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# THE INDO-US STRATEGIC NEXUS: POLICY OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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*The Indo-US strategic nexus is one of the most remarkable post-Cold War geo-strategic developments. This study examines the major factors behind the Indo-US strategic nexus and reveals the key policy options for Pakistan. The objectives of the Indo-US strategic nexus are geared towards achieving their strategic and economic interests. However, the main effort is aimed at containing China's evolving global role. To achieve this goal, India and the US have signed various agreements on strategic, nuclear, technological and economic fronts and have agreed to further deepen their strategic nexus. The Indo-US strategic nexus has created some strategic and economic challenges for Pakistan and disturbed the balance of power in South Asia and beyond. Pakistan could respond prudently by reorienting its foreign policy in response to the Indo-US strategic partnership. Developing a stronger relationship with evolving China, a resurgent Russia and energy-rich Iran are some of the options for Pakistan to safeguard its strategic interests and overcome its energy crisis and economic stagnation. This study makes some key recommendations for the balance of power in South Asia by developing a strong relationship on geo-economic and geo-strategic grounds with China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, and the CARs.*

**Keywords:** *Indo-US strategic nexus, Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan.*

## **Introduction**

The Indo-US strategic nexus is one of the most remarkable post-Cold War geostrategic developments in the Asia Pacific and South Asia. The disintegration of the USSR brought about noteworthy developments in the world on the diplomatic and strategic fronts. As a result, the US emerged as the sole superpower and the world changed from bipolar to unipolar. The US proclaimed a new world order to maintain its global supremacy and dominance over global politics on its own terms. The main objective of the new world order was to set up regional alliances and partnerships in different parts of the world. These regional alliances and partnerships would play a crucial role in protecting and supporting the US interests in the regions and worldwide (Ejaz 2012).

The US policymakers argued that India's geo-strategic location, unfriendly relations with China and huge economic market made it the perfect option to support and safeguard American interests in the region. On the other hand, India's hostile agenda against China and Pakistan and its desire to become a global power with the support of the US were important points of convergence of their strategic interests. Thus, based on the

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common interests of India and the US in the region, both countries developed a strategic nexus to achieve their objectives. The Indo-US strategic nexus has continued to grow, supported by political commitments and their converging apprehensions of China's rising soft power in the Asia-Pacific (White 2021). The Indo-US strategic nexus would threaten the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia. The United States is concerned about China's developing military and economic power, which could challenge it in the Asian landmass now and worldwide in a few decades. Hence the U.S. is pursuing a policy of containing China by strengthening India as a counterweight and by reinforcing its relations with East Asian states and Australia (Hussain 2010). In addition, the US and its Western allies have decided to make India a regional power for the small states in the region and also to counter China (Tamimi 2010). India's relations with her neighbors are fraught with tension, unease and disputes. The neighboring states perceive India as a threat to their solidarity and security. India's hegemonic aspirations have destabilized the balance of power in South Asia, making regional security in general and Pakistan's security in particular vulnerable (Rashid and Javaid 2018).

The Indian Ocean is at the center of great powers' competition because of its geo-economic and geo-strategic importance. It provides critical trade routes linking East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Australia. The Straits of Malacca and Hormuz are the world's most significant geo-economic and geo-strategic chokepoints, and about 50 per cent of the world's maritime oil is passes through these Indian Ocean straits.

The major powers competition in the Indian Ocean, the US's desire to maintain the status quo, China's rising power and Russia's return to South Asia have political, strategic, and economic implications for Pakistan. The US has sought to contain China in the Indian and Pacific Oceans through alliances with like-minded states like India.

