

his 1919 volume, he depicted this region as one of the six “natural” regions of the world.<sup>3</sup> In continued support of this thesis, he argued in 1943 that “a thousand million people of ancient oriental civilization inhabit the lands of India and China. They must grow to prosperity. . . . Then they will balance the other thousand million who live between the Missouri and the Yenisei.”<sup>4</sup> The latter reference is to the heartland and North Atlantic units working in cooperation with one another.

What this worldview failed to appreciate was that the geopolitical destinies of India and China could not be shared because of their unique geographical and cultural-historical settings. Even in Mackinder’s time, as today, the two had different demographic and resource bases and different sets of strategic concerns. China was an essentially homogeneous nation caught between the Eurasian heartland and Asia Pacifica, with much of its space belonging to the continental interior. In contrast, India’s populace was highly diverse racially, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously. Its Indian Ocean strategic orientation was reflected in the historic reach of its sailors and merchants to Southeast Asia’s islands and to the eastern and southern coasts of Africa—the two major regions where the Indian diaspora first took root. In addition, the ecumenes of the two great civilizations were too far removed from each other geographically to develop significant interaction or to enable one power to dominate the other militarily.

Although the historic buffer zone of Tibet and the Himalayas that lies between East and South Asia has been breached by China in recent decades, India holds the dominant position within its region. In general, the towering Himalayan mountain ranges continue to bar the route to northern India. They wall off Tibet from the lands to the south and, while the northern part of Azad Kashmir, which Pakistan ceded to China, now connects China’s Xinjiang to Pakistan, it is too remote an outpost to serve the Chinese as a serious military threat to northern India.

During the course of the Cold War, the USSR was able to gain some influence in India, while at various times China and the United States became important military backers of Pakistan. However, these inroads did not fundamentally alter the geopolitical status of South Asia. It remained a separate and inwardly oriented geopolitical region, most of which took a neutralist posture in the struggle between the Western and Communist realms. Pakistan’s ties to the West and China’s rise as a major power did not alter Pakistan’s fundamental geostrategic orientation, which remained South Asian. Its major concern was its struggle with India over Kashmir, but it also felt threatened by the Soviet inroads into Afghanistan.

South Asia was spared from becoming another Cold War shatterbelt by the combination of physical vastness, a huge population that has now reached 1.7 billion, an inward economic and cultural orientation, a common political history, and India’s dominant role. However, while it stands apart from adjoining geostrategic realms and maintains independent geopolitical regional status, the unity that the Indian subcontinent once enjoyed eludes it today.

## Regional Geopolitical Overview

### INDIA AND PAKISTAN

India gained its independence in 1947. It adopted a policy of nonalignment or neutralism in the Cold War, based in part on what Jawaharlal Nehru described as its geographical position: “India is big and India is happily situated. . . . [A]n invasion or attack on India . . . will give

[other countries] no profit.”<sup>5</sup> The main preoccupation of India’s leadership was its disputes with Pakistan over Kashmir, water rights, and East Pakistan.

India did have a broader view that extended beyond the region. This was reflected in its leadership role within the “third force”—the grouping of Asian and African states initially assembled in 1955 at Bandung, Indonesia, where Nehru expressed his opposition to military alliances and called for a moratorium on nuclear testing. However, he had doubts as to whether the Asian-African conference could ever develop into a cohesive group.<sup>6</sup> In this, he was being realistic. India was so preoccupied with its conflict with Muslim Pakistan and binding together the union of India that it had little surplus energy, beyond moral exhortations, to look beyond the subcontinent. The partition of British India left one hundred million Muslims within India, out of its then total population of four hundred million. Muslims now number nearly 220 million, or 14 percent, of India’s population of over 1.2 billion, including heavy concentrations in Mumbai and Bangalore. They are heavily urbanized, with a high poverty rate. Intercommunal strife between the Hindus and the Muslims remains a serious threat to India’s unity, particularly since Hindu militants have gained political influence with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in competition with the Congress Party.

The response of Washington to India’s neutralism was to draw Pakistan into a military alliance, first in 1955 through the short-lived Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which also included Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, and later through bilateral arrangements. Also in 1955 Pakistan joined the now-defunct SEATO, which together with its involvement with CENTO reflected both westward and eastward strategic pulls.

