FEATURE

Russia, South Asia, and the United States

A New Great Game?

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Russia will continue to struggle to regain the level of influence in South Asia that its predecessor, the Soviet Union (USSR), had in the 1980s—before it retreated from Afghanistan and before the Central Asian republics gained independence, geographically separating the fledgling Russian Federation from the subcontinent. While Russia has been resurgent in parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia and has succeeded in creating divisions among NATO members and degrading the Western alliance to a limited extent, the power structure in most of Asia has changed to such an extent that Russia's reach and influence are limited and will remain so, especially in South Asia. Structural realism provides the principal explanation for a resurgent Russia's inability to resume its previously dominant role in South Asia. The collapse of the USSR, detachment from South Asia, and the rapid growth of China and India are structural obstacles to renewed Russian hegemony. These dynamics were similar to those that faced Britain and France in the 1940s as they tried but failed to resume their hegemonic roles in Asia. In addition, Russia's acceptance of a junior role in its strategic partnership with China in the 2010s has created another obstacle preventing Moscow from resuming the close partnership that it had with New Delhi in the 1970s and 1980s. Most importantly, the reentry of the US superpower into South Asia in 2001 and America's forging of strategic partnerships with India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, especially using the military instrument of power has Russian preempted resurgence.

With Russia's resurgence under Pres. Vladimir Putin as a major "petro-power" in the 2000s,[1] Moscow has attempted to get back into the Asian game.[2] Besides strengthening military forces in the Far East, Russia has ramped up its "soft power" activities and has led a campaign of "soft balancing" aimed against the United States.[3] Moscow has worked with Beijing and led in enlisting New Delhi into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer in 2005 and full member in 2015 and the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) economic group in 2009; both organizations excluded the United States.[4] Russia has also courted the Taliban and held talks in Moscow concerning a settlement of

the Afghan conflict that could be unfavorable to Washington. In addition, the country has maintained its role as a major arms supplier to India, most notably selling the advanced S400 surface-to-air missile to India in 2018.[5] Russia's increased cooperation with China to counter US dominance in Asia works against India's interests and has been counterproductive in Moscow's efforts to rebuild relations with New Delhi.

A widespread view of Russia's limited resurgence was captured by US Pres. Barack Obama, who responding to Russia's 2014 seizure of Ukraine, commented that Russia was a "regional power" that could only threaten its immediate neighbors, implying that it was not the Soviet superpower that had much greater reach and partnerships.[6] A number of factors preempted Russian resurgence in South Asia, including US military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 to battle al-Qaeda, a "non-NATO major alliance" with Pakistan in 2004 to maintain access to Afghanistan, and a strategic partnership with an increasingly powerful India in 2002 to counter the rise of China. In addition, China surpassed Russia as the most-powerful Eurasian state in the 2000s and assumed a more important role in South Asia, having forged a strategic partnership with Pakistan and encroached on India's northern border.

This article analyzes a contemporary case of the ways in which a resurgent power tries to regain influence in a region where it once was dominant but has been thwarted by changing power dynamics. These dynamics thwart resurgent powers in resuming full membership in a regional security complex,[7] limiting them to transactional relations and "soft balancing," with policies at two different levels that contradict each other.[8] A structural realist approach supports the argument, demonstrating how changing power dynamics in a region have shaped the behavior of great powers and, in particular, thwarting a resurgent power's efforts to reassert itself.[9] In sum, the weakening of a major power, removal from a "neighborhood," and shifting regional power dynamics prevent a resurgent power with even the most-prescient strategy from successfully resuming its role in a neighborhood where it once was dominant.

Approach

The article shall assess the argument by describing how the Asian power structure has changed since the 1970s and 1980s and how Russia's power has been eclipsed; examining Russia's efforts and interactions with India and other South Asian countries in an effort to regain the status that it lost in the 1990s and demonstrating how Russia's efforts are falling short of recouped status by examining Russian relations with India and other subcontinental actors in the 2010s. The article includes a focus on US entry into the subcontinent and its strategic

partnership with India that has preempted Russia's resurgence, as well as analysis of India's grand strategy that emphasizes the US strategic partnership while not excluding engagement with Russia. The article relies upon interviews conducted with Indian governmental and think tanks security experts in December 2017 and upon secondary sources.

The article analyzes the major reasons why the power structure of South Asia has changed so much and why Russia will continue to struggle to regain its status. The first reasons to be explored will be the power that Russia lost because of the Soviet withdrawal from the subcontinent at the end of the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The amount of power that Russia lost in 1991 when the Soviet Union broke up is similar to that lost by Britain and France in the postwar 1940s.[10] The second factor is the filling of the regional power vacuum filled by the China-Pakistan partnership as opposed by India that has complicated Russian efforts to regain status. The third reason is the US reentry into the region in the 2000s, with the United States offering considerable security cooperation to India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, which has created a multipolar structure in the subcontinent wherein there is no space for Russia. The fourth factor is a resurgent Russia leaning toward a rising China, which has created a "two-level game" in which Russia has armed China to counter the United States and India at the continental level, while arming India to counter Pakistan and China in South Asia. Regarding power shifts, Russia's 1991 detachment from the subcontinent and US reentry in 2001 are the most significant.

