China in South Asia: The Case of the United States

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Key Points

- China needs to increase its presence in South Asia for strategic and economic reasons.
- It needs to contend, however, with an established American presence in some regional countries and a growing presence in others.
- It is a situation that can only produce mixed results for China’s strategic efforts in the near- and mid-future.
- China’s approach to South Asia could lead to increased tensions with its main rival in the region, and increasingly close partner of the US, India.

Summary

A previous Future Directions International paper, the first in this series, began with a much abbreviated introduction to China’s rise. It examined in short detail China’s economic progression to become the world’s second-largest economy by illustrating the sheer volume of cement it used between 2011 and 2013 and, to underscore the point, compared the amount with that of the United States over the whole of the last century. That illustration makes two points; first, that China’s growth may only be compared to the current situation of the leading economic and military power and, second, that China itself compares itself in relation to the United States. In other words, the United States provides the benchmark that China feels it must exceed in every metric.
That is no coincidence. The United States is the polar opposite of China in almost every political and social endeavour. Where the United States has an open, liberal democracy, China is an authoritarian, one-party state; where the justice and social organisations of the United States swear fealty to the country’s Constitution rather than to a current administration or even to Congress, the equivalent government bodies are completely beholden to the Chinese Communist Party. Importantly, where the military of the United States also remains loyal to the Constitution, China does not have a military force in that sense at all: the military in China is an extension of the Chinese Communist Party.

Concurrent with China’s economic growth has been a parallel growth in nationalism, which has been, to a large extent, encouraged by the Communist Party. The Communist Party, which credits itself for the country’s economic, military and political progress and is at pains to ensure that that message permeates Chinese society in its entirety, thus ties itself to that progress. It does so for a simple reason: it has an implicit agreement with the Chinese people that runs along the lines of, “We will ensure your economic progress; in return, do not question our right to govern.” If the Communist Party is to remain in power, therefore, it must ensure China’s ongoing economic rise.

In the current international system that is, to a large extent, dominated by the tenets of globalisation; economic progress is almost inextricably intertwined with understated military might and political influence. While the concept has prevailed for centuries, it is more pronounced at this time, which has a flow-on effect on the international system. This paper will examine a part of that effect: China’s relationship with the United States in South Asia.

Analysis

The growth of nationalism in China, together with its economic and military growth, has seen a radical shift in its perception of itself. The assertive China of today is far removed from the subdued China of Deng Xiaoping and even further removed from that of the 1950s and 1960s. That shift is predicated on its economy, which has grown at an average rate of around ten per cent a year over the past thirty-plus years. There have been increasing signs, more recently, that that growth rate is slowing sharply but, even if it is unable to sustain its current official growth rate of 6.9 per cent, China now has the economic, military and political momentum and heft to challenge the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. That challenge is overtly recognisable in the South China Sea and is occurring, albeit to a less conspicuous degree, in South Asia, Africa, South and Central America and Eastern Europe. Beijing’s primary focus, however, is on its periphery, hence its attention to the Indo-Pacific region.

One final point must be noted before examining the competition between China and the United States in South Asia. When George H.W. Bush launched the First Gulf War in 1991, his military commanders employed the term “shock and awe” to indicate the overwhelming use of technology and firepower to destroy Saddam’s forces. China watched the demonstration of firepower, technology and sheer overwhelming force closely. It came as no real surprise, then, that Beijing sought to modernise its military at a rate that approached
a war footing. It also took to heart John Stuart Mill’s observation that “Our diplomacy stands for nothing when we have not a fleet to back it.” China does not overtly threaten an adversary with military force, but that threat is implicit in all its actions and underscores its economic and diplomatic efforts.

