
Balancing Acts: Afghanistan, India and Strategies for Managing Pakistan– Russia Engagement in the region

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***Abstract:** The period from 2001 to 2021 saw India establishing robust ties with Afghanistan through significant economic aid and infrastructure development, with a recorded cost of \$3 billion, claimed at ensuring Afghan stability. Pakistan, however, viewed these growing India-Afghanistan relations with suspicion, fearing encirclement and increased Indian influence in the region, specifically against its national interests. In response, Pakistan, with support from Russia, engaged with the Taliban to restore their government in Afghanistan by sponsoring peace dialogues with the assistance of China and Iran, thereby seeking to counter US-India collaborative strategies aimed at regional dominance. Hence, within the theoretical frameworks of balance of power, classical neorealism and hegemonic stability theory; this study explores several key aspects of this geopolitical relationship, such as, the impact of Indian investment on the joint interests of Russia and Pakistan, the nature of these joint interests, and whether their policies in Afghanistan can be considered balancing acts against India-US ties. Additionally, it examines potential future policies of Russia and Pakistan in light of expected Indian efforts to reassert influence in the region. By utilizing qualitative analysis of diplomatic communications and policy documents, this study draws on previous literature including works by Shuja Nawaz (2020), Ren Mu (2021) and Kirill Krivosheev (2024) to contextualize the shifting dynamics. As post-15/8/2021 Afghan politics reflect the undermining of India's strategies for the region, this study also highlights the joint interests of Pakistan and Russia and their*

balancing acts to ensure that the interim government of the Afghan Taliban aligns with broader regional interests.

Keywords: *Chabahar-Gwadar Memorandum of Understanding 2016, Win-Win Strategy, Central and South Asia, Eurasian Economic Union, CPEC, Post-US Afghanistan*

Introduction

Utilizing the concept of balance of power within the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, this study focuses on the strategic maneuvers of Pakistan and Russia against India (and its alliance with United States for Afghanistan and the region around). As neoclassical realism, combining classical realist and neorealist theories, posits that a state's actions in the international system are influenced by systemic variables such as power distribution, cognitive variables including perceptions of threats, and domestic variables like state institutions and elites¹; this framework is pivotal in understanding how India, with support from the United States, sought to establish and maintained a significant presence in Afghanistan, claimed that their policies were in the best interest of the Afghan people (Paliwal, 2017, p. 13). Conversely, Pakistan and Russia, operating within the classical neorealism paradigm, aimed to balance these power dynamics by supporting the Taliban, thereby asserting their influence in the region (Nawaz, 2020, p. 329). Ebrahim Aliyev (2023) argues that, "the India's involvement in Afghanistan, particularly from 2001 to 2021, can be seen as an attempt to secure its strategic interests while claiming to promote stability and development in Afghanistan. India's approach was multilayered, encompassing economic aid, infrastructure development and diplomatic engagement, with a recorded investment of \$3 billion. This substantial financial commitment was directed towards various sectors, including healthcare, education, transportation and energy, reflecting India's apparent intent to build a stable and prosperous Afghanistan. Likewise, India's economic aid to Afghanistan, amounting to approximately \$790 million, was apparently aimed at promoting long-term stability and development. Key projects included the construction of the Afghan Parliament, the Salma Dam and significant contributions to construct or establish healthcare and education centers. The new Afghan Parliament building, inaugurated in 2015, exhibited as a symbol of India's apparent commitment to Afghan democracy. At the same time, the Salma Dam, also known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, inaugurated in 2016, played a vital role in providing electricity and irrigation, thus projecting how much India had been serious for Afghan national growth. However, all this was just to economically devalue Pakistan by encouraging Afghanistan and Central Asian states to bypass China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by idealizing longest expensive trade route of Herat-Mashhad-

¹ (Mu, 2021)

Chabahar. Another secret aim of India was to destabilize Pashtun belt of Pakistan by triggering either Pashtun ethno-national separatism (propagating by utilizing Afghan soil) or religious militancy / radicalization" (Aliyev, 2023).

