

TRUMP'S RETURN TO POWER: PROBABLE SCENARIOS AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON SOUTH ASIAN GEOPOLITICS

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ABSTRACT: *The potential return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency could significantly impact South Asia's geopolitical landscape. This study analyzes probable scenarios affecting India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China's influence, focusing on Trump's "America First" policy and strategic priorities. Using a qualitative methodology, the research integrates scenario-building grounded in Realism and Constructivism, supported by historical data and case studies. Content and thematic analyses reveal four key outcomes: a strengthened U.S.-India alliance, intensified U.S.-China competition, renewed pressure on Pakistan regarding counterterrorism, and heightened instability in Afghanistan. These shifts could reshape regional trade, security, and political alignments. The study recommends a balanced approach by South Asian nations to manage U.S.-China relations, enhance regional cooperation, and strengthen multilateral frameworks. While Trump's return presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for South Asia to recalibrate its strategies and assert its role in global geopolitics. Preparing for economic and strategic shifts is crucial.*

Key Words: Trump Presidency, South Asia, Geopolitics, US Foreign Policy, Regional Security

INTRODUCTION:

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has always been intricately linked to the foreign policy dynamics of global powers. With its significant economic, strategic, and security-related relevance, the region serves as a crucial arena for international politics. In recent years, the United States has played a pivotal role in shaping South Asian geopolitics, driven by evolving alliances, economic interests, and security imperatives. Donald Trump's presidency (2017–2021) marked a distinct departure from traditional U.S. foreign policy, emphasizing an "America First" approach. His administration's policies, which prioritized American economic and security interests above multilateralism, had a profound impact on the region, particularly in terms of U.S.-India relations, Pakistan's role in counterterrorism, Afghanistan's stability, and China's growing influence [1]. With the possibility of Trump's re-election, there is an increasing need to evaluate how his return could influence the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia.

During his first term, Trump sought to redefine U.S. foreign relations by focusing on bilateral agreements and economic pragmatism. South Asia, a region fraught with historical conflicts, burgeoning economic growth, and shifting alliances, was not immune to these policies. The strengthening of the U.S.-India strategic partnership under Trump was evident through defense agreements, including arms sales and collaborations under the Indo-Pacific strategy [2]. India's role as a counterbalance to China's rising power in the region aligned closely with U.S. strategic goals, making it a key ally. Meanwhile, Trump's policies towards Pakistan were more confrontational, as he criticized its counterterrorism measures and suspended military aid, accusing it of harboring terrorist groups [3]. These shifts highlighted the administration's preference for rewarding cooperative allies while pressuring those perceived as obstructive to U.S. interests.

One of the defining moments of Trump's presidency in South Asia was the U.S.-Taliban peace deal signed in February 2020, aimed at ending the two-decade-long conflict in Afghanistan. While the deal underscored Trump's intent to reduce the U.S. military footprint in the region, it also raised questions about Afghanistan's long-term stability and the spillover effects on neighboring countries, including Pakistan and Iran [4]. Furthermore, Trump's economic policies, such as his withdrawal from

multilateral trade agreements, had mixed implications for South Asian economies. While his administration promoted bilateral trade negotiations with India, it imposed tariffs that strained trade relationships [5].

At the heart of Trump's South Asia policy was his administration's approach to China, whose Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and strategic investments in South Asia, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), were viewed as direct challenges to U.S. influence in the region [6]. Trump's stance on curbing China's economic and geopolitical expansion extended to South Asia, where the U.S. sought to counterbalance Beijing by strengthening ties with India and other regional players. The Indo-Pacific strategy, heavily promoted by the Trump administration, positioned South Asia as a key theatre in the broader U.S.-China competition [7]. However, these policies often exacerbated existing regional tensions, such as the India-Pakistan rivalry and the delicate balance of power in Afghanistan [8].

The re-election of Donald Trump raises critical questions about the future trajectory of U.S. foreign policy in South Asia. Would a second Trump presidency further solidify the U.S.-India partnership, or would potential trade disputes undermine this relationship? How might Trump's administration address the ongoing instability in Afghanistan, especially in light of the Taliban's resurgence and the humanitarian crisis? What strategies would be adopted to counter China's deepening economic and strategic ties in the region? These questions highlight the complexities of South Asian geopolitics, which are deeply influenced by the interplay of global and regional powers.