The Indo-US strategic partnership is a regional-global partnership. In this context, what are the options for Pakistan to protect its security and strengthen its economic interests through regional-global partnerships and alliances? Developing a stronger relationship with a developing China, a resurgent Russia and energy-rich Iran are critical options for Pakistan to establish a regional-global nexus to achieve its strategic and economic interests. Therefore, Pakistan should further deepen its relations with China and reorient its foreign policy towards Russia, Iran, Afghanistan and the CARs to achieve its strategic interests and overcome its energy crisis and economic stagnation.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Realism and liberalism are two major schools of thought in international relations. The former focuses on power, and the latter on interests and cooperation. The balance of power theory has been applied in this research, which is based on the realist school of thought, and focuses on domination, hegemony, and power politics. This theory offers the function of a balance of power approach and emphasizes the alliance relationship as a critical technique to balance an adversary's power. According to the realist school of thought, the balance of power approach is the perfect option for achieving security. In this context, Kenneth Waltz articulated, 'If there is a distinctive political theory of international politics, it is the balance of power theory' (Waltz 1979). According to Morgenthau, the development of the balance of power approach dates back to the origins of politics itself. He contended that the state's interest is mainly governed by its pursuit for increasing power. Furthermore, Morgenthau analyzed that traditional alliances of countries define how the balance of power historically shapes state interactions

(Morgenthau, Thompson, and Clinton 1985). The balance of power theory provides a solid basis for understanding the changing power dynamics in regional politics, especially with regard to the Indo-US strategic nexus, as it focuses on the policy of domination and power. The balance of power is an important theoretical approach to international relations. It has helped scholars and diplomats to understand partnerships, alliances and global politics (Brooks and Wholforth 2008). States strive to maintain the status quo against a power that is likely to affect their security through balancing. The importance of the balance of power approach has increased in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific with the emergence of the Indo-US strategic nexus. Morgenthau argued that 'balance of power is a baseline for regional and global stability due to its ability to deter the hegemony of a single state or a coalition of states' (Morgenthau 1978). In an anarchic world, the balance of power constrains the efforts of a potential hegemonic nation to disrupt the status quo. Oppenheim argued that 'in international relations, a balance of power exists when competing forces are stable' (Oppenheim 1981).

The Indo-US strategic nexus is designed to counterbalance China, and such countermeasures generate serious concerns for Pakistan. This strategic nexus has several implications for Pakistan, as the emergence of India as a counterbalance to China will tilt the balance of power between Washington and Beijing. Furthermore, the Indo-US strategic partnership will destabilize the strategic balance between India and Pakistan and power equilibrium in South Asia. This represents a significant correlation between the Indo-US strategic nexus and Pakistan's national security. Pakistan's security relations with India have focused on maintaining a strategic balance. The balance of power theory seems relevant to this study because it focuses on strategic balance and alliance behavior. Through the Indo-US strategic alliance, the US has legitimized its Indian exceptionalism, which has expanded to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) domain. Sharon Squassoni argues that Indian exceptionalism is a clear violation of international non-proliferation policy, 'rather than India moving into the mainstream, the mainstream has moved to it' (Squassoni 2010). The balance of power theory suggests that 'states will take measures to protect themselves from the power or threat of another state' (Vasquez and Elman 2002). In this context, the Indo-US strategic nexus could create a clash of interests among the great powers and simultaneously offer an opportunity to Pakistan to strengthen its strategic bonds with China and Russia in order to maintain the regional balance.

## **Converging Factors of the Indo-US Nexus**

### *1. Strategic Interests*

The Indo-US strategic nexus is developing an asymmetry in the power index between the critical rivals in South Asia. The main objectives of the Indo-US strategic nexus are geared towards achieving their strategic interests in the region. After the end of the Cold War, there was a paradigm shift in regional and international politics. The US began to tilt towards India, and both countries engaged with each other to achieve their converging strategic interests. In this context, the first official high-level security dialogue between the two countries was held in New Delhi in January 1992. The Indo-US strategic nexus and the civil nuclear deal indicate that the US considers India as a perfect option for achieving its objectives in the region. Moreover, India is also important for the US because of its growing economy, trade-driven foreign policy and robust relations with industrialized nations (Teresita 2008). In April 2005, Ashley J. Tellis presented a report

to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on the US strategic interests in South Asia. He suggested that the US should take some essential steps to ally with India. The first step is that the US should support India in developing its economic and military sectors to counter China's leading role in Asia. The second step is to end the illusory idea of a military balance between India and Pakistan, and the US must provide additional economic and military assistance to India. The third step is that the US should recommend Indian membership of the United Nations Security Council, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the Group of Eight. Furthermore, he suggested that the US should allow India to sell dual-use technology, including nuclear security equipment and complete the Iran-India gas pipeline project (Tellis 2005). In June 2005, India and the US signed a ten-year arms deal in Washington DC to strengthen and deepen their defense relationship. This agreement would help transfer military and civilian technology to India and cooperate on missile technology and weapons production (Bhatty 2005).

