

Alignment, Hedging, and Autonomy: South Asians' Strategic Choice Without Choosing Sides

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary global geopolitics, South Asia occupies a position which is though pivotal but understudied. The region faces increasing pressures to reconfigure foreign policy alignments, as it confronts trans-regional instability emanating from the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan, persistent Indo-Pak hostility, and growing U.S.–China strategic rivalry. This article studies the likely strategic alignments of South Asian states— Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Maldives—using an “integrated analytical framework”, combining national policy preferences and historical trajectory analysis. The study states that instead of merging into rigid alliance blocs, South Asian states are adopting hedging strategies shaped by domestic political constraints, economic vulnerabilities and asymmetric power relations. The findings suggest that South Asian alignment behavior is best understood through the concept of constrained strategic autonomy rather than classical balancing or bandwagoning.



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Introduction

Geopolitically, South Asia remains one of the most consequential but institutionally fragmented regions of the international system. Home to nearly two billion people, vital maritime chokepoints, and two nuclear-armed rivals, the region lies at the intersection of the India Pacific, Central Asia, and the Middle East. South Asia is a multi-culture, multi religion and multi ethnic region with numerous commonalities and dividing lines, therefore, despite its strategic salience, it lacks cohesive regional security institutions and remains characterized by bilateral rivalries, asymmetric power distributions, and external penetration by major powers. Politics of the region has been greatly affected by the rivalry between two major countries, India and Pakistan.

During the Cold War, most of the South Asian countries were nonaligned, in practice, though India was the largest business partner and recipient of huge amounts of Soviet military hardware. Indo-Soviet Treaty of "Peace, Friendship and Cooperation" was signed between India and the Soviet Union, in August 1971, specifying bilateral strategic cooperation. This was noteworthy deviance of India from its principled position of nonalignment. Pakistan on the other hand was in alliance with the United States, in Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), acted as a frontline state in the Washington's efforts against Soviet Union, especially during its occupation of Afghanistan, in 1980s. Rest of the South Asian countries were not of significant strategic importance from the Cold War point of view.

South Asia's strategic environment was fundamentally altered with the collapse of the Soviet Union. India's engagement with the Western institutions and markets was spurred by its economic liberalization of 1991. After nuclear tests of 1998, Pakistan was facing international isolation therefore, deepened its strategic cooperation with Beijing. For attracting development assistance and investment, other South Asian states diversified international

corporations. As the region evolves from the "post-Cold War uni-polarity" toward developing condition of "near-multi-polarity", strategic landscape of the South Asia is increasingly shaped by complex balancing behavior.

The contemporary South Asia confronts a strategic environment which is affected by three overlying dynamics. Firstly, instability in neighboring regions, particularly, the Middle East and ongoing US-Iran war, Iran, and Afghanistan causes ideological, economic, and security spillovers. Secondly, unsettled regional conflicts, mainly between Pakistan and India and Pakistan and Afghanistan, are persistently distorting cooperation in the region. Third and most importantly, the escalation of Sino-US rivalry has transmuted the Asia Pacific region into a vital field of global competition, having grave imprints on the Politico-security landscape of South Asia. The diffusion of power, the declining probability of external security guarantees, the reemergence of great power competition and instability in the region have constrained the regional states to reevaluate traditional alignment choices.

This article is an endeavor to seek answer of the query: How does systemic competition and regional instability shape South Asian states' strategic choices to pursue alignment, hedging, and autonomy, without formally choosing sides? The article discusses that, instead of relying on rigid alliance structures, the South Asian states follow policy of selective balancing. To offset perceived threats, they combine limited security partnerships, diplomatic diversification, and military modernization, while maintaining strategic flexibility. India is attempting to counter mounting influence of China, Pakistan is responding to technological and conventional advantages of India, and the smaller states are reverting to adaptive strategies. Collective efforts of all the states reflect a pattern of balancing under constraint, across the region. The developing form of balancing is neither entirely alliance-driven nor purely classical, but operates together with strategic autonomy and hedging, making issue-

specific and fluid alignments, that explain contemporary South Asian security Configurations

Methodologically, the study combines national policy preferences and historical trajectory analysis with empirical indicators based on open sources.

Analytical Framework: Alignment, Hedging, and Strategic Autonomy

International relations theory theorizes alliance mainly through the logics of bandwagoning and balancing. They claim that weaker or smaller states either make alliance against dominance of a threatening power or bandwagon with it for material benefits and security concerns (Stephen, 1987). This is a binary framework which assumes comparatively a predictable distribution of power, clear alliance commitments, and stable threat perceptions. In contemporary South Asia, such assumptions are not practicable, because on one hand regional states face uncertainty regarding long-term strategic outcomes in alliances with major external powers and on the other hand, major powers follow overlapping and inconsistent policies.

