

CISS STRATEGIC VIEW

Geopolitical Bias and the Differential Treatment of Pakistan

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Introduction

In recent decades, the geopolitical dynamics in South Asia have received increasing international attention, mainly focusing on the United States' relationship with Pakistan and India. A careful examination of US sanctions against few countries and growing strategic partnerships with others shows a clear geopolitical bias. For instance, American behavior has a clear pattern of preference towards India and a policy of not only constraining Pakistan but also sanctioning other countries for trading with it. This favoritism shows that the United States uses the Indian lens to look at and for dealing with Pakistan.

Besides affecting American interests in the long run, such bias creates an imbalance in South Asia and increases strategic instability. An increasing technological divide against Pakistan is also hindering its sustainable development and causing increased hardship for its people, which will increase public resentment against America and cause an irreversible loss of space that the US has created in Pakistan.

This bias appears to be anchored in Washington's desire to contain China's peaceful economic rise through military axes like the Quad and AUKUS, which are subsets of the so-called Indo Pacific strategy. In this context, India has been designated the role of net security provider in the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific regions and the spigots of technology have been opened for it by the US-led Western group of states.

While these axes are engaged in the proliferation of military technologies by creating India-specific exceptions for the rules that the US champions, others are being constrained even in pursuit of peaceful activities aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)-2030. In unprecedented developments, the US has lately begun sanctioning Chinese and other entities for their alleged military exports to Pakistan.

This paper examines the implications of such policies, the historical context of US actions, and their deep impact on regional stability.

Sanctions and Strategic Preferences

A. The Recent Sanctions Landscape

On 19 April 2024, the US sanctioned entities from Belarus and China for their support for Pakistan's missile program. Likewise, on 23 April 2024, while the Iranian President was visiting Pakistan, the US Department of State's Deputy Spokesperson Patel, an Indian

American, reasserted that America would not stop Pak-Iran bilateral cooperation but mentioned the potential risk of sanctions if business deals continued.

Although historically a champion of liberal order, the US is now known for making moves before elections to appease the Indian and other caucuses. This latest move highlights a broader trend of geopolitical motivations shaping US foreign policy of containing China's peaceful rise and Russian resurgence by creating military axes and using economic and political coercion against anyone doing business with them. India and another country are the only exceptions to such sanctions. A comparative analysis of sanctions over the past twenty-five years involving China, India, and Pakistan suggests a strategic alignment by the US that favors India.

B. The US-India Nuclear Deal and its Consequences

Since the initiation of the US-India Nuclear Deal in 2005, a significant shift occurred in how sanctions were applied. From 2005 to 2015, not a single Indian technological entity was added to the US sanctions list. Instead, many were removed. For example, in 2011, the US removed 9 out of 15 Indian entities previously sanctioned. This decision aligns with India's precondition for its support against China, leveraging its geopolitical position to gain favorable terms from the US.