The Indo-US military deal helped achieve two main objectives. The first primary goal was to help the US achieve its strategic objectives in Asia. The second main objective was to help India to develop as a great power, which could allow the projection of Indian military power beyond its borders (Bhatty 2005). Both states intended to secure their strategic interests through this landmark strategic agreement. The US has strategic interests in energy-rich regions such as the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. India is strategically located between the Arabian Sea, the Gulf region and the Pacific Ocean. These are the main reasons for the convergence of the Indo-US strategic interests. The US security experts see India as a fertile ground where the US can promote its strategic objectives.

## *2. Economic Interests*

In economic terms, half of the world's commercial shipping and around 65 per cent of the world's oil trade passes through the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Iskander Rehman argued that by 2030, some 85 per cent of global energy consumption is likely to pass through the Asia-Pacific region (Rehman 2014). Asian Development Bank president Takehiko Nakao said, 'Today, the economic center of gravity is shifting to Asia and the Pacific, and almost all our developing countries have advanced to middle-income status. However, large challenges remain, and new ones emerge' (Nakao 2018). There are some critical economic interests behind the Indo-US relationship. India's colossal and promising market is a major factor in the warm relationship between India and the US (Nandy 2015). India is the third largest trading partner of the US in the Pacific region and the ninth largest trading partner globally.

Notably, the US is India's largest trading partner from 2021. To further deepen their economic relations, India and the US have set an ambitious goal of increasing annual trade from \$146 billion to \$500 billion soon. The US is India's largest source of foreign direct investment (Melin 2022). Washington's commitment to arms sales not only benefits its economy, but also helps operational cooperation and interoperability between the two states. According to analysts, successful military operations require real-time data and systems that can be networked across domains (Tellis 2020). The main objective of the US is to consolidate its status as the sole superpower in order to maintain its dominant role in the world. As an emerging economic power, India could protect the US economic interests in the region (Berlin 2006). The huge degree of economic interde-

pendence could further lead to Indo-US strategic convergence. India and the US have a common interest in sustaining their strategic and economic interests in South Asia and Asia-Pacific region because about two-thirds of India's trade passes through these waters. It is also an indispensable trade route for the US and its allies. Policymakers in both countries have sought to further deepen their economic ties to promote common economic interests in the region. India is an important trading partner for the US since India is one of the world's largest economies.

### *3. Containment of China*

The US policymakers have employed various strategies to contain the states through alliances, military presence, economic sanctions, and robust diplomacy. Over the last three decades, the US has developed strategies to contain China. The containment of China is a critical factor behind the Indo-US strategic nexus. Mearsheimer analyzes that the containment policy is based on preserving the US economic, military and technological hegemony through reciprocal agreements. The US has designed a global system to protect its interests and boost its power. The US aims to contain China; however, the US political leaders continue to deny this. The US policymakers have designed a plan to control China's rapid economic and military development. The US military forces could threaten Chinese trade through the South China Sea (Mearsheimer 2010). China is evolving as a superpower. Therefore, the US established a plan to slow down China's development pace (Burzynski 2012). Under the shadow of the containment policy, the US shifted its military power to the Pacific region through Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' (Ford 2017). The aim of this strategic plan was to signal the containment of China through hard power. China strengthened its deterrence strategy and modernized its missile and nuclear technology in response to the US containment policy (Jalil 2019).