In the same paradigm, Shalini Chawla (2023) highlights that, "India had also invested heavily in humanitarian aid and capacity-building initiatives in Afghanistan during 2001 to 2021. This included providing scholarships to Afghan students, training civil servants and police officers, and sending substantial amounts of food and medical supplies. Such efforts were intended to improve the quality of life for ordinary Afghans and build goodwill towards India, positioning it as a benevolent and reliable partner. India's strategy was not merely altruistic; it was also driven by a desire to counter Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and ensure that Afghan soil would not be used for anti-India activities. This was particularly important given the historical context of Pakistan's support for militant groups that have targeted India. By establishing strong ties with the Afghan government and investing in its stability, India aimed to create a buffer against these threats" (Chawla, 2023, pp. 33-34).

However, Pakistan viewed India's growing presence in Afghanistan with deep doubt, interpreting it as a strategic encirclement. Pakistan feared that India's influence in Afghanistan could undermine its own national security and geopolitical interests. In response, Pakistan, supported by Russia, began to engage more actively with the Taliban, seeking to restore their government in Afghanistan through sponsored peace dialogues. This effort was further reinforced by the assistance of China and Iran², who were also interested in countering US-India collaborative strategies aimed at regional dominance. The strategic calculus of Pakistan and Russia involved not only balancing against India's influence but also ensuring that the government in Kabul would be friendly to their interests. This was achieved through a combination of diplomatic efforts and material support for the Taliban, who were seen as the most effective force against the Afghan government backed by the US and India (Zaheer & Asim, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan* (Volume 02), 2024).

Ali & Mu (2024) discuss that, "the involvement of Russia and Pakistan in supporting the Taliban is traced through the lens of classical neorealism, which emphasizes the importance of power and security in international relations. By aiding the Taliban, Russia and Pakistan aimed to create a counterbalance to US

² China and Iran, at that time, also intended to change the regime in Afghanistan due to their economic interests. First, the Chabahar-Gwadar Memorandum of Understanding in 2016 paved the way for Iran to become a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Secondly, the China-Iran 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership provided a comprehensive framework for not only both countries but also Pakistan and other Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries, including Russia, to ensure a friendly regime in Afghanistan. A regime that would devalue the India-US hegemonic interests in the region. Therefore, China and Iran both assisted Pakistan and Russia in peace dialogues to oust India and the United States from Afghanistan (Asim, 2023).

and Indian influence in Afghanistan. This strategy was also aligned with their broader geopolitical goals, such as limiting NATO's presence in the region and securing their own borders against potential threats. The win-win strategy under classical neorealism is evident in how Pakistan and Russia positioned themselves as allies of the Taliban. They framed their support as being in the best interests of Afghanistan, presenting themselves as advocates for Afghan sovereignty and stability. This narrative was crucial in legitimizing their involvement and gaining acceptance from various factions within Afghanistan" (Ali & Mu, 2024).

Moreover, the post-15/8/2021 political landscape in Afghanistan, following the Taliban's takeover, highlights the complex relationship of these strategic interests. The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the subsequent rise of the Taliban marked a significant shift in the balance of power in the region. For India, this development represented a major setback, as years of investment and strategic planning appeared to be undone. Conversely, Pakistan and Russia viewed the Taliban's return as a validation of their long-term strategy. They sought to engage with the new regime, ensuring that their interests were protected and that Afghanistan did not become a hub for extremist activities that could threaten their security (Ganaie & Ganaie, 2022).

This study investigates the implications of these alliances for regional security and geopolitics, posing critical questions about the future stability of Afghanistan and the broader Central and South Asian region. As this study has now to investigate;

- 1) Did Indian investment in the region, particularly in Afghanistan, really affect the joint interests of Russia and Pakistan?
- 2) What are the joint Russian-Pakistani interests in Afghanistan?
- 3) Can Russia-Pakistan joint policies for Afghanistan be defined as balancing acts against India-US ties?
- 4) What can be the future policies of Russia and Pakistan in Afghanistan in response to any expected Indian effort to restore its influence in the region?

