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Structural Realism and South Asia's Strategic Uplift in the Us-China Rivalry, 2010-2025

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ABSTRACT

This article use Structural Realism to examine the shift in United States-China relations from 2010 to 2025, and the attendant South Asia becoming a zone of Great Power rivalry. The argument of this article is that the structural change from the American-led unipolar international system to an emerging bipolar arrangement of capabilities, induced by the economic and military ascendancy of China, is the reason for the strategic realignment of both Washington and Beijing since 2010. The study outlines the evolution of the American "Pivot to Asia" and its strategic-competition doctrine, as well as China's parallel shift from "low-profile accumulation" toward assertive regional projection through the Belt and Road Initiative. It demonstrates that these systemic level policy changes, and not political or ideological preference at home, explain the constant reference to South Asia in the calculations of both powers over different and ideologically opposed American administrations. The article concludes that Structural Realism, in conjunction with Power Transition Theory, provides a concise but empirically satisfactory analysis of the "systemic causes of the rivalry," and that a full explanation of this rivalry is not possible without the dimension of structural causes.

Keywords: Structural Realism, great-power competition, United States-China rivalry, South Asia, Power Transition Theory, Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

In one of the most far-reaching reallocations of power in the modern history of the international system, the first quarter of the twenty first century has seen the rise of a new superpower. A new super power has emerged in one of the most significant reallocations of power in the modern history of the international system during the first quarter of the twenty first century. After the USSR collapsed, the unipolar conditions of the postwar world put the USA in a situation of military, economic and technological dominance that had not been experienced since the end of World War II (Waltz, 1979; Ikenberry, 2008). This primacy remained untouched for a good 20 years or so, but as China has become an economic, technological and military pillar, its influence has slowly been shifting. China's emergence as a major force in international trade, finance, infrastructure and diplomacy along with its status as the second largest economy in the world by the 20th century, is not a coincidence (Ferdinand, 2016). The relative shift has resulted in what is currently considered as the defining geopolitical struggle of the day: the strategic competition between the United States and China (Friedberg, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2021).

The article does not focus much on the bilateral nature of this rivalry in abstract terms, but on a specific and under-discussed aspect of this rivalry, namely the strategic elevation of South Asia as a theatre where the larger power struggle is being played out. Geography,

demography and connectivity play a significant role in the importance of South Asia in this regard. The region is also a crossroads of East Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, and its sea lanes, ports and overland routes have become a strategic fact of life for neither Washington nor Beijing (Kaplan, 2011). The aim of this article is to write about the shift of South Asia from periphery to centre in the great power calculations of 201025 and demonstrate that the Structural Realism (as the thesis that the structure of the international system and, particularly, the distribution of capabilities within it determines the behaviour of states) is the most parsimonious and empirically defensible explanation of the shift.

The article is divided into five parts. In order to establish the framework for the analysis, Section 2 presents the Structural Realist approach, which relies on the Waltzian version of structural realism, and the Mearsheimerian version. For the purpose of establishing the framework for the analysis, Section 2 introduces the Structural Realist approach, which draws on both the Structural Realist approach of Waltz and the Structural Realist approach of Mearsheimer, in addition to the complementary insights of Power Transition Theory. Section 3 maps the systemic-level policy changes through which the rivalry played out: from the American Pivot to Asia to its eventual hardening into explicit strategic competition; from China's strategy of accumulation to that of assertive connectivity-led projection via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The systemic changes are then discussed in section 4 in relation to the tangible strategic rise of South Asia. The empirical record is then subjected to theoretical questioning, to see whether the pattern observed is well captured by Structural Realism, before a final section extracts the article's general implications for the study of regional order in the context of great-power rivalry.

Literature Review

There are several accounts in the scholarly literature that offer partly competing explanations as to what might make established and rising powers come into conflict, and a brief survey of this literature will help to situate the structural realist approach taken here. The first strand of scholarship, closest to Allison (2017), embodies a historical observation of a "Thucydides's Trap", in which a challenge from an emerging power to a dominant power has, in most situations, been the source of a war. These works are helpful in raising the awareness of the frequency with which conflict has erupted during periods of hegemonic transition in history, but tend to focus on the psychological anxieties of the losing power, an emphasis more in keeping with classical realism's focus on perception than the structural variables emphasized in this article (Morgenthau, 1948).