The Trump administration took its containment policy towards China to the economic domain. The US pursued economic sanctions against some Chinese industries and launched an economic war against the gigantic Chinese economy (Allen-Ebrahaminian 2021). In this context, in July 2018, the US imposed a 25-percent tax on Chinese commodities worth \$34 billion. However, China responded and imposed a 25-percent tax on \$34 billion of the US imports (Mullen 2021). The Biden administration has continued the Trump administration's policies on the economic front and has spoken out on human rights violations in China (Dahiya 2021). India will serve the US interests in the region to appear as a global power. India is a cost-effective option for the US to maintain a balance of power in the region against China. A vital purpose of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal is to support India's development as a global power to contain China (Tasleem 2008). The US has come up with the policy of containment to counter China's expansion and likely emergence as a world power. The US has signed various agreements with China's neighboring countries as part of its containment policy (Sempa 2019). The Indo-US civil nuclear deal and the growing influential role of the US in the Asian landmass reflect that the US has adopted a strategy to contain China by limiting its regional, global and strategic ambitions (Venu 2002). In this regard, the Indo-US partnership and agreements are a significant development. The US has improved its relations with the regional states via agreements and alliances such as agreements with India and Vietnam. The US has adopted an alliance policy to continue its critical and influential role in Asia. It has developed several military bases in the regional states to check the rise of Chinese military and economic development.

## Policy Options for Pakistan

### 1. *Realignment of Foreign Policy*

The world is shifting from unipolar to bipolar or multipolar. The US supremacy is being challenged by a partnership between resurgent Russia and rising China. In such a situation, the neo-realist school of thought suggested that developing countries must tilt towards the great powers that have a colossal influence on the world power index. Pakistan has experienced a close relationship with the US because of its powerful influence in world politics. The world's power structure is currently being challenged by resurgent Russia and rising China. Therefore, various countries are reorienting their foreign policies due to the global power shift from the West to the East (Wadood and Alamgir 2019). The emergence of China and Russia in great power politics provides Pakistan with alternative options to avoid the US pressure and develop a healthy relationship with Russia. Pakistan should further deepen its relationship with China, which has always supported Pakistan in international forums and acknowledged Pakistan's sacrifices of in the War on Terror (Sampathkumar 2018). Ashfaque Hassan argued that 'since 9/11, Pakistan has received about \$14.6 billion through the Coalition Support Fund, which is only 12 per cent of the cost Pakistan has paid (\$123 billion). Pakistan has suffered a lot in the name of war and terror' (Hassan 2018).

Former Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar argued that since independence, Pakistan had developed a strong relationship with the US and played an important role on its behalf in the Cold War. However, Pakistan has lost its socio-economic development, peace and security in return. Therefore, Pakistan will readjust its foreign policy in light of new regional and global developments (Sattar 2013). However, Sadaf *et al.* argued that Pakistan should continue its friendly relations with the US to safeguard the common interests of Pakistan and the US in the region, except for the US policy of containment of China. They further articulated that Pakistan should enhance collaboration with China in the field of nuclear energy and develop a strong relationship with Russia (Farooq, Kazmi, and Javed 2018). Several developments are taking place in the Asian landmass, particularly in terms of cooperation and alliances. The US strategic and economic interests in East and South Asia could drive major or minor regional political changes. In this context, the Indo-US nexus will play a pivotal role in promoting the US interests in the region and Indian hegemonic aspirations based on Indian strategic culture. However, Pakistan has several options to strengthen its economic and strategic position in the region to secure its national interests. In this regard, Pakistan should reorient its foreign policy towards Russia, Iran and the CARs and strengthen its strategic relationship with China. By reorienting its foreign policy, Pakistan can undermine the Indian ambitions, which are bound to isolate Pakistan at regional and global levels.

### 2. *The Sino-Pakistani Countermeasures in Response to the Indo-US Strategic Nexus*

The China-Pakistan relationship is the epitome of long-term friendship despite different cultures, beliefs, and social systems. In response to the Indo-US strategic nexus, China and Pakistan should strengthen their defense ties to maintain the balance of power in the region (Hussain, Hussain and Qambari 2020). The Indo-US strategic nexus undermines the strategic interests of China and Pakistan. This strategic nexus would allow China and Pakistan to deepen their civil nuclear energy cooperation, promote strategic interdependence, and boost cooperation in the industrial, technological, agricultural, and

