



From Conventional Triumphs to Power Asymmetry: The Changing Contours of Indo-Pak dynamics

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Abstract: A long history marred with conflict and confrontations marks the intricate and multifaceted relationship that is shared between India and Pakistan, which engenders, as well as endangers, the decrepit balance of power in the South Asian region. The research paper delves into the delicate role of Pakistan's geostrategic importance for external actors and its transient nature in South Asia, evaluating defence spending and India's efforts to modernize its military prowess. The research focuses on the fleeting nature of the relationship that is shared by the two countries, going from arming themselves to the teeth in the midst of power disparity to the difficulties that arise from it. The study also focuses on the application of proxies as an asymmetric method to overcome the need to avoid conflict and escalations in contemporary times. The research paper also examines whether India's bid for military modernization is solely aimed at Pakistan and would lead to yet another arms race between the two nations or is a result of another factor pushing New Delhi to recheck its military calibrations.

Keywords: Balance of Power, Defence, Proxies, Modernisation, South Asia, Arms Race, Security Dilemma.

Introduction:

Ever since gaining independence from colonial rule under the British Raj and the subsequent partition that led to the creation of India and Pakistan, the two nuclear powers of South Asia have been locked in a series of confrontations and rivalry. The rivalry between India and Pakistan has found its expression over the contentious territory of Kashmir (see Haqqani, 2005). Both countries view each other as a security threat; festering mutual suspicion has led to a security dilemma and arms race (see Amir-ud-Din et al., 2020), which prompts each state to fortify its defence capabilities. This has led to strong security apprehensions, binding the two countries to a spiral of reactions to one another's actions, which leads to arms buildup between the countries involved.

Complicating India's security calculations is China's relationship with the former and the ongoing rivalry between the two countries at regional as well as international level, which stems from the fact that the two countries are the emerging economic engines of the world, providing workforce and technology in significant numbers. India and China share their ambition to have unchallenged supremacy in the region, thus amplifying the competition between the two countries (see Fazli et al., 2022).

The article is divided into four parts. The first part discusses the historical and evolving relationship between India and Pakistan, which originated from a shared past but was marred by conflicts. The second part deals with the geostrategic importance of Pakistan for external actors and its fleeting nature marked by the alignment with the U.S during the Cold War to the diminished ties with the U.S after its exit from Afghanistan to finding new vigour in its ties with China. The third part deals with defence spending, its evaluations, with major focus being on India. The fourth part deals with the asymmetric challenges that are brought into action by power disparities between the two nations.

Mapping Indo-Pak relations:

The two nations came into being from a single piece of land, culture, and colonial rule and continued on their own independent paths for national identity. The rivalry between the two nations came from the scepticism that was borne out of Jinnah's apprehensions regarding the future condition of Muslims in a Hindu majority state after the end of the British Raj and furthering this scepticism and fuelling this concern was Independent India's delay in transferring the share of assets to the Pakistani state after the independence from common colonial rule (see Haqqani, 2005a). The two nations, which were born out of the same homeland, had their fall out with each other which started over the issue of Kashmir which largely remains the key reason for the animosity between Islamabad and New Delhi.

Since 1947, the two nations have come a long way from where they started and had fought with each other on occasions in 1948-49, 1965, 1971, and 1999, as well as countless border skirmishes and clashes over the period. The creation of Bangladesh as a free and independent country from Pakistan after the war in 1971 ushered in a new phase of relationship between the two countries. The loss of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) at the hands of India was a traumatic event for the newly born nation, as Pakistan lost a considerable amount of land and economy (see Haqqani, 2005a). The defeat at the hands of the Indian side fuelled the animosity between the two nations, and the nuclear tests conducted by India in 1974, which were the results of the threat posed by China's nuclear capabilities (see India's Nuclear Tests: Sino-Indian Mutual Concerns, n.d.), increased the fault in the Indo-Pak relations. The politicisation of Islam in Pakistan undertaken during Bhutto and then furthered by Zia-ul-Haq's tenure as a means of common national identity and the freehand given to the Muslim clergy and Jihadists after 1979 by Zia-ul-Haq (see Haqqani, 2005b) gave rise to the terrorist organisations aimed at causing instability in India and all over the world which operate today (see Khan, 2005).

