Commentary
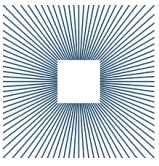
*based on the research being conducted by author

The Evolution of US Foreign Policy in South Asia: Strategic Shifts, Key Partnerships, and Geopolitical Trends

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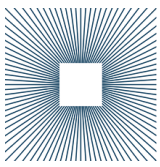
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Source: Medium.com

Over the past two decades, the South Asian region has emerged as a critical region influencing global trends and international developments. Key factors include India's rapid rise on the global stage and the initiation of the international North-South transport corridor. Additionally, India and Pakistan's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the escalating Kashmir conflict, heightened nuclear tensions between Delhi and Islamabad, Pakistan's strategic shift from being a close US ally towards closer ties with China, and the inclusion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in the Belt and Road Initiative are also notable developments. The US-Afghanistan war, the rise of international terrorist networks, the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and subsequent dialogues with the Taliban further underscore the region's geopolitical complexity. In analyzing US foreign policy towards South Asia, it is evident that the United States has adopted distinct approaches towards the region's two principal actors, India and Pakistan. US foreign policy has shifted over time, sometimes prioritizing India, at other times focusing more on Pakistan, and during certain periods such as the 1990s, balancing both. Currently, US relations with Pakistan and India are conducted through separate, differentiated policies. Relations with Pakistan are primarily security-oriented, while US engagement with India is framed more strategically and economically. A historical analysis of US foreign policy in South Asia reveals a dynamic evolution. The contemporary US approach to the region began after World War II, following independence of India and Pakistan. Studies by Nawaz M., Shaheen M., and Saif A. have typically divided US foreign policy into three or four distinct phases. However, our research, delineates seven distinct periods of US foreign policy development: 1947-1965, 1965-1979, 1979-1989, 1989-1998, 1998-2001, 2001-2021, and 2021
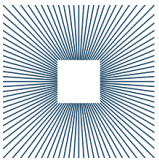
onwards. Major events that have shaped US foreign policy in South Asia include the establishment of India and Pakistan, the Vietnam War, the Soviet–Afghan War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, nuclear tests by India and Pakistan, the events of September 11, and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Each of these events has precipitated substantial shifts in US foreign policy in the region.
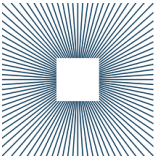
Our research produced a table titled *"Genesis of US Foreign Policy in South Asia"*, which outlines these seven pivotal periods. This tool provides a valuable framework for scholars and students analyzing U.S. foreign policy in the region, offering a concise and structured overview of its evolution.

№	Period	Directions and focus	Key events and Partnerships
1	1947–1965	Containment of communism, strategic importance of the region	Close ties with Pakistan, anti-communist barrier, passive relations with India (due to non-alignment movement)
2	1965–1979	Period of passivity	Vietnam War shifts US focus away from South Asia, minimal involvement in 1965 and 1971 India–Pakistan wars, distancing from Pakistan
3	1979–1989	Anti-Soviet struggle, war in Afghanistan	Soviet entry into Afghanistan, Pakistan becomes a key US ally, support for Afghan mujahideen
4	1989–1998	Collapse of Soviet Union, global leadership	Soviet collapse, end of Cold War, US interests shift to India's growing economy, sustained strategic relations with Pakistan
5	1998–2001	Nuclear tests strain relations	Nuclear tests by India and Pakistan, US sanctions on both countries, deterioration of relations
6	2001–2021	Global war on terrorism, countering China's influence	US enters Afghanistan after 9/11, cooperation with Pakistan against terrorism, economic and military ties with India strengthen, viewing India as a strategic partner against China
7	2021–present	Withdrawal from Afghanistan, strategic partnership with India	US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, diminishing role of Pakistan, India seen as a "Major Defense Partner", continued counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan

*** By increasing the intensity of color, you can notice the increase or decrease in the importance of South Asia in US foreign policy*

From 1947 to 1965, US foreign policy in South Asia primarily focused on "containing" the global spread of communism. During this period, the region held strategic rather than economic value for the US, with Pakistan viewed as a reliable partner in building an anti-communist buffer across the Middle East and South Asia. In contrast, US-India relations were minimal, largely due to India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement, which distanced itself from Cold War power dynamics. **From 1965 to 1979**, US foreign policy in South Asia became more passive, as attention shifted towards the Vietnam War **(1965-1973)** and Southeast Asia. This resulted in a reduced US presence in South Asia and a growing distance from Pakistan. The US did not intervene in the India-Pakistan wars of **1965 and 1971**. The Soviet-Afghan War **(1979 to 1989)** marked a significant shift in US focus back to South Asia, as Pakistan became a pivotal ally in the US efforts to counter the Soviet Union's influence in Afghanistan. This period saw Pakistan take center stage in U.S. strategic calculations. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1989 initiated a new phase **(1989-1998)**, as Washington sought to consolidate its global leadership. During this time, the US expressed growing interest in India's emerging economy, while maintaining Pakistan's strategic importance in the region. **From 1998 to 2001**, relations between the US and South Asia deteriorated, particularly following nuclear tests conducted by both India and Pakistan, which heightened regional tensions and triggered international concern. The events of September 11, 2001, reoriented US foreign policy towards South Asia, particularly in the context of the US-led war on terror **(2001-2021)**. Pakistan became a key partner as a logistical and operational based for US efforts in Afghanistan, while US-India relations flourished economically, driven by a shared interest in countering China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific. **From 2021 to the present**, US foreign policy in South Asia has been influenced by the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Pakistan's strategic role in US foreign policy has significantly diminished, though cooperation in counterterrorism remains. Meanwhile, India has gained prominence, with US designating it as a "Major Defense Partner", reflecting a broader shift in US priorities toward economic and defense cooperation with India.

In conclusion, an analysis of the genesis of US foreign policy in South Asia reveals a cyclical pattern of engagement and disengagement. During the Cold War, the region was viewed through the lens of containing communism, with Pakistan serving as the main partner. In the modern era, India's stable economy and democratic governance system have made it a favorable partner for the US, while Pakistan continues to hold importance in counterterrorism efforts.