However, first, this study must explore the existing literature on this subject and trace how other scholars and researchers have defined the respective phenomena.

Literature Review

To address the research questions concerning the strategic dynamics involving India, Pakistan, Russia and Afghanistan, this study reviews and synthesizes existing literature. By examining key works, it identifies

gaps and highlights how various authors contribute in understanding of the region's geopolitical landscapewithin the context of balancing power dynamics.

Recent studies, such as those by Sharma (2024) and Shekhawat & Jayaprakash (2024), offer insights into the evolving roles of India, Russia and Pakistan in Afghanistan. Sharma (2024) highlights how India's investment in Afghanistan has been primarily aimed at promoting economic development and countering Pakistani influence. The Indian government has invested in infrastructure projects, such as the Chabahar Port and various development initiatives, which have been designed to strengthen Afghanistan's economicindependence and reduce its reliance on Pakistan. However, this investment has had mixed repercussions for Russia-Pakistan joint interests. While India's presence has aimed at reducing Pakistan's strategic leverage, it has inadvertently strengthened the Russo-Pakistani alliance. Russia's strategic interest in minimizing the spread of terrorism from Afghanistan has aligned with Pakistan's need to stabilize its western neighbor to secure the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other regional projects. The literature indicates that Indian investment has indirectly encouraged Russia and Pakistan to enhance their cooperation, focusing on stabilizing Afghanistan and countering terrorism.

Despite this, there is a literature gap concerning how precisely Indian investments have altered the strategiccalculus of Russia and Pakistan on the ground. While Sharma (2024) and Shekhawat & Jayaprakash (2024)offer a broad overview, more detailed empirical studies are needed to assess the direct impacts of specific Indian projects on Russo-Pakistani cooperation and regional stability.

Kaushiki (2024) presents a comprehensive analysis of the factors leading to a strategic rapprochement between Russia and Pakistan. The paper outlines how both countries have converging interests in Afghanistan, primarily driven by the need to counter terrorism and secure economic routes. Both Russia and Pakistan view Afghanistan's stability as vital for their regional security and economic ambitions. Russia's engagement with the Taliban and its efforts to integrate Afghanistan into the Eurasian economic space are aligned with Pakistan's strategic goals, particularly concerning CPEC and broader regional stability.

Hussain (2019) further explores this convergence, detailing how both nations aim to mitigate the threat of terrorism from groups like ISKP³ and to prevent the destabilization of Central Asia. The shared interest incountering terrorism and securing economic projects highlights a significant strategic alignment between Russia and Pakistan.

³ ISKP stands for "Khorasan Province of Islamic State", propagated by ISIS militants once based in Iraq and Syria (Asim, 2023).

However, the literature is sparse on how this strategic alignment translates into concrete policy actions and cooperation mechanisms. While Kaushiki (2024) and Hussain (2019) discuss the broad strategic interests, there is a need for more specific case studies -- particularly how ISKP was launched in Afghanistan, who weaponized them in Afghanistan province of Badakhshan that is bordered with China, Tajikistan and Pakistan, and why US forces are still stationed in Uzbekistan and tracing strategic space for India in post- Ghani Afghanistan⁴ -- that illustrate how these interests are operationalized in joint initiatives and policies.

The strategic convergence between Russia and Pakistan can be viewed as a balancing act against the growing Indo-US nexus. Hussain (2023) explores how the Indo-US strategic partnership, aimed at countering China, has influenced Russia and Pakistan's policies. Both Russia and Pakistan view the Indo-US alliance with concern, as it potentially shifts the balance of power in South Asia and beyond. He argues that the strengthening of Indo-US ties has prompted Russia and Pakistan to seek deeper cooperation in Afghanistan to counterbalance this influence. This includes their joint efforts to engage with the Taliban and address the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan, which directly impacts their strategic interests vis-a-vis the Indo-US partnership. However, his work also lacked for detailed analyzing of how specific Russo-Pakistani policies directly challenge or counteract the Indo-US nexus.

