegemonic designs.

Pakistan also accuses the Indian government of latter's anti-Pakistan stance that involves continuing accusation of Pakistan by the Indian government on a number of pretexts. In recent decades, whenever there has been a high-profile terrorist attack on Indian soil, the Indian Government is swift to blame Pakistan and its establishments of cooperating and assisting resulting in the strained relations (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015, p. 5). The New Delhi Parliament terrorist attack in 2001 supplied pretext to the Indian Government to create border tensions against Pakistan: the military standoff in 2001-2002. Subsequently, the 2008 Mumbai attacks provided reason for New Delhi to introduce a new military strategy called Cold Start which is a clear sign of Indian hegemonic and threatening designs in South Asia especially targeted at Pakistan. The strategy entails a swift low-scale army and air force coordinated multiple-front Indian invasion of Pakistani border territories as a reaction to alleged terrorist activities aimed at capturing some Pakistani border areas and pressing Pakistan to succumb to Indian terms before any international mediation attempt for defusing tensions (Rajagopalan, 2017). This highlights the multidimensional character of India's construction of Pakistan as a rival or enemy state.

A track 1.5 dialogues organized by a German political foundation, inviting views of political, defense, economic, media and social elites from India and Pakistan found Pakistani intelligentsia participants raising the issue of Indian intervention in Baluchistan and alleged assistance and involvement of Indian state agencies in the anti-state activities on Pakistani soil (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015). The culmination of unbridgeable trust gap has brought about what is regularly dubbed as the India factor in defense and economic policies of Pakistan. The shadow of this threat affects Pakistan's foreign and defense policies (Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017; Nicolson, 2022; Pande, S., 2017; Shukla, 2020).

Some writes have blamed the Pakistani ruling elites and politicians for demonizing India (Haqqani, 2005) but almost everywhere else in the world, the perceived threat is dealt with a similar fashion. Reagan's remarks about Soviet Union as evil empire, G. W. Bush's dubbing of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the axis of evil, Iran's dubbing of the USA as the "great Satan", North Korean and American leaders' tirades against each other are a few of examples of how states portray their perceived threats. American stances on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, human rights violation, suppression of people's rights are a few instances that how states portray and justify their policies. Pakistan cannot be exception to this. India is portrayed as a threat based on historical instances and the perception of Pakistani elite as well as people.

#### **Current Status of Perception about India Factor**

The year 2024 has brought a combination of good and bad news in terms of regional security scenario. The 2024 elections in Pakistan and India, toppling of Shaikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh, the new pro-China government in Maldives, unprecedented violence in Palestine, the direct armed engagement between Israel and Iran, pursuit of modernism in Saudi Arabia, continuation of civil wars in Yemen and Syria, instability in Iraq, the consolidation of power by Taliban in Afghanistan, continuation of violence in Jammu and Kashmir, and sabotage activities inside Pakistan

carried out by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Baluch separatists and other non-state actors allegedly aided by state actors have changed the regional security scenario. Moreover, the growing economic war between China and the USA is sending shock waves to the other Asian economies. On the positive side, there are some indications that reflect a rather peaceful forthcoming encounter between Islamabad and New Delhi. The issuance of visas to Sikh pilgrims, release of fishermen, and no occurrence of any border skirmish since 2023 may portray a positive picture of the existing bilateral affairs (Bukhari & Abbas 2024).

### **Future Predictions**

This "India obsession" as Lieven (2002) calls it, the fear and "[t]he Pakistani self-perception as the victim of Hindu domination led to the mother of all 'trust deficits'...there is nothing that Pakistan can do to normalize the relationship" (Cohen, 2011, p. 19) on account of the unreliable Indian attitude which the latter had proven many a time (Pande, A., 2011). Scholars have predicted the high likelihood of the continuation of the India factor in shaping Pakistan's the prospective external and defense strategies bilaterally and multilaterally. In the post 2024, in the backdrop of the non-resolution of Kashmir issue and alleged continuing proxy wars between India and Pakistan, both states are likely to take a cautious stance (Ali, 2017). The future possibilities of the "India factor" in Pakistan's security and foreign policies is structured by various complex and competing elements. Gokhale (2021) debates that the Indo-Pakistan relationship would entail four probable passages i.e. armed clash, security coexistence, positively-oriented competition, or co-operation. There would be several possible scenarios in India and Pakistan relations in future which could be based on 3-Cs i.e. conflict, competition and it could potentially be cooperation with each other.

### **Conflict**

In the light of classical realism, power which is amassed, preserved and exercised for the sake of state-interest identified as national defense and materialized in the shape of physical capacities, sits at the centre of global politics (Morgenthau, 1948). Advocates of realism consider global politics and power politics as identical (Mearsheimer, 2013). In this respect, India and Pakistan have been rivals since 1947 while the fundamental cause of their rivalry, called Kashmir issue, still remain unresolved. It is the main reason that would remain central in security and foreign policies of Pakistan. Both nations have not compromised with diplomatic stalemates on Kashmir. After fighting four wars and engaging in countless military standoffs, the neorealist thought does suggest that both would continue to keep themselves on the same track. Under the pressing economic and diplomatic circumstances, and the volatile nature of South and West Asia, India and Pakistan would likely stay on rivalry path (Sridharan, 2020).