Constructivism provides a second set of reasons why Russia struggles with regaining influence in South Asia.[11] India and the United States formed their strategic partnership in 2002 based upon the conception that the world's two largest democracies were "natural allies." In 2005, when the Bush administration's commitment to global democracy was at its height, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that US policy was to make democratic India a "global power."[12] The US-based Indian-American lobby has influenced the foreign policies of both democracies, especially in securing the 2008 US–India Nuclear Deal. The lobby has helped to increase US–India engagement, rendering comparatively less effective efforts by a resurgent Russia to resume a prominent role in South Asia.

Constructivism also explains factors that have allowed Russia to make a limited return to the game. Indian leaders' traditional stance of "strategic autonomy" and view of their country as a peace-loving one with a foreign policy based upon "nonalignment" (no alliances; only partnerships) have left the door open to "old friends" like Russia, explaining Moscow's limited revived status in South Asia. While constructivism plays a role in explaining Indian and US behavior, structural realism is more significant in explaining limits to Russian resurgence.

Power Structure of South Asia in the 1970s and 1980s: Soviet–Indian Dominance

Toward the end of the Cold War, the power structure in Asia was one in which the Soviet Union partnered with and armed India and had the upper hand over the United States and its partners—China and Pakistan.[13] During this period, Soviet strategy was to protect its Central Asian territories by supporting allies and partners in South Asia and by being prepared to use hard power. The United States believed that the Soviets were challenging American interests in the Persian Gulf and threatening oil supplies to the West. The Soviet Navy established a presence in the Indian Ocean, and there was evidence that the Soviets were supporting revolutionary movements in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan's Baluchistan Province. The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 heightened US concerns.[14]

In the early 1970s, the United States was bogged down in Vietnam, and China was still in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, weakening both powers. The Soviets had scored a tactical victory over China over the Ussuri River boundary in eastern Siberia in 1969, which also signaled Soviet dominance in Asia.[15] With the onset of the East Pakistan crisis in March 1971 and massive human rights abuses by the Pakistan Army, India sought the backing of the USSR to intervene. In August 1971, Moscow and New Delhi concluded a 20-year "Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation," which established the strategic partnership.[16] The treaty contained an implied Soviet promise not to provide support to Pakistan or its ally—China—in case of a war with India. In December, the Soviet Union supported India in the war to defeat the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan. India's quick victory led to the dismemberment of India's mortal adversary—Pakistan—and to the creation of Bangladesh. In May 1974, the Soviet Union publically supported India's nuclear test as a "peaceful" one, which provided diplomatic cover, though Moscow—as a cosponsor of the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—had pressured New Delhi not to conduct it.[17]

In the 1970s, the USSR became India's major arms supplier. The Soviets facilitated arms sales by permitting India to make deferred rupee payments, easing its chronic foreign exchange shortage. The USSR helped India build factories for the MiG 21 and MiG 23/27 fighter aircraft, which were assembled under Soviet license. The Soviets also sold T-72 tanks and built a repair factory in India.[18] By the end of the 1970s, the USSR was supplying 80 percent of India's arms and had become its number one trading partner. India's reliance on Soviet legacy weapons systems is today a problem that the country is trying to overcome.

In Afghanistan, after Daoud Khan's 1973 coup, Soviet influence grew, culminating in the 1978 communist takeover led by Hafizullah Amin. Pakistan believed that this constituted encirclement and sponsored the Afghan *mujahidin*. The subsequent mujahidin threat to topple the Amin regime led to the Soviet invasion in December 1979 and the installation of the Najibullah regime. India did not oppose the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and kept its embassy in Kabul open. With the occupation, the United States feared that the Soviet strategy was one of gaining access to the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran.[19] Therefore, Washington allied with Pakistan in supporting the Afghan mujahidin. The Soviet occupation led to a decade-long war, which constituted strategic overreach. Also, Rajiv Gandhi replaced Indira Gandhi as Indian prime minister in 1984 and began to open to the West, seeking Western weaponry that was more advanced than that provided by the Soviets.[20] Afghanistan became the USSR's Vietnam and coincided with rapid economic decline, leading to the installation of Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and his *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms and culminating in the dismantlement of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988 and the end of US support for the mujahidin and Pakistan left a vacuum in South Asia that led to chaos in the 1990s, the Taliban–al-Qaeda takeover of Afghanistan in 1996, and a violent extremist campaign in Kashmir against India.