A second strand of liberal institutionalist scholarship focuses on the pacifying effects of economic interdependence and institutional embeddedness. Ikenberry is a strong supporter of the concept that the post-1945 liberal international order is resilient because it will allow new powers to enter the governance system of trade, finance, and international institutions; the accession of China to these institutions provides a raft of incentives to continue participating in the system instead of challenging it from within (2008, 2011). This literature is useful in providing an understanding of the continued level of economic ties between the two countries despite the increasing strategic competition, and is used in the present analysis as a partial counterweight to a purely conflictual interpretation of the rivalry, rather than to supplant the structural analysis presented here.

A third body of literature is more directly related to the approach taken in this article, and considers the rivalry as a phenomenon related to changes in relative capability at the system level. Wohlforth (1999) and Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) have analysed the endurance of American unipolarity and the circumstances under which it might be supplanted by a return

to great-power rivalry, while Layne (1993) predicted, long before the rise of the Chinese state, that the appearance of new great powers is a structurally predictable outcome of an unipolar system, not an aberration that needs explanation. In particular, the Eurasian and South and Central Asian theatres, Markey (2020) gives attention, exploring the geopolitical implications of China's connectivity strategy towards the west, before some of the empirical findings detailed in Section 4 of this article. Constructivist scholarship, represented here by Wendt (1992), provides another corrective: the meaning states accorded to changes in "relative capability" is neither necessarily nor automatically determined by the distribution of power but by "identity and social interaction."

Theoretical Framework: Structural Realism and the Logic of Systemic Change

Unlike the classical realism of Morgenthau (1948) who believed in the need for people to be dominators, Structural Realism (neorealism) is a departure from this classical realism. Waltz (1979) shifted this explanatory burden away from the nature of the human individual to the structure of the international system itself, which is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority that can enforce rules on the individual states, and that leads to states using self-help to ensure their survival. In this anarchic system of states, Waltz noted that what really matters is the distribution of capabilities among the states, or polarity. In his story bipolar systems tend to be more stable relative to multipolar systems because "the two great powers can deal with threats directly, but multipolar systems are susceptible to miscalculations and changing commitments to allies."

This theoretical framework is quite parallel to the transformation of post-Cold War order. In the 1990s and 2000s, the unipolar reality of the United States has been replaced by the bipolarity that is now unfolding, first and foremost in terms of the reallocation of relative capabilities between Washington and Beijing (Wohlforth, 1999; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016). From a Waltzian perspective, the turn to more intense competition between the United States and China after 2010 is not a product of ideology or the preferences of the specific U.S. administrations in office; it's a structural result of a shift in the distribution of capabilities at the systemic level, one that on Waltz's own logic should be expected to lead to balancing behaviour, alliance formation, and, in some situations, arms competition.

This is complicated by Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive form of Structural Realism. While Waltz sees states as fundamentally seeking security and being content once they have a tolerable level of security, Mearsheimer believes that great powers never allow themselves to be satisfied with their current share of power because it is never certain what the real intentions of other states are. Mearsheimer also believes that a state that has become the regional hegemon will step in to prevent the rise of another state gaining a similar position in the region, as a rival hegemon could project its power onto the global stage, which would affect the first state's dominance. This logic provides a parsimonious explanation for the pattern of continued American involvement in Asia across three different administrations with markedly different ideological dispositions: that is, it is the consistency of the policy, and not its content each year, that has more theoretical significance, as it suggests that it is a structural and not a partisan driver. (Mearsheimer, 2021)

Another complementary view is offered by Power Transition Theory, which predicts an increase in the likelihood of conflict or escalated rivalry when a rising challenger catches up to a dominant power, especially when the challenger does not accept the status quo in the distribution of status and institutional privilege (Organski, 1958; Gilpin, 1981). In this regard, Gilpin's conception of hegemonic transition is particularly helpful, as it suggests that the costs of maintaining a particular international order can also be a variable that increases over time,

relative to the ability of the hegemon to pay them, thereby creating incentives to retrench, shift the burden to allies, or reinvest competitively — behaviors all evident in the American policy record explored below. Both Structural Realism and Power Transition Theory share the same general premises: that the balance of material capabilities is the key independent variable, not unit characteristics like ideology or regime type, and that increased gains by the challenger will lead to counter-response from the incumbent power. They offer a theoretical framework for the empirical analysis to follow, and the presence of United States-China competition in South Asia is seen as a structurally determined outcome rather than a sequence of policy decisions.