As a response to the limitations, a more context-sensitive and flexible strategic concept – “hedging” s- has been advanced by the recent scholarship. Hedging is considered to be a set of policies through which states cultivate simultaneous engagement with opposing powers while taking precautionary measures as per adverse shifts in the strategic environment (Evelyn, 2005). Hedging allows states to avoid excessive dependence on any sole exterior actor, preserve maneuverability, and spread risk. For the regions like South Asia, this approach is mostly beneficial and relevant because the key Middle Eastern powers, Russia, China, and the United States, all exercise influence, yet none offers explicit security guarantees.

The notion, closely linked to hedging is strategic autonomy, a concept with deep reflection in post-colonial Foreign Policy Traditions. Strategic autonomy emphasizes issue-based cooperation, freedom from binding alliance obligations, and

independent decision-making, over rigid alliance discipline (Mohan, 2004). Contemporary strategic autonomy is unlike Cold War-era non-alignment, neither ideologically rigid and doctrinaire nor equidistant; but practical and transactional, allowing states to cooperate with diverse allies across technological, economic, political and defense domains without surrendering sovereignty. External intervention and historical experience of colonialism has made autonomy not only political imperative but a normative for many South Asian states.

South Asia, empirically demonstrates a hybrid pattern of alignment behavior that may not be sufficiently explained by any single theoretical framework. India, for example, overtly emphasizes strategic autonomy while at the same time broadening defense interoperability with Washington, managing plurilateral arrangements like the Quad, yet continuing close defense procurement and energy ties with Russia. This selective engagement reflects a hedging logic rather than an ultimate alliance choice.

In contrast to India, Pakistan demonstrates a form of asymmetric alignment, dominated by deep economic and strategic dependence on Beijing beside endeavor to cultivate partnerships with Gulf states and sporadic attempts to stabilize relations with Washington. This approach shows “constrained hedging” under domestic and structural limitations instead of ideological alignment. In the meantime, smaller states of South Asia are predominantly engaged in economic hedging, capitalizing on development assistance, trade access, and infrastructure finance from competing external powers while intentionally avoiding explicit geopolitical and alliance obligations. Alignment, strategic autonomy and hedging while taken together, represent a “Composite Analytical Framework” that more accurately explains South Asian foreign policy behavior than classical alliance theory alone. This framework enables the study to trace how regional states navigate uncertainty, manage power asymmetries, and respond to external pressures without committing to rigid alliance structures.

India and the Regional Alignment

a. India's Foreign and Security Policy Approaches

Historically, Indian foreign and security policy approaches on making alliances and alignments are based on four principles of the country's statecraft. Non-alignment is the first principle, defined by the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. This principle was aimed at keeping away from the camp's politics of aligning in support or against any of the super powers. 'Strategic Autonomy' was the second principle mostly followed by the Congress Party or Congress Party led alliances in India, during the first decade and a half of the 21st century. Policy of – pursuing 'national interests' while adopting favored foreign policy, without any hindrance of any sort by other states' – was articulated by the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. In both of these approaches, bilateral strategic partnership with the Soviet Union/ Russia and the United States was acceptable in accordance with the developing situation and India's strategic needs (Drezner, 2009).

The third concept was similar to the 'Strategic Autonomy', but additionally advocated 'strategic equidistance' among China and the United States. It was developed almost parallel to the second concept. Approach of 'strategic equidistance' among China and the US differentiates this concept from the earlier two as both of them permitted selectively leaning towards a single power as situations entail. The fourth concept was multi-alignment, which has been developed and adopted by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi led Bharatiya Janata Party's government. This approach was usually shown as a normal evolution of 'Strategic Autonomy. It offered distinctive definition of strategic interests of the country, identified China as an ever-increasing antagonistic actor and conversely the United States as an unambiguous positive mate of India (Drezner, 2009).

b. India Preference of Avoiding Alliances and More Interest in Bilateral Partnerships

In Indian diplomacy, all the above concepts are

combined together, for eluding alliances. India, throughout its history, has shown more interest in 'strategic partnerships' rather than forming alliances as partnerships never bind its members to back each other in all circumstances and on all strategic issues. Partnerships are generally focused on those areas of mutual interests where reciprocated help and cooperation can be of long-standing benefit for both sides.

The Indian approach is multi-prong and has been a member of various multilateral grouping. It same time it is member of the US led groupings like Quad, 2+2 Dialogues and also Russia and China led - groupings like Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral arrangement, the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) alignment and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Smith, 2021). India follows varied policies for regional and global adaptation. Indian multi-alliance engagement involves its "forum-shopping" to forward its policy agenda across all these forums and alliances. Also, to ensure that all of these organizations, spread across the world, work in favour of India. "Forum-shopping" supports India's agenda of engaging in 'soft balancing', which requires economic measures, international institutions, informal alliances and alignments to constrain antagonistic power(s). Such practices balance two opposing Indian imperatives - to exploit its skills of advancing vital issues across different forums and to pursue its preference for foreign policy.