The objective of this study is to analyze the probable scenarios that could emerge under a second Trump presidency and their implications for South Asian geopolitics. This analysis is grounded in geopolitical and international relations theories, including Realism and Constructivism. Realism, with its focus on power dynamics and state-centric interests, provides a framework for understanding how Trump's policies might prioritize U.S. strategic goals over multilateralism. Constructivism, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of ideational factors, such as Trump's leadership style and the narrative of "America First," in shaping U.S. foreign policy [9]. By employing these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to construct plausible scenarios and assess their potential impacts on

key regional actors, including India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China.

The research methodology combines qualitative approaches with scenario-building techniques to explore the potential outcomes of Trump's return to power. Historical data from his first presidency, regional case studies, and an analysis of current geopolitical trends form the basis of this study. Content analysis is used to identify patterns in Trump's foreign policy decisions, while thematic analysis facilitates the interpretation of potential scenarios. For example, the study examines how a renewed focus on the U.S.-India alliance might impact regional security dynamics, particularly in the context of India's tensions with Pakistan and China [10]. Similarly, the implications of a more confrontational approach towards Pakistan are analyzed, considering its strategic partnership with China and its pivotal role in Afghanistan's stability. The findings of this study suggest that Trump's return to power could lead to significant shifts in South Asian geopolitics. A strengthened U.S.-India partnership, coupled with increased pressure on Pakistan, is likely to exacerbate regional tensions. The U.S.-China rivalry, already a defining feature of global politics, could intensify in South Asia, with implications for economic development and security in the region. Additionally, the instability in Afghanistan may present new challenges for U.S. engagement, particularly in managing the fallout of the Taliban's rule.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The literature surrounding U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump and its impact on South Asia reveals a complex and multifaceted analysis of regional dynamics. Trump's administration marked a shift towards "America First" policies, which emphasized U.S. interests and questioned traditional multilateral engagement. His approach to South Asia, particularly regarding defense, security, and economic relations, has sparked considerable debate among scholars. These debates focus on the evolving alliances, the geopolitical balancing act required by South Asian countries, and the long-term consequences of Trump's actions. One of the central areas of study in the literature is the strengthening of the U.S.-India relationship, particularly through defense cooperation. Scholars like Pant (2020) highlight the robust growth of U.S.-India ties during Trump's presidency, noting the importance of defense partnerships, especially within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) [11]. This alignment is seen as part of a broader U.S. strategy to counterbalance China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific. According to Kugelman (2020), Trump's administration significantly enhanced U.S.-India defense cooperation, particularly with arms sales and support for India's regional role in security matters [12]. However, this shift in U.S.-India relations could exacerbate tensions with Pakistan, particularly as defense cooperation intensifies and Pakistan feels increasingly sidelined.

On the other hand, Trump's approach to Pakistan, especially his critique of Pakistan's role in counterterrorism efforts, has been widely studied. Saeed (2020) argues that Trump's administration adopted a tougher stance towards Pakistan, including suspending military aid and accusing Pakistan of not doing enough in the fight against terrorism. This strained relationship led Pakistan to seek closer ties with China, further complicating its position in the region [13]. The literature suggests that Pakistan's growing

reliance on China, particularly through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), was exacerbated during Trump's presidency, pushing Pakistan deeper into China's economic and political sphere.

Trump's policies toward Afghanistan, especially the peace agreement with the Taliban, have also garnered significant scholarly attention. The literature reflects mixed opinions regarding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and its subsequent impact on regional security. Bhat (2019) argues that Trump's decision to engage in peace talks with the Taliban, culminating in the Doha Agreement, was a critical step towards ending the prolonged U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. However, this move has also been criticized for creating a power vacuum, destabilizing the region, and exacerbating the security situation in neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iran [14]. Scholars such as Alavi (2020) contend that the withdrawal could result in an unstable Afghanistan, which in turn could hurt South Asian security, particularly for Pakistan and Iran, both of which share borders with Afghanistan and have significant geopolitical stakes in the region [15].