In terms of future policies, works of various scholars, such as, Arnab Goswami (2022), Ayaz Gul (2022), Seher Kamran (2023) & Zammurd Afshan (2024) exhibit how Russia and Pakistan might respond to potential Indian efforts to restore its influence in Afghanistan. They discuss how Russia and Pakistan are likely to continue their engagement with the Taliban while also working to enhance regional economic connectivity. They suggest that both countries will aim to leverage their relationship with the Taliban to maintain stability and counteract any renewed Indian influence.

The report on Pakistan's hard policy choices (2022), written by Zaheer & Asim emphasizes that Islamabad will likely continue supporting the Taliban but will need to carefully steer its international relations to avoid backlash. It suggests that Pakistan will use its influence to encourage the Taliban to make compromises on governance and counter-terrorism, which could influence future Russo-Pakistani policies.

⁴ According to Kees Eggink, "the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is defined as a regional chapter of the Islamic State, comprising defectors from various extremist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP). The group aims to establish a transnational caliphate and poses a significant security threat, particularly in Afghanistan, where it operates with relative impunity. Allegations that US forces weaponized ISKP in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province -- bordering China, Pakistan and Tajikistan -- stem from theories suggesting strategic manipulation of regional dynamics. These theories argue that supporting ISKP could serve to destabilize the region, counterbalance influence from neighbouring powers, or indirectly support broader US geopolitical objectives. However, such allegations remain contentious and lack concrete evidence" (Eggink, 2024).

Impact of Indian Investment in Afghanistan on the Joint Interests of Russia and Pakistan

Indian investment in Afghanistan has significantly influenced the strategic dynamics of the region, particularly affecting the joint interests of Russia and Pakistan. This impact has been analyzed through the lenses of balance of power and the win-win strategy under neoclassical realism. India's engagement in Afghanistan, particularly following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, represents a strategic recalibration aimed at countering Pakistan's influence and asserting its own regional presence. The Indian government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has maneuvered to enhance its geopolitical leverage by leveraging economic aid and diplomatic strategies, despite the Taliban's controversial governance (Gupta, 2023).

In the wake of the Taliban's rise, India's strategic interests in Afghanistan have been driven by its regional competition with Pakistan. India's decision to open a technical office in Kabul in June 2022 and provide 20,000 metric tons of wheat through Iran's Chabahar port underscores a calculated move to bypass Pakistan, which had previously been a crucial transit route for Indian aid. This shift reflects India's strategic aim to diminish Pakistan's control over Afghan trade routes and assert a more independent role in Afghan affairs. According to Kanika Gupta (2023), the donation of wheat via Chabahar not only strengthens India's soft power but also repositions India as a key humanitarian actor in Afghanistan while circumventing Pakistan's geopolitical sway (Gupta, 2023).

Pakistan's response to India's activities in Afghanistan reveals the tension in its strategic calculations. Historically, Pakistan has sought to maintain a pro-Pakistan Afghan regime to prevent encirclement by India. This geopolitical anxiety is rooted in Pakistan's fear of strategic encirclement if Afghanistan were to align more closely with India, a concern that has driven its support for various militant groups in Afghanistan. The Pakistani military and intelligence establishment's longstanding emphasis on achieving 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan highlights its deep-seated concerns about India's influence. Pakistan's struggle with terrorism from groups like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has only intensified its desire to keep Afghanistan within its sphere of influence, which has been challenged by India's increasing presence (Zaheer & Asim, Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan (Volume 02), 2024).