Hindsight teaches us that the Cold War policy of tolerating no neutrals pursued by US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was a major blunder. For Dulles, the nonalignment of India was “immoral,” regardless of the fact that India was the world’s largest democracy. He therefore turned to the alliance with Pakistan, which was to be plagued by corrupt and often dictatorial military rule and chronic political instability throughout the Cold War and beyond.

India’s hopes for nonalignment were severely shaken by the intrusion into the region of both the United States and China. With its mortal enemy, Pakistan, in alliance with the United States and its relations with China deteriorating because of border disputes, New Delhi had to open itself to Soviet military, economic, and political support to gain Moscow’s backing for its position on Kashmir.

In the 1959 Longju incident, China occupied a garrison post in India’s North-East Frontier Agency (which in 1987 was renamed Arunachal Pradesh State). Khrushchev sought unsuccessfully to mediate the dispute, as he tried to balance Soviet-Indian ties with the ideological and strategic Sino-Soviet bonds. However, just before the 1962 war broke out between India and China, the Soviets agreed to build and deliver jets for India. Moreover, rather than backing Beijing, Moscow remained neutral when the war broke out. All of this contributed to the eventual Sino-Soviet schism, for it fanned Mao’s fears that the USSR was seeking to outflank China through an alliance with India. As noted previously, Beijing has remained in control of over 40 percent of Aksai Chin—that cold, high desert plain in the northeasternmost part of Jammu and Kashmir that is bordered by Xinjiang on its northeast and Tibet on its southeast. The Chinese also invaded India’s North-East Frontier Agency, which lies north of Assam, but withdrew at the end of the war.

Beijing’s speedy reaction to the Soviet-Indian ties was to settle outstanding differences with Pakistan over their common border in northern Kashmir in 1963. At that time, Pakistan ceded to China 2,050 square miles of the northern Azad Kashmir territory also claimed by India. Beijing, in turn, became Pakistan’s major arms supplier during the next two decades. The

two countries agreed to build the Karakoram Peace Highway—a 750-mile, all-weather road over the Karakoram Range from Rawalpindi, Pakistan, to Kashi (Kashgar) in Xinjiang that crossed the mountains at the 15,420-foot Khunjerab Pass. (It was completed only in 1978.) The road is the sole paved section of the historic Silk Route from the Mediterranean to China.

By 1971, when the Bangladesh rebellion broke out in East Pakistan (which is separated from the western half of Pakistan by eleven hundred miles), China openly supported Pakistan, while Moscow backed India. Washington supported neither its Pakistani ally nor India, whose troops quickly triumphed over those of Pakistan. In the months of civil war that had preceded India's intervention, estimates vary widely on the number of native Bengalis killed in East Pakistan, ranging from three hundred thousand to three million. Several million fled into exile in India.

Beijing subsequently supplied Islamabad with nuclear technology. At the same time, while the United States was decrying the spread of nuclear weapons in South Asia, it was building up Pakistan militarily to support the Afghan rebels in their war against the Soviet Union.

The second war between India and Pakistan was over Kashmir. It took place in 1965 and caused the United States and Britain to impose an embargo on the sale of arms to both countries. This further strengthened the bonds that India and Pakistan had, respectively, with the USSR and China. The embargo was lifted in 1975, but in the meantime India had turned to Moscow for new and major infusions of weapons, as part of a 1973 aid agreement that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had forged with Moscow. New Delhi abandoned its antinuclear policy the following year, when it exploded an underground nuclear test device in the Thar Desert.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to prop up its Marxist governmental ally in Kabul against Islamic fundamentalist rebels, Washington called upon Islamabad to help foil the Russian move. Pakistan became the main arms conduit from the United States to the rebels and provided the Afghan mujahideen and volunteers from other Islamic countries with major training and supply bases. Also, since this period, it has sheltered well over two million Afghan refugees. Saudi Arabia, which was also enlisted in the effort in Afghanistan, provided considerable financial support to the rebels. The magnitude of US military and economic aid to Pakistan during the 1980s—\$600 million per annum—made Pakistan the third-largest recipient of US aid, after Israel and Egypt. Adding to India's fears over the resurrected US-Pakistan alliance was the continuing thaw in the relations between Washington and Beijing. For India, this raised the specter of encirclement and provided additional justification for its drawing closer to the Soviet Union.

