

Choice Paradox: How South Asian Countries Choose Between China And The Us

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Abstract

In international relations, countries engage, disengage, and re-engage, keeping in view their core interests in the region. While engaging or making friends in the region, countries need to have a careful choice. Such type of advice came from one of the top diplomats in Pakistan. It is also a well-established fact that ‘nothing is permanent but the interest of the countries’. The dilemma among underdeveloped countries is that, for one reason or the other, they opt to engage with a country that is more powerful: economically, militarily, and technologically. This article explores the choice paradox of the South Asian countries while choosing between China and America. Further, it explains the choice paradox as theorized in International Relations, and sheds light on how and why South Asian states engage with Beijing and Washington for their economic stability, security, and democracy in the region. What is the impact of this engagement (China and American engagement with South Asian states) in the region? Based on the Choice Paradox theorization in IR and qualitative research (secondary and primary sources of data), this paper will reach its findings and conclusion.

Keywords: International Relations, Choice Theory, US and South Asia, China and South Asia.

Introduction

The choice between China and the United States for South Asian countries is often seen as a paradox because both countries have significant economic and political influence in the region. China is a major trade partner and investor in South Asia. It is an economic giant in the region. Countries in South Asia look for alliance-making. China’s investment in several infrastructure projects often attracts third-world countries. Along the same line, South Asian states also prefer to have closer links with America in terms of security. They think that America is militarily still a powerful country that possesses modern weaponry technology in addition to democratic values. While India as a growing power in the region is a strong ally of the US in the region. It has stronger security relations with them. However, security and democratic values are

significant for India to have closer linkages with America in the region. Ultimately, the decision of which country to align with depends on the specific priorities and needs of each South Asian country.

The South Asian states used to see China as a threat, but now they see it as a chance for different kinds of growth. The Chinese growth model has had great success and could soon replace the Western and even the Indian models. On the other hand, this makes me wonder what it means for India, the developed West, and the developing and middle-income countries that edge India. For China, foreign policy is still mostly about China, even though the main reason for China’s presence in South Asia has changed a lot. The economic power of China poses unique dangers to countries that border India and to the world’s political economy as a whole. Some of these

problems are worries about people's safety, the connectivity of economies, and the connection between the quality of physical infrastructure and the provision of public goods on a global scale. Since China is a major power, their need to move goods through South Asia is seen as a difficult new reality (Ping, J. H. 2013).

Notably, South Asia is currently facing a space security issue because of the unique and unusual character of the space interactions between the United States and China. The misinterpretation and misunderstanding between the United States and China in the field of space has caused a strategic reorientation in the bilateral relations of China, India, and Pakistan. This has led to the emergence of a security conundrum. All three states prioritize their space programs based on socioeconomic and national security interests. All three global powers acknowledge the strategic significance of space as a developing battleground. Nevertheless, the unequal distribution of power in South Asia has redirected attention towards space-related skills as a powerful tool for strengthening authority and advancement. Hence, spatial considerations have exacerbated the security predicament for opponents in South Asia, forging a nexus between China, India, and Pakistan within an intricate global security framework (Khan, Z., & Khan, A. 2019).

In addition to the economic and security considerations, South Asian countries also have to consider other factors such as historical ties, cultural similarities, and geopolitical considerations when deciding whether to align more closely with China or the United States. For example, India has traditionally had close ties with the United States but has also been increasing its economic engagement with China in recent years.

Pakistan and China are strategic partners in the region. In connection with this, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

is being considered as a linchpin project for both countries. This project is a crucial part of a mega project- BRI. In addition to this, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives have also good economic relations with Beijing in the region. China has been investing in ports, railways, highways, and power plants. These investments are important for the socio-economic development of their respective societies. However, the growing competition between the US and China has caused some countries in the region to adopt and observe a precautionary approach in their relationship with both the powerful countries in the region. It is interesting to note here that Nepal and Bhutan are two countries in the region that are avoiding dependence on the US and China. They might be considering issues like human rights and democracy. In this regard, America is being considered a champion of human rights and democracy while condemning human rights committed by China in Tibet and Xinjiang.