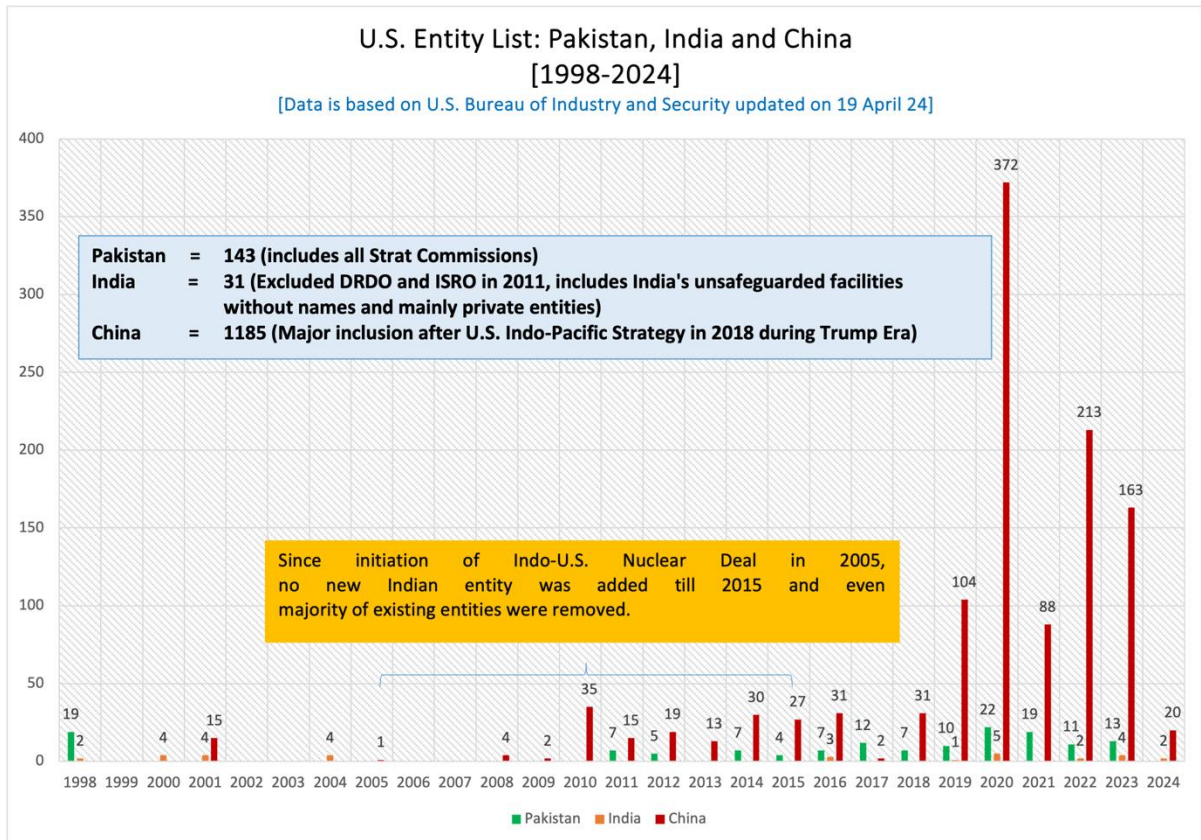
It is crucial to note that despite significant concessions from the US, including the landmark nuclear deal and a subsequent exceptional waiver from the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) that allowed India access to nuclear materials and technologies in the international market, India's actions post-agreement have not reciprocated US expectations in containing China.

Following these US-facilitated agreements, India continued diversifying its defense and technology partnerships rather than privileging American companies. For instance, India has signed multiple defense deals with Russia, including the procurement of the S-400 missile defense system, and has engaged in substantial trade agreements with European nations for civil nuclear technology.

These decisions highlight a pattern where, despite receiving strategic concessions from the US, India opts to engage economically and militarily with other countries, and thus not translating US investments into leverage against China. This approach underscores India's broader strategy of maintaining strategic autonomy, where it benefits from relationships with global powers, including the US, but avoids committing exclusively to their interests, especially in its strategies regarding China.

C. Disproportionate Sanctions

Conversely, the number of Pakistani and Chinese entities facing American sanctions has expanded significantly. Since 1998, around 143 Pakistani entities have been added to the sanctions list, compared to only 31 Indian entities. The disparity grew especially noticeable during Donald Trump's presidency when 1185 Chinese entities were sanctioned, as reflected in the graph given below.



D. The Impact of Sanctions on Pakistan’s Development

While the sanctions imposed on Pakistan are politically driven, the impact on Pakistan is deleterious to its economy. Sanctions have a serious and multifaceted impact on a state’s socio-economic landscape. In the case of Pakistan, the extension of sanctions on various entities since 1998, which now includes 143 Pakistani organizations and firms, severely undermines its economic progress and development. These sanctions restrict access to crucial international markets and technologies, hindering growth in critical defense, energy, and technology sectors. Limited engagement with the global trade system affects foreign direct investment (FDI) and international partnerships, otherwise essential for economic growth and employment creation.

Most importantly, these restrictions affect Pakistan’s research and development capabilities. Access to advanced technologies and scientific collaborations is limited, stalling innovation and technological advancements which are vital for modernizing the economy. This limitation permeates the broader economic fabric of the nation, diminishing productivity and competitiveness on a global scale.