The dismantlement of the Soviet Union led to a sudden drop in GDP—from $2.66 trillion (confirmed by the CIA) in 1989 to less than $1.4 trillion in 1994, rising back to $4 trillion in 2017.[21] Britain and France in the 1940s are comparable cases to the Soviet Union in the 1990s, with both losing power in World War II and, in their limited resurgence, failing to reassert their colonial power in Asia. France's GDP fell from $199 billion in 1939 to $101 billion in 1945, while Britain's GDP rose from $287 billion in 1939 to $331 billion in 1945, thanks in part to US aid during the war.[22] While Russia inherited much of the Soviet Union's aging military hardware, France and Britain slowly rearmed in the 1940s, relying on substantial amounts of American equipment through Lend-Lease (1941–45). In fighting a losing battle to regain control of Indochina (1945–54), France relied heavily on US military support to fight the Vietminh, who the Soviet Union and China backed in the early 1950s. A weakened Britain no longer had the power to hold onto its large Indian colony and was able to work with local forces in waging an anticommunist counterinsurgency in Malaya in the 1950s.[23] Instead of Britain and France resuming their dominant roles, the United States, the People's Republic of China, and the Soviet Union became the major powers in the region. In sum, the weakening of all three powers limited their

resurgence and prevented them from resuming their previously hegemonic roles in distant regions.

In conclusion, the Soviet partnership with India enabled the USSR to wield more power and influence than the United States in South Asia during the 1970s and 1980s. However, the ambitious Soviet strategy led to the excessive use of hard power, overreach, and decline. The United States recovered from the Vietnam War, and Washington's strategy of backing Afghan surrogates helped to exhaust Soviet resources. All told, Russia in the 1990s was much weaker than the USSR and much less able to project military power, as demonstrated by its inability to subdue Chechen rebels between 1994 and 1996 and the rapid decline of the Russian Navy. Just as important, the independence of the Central Asian Republics geopolitically cut off the Russian Federation from South Asia.

In the 1990s, India and China grew economically at a rapid pace and gradually began to fill the power vacuum in South Asia that the Soviet and American withdrawals created**.** China was the fastest-growing economy in Asia, had become the major supporter of Pakistan, and began to concern US hawks. India underwent economic reforms in 1991 that led to high rates of growth and attracted US attention as a possible balancer against China. China's GDP rose from $1 trillion in 1980 to $2 trillion in 1990, to $4 trillion in 2001, and $13.6 trillion in 2018. India's rose from less than $1 trillion in 1990 to more than $2 trillion in 2000 and to $9.5 trillion in 2017.[24] India and Pakistan also tested nuclear weapons in 1998 and almost went to war with each other in 1999. Therefore, by the 2000s, China and India were more powerful, making Russia's resumption of its role in Asia and particularly South Asia that much more difficult.

Russia Resurges and Tries to Get Back in the Game in South Asia: 2000 Onward

With the commodities boom of the 2000s and surge in oil and gas prices—plus the strategic leadership of Pres. Vladimir Putin—Russia began to play a more prominent role on the world stage.[25] In that regard, Putin worked to revive Russia's relations with India. In 2000, the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between India and Russia marked a revival of relations, and the India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission became one of the only bilateral bodies involving India besides one with Japan. In addition, Russia supported India's bid to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Putin worked with China's president Jiang Zemin in formalizing the "Shanghai Five" into the SCO. The charter of the SCO stood for global multipolarity as opposed to US dominance, noninterference in the internal affairs of member

states, and counterterrorism. The SCO also implied the exclusion of the United States from Central Asia and strove for the inclusion of India as a member state. In 2005, India and Pakistan were invited as observer states, but they only became member states in 2015. The SCO has not become a Central Asian NATO that can militarily challenge US dominance in South and East Asia and has merely remained a diplomatic organization, limited to soft balancing against the United States. The reasons for the underperformance of the SCO include Russia's lack of ability to project force and fundamental differences in interests with China. Russia wishes to continue to exercise hegemony in Central Asia, while China has worked hard to open up the region with a free-trade area and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The expansion of the SCO to include India and Pakistan has diluted the organization and made it even more of a diplomatic body than before 2015. For India, the SCO served its foreign-policy stance of strategic autonomy and the cultivation of diverse and sometimes competing partnerships.[26]

The 2008 financial crisis and the US printing of dollars to stop economic collapse led to depreciation of its currency, angering China and Russia. This prompted Russia to hold the first BRICS summit in 2009 in which India was a prominent member. At a time of US weakness, there was talk of putting forward an alternative currency to the US dollar. However, Russia failed to become the driving force behind the BRICS, because China had become the most-powerful economy in the bloc. China became the financial force behind the BRICS and created the BRICS bank, and China's *Renminbi* became the logical alternative currency to the dollar.