While some of the countries in the South Asian region prefer economic development over democratic values, such a policy among countries in the region makes them closer to China. There is no doubt that China is a growing power, both economically and militarily. Given the increasing influence and power of China in the region, states might opt under pressure from China. To avoid any backlash in the future, South Asian countries might be inclined towards China. However, the American-Indo-Pacific alliance through India is expected to influence China in some way in the future.

It would be wrong to assume that making a choice between the US and China for the South Asian countries depends on the priorities of each country in terms of democracy, human rights, trade, and security. It is very difficult to choose without weighing the cost-benefit analysis among the foreign policy circles in each country in the region.

Literature Review

There are several studies on US and Chinese engagement in the South Asian region. They have diplomatic, economic, military, and political relations in the regional countries, for instance, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. There are several domains in which Americans are engaged with the regional countries, such as the economy, technology, military, terrorism, and climate change. It has been giving aid and support to countries that are economically and politically on the verge of collapse. While China is exactly doing the same thing but in a different way, Their approach is multi-dimensional. They have launched many initiatives through the BRI project in the region. They are building ports, railways, and highways. In addition to this, they are trading, investing, and aiding individually and collectively. The partnership is believed to be a win-win deal for other countries in the region. By offering economic engagement, the Chinese believe that they are supposed to bring peace, stability, and prosperity to the countries in the region. It would be safe to assume that China and the US are vying for power and influence in the region by adopting different approaches.

China is more interested in making investments and building up infrastructure than the US is in improving ties, working together on security, and giving China money. The countries in South Asia are carefully balanced between these two superpowers so that they can further their own national goals. This makes the region's politics very complicated. Consequently, the constantly changing relationships between the US, China, and South Asian countries affect world politics and the stability of the area. There are several studies on US and Chinese engagement with South Asian countries. Research scholars focus on American and Chinese engagement with South Asian states in terms of politics, military, and economics. (Papatheologou, et al., 2020; Chari, P. R., et al., 2009; Ejaz, K.,

& Jamil, F. 2022; Kumar, S. 2019, Jia, C. 2017). This research focuses on how South Asian countries choose between the US and China.

Choice Paradox Theorization in IR

In the realm of international relations, the concept of "choice theory" does not have a direct association with any one individual or originator. Instead, it is a holistic theoretical perspective that integrates ideas from several scholars and fields, including sociology, political science, and economics. The ideas for rational choice theory have been influenced by various academic disciplines. Rational choice theory is a major intellectual framework that upholds the principles of choice theory. Mostly these academics belonged to America. Rational choice, strategic, and game theory were introduced by Kenneth Arrow, Anthony Downs, Robert Powell, and Thomas Schelling. Its foundation is deeply rooted in economics, rational choice theory, and game theory. This development, in theory, has been analyzed to assess the behavior of states and the relationships between countries in the field of international relations. In connection to this several experts have put the foundation of their scholarly works on this theory. For instance, (Schwartz, B. 2015; Fernandez, C. 2017; Kinjo, K., & Ebina, T. 2015; Robert, L. P., & Dennis, A. R. 2005, and Piasecki, M., & Hanna, S. 2011).

The choice paradox in international relations refers to the idea that countries may not always make the best choices for themselves when it comes to foreign policy, even if they have all the necessary information and resources. This can happen for a variety of reasons, such as domestic politics, bureaucratic politics, and cognitive biases. It is the concept of "groupthink," which occurs when individuals within a decision-making group prioritize the preservation of group cohesion over the objective assessment of the situation.

Moreover, the choice paradox is a complex phenomenon in international relations. It is problematic in the sense that it is based on several considerations, such as domestic politics, cognitive biases, perceived threats, strategic interests, bureaucratic hurdles, interest groups, and conflicting interests. It often blurs the vision and foresightedness of the leadership while making foreign policy decisions. Sometimes there are more costs than benefits concerning choosing powers in the region. To avoid these issues, one needs to have a complete understanding of factors and forces. For example, open discussions, and listening to dissenting voices. These approaches might help leadership overcome biases, promote cooperation and harmony, and reduce the influence of bureaucratic hurdles in foreign policy decision-making.