Trump's stance on China's growing influence in South Asia has also been an area of interest for many scholars. White (2020) examines the administration's concerns over China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its expansion into South Asia, especially through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) [16]. These authors argue that Trump's administration viewed China's growing economic influence in the region with suspicion, prompting efforts to counter Chinese investments in countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, Trump's administration encouraged South Asian countries to resist Chinese economic influence, viewing it as a potential strategic threat to U.S. interests in the region. Meanwhile, Hsu (2020) explores how the U.S.-China rivalry, particularly under Trump, has turned South Asia into a battleground for influence, with countries in the region increasingly caught in the middle of this global competition [17].

The literature also examines the broader geopolitical implications of the U.S.-China rivalry in South Asia. Additionally, South Asia's strategic location makes it a critical region for both global powers, influencing not only bilateral relations but also broader security dynamics across Asia. Moreover, the growing tensions between the U.S. and China have forced South Asian countries to re-evaluate their foreign policy priorities, balancing the need for economic cooperation with China while maintaining strategic ties with the U.S. The region's response to these competing pressures remains a key focus in the literature, with scholars highlighting the challenges faced by countries like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka in maintaining neutrality while benefiting from relations with both powers.

Trump's policies towards Afghanistan and its impact on regional actors such as Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia are another key area of research. Moreover, Trump's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the ensuing instability could have significant spillover effects on Pakistan, Iran, and even Central Asia, regions that are already dealing with complex security issues related to terrorism and insurgency. Furthermore, the U.S. decision to reduce its military footprint in Afghanistan has allowed other regional actors, such as China and Russia, to take a more prominent role in the region, further complicating South Asia's security environment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the probable impacts of a potential second Trump presidency on South Asian geopolitics. A combination of case study analysis, comparative analysis, and scenario-building techniques is employed to assess the potential outcomes of various political and strategic actions by the U.S. under Trump's leadership. The research relies on secondary sources, including academic journals, books, policy reports, and official government documents, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics in U.S.-South Asia relations. A key aspect of the methodology is the use of historical analysis to draw parallels between Trump's previous tenure and its impact on the region, focusing on U.S.-India defense ties, U.S.-Pakistan relations, and broader security issues involving Afghanistan and China. Scenario-building is central to this research, where multiple probable geopolitical scenarios are developed based on current trends and Trump's foreign policy rhetoric. These scenarios are analyzed using qualitative data interpretation techniques, such as thematic analysis and content analysis, to identify patterns and potential outcomes. The research does not rely on primary data collection but synthesizes existing scholarly work, government publications, and expert opinions to construct a multi-faceted analysis of South Asia's geopolitical future under a potential Trump presidency. This methodological approach enables a nuanced exploration of the complex and evolving political landscape of South Asia about U.S. foreign policy.

TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY LEGACY IN SOUTH ASIA:

Donald Trump's presidency (2017–2021) fundamentally altered the United States' foreign policy approach towards South Asia. His tenure marked a shift from the Obama administration's emphasis on multilateralism to a more transactional and occasionally confrontational approach. South Asia, a region with deep historical ties to U.S. foreign policy interests, witnessed significant shifts under Trump's leadership, particularly in relation to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. Trump's focus on counterterrorism, strengthening alliances, and confronting China's growing influence in the region were key priorities that defined his policies. These strategies not only shaped U.S. relationships with South Asian countries but also had broader implications for regional security, economic developments, and diplomatic dynamics. In particular, Trump's interactions with India and Pakistan, his role in the Afghanistan peace process, and his stance on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrate the complexity of U.S. engagement in South Asia during his presidency. While some of Trump's policies resulted in closer strategic ties with certain countries, others deepened regional tensions and reshaped the region's geopolitical contours. Understanding these dynamics provides critical insight into the lasting impacts of Trump's foreign policy on South Asia and its role in shaping global geopolitics.