The fact that the USSR was India's number one trading partner in the 1980s but Russia is today a distant fourth place exemplifies Moscow's relative economic insignificance. In the 2000s, an increase in trade, rising from $3 billion in 2000 to $10 billion in 2010 accompanied the revival of Indo-Russian relations and the global commodities boom. To some extent, this increase represented Putin's use of "petro-power" and sales of oil and gas to win over potential partners. However, by 2018, trade levels remained relatively flat, though with plans to boost it to $50 billion by 2050. In contrast, US–India trade was valued at $126 billion, Indo-European Union trade at $90 billion, and Sino-India trade at $87 billion; these figures indicate the relative weakness of the Russian economy and the limits of Putin's "petro-diplomacy" in South Asia.[27]

Russia has become subordinate in its strategic partnership with China, which is exemplified by the oil and gas deals that have been struck in recent years and the trade imbalance between the two countries.[28] Furthermore, Moscow has sold more advanced weapons to China than to India and has enabled China to become a major arms manufacturer and exporter to Pakistan. For example, from

2002–2006, China purchased 145 combat aircraft (including the SU-35) from Russia; however, by 2007 China was able to reverse engineer those aircraft and manufacture much of them domestically. From 2007 to 2016, China only needed to purchase 626 Russian jet engines to complete the manufacturing process. China now supplies more arms to Pakistan than the United States or any other country does, including the 2018 sale of sophisticated optical tracking systems for nuclear missiles with multiple nuclear warheads.[29] These facts signal to many leaders and experts in New Delhi that Moscow has been aiding and abetting Beijing, that Russia places its partnership with India in a distant second place, and that Putin is engaging in diplomatic hedging and transactional relations.[30]

Courtesy Russian Presidential Press and Information Office, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57508

Figure 1. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on a boat tour in Sochi, Russia, 21 May 2018.

India still purchases substantial military hardware from Russia, and New Delhi's acquisition of the S-400 air defense missile system and Russian submarines

and frigates are major examples.[31] In addition, the Russian Navy regularly holds joint exercises with the Indian Navy. However, US arms sales are now outcompeting Russian ones,[32] and Russian arms sales to India have declined.[33] For example, Moscow had shown off the SU-57 stealth fighter to New Delhi and promised to coproduce one with India, but Sukhoi struggled to meet production deadlines and an economic recession led to drastic cuts in SU-57 production, causing the project to fail.[34] Furthermore, in March 2019, US-provided Pakistan Air Force F-16 fighters shot down upgraded Indian Air Force MiG-21s, an incident that has again raised concerns in India about reliance on aging Russian equipment[35] and renewed India's interest in US combat aircraft.[36]

In November 2018, Russia hosted a conference in Moscow for talks involving the Taliban and other Afghan opposition parties on the future of the country, which excluded Afghan government representatives. Russia has also reached out to Pakistan. Russia's diplomatic moves represented the filling of the vacuum that the United States had left by the reduction of aid to Pakistan and the announcement of its intention to withdraw from Afghanistan.[37] Washington was also holding separate talks with the Taliban but with the expectation the group would become part of an Afghan coalition government. New Delhi shared this expectation, and Indian officials were upset that Russia would take Pakistan's side in excluding the Afghan government from Moscow's talks.[38]

In conclusion, Russia's resurgence led to Moscow regaining limited power and influence in South Asia. However, Russia's lingering weakness and dramatic changes in the power structure of the subcontinent confined Moscow's role to a transactional one and soft balancing with some contradictions, given Russia's role as China's junior partner. The following section deals with the second major reason why Russian efforts fell short—the US reentry in the region in 2001.

2001: The United States Reenters South Asia and Preempts Russian Resurgence

Aside from Russian weakness, the other major reason why Moscow's resurgence has only brought limited results in South Asia is explained by America's reentry into the region, which led to regional political, military, and economic dominance and preempted Russian efforts to resume Moscow's major regional role. In 2001, the Bush administration initiated a dualist approach of economic engagement with China as well as balancing against Beijing's rise. Washington de-hyphenated its India-Pakistan policy, began to treat New Delhi as a potential partner to balance against a rising China, and lifted military and residual economic sanctions. US overtures and India's growing self-assurance led New Delhi

to join the coalition against terrorism after the 9/11 attacks and to offer US forces overflight and port and basing rights in the struggle against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

In October 2001, Pakistan president Pervez Musharraf preempted the Indian overture by offering the US overflight, transit, and basing rights in his country. This led the US to declare Pakistan a "non-NATO major ally" in 2004. US entry into the region led to the end of a Taliban regime that was hostile to India and put pressure on Pakistan to diminish support for anti-Indian terrorism in Kashmir. Most importantly, the United States stationed tens of thousands of troops in Afghanistan—a South Asian country—in an effort to stabilize the country and prevent the Taliban and al-Qaeda from returning to power.

