

BALANCE OF POWER POLITICS AND CHINA'S ROLE AS STRATEGIC BALANCER IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This study has an objective to have a theoretical insight about Chinese maneuverings in South Asia. This paper will analyze whether it is going to change regional power equilibrium and what will be its influence on international relations. The scope of this study is to highlight the importance of South Asia on geo-political map and to discuss the interests and role of China in this region. It primarily focuses on the issues of peace and security as well as political and strategic milieu of South Asia. This paper presents new paradigm of Chinese military coalitions with regional states. In conclusion, it presents the depiction of future politics and power equation in the competitive ambiance of South Asia. This strategic competition will be analyzed keeping in view China's efforts to neutralize Indian aggressive intentions having bonds with other states of the region.

Keywords: *Power Politics, Balance Of Power, Balance Of Threat, Bandwagoning, Alliances, China.*

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia has gained geostrategic and geopolitical significance owing to its unique location on world map. Pakistan and India are two big stakeholders of the region having nuclear capabilities, including two nuclear neighbours, Russia and China; bordering with each other. To prevent this region from any nuclear confrontation among Pakistan and India, the power equilibrium and deterrence among these states is much crucial. Further, strategic regional alignments; India-US and Pak-China are becoming important dynamics of balance-of-power in South Asia.

The recent political changes in different countries of South Asia and the complexities of interstate relations as well as global importance of the region require an up-to-date study of the regional politics and order. Some complicated and profound changes in Asian international relations have been observed in the 21st century. New challenges have been emerged for regional states. Growing role of major regional as well as external powers in South Asian politics is also striking. Chinese prowess as world's leading economy and its regional engagements affect regional political and economic scenario. Systematically, the political order and international relations of Asian states must be examined both as being a regional part of international system and particularly having some distinct systemic properties.

China is struggling to make client states for her own interests and strategic benefits. It has shown concerns over Indo-US strategic engagement in South Asia and have tried to balance the deal through strengthening her close ties with Pakistan. Beijing has successfully maintained power equilibrium in South Asia through precluding Indian upper hand over Pakistan. As United States and Russia are providing support to India in the fields of missile and nuclear technology, similarly, China is assisting Pakistan on the same grounds. Now the question is that either there will be an environment of skirmishes and tensions among different states struggling for hegemony or the economic globalization and multilateral relations will bring peace and stability in Asia. Moreover, this study will also help to understand the competition among major powers and the ongoing new great game in this region.

There are a lot of theoretical explanations and models characterizing Asian regional order. Pakistan and China have formed an alliance during Cold War to prevent the threat perception from India-Soviet strategic engagement. These close ties between China and Pakistan

did efficiently counter Indian threat and also limit the India's focus on China. Beijing has also influenced the scenario through factors of national power, economy, military and nuclear collaboration. 'Balance of threat theory' demonstrates that there are not only India's power capabilities which put China and Pakistan together, but her hegemonic designs combined with geographic proximity, offensive power and destructive intentions pose a real threat. Some theoretical description is detailed here under.

REALISM: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Realists denote that international system is anarchic.¹ States are sovereign and autonomous, only bound to forcible coercion or own will. Anarchy means there is no central ruling or commanding authority to settle down the disputes, which rises the 'security dilemma'. In this scenario states feel insecure which give birth to need of security and self-protection. Security, survival, protection, national interest, ability to influence others and power are the key factors of realism.

Amitav Acharya in his article "Theoretical Perspectives on International Relations in Asia" has criticized the realistic point of view that bipolarity during Cold War was a source of regional stability and quoted the statement of Chinese eminent.² The scholar Yan Xuetong from Qinghua University that 'balance of power during Cold War was reasoned to prevent traditional war between USSR and United States but failed to prevent many regional conflicts among allied states which caused a huge destruction like Korean war'.³ Similarly, it is presumed that post-Cold War power equilibrium between China and the US was failed to limit or prevent regional disputes and conventional wars.⁴ Thus 'state power' is the basic variable; as the power ensures state defense and survivability in contemporary world. Realists interpret power in different ways like military, diplomacy, economy, but stress on coercive material power as the determining factor of international political system.

¹ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 6.