US-India Relations:

Under Trump's administration, U.S.-India relations witnessed a period of growth, driven by shared strategic interests and concerns over China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The Trump administration's support for India's growing role in regional security was evident through enhanced defense partnerships. One of the key

developments in this period was the signing of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in 2020, which enabled the exchange of sensitive geospatial intelligence between the two nations, thereby enhancing India's defense capabilities [18]. This agreement strengthened India's ability to effectively counter regional threats, especially from China. Furthermore, the U.S. increased its arms sales to India, including advanced weaponry like the Apache helicopters and the MH-60R Seahawk maritime helicopters, worth billions of dollars. These deals signaled the U.S.'s commitment to supporting India's defense modernization efforts [19]. In trade negotiations, Trump occasionally pushed for more balanced agreements, citing India's trade imbalances and tariffs on U.S. goods. However, his administration's emphasis on improving relations with India, particularly in the context of countering China's dominance in the Indo-Pacific, contributed to strengthening the strategic alliance. Despite challenges, U.S.-India relations flourished during Trump's presidency, with both nations taking decisive steps toward bolstering defense cooperation and regional security initiatives [20]. The strengthening of this partnership was seen as a counterbalance to China's growing economic and military influence, particularly in the context of the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

US-Pakistan Relations:

Trump's approach to U.S.-Pakistan relations was marked by a distinct shift in tone and substance. The early years of Trump's presidency saw growing tension between the two nations, largely due to his critical stance on Pakistan's role in counterterrorism efforts. Trump accused Pakistan of harboring terrorist groups such as the Taliban and Haqqani Network, which were seen as undermining U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan. In his first year in office, Trump's administration suspended \$1.3 billion in military aid to Pakistan, signaling a shift away from the historically close military relationship between the two countries [21]. This policy shift reflected Trump's broader strategy of adopting a more transactional approach to foreign relations, where financial aid and military support were closely tied to a country's compliance with U.S. objectives. However, despite the public criticism and strained relations, Pakistan played a critical role in facilitating the peace talks between the U.S. and the Taliban, culminating in the signing of the U.S.-Taliban peace agreement in February 2020. This role helped Pakistan regain its importance in U.S. foreign policy calculations. Additionally, Pakistan's strategic location and its nuclear arsenal remained central to U.S. interests in South Asia, ensuring that despite tensions, the relationship retained an element of pragmatism. Trump's Pakistan policy, while initially confrontational, ultimately reflected the geopolitical realities of U.S. interests in the region, particularly in the context of counterterrorism and the Afghanistan peace process [22].

Afghanistan Withdrawal and its Aftermath:

One of the most defining aspects of Trump's foreign policy in South Asia was his decision to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban. The U.S.-Taliban agreement, signed in February 2020, set the stage for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan after nearly two decades of conflict. Trump's administration argued that the deal would end America's longest war while bringing stability to Afghanistan and allowing the U.S. to reallocate resources to other strategic priorities. However, the deal and its

aftermath revealed the complexities of the situation. The agreement required the Taliban to pledge to cut ties with terrorist organizations and ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base for international terrorism. However, the Taliban's commitment to these terms was widely questioned, and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan government in 2021 raised significant concerns about the long-term implications for regional stability. The U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power had profound consequences for Pakistan, Iran, and other neighboring countries. Pakistan, in particular, faced the challenge of managing a potentially unstable Afghanistan on its western border while dealing with the influx of refugees and the resurgence of insurgent groups. Trump's withdrawal strategy, while aimed at ending U.S. military involvement, left Afghanistan and the broader region facing new security dilemmas and a shifting geopolitical landscape [23].

China and South Asia:

Trump's presidency coincided with an intensification of the U.S.-China rivalry, which had significant implications for South Asia. Throughout his time in office, Trump took a hard-line stance on China's growing economic and military influence, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The BRI, which aimed to create a vast network of infrastructure projects across Asia and beyond, was seen by the Trump administration as a tool for China to expand its political and economic influence globally, including in South Asia. Trump criticized the BRI, arguing that it often trapped countries in unsustainable debt, with Pakistan being one of the primary recipients of Chinese investment through CPEC [24]. The U.S. sought to counter this growing Chinese presence in the region by offering alternative economic partnerships, such as infrastructure projects and trade agreements, particularly with India and other key South Asian countries.