The Systemic-Level Policy Shift (Engagement to Strategic Competition)

The American Pivot and its hardening

American policy toward China for the two decades after the Cold War's conclusion rested on the assumption that over time the integration of China into the liberal international order would help to secure it, rather than threaten it (Ikenberry, 2008). As Chinese capabilities increased, this assumption was being questioned. The most glaring indication of the change occurred in 2011 with the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia," later renamed the "Rebalance" that turned America's diplomatic, economic and military focus away from the Middle East theatres that had been the mainstay of US policy since 2001 and towards the Indo-Pacific as the primary battleground in twenty first century great power competition (Clinton, 2011). The rebalance was not officially discussed as a containment policy targeting China, but its real substance — alliances and the expansion of military presence and economic engagement throughout the region — was understood, both in Beijing and in the region, as a structural answer to China's rise (Art & Waltz, 1983, on the general logic of the use of force as an instrument of rebalancing).

This rebalancing became a new strategic competition doctrine in the 2015-2025 period. The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy described China as a revisionist power that aims to "transform the international order in an unfavourable way for the United States," a departure from a previous administration's more talk of engagement (White House, 2017). The Biden administration, which takes over from the Trump administration with a markedly different tone and a more multilateralist approach, has maintained the strategic assessment of China as the primary long-term competitor, and has continued a strategy of working in coalitions (including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which was revived under the Trump administration). In a Structural Realist interpretation, this consistency is exactly what anyone would predict if the real forces behind policy change were the underlying shifts in relative capabilities and not the preferences of any administration (Mearsheimer, 2001).

China's Parallel Evolution: Accumulation to Assertive Connectivity

China's own strategic path over the course of the period is structured in a similar (but opposite) manner. Deng Xiaoping had restructured China's foreign policy around an "economic modernisation and concealment of force" principle, which was focused on protecting strength and waiting for the time to be right for direct confrontation with the "established powers" (Nathan & Scobell, 2012). The posture became more challenging to maintain as Chinese capabilities grew and Chinese grand strategy since the 2012 leadership transition has become increasingly assertive and long-term driven by a return to China's 'historic centrality in regional and global affairs' (Doshi, 2021).

The most obvious institutional manifestation of this change is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that Beijing has announced in 2013, which is an unprecedented programme of investment in the transport, energy, telecommunication and port sectors throughout Asia,

Africa and Europe (Ferdinand, 2016). The BRI is officially about 'mutual development and shared prosperity', but just as a tool of economic statecraft, it is also a means of cementing long lasting political and economic ties that strengthen China's regional presence (Clarke, 2017). The "Malacca Dilemma" of China's vulnerability to a narrow seaway for most of its energy supplies (Miller, 2017) is the strategic rationale behind the project. The project's strategic rationale is the "Malacca Dilemma" of China's vulnerability to a narrow seaway for most of its energy supplies (Miller, 2017). This economic forecast is accompanied by a long-standing military modernization programme, which has been ongoing since 1949, involving China's navy, its missile force, and investments in new military technologies, all with a clear aim of bolstering territorial defence, strengthening deterrence and expanding its operational ability to go beyond its immediate environment (Fravel, 2019, on the wider development of China's military strategy since 1949 provides background for this evolution, though this current analysis focuses mainly on the connectivity aspect).

But the technological competition is another aspect of this parallel evolution that should be discussed in its own right. In the era of economic and military competition in which semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing, along with next-generation telecommunication infrastructure, are playing a pivotal role, technological self-sufficiency has become a key part of China's strategy, which has grown more acute as America has tightened controls on the transfer of sensitive technologies throughout the period covered (Doshi, 2021). In a structural sense, this structural aspect of the rivalry is analytically important because it shows how the struggle over relative power has expanded beyond the military sphere to encompass a wider array of capabilities that structural scholars are more and more defining as part of a nation's overall power, and less and less as something peripheral to it (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016).