c. Relations with Russia

India-Russia relations remain a critical pillar of New Delhi's broader balancing strategy, particularly as India navigates deepening cooperation with the United States and intensifying rivalry with China. Historically rooted in deep defense cooperation and political trust, dating from the Cold War, the partnership has adapted rather than disintegrated in the face of India's systemic shifts toward US-China rivalry and multidirectional alignments (Burns et al., 2024). Though Indo-US ties have deepened across minilateral frameworks like the Quad, intelligence sharing, and defense interoperability &

synchronization, India has intentionally maintained its strategic partnership with Russia to retain independence in security decision making and avoid overdependence on the United States. Simultaneously, role of Russia as a long-standing provider of advanced military hardware and technology, particularly in missiles, nuclear submarines, and air defense continues to shape India's capacity to deter any adversary (Burns et al., 2024). Though Russia increasing strategic alignment with China causes tensions in the bilateral relation, India has sought to bracket and manage these difference, seeing Russia as a stabilizing counterbalance within an increasingly polarized great power environment. Russia – India ties, thus function as a hedge against uncertainty in the US - India relations and also act as a complementary factor in the long-term balancing posture of India against China. This will reinforce Indian quest for strategic autonomy under environments of multi-polarity or near multi-polarity (Tellis, 2016).

India has adopted a calibrated stance since the eruption of the Ukraine conflict in 2022. It is neither out rightly condemning Russia nor fully approving its actions, but calling for the diplomatic dialogue and a peaceful resolution. This approach shows Indian pursuit of strategic autonomy, balancing the needs of continuing strong ties with Moscow against the growing technology and security partnership with Washington. Energy cooperation has been key element of the post-Ukraine relationship. Despite imposition of trade penalties and sanctions by Western countries on Russian energy exports, supply of discounted Russian crude oil to India have surged sharply, making it one of the largest Russian oil importers which consequently boosted bilateral trade. Connectivity and economic initiatives, such as an aspiring five-year economic roadmap to increase bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030 and the Vladivostok - Chennai maritime corridor have signaled a deepening of the partnership despite pressures from the Western countries. Meanwhile, growing economic and military might of China is reinforcing incentives of India to broaden cooperation with Western partners and

diversify defense supplier to hedge against an increasingly assertive Beijing (Tellis, 2016). Russia – India ties, in this sense, show that how India successfully manages multiple alignments, navigating the demands of US – India cooperation while preserving long standing relations with Russia in a near multipolar global order.

d. India–United States Relations

US - India ties have deepened progressively over the past two decades, growing from limited strategic engagement to a broad, multidimensional partnership covering regional security cooperation, energy, trade, technology, and defense (Burns et al., 2023). The bilateral relationship has been chiefly driven by the stability of global supply chains, the rise of hybrid threats, and converging concerns over Chinese assertiveness in the Asia Pacific region. Key manifestations include active participation of India in monolateral frameworks such as the Asia Pacific Economic Framework and the Quad, joint military exercises like Malabar, intelligence-sharing agreements, and the expansion of defense interoperability. Though India has embraced these opportunities, it has concurrently sought to preserve relations with Russia and other regional powers, maintain independent foreign policy decision making and maintain strategic autonomy. Broader great power tensions and conflict in Ukraine have further reinforced careful calibration of India, as it leverages ties with the United States to enhance deterrence against China while evading full alignment that might restrict its freedom of maneuver.

US - India relations are experiencing episodic strains, during the Trump administration, largely driven by divergent approaches to the multilateral institutions tariff impositions, India – Russia ties and trade disputes (Burns et al., 2023). U.S. threats of revoking preferential trade status of India under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), coupled with imposition of tariffs on aluminum and steel, undermining New Delhi confidence in economic reliability of the United States. Simultaneously, varying messaging on global governance and withdrawal of the United

States from the Paris Climate Accord unilaterally reinforced Indian perceptions that the administration's Western hemisphere specific focus may affect their long-term strategic partnership. Analysts argue that these tensions reflect the Trump administration's emphasis on immediate economic leverage, bilateral bargaining, and a selective vision of global order, which occasionally conflicted with India's long-term strategic and economic priorities, illustrating the delicate balance inherent in hedging strategies amid asymmetric power dynamics. As conclusion, US - India ties demonstrate a mix of calculated autonomy and pragmatic partnership, exemplifying broader strategy of hedging and issue specific balancing within a near-multipolar regional environment (Usmani, 2026).

Though the US-India relations have grown significantly through the critical technology initiatives and Quad, fissures however, emerged in the bilateral ties due to some regional diplomatic moves, US scrutiny of India's energy purchases and tariff disputes. On the other hand, India continues to rely on Russian oil/ energy and military hardware. Regardless of the US and Western pressures, India continued expanding discounted priced energy trade and is pursuing new logistics ventures like the Northern Sea Route (Krishnan, 2026). In the US-Iran war, though India acted cautiously still its tilt towards US, Israel and UAE tringle is quite visible. India used to take pride to manage relations with the US, Russia, Israel, Iran and the Gulf States – building defense ties with Israel, buying oil from Iran and Russia, maintaining strategic relations with both the US and Russia and extending economic ties with the Gulf States - still insisting that it would not be drawn into formal alliances or regional camps. Ongoing war the Gulf is stretching that formula to its limits. Narendra Modi government appears to be sensing the pressure and India's ability to balance its ties with the countries having diverse and conflicting interests is under great pressure. It will become almost impossible for India to manage it if the war drags on further.