**China and the United States in Afghanistan**

As a result of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, the United States has prosecuted its longest war – in Afghanistan – against al Qaeda and the Taliban with seemingly no end in sight. It has up to fifteen thousand military personnel in Afghanistan at this point. The military presence of a powerful competitor so close to its western border and a restive province makes China uneasy. That aside, as the paper alluded to earlier observed, China has several reasons for wanting to enhance its relationship with Afghanistan and, ideally, to replace the US presence and influence there. The fact that doing so could lead to China discarding its policy of not interfering in the domestic situations of other countries appears to have been considered and ignored. Chinese troops reportedly now patrol the Afghanistan-Xinjiang border with Afghan military personnel. There is also speculation that China could replace the United States once the latter leaves Afghanistan. More immediately, however, China feels that it has been encircled by the United States, which has a military presence in Japan, South Korea and, now Afghanistan. While Beijing has taken measures to mitigate Washington’s military presence in East Asia, it has not, until now, done so in Afghanistan.

The United States, for its part, fears that China would dominate Afghanistan as it now does Pakistan, thus extending its influence in Asia. By remaining in Afghanistan, Washington could not only thwart China’s attempts to influence that country but also keep Beijing off-balance by its sheer presence so close to a restive Chinese province. Washington could also keep watch over any attempts to expand the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, potentially extending the Chinese oil and gas pipelines that presently run via Pakistan through Afghanistan at a later date, while also remaining close to any Belt-Road trade route that China might attempt to construct that runs through or near to Afghanistan.

The problem for the United States is one of funding for its troop presence in Afghanistan. That could, perhaps, be why it seeks to develop closer ties with India and how it might use New Delhi to balance China. India, which has already invested over US$1 billion in Afghanistan and has mining leases there, has strong historical links to Kabul and would not wish to see its influence reduced in that country. Maintaining a presence in Afghanistan would also give India the ability to implicitly threaten Pakistan on two fronts and, to a large extent, eliminate the “strategic depth” enjoyed there by Islamabad.

Those factors give China increased reason for engaging with Afghanistan. It is probable that Beijing would offer Kabul the opportunity to have access to vast investment to reconstruct its economy. Such an offer would have huge appeal to a country that has been ravaged by various wars for forty years. That thinking would undoubtedly be tempered by Kabul’s recognition of Chinese influence in Pakistan and the Chinese debt trap in which Sri Lanka now finds itself.
In summary, China could find itself working alongside the United States in Afghanistan, albeit in a different capacity. It could be that Washington continues to fight the Taliban and insurgent factions in Afghanistan while China concentrates on developing Afghanistan’s economy. While such a scenario would be ideal for Beijing, it is difficult to see Washington acceding to such a construct. In short, China has its work cut out if it wishes to replace the United States in Afghanistan.

**China and the United States in Pakistan**

Unlike Afghanistan, China has already brought Pakistan into its zone of influence. In fact, China’s influence in Pakistan is so strong that it is difficult to specify a single area of activity in the latter country that does not exhibit Chinese influence. While that is, in itself, a remarkable situation, what is even more so is the speed at which Pakistan has become close to being a vassal state of China. It is also remarkable given that the United States has had a strong presence in Pakistan ever since it worked with Pakistan’s security apparatus to train and equip the Mujahedeen fighters in Afghanistan in their struggle against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the late 1970s.

The United States, however, has used Pakistan only when it required its services and has neglected or ignored it at other times. The relationship is, in its essence, comprised of sanctions and withdrawals, determined by the immediate needs of the United States, rather than the interests of Pakistan. For instance, President Carter imposed sanctions on Pakistan in 1979 then soon withdrew them following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Washington sanctioned Pakistan in 1998 for conducting nuclear tests and then withdrew them after 9/11, when Musharraf joined the United States-led coalition against the Taliban. The flip-flops by Pakistan’s most powerful partner, as the United States once was, and its seeming lack of a strategic long-term interest in a stable partnership, have left Pakistan feeling vulnerable given India’s military might. It is hardly surprising, then, that Islamabad turned increasingly towards Beijing.