The social impact is equally significant, as economic stagnation exacerbates poverty and limits public access to essential services, including healthcare and education. Reduced economic activity leads to higher unemployment rates, increasing social inequality and potentially contributing to social unrest and instability.

Although sanctions are inversely proportional to development in any case, it is noteworthy to point out the apparent asymmetry in the imposition of sanctions on Pakistani entities compared to Indian entities. While Pakistan has seen a significant number of its entities sanctioned, particularly under the Trump administration, India has had far fewer entities, only 31, facing similar restrictions. This disparity becomes even more pronounced when considering the ongoing expansion of India's nuclear and missile programs.

The reduction in sanctions on Indian programs is somewhat paradoxical, given that these programs have frequently benefited from the proliferation of technologies from Western countries, including the US and Russia. This technological transfer has supported India's strategic military capabilities and fostered its domestic industries, enhancing its socio-economic development. The logical inconsistency arises when one considers that despite Indian military programs' continued expansion and evident capability enhancement, the West appears to have softened its stance significantly.

This situation raises questions about the equity and criteria of the US in the application of some international sanctions. Despite its growing capabilities in sensitive technologies, the selective reduction of sanctions on India suggests a geopolitical bias that favors India's strategic utility over its compliance with non-proliferation norms.

Strategic Partnerships and Military Enhancements

A. India's Growing Military Capabilities

In the US relationship with India regarding sanctions and technology transfer, the latter has gained more than the former. Historically, Indian organizations and entities were subject to US sanctions due to concerns over nuclear proliferation. For example, following India's nuclear tests in 1998, the US imposed a series of sanctions on Indian scientific, military, and technological entities. These were primarily under the Nonproliferation Act, which targeted entities believed to be involved in proliferating weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and their delivery systems.

However, the signing of the US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2005 marked a pivotal shift, wherein the US recognized India as a 'responsible' state with advanced nuclear technology. While it technically allowed nuclear material and technology transfer from the US to India, which was previously restricted under nonproliferation sanctions regimes, other NSG members also benefited from the windfall.

The US nuclear industry could not get business in India after the Nuclear Deal, because New Delhi traded with other NSG members and entangled American industry in its domestic nuclear liability laws that Westinghouse and others could not accept.

The deal effectively lifted sanctions on Indian nuclear entities as a part of a broader strategy to cultivate India as a strategic counterbalance against Chinese influence. The US Congressional Research Service discusses these developments extensively, highlighting the strategic motivations and implications of the US-India [nuclear deal](#).

The imperative of containing China and appeasing the Indian diaspora is perhaps so high that the US did not learn from the business loss in the nuclear deal. Instead, it has shared advanced military technology with India, enhancing its defense capabilities significantly. This includes critical technologies for long-range ballistic missiles and other strategic systems. For instance, the sale of advanced US defense equipment, like the Integrated Air Defense Weapon System (IADWS) and the Multi-Mission Unmanned Aerial Systems (MMUAS), as reported by the US Defense Security Cooperation [Agency](#), has bolstered India's indigenous defense technological base and capabilities in significant areas, including its missile development programs.

This transformation in US policy towards India, from stringent sanctions to strategic partnership, marks a significant shift in international relations influenced by broader geopolitical dynamics and domestic politics.

India has substantially built up its strategic and conventional military capabilities, leveraging US weaknesses to contain China. Since joining the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) with American help, India has increased the range of its BrahMos missile to 900 kilometers, demonstrating significant qualitative and quantitative military growth. The BrahMos missile was originally developed as a joint venture between India and Russia and had its range capped at 300 kilometers to comply with the MTCR guidelines. Following India's accession to the MTCR, this limitation was lifted, and recent tests have demonstrated ranges up to 900 kilometers, enhancing the strategic reach of India's armed forces. This development is discussed in detail in several [reports](#), which elaborate on how MTCR membership facilitated this enhancement.

Meanwhile, the US has increased its military cooperation with India, as seen in the signing of defense agreements such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA). These agreements enhance India's strategic capabilities and operational readiness against Pakistan and exacerbate the latter's security dilemma.