India is unlikely to put all of its eggs in one basket. It will remain collaborating with the United States

on selected issues like countering Chinese influence in the region, counter terrorism, navigation safeties, safe energy transportation, bilateral trade, military, nuclear and civil technology transfer, and cultural exchanges. India is also likely to remain engaged with Russia in a wide array of mutually benefiting issues like military purchases, gas and oil trade.

Pakistan and the Emerging Geostrategic Environment

Traditionally, Pakistan's alignment is shaped by India-centric threat perceptions and economic fragility. Pakistan was among those countries that remained engaged in block politics and had suffered considerably. In the emerging settings, Pakistan conceptually rejects bloc or camp politics, and wants good relations with all. Pakistan is on the cross road to decide its future inclination. On one side, China has made a deep ingress in Pakistan's market, economy, politics, military hardware, technology and infrastructure development sector on the other, its ties with Russia has improved distinctly, since 2010. The upward trajectory of Russia – Pakistan relations is evident from high-level political and military leadership visits, increase in multi-level cooperation and arms sales. Moreover, populist sentiments in the country are against the West and they want independent policy that can't be exploited by any external power. The youth of the country does not want to be a frontline state against any future adventure. Increasing US inclinations towards India and their multi-layer strategic partnership is seen by the masses as a betrayal. Pakistan relations with the major powers in recent past could be summarized as under: -

a. Pakistan-China Relations: Strategic Anchoring and Regional Hedging

Pakistan-China relations represent one of the most enduring and strategically consequential partnerships in South Asia, rooted in decades of mutual trust, shared geopolitical interests, and complementary strategic needs. These relations sprung in a response to security asymmetry of Pakistan vis-à-vis India and Chinese urge for access to the Indian Ocean and influence in the

region. With the passage of time, this mutual corporation evolved into an “All Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership,” institutionalized in series formal agreements, tying parties into sustained economic engagement, high level defense collaboration, and mutual support (mofa.gov.pk, 2024). High level of this mutual trust has created space for Pakistan to navigate an intricate regional setting characterized by multiple competing powers, and structural disadvantages thus providing an opportunity for balancing the conventional Indian superiority and also a flexibility in strategic alignment choices.

Linchpin of this relationship is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a cornerstone of the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at connecting Arabian Sea ports of Pakistan to western provinces of China. CPEC has accommodated extensive investments in industrial development, transportation, infrastructure, and energy, providing critical economic lifelines to Pakistan for enhancing its resilience against both external pressures and domestic vulnerabilities. Economic ties are complemented by technological and defense cooperation that includes the advanced missile systems, Hangor-class submarines, co-production of JF-17 fighter aircraft, and many more. These collaborations reinforce conventional deterrence of Pakistan vis-à-vis India while conveying messages to the global and regional actors that the robust strategic partnerships that Pakistan maintains is capable enough to counterbalance asymmetric threats.

China-Pakistan strategic partnership was brought into a sharper regional focus during India - Pakistan military escalation of May 2025. Performance of China made weapon systems including fighter aircraft, missile systems and defense platforms, during the conflict, underscored role of China as a vital defense supplier. Beijing reaffirmed its commitments to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Pakistan. This episode demonstrates the dual purpose of China policy towards Pakistan: tangible material support through defense cooperation and arms supply, coupled with cautious public diplomacy aimed at avoiding

explicit alignment in a full scale in an all-out regional war.

China - Pakistan relation, as a whole, represents a mutually essential framework of strategic autonomy, hedging, and regional balancing in the region. Pakistan gains several advantages while maintaining a close partnership with China; firstly, avails flexibility to engage selectively with other powers, including Gulf states and Washington, secondly, capitalizes economic and military support to strengthen its deterrence, and finally, eases structural disadvantages against India. This multi-layered approach shows that in order to pursue influence and survival within a near-multipolar international order, South Asian states navigate regional power asymmetries and systemic constraints.

b. Pakistan – India Paradox

In the regional context, all the major powers in the past used to look into the South Asian countries as separate and independent entities and prepare separate sets of policies to deal with each country, especially India and Pakistan. Since last decade, major powers, especially the United States, have looked into the region through the prism of India. While preparing policies and strategies for South Asia, Washington keeps the interests of India paramount. No doubt, that in comparison to India, Pakistan is not only a small power, but also experiencing economic and internal political problems. Pakistan may not be able to match the power potential, political, economic and strategic clout of India, in its ties with major and world powers. Moreover, Pakistan may not be in the position to significantly contribute to the overall equation in the European front, in events like the Ukraine issue, other than some press statements and vote in favor or against in UNGA or other forums. Pakistan however, still is a vital actor in the developing geopolitical situation in Eurasia. Despite the handicap of mismatch against India, there are some factors that provide substantial leverage to Pakistan in conduct of International Relations. Some of the factors include – geography, significant sway in the Islamic world, evolving nuclear capabilities, strong military and evolving