In November 2001, Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke of the US and India as "natural allies" and reiterated his support for Bush's global war on terrorism (GWOT). In deference to the United States and its dependence on Pakistan for access to Afghanistan, India refrained from providing substantial military assistance to the Afghan government of Pres. Hamid Karzai that was established in 2002. After the Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 and India's mobilization and posting of 700,000 troops on the Line of Control and Pakistan border,[39] Washington exerted considerable pressure to forestall an Indian attack against Pakistani forces and terrorist camps that could have spiraled into nuclear war.[40] US efforts to resolve the 2002 crisis and support of India's position against terrorism in Kashmir helped pave the way for increased US–India cooperation. In 2002, India began to engage in a regional security dialogue with the United States, fostering greater understanding of New Delhi's concerns, including Pakistan's state sponsorship of terrorism and destabilization of Kashmir as well as India's policy toward the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka in which India favored devolution of some powers to the Tamil minority.[41]

US–India cooperation in the GWOT and on regional issues helped pave the way for the 2004 "Next Steps in the Strategic Partnership" and cooperation in the areas of nuclear energy, high technology, and space, as well as missile defense and other military matters.[42] Indian and US interests were converging in South Asia, while Washington remained focused on fighting the GWOT in Afghanistan and cajoling Pakistan to counter the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network in North Waziristan.[43] The United States recognized the significance of the partnership, India's regional leadership and hegemony in South Asia, and New Delhi's democracy and increasingly dynamic economy as positive forces.[44] In March 2005, *US* Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced the Bush administration's intention to assist India in becoming "a global power."[45] New Delhi and Washington

negotiated the New Framework in the India–US Defense Relationship, which charted a more ambitious course in joint exercises, transfer of technology, counterterrorism, and other areas.[46] One result was that the Indian military began to hold more joint exercises with the US military than with any other country, holding several exercises every year. In addition, by 2008, the United States became the biggest exporter of defense equipment to India, surpassing Russia, and New Delhi has subsequently bought billions of dollars' worth of US military hardware.

The efforts of the Bush administration and Indian government to negotiate and enact a civilian nuclear agreement, in which Washington recognized India as a de facto nuclear weapons state that did not proliferate, constituted a major step in striving to help India become a norm-observing global power. After three years of negotiation and an arduous political process, the Bush administration and the newly powerful US "India lobby" were able to secure congressional ratification of the "nuclear deal" in 2008.[47] The nuclear deal ended 30 years of nuclear sanctions against India, opened India's nuclear market to US and other nuclear exporters, and heralded a new stage in India's foreign policy. The deal elevated India to the level of the other five declared nuclear-weapons states, which had led the nonproliferation regime. Washington lifted sanctions against trade with India in nuclear equipment and materials, with the justification that New Delhi had established a good nonproliferation record that would not imperil the NPT.

The nuclear deal and the US–India strategic partnership helped India to move toward becoming a major power that would be more strategically assertive in Asia.[48] The United States had taken major steps toward enlisting India in countering the rapid rise of China as a strategic competitor and eventually forming an alliance.[49] However, New Delhi remained committed to its traditional positions of strategic autonomy and nonalignment and working with Russia, China, and other powers. In reaction, some US observers found that Indian leaders lacked "strategic vision" and assertiveness to develop the capabilities to be a major partner, much less a potential ally. The US–India partnership raised questions as to how India would take advantage of US diplomacy and partnership to expand its presence on the world stage.

Pres. Barack Obama continued the partnership with New Delhi and in November 2009 declared the US and India "natural allies" because of their shared free-market, democratic values and "core goal of achieving peace and security for all peoples in the Asian region."[50] India participated in the Obama administration's "nuclear security initiative" to prevent violent extremists from obtaining nuclear materials.[51] Additionally, New Delhi responded to the nuclear deal by continuing its unilateral nuclear testing moratorium that began after its nuclear tests in May 1998.[52] As part of proving that it would be a good nonproliferation

partner, India voted in International Atomic Energy Agency meetings in 2005 and 2009 against Iran's lack of transparency in its nuclear program.[53] New Delhi worked with Washington in efforts to start negotiations on a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty and a nuclear weapons convention.[54] The two cooperated to further India's intention of joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies, and the Australia Group on chemical and biological export controls. While India finally was able to join the MTCR and the Wassenaar Arrangement in 2017 and the Australia Group in 2018, China has continued to block the country's NSG membership to prevent India from rising in power and prestige.