The bad blood between Islamabad and Washington was exacerbated when the latter, having discovered in 2012 that Osama bin Laden was living in Pakistan, conducted a Special Forces raid to eliminate him without warning Pakistan of the raid in advance. Islamabad, having been embarrassed internationally and domestically, collected the pieces of a Special Forces helicopter that had crashed in the assassination attempt and made a point of handing those to China for the latter to examine American technology. The United States has, moreover, also conducted drone attacks in Pakistan against the Taliban despite Pakistani protestations, further adding to Pakistani misgivings about the stability of its relationship with Washington.

The election of Donald Trump to the office of President saw the relationship deteriorate further due to his outspoken and abrasive manner. Trump has insulted Pakistan on more than one occasion and severely reduced the financial aid given to Islamabad. That, coupled with China’s investment in Pakistan via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, has seen Beijing and Islamabad grow closer than ever before, to the detriment of the Pakistan-United States relationship.

Washington need to keep Islamabad on-side because it needs to supply its forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan offers the cheapest and most direct route for doing so. It is difficult
to state with any accuracy, however, how long even that relationship, as shaky as it is, will last.

Pakistan’s need for a powerful ally to balance India has seen it grow close to China. That alliance will continue to grow as long as Pakistan is not convinced about the stability of its relationship with the United States.

**China and the United States in India**

India’s relationship with the United States has derived from circumstances entirely different from those of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whereas, during the Cold War period, India leaned towards the Soviet Union, with the collapse of the USSR and the inability of its successor, Russia, to grapple with its domestic and foreign issues, New Delhi had few alternatives for engaging with the broader international community. With its rise threatened by China and facing supply and reliability issues in its procurement of military equipment from Russia, India began looking towards the United States for alternative materiel. From that tentative start, the relationship has grown in leaps and bounds to one in which India is now described as a Major Defence Partner and has signed an agreement wherein both countries may procure logistical assistance from each other. The United States is pushing India towards signing two other agreements relating to the provision of communication facilities to India and also towards deepening the relationship so as to extend it into the economic and commercial fields.

Just as Pakistan and China developed their relationship predicated upon their individual quarrels with India, so India and the United States are being drawn together because of their mutual fear of China’s economic and military development in general and that country’s willingness to employ those developments in aggressively pursuing its agenda. While India perceives a source of military technology and a market for its commercial information technology expertise, it also fears opening up its domestic market to aggressive American business organisations that could undercut and replace Indian ones. The United States, for its part, sees India as a regional counter-force to China, a market for its military equipment and an attractive commercial market.

China is correct to be wary of, if not fear, a closer Indo-United States relationship, but that is exactly what appears to be occurring. There are now reports that India is possibly interested in procuring Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighter aircraft from the United States, no doubt with an eye on China’s soon-to-be-deployed J-20 fighters. While it may be difficult to envisage that coming to fruition, given the apprehensions of the United States at the possibility of its highly-advanced technology leaking into India’s co-development of a fifth-generation fighter aircraft with Russia and India’s requirement that a substantial portion of all defence acquisitions be manufactured locally, the fact that New Delhi is even thinking along those lines ought to give China pause for thought. It certainly provides an indication of the new depth of the Indo-US relationship.

Short of a drastic occurrence that damages the relationship irreparably, it is difficult to see how it would not continue to grow to an even greater degree.
Conclusion

To conclude, China’s efforts to replace the United States in South Asia provide mixed results. It is well on its way to replacing the United States altogether in Pakistan. Afghanistan, however, would be wary of becoming overly-dependent on China, given its observation of what has happened in Pakistan, and would be loath to renounce its strong relationship with India, which is what China would endeavour to accomplish in one form or another. India, however, is another matter altogether. The Sino-Indian war of 1962, China’s close association with Pakistan, the events at Doklam and many other issues encourage India to keep China at arm’s length and to be wary of it. That is, in fact, why the Indo-US relationship is growing to such a large degree. China undoubtedly recognises that and knows that it would have to contend, sooner or later, with an economically- and militarily-empowered India on its western flank. It is difficult to see how China could undercut that relationship.

In short, China’s efforts to replace the United States in South Asia have produced, and will continue to produce, mixed results.

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