² Amitav Acharya, "Theorising the International Relations of Asia: Necessity or Indulgence? Some Reflections," *The Pacific Review* 30 (2017): 1-13, doi: 10.1080/09512748.2017.1318163.

³ Xuetong Yan, "Decade of Peace in East Asia," *East Asia* 20, no. 4 (2003): 40-41, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248138826_Decade_of_peace_in_East_Asia

⁴ Yan, "East Asia," 40-41.

Until the end of Cold War, classical realism was applied while defining the Asian international system. Later, it replaced with Waltz's neorealist focusing on distribution of power. Realists concentrate on anarchy, security, survival and power while describing international order.⁵ However, they focus on power equilibrium while shaping and determining Asian Post-Cold War order, considering the US as a main character of the theory. Realists proclaim that law enforcement in the world is possible through power which is only reality in this anarchic world.⁶

STRUCTURAL REALISM OR NEO-REALISM

Neorealist also called structural realism or modern realism presented by Kenneth Waltz in "Theory of International Politics".⁷ According to him all states try their best for their security and survival. Waltz defines different aspects of international relations as system structure and power distribution. In comparison to traditional realism, neorealist or structural realism is more scientific because it suggests general laws while explaining events; however, the latter is not as rich as traditional realism.⁸

Later, some divergences have also found among realist school of thought on some issues. "Offensive realists' employ on maximizing the state power to secure and ensure its survival."⁹ According to them, a state can never be secure when its competitor also has the equal power capabilities. So, a state has to adopt the hegemonic strategy, if possible. On the other hand, 'defensive realists' oppose this strategy of domination while pursuing state survival.¹⁰ According to 'defensive realists,' hegemonic intentions lead to dangerous clashes among international states. States generally do not try to interfere in internal matters of other states and enjoy status quo until their own security and survivability is challenged. Thus, they present another system of maintaining the balance

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994): 32-33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539078>.

⁶ Mearsheimer, "International Institutions," 32-33.

⁷ Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.

⁸ Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1993), 134.

⁹ Buzan, Jones and Little, *Anarchy*, 136.

¹⁰ Waltz, *International Politics*, 14.

of power,¹¹ where states having equal distribution of power ensure that none of the state will risk attacking the other one. Polarity is the determinant factor of realist theory.

BALANCE OF POWER: THEORY AND PRACTICE

While studying Asian political phenomena, a great analytical relevance is found among 'realist school of thought' and 'balance of power theory'. Power is a central concept and cardinal near realists, but not easy to determine or measure.¹² It is described as the capability to influence others to get a desired result. Power in it is not an influence; it is a potential or ability to influence others. This potential is composed of some specified (tangible/intangible) features or properties of the states like size, economy and military. Capabilities are simple to measure than influence. But to explain how a state, having such capabilities, influences the other state is not an easy task.

State power may be determined by a single indicator that is its total GDP (Gross Domestic Product) along with its size, technical capabilities and wealth, but this is just a material capability. Power also has some non-material elements like effective and strategic mobilization and deployment of capabilities, diplomatic skills, legitimacy, political thoughts, leadership, ideology, religion, nationalism and ideas which can influence and so forth. For instance, it is easy for a state to influence others if its norms and values are shared and accepted in other countries that is called soft power.¹³ It is a contrary concept to the realists as there is no need of dominance or to exert power. Chinese policy of soft power towards South Asian states will also be examined in this study.

Balancing is an old, traditional and consistent theme of international relations and politics. Waltz described it as "if there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, It is balance of power". Whereas looking back in history, 'the Peloponnesian war' (431-404 BC) can be described by using the expressions 'balance', 'power' and 'threat'.¹⁴ States ordinarily ally to balance against threats not against

¹¹ Acharya, "International Relations of Asia," 8.

¹² Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (2005): 55-56, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3877878>.

¹³ Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (NYC: Basic Books, 1990), 128-129.

¹⁴ Ilai Z. Saltzman, *Securitizing Balance of Power Theory: A Polymorphic Reconceptualization* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 24.