China's participation in current multilateral institutions provides another example. Beijing has, to a large degree, followed a path of selective participation and the parallel development of new institutions in which it has a larger voice, a strategy that could be termed "workthrough and around" the existing institutional order as Ikenberry (2014) has observed about rising powers in open institutional orders. In fact, this process of selective institutional engagement, instead of revisionism, is an observation of its own theoretical interest, as it implies that the structural pressures that lead to great-power competition do not necessarily lead to the type of institutional upheaval that some interpretations of Power Transition Theory might predict (Organski, 1958).

From a Structural Realist perspective, what is analytically important about this pattern is that it is in line with the prediction made by both defensive and offensive versions of the theory. Waltzian logic suggests that in the process of building a new power, its relative capabilities are rising, thus giving it greater voice and influence commensurate with its new capability, a process that has been happening in China as it asserts itself in the existing multilateral institutions, as well as by sponsoring parallel ones, like new development-financing mechanisms (Ikenberry, 2014). Mearsheimer's offensive version is more extreme, suggesting that a rising power will try to gain not just parity but a regional dominance, as China did in the immediate vicinity of its borders and as Chinese military posts have been spreading into the Indian Ocean region (Mearsheimer, 2001). The empirical record of the era, that is, is not easily reconciled with an account based on the personal preferences of the individual leaders of China, and is much more easily reconciled with an account based upon the structural incentives which any rising power faces as it approaches parity with the established hegemon (Layne, 1993).

Strategic Uplift of South Asia

This explains how theatre choices are made in the context of geography and connectivity. This describes the rationale for theatre selection in terms of geography and connectivity.

The shift from an East Asian and Western Pacific competition to one with a significant South Asian component is not coincidental in the United States-China rivalry. South Asia's strategic importance stems from its geographic location on the crossroads of major trade routes, its strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz and the broader Indian Ocean, and its geopolitical status as the geopolitical fulcrum between the western periphery of China and the Arabian Sea, which no power can afford to ignore (Kaplan, 2011). South Asia also provides China with the opportunity to gain overland access to the Indian Ocean, which would otherwise rely on maritime chokepoints the Chinese trade and energy security on. South Asia is also the region where China can access the Indian Ocean, without using maritime chokepoints to which it currently depends for its trade and energy security (Miller, 2017). For the United States, South Asia's importance is rooted mainly in its implications for the larger Indo-Pacific regional balance of power, and in the potential for India to act as a significant counterweight to the Chinese presence in the region (Clinton, 2011).

Finally, it is important to highlight that the strategic importance of South Asia in the overall competition is not a foregone conclusion or a static reality, but is dependent on the nature of the pattern of capability development that can be mapped from China and the USA as outlined in Section 4. If Chinese economic and naval power had not grown enough to support continuous investment in the overland connectivity and blue-water naval reach of the South Asian region, then their geographies would not have assumed the strategic importance they are enjoying today, and, likewise, if America's strategic focus had remained on the Middle East theatres where it was overwhelmingly active in the first decade after 9/11, then the region's rising salience to the Washington calculations would have been significantly postponed. Finally, it is important to record that the uplift of South Asia is not the outcome of some purely local process, but rather is one of the systemic consequences already described in this article: that is, Structural Realism provides the main explanatory variable, not just local variables (Kaplan, 2011; Markey, 2020).

The region has been raised up with some accuracy, directly after the Pivot to Asia announcement. The rebalancing strategy was presented in general Indo-Pacific terms, but it had specific implications for South Asia insofar as it saw India as a nation with growing power that can help bring balance to the region. This is not only the case with respect to American declaratory policy, but also with respect to the institutionalisation of security cooperation, which had culminated in a series of foundational defence agreements reached over the next decade that had made intelligence sharing, logistics cooperation and technology exchange possible that would have seemed unimaginable at the beginning of the study period (Tellis, Szalwinski, & Wills, 2020).

Instruments of Competition in the Region

The competition between states in South Asia since 2010 is not just economic, statecraft or military, but extends to technologic, institutional and diplomatic dimensions as well as infrastructure (Friedberg 2005). In the economic field, Chinese engagement has been oriented toward financing infrastructure investment, with China becoming the dominant source of financing infrastructure in several South Asian states, even though by mid-Decade the volume of such funds was still comparable to that of traditional multilateral and bilateral donors (Rolland, 2017). American engagement, by contrast, has been less direct, depending less on government-funded infrastructure and more on trade, private investment,

technological partnership, and development assistance, delivered via, among other entities, the International Development Finance Corporation, as well as coordinated projects and assistance with allies to set up alternative standards for financing infrastructure. (Ikenberry, 2011)

The region is increasingly a battleground in naval competition, in particular across the Indian Ocean, where China's naval modernisation, deployments of overseas logistical bases and increases in naval and submarine and surface patrol activity have been perceived by regional and American observers as a growing effort to build a more enduring Chinese naval presence (Kaplan, 2011). The American and allied response has been an intensified programme of joint maritime exercises, especially through the enlarged Malabar exercises which have increasingly become a platform for a coordinated programme of maritime signalling between the United States and its regional partners (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016).