The two South Asian countries went on to arm themselves against each other from the very year of their inception as free and independent countries. India and Pakistan became nuclear armed in May 1998, and soon the two countries went on with their preparations for nuclear warfare which seemed imminent at that time as both countries fought each other in the Kargil War (see Haqqani, 2005a). Prior to the late 1990s, during which India and Pakistan showcased their nuclear prowess and entered the selective group of countries that have military nuclear capabilities, the two countries relied on conventional deterrence against each other, which remained one of the key military strategies even after the advent of nuclear warheads in South Asia (see Ladwig, 2015). However, India's bid for military modernisation and the subsequent change in conventional deterrence between the two nations led to the induction of tactical nuclear warheads by Pakistan to overcome and win against any conventional military advantage that India might have had in the form of what is termed as cold start or limited war doctrine which came after the failure of operation Parakram to surprise the Pakistani side (see Jalil, 2017). However, it is argued that the India's bid for military modernisation was more focused on replenishing of the stockpiles, ammunition, and obsolete military hardware (see Ladwig, 2015) rather than changing the status quo.

The relations between the two countries stooped to new lows after the notorious 2008 (see Fernandes, n.d.) terrorist attacks in Mumbai, also known as 26/11, the Indian equivalent to 9/11 in the US. The terrorist attack undertaken by Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a terrorist organisation (see Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), n.d.) carried out the attack. However, India refrained from launching an attack against Pakistan as it lacked just military options at that time (see Riedel, 2009). The Uri (see India Today, 2022) and the Pulwama (see Times of India, n.d.) attacks on Indian territory by terrorist organisations operating from within Pakistan, however, showcased the strength of the Indian side to retaliate against such attacks. The inability of the Pakistani side to retaliate against the airstrikes on PoK (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir) became a watershed moment in Indo-Pak relations.

Pakistan's Geostrategic Importance: The Changing Landscape

Geographic allocations of a nation bring about some room to manoeuvre in accordance with its national interests. Thus, the location of a state matters in deciding its future in a time when the international system is governed by strategic partnership. The same can be said for Pakistan, as it has gateways to other regions like Central Asian Republics and West Asia. In the north, it leads towards China and to its eastern neighbour India, making it an important player in regional politics. Pakistan has benefited with its geographic positioning, where it was used by the British and the US to counter the growing sphere of influence of the then USSR during the Cold War (see Khan, 2005). Pakistan's presence in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation and the Central Treaty Organisation was boosted by the country's geographic location, which served the interests of the US during the Cold War era. The inclusion of Pakistan in SEATO and CENTO also proved to be of benefit to the country's military outlook, which came from the overlords who sat across the Atlantic ocean (see JABEEN & MAZHAR, 2011). The subsequent signing of bilateral agreements between the US and Pakistan in 1959 aimed at providing military assistance to the country (see "PAKISTAN AND THE MILITARY ALLIANCES: DOCUMENTS," 1967). Pakistan left SEATO in 1972 when the US left the country high and dry because it hesitated to provide full support to Pakistan during the 1965 conflict and 1971 war with India.

However, the geostrategic significance of a country changes in accordance with the changes in international politics and with the shift in the temporal interests of a state. In contemporary times, the geopolitical importance of Pakistan has waned for the US after its exit from Afghanistan (see The Hindu, 2021). US's presence in Afghanistan came after the notorious 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the US's war against global terrorism. Pakistan's geostrategic location prompted the US to reinvigorate its bilateral relations with Pakistan. Located on the eastern borders of Afghanistan, Pakistan provided logistical support to the US during its conquest to end terrorism from the world (Riedel, 2010). Pakistan's waning geostrategic importance for the US also stems from the rise of India because of its strategic position in the South Asian region, and at the international level as the US's geopolitical as well as geostrategic interests now lies with India for keeping a check on growing Chinese sphere of influence which overall threatens the dominance of US as the world leader.

India's bid for the global isolation of Pakistan in the international community due to its continued support for providing a haven to terror outfits that threatens the security of India also dampens the geostrategic importance of Pakistan for the US, which came after the terror attack in Uri that claimed the lives of Indian soldiers (see Neelakantan, 2016). The growing strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi rallied by their national interests and Pakistan's internal political turmoil (see Alan Kronstadt, 2023) as well as Islamabad's failure to deliver on the Afghan issue as per Washington's wishes and Pakistan's working as a double agent during the US's conquest to put an end to global terrorism (see Nadim, 2017) closed the curtains for the near-term revival of bilateral relations between the two nations.