The acquisition of several other advanced technologies and systems from the US augment India's strategic military capabilities. These include the MH-60 Romeo multi-role helicopters and the P-8I Poseidon aircraft for maritime surveillance. These platforms significantly enhance India's anti-submarine warfare capabilities and maritime domain awareness. The US [Department](#) of Defense provides detailed insights into these transactions and their strategic implications in press releases and defense cooperation announcements.

Another critical advancement area is space technology, where US-India collaboration has led to significant developments. For instance, the NISAR (NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar) mission, launched in 2022, aims to provide an unprecedented, detailed view of Earth using advanced radar imaging. This mission enhances scientific cooperation and has significant military applications, given the dual-use nature of such technologies. Detailed discussions of these collaborations are available on NASA's official [website](#), which provides insights into the scope and potential of these joint missions.

These developments are not just technological advancements. They represent a clear trajectory of military and strategic expansion by India. By leveraging its relationships with global powers like the US, India is building a robust capability that serves both its regional ambitions and global strategic interests.

B. Fissile Material and Nuclear Arsenal

India's nuclear program has seen a significant and rapid expansion, mainly due to biased American policies, making it one of the fastest-growing unsafeguarded nuclear programs globally. According to the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), recent assessments place India's nuclear arsenal at approximately 170 warheads, marking a considerable increase from earlier estimates.

This growth in nuclear capabilities reflects India's advanced technological and material capacity and suggests a robust production of fissile materials, positioning India as having the third-largest stockpile of fissile materials after the US and Russia. Earlier assessments, like the ones by [Dr Mansoor Ahmed](#), Dr Syed Javaid Khurshid, and [Syed Saddam Hussain Shah](#), published in Belfer Center and Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, show that FAS is still downplaying Indian actual potential.

India is moving towards a more assertive nuclear posture. While it was previously adhering to a 'No First Use' (NFU) policy, there have been discussions within India's strategic community about revising this stance towards a preemptive nuclear first strike and counterforce targeting strategy.

Implications and Regional Stability

A. Risk of Conflict and Strategic Imbalance

The exceptional treatment it receives from the United States facilitates the significant expansion of India's nuclear arsenal and consequent adjustments in its nuclear doctrine. This special status has not only bolstered India's nuclear capabilities but has also raised concerns about its long-term implications. Critics argue that by enabling India's nuclear expansion, the US is contributing to a future strategic challenge that could conflict with its interests in maintaining regional stability and preventing nuclear proliferation.

These developments also underscore the complexities and potential risks associated with the US policy of differential treatment, which has not only emboldened India, but also increased the risk of conflict in the region. This was also evidenced by the Balakot strike in 2019 and the BrahMos missile incident in 2022. Such actions destabilize the delicate balance of power in South Asia.

B. Impact on Public Opinion and Policy in Pakistan

The US strategy, which requires unilateral restraints from Pakistan on the one hand, and strengthens military cooperation with India on the other, could trigger significant shifts in

public opinion and government policy in Pakistan. This perceived bias will prompt Pakistan to resolutely fortify its deterrence capabilities against India, to maintain regional strategic stability. However, this preferential treatment towards India is creating a public perception of a strategic threat to Pakistan. Ironically, the unilateral US approach could build Indian capacity to the extent that it may not necessarily do American bidding.

Conclusion

The increasing pressure on Pakistan due to the US discouraging other countries from trading with it and imposing sanctions against Pakistani entities significantly hampers the nation's socio-economic progress. This is starkly in contrast with the blind eye turned towards India despite its ongoing proliferation and expansion of sensitive military technologies. This imbalance stifles Pakistan's development and fosters regional instability by skewing the power dynamics. Such inconsistencies challenge the effectiveness and fairness of global non-proliferation objectives and international equity.

Furthermore, the current US policy towards South Asia displays a conspicuous bias favoring India through strategic support and relaxed sanctions. This preferential treatment disrupts regional equilibrium and heightens the potential for conflict. To ensure long-term peace and stability, the international community and regional stakeholders must practice and advocate for a more balanced and consistent approach, thereby preventing geopolitical biases from escalating into broader instability.

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