The May 2014 general election landslide for the Bharatiya Janata Party and Prime Minister Narendra Modi led to a reassertion of Indian nationalism and reinvigoration of the strategic partnership with the United States. Modi and his government focused on industrializing India and creating jobs with the "Make in India" campaign [55] and boosting the country's military power. The new government intended to stand up to a growing strategic challenge from China and its partners and sought increased US assistance. New Delhi and Washington established a contact group, which helped break a logjam in a range of programs. India and the United States also created more than 50 bilateral mechanisms, particularly the India–US Commercial and Strategic Dialogue, to deal with issues in relations. The Modi government established an insurance arrangement that overcame liability issues in civilian nuclear energy cooperation with the United States and began preparatory work to pave the way for the purchase of US nuclear power plants.[56] Despite the progress, significant barriers remained for the partnership, especially differences over Iran and India's stance of strategic autonomy.[57]

In June 2015, the United States and India signed a renewal of the Defense Framework Agreement for 10 years, which represented an upgrade in defense relations. The framework agreement recognized the significance of the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative and mentioned codevelopment and coproduction of defense articles and services. Specifically, the agreement mentioned joint development of mobile electric hybrid power sources and next-generation protective ensembles for soldiers operating in biohazard environments.[58] The agreement also opened the way for cooperation in jet engine technology; aircraft carriers; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms. In 2016, the Obama administration further upgraded India to the status of a Major Defense Partner, which opened the way for additional codevelopment and coproduction as well as the transfer of sensitive defense technology. In addition, the United States and India signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA).

The LEMOA held out the possibility of the India Navy using US bases in Diego Garcia and elsewhere on a case-by-case basis and the United States using Indian bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.[59] In 2017, the two countries began to operationalize the LEMOA when a US Navy tanker refueled an Indian Navy ship in the Pacific Ocean. Washington and New Delhi have also been cooperating on strengthening cybersecurity, but they still need to sign the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geospatial Intelligence.

The US presence in Afghanistan served India's interests by removing the country from the control of the pro-Pakistan Taliban. However, in 2011, President Obama announced that the United States would be handing over security responsibility to the Afghan government. The concern in India was how much US presence would remain after 2014 and how long the Afghan regime would stay in power. However, the rise of the Islamic State and its smashing victories in Iraq and Syria in 2014 and appearance in Afghanistan caused the administration to stop short of total withdrawal and to keep a residual force of 10,000 troops and air force assets in Afghanistan to prevent collapse. This caused a sense of relief in India, which had provided a substantial amount of aid and road-building projects to Afghanistan. In June 2016, Prime Minister Modi signed an agreement with Iran for $500 million to upgrade the port of Chabahar, which would enable India to establish a land corridor with Afghanistan and take over some of the burden that the United States and its allies have carried in trying to stabilize and develop the country.

In 2017, Pres. Donald Trump showed an interest in making economic deals with India and sustaining the defense relationship, and Prime Minister Modi responded by quickly engaging with Trump.[60] In June 2017, China provoked a military standoff in the Himalayas that brought India and the United States closer together. Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops moved onto the Doklam Plateau in the Himalayas to build a road that infringed upon the territory of the Kingdom of Bhutan, which had long been under Indian protection. The Indian Army responded by sending troops into the area to block road construction, leading to a 73-day standoff between the Indian Army and PLA. While India demonstrated resolve during the standoff despite China's protests, some officials in New Delhi were careful to keep the confrontation from escalating into a border war and were concerned about US rhetoric that was casting the issue in the broader context of China's territorial violations in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS).[61] Other officials perceived that Washington had not been specific enough in its support for India and Bhutan.[62] However, some US

and Indian officials asserted that Doklam was a "game changer" and would bring India ever closer to cooperating with the United States and its allies.[63]

In August 2017, President Trump announced a new US strategy toward South Asia in which Washington would increase the number of troops in Afghanistan to more than 10,000 and keep its presence open-ended.[64] The strategy included pressuring Pakistan to do more to stop terrorists from using safe havens within its borders and India providing more economic and development support to Afghanistan. US officials stated an interest in sustaining and improving defense relations to counter a rising China in the Indian Ocean and Asia. Then Secretary of Defense James Mattis said that the "world's two greatest democracies should have the two greatest militaries."[65] Trump and Modi repeated this statement in November 2017 on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Manila, when the two leaders pledged to elevate India's status as a major US defense partner. As part of the December 2017 *National Security Strategy*, Washington pledged to "deepen the strategic partnership with India and support its leadership in Indian Ocean security and throughout the broader region."[66] At the same time, the United States criticized Pakistan for its military's unwillingness to counter the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network operating from on its soil.