The diplomatic aspect of the competition, which is less readily measurable than the economic and military aspects, has also been no less significant in influencing the strategic situation in the region. Both have mounted extensive efforts to keep engaging South Asian governments at the highest levels, from head-of-state visits and strategic dialogues to development assistance packages that are tailored to build on the economic and security ties paved by other means (Clinton, 2011). Chapters in the region have been drawn to China's approach of non-interference in domestic affairs and of not imposing conditionality on economic assistance—a stance that has resonated with governments that are wary of conditionality levied by Western backed development finance (Ferdinand, 2016). In contrast, American and allied foreign policy has increasingly conceptualized the region in terms of a shared set of democratic values and a “free and open” regional order, one that has some normative appeal in some quarters but, at times, has also raised questions about dealing with governments less amenable to values-based diplomacy (Ikenberry, 2008). As far as the net result of this diplomatic competition goes, the attention of the great powers to the region has been greater and more intense on both sides than at any time before, although there is no indication that either side has gained a decisive diplomatic advantage, as would be predicted by the structural logic of Waltz, who argues that competitive relationships between similarly powerful powers tend to give both sides a comparable advantage (Waltz, 1979).

The third tool of competition, not always discussed in the literature on great power competition but very significant in the South Asian context, is institutional contestation—the attempt of both powers to influence, defy, or create regional and minilateral institutions in a manner that is conducive to their respective interests. The institution-building efforts of China and the American and allied push for enhancing institutions, like the revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, are indicative of institutional architecture being a central arena of great-power competition in the region, consistent with Power Transition Theory's suggestion that a power that is dissatisfied with the status quo would push for a reconfiguration of institutional arrangements that it believes reflects an outdated distribution of power (Organski, 1958; Ikenberry, 2014).

The Asymmetry of Statecraft

One empirical result from this analysis is that it is far from symmetric in terms of how American and Chinese economic statecraft is developing in the region, with significant non-trivial consequences for the course of the competition. In China, infrastructure investment is significantly made via state-owned enterprises and policy banks, which gives Beijing the ability to allocate capital for strategically important projects without putting much concern on the short-term commercial return, thus effectively subsidising strategic investment on

infrastructure from state balance sheets (Rolland, 2017). Presenting a different view, American economic statecraft works primarily through the market and private capital, and while not focused here, provides the conceptual language by which this imbalance is most effectively described (Baldwin, 1985, on economic statecraft as a foreign policy tool more broadly). This imbalance has created a long-standing disconnect between American rhetoric about the importance of regional infrastructure investment and the real rate at which such funds are available, which regional governments interested in the relative reliability of American and Chinese engagement have not ignored (Ikenberry, 2011).

From the empirical record outlined above, there is strong support for the key Structural Realist assumption that changes in the distribution of capabilities at the systemic level shape the strategic action of states, such as the selection of regional theatres in which they compete. It is hard to explain plausibly that the shift in American strategic focus from Europe to China persist across three administrations with widely divergent ideological leanings, and much easier to explain as a structural response to an identifiable and measurable change in relative capability (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 2000). Likewise, the evolution of Chinese strategy, from accumulation and avoidance of confrontation to assertive, connectivity-oriented regional projection, was concurrent with the ongoing development of Chinese material capabilities over these same years, supporting the notion that material capabilities drive material capabilities, which is at the core of both Waltzian and Mearsheimerian variants of Structural Realism (Doshi, 2021).