From the Russian perspective, the evolving situation in Afghanistan has opened new avenues for engagement and competition. Russia's recent decision to remove the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations and its attempts to promote economic ties with Kabul reflect a strategic shift to align more closely with Afghanistan amid a broader regional realignment. Kirill Krivosheev (2024) notes that Russia's interest in Afghanistan includes potential economic benefits, such as using the country as a transit hub for

Russian natural gas and other goods. However, the success of such ventures remains uncertain due to infrastructural and political challenges. Russia's engagement with the Taliban is also seen as a part of its broader strategy to counterbalance Western influence and to secure a foothold in Central Asia, where it faces competition from China (Krivosheev, 2024).

China's influence in Afghanistan further complicates the regional balance. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which China is a key member, has sought to stabilize the region by supporting the Taliban and curtailing Western presence. China's strategy in Afghanistan, which includes investments in energy resources and infrastructure, aligns with its broader goal of establishing a win-win relationship with Central Asian countries. This approach contrasts with India's more adversarial stance towards Pakistan and its strategic maneuvering to enhance its influence in Afghanistan. China's investments, though relatively modest, highlight its interest in ensuring stability and access to regional resources, which indirectly affects the strategic calculations of both Russia and Pakistan (Chatwin, 2024).

According to Javedana Arzu (2024), "the relationship between Indian investments and regional dynamics underlines the complexities of neoclassical realism in international relations. India's strategic investments in Afghanistan, alongside its efforts to bypass Pakistan, reflect a balance of power strategy aimed at countering Pakistan's influence and asserting its own regional dominance. Simultaneously, Russia's attempts to build ties with the Taliban and influence Afghanistan for economic and strategic gains illustrate its efforts to navigate the shifting balance of power in Central Asia" (Arzu, 2024). Therefore, this study finalizes its conclusion on a statement that "the absolute impact of Indian investment on the joint interests of Russia and Pakistan has triggered complex regional rivalries and alignments that define contemporary geopolitics in the region" (Asim, 2023).

Joint Russian-Pakistani Interests in Afghanistan

The joint interests of Russia and Pakistan in Afghanistan are shaped by both strategic and economic considerations, reflecting a multipart chemistry of regional dynamics. Both countries have a vested interest in stabilizing Afghanistan, albeit with differing motivations and approaches.

From a strategic standpoint, Russia and Pakistan are united by their desire to counterbalance the influence of Western powers and India in the region. Russia's engagement with Afghanistan, particularly through diplomatic and economic channels, is aimed at mitigating the risks associated with instability and promoting a cooperative relationship with the Taliban. This is part of Russia's broader strategy to reassert its influence in Central Asia and to counter Western hegemony. The recent decision by Russia to remove the Taliban from its list of designated terrorist organizations indicates a shift towards deeper cooperation, potentially facilitating better security coordination against common threats such as Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K or

ISKP). This alignment reflects Russia's need to stabilize its southern flank and prevent the spread of extremism that could destabilize neighboring regions (Krivosheev, 2024).

For Pakistan, Afghanistan's stability is crucial due to its geographical proximity and historical ties. Pakistan's strategic interest lies in ensuring that Afghanistan remains within its sphere of influence, which helps counterbalance India's regional ambitions. The Pakistani military and intelligence services have long supported factions within Afghanistan that align with their interests, and the Taliban's control over Kabul offers Pakistan a strategic partner in managing regional security dynamics. This partnership is vital for Pakistan as it seeks to maintain its influence and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a base for anti-Pakistan militants (Stolyar, 2023) (Krivosheev, 2024).

Economically, both Russia and Pakistan are interested in Afghanistan as a potential transit hub for regional trade. Russia envisions Afghanistan as a conduit for exporting natural gas and other goods to South Asia, particularly India. However, achieving this goal involves significant infrastructural challenges, including the construction of pipelines and railways that traverse mountainous terrains. The feasibility of such projects remains uncertain, and the required investments are substantial. Similarly, Pakistan sees economic benefits in utilizing Afghan territory for trade routes, enhancing its position as a regional trade hub. However, the practical realization of these economic benefits depends on a stable and cooperative Afghan government, which remains elusive (Asim, 2023).

