

The Contours of New Regional Alignments in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

South Asia is an important but complex region. Its manifold complexity is largely ascribed through historical, economic, political and strategic manifestations. The region has witnessed instability in all the given premises and interactions. The entirety happens to be the fact that the structure of alignments is motivated by security complexes which involve cohesion of foreign powers and regional states. The US, Russia, Iran and China now make out to be contemporary stakeholders in South Asian security equation. Their involvement has been seen as a major re-orientation in the regional dynamics in terms of political, economic and security characteristics. The manifold possibilities of re-alignments are what the future of the region will look like. The chance of full-fledged strategic alliance in the face of US-India on the basis of similar political, economic and security interests is on the horizon. As a corollary to this alliance pattern, there is China-Russia-Pakistan alliance which is similar in force but opposite in direction. These two systems are one set of opposition forces to each other, which are also natural in form. Another structure which occurs out of the regional dynamics happens to be of India-Iran-Afghanistan which is a triffecta aiming at Pakistan. On the other hand, Russia-China-Pakistan which could turn into a politically motivated and economically driven alliance and can also cover certain aspects of security. Therefore, due to various changes in order there will stem out various patterns of relationships, which could set the order of the region as one marked by various fluctuating alignment patterns.

Key Words: South Asia, Realignment, Security Dynamics, Regional Stakeholders

Introduction

In the international arena various phenomena occur and sometimes re-occur, which then shape the political and security dynamics. Alignments and re-alignments are one such phenomenon that needs to be explored, particularly in the case of certain regions. South Asia happens to be one such region which has had a good amount of history to prove how it gained some of its political relevance by means of alignments with foreign powers. With various unfolding international dynamics, re-alignments have also taken place within South Asia. This paper explores the conceptual framework which surrounds alignments and alliances and shows how the concept is multidimensional. Furthermore, it also throws light on some of the

unfolding alliance patterns while mentioning some of the requisites of alignments in the region and finally draws some limits to the alignment patterns.

Conceptual framework

The notion of alliances being a prominent characteristic of power politics, strategy and even security in states along with regional and international politics is very old. More than often it is from the prospects of alliance formations and regional and international alignments that new features of politics emerge, which then go on to affect the international political environment. It is apt to base the theoretical foundation as a mixture of contemporary and traditional due to the structure of alliances being somewhat loose and nebulous. For this reason, the concept of alliances and realignments is studied as given by certain scholars of International Relations.

The definitional dissatisfaction does not really persist in the case of alliances because scholars agree to the structural and the basic meaning of alliances. Stephen Walt contends that "an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states." (Walt: 1987) In close contrast there is Glenn Snyder's definition that "alliances ... are formal associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, intended for either the security or the aggrandizement of their members, against specific other states..." (Synder: 1990).

Furthermore, it is also important to note that states in alliances usually go through a system and these alliances are systematic and follow some patterns. Relating to this, one particular concept surrounding alliances was given by George Liska, who delimits the idea of groups of states forming alliances in order to attain similar goals or shared objectives. There is also credence that usually states forge alliances in order to achieve goals, which surround the attainment of stability, security and even status. The idea is that there is a good amount of cost-and-benefit analysis in terms of forging alliances since states take great care as to what the alliance requires to attain and how to achieve this. (Liska 1961) According to George Liska and William Riker "the gains and liabilities associated with alignment can be grouped into pairs. For example, the pair peculiar to security is protection and provocation, the first to be derived from a particular alliance and the second producing counter-action and counter alliance. Burdens and gains, as well as potential for status enhancement and possible losses in capacity for independent action, must be balanced." (Dougherty, 2009)

The formation of alliances itself depends upon features and characteristics which have certain political and strategic grounds to it. As William Ricker opines that "actors join alliances or coalitions for several reasons: the threat of reprisal if they refuse to align themselves; to receive payments of one kind or another; to obtain promises about policy or about subsequent decisions; or to gain emotional satisfaction." (Ricker, 1962) In a way, Liska and Riker both contend that balance of power is a requisite for alliance formations. But their ideas though vague for the

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contemporary and highly complicated system of international relations do shed light on some pertinent features of alliance formations; mutual need, balancing and equilibrium, gains and losses and calculations. This makes the idea of alliances a very calculated one and no doubt that it is because no state willingly jumps into coalitions without assessing what it has in store for them. Moreover, this concept also validates ideas like stability, security and status which are the underlying themes in the discourse of international politics. There is also the idea of alliance disbanding, which occurs when the mutual need is no longer there and when there is the fulfillment of objectives by the parties in any alliance or coalition. (Dougherty, 2009) Finally, it is also somewhat clear that alliances legitimize politics and strategy since they are need based and the requirement surrounds issues and dynamics which states go through and need each other.