China–Pakistan economic defence and strategic relations. In May 2025 Indo-Pakistan war and Pakistan's role in the ongoing Gulf crisis have adequately proven that Pakistan is an important player in regional and global context.

c. Pak - Russia Growing Relations

Russia and Pakistan, in the past, could not develop warm relations because of the Cold War contrasting narratives, but now they are trying to put the past memories on the back burner and engage in mutually beneficial relations. Russia has some concerns about close alliances of Pakistan with the West in the past and the fast-evolving Sino-Pakistan strategic relations. Similarly, Pakistan has deep concerns about Indo-Russia strategic relations. Since the past decade, both Russia and Pakistan, are in agreement on common cause to reassess their conjoint relations. Russia is discovering new openings in South Asia while Islamabad is looking for new allies to fill the void, created by its slowly deteriorating ties with Washington. Despite many odds, Pakistan availed the opportunity to establish closer relations with Russia, through bilateral approaches and the common platform of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), led by China.

Pakistan needs diversification in its foreign policy outlook and desires mutually beneficial relations with all the major poles of power, counting Russia, China, European Union, Middle East and the United States. Russia also wants to avoid wide-reaching diplomatic isolation and to carve out a key role in Eurasia. Russia recognizes the value of its deeper ties with SARC countries. Apparently, Russia is deeply interested in coordinating regional issues with Afghanistan's neighbors to achieve a lasting peace in the region. The possibility of recurrence of terrorists' entities in Afghanistan is a common concern for all of its neighbors. A politically and economically stable and peaceful Afghanistan can be a conduit for Russian and Central Asian trades via Pakistani ports. Russia is keenly interested to engage both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

d. Pak-US Rollercoaster Relations and Pakistan's likely Course of Action

Historically, Pak – US relations have been based on certain issues, after the resolution of the issue or achievement of the objective there have always been a chill. Therefore, looking at the curve of the past over seven decades of relationship between Washington and Islamabad, there are a number of ups and downs and gaps but they never take time to be hand and glove again whenever they need each other. If history is the yardstick, then the ongoing frost in their bilateral relations is only a small gap that too shall be bridged or a phase that shall pass, beforehand both sides huddle-up for a particular objective. Recent developments and series of visits by the US civil and military officials indicate that though there may not be a complete reset of relations but both sides may want to open narrow areas of mutual cooperation like the US support for Pakistan on international forums like FATF, getting loans from IMF and World bank and variety of regional issues like dealing with India. Pakistan–US relations improved markedly in the second half of 2025, after President Trump's mediation in war with India.

Several strategic recalibrations and structural incentives might elucidate this unpredicted reconciliation (apnews.com, 2024). Firstly, geopolitical competition with China could have prompted the U.S. to assume supplier diplomacy toward Pakistan, pursuing Islamabad to balance its longstanding cooperation with China with re-engagement in U.S.-led economic and security initiatives. Secondly, economic needs of Pakistan, including desire for diversified foreign investment and balance of payments pressures, could have compelled Islamabad to engage Washington more beneficially. Thirdly, changing priorities of the United States in the Indo-Pacific might have prompted Washington to seek wider strategic partnerships beyond its primary Quad framework, appreciating that Pakistan's geographic location adjacent to Central Asia and Afghanistan may be capitalized to advance regional stability. Analysts could construe such a development as mutual hedging, where both sides expect functional benefits in cooperation that ease regional insecurity and increase policy options without formalizing an alliance

Growing diplomatic credibility of Islamabad, in the US-Iran war has solidified its position as a crucial link for dialogue. Pakistan has thus proved that its role as facilitator and mediator is indispensable for Tehran and Washington. Leveraging its longstanding diplomatic ties with both the Muslim countries and the West Pakistan is increasingly recognized as a reliable neutral facilitator and mediator in global affairs. In a wider context, Pakistan has kept a subtle balancing act with all the great powers including China, the United States and Russia. Instead of choosing sides with any of the great power, Pakistan has effectively placed itself as a neutral hub where opposing powers can involve in beneficial and practical discussions.

Pakistan is pursuing a foreign policy of asymmetric dependence that prioritizes economic diplomacy and national interest over ideological blocs. It maintains an "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership" with China while simultaneously working to improve and balance relations with the US, (a major export market and IMF influencer), developing new energy and trade links with Russia, and Middle Eastern nations to maximize economic opportunities and attract investment.