Hence, this study finds, while Russia and Pakistan share common interests in stabilizing Afghanistan and countering regional threats, their approaches and expectations are influenced by their individual strategic goals and economic ambitions. The joint efforts to engage with the Taliban and explore economic opportunities underscore a pragmatic approach to regional stability and influence, despite the complex realities on the ground.

Joint Russia-Pakistan Policies for Afghanistan as Balancing Acts Against India- US Ties

The joint policies of Russia and Pakistan regarding Afghanistan can indeed be interpreted as a balancing act against the influence of India and the United States. Both Russia and Pakistan view Afghanistan through a strategic lens that aligns with their broader geopolitical interests, which often intersect with their desire to counterbalance Western and Indian dominance in the region. From Russia's perspective, engaging with Afghanistan and the Taliban serves multiple strategic purposes. As the Kremlin seeks to reassert its influence in Central Asia, its policy towards Afghanistan reflects a broader effort to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation. By ensuring a

relationship with the Taliban and exploring potential economic collaborations, Russia aims to position itself as a key player in the region, capable of challenging Western narratives and influence. This strategy is not merely about economic gain but also about undermining Western hegemony and reasserting Russian geopolitical clout (Suleymanov, 2023).

Pakistan's approach to Afghanistan is similarly motivated by a need to balance against Indian influence. With Afghanistan on its western border, Pakistan views stability and control in Afghanistan as crucial to its national security. The Taliban's control over Kabul provides Pakistan with a strategic partner that can help counterbalance India's regional ambitions. This partnership allows Pakistan to maintain its influence in Afghanistan, ensuring that it does not become a base for anti-Pakistan militants and to influence Afghan territory for strategic depth in its regional rivalry with India. The recent agreements between Pakistan and Afghanistan, aimed at boosting trade and managing border tensions, underscore Pakistan's desire to consolidate its influence while countering Indian interests in the region (Muttaqi, 2023).

The United States' involvement in Afghanistan has historically been driven by its counterterrorism objectives and its broader strategic goals in South Asia. The US seeks to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorist groups that could threaten American interests and those of its allies. The Taliban's resurgence has complicated US efforts, leading to a cautious engagement strategy that emphasizes counterterrorism commitments and human rights while refraining from full normalization of relations. This approach aligns with the broader US objective of maintaining regional stability and countering any potential threats emerging from Afghanistan (Bateman, 2022).

Thus, this study evaluates that, the joint policies of Russia and Pakistan towards Afghanistan can be seen as deliberate moves to balance against the strategic interests of both India and the United States. By engaging with the Taliban and pursuing regional influence, both countries aim to counter Western and Indian dominance in the region, reflecting a pragmatic approach to achieving their geopolitical and strategic objectives amidst the evolving dynamics in South Asia (Zaheer & Asim, Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan (Volume 02), 2024).

Future Policies of Russia and Pakistan in Afghanistan in Response to Expected Indian Efforts to Restore Influence

The evolving geopolitical dynamics in Afghanistan, particularly in light of the Taliban's control and the shifting interests of major regional players, have significant implications for future policies of Russia and Pakistan. Both countries are deeply invested in Afghanistan's stability and its strategic outcomes due to their historical, political and security interests. As India still seeks to restore its influence in post-Ghani or

post-US Afghanistan, Russia and Pakistan are likely to adapt their strategies to counterbalance Indian efforts while pursuing their own national interests. This study has not to explore the anticipated policies of Russia and Pakistan in Afghanistan under the frameworks of neoclassical realism, balance of power and hegemonic stability theory.

Pakistan's Future Policies

Pakistan's future policies in Afghanistan will likely be driven by neoclassical realism, which emphasizes the impact of domestic factors and national identity on foreign policy. Historically, Pakistan has pursued a strategy of "strategic depth" to ensure a friendly government in Kabul that would serve as a buffer against India. However, the Taliban's recent actions, including their support for anti-Pakistan groups such as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), have undermined this strategy. To counterbalance India's influence, Pakistan may adopt a more assertive approach that integrates both domestic and international factors.