Glancing over the History

China and South Asian countries' linkages date back to ancient times. The connecting point for these countries was trade routes through the Silk Road in the region. Chinese leaders visit Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka to stress their commitment to South Asia and reassure their partners that improving Sino-Indian relations will not hurt them. Beijing supports the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence for bilateral conflict resolution. Additionally, it criticizes India's use of diplomatic coercion for security. Beijing and Pakistan's nuclear and missile development has strengthened their diplomatic relationship. New Delhi closely monitors China-India's neighbors' political and strategic relations. Chinese national security calculations are expected to prioritize South Asia in the 21st century based on strategic and economic trends. China-India conflict in southern Asia and the northern Indian Ocean may shape Asian geopolitics (Malik, J. M. 2001).

In modern times, China has been a major economic partner for many South Asian countries, particularly through infrastructure projects and investment. However, there

have also been tensions, particularly over territorial disputes in the region. The relationship between South Asian countries and the United States has also been complex. Historically, the US has had strong ties with Pakistan, but its relations with other countries in the region have been more distant.

In the recent past, India and the US have inked landmark defense deals. These defense agreements are being taken as a counterbalance to China's increasing influence in the region. American engagement in Afghanistan has made the situation cloudier and has paved the way for China to engage in the regions where America is leaving. China, for a long time, has been deeply engaged with the South Asian states through land and sea. It is making inroads through the exchange of goods and cultural exchanges in the region. Developments and economic engagement in other regions of the world in areas like ports, railways, highways, trade, and investments have been making China even more attractive in the region. There have also been tensions in the relationship. Some South Asian countries have been concerned about the potential debt burden and lack of transparency associated with BRI projects, while others have expressed concerns about China's territorial claims in the region. India and China have long-standing border disputes and competing strategic interests in the region.

In recent years, the US has sought to strengthen ties with India as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region. The US and India have a strategic partnership and have cooperated on a range of issues including defense, trade, and counter-terrorism. The US has also been involved in conflicts in the region, such as in Afghanistan, and has a strong military presence in the region. Therefore, the relationship between South Asian countries and China, as well as the United States, is multi-faceted and has been shaped by a

range of economic, political, and strategic factors over time.

China And South Asian Countries

There are many studies conducted collectively and individually by various scholars on China. For instance, (Mahesar, P. A. 2019, Mahesar, Pervaiz., Chow-Bing, Ngeow., & Rogers, Roy. 2019, Chow-Bing, N., Mahesar, P. A., & Rogers, R. A. 2018, Mahesar, P. A., Ghumro, A. K., & Mahesar, A. H. 2020, and Mahesar, P. A. 2020). Though China and South Asian countries have a long history of cultural, economic, and political ties. China is a major trade partner for many South Asian countries, and the two regions have a growing economic relationship. In recent years, China has also invested heavily in infrastructure projects in South Asia, including ports, power plants, and highways. However, there are also political tensions between China and some South Asian countries, particularly in the areas of territorial disputes and human rights (Sahoo, P. 2013).

The history of relations between China and South Asian countries dates back centuries. The ancient Silk Road trade routes connected China with South Asia, facilitating the exchange of goods and ideas between the two regions. During the colonial era, South Asian countries were under British rule while China was under the control of the Qing dynasty and later the Republic of China. After World War II and the decolonization of South Asia, both China and the newly independent South Asian countries established diplomatic relations and began to build economic ties. In recent years, China has been investing heavily in infrastructure projects in South Asia as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at boosting economic growth and connectivity in the region (Samaranayake, N. 2019).

Besides positive developments, there is also cooperation and competition in Chinese engagement with the South Asian states. In

line with this, the Chinese strategic relationship has been growing rapidly. Many experts agree that China is investing in ports, shipping cooperation, railways, and infrastructure development in regions like Asia, Europe, and Africa. However, these developments are not sailing smoothly in all regions. Some states have shown their concern regarding the increasing burden of debt and the lack of transparency in trade deals (Malik, J. M. 2001). China has territorial issues with some states in the region. For example, India and Bhutan. However, human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang have also been alarming for some of these countries. It has also been a source of tension among the Muslim population in the region. The Chinese presence in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti has been an alarming situation for South Asian countries. Hence, Chinese engagement in the region is a mix of economic, political, and security factors (Singh, S. 2000).