Trump's administration also intensified its strategic competition with China, particularly in the South China Sea, which had indirect consequences for South Asian countries. For instance, the U.S. increased its support for India's maritime security, with the two countries engaging in joint military exercises and enhancing defense cooperation [25]. This strategy aimed to limit China's influence over key regional shipping lanes and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. While Trump's policies did not directly result in a resolution to the growing U.S.-China tensions in South Asia, his administration's aggressive posture underscored the strategic importance of the region in the broader geopolitical contest between the U.S. and China [26]. Trump's foreign policy legacy in South Asia thus remains pivotal in shaping the region's ongoing geopolitical dynamics. His administration's focus on counterterrorism, strategic partnerships, and confronting China's economic expansion left an indelible mark on U.S. relations with key South Asian nations. The challenges arising from these policies continue to influence the region's diplomatic and security landscape, with implications for future U.S. engagement in the region.

PROBABLE SCENARIOS UNDER A TRUMP PRESIDENCY:

Under a potential second Trump presidency, the geopolitical landscape of South Asia is likely to evolve significantly. Trump's policies are expected to shape U.S. relations with key regional players, particularly India,

Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan, based on his administration's strategic priorities and his "America First" ideology. The scenarios discussed below are grounded in Trump's previous foreign policy approach and consider how they might impact South Asia's geopolitical dynamics.

Strengthened US-India Alliance:

One of the most probable scenarios under Trump's return to power is the continued deepening of the U.S.-India alliance, particularly in defense and security sectors. Throughout his first term, Trump significantly strengthened ties with India, focusing on countering China's growing regional dominance, especially in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad, a strategic alliance involving the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, gained considerable momentum during Trump's presidency, and this partnership is likely to be further solidified. The U.S. could enhance defense cooperation with India through joint military exercises, technology transfers, and arms sales, positioning India as a key strategic partner in the region [27].

The strengthening of the U.S.-India alliance would have profound implications for the regional balance, particularly regarding Pakistan and China. India's growing military capabilities, bolstered by U.S. support, could alter the power dynamics in South Asia, potentially leading to heightened tensions with Pakistan. Additionally, China's strategic ambitions in the region, especially its investments through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), may prompt the U.S. to intensify its efforts to limit China's influence in South Asia. While the strategic alignment between the U.S. and India could foster closer cooperation, it may also lead to trade tensions. Trump's "America First" approach often prioritizes reducing trade deficits, and India's trade policies, including tariffs, could become a point of contention between the two countries [28].

Pressure on Pakistan:

Another key scenario under a second Trump administration would involve increased pressure on Pakistan to meet its counterterrorism commitments. Trump's first term saw significant tension between the U.S. and Pakistan, especially due to Islamabad's perceived lack of action against certain militant groups operating from its territory. In his second term, Trump is likely to intensify this pressure, demanding stronger actions from Pakistan against terrorist organizations, particularly those targeting Afghanistan and India [29].

The growing strategic partnership between Pakistan and China poses a challenge to U.S.-Pakistan relations. As Pakistan increasingly relies on China for economic and military support, the U.S. may view this shift as a complicating factor in the bilateral relationship. In addition, Pakistan's reliance on Chinese investment through CPEC, which has been a source of regional contention, could further strain ties between the U.S. and Pakistan. However, Trump's approach may also include a more pragmatic recognition of Pakistan's strategic role in Afghanistan. Pakistan's involvement in facilitating the peace process with the Taliban could give it leverage with the U.S., allowing for a more cooperative stance on counterterrorism and regional stability. The spillover effects from Afghanistan's instability, including refugee flows and cross-border insurgency, may prompt renewed strategic cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistan to manage these risks [30].

Heightened US-China Rivalry in South Asia:

South Asia is likely to emerge as a central battleground in the intensifying rivalry between the U.S. and China under a second Trump presidency. The competition for influence in the region is particularly relevant in light of China's growing presence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Trump's administration was highly critical of China's economic activities, particularly its investments in strategic infrastructure projects in South Asia, which are perceived as a means for China to expand its political and economic influence [31].

Under Trump, the U.S. would likely continue efforts to counter China's growing dominance in South Asia. This could include measures to limit the reach of CPEC and other Chinese investments in the region by offering alternative infrastructure projects, financial aid, or investment packages to countries in South Asia. Trump may also increase military support to countries like India to strengthen their defenses against Chinese influence, particularly in contested areas like the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Given the strategic importance of the region for both the U.S. and China, South Asia could become an area of heightened tensions, with countries in the region being drawn into the U.S.-China rivalry. The resulting economic and military dynamics could further complicate regional stability and development.