‘power with no aggressive intentions’. The geographical juxtaposition, aggressive ability, and violent objectives form real threat posture. ‘Balance of power theory’ presents that states make alliances to secure themselves from the hegemonic intentions of stronger states and to defend themselves from the state having capabilities posturing a threat to their sovereignty.¹⁵

States which fail to secure themselves by their own means, join hands with powerful states to balance the power of an enemy. Generally, balance of power means the use of power by one or more states to balance the power of another state or states. States may also opt the strategy of internal balancing like arms buildup to obtain the ability to counter the challenge and balance the military power of the enemy. Theorists argue that an equilibrium of power preserve the peace and stability among great powers. When there is no hope or chance of success in war due to power parity, it reduces the risk of war.¹⁶

All the major or small independent countries have the right to enjoy free will and liberty of action inside its territory without any foreign influence irrespective of their power or size and power equilibrium prevents the emergence of international disorder. Sometimes rising states with growing military capabilities disturb the regional balance of power. So, the states try to balance them through coalitions with regional states or external powers. Balancing may also be acquired through internal means by modernizing weaponry and military capabilities. Regional balance of power equation causes a distribution of power intending to prevent war.¹⁷ It is pertinent to mention here that a level of deterrence is found between Pakistan and India since they have achieved nuclear capabilities in 1998.¹⁸

¹⁵ Michael P. Watson, *Balance of Power vs. Balance of Threat: The Case of China and Pakistan* (VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff Coll Quantico, 2001), 28.

¹⁶ Rizwan Naseer and Musarat Amin, “Dynamics of Balance of Power in South Asia: Implications for Regional Peace,” *Berkeley Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2011).

¹⁷ Paul, ThazhaVarkey, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st century* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Martin Rhodes, *Global Political Economy: Understanding the International Economic Order* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 15-27.

BALANCING OR BANDWAGONING: AGAINST POWER OR THREAT

Kenneth Waltz, the founder of balance of power theory in international relations has explained the state behaviors in international political milieu. He described following suppositions. Firstly, all states are independent in acquiring power capabilities. They maintain minimum level of power essential for survival or they may desire authoritative role at maximum. Secondly, states follow a rational approach in accordance with their available resources to achieve their ends. The state strategies in this regard, can be categorized as internal and external. Better economic resources and advancement in military capabilities are internal efforts which comprises on the promotion of economic sources and increase in military might.

According to Waltz, worldwide anarchy forced the states to make or connect with the coalitions to balance the outer states or alliances who are posing a threat on the behalf of their power capabilities. States have to do so in pursuance of their survival. Balance of power theory is mostly based on European experiences in the era of 19th and 20th centuries. However, its use in the 21st century is fairly limited. States like China and Russia have pursued to balance the power of the US. However, this argument does not fit for the analysis of the behavior of small states.¹⁹ Small states prefer to join the stronger side which is called 'Band wagoning'. For instance, during Cold War most of small states bandwagon with United States. In short, the great powers always choose to balance; however, small states choose the other option. Looking into history, examples of bandwagoning are rare, one of them is German-Soviet treaty of non-aggression in 1939.²⁰

There are two main reasons due to which states prefer balancing: First, the state survival will be at risk if it could not check or control the hegemonic potential before becoming too strong. Alignment with a strong one means to have a trust on it which may be risky if it breaches the trust. So states try to join with those who are not capable to dominate their allies, it is the safer side. As Henry Kissinger, former American statesman and Secretary of State described that while reconciliation with China, the

¹⁹ Constantine C. Menges, *China: The Gathering Threat* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Current Books, 2005), 33.

²⁰, Rex Warner Tucídides and M. I. Finley, *Thucydides: History of the Peloponnesian War* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 63.

US did not choose the option of USSR in triangular relationship, because they prefer to align with comparatively weaker side. Second, when state align with a weaker side there will be more influence of a new member in the alliance, as it requires more assistance and make the alliance powerful. In contrast, joining the already strong side will reduce the influence of new member because its participation is comparatively less than the existing one. So preference should be given to align with a weaker side.