While the geostrategic importance of Pakistan has waned for the US, it has found vigour in the ever-growing ties between Islamabad and Beijing. The bond between the two countries has grown exponentially over the period, which can be witnessed in Pakistan's external loan structuring. Pakistan owes 27 billion US \$ to China (see Rana, 2023) and the growing military ties between the two nations, with Pakistan being the biggest consumer of Chinese arms export, importing about 40% of Chinese Arms exports (see Lalwani, 2023) exemplifies the growing sphere of Sino-Pak relations. China has heavily invested in Pakistan under its flagship project, CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor). China aims to invest almost 62 billion US \$ in this project spanning fifteen years.

Defence Spending: The Grey Area

The defence budget plays an important role in assessing whether there is going to be an arms race between two nations or not, as the defence budget of the two countries will increase as they arm themselves against each other to the teeth. However, it is not necessarily an effective way to look at the security dynamics when comparing two nations as security dynamics remain the same between the countries; however, their strategies may change based on the intentions and perceptions of the countries regarding each other.

Table 1

Military spending 2022				
S.no	Country	Spending in Billions	Share of Govt. Spending (%)	Share of GDP (%)
1	United States of America	876.9	NA	3.45
2	India	81.3	8.26	2.43
3	Pakistan	10.3	17.89	2.63
4	China	291.9	4.79	1.6
5	Russia	86.3	10.35	4.06

NA: Data Not Available, Source: SIPRI <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

India and Pakistan's share to the world defence spending accumulates to about 3.6 per cent and 0.5 per cent respectively (see Tian et al., 2023) totalling to about 4.1 per cent in world defence spending and totalling to about 91.7 billion US \$ amounting to about 93.38 percent of what was spent on defence by South Asia as a region in 2022.

Defence and military spending may sound analogous, but when closely examined, there appears to be some distinction between the two terms. The international system has no predetermined aspects of what constitutes defence spending or budget in the international system. However, in India, defence spending relates to a broader and wider spectrum of what is spent on the overall security of a nation, which includes paramilitary forces, military forces, infrastructural development projects, R&D programmes, pensions, and salaries of defence personnels etc. Military spending includes personnel salaries, equipment procurement, and army's operational costs. Military spending can be used to display a country's capability to keep it secure from external threats.

While the number in Table 1 shows that India is spending more on defence in comparison to China based on the percentage of their respective GDPs; China being the world's second-largest economy and six times that of India's it exponentially increases China's defence spending as compared to India's due to a low base effect; on the other hand Pakistan continues to spend more on defence rather than spending on economic development given the state of constant financial crisis faced by the country. The data also indicates that China can allocate more on its defence spending freely without making a major change in its budget allocation as it is only spending a meagre 1.6% of its GDP on defence spending.

While the data highlighted in Table 1 helps to see a stark difference between the defence spending of both countries, the data does not include any military aid given to a country; however, it is included in the defence spending of the patron country, as mentioned in the report by SIPRI from which the data has been used. Military aid received by Pakistan has enabled it to arm itself to the teeth against India. Pakistan received approximately 19 billion US\$ alone from the US during 2002 – 2010 in aid, of which about 12.5 billion US\$ was meant for military purposes (see Zaidi, 2011). The indigenous spending of Pakistan on defence remained the same but the foreign assistance significantly enhanced its military capabilities. The military aid received by Pakistan has raised security apprehensions for India (see The Economic Times, 2014).

India's defence spending remains low compared to what is spent on defence considering the prospect of a two-front war conundrum posed by the Chinese and Pakistani entente (see Singh, 2021). The defence spending is also hampered as to how the allocated budget of the Ministry of Defence is spent in the internal structure of the MOD. India allocated about 52% of the MOD's Budget towards salaries and pensions in 2023-24 which leaves little room for modernisation and expansion of the defence forces of the country which is necessitated by the increasing military mobilisation along its borders with China. The budget necessary for the modernisation and smooth working of the armed forces has steadily declined over the years making things more tense for the Indian state. Moreover, New Delhi needs to allocate a steady amount of 3% of its GDP to the MOD which is necessary for the military preparedness of the country. (see Chakrabarty, 2023) The situation is also exacerbated by the fact that the majority of India's Soviet-origin military equipment and systems are nearing their service life.

