# HOW BALANCE OF POWER SHAPES THE WORLD

By

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The twin concepts and mechanisms of the balance of power and power maximization act as key global geopolitical drivers in the current international system. What these concepts mean in the simplest terms is this: the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to act as relentless power acquisition entities in order to ensure their security, leading some states to accumulate more power than the rest, which drives other states to join hands to counter the threats stemming from the resulting imbalance.

For the US and other great powers, the traditional locus of the global balance of power is the massive geographical expanse of Eurasia.

Henry Kissinger, the former US National Security Advisor (NSA) and the Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford, explains in his book Diplomacy (1994) that the maintenance of the global balance of power by the US and the preservation of its national security consists in the prevention of the domination of Europe or Asia by any one power or of both by the same power.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former NSA under President Carter, warned in his book The Grand Chessboard (1997) that the domination of the western, central, eastern, and southern regions of Eurasia by major powers and their alliance could affect American supremacy as well as the Eurasian balance of power.

The Grand Chessboard also provides another valuable clue to understanding great-power behaviour in Eurasia in the distinction it draws between “geostrategic players” and “geopolitical pivots”. The former are defined as “the states that have the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond their borders in order to alter . . . the existing geopolitical state of affairs.” The latter are defined as “the states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behaviour of geostrategic players.”

Brzezinski conceded that pivots states could also display geopolitical activism. It is implicit in this concession that such dynamism is neither considered productive nor appreciated by major powers or geopolitical players as it constrains their capacity to influence these states and makes balancing against competitors difficult.

The insights of these two eminent strategic thinkers were based on the fact that the Great European Plain (including Western Europe and the key portions of the Russian landmass), Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia have historically served as favorable sites for successful great power projects during the last millennium.

Let’s now examine the case of South Asia to illustrate how balancing impacts inter-state relations.

The US was comfortable with China-Pakistan partnership in the 1970s and 1980s when the triangular diplomacy, begun by President Nixon, was aimed at normalizing relations with China to contain Soviet Russia.

The same partnership has become a point of concern now that China has become a global power, gained immense influence in East Asia, and created a strategic partnership with Russia, the major power of the central Eurasian region.

From the American perspective, these events have tripped the strategic fire alarm. As explained by Stephen Walt in The Origin of Alliances (1987), once a state feels something to be a threat it moves to counter and balance that threat. The threat here is not so much China as the prospect of the disturbance of the Eurasian balance of power which has occupied the Anglophone strategic imagination for the last 200 years.

It is possible that Pakistan may have been mistakenly perceived as another pivot state trying to display geopolitical activism. Such an error cannot be ruled out given its proximity to Afghanistan whose existence as a classic pivot state has led to the involvement of the US in Afghan affairs since the 1980s. However, the fact that Pakistan has consistently played a leading role in the American efforts for regional peace and stability far beyond the capabilities of any pivot state can help avoid this error of perception.

Pakistan’s relationship with China may even appear to be a case of band-wagoning, whereby a smaller state joins the rising power to improve its security prospects, only if one ignores the fact that Pakistan was China’s friend long before China became a global power. How can this flawed perception have arisen given that Pakistan’s will to continue to be America’s friend remains stout?

This misperception may be linked exclusively to the change in the relative power of the US in the last two decades. Although America’s absolute power is greater today than it was in the 1960s and it still continues to be the leading global power, its power relative to states like China and Japan or grouping of states like the EU has decreased over time.

It is this decline in relative power that can explain the development of America’s strategic partnership with India. This partnership signifies a lack of confidence on America’s part that is distressing for old friends like Pakistan because it entails risks to long-term security and standing of the US.

For a balanced approach, the US should consider two things. First, the US should not forget the indifference India displayed towards the crisis of Soviet power in Afghanistan and its subsequent disintegration, though it was ostensibly a Soviet ally during those traumatic times for the Soviet power. There is no guarantee that India would not behave in the same manner if the US were tomorrow to face some crisis in the region.

Second, the US should remember that any increase in India’s overall power would inevitably cause further decrease in America’s relative power. The compulsions of the maintaining a certain global balance of power today to counter what it perceives to be contemporary challenges to its power should not make the US oblivious to the future consequences of today’s balancing.

In sum, balance of power inevitably spawns competition and leads to conflict. Since the threat of nuclear annihilation has warded off hegemonic conflict so far, the threat of regional conflict has become more acute. This calls for the urgent need to imagine a collective way out of the impasse into which power maximization drives the inter-state system at regular intervals like clock-work.