BALANCE OF THREAT THEORY: AN EXPLORATION

Stephen M. Walt presented a new concept in ‘balance of power theory’ that is known as “balance of threat theory.” First time this theory was bestowed in an article “Alliance Formation and the balance of World Power” in 1985 in International Security Journal, then in a book “The Origins of Alliances” in 1987. This theory was tested in 1988 and test results were publicized in “Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia”.²¹ Theory of balance of power assumes that the state acts according to its power capabilities but balance of threat theory suggests that there is a major role of state intentions than power distribution. Stephen M. Walt has described balancing as “allying with others against the prevailing threat” and band wagoning as “allying with the source of danger”.²²

This theory is an improved form of ‘balance of power theory’ which was presented by neo-realist school of thought. In this theory state's alliance behavior is influenced by the threat perceived from outer states. Walt says that countries will normally balance through making alliance against an apparent threat, however weak states use another way of band wagoning with the rising threat for the protection of their security and survival.

Walt has identified four different conditions to appraise a threat postured by a foreign state:

- Aggregate power (economy, size, population): it makes possible for a state to threaten another state to a great extent.

²¹ Jonathan R. Martin, “*Balancing and Band wagoning in South China Sea*” (Master’s Thesis, National Defence Academy of Latvia, 2013), 39.

²² George Liska, *Resurrecting a Discipline: Enduring Scholarship for Evolving World Politics* (Minneapolis: Lexington Books, 1999), 78.

- Geographic proximity: it is the distance which lying between the potential opponents; the distance limits the capability to use power and limits the threat.
- Offensive capabilities: a great offensive capability enables a state to pose a great threat. It relates with both the aggregate strength and geographic proximity.
- Offensive intentions: how states perceive a potential enemy.

Walt argues that when states view an emerging state holding these qualities, they usually take it as a threat and require balancing against it. An important question raised here that in which situation, states decide to balance & under what circumstances they tend to bandwagon? The balance of threat theory provided its answer as under:

- Power or weakness: If a state is powerful then it will tend to balance and bandwagon vice versa. While, weaker states also sometime choose to balance when threat is from a rough side however against a powerful state its option is bandwagoning.
- Allies are available or not: States threatened by a great power try to balance it through alignment with other states, however they have to bandwagon if no such allies are available to share with them the identical interests.
- Situation of peace or war: According to experience from history states prefer to balance during peace times or in early phases of war, to dissuade the threatening power, however at later stage states usually bandwagon with the winner side.

While deciding about balancing or band wagoning statesmen usually consider the above mentioned scenarios. However, two more parameters can also be by included here that are proposed by Alaa A. H. Abd Alaziz in his final report "Balance of Threat perception and the prospects of NATO Mediterranean Dialogue" submitted to "NATO Academic Affairs, University of Helsinki" in 2003.²³

- World Order Structure: Decisions of the states regarding balancing or band wagoning are affected by distribution of power among states. If the prevailing structure of world order is bipolar or multi-polar than balancing is best option as states can be benefitted from

²³ Waltz, *International Politics*, 6.

inter-superpower rivalries. However, in unipolar world order state have no option except band wagoning.

- **State Vulnerability:** Economically weak states facing the problem of legitimacy and poor democracy usually bandwagon. The reason is that balancing requires the use of aggressive attitude which needs ultimate social and public support for which a strong and legitimate functioning democracy is compulsory.

BALANCING AGAINST THREAT VERSUS BALANCING AGAINST POWER

States are secure or not, is an important question which is determined by state behaviour either state is to ally with or against the perceived threat. If a state prefers to balance against the threat then it consider more secure because the aggressor have to face a common resistance. If tendency of bandwagoning is more than balancing then it is presumed that states are less secure, as invader can invite more allies resulting in reduction of opposite ones.²⁴ Answering the question that why states prefer balancing over band wagoning someone has to take into account the supposition of tendency of dominance in international politics. So, states prefer to balance than bandwagon while facing an external threat.

Example of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can be used to elaborate both the theories “balance of threat” and “balance of power”. NATO formed in 1949 after World War II, to contain the communist threat of USSR and her ally states. In the beginning, NATO consisted of only 12 states that joined it to defend one another from expanding communist threat. These all were ideologically and politically different, but common cause among them was to contain the aggression and expansion of communism of the USSR. Lately four more European nations joined the alliance and continued to join hand together till the end of threat in the shape of demise of USSR in 1991.²⁵

Now the perceived threat has been gone away but the alliance is still existed but its motto has been changed. Now all the member states collaborate more effectively aiming at collective security for the whole Europe. Further, NATO has also changed its format like helping the

²⁴ Waltz, *International Politics*, 7.