infrastructure sectors (Munir 2018). To develop an effective foreign policy, Pakistan can overcome its internal problems and crises. For this purpose, the perfect option is to avoid the prospect of war. Pakistan should strengthen its relations with China and develop a healthy relationship with the US. However, Pakistan should ensure that its relationship with China does not hinder its relations with other states, because China always has strategic support for Pakistan, which the US never did (Ashraf 2018). Beijing's response was that of a loyal friend when the NATO forces attacked a border check post in Pakistan in November 2011, killing 26 Pakistani army personnel. The Chinese government official said, 'Any threat to Pakistan will be taken as a direct threat to China' (Watson and Han 2011). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a landmark project for economic development and offers several opportunities for China and Pakistan. The significance of CPEC for China and Pakistan is manifold. China will access its energy destination (the Gulf region) within ten days through the CPEC route. On the other hand, it takes about 40 days for Chinese ships to reach the Middle East and the Persian Gulf through the sea route. The successful completion of CPEC will help to overcome the energy-deprived economy of Pakistan.

Hussain *et al.* argued that CPEC is the cheapest, safest and closest route for the Chinese to connect with the Middle East and Gulf region. CPEC could potentially develop regional economic integration between China, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and the CARs (Hussain, Ke, and Bano 2019). Markey argued that India and the US have objections to the route of CPEC and both states want to sabotage it. Some US scholars suggested that China should reduce its activities in Pakistan to minimize regional instability (Markey and West 2016). However, CPEC would be an economic game changer for China-Pakistan and regional countries. Both countries should accelerate work on CPEC projects to complete them on time. China is a time-tested friend of Pakistan and has continuously come to help Pakistan in difficult times. China could provide further assistance to Pakistan in the fields of defense and technology. In this context, both countries should enhance their strategic, economic, nuclear and technological cooperation to counter the Indo-US strategic nexus, containing China and to counter the Indian hegemonic aspirations in the region.

### *3. Reorientation of Relations with Russia*

Pakistan-Russia relations remain fragile for geostrategic reasons. However, both countries have taken some initiatives to improve their relationship. Several options are available for both states to develop a robust economic and strategic relationship (Malik 2019). The Indo-Russian friendship and Pakistan's close association with the West have kept Pakistan-Russia relations estranged in the past. However, the growing relationship between the US and India, especially the US-India civil nuclear deal, has several implications for the Pakistan-US and Indo-Russian relations, respectively. As the US changed its priorities in South Asia, Pakistan reformed its priorities and realigned its relations with Russia. With the changing scenario of regional politics, Russia endorsed Pakistan's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Nazir 2012). Pakistan's membership in the SCO improved its regional status and would be helpful in alleviating the concerns of China, Russia and Iran regarding the part of the Western alliance. In response to the Indo-US strategic nexus, Pakistan could strengthen its strategic ties with China, Russia and Iran. However, the growing relationship between Pakistan and Russia is a source of tension for the Indo-US alliance (Khan 2014). Craig

Tim analyzed that Pakistan enhances its relations with Russia because the Indo-US nuclear deal could develop into a security threat for Pakistan (Craig 2015). Cenk Tamer analyzed that Pakistan will be an effort to pursue a multipolar foreign policy. In this regard, China and Russia are alternative options for Pakistan. Pakistan is expected to receive Chinese and Russian support in this transition phase (Tamer 2022).

Russia launched a military operation against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine occurred because of NATO's expansion against Russia. Pakistan can have a better relationship with Russia without affecting its relations with the US and the West if Moscow maintains a healthier relationship with Indo-Pak, and New Delhi continues its relationship with Washington and Moscow respectively (Shah, Majeed, and Ali 2022). The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war creates a complex situation on the diplomatic and economic fronts across the globe. Due to a poor experience with camp politics, Pakistan wishes to maintain a good relationship with both the West and Russia. In this regard, Pakistan abstained on the anti-Russian resolution at the United Nations General Assembly in order to remain impartial (Mirza 2022). However, the Russia-Ukraine war and the ongoing salute in Afghanistan pose various challenges and provide opportunities for Islamabad to reorient its diplomatic role to establish a robust relationship with the Biden administration and Moscow as well.

The peace process in Afghanistan provides a basis for a convergence of interests between Pakistan and Russia. Both countries agreed that political reconciliation among all the Afghan factions is the only way to achieve lasting peace in Afghanistan (Directorate of National Intelligence 2002). Furthermore, the critical concerns of Pakistan and Russia following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan are maintaining stability in the region and ensuring the security of their own countries. Russia is the world's second largest arms supplier and may be looking for another strategic partner in the region, given the Indo-US strategic partnership.