Alignments actually go on to show that in any given situation two or more states can indulge and benefit not just each other but the idea of politics and strategy as well. Largely, alignments in the contemporary dynamics talk about threat perceptions, balancing power as well but without the utility of too much military. (Chidley, 2014) Therefore, the contemporary alliances have become an amalgamation of liberal values like economics and trade, politics, diplomacy and security all in one node. In this sense the military aspect is now a part of trade and economics as well as security but the idea of militaristic alignments does not really matter now. Even in the case of NATO, the collective security is now becoming a bit outdated especially in the stream of geo-economics and political security. Hence the strategic terminology incorporates alliances and coalitions into more politico-economic aspects of alignments.

Therefore, it is pertinent to discuss and analyze South Asian alignment and its changing pattern and also take into consideration the scope of threat perceptions and balancing in the sense of security, economics and politics among the regional and extra-regional states. The reason for this is that as a concept alignments and alliances encompass not just the fore-mentioned aspects but threat perceptions and power factors. The only difference is that in this century and time, more energy is allocated in forging cooperation which do not work solely on strategic purposes but largely incorporate economic values and political grandeur and security feasibility as well.

Alignments in South Asia

Befitting the concept and the need to balance out power, threat or both, South Asia has been a region rich in alignments. It must be noted that these alignments followed a pattern which largely encompassed of regional-foreign states and not regional-regional states to be exact. The inherent need for alliances was deemed to be the idea of balancing of threat as initially Pakistan and India perceived as the imminent threats to each other. In the later turn of century, this slowly became balancing power since both states began to attain militaristic and economic

grounds. Furthermore, the arms race and the foreign actors with their own agendas propelled these policies of embracing alliances.

For Pakistan, the region became somewhat susceptible since Indian policies to develop hegemony were becoming daunting. The former state was economically not very sound as well and needed an alliance, which would serve its interests in the new found regional configuration. "The United States and Pakistan established diplomatic relations in 1947. The US agreement to provide economic and military assistance to Pakistan and the latter's partnership in the Baghdad Pact/CENTO and SEATO strengthened relations between the two nations." (Javaid, 2014) Though it was clear that this alliance was one which benefitted Pakistan in terms of economy and there was a lot more emphasis on the preservation on balancing power and eradicating any immediate threat which might stem out from the Indian side.

Additionally, Pakistan and China also forged diplomatic ties in 1951 which led to the formation of an alliance in the later years became a solid foundation for strategic bilateral engagement between Pakistan and China in the subsequent years. This was an opportunity for both states yet again to create a balancing act in terms of countering the Indian threat and keep the power equilibrium intact in South Asia. In the later phase, this alliance began to develop a keen sense of credibility in terms of power as well. (Ali, 2018)

In case of India, the idea of alignments was imbedded but it was not streamlined during that era. This is because of the Nehruvian policy of keeping India as a neutral state and away from the intensity of the Cold War. In the context of the Cold War era, both balance of power and threat were plausible. India which was otherwise a part of the Non-Alignment Movement but had already picked sides, forged diplomatic and military partnership with USSR in 1959. (Damodaran, 1983) This was in a way a partnership which would counter the Pak-US alliance and since India lost its bid against China during the 1962 border war, there was perhaps a double threat of not just a build-up between Pakistan and China but also of losing power in the region at the hands of a growing dependence of both the US and Pakistan on each other. In the 1980s as the Soviet War began to unfold and the US realized that without Pakistan's help their bid for maintaining ascendancy in South Asia would not be possible, the US-Pak alliance came out as a strong front. (Sattar, 2017)

Another event which marked the alliance structure in South Asia was 9/11 and as the Global War on Terror was propagated by the US, Pakistan was given the choice of 'us versus them' and having to choose an alignment to team up with. Pakistan fought alongside the US and this alliance was kept alive by the military and economic aid given by the US while strategically Pakistan pulled its weight. Up, until 2010, the alliance was smooth one but in 2011 there were certain instances like the Salala incident and the Osama bin Laden operation which put some gaps and vacuums in the this alliance.