- One potential policy shift could involve strengthening border security and increasing military and intelligence cooperation with Afghanistan's neighboring countries, particularly in Central Asia. This aligns with the neoclassical realist view that domestic instability and security concerns drive foreign policy. By fortifying its western border and countering militant infiltration, Pakistan aims to mitigate security threats emanating from Afghanistan and prevent Indian influence from expanding through Afghan territory (Noor, 2024).
- In response to India's efforts to restore its influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan might pursue a balance of power strategy, seeking to build regional alliances to counteract Indian and Western encroachments. Strengthening partnerships with China and other Central Asian countries could be central to this approach. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its potential extension into Afghanistan could serve as a strategic counterbalance to Indian influence. By confirming economic interdependence and infrastructure development, Pakistan aims to enhance its influence and secure its position in the region (Asim, 2023).
- Additionally, Pakistan may engage in diplomatic efforts to isolate India diplomatically within the region. This could involve influencing regional forums and bilateral relations to portray India's actions as destabilizing and counterproductive. By highlighting the security challenges posed by India's engagement in Afghanistan, Pakistan can garner support from other regional players who share concerns about Indian hegemony and seek to maintain regional stability (Aliyev, 2023).
- Under the lens of hegemonic stability theory, Pakistan might adopt policies aimed at disrupting India's attempts to establish regional hegemony through economic and diplomatic means. This includes advocating for regional economic integration that counters India's trade initiatives and promotes alternative trade routes and partnerships. By encouraging economic collaboration with

Afghanistan and Central Asian countries⁵, Pakistan can challenge India's attempts to dominate regional trade and influence (Zaheer & Asim, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan* (Volume 02), 2024).

- Furthermore, Pakistan's economic diplomacy may focus on providing humanitarian aid and economic support to Afghanistan, aiming to win the favor of the Afghan populace and government. This approach aligns with the hegemonic stability theory's notion of economic incentives as a tool for maintaining influence and stability. By positioning itself as a key economic partner for Afghanistan, Pakistan can counterbalance Indian efforts and enhance its own strategic positioning in the region (Zaheer & Asim, *Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan* (Volume 02), 2024).

Russia's Future Policies

Russia's policies in Afghanistan would have to be shaped by neoclassical realism as well, emphasizing the impact of domestic politics and national interests on foreign policy. Russia's historical experience in Afghanistan, coupled with its concerns about regional security, will drive its approach. To counterbalance Indian influence, Russia may focus on strengthening its own strategic position in Central Asia and safeguarding its borders from potential spillover effects of instability.

- Russia's future policies may involve increasing its diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban, while simultaneously reinforcing its security partnerships with Central Asian countries. This strategy aligns with neoclassical realism, which suggests that domestic and regional security concerns drive foreign policy. By strengthening security cooperation and economic ties, Russia aims to ensure stability in the region and prevent the emergence of threats that could undermine its interests (Ali & Mu, 2024).

In this way, Zaheer & Asim (2024) also finds Russian future efforts to add Afghanistan into SCO and EEU as one of the closest regional ally.

- In response to Indian efforts to enhance its influence in Afghanistan, Russia may adopt a balance of power strategy by deepening its alliances with key regional players. Strengthening ties with Central Asian countries, particularly those with historical and strategic ties to Russia, will be critical. By enhancing military and economic cooperation with these nations, Russia seeks to counterbalance India's growing influence and maintain its own strategic position in the region.

⁵ Inauguration of the term "Central and South Asia" for connecting Uzbekistan and Pakistan via Afghanistan in 2021 is one of the examples of Pakistan's balancing acts in a response of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tashkent where he tried to convince Uzbek leadership for bypassing CPEC by utilizing Tashkent-Kabul-Herat- Mashhad-Chabahar longest expensive trade route (Asim, 2023) (Zaheer, *The Emerging Strides of Pak-Uzbek Relations*, 2023).