Smaller South Asian States

a. Bangladesh Toddling Between India and China

During the Cold war Bangladesh like other South Asian countries was out of the scope of super powers competition but in the last two decades, it has shown great progress in economic development, opening up its market and integration in the world economy. Both China and India are enhancing their influence and making great inroads in Bangladesh. India - Bangladesh relation has been boosted since PM Narendra Modi came into power. His visits to Bangladesh in June 2015 and March 2021, helped to solve the contentious border issue, as well as the resolution of the maritime dispute under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. He also signed bridge projects, transport-related deals and trade deals which would help India to maintain

equilibrium with China (timesofindia.indiatimes.com).

Similarly, China - Bangladesh relations have thrived in the recent past. Most of the Bangladeshi Navy ships and submarines are Chinese built. The major hardware supplier of the Bangladeshi army and air force is also China. Despite Indian pressure, Bangladesh has been a partner in BRI since 2016 and China has pledged to undertake 33 billion worth developmental projects in the country. Following the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's regional and international alignment has entered a phase of cautious recalibration rather than abrupt realignment. Dhaka has sought to rebalance its foreign policy by reducing the overt India-centric tilt associated with the Hasina era while reaffirming commitments to strategic autonomy and economic pragmatism.

Due to geography, trade, and connectivity, Bangladesh relations with India remain structurally important but public perceptions and political sensitivities of Indian backing for the former regime have obliged the country's interim leadership to have diplomatic distance. Meanwhile, Dhaka has moved to normalize and modestly expand engagement with Pakistan, mainly in trade and defense sectors, reflecting an effort to diversify regional partnerships without provoking escalation. While continuing functional ties with Beijing as a vital trading partner and infrastructure investor, Bangladesh has internationally pursued renewed engagement with Western states and multilateral institutions for attracting investment, stabilizing the economy, and restoring democratic credibility. This hedging posture is used for balancing regional Muslim partners, China, India and the West. This approach underscores Dhaka's attempt to shield domestic political transition from external pressures and positions alignment not as a tool for ideological commitment but for stabilization of the regime (Khan, 2021).

After coming into power in February 2026, elections, Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has defined its foreign policy by a "Bangladesh First" doctrine. He has prioritized regional alignments to

be based on economic diplomacy, strategic autonomy, and national sovereignty. This outlook is departure from the Hasina's overreliance on India. PM Rahman is interested in diversifying economic, strategic, and labor partnerships with Pakistan, China, and Southeast Asia. Multilateral Balancing of moving away from the old India centric policies to maintaining a realistic equilibrium of having good relations with all the major and regional powers. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's first international visits to Malaysia and China emphasized a concentric focus on acquiring overseas labor markets for Bangladeshi workers and securing foreign direct investment and strategic partnership with China. The new Bangladesh government urged to maintain deep diplomatic ties with India and resolve enduring bilateral friction like an end to border shootings and fair water-sharing agreements. Rahman government is also attempting to rebuild ties with Pakistan, deepen engagements with the broader Muslim world and the United States.

b. Sri Lanka under the focus of Major Powers

To maintain political autonomy and maximize economic benefits, Colombo has often adopted a balancing strategy, engaging both China and India. Recent agreements and investments reflect this dual approach. While India's role in stabilization has expanded, Chinese investments remain significant. Regardless of its cautious approach, Sri Lanka is an essential part of BRI and accommodates several Chinese naval facilities for operating in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka's geostrategic location and geographical terrain offers opportunity for China to build deep seaports for docking large and heavy merchant ships which adequately facilitates the passage of the Chinese commercial ships through the region, outside the Malacca Straits. Sri Lankan port, in the long run may also enable docking of the Chinese Naval Ships and submarines (PICSS, 2025)

Concurrently, engagement of India with Sri Lanka is a blend of economic support, infrastructure investment, and strategic cooperation aimed at deepening bilateral ties and offering appropriate

alternative to Chinese influence, specifically where that influence might compromise policy autonomy of Sri Lanka or Indian Ocean security. Indian support includes credit lines, connectivity projects, security cooperation, and private-sector investments. This approach positions New Delhi as a credible and sustainable partner for Colombo in the 21st century. In overall calculation, despite economic crunch/ Sri Lankan bankruptcy and Indian/ U.S. pressure. Sri - Lanka China strategic cooperation is holding ground and Chinese military and commercial ships are using Sri Lankan ports and facilities to feel its presence in the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously, United States and Indians interests and policies are also being accommodated. Colombo now actively diversifies partnerships to avoid dependency traps and garner economic advantages.