The changing scenario of regional and global politics will provide several opportunities for Pakistan to develop a robust relationship with Russia to overcome its energy crisis, security needs and economic stagnation. Pakistan should realize the importance of the bilateral relations with Russia for economic, strategic and technological reasons. Russia has already realized Pakistan's pivotal role in regional and international politics, and thus, Russia has given a prudent response to Pakistan in the past decade. In 2018, Pakistan and Russia agreed on a security training agreement when the US limited its military support to Pakistan. Pakistan and Russia should minimize their trust deficit and then there will be sufficient grounds for the convergence of their strategic and economic interests in the region. In this context, particularly, Pakistan should reorient its foreign policy towards Russia, and both countries could increase their economic volume, strategic cooperation and technological collaboration. Both countries must realize that their healthy relationship is necessary to overcome the trust deficit, develop a new era of cooperation and maintain the balance of power in the region.

#### *4. Reorientation of Relations with Iran*

Historically, Pak-Iran relations have been cordial, but there have been many ups and downs happened due to some regional and global issues. Pakistan faces several challenges in strengthening its relations with Iran. For instance, despite being immediate neighbors, the trade volume between the two countries is nominal. Sadaf *et al.* argue that Pakistan should expand its relations with Iran on the basis of equality and mutual



interest. Iran is an energy-rich state, and Pakistan could meet its energy and economic needs by deepening its relations with Iran. Pakistan needs a strong military, a strong economy and healthy relations with its neighbors to fully deal with the Indo-US nexus (Farooq, Kazmi and Javed 2018).

Fisher argued that Iran is a time-tested friend of Pakistan in difficult times. For instance, Iran provided military assistance to Pakistan in the 1965 Pakistan-India war (Fisher 2013). Babar analyzed that Pakistan received diplomatic and military assistance from Tehran in the 1971 war against India, and the Tehran government declared the Indian attack as 'aggression' (Babar 2012). Umer Karim examined that the lack of diplomatic and economic engagement between Iran and Pakistan is the main issue that can bypass their national security concerns. The perfect way for both states to recognize and eliminate their bilateral security concerns is through a meaningful dialogue. At the same time, both countries should keep their economic and security issues separate and complete the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project as soon as possible. A constructive relationship between the two countries could help minimize the overlapping effects of regional geopolitics and ensure their national security (Karim 2017).

Pakistan's closeness to the West and American pressure on Pakistan, as well as Indo-Iranian relations, has kept them estranged. However, the changing scenario of regional geopolitics could bring about strategic and economic convergence. The Indo-US strategic nexus, the Afghan issue, terrorism, and the growing arms race in the region are major issues challenging the national security of Pakistan and Iran. Both countries should redefine their national challenges and improve bilateral relations to minimize the trust deficit. The Indo-US nexus could pose several challenges for Pak-Iran as the US wants to isolate Iran, while India wants to isolate Pakistan. Therefore, both countries should recognize their geo-strategic and geo-economic importance in the region. Pakistan should reorient its foreign policy towards Iran and resume work on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline as soon as possible to overcome its energy crisis. In addition, China-Pakistan has offered regional countries to be part of the CPEC, and Iran's desire to join the economic venture of CPEC, which will be helpful for Pak-Iran to strengthen their economic relations. In this economic era, Pakistan could benefit from Iran because, despite the US sanctions, Iran is still a stable economy with high per capita income, solid GDP, and energy resources.

## **Conclusion**

Through careful studies of previous research on the Indo-US partnership and Pakistan's response, this research analyzes and reveals some key objectives of the Indo-US strategic convergence and presents some policy recommendations for Pakistan to ensure its national security, economic growth and maintain the balance of power in the region. Balance of power remains a practical approach to strategic stability and protects national interests in strategic, economic, and diplomatic domains. Several options are available for Pakistan to respond to the Indo-US strategic nexus. The Indo-US strategic nexus is causing a shift in regional partnerships and alliances and has an unfavorable impact on Pakistan's security. Strategic interests, economic interests, and containment of China are the core objectives behind the Indo-US strategic nexus. These objectives directly and indirectly affect the balance of power in the region by developing India as a region-

al and global power, which will adversely affect Pakistan's security and economic growth.