Requisites of alignments in contemporary South Asia

There needs to be common goals or shared values which create circumstances leading to the formation of alliances. In this context, there are certain unfolding dynamics which affect South Asia in such a way that they directly impact the security and political characteristics and make for patterns which surround alliance formation.

Firstly, there is the Afghanistan question which has turned the regional dynamics into a quagmire. All major international and regional powers have become immersed and interested in Afghanistan and are engulfed in the political and security dynamics. The fact is that whoever gains an upper hand in achieving security and political gains in Afghanistan will supersede in South Asia. This makes for the power factor and out of this there is the lingering security situation which gives rise to various threats; the biggest of them being one alliance gaining momentum in Afghanistan over the other.

Secondly, there is the ever increasing arms race within South Asia which has given rise to immense insecurity. Two things come out as a result; one is that both India and Pakistan need military partnerships with bigger powers in order to achieve and attain armaments which will cause deterrence upon the other state. And in the second place, there is the idea that an alignment of states with technology and weapons system e.g. Pakistan-China or Pakistan-US or US-India or India-Russia, there becomes a systematic balance of power and threat side by side.

Thirdly, South Asian alliance system up until now would not be possible without the foreign powers and the underlying interests each foreign actor has. The foreign state interests in South Asia like politics, strategy, security and economic interests have always in a way coincided with the need-based interests of the regional states. This brings to the picture the newly emerging dynamics of New Great Game which encompasses geo-strategic, geo-economics and geo-political aspects of South Asia. The New Great Game may be just another term for some meta-dynamics which include Russia, US, China, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and India and since it caters to all these states it prompts alliances and alignments.

Fourthly, there are various geo-economic realities which are now part of South Asia and give economic validity and dimension to the geo-strategic alignments in lieu of trade. The Gwadar port is one example as it has become an integral part of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), while the Chahbahar port in sharp contrast also serves as an example. The economic realities have become important in the sense that they contribute to raw power for states and thus they also help in balancing in the new arena.

Finally, there are various security fissures which have crept inside South Asia and turned it into a very volatile region. There is the lingering presence of terrorism in the face of Taliban and their affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is radicalization which affects all the states in the region. Even China has issues with the threat of terrorism within its borders. India and Iran also have a

sword hung atop their heads of radicalization somehow creeping within their territory. The US has always asserted itself as the frontrunner against terrorism, while Russia does not wish that radical elements seep through Russian zones of influence.

These themes are related to the idea of power and threat side by side. It all boils down to the need for equilibrium in the region wherein all the incumbent powers are running towards developing not just hegemony but securing themselves and their interests through coalition partnership, alliances and alignments.

Realignments in South Asia

There are some new and intriguing alignment patterns which have risen in the case of South Asia. Moreover, these are not just between regional and foreign actors but intra-regional states as well. In certain cases the alliances are tailored around power patterns while at other instances, there might be certain threat against which the alignments are formulated. Following are some of the realignments taking place in the South Asian security environment.

US-India: US and India moved closer in 2008 and their partnership became one of convenience in terms of trade and military. This alliance is semi-asymmetric because it involves US, a foreign global actor with India which is a big regional actor. This realignment is perhaps one which is largely aimed at minimizing the power of China in the region. Furthermore, it could also put light on the fact that for US a growing China is a pertinent threat as well. Thus it fits the power-threat loop quite well as both India and US have issues with the growing Chinese influence and under this prism they also want to root out the threat which Pakistan might pose in the realm of security. As opined by an Indian journalist, which categorically stated that, “Under its new strategy, the US promises that it will help South Asian nations maintain their sovereignty as China increases its influence in the region.” It also says it will support India in its “leadership role in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region. India needs the US, as much as the Americans need us.” (Joshi, 2018)

Modi-Trump duo is one which has aims of expansion of power within South Asia as India is already moving towards the top and has its economy and technology garnered and secured to keep moving upwards. The meeting of Secretary Mike Pompeo in September 2018 with his Indian counterpart and the signing of various economic and military deals fits well here. The need of US has changed and it has disbanded Pakistan for its larger strategic benefits and attached itself to India. Both India and the US are to maintain status-quo in the Asia Pacific region and this they are trying to achieve with the help of harvesting close trade and military ties. This fits in the dynamics of New Great Game, arms race with Pakistan and the Afghanistan question as well since both the US and India want to have a powerful sway in all these features as partners.