c. Nepal Political Instability and Cautious Foreign Policy Behavior

Alignment strategy of Nepal reflects geographic vulnerability. India remains economically indispensable, yet China offers infrastructure alternatives. Kathmandu practices defensive hedging to preserve autonomy. Ouster of the government in Nepal, in 2025, once again highlighted chronic political volatility of the country and reinforced Kathmandu's enduring strategy of external balancing rather than alignment. The collapse of the ruling coalition, motivated by civil-military sensitivities, constitutional maneuvering, and elite fragmentation, could not produce a major shift in foreign policy orientation but intensified efforts of the country to recalibrate relations with its immediate neighbors (Klasra, 2026). In the regional context and amidst Sino-Indian rivalry along the frontiers of Himalaya, Nepal has avoided undue strategic exposure to China while pursued to manage asymmetric dependence on India. Nepal's primary economic partner and transit lifeline remains India, therefore, notwithstanding recurrent nationalist rhetoric, prioritizing functional engagement for the post crisis government in Kathmandu is not easy. Keeping in view political sensitivity, domestic backlash and Indian concerns, Kathmandu continues selective

cooperation with China on connectivity and infrastructure projects. Post-2025 alignment of Nepal reflects continuity: an emphasis on regime survival, multilateralism, and non-alignment through diplomatic hedging rather than ideological positioning (Pant, 2023). This pattern emphasizes how internal political instability in Nepal reinforces cautious foreign policy behavior, limiting the country's capacity to act as an autonomous strategic actor and instead anchoring its alignment choices within the structural constraints imposed by geography, economic dependence, and great-power rivalry in South Asia.

d. Maldives Closeness with China

Maldives, with 1,200 small islands is of inordinate geographical importance for regional and Extra Regional powers. Maldivian alignment fluctuates with domestic politics. The last two successive governments in Maldives have deepened relations with China and awarded numerous developmental projects to Chinese companies and signed agreements of massive FDI. Maldives has also become part of the BRI network. While coming into power in 2023, President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, has tried to evolve relations with China from initial diplomatic tension to a renewed emphasis on cooperation (Hillman, 2020). While enhancing Chinese investment and trade, Maldives has sought to diversify engagement with New Delhi on economic, security, and development fronts. High-level visits, expanded credit lines, and sustained dialogue reflect a pragmatic approach by both capitals to strengthen bilateral partnership in the face of regional strategic competition. While China finances infrastructure, India remains the primary security provider. Maritime geography ensures continued strategic interest from both powers.

External Variables and Their Impact

a. Middle East Instability

One of the drivers in the strategic alignment of South Asia is the region's deep dependence on the Middle East for investment capital, energy supplies, and remittance inflows. Extent of dependence augments the vulnerability of the

South Asian region to Middle Eastern crises. These crises may arise from the fluctuations in Gulf political stability, regional conflicts or great-power rivalry. For the energy importing economies like Pakistan and India, interruptions in the gas and oil markets of the Middle East directly affect fiscal instability, balance of payments stress and inflationary pressures, thereby constraining foreign policy autonomy (Ruttig, 2022). Middle East is structurally central to the South Asian economic resilience, ensures that regional states must take sensitivities and preferences of the Gulf into their strategic calculations, which often limits space for explicit alignment choices in broader geopolitical rivalries.

Investment of the Gulf countries and remittances have emerged as a decisive instrument determining strategic orientation of South Asia. The United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, in particular, have expanded energy-sector partnerships, infrastructure financing, and sovereign investments, with both Pakistan and India. Despite divergences over regional security issues and Iran, rapidly expanding trade of India with the Gulf has reinforced its pragmatic engagement with Middle Eastern powers. Pakistan, facing constraints of chronic balance of payments, has become even more dependent on deferred oil payment arrangements, deposits, and financial support of the Gulf therefore, further reducing space for the strategic maneuvering.

In this context, the Pakistan–Saudi Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) and expected similar agreement with Kuwait signifies a notable deepening of security ties beyond traditional economic cooperation. The SMDA institutionalizes advisory roles, defense collaboration, joint exercises, and military training, reinforcing position of Pakistan as the Kingdom's long-term security partner. This arrangement not only strengthens bilateral ties but also places Pakistan more confidently within the “Regional Security Architecture” led by Saudi Arabia. This development is more beneficial for Pakistan at a point and time when threat perceptions of the Middle East is evolving. Expected inclusion of Turkey, because of its growing defense

cooperation with both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, may further consolidate a trilateral security framework connecting geopolitics of Middle East with Eastern Mediterranean and South Asia.

The ongoing US-Iran war has deeply ruptured the Middle East. The crunch has exposed a deep rooted and strategic rift among the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The crisis also caused severe economic and geopolitical/geostrategic repercussions throughout South Asia. Iran's attacks on the US bases in the Gulf and interruption of the Strait of Hormuz has clutched the global oil flows. During the crisis, the UAE remained aligned with Israel and the United States. Other Gulf States, particularly, Saudi Arabia has followed a policy of restraint, diplomacy and neutrality to avoid spread of war. Ripple effects of deepening frictions among the two Gulf powers, UAE's withdrawal from OPEC and a decline in economic growth across Gulf markets have been felt in South Asia. The crisis has caused severe energy supply anxieties. Pakistan is cautiously balance its security and economic ties with Saudi Arabia and diplomatic engagements with Iran. Millions expatriates of South Asia working in the Gulf, military threats to infrastructure, closure of airspace, and flight operation suspension of major airline, pose substantial risks to both safeties of the personnel and national remittance economies (World Bank, 2024). This development highlights the degree to which strategic alignments of South Asia continue to dependent on political trajectories of Middle East, where regional actors may not be able to exercise effective control.