Defence spending remains a skewed characteristic in defining, claiming, and predicting the future of a region, leading to more security apprehension between the countries involved. The data displays India as a military giant in terms of spending but fails to deliver a proper insight of what the amounts constituted into as India publishes or allocates a budget under the ministry/department.

Challenges: Arms Race or A different approach:

The ensuing political and economic instability in Pakistan limits its action to be involved in an arms race with India. However, the Pakistani military's tactic to strike a deal with non-state actors to wage war against state actors remains one of the best possible and plausible options for the Pakistani Army. The same manoeuvre can be and has been actively used by Rawalpindi to achieve its goals in Kashmir see (Sharma, 2016).

The use of proxies as statecraft exemplified in the use of non-state actors against a nation-state by Pakistan during its dealing with the good and bad Taliban for its interests during the US's conquest in Afghanistan to end terrorism is a well-documented fact(see Nadim, 2017). The use of technology and media over the period of time by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), which is the media and public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces which is involved in propaganda warfare against India(see Malhotra, 2020) and shaping a narrative which degrades India also shows the war of narratives. On the other hand, India has also been accused by Pakistan of promoting terrorist organisations aimed at causing instability in Pakistan(see Buisness Standard, 2022). While the terror-activities undertaken by the terrorist organisation against India operating from Pakistan is aimed at internationalising the Kashmir Issue which has remained one of the main tactic of Pakistan, the prospects of causing instability in Baluchistan by drawing attentions towards Baloch people and in the region can serve the interests of India in keeping Pakistan busy in its internal issues to safeguard it from causing trouble for India(see SAHOO, 2019) shows the possible applicability of the same tactic. The growing field of warfare or asymmetric challenges borne out of power asymmetry between the two nations also shows expanding field of warfare.

Pakistan remains a credible source of security apprehension for India due to its nuclear arsenal and the staging of its conventional military against India, fuelled by the presence of terror outfits aimed at destabilising India(see Pakistan Army and Terrorism; an Unholy Alliance, 2017) but the change in traditional deterrence between India and Pakistan has come from a long way as the two nations which were conventionally involved in the arms race, and remained a security concern for each other. But despite serious setbacks and conditions prevailing in the country, Pakistan remains one of the major security threats for India, as the growing collusion between China and Pakistan serves the greater political interests of China of global dominance, as both nations tend to, and have actively and judiciously used each other to counter the growing political vulnerabilities of India(see Pant & Bommakanti, 2019). The prospect of a two-front war dilemma(see Singh, 2021) remains a major perceived threat for India fuelled by the ever-increasing collusion between Beijing and Islamabad and the collision of the two with New Delhi. Furthering the need to recheck its military calibrations is the growing and looming threat posed by the assertive and expansionist China, which does not view India as a threat. Still, the latter cannot say the same(see Gokhale, n.d.), as the blemishes of 1962 surprise Indo-China war still remains a credible motivation for India to remain sceptic of China.

Conclusion:

The history of India and Pakistan is marked with tensions, conflict, and scepticism rooted in the partition of British India in 1947, and the ensuing animosity between the two nations intensified with the collusion of politics and ideology at the domestic level, continues to shape the threat perception for the two countries. The ensuing internal vulnerability of Pakistan limits its action to wage war or even be involved in the arms race with India. Still, using non-state actors as a method of statecraft would continue to ignite problems for India as well as for Pakistan.

However, the threat perception for India has indeed evolved; at the same time, Pakistan remains a significant threat to India's security, the ever-growing Chinese assertiveness and expansionism, especially along the disputed borders, has nevertheless increased the need to focus on the military modernisation for India. The rise of China and the prospect of a two-front war exemplified by the growing collusion between Beijing and Islamabad has shifted the security calculus for New Delhi. The growing and evolving threat to India's sovereignty demands New Delhi to focus on military modernisation which can be seen in the recent military arsenal testing spree of India in developing MIRV(see Gupta, 2024) and Brahmos(see *The Economic Times*, 2023) while also keeping a check on future wars and modernising its military tactics(*Times of India*, 2024). Despite the ambitions of upgrading its military, India faces major hurdles in achieving the desired goals as MOD continues to spend a major chunk on pensions and salaries and less for its bid to modernise its arsenal. Balancing the need for military readiness against internal spending in MOD remains a complex dilemma for India. Nevertheless, the evolving geopolitical landscape and the perceived threats from Pakistan and China continue to drive India's efforts to enhance its defence capabilities and ensure its sovereignty and security.

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