Pakistan-China: This has also been termed as a strategic partnership and contains all the elements of politics, strategy, security and most of all economics. The alignment is asymmetric because there is one regional state involved and another extra regional big power in the face of China. Since it is an asymmetric alliance, it benefits China in terms of political and strategic gains and Pakistan in terms of economic gains. But this alliance works perfectly under the given framework as at one time its aim is to counter the rising threat from Indo-US alliance and at the same time counter any formidable power gains which the US and India might gain within South Asia.

This alliance is the impeccable strategic maneuver in South Asia as it covers military, economy, trade and politics and with opportunities like CPEC and OBOR which aim for regional connectivity via Pakistan. China aims to outmaneuver the West in terms of power, since it will forge ties with Central Asia, South Asia, the Gulf, Middle East and Africa. Furthermore, the interests of the two states are intertwined in terms of Afghanistan and security which makes their partnership a promising one in the future. (Hussain, 2016) Thus, as a direct corollary to the US-India partnership, this also sets well in terms of security and larger political gambit like armament race, Afghanistan and the Great Game between the superpowers.

Pakistan-Russia: This is perhaps going to be one of the neo-strategic alignments because of the fact that the US no longer holds Pakistan in the same light as it used to. Not only has the US put Pakistan under a lot of economic pressure by blocking its aid packages by Donald Trump but also has categorically proven to Pakistan that it no longer caters to this alliance. As a result of this, Pakistan has begun to look eastwards and particularly towards Russia. The state has not only welcomed this but has also promised various military and defense as well as security deals for Pakistan. In a way, the alignment will also balance the US-India alignment and cater to the Asiatic strategic needs. Pakistan has reversed the New Great Game towards a different angle by showing willingness to proceed with Russia to form alliances. Both countries are engaged in high-profile visits, joint military exercises, and energy cooperation. (Hussain, 2015) Pakistan and Russia have signed MOU to work for laying \$10 billion offshore gas-pipeline. (Khan, 2018)

India-Iran-Afghanistan: In the present political and security environment of South Asia, this new alignment seems to be gaining impetus and it might come through as a formidable one. This happens to be of India-Iran-Afghanistan troika which revolves around the balancing threat(s) whilst achieving power. It is a non-linear partnership because India is the only big regional power in the course while Iran is not inside South Asia but one which harbors Afghanistan and the latter state happens to be in persistent chaos due to war.

At best it can be described as an alignment which aims at curbing the influence and 'power' of Pakistan within Afghanistan. The three states border Pakistan and happen to have faulty relations with the state as well. This alignment

also serves as a geo-strategic maneuver to edge Pakistan from three sides and push back its influence and its role within South Asia. One way of that is to build the Chahbahar Port which undercuts the Gwadar Port and its value. “For all the participants, the economic rewards of this pact are huge. The development of Chabahar Port and the connecting transport-and-trade corridor has the potential to unlock the untapped energy and mineral riches of Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia for export toward India.” (Akram, 2016) Also India aims to keep a firm grip on the internal issues of Afghanistan and this aims to do with the help of Iran. This would subsequently put Pakistan in a very low point in terms of insecurities. The idea of promoting terrorism inside Pakistan’s borders of Baluchistan is an effective tactic worked up by this nexus and the live proof is Kulbhoshan Jadhav episode. The only question is how much damage the parties are willing to do unto Pakistan without inherently damaging the regional security as a whole which will affect them all equally.

Pak-China-Russia: This trifecta is going to be a very important one for the region as well as each state involved because it is not only going to be a politically driven alliance but also motivated by strategy, military, economy and most of all security. One of the most significant features about this alliance happens to be that there is just one regional state; Pakistan and two foreign states; China and Russia. This is a very important feature because it points to the importance of Pakistan for the two states. But it also points to the fact that this alliance happens to be non-linear as well since two big foreign states are involved with a regional state. Pakistan can get military and economic advantages from China and military and strategic advantages from Russia. This is going to be reciprocated in terms of trade, geopolitics and balancing against US and India.