b. U.S.–China Strategic Competition

South Asia has increasingly emerged as a secondary theater of U.S.–China strategic rivalry, shaped less by direct great-power confrontation than by the region's asymmetric economic dependencies and security alignments. While the Asia Pacific remains the primary arena of U.S.–China competition, Washington's strategy increasingly treats South Asia as a supporting flank—particularly through India's role as a net security provider and balancing power vis-à-vis China. Strategic salience of India has been steadily

elevated by the United States and integrated it into a wider framework of Asia Pacific arrangements, such as the Quad. U.S. has expanded joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and defense technology cooperation. Elevation of India to such a high pedestal shows that the United States has recognized its growing naval capabilities, demographic weight, geographic location, and made it strong enough to counter influence of China along the Asian littoral and across the Indian Ocean region. This factor however, has not been translated into a region-wide alignment, because anchoring South Asia as a unified strategic bloc needs political and economic efforts and political will (Grossman, 2026).

Almost all of the South Asian states continue to resist overt alignment with either great power, but following hedging strategies considered to maximize economic gains while minimizing strategic exposure. Deep penetration of China into regional economies through supply chains, infrastructure financing, investment, and trade, has caused severe concerns about economic retaliation in the event of explicit political or security alignment with Washington. Both Beijing and Washington have demonstrated willingness to employ coercive economic measures—such as tourism bans, investment slowdowns, increase in tariff or trade restrictions—against states perceived as hostile, have reinforced regional caution. Consequently, South Asian governments tend to rhetorically support a “free and open Indo-Pacific” while avoiding formal security commitments that could provoke Chinese countermeasures. Similarly, increase in U.S. tariff aimed at persuading countries away from business with Russia and Iran compelling regional states not to be in rigid alliance with any of the major powers. Although India is central to Washington strategic planning, it is under heavy tariff for trading with Russia. This pattern underscores a central paradox of Sino - U.S. rivalry in South Asia. The region remains structurally constrained by economic interdependence with China, limiting Washington's ability to convert strategic competition into durable regional alignment.

c. Internal Unrest in Iran and Afghanistan

Persistent economic and political instability in the South Asia neighbor countries – Iran and Afghanistan – create disturbance through indirect but structurally in a significant way, particularly because of ideological spillovers, diaspora labor flows, migrant issues, and energy markets. Although South Asia, barring Pakistan, lies outside Iran's and Afghanistan's immediate strategic periphery, oscillations in domestic instability of these two countries driven by periodic social unrest, elite factionalism, and sanctions pressure, resound across regional energy security matrix, mass migration and spread of terrorism.

Return of the Taliban to power, in Afghanistan in August 2021, significantly increased security risks across South Asia and intensified bilateral tension between Pakistan and India. The post-2021 security environment, has exposed the structural limits of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy, as governances of Taliban have neither prevented Afghan territory from being used by hostile non-state actors nor consolidated internal control (Mozumder, 2026). In sharp contrast, despite lacking formal diplomatic recognition of the Taliban, India has managed to preserve and, in some areas, expand its influence in Afghanistan

through selective diplomatic outreach, development engagement, and humanitarian assistance. This evolving India–Taliban interaction, from Pakistan's perspective, has reinforced long standing concerns regarding Indian sponsored terrorism emanating from Afghan soil, particularly through intelligence cooperation with anti-Pakistan militant networks. The Afghan front has thus re-appeared as a persistent source of instability that constrains chances for regional de-escalation and sharpens Indo-Pak rivalry.

Alignment Typology in South Asia

In sum, strategic alignments of the South Asian states are conditioned by a complex matrix of external variables that include technological competition, trade and energy dependencies, regional instability, and great-power rivalry. Within the region, states adopt “differentiated hedging strategies” to balance immediate security imperatives against long-term strategic and developmental objectives. In response to the unexpected as well as predictable international developments, the interplay of external pressures ensures that alignments are continuously recalibrated, context-dependent, and fluid.

Alignment Pattern	States
Strategic Convergence	India
Asymmetric Dependence	Pakistan
Economic Hedging	Bangladesh
Rebalancing	Sri Lanka
Politically Contingent	Maldives
Buffer Hedging	Nepal

Conclusion

Strategic alignments of the South Asia are best understood and explained through hedging behavior and constrained autonomy rather than alliance theory. Empirical indicators demonstrate that foreign policy choices are more decisively

shaped by domestic politics, defense asymmetries, and economic dependence, not ideological affinity. As systemic competition intensifies, South Asian states may continue to navigate between vulnerability and opportunity. Overall alignment in the region is characterized by following factors:

- States sustain hedging, avoiding polarization while extracting benefits from competing powers.
- Escalating U.S.–China rivalry narrows hedging space, increasing instability.
- Limited cooperation on trade, connectivity, and climate security mitigates rivalry effects.

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