Without accepting any pressure, Pakistan should diversify its relations with all global powers on the basis of mutual respect, equality, and cooperation, which will help Pakistan to overcome its economic vulnerability and energy crisis. In this regard, Pakistan needs to reorient its foreign policy and establish a robust relationship with China, Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan without affecting its relationship with the US. Some key recommendations for Pakistani policymakers to respond to the Indo-US strategic nexus.

### **Recommendations**

1. The Indo-US strategic alliance is shifting the balance of power in South Asia and beyond. Therefore, Pakistan should continue to deepen its strategic, economic, and technological relations with China, Russia, and Iran to maintain the balance of power.

2. Pakistan and China should strengthen their strategic relationship in response to the Indo-US strategic nexus. In this regard, the authorities in Islamabad and Beijing need to develop a strategic plan to maintain the balance of power in the region. For example, both countries could develop a joint effective intelligence-sharing mechanism, a robust artificial intelligence program, a proficient cybersecurity plan, an effective air defense system and cooperation in missile technology.

3. Pakistan should separate its economic and strategic priorities to achieve more economic and strategic objectives. For example, China and India are diplomatic and strategic adversaries while they enjoy a stable economic relationship. The annual bilateral trade between India and China amounted \$135 billion in 2022, while the annual trade volume between Pakistan and China amounted only \$26.4 billion in 2022.

4. Pakistan and China have a glorious history of ideal friendship as neighboring states around the globe, while their economic relations are average. On the other hand, Indo-US economic relations have grown rapidly in the last decade. Both countries have agreed to increase their annual bilateral trade volume from \$146 billion (in 2021) to \$500 billion within five years to further strengthen their economic relationship. In the same vein, China and Pakistan should increase their annual trade volume from \$26.4 billion (2022) to \$100 billion within five years.

5. A major converging interest of the Indo-US partnership is to sabotage the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) because of its economic importance for China and Pakistan and regional countries. It will provide several opportunities for Pakistan to develop as a regional economic hub. It is the safest, cheapest and shortest route for China to reach its trade and energy destinations. Through effective diplomacy, the authorities in Islamabad should highlight the economic benefits of the CPEC for regional countries, especially Iran, Afghanistan and the energy-rich landlocked CARs. They should also highlight the economic benefits and incentives of the CPEC for foreign direct investment (FDI) in Pakistan's special economic zones (SEZs).

6. Currently, Pakistan's economy is in a poor state due to various reasons. However, the energy crisis is the main reason for this economic calamity. Therefore, Pakistan should choose alternative options to overcome its energy crisis and economic stagnation. In this regard, Russia and Iran are perfect options for Pakistan to meet its energy needs and stabilize its economic position.

7. Due to changing regional and global strategic dynamics, we need to reorient our foreign policy towards resurgent Russia. Moreover, as an energy-starved country, it will

be a major achievement for Pakistan to develop and strengthen its economic relations with Russia. Especially, after India's tilt towards the US, Russia is keen to explore other options. In this regard, Russia is well aware of Pakistan's strategic and economic importance in the region.

8. The Indo-Iranian economic relations have boosted over time. On the diplomatic front, Iran has always sided with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. The Iranian Foreign Ministry has condemned the Indian aggression against the innocent people of Kashmir. However, the economic relations between Iran and Pakistan are nominal, despite being immediate neighbors. Pakistan should reorient its foreign policy towards Iran and enhance its economic relations with Iran. In this regard, Pakistan should first complete the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, which could be a landmark project to overcome the energy crisis in Pakistan.

9. Islamabad authorities need to develop a grand strategic and economic plan in response to the Indo-US strategic nexus and to overcome its internal crisis. In this context, Pakistan should strengthen and deepen its strategic, economic and technological relations with evolving China, resurgent Russia and energy-rich Iran to overcome its economic and energy problems and maintain the balance of power in South Asia and beyond.

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