

## **The New Great Game in South Asia**

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The celebrated Nobel Prize winner British novelist, Rudyard Kipling, though not the originator of the term, yet popularised the phrase 'The Great Game' in his book 'Kim' in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries respectively. The Great Game symbolised the geopolitical and geostrategic contestation between the two empires, an expansionist Russia and Imperial Britain, during that era. Both these empires strived for carving out areas of influence in Central Asia, Afghanistan and even Tibet. Though there was no resultant kinetic war between these two powers, but rivalry had remained intense. Fast forwarding to the current times, antagonism in many aspects of human endeavour between some nations in this region persists. However, these two erstwhile empires have been replaced by China and India. Some decades back, for a few years, both Russia and later the US also had featured in the geopolitical landscape of this region. Now, in the Asian continent including the Indo-Pacific expanse, India, China, and Japan are the major economic powers, with the former two also being military powers—China leading in most indices of power. That China's traditional territorial ambitions brook no elaboration is a well-accepted fact.

During the onset of the original Great Game, Russia and Britain though contesting for influence, primarily in the economic sphere and managing no major political upheavals in the region, ensured their overall dominance by themselves without recourse to kinetic wars. On the contrary, in the current Great Game in South Asia, it is China—more than India—that is striving to gather a few other nations into its fold, keep India preoccupied with regional issues, and ensure that India remains boxed in within South Asia. However, the fact remains that India with its growing status is playing an important role globally and China's efforts in this aspect have been soundly thwarted. But equally, the fact remains that the new Great Game in South and South East Asia is being played in differing dimensions with some other nations in support of the China-led bloc. Expectedly, with its continually growing military muscle and deep pockets, China—though not technically a part of South Asia—has expanded its footprint in the region with support from its vassal state, Pakistan. Both China and Pakistan, collectively, have successfully managed to make the original South Asian states grouping, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) irrelevant. India must remain acutely mindful of the collective machinations of China and Pakistan directed against it, while also endeavouring to revive SAARC and promote trade, tourism, security, and other areas of cooperation within the organisation.

The South Asian region, since Aug 2024, most unexpectedly, witnessed a traumatic change, with the ouster of its pro-India Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina from the Bangladesh government on some flimsy grounds, of student admission quotas in their

universities. That Begum Hasina was in power continuously for the last 15 years uninterruptedly as the PM, her sudden unceremonious departure from Dhaka remains a mystery as to the real power behind the termination of her Awami League government and replacement by Nobel Laureate economist Mohd Yunus. The latter, to everyone's surprise, is utterly communal and perhaps, behind the scenes, been put there by the United States (US) intelligence as part as their New Great Game agenda. Admittedly, the sudden change in Dhaka has been a setback for India which had been working for better harmonious relations in the South Asian neighbourhood. That the Yunus government in Dhaka has opened up its doors to Rawalpindi in a variety of ways including exchange of visits by senior defence officers to each other's capitals and warming up of intelligence contacts between the two nations is indicative of the road ahead to the determinant of Indian interests in the region. Which are the powers who want to destabilise India's eastern flank and by extension some of the states of India's restive north-eastern states? A look back at China's past record points the finger at Beijing. However, former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had alleged that her refusal to hand over St. Martin's Island to the Americans led them to plot her ouster.

In South Asia, one of the pronounced exporters of terrorism, since decades, has been Pakistan. Universally acknowledged as the epicentre of global terrorism, Pakistan, now suffers gravely from its own misdeeds of the past. Afflicted by a formidable insurgency in its largest yet impoverished Baluchistan province, severe disaffection in its Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, gross political instability within highlighted by former PM Imran Khan languishing in jail with lakhs of his supporters on the streets, Pakistan, is virtually a failing state. Its political problem with neighbouring Afghanistan also adds to its woes. Adding to its misery is Pakistan's worsening financial state. Surviving on repeated loans and doles from global financial institutions, Pakistan has barely a month's worth of foreign exchange reserves. Thus, financial assistance to it from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, sympathetic nations like China, US, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey is sine qua non. The US's on-off-on financial policies towards Pakistan are indeed baffling and somewhere the Americans under President Trump appear to be playing a double game against India. Has the CIA felt the need, after many years, to utilise, once again, the assets of the Inter-Services Intelligence in Afghanistan in the near future?

An objective overview of the geopolitical churnings in South Asia also indicates greater complexities and regional disruptions erupting after India launched Op Sindoor in retaliation of the brutal murder of 26 Hindu tourists in Pahalgam on 22 Apr 2025. That India displayed its 'New-normal' determination and professionalism by targeting a nuclear nation with near impunity and right across the wide geographical canvas also conveys newer methods of staging kinetic reprisals against terrorists in the region. India will also have to factor in its counter measures in case Pakistan or China indulge in non-contact warfare extensively employing long range Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles,

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles etc. The employment of hundreds of drones and other varieties of unmanned yet lethal platforms will have to be ensured. Air Defence (AD) will now require greater range coverage, better target acquisition and tracking capabilities and lethality. During Op Sindoor, from media reports, the Indian AD systems appear to have done far better than those belonging to the Pakistani Armed Forces. It is most likely that the Chinese will be donating better AD weaponry to Pakistani units manning these systems.

Overall, though PM Modi had wisely exclaimed a year back that “This is not an era of war”, events appear to be leading nations in many regions of the world to be prepared for conflicts right across the entire spectrum of warfare. Thus, as India endeavours to motivate nations right across the world and in our troubled neighbourhood to eschew war, deterrence to prevent any serious kinetic conflicts will only be achieved by far better intelligence gathering measures and surveillance systems. In the end it will only be a nation's better military capability which will prevent wars. Overall, challenging times lie ahead for India in the South Asia region. Thus, there is no alternative for India but to rapidly enhance its combat capabilities across all spectrums of warfare, ensure a high level of internal societal harmony, and, while maintaining its traditional strategic autonomy in external relations, work towards fostering harmony in its neighborhood. It well must manage its economic and military relationships with both the US and Russia with prudence and maturity. Nevertheless, with a hawkish, anti-India military leader dominating Pakistan's political landscape, India must be prepared to once again exercise its 'New-normal' strategic policy with determination and the necessary force, should the need arise.

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