At this stage, Vahdatyar Agajanov (2024) argues that “Russia has no problem with India in Afghanistan, but with only its strategic alliance with United States. Therefore, even Russia has supported Indian membership in SCO, but Russia is still reluctant for Indian policies in Afghanistan and Central Asia” (Agajanov, 2024).

- Russia may also generate its influence within regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to advance its interests and challenge Indian dominance. By promoting collective security arrangements and economic initiatives, Russia can consolidate its position and mitigate the impact of Indian influence in Afghanistan. This approach reflects the balance of power theory, which underscores the importance of alliances and regional cooperation in countering dominant powers (Arzu, 2024).
- Russia’s approach to Afghanistan may also be informed by hegemonic stability theory, which emphasizes the role of economic and diplomatic strategies in maintaining regional stability. Russia may seek to enhance its economic engagement with Afghanistan through trade agreements and investment initiatives. By promoting economic ties and providing support for infrastructure development, Russia aims to establish itself as a key player in Afghanistan’s economic reconstruction and regional stability (Arzu, 2024).
- Additionally, Russia’s engagement with the Taliban may be framed as a strategic partnership aimed at stabilizing the region and countering extremist threats. By positioning itself as a stabilizing force and offering economic incentives, Russia can enhance its influence and challenge Indian efforts to assert dominance. This approach aligns with the hegemonic stability theory’s focus on using economic and diplomatic tools to maintain regional order and stability (Arzu, 2024).

Common Stances of Russia and Pakistan

By investigating the works of Krivosheev (2024) and Ali & Mu (2024), this study traces some common stances of Russia and Pakistan for their future policies or balancing acts towards region, particularly Afghanistan;

- Both Russia and Pakistan are likely to adopt policies driven by neoclassical realism, emphasizing the impact of domestic factors and security concerns on their approaches to Afghanistan. Shared security concerns, particularly related to the potential spread of extremism and regional instability, will drive their common stances. Strengthening border security, countering militant groups, and enhancing regional cooperation will be central to their strategies (Ali & Mu, 2024) (Krivosheev, 2024).
- Russia and Pakistan may pursue a coordinated balance of power strategy to counterbalance Indian influence in Afghanistan. By deepening their alliances with Central Asian countries and promoting

regional integration, both nations aim to challenge India's efforts and maintain their own strategic positions. Collaborative initiatives, such as joint economic projects and security arrangements, will be key to their approach (Ali & Mu, 2024) (Krivosheev, 2024).

- Under hegemonic stability theory, Russia and Pakistan may work together to challenge Indian dominance through economic and diplomatic means. Enhancing economic engagement with Afghanistan, promoting regional trade, and providing humanitarian support will be central to their strategies. By positioning themselves as key economic partners and stabilizing forces, both countries aim to counterbalance Indian efforts and maintain regional stability (Ali & Mu, 2024) (Krivosheev, 2024).

Conclusion

“Geopolitical rivalries often reveal the hidden interconnectedness of regional strategies”, as noted by former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Under the shadow of this statement, this study emphasizes the complex balance of power in South Asia, where the strategic maneuvers of India's investments and influence in Afghanistan have sparked a coordinated response from Pakistan and Russia, united by their shared interests and concerns. The collaborative efforts of these nations, through engaging with the Taliban and aligning their policies, illustrate a pragmatic approach to managing regional stability and countering perceived encirclement by India and the US. Theoretical insights from classical neorealism and the win-win strategy illuminate how Pakistan and Russia's policies are designed not only to safeguard their strategic interests but also to promote mutual benefits amidst competing global influences. As this analysis reveals, the future of Afghanistan's geopolitical landscape will hinge on the ability of these countries to steer their interests and forge cooperative strategies that ensure regional stability and collective security, emphasizing that true success in international relations lies in the capacity to transform rivalry into opportunity for shared growth and stability.

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