The sudden pullout of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989 and US suspension the following year of all military and economic aid to Pakistan because of its nuclear weapons program appeared to set the scene for a radical restructuring of alliances in South Asia. India had become far more attractive to Washington as a potential ally on several grounds: (1) its significance as a potential market (from 2002 to 2011, India's economy grew by over 7 percent per annum, only to drop to 4.4 percent the following year), (2) its pool of technological brainpower, (3) its role as a leader of developing countries in bridging the differences between the Third World and the World Trade Organization, and (4) its importance as the world's largest democracy.

The convergence of US and Indian interests also related to the deterioration of ties between Washington and Islamabad, until the exigencies of the US war in Afghanistan restored these relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union had undercut the strategic rationale for the US-Pakistani military alliance of the 1980s. Tensions then increased between the two countries because of Pakistan's role in supporting the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's

terrorist base in Afghanistan and because of its 1998 testing of nuclear weapons. The unintended consequences of the American effort to support the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet forces and their Afghan allies was the rise to power of the fundamentalist Sunni Taliban. There are strong bonds based on Pashtun lineage between the Taliban of Afghanistan and the twenty million Pashtuns who live within Pakistan's western borderlands, from Peshawar to Quetta. Pakistan harbored many Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas who had been redirected from the Soviet Afghan war to support Muslim militants in the Indian-held part of Kashmir. A strong Pakistani Pashtun Taliban movement has arisen to make common cause with its Afghan compatriots.

After the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 by the United States and its allies, the alliance between the United States and Pakistan was resumed. With the rout of the Taliban, Pakistan's Pashtun border region became the safe haven for both al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Despite billions of dollars' military aid provided by Washington, Pervez Musharraf's military regime had been unwilling or unable to eliminate these bases. The Pakistani army's Interservice Intelligence (ISI) has played a shadowy role in the battle against Islamic militants, using much of the military aid to continue to train and supply militants to operate against India in Kashmir while maintaining links with the Taliban.

While Pakistan's military commitment has been weak and its political scene highly volatile, the United States saw little choice but to stay the course. It tried to balance support of Musharraf with the restoration of civilian government amid the rising tide of Islamic extremism. Pressured by failure to rein in the militants, opposition from lawyers and judiciary, and widespread public demand for free elections, Musharraf abandoned military rule for civilian government in 2007. The ensuing political campaign, punctuated by Benazir Bhutto's assassination, culminated in the February 2008 victory of the Pakistan Peoples Party and the Pakistan Muslim League-N, marginalizing Musharraf. Meanwhile the country remains torn among the elected political parties, the military, and Islamic militants. Pakistan's future stability depends on whether partnership between civilian government and the military can contain the militants and whether widespread corruption and one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world can be successfully overcome. In an effort to restore peace in the Tribal Areas, the new civilian government agreed to withdraw all army forces in return for Pashtun withholding of support to the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The agreement was made in the face of opposition by the United States, which feared a weakening of the government's commitment to eliminating terrorist bases within Pakistan's border areas. This agreement has not held. Within a few years, Pakistan returned troops to the border. The current Pakistani government, led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, which has had on-and-off peace talks with the Taliban, launched air strikes against them in their strongholds within the tribal region of North Waziristan along the Afghan border.

With the end of the Cold War, the estrangement between India and the United States was repaired. In recognition of India's economic and strategic importance, Washington sought stronger ties. In 2007, the United States and India began negotiations for a strategic partnership, wherein India would be able to acquire US nuclear technology and materials for energy use. While initially these negotiations encountered strong opposition from their respective legislatures, the accord was formally signed in 2010. It provides for joint military and naval exercises and missile defense coordination as well as nuclear energy cooperation. For decades Russia had accounted for nearly 80 percent of India's weapons imports, but in 2011 New Delhi, the world's largest importer of arms, turned to the United States as its major weapons supplier.