America And South Asian Countries

The relationship between the United States and South Asian countries is complex and multifaceted, shaped by a mix of economic, political, and security factors. Historically, the U.S. has had strong ties with South Asian countries, particularly India and Pakistan, and America is highly engaged economically and strategically with many countries in South Asia (Thomas, R. G. 1981 and Kreisberg, P. 1989). America has established strong linkages with the South Asian states by enhancing its commercial and economic relations. It has launched initiatives like the U.S.-India Strategic Partnership and the U.S.-Pakistan Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. America is perceived differently in the region. Some view its relations with India as counterbalancing China, while it has complicated relations with Pakistan. Though America has been aiding and trading with Pakistan for a long time, they lack trust and

credibility. Islamabad has often been pushed to do more in terms of the war against terror, and governments have been criticized more often.

Holistically, American engagement with the South Asian region has been more about security than economics and trade. It has actively played a pivotal role in the war on terror in the region. It remained in Afghanistan for more than eighteen years and later withdrew from this volatile region in haste. This was seen as a bad omen for the peace and stability of the region. However, American engagement in the region is often shaped by factors like economics, politics, and security (Guihong, Z. 2003).

In addition to the economic, political, and security factors, the U.S. has also been involved in various cultural and educational exchange programs with South Asian countries. These programs aim to promote mutual understanding and cultural exchange between the U.S. and the region. It has also been involved in various humanitarian and development assistance programs in South Asia. These programs aim to address poverty, hunger, and other development challenges in the region, and include initiatives such as the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the U.S. government's Global Health Initiative (GHI).

The U.S. has been working towards a peaceful resolution of the long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan over the region of Kashmir, which has been the cause of several wars and border skirmishes between the two countries. The U.S. also has been involved in counter-terrorism efforts in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where it has been actively fighting against the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations (Gojree, M. U. 2015).

It is to be noted that the relationship between the United States and South Asian countries is complex and multifaceted, shaped by a mix of economic, political, security, cultural,

educational, and humanitarian factors. The U.S. continues to be an important economic and strategic partner for many countries in the region, and it remains actively engaged in efforts to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the region (Mohan, C. R. 2008).

Impact Of Engagement

The impact of the relationship between China, the United States, and South Asian countries on the region has been significant. Economically, China's Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S.'s economic and commercial ties with the region have brought significant investment and development opportunities to South Asia. The infrastructure projects funded by China, such as ports, power plants, and highways, have improved connectivity and accessibility within the region and beyond, boosting trade and economic growth. On the other hand, U.S. trade and investment in the region have also helped to create jobs and promote economic development (Qais, U., Aziz, A., & Fazil, D. 2023).

In the political domain, China's territorial disputes with some South Asian countries, particularly India and Bhutan over the Himalayan border regions, have been a source of tension. Additionally, China's treatment of ethnic minorities, particularly the Uighurs, has been a source of tension between China and several South Asian countries with large Muslim populations. The U.S. has been actively promoting its relationship with India as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region, which can have both positive and negative effects on regional stability. Security has also been affected by the relationship between China, the U.S., and South Asian countries. China's military presence and naval bases in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti have sparked concerns in India about China's growing military influence in the region. U.S. counter-terrorism efforts in the region, particularly in Afghanistan and

Pakistan, have helped to combat terrorism, but have also led to concerns about civilian casualties and human rights abuses.

Conclusion

The relationship between China, the U.S., and South Asian countries has had a significant impact on the region, both positive and negative. (Khan, Z. 2022). The economic and infrastructure developments brought by China and the U.S. have brought significant benefits to the region, but the political and security concerns have also created challenges for regional stability. Smaller nations in South Asia choose their relations based on their security threats, economic instability, and geographical proximity. However, with time friends and alliances change given the influence of competing powers at a global level.

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