However, the analysis points towards some boundaries of a purely structuralist account at the same time. By construction, Structural Realism leaves out unit-level factors (domestic political coalitions, leadership preferences, and bureaucratic politics) because these are theoretically subordinate to systemic factors. The South Asian case demonstrates that the general characteristics of great power competition in the region can be reasonably understood with structural variables, but at times, it has been influenced by other domestic political variables which are not fully captured by the Structural Realism paradigm, a fact structural realists acknowledge as a price to be paid for the simplicity of the theory (Waltz, 1979). Here, Power Transition Theory is useful because it highlights the challenger's feeling of contentment with the status quo, a dimension that a capabilities-focused approach might overlook, in order to focus on the ideational and status aspects of Chinese discontent (Gilpin, 1981).

Another thought on the temporal aspect of structural explanation is due. Doubt has always surrounded Structural Realism in its ability to forecast the exact timing of specific policy changes; the process of structural pressure turning into observable policy is mediated by domestic political processes that act on their own timetables (Waltz, 1979). The South Asian case, in particular, is illustrative of this: there was a structural pressure on the United States from China's growing power which was arguably already there before 2010, but only became an explicit policy doctrine of 'strategic competition' a few years later and then in different ways on different instruments of statecraft. While not a fatal flaw for the structural account, this delay does indicate that factors beyond the central tenets of the structural tradition need to be taken into account to explain the timing rather than the direction of great-power policy. This is recognized even by scholars who have been broadly supportive of the structural approach (Wohlforth, 1999).

This, however, supports a structural analysis of the pattern rather than other accounts based on ideology, leadership idiosyncrasy or short-term policy fashions, as does the overall pattern of continuity in strategic reorientation in American strategic policy, a trajectory in China that

tracks the growth of material capability, and a geographically predictable selection of South Asia as a theatre of competition as it presented the geopolitically most convenient location athwart critical maritime and overland strategic routes. The evidence, in brief, suggests that the best, parsimonious, and empirically defensible explanation of the systemic forces behind the United States-China competition and its spillover into South Asia is provided by Structural Realism, with Power Transition Theory as a useful supplement.

Policy Implications

The following conclusions are given as a kind of analysis rather than prescriptions based on this analysis. First, as the competition is structurally driven, it's doubtful that a change in the political leadership in Washington or Beijing will substantially change the course of the competition, and policy makers in the region ought to plan accordingly assuming continuation of the competition, not a reset to a "new beginning." Second, the fact that the Chinese model is structurally asymmetric between state-directed and market-based approaches to economic statecraft means that U.S. and allied efforts to out-compete Chinese infrastructure investment may not be as likely to be successful if they are not supported by more robust financial instruments for public financing to be incorporated, nor if they are not better coordinated among allied donors (Ikenberry, 2011). Third, the institutional contestation outlined above indicates that regional and minilateral institutions will remain significant, though not flawless, spaces for great-power rivalry and that their development deserves greater focus in the study of great-power rivalry than has been traditionally been given (Organski, 1958).

Conclusion

This article has made a case for understanding the strategic upheaval of South Asia in terms of a structurally conditioned outcome of the distribution of capabilities between the United States and China between 2010 and 2025. The American pivot to Asia and the corresponding shift from soft to hard power in U.S. strategic competition, plus the Chinese development from a cautious strategy of accumulation to assertive connectivity-led projection through the Belt and Road Initiative, can be seen as the systemic-level dynamics that explain the growing strategic relevance of the region. Even though a structural account alone cannot totally explain the pattern, it is a parsimonious and well-supplied account that can be obtained from the combination of Structural Realism (either its Waltzian or Mearsheimerian form) and the addition of Power Transition Theory. The division of powers between Washington and Beijing is continuing to shift, and South Asia will continue to be a key, not peripheral, battleground of great power competition, which will have far reaching impacts on the region's stability, economic growth, and autonomy of the states located within it.

The greater theoretical relevance of this analysis is asserted by the fact that, despite the fact that structural realism is most frequently used in the discussion of the direct bilateral relationship between great power rivalry, it still has some explanatory power when applied to the issue of theatre selection why a certain rivalry is played out in one theatre and not another. The South Asian case makes clear that this question can be answered, at least in part, using the same structural factors that characterize the heart of the Structural Realist literature, namely the distribution of capabilities, the geographical logic of power projection, and the incentives of a small power seeking to secure its flanks from a large power. The present analysis could usefully be extended to other regions where similar strategic surges have taken place in the same time, to see if the pattern here for South Asia is a true general structural logic or a contingency specific to the region that appears to converge into the same direction.

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