Despite all this, some of the Trump administration's policies have created the conditions for Russia to gain greater influence in South Asia. In May 2018, Trump pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that curbed Iran's nuclear program. The US renewal of sanctions poses a threat to India's energy supply and has led to new tensions in relations; Russia continues to be a major supporter of the JCPOA.[67] In addition, India's agreement to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense missile system has placed an obstacle in the way of purchasing US combat aircraft and could eventually lead to US sanctions against New Delhi; this improves the prospects for India purchasing the SU-57 and other Russian fighter aircraft. The Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), designed to divert military resources from Iran, Russia, and North Korea could prohibit Washington from selling advanced fighter aircraft to India if New Delhi proceeds with the acquisition of the S-400 system. In March 2019, the Trump administration announced that India was the "tariff king" and that preferential trade preferences would end, which could worsen relations.[68]

US Air Force photo by SSgt Hailey Haux

Figure 2. US–India cooperation. Gen CQ Brown Jr., Pacific Air Forces commander, discusses his orientation flight in an Indian Air Force Mirage 2000 at Cope India 19 at Kalaikunda Air Force Station, India, 14 December 2018. Total participation in the exercise included more than 200 US Airmen, F-15 Eagles from the 18th Wing, Kadena Air Base, Japan, and C-130J Super Hercules from 182nd Airlift Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, alongside IAF airmen operating Sukhoi 30s, Jaguars, Mirage 2000s, C-130Js, as well as Airborne Early Warning and Control System and refueling aircraft.

In conclusion, the US reentry into South Asia in 2001 led to strategic partnerships with India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The US–India strategic partnership has transformed the power dynamics of South Asia and enabled balancing against China—Russia's senior partner. The next section deals with India's grand strategy and reinforces the conclusion that the United States will remain the country's primary strategic partner, while Russia will stay a secondary partner.

India's Grand Strategy and Relations with Russia

India proclaims a position of "strategic autonomy," but the country has in practice worked with the United States to counter the rise of China, defending the Asian status quo and fending off the growing challenge from Beijing and its territorial expansion and partnership with Islamabad. This means that Indian

relations with Russia play largely a symbolic role in demonstrating that India has some autonomy from the United States. New Delhi sees rising Chinese nationalism and the assertiveness of Pres. Xi Jinping as obstacles to resolution of growing differences with China. In 2013, Xi came to power in China and initiated the BRI, with infrastructure plans, projects, and funding that work to counter Indian cooperative activities with Asian countries. India has not welcomed the BRI, partly because it sees China's initiatives as aimed against India's influence. In New Delhi, many observers perceive China's outreach to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Myanmar as part of a strategy of encirclement.[69] China has been selling submarines to Pakistan and Bangladesh, another perceived instance of encirclement. By building infrastructure through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea and Myanmar to the Bay of Bengal as part of the BRI, China is lessening the possible impact of an Indian "distant blockade" of energy flows through the Strait of Malacca and to Chinese ports.

India increasingly is concerned about the growing presence of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean and in the SCS and ECS and is developing responses. Indian analysts regard PLAN efforts to improve sustainment, tactical air cover, and basing in these waters as critical indicators of Beijing's intentions.[70] India is strengthening its strategic partnership with Japan in balancing against China, and the Japanese government has been pushing hard for a stronger partnership with India and the United States. While the United States and Japan can work together in guaranteeing freedom of navigation and territorial integrity in the ECS and SCS, India can help secure Japan's energy supplies that pass through the Indian Ocean.

India would like the Washington to avoid any dialogue with China that moves toward bilateral cooperation in "solving Asian security problems." In particular, New Delhi rejects any outside meddling in the Kashmir dispute and asserts that it is well on the way to resolving the issue despite interference from Pakistan. Regarding Tibet, both India and the United States have quietly supported the rights of the people to some form of autonomy and self-determination since China's forceful takeover in 1959. Tibet remains restive, and unrest by supporters of self-determination based in India could contribute to rising tensions in the Himalayas. China's installation of a new Dalai Lama in Tibet would also increase tensions with India and the United States but would not spark a military conflict. The perception in New Delhi is that Beijing remains hypersensitive about Tibet.

India fears long-term erosion of its strategic position because of China's buildup of border deployments, conventional capabilities, and strategic forces. New Delhi's greatest concern is over China's military–logistical buildup along the Sino–Indian border. Much more likely is a conflict in the Himalayas, especially with ongoing

border issues. In addition, China has projects under way to dam the Brahmaputra River and other streams that could deprive parts of India of vital water sources.[71] The 2017 Doklam confrontation raised the prospect of a new phase in Sino–Indian confrontation. However, since then, the two sides have remained cautious and not escalated beyond skirmishes.

In Southeast Asia and the SCS, India shares interests with the United States in cooperating to maintain security and the status quo, since more than half India's trade passes through those waters—as does much of the trade of the US and its allies and partners. New Delhi has been involved in ASEAN Plus defense ministers meetings and has conducted Indian Navy port calls and exercises with ASEAN countries. India implemented a "Look East" policy, which achieved success especially in engagement with Burma, opening the country to a wide range of countries and enabling India to compete for influence with China.[72] The successor to Look East, Prime Minister Modi's "Act East" policy, has focused on expanding activities into Southeast Asia via infrastructure development, foreign direct investment, and a free-trade area with ASEAN, which complement US policies in the region. Russia and India (and the United States) share close relations with Vietnam, including security cooperation.