²⁵ Watson, *Power Vs. Threat*, 35.

member and non-member states in peace maintenance and crisis management.²⁶

CHINA'S ROLE AS STRATEGIC BALANCER IN SOUTH ASIA

Walt has argued that as distance reduces the ability to project power, the nearby states can pose a greater threat in comparison to the farther one.²⁷ A neighboring state with expansionist or aggressive intentions requires a quick and strong opposing coalition. So, China through strategic alliance with Pakistan is diffusing Indian as well as Soviet threat and engages India to keep away from focusing on China.

The Sino-India relations remained friendly during first decade after independence. Later during a revolt in Tibet in 1959, India's decision to grant political asylum to Tibetan spiritual leader, Dalai Lama brought a twist and drastic change in their friendly relations. Afterwards there was a chain of border disputes followed by a low scale boundary war between India and China in 1962 that worsened the situation.²⁸ Resultantly India established its close relations with Soviet Union, a regional rival of China, and soon Moscow was the India's biggest arms supplier in the world.

The United States abolished its policy of isolationism during world war II and started active participation in world affairs. Considering the USSR an ideological, political and military competitor, the US got involved in this region.²⁹ The principle objective of American presence in South Asia remained to pursue its wider geo-political and strategic concerns. This region is also significant as it connects with warm waters of Indian Ocean and two significant Asian regions i.e. South East Asia and Gulf.³⁰ Thus it brings the US in competition with other powers of the region. The Indo-Pak rivalry and China's increasing influence and economic relations with South Asian states became troublesome for America's South Asia policy.³¹

²⁶Watson, *Power Vs. Threat*, 39.

²⁷ Watson, *Power Vs. Threat*, 42.

²⁸ Watson, *Power Vs. Threat*, 43.

²⁹ Mehraj Uddin Gojree "The US Interests and Policies towards South Asia: From Cold War Era to Strategic Rebalancing," *Research Journal of Language, Literature and Humanities* 2, no. 4 (2015): 7.

³⁰ Mearsheimer, *International Institutions*, 41.

³¹ GangulyShivaji, "US Policy towards South Asia" (1990).

China has acquired the status of sole superpower in Asia. In the backdrop of the unresolved border disputes between China and India, Beijing views the development of closer ties between the US and India with concerns. In this scenario, China strengthens its relationship with Pakistan. Status quo will persist in South Asia until a time when tensions between Beijing and New Delhi escalate. Islamabad may play a balancing role in case of any conflict between these two nations.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that states behave according to ground realities and make alliances to inhibit the dominance of stronger ones and to defend themselves from those states or alliances whose hegemonic intentions demonstrate ‘threat’ to their sovereignty. The geographic proximity, aggressive power capabilities and most importantly destructive aims overrule the threat level. Cold War disturbed the regional stability and deep-seated regional problems provided China with an opportunity to fill the vacuum created after the disintegration of USSR. The US had also showed a cold shoulder as South Asia became an area of low priority for Washington in the 1990s. So, China came forward to lead the region with its responsible behavior. In order to attain modernization, Beijing has been required to shed its steadfast determination to define its national identity in terms of status and security. It also has to respond positively to the proposals for collective regional security. China is developing economically, politically, socially and culturally and regional states intend to make alliance in order to benefit from its rising status.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the balance of power dynamics has been changing within the framework of South Asian region. Being one of the strategic centers in Asian continent where current geopolitical and geo-economic realities have developed geostrategic significance in global politics in the background of strong Indo-US strategic relations. This alliance of a great world power with India has changed the geopolitical and security status of the South Asian strategic equation. Balance-of-power theory advocates that “a system of countervailing power” can guarantee sovereignty and independence of major and small states. Keeping this scenario in view, Pak-China strategic cooperation has been driven to counter the influence of Indo-US strategic relationships. As India makes quick strides in establishing its strong relations with the US to strengthen its position in global political hierarchy, the importance of Pakistan in China’s foreign policy preferences is likely to grow. Pakistan has gained a prominence in Chinese

policy priorities in addressing the challenges posed by growing Indo-US strategic relations. South Asia is being transformed into an essential new front in the strategic rivalry between China and India as well as the US and China. Accordingly, the region's weigh in global politics is likely to increase in coming years.