Moreover, India's concentration on enhancing its military power and Pakistan's preparation on defense investments and strategic alliances indicate a security-focused stance (Shukla, 2020). Based on the dictates of classical realism, this power-maximization mentality puts clash in the terrain of possibility and cooperation in the field of impossibility (Acharya, 2008). The key cause of any future conflict between the two nuclear giants would be based on non-resolution of territorial disputes (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018). Continual issues since inception including Kashmir conflict, border and water resources disputes may enable episodes of conflict and tensions likely to continue between two nations in near future (Pardesi, 2018). The alleged involvement of non-state actors in the Indo-Pakistan rivalry has the potential to force the two neighbors to embark upon the policy of continuation. Moreover, the hawks sitting in the decision-making corners may also affect any likely change in the existing policy.

### **Competition**

Both India and Pakistan seek to bolster influence on regional and global diplomatic, political, cultural, and economic affairs through strategic competition (Farid, 2021). India's counterweight to China's influence in South Asia with its 'Act East' policy and close ties with USA and other Quad countries, India's growing economic stature, Prime Minister Modi's forceful policy of wooing various economic partners have forced Pakistan to adopt a course that is fruitful to it (Bukhari & Abbas, 2024). In response to these developments, Pakistan has strengthened its strategic ties with China through projects like CPEC to build economic resilience and counter the regional influence of India (Briskey, 2022). Pakistan is also strengthening ties with Russia which creates a multipolar competition where both countries secure their interests by engaging with other regional powers. This scenario can compel

both the rival states to focus primarily on their economic interests and deviate from the path of any armed clash.

The foreign and security Policies of Pakistan will continue to be influenced by India factor, which results in a future of both countries with a blend of competition and selective cooperation. The non-resolution of Kashmir issue might be the reason of continuity in rivalry between the two countries that would potentially divert the cooperation towards competition or conflict.

### **Cooperation**

Although neorealism does not observe much potential for cooperation in the international system, the liberal theory is optimistic about it and sees huge potential for cooperation (Mearsheimer, 2013). Liberalists regard global political economy as the main driving force in the international system (Acharya, 2008). Despite the deep-rooted rivalry of both countries, there are some prominent opportunities for cooperation on non-traditional security issues specially climate change, trade, poverty, and health crises. Both India and Pakistan face climate induced challenges like risks of water crisis and natural disasters. It could encourage cross-border cooperation. SAARC offers frameworks for dialogue on these issues, and both countries could engage in confidence-building measures to strengthen stability. If both countries improve bilateral trade in specific sectors, like pharmaceuticals and agriculture, it could be beneficial from economic perspective for both states (Bukhari & Abbas, 2024). There are other possible avenues where regional organizations can pave way for greater cooperation Ahmed et al. (2019) argue that the membership of both India and Pakistan in Shanghai Cooperation Organization can serve as means to strengthening positive cooperation. Another possible avenue would be South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

### **Conclusion**

The occurrence of substantial adverse developments between the two neighboring states of Pakistan and India have created what scholars call 'India factor' in the foreign and security policies of Pakistan. This factor has affected the bilateral and multilateral relations of Pakistan significantly. Keeping in view the distrustful historical legacy and antagonistic developments, the 'Indian factor' is likely to dominate Pakistan's foreign and security ties in future. The India factor will continue to occupy pivotal role in shaping Pakistan's future foreign and security policies (Cohen, 2011). However, a fair assessment, based on classical realist dictates, may suggest that there are three possible avenues, though opposing, might take shape in the form of conflict – continuation of the status quo – where Pakistan would continue looking upon India as an existential threat.

Scholars have identified that India and Pakistan may engage with a blend of competition and selective cooperation. This probability of meaningful cooperation will depend on regional stability and de-escalation efforts for domestic political shifts. It is worthwhile to state that the non-resolution of Kashmir issue would still be the main cause of continuity of conflict. Based on the assumptions of neorealism, the second possible arena would be of competition where both Pakistan and India might engage in their quest for supremacy in South Asian region. The third possible scenario, founded on liberalist ideals, is that of cooperation where both nuclear states might cooperate in terms of economic growth, environmental protection, anti-terrorism, poverty alleviation, and interfaith harmony by virtue of bilateral or multilateral ventures through SCO, SAARC, UN and so forth.

The paper suggest that both Islamabad and New Delhi should engage in confidence-building measures, embrace an approach aimed at normalizing diplomatic ties and restart trade relations. Both should aim to resolve the fundamental issue of Jammu and Kashmir in an amicable manner. Any abetting or assistance to the non-state actors and any attempt for proxy wars should be stopped. It is only through peaceful means that the region of South Asia can become a potential ground for development. Any attempt for armed clash between Pakistan and India may trigger a larger war and might lead to nuclear conflict.

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