To its west, India is concerned with Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as the Persian Gulf and its close relations with and energy supplies from Iran. Afghanistan remains a major source of concern in New Delhi. There is the danger that—as in the 1990s—the dominoes will fall, with Afghanistan succumbing to the Taliban, large parts of Pakistan falling to the Taliban, and a rise in violent extremist activity in Kashmir and by Pakistan-backed violent extremists within the rest of India. In attempting to secure Afghanistan, inserting thousands of Indian forces there would cause a major crisis with Pakistan. India has to be careful to place no more than a couple hundred Indian military advisors in Afghanistan for fear of escalation. However, the Trump administration's open-ended Afghanistan strategy has brought strategic convergence with India but no "light at the end of the tunnel."

India is concerned about China's growing alliance with Pakistan, Beijing's development of an overland route from Xinjiang, and China's access to the Indian Ocean through the port that Beijing is developing at Gwadar in Baluchistan as part of its BRI strategic program. New Delhi has welcomed America's move away from Pakistan and continued warm relations with India. However, the United States is compelled to maintain relations with Pakistan to continue to have access to Afghanistan and press Islamabad to fight the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and remnants of al-Qaeda.[73] Therefore, the best that Washington and New Delhi can

do is to manage relations with Pakistan and prevent radical Islamists from taking control of the country and its nuclear weapons.

In sum, India's grand strategy is one in which the United States plays a more prominent role than Russia. However, India continues to keep open the door to Russia. New Delhi has not joined the West in sanctioning Moscow for the seizure of Crimea and has not denounced Moscow's hybrid warfare against Ukraine and Western democracies. India is still interested in buying Russian military hardware and joint weapons production,[74] but the United States has supplanted Russia as India's closest partner and major arms supplier. When India decided to become a full member of the SCO in November 2015, leaders viewed it as a way of preventing encirclement by China and believed that Moscow had paved the way for New Delhi's admission as a way of soft balancing against China's expansionist activities in Central Asia.[75] In conclusion, India's grand strategy shows the relatively minor role that Russia plays as opposed to the strategic partnership with the United States.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how structural realism explains a resurgent Russia's inability to resume its previously dominant role in South Asia. The collapse of the USSR, independence of the Central Asian republics, and rapid growth of China and India proved to be formidable obstacles. Russia's acceptance of a junior role in its strategic partnership with China has created another obstacle, preventing Moscow from resuming the close partnership that it once had with New Delhi. The reentry of the US superpower into South Asia in 2001 and its forging of strategic partnerships with India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan has been the most important factor. The US–India strategic partnership has been of particular importance and has grown from the United States making India a respected nuclear weapons state in the 2000s to a multifaceted security relationship, including countering violent extremists and equipping, training, and exercising with Indian forces to defend the country from Pakistan and China. In addition, given the superiority of US weapons systems, Russia has been losing its advantage as a major arms supplier to India. The partnership has also led New Delhi to develop its grand strategy toward countering the Sino–Pakistan partnership, widening India's strategic vision beyond the subcontinent and removing US military and residual economic sanctions against India.

Constructivism plays an explanatory role in Russia's inability to get back in the game. Principally, one cannot discount the role that democratic affinity and the Indian–American lobby have played in US–India relations. The breadth and depth of the strategic partnership has made it that much harder for Russia to compete.

Russia could play a more prominent role in the South Asian game as the United States withdraws from Afghanistan and cuts its ties with Pakistan. Russia's gambit with the Taliban and Pakistan demonstrates that Moscow has the ability to take advantage of US vulnerabilities. As China continues to grow in power and tightens its partnership with Pakistan, India could fail to keep up, despite US security cooperation efforts. India's military weakness could provide an opportunity for Moscow to revive its strategic partnership with New Delhi, as evidenced by the S-400 sale. However, Russia has to modernize its defense industries to compete with the United States and China—a daunting task.

On the other hand, it is clear that Russian interests and reach have shrunk and could deteriorate further, as President Obama observed. As Russia becomes increasingly involved in destabilizing Europe, playing a more active role in the Middle East with its Syrian ally and others, and fending off China's challenge in Central Asia, Moscow's interest and ability in great power competition in East and South Asia could decline further. China and India will continue to rise in the 2000s, while the US future role maintaining the Asian status quo seems uncertain. Therefore, Russia appears to be playing a losing game. The lesson for the United States is to stay in the Asian game and not to withdraw; once it leaves, it may not be able to return. JIPA

Notes

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