Furthermore, it has been widely recognized by the US and Trump has become more cautious of this partnership, “This formation of hard alliances is a return to 20th century diplomacy and the rigid rulebook that defined bilateral relations, which caused wars of all kinds. But there still might be a chance that the China-Pakistan-Russia axis might end up being shaped by the common interests that define it, rather than the ramifications for the states that it alienates.” (Shahid, 2017) But the most important reason for the formation of this alliance happens to be Afghanistan issue as none of the states want a prolonged presence of the US inside Afghanistan. This is because the lingering US presence inside Afghanistan is a direct cause of instability for not just Pakistan but also for Russia and China.

In due course of time, this trifecta ought to turn into a tactical advancement for the three states as each has its own interest in Afghanistan. Since these coincide at one point, the US dismissal from Afghanistan, this is one which is a power alliance and aims to hold and even sway the equilibrium to its own side and perhaps further tighten the noose around the US policy makers.

Pakistan-Iran-Afghanistan-India: Unlike the previously mentioned alignments, this one in particular has a structure which consists of three regional

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states i.e. India, Pakistan and Afghanistan while Iran is a state which shares common borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan and though it is not in South Asia but shares its periphery and this makes the alignment follow an uneven pattern.

Three things need to be discerned regarding this alliance; not only is it one out of the ordinary but since it consists of all such states which are politically and militarily interwoven in conflict, there is dampening of the threat perception and as such there is no need to balance any threat since there is no internal threat. Secondly, this alignment then solely gets based on power factor which is based on security since the ideal equation of this alignment would come out as a result of tackling the various security issues within their periphery. Thirdly, these states can join together in terms of security, strategic, military and economic alliance, which would ultimately benefit the region and South Asia might end up becoming one of the most stable regions in the world.

Limits and impacts

All these alliances/alignments have certain goals and once the goals are achieved the alliance gets disjointed. This happens to be a limit of a sort on alliances. Because foreign states are an inherent part of alliance patterns in South Asia, most have their own sets of interests and reasons to form an alliance. This involves the culminating threat within regional states along with the need to increase their power. This mutual interplay of reasoning runs thin because as soon as the foreign states achieve their goals, they usually leave the regional and smaller states out. This did happen to the US-Pakistan alliance because as soon as the US came closer to achieving its goal, it branched out to India in order to make sure its gains are ultimate gains and not relative gains. Pakistan was left out in the open to ward off terrorism and in a way the new alliance turned their tide against Pakistan.

Similarly, in the realignments there needs to be clarity that US, China and Russia once reach their goals might leave their new allies out in the open to fend off on their own. Pakistan then also needs to understand that US might be an entity it cannot easily rid of and much has to do with the trade balance since the Pakistani dependency on the US trade benefits Pakistan more but that with China or Russia goes in the negative for Pakistan. In the case of US-India partnership, there are also certain limitations and since this is only a semi-asymmetric alliance, the US needs to be careful with Modi. It has been US Achilles's Heel that it benefits an actor and that actor then turns out to be counter-productive to US interests. In case of India, there are chances that India might supersede US and that will not work well for the latter state.

Then in terms of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran-India alignment, though this might be ideal but this perhaps might not be as realistic and the reason for that happens to be the India-Pakistan rivalry. This alliance will only surface if the two states can put their differences aside for the sake of security and economy but that might not be happening anytime soon. Pakistan-Iran relations are going through a swift change and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations at the moment are still stagnant.

The Indo-Pak venture within this alignment would actually work as a feature which jolts the structure from inside.

Conclusion

There are multiple reasons as to why states are motivated towards alignments and this holds true for South Asia as well as the region has become vigorous in alliances. An interesting phenomenon is not the actual alliance formation or the idea of balancing or band-wagoning; it is not even the idea of states forming alliances which are loosely held structures in tight knit power factors but the intensity with which these alignments patterns change and seem to change. South Asia over time has become a very prominent region and alignment patterns have much to add to this.

With various limitations, the alignments might be fully long-lasting; the dynamics get changed and further disrupted. Though alignments are important as they give legitimacy to power and threat, these are not as enduring as one might imagine. Furthermore, with internal politics of states like India and Pakistan as well as Afghanistan and Iran, it becomes somewhat tricky to keep managing alliances. Especially for various foreign actors for whom the idea of alliances is to pursue their larger national security interests. But this does not at any time disprove the idea of alliances/alignments as a wider international phenomenon.

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