Re-engagement with Afghanistan:

A second Trump presidency might also involve renewed U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, particularly in efforts to stabilize the country following the U.S.-Taliban peace deal negotiated during his first term. Although Trump's administration sought to reduce U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, the volatile nature of the region, compounded by the Taliban's resurgence and the failure of the Afghan government to maintain stability, could lead to a shift in policy. Under Trump, there could be increased efforts to re-establish U.S. influence in Afghanistan, particularly in stabilizing the country and countering extremist groups like ISIS-Khorasan. This renewed involvement would likely have significant implications for neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia [32].

For Pakistan, U.S. re-engagement in Afghanistan could raise concerns about potential pressure to align its policies with U.S. counterterrorism objectives in the region. Pakistan's long-standing concerns about Afghan stability, coupled with its strategic ties to the Taliban, would make its position on any renewed U.S. involvement in Afghanistan highly complex. Similarly, Iran's interests in Afghanistan, particularly its influence over the Shia Hazara community and its security concerns along the border, would make it a critical player in any future U.S. strategy for the region. Central Asian states, too, would be impacted by the broader security implications of Afghan instability and the return of U.S. military forces to the region. These developments would likely lead to a recalibration of alliances and strategic partnerships in Central Asia and the broader region.

Reduced Focus on South Asia Due to Domestic Priorities:

Despite the likelihood of these heightened geopolitical scenarios, one significant possible outcome of a second Trump presidency is a reduced focus on South Asia as a result of domestic priorities. Trump's "America First" policy emphasized addressing domestic issues, such as

economic recovery, infrastructure development, and immigration reform, while minimizing foreign entanglements. This inward-facing approach could result in less active U.S. engagement in South Asia, with the region potentially being sidelined in favor of more pressing domestic concerns.

This reduction in U.S. engagement could have profound consequences for regional conflicts and development initiatives. South Asian countries, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan, may face challenges in securing U.S. support for stability and development projects. Additionally, ongoing regional conflicts, such as the India-Pakistan rivalry and tensions in Afghanistan, might intensify without the moderating influence of U.S. diplomatic efforts. South Asia's significance in global geopolitics would likely remain, but the U.S. could increasingly prioritize other regions, especially the Indo-Pacific, in its strategic calculations. The reduced focus on South Asia could leave a vacuum that might be filled by other global powers, particularly China, further shifting the region's balance of power.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIA:

The potential re-inauguration of Trump's presidency carries significant implications for the economic, security, and political dynamics in South Asia. Under Trump, the South Asian region would likely witness shifts in trade relations, defense cooperation, and political landscapes, all influenced by his "America First" approach. The region, already characterized by tensions and diverse geopolitical interests, would face challenges as well as opportunities arising from these potential changes.

Economic Impacts:

One of the most immediate economic implications of a second Trump presidency for South Asia would be his trade policies. During his first term, Trump focused on reducing trade deficits, often through tariffs and protectionist measures. His administration took a confrontational stance against major trading partners, including India, implementing tariffs on steel and aluminum and criticizing India's trade practices. These policies could be re-enacted or intensified in a second term, potentially leading to economic disruptions across South Asia. Countries like India, which depend on exports to the U.S., could face increased tariffs on their products, affecting their manufacturing and agricultural sectors. Likewise, trade disputes may affect regional supply chains and lead to a reduction in the flow of goods between South Asia and the U.S..

Moreover, the U.S. is a key source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in South Asia, particularly in India. A change in U.S. trade policy could alter investment flows, with companies possibly reconsidering their operations in the region due to higher tariffs or regulatory hurdles. This could impact job creation and economic growth, especially in developing economies like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, which rely on U.S. investment for industrial growth. Additionally, changes in U.S. development aid, particularly to Pakistan and Afghanistan, could exacerbate financial difficulties in these countries, potentially limiting the resources available for infrastructure, education, and health programs that are vital for regional stability.

Security Dynamics:

The security dynamics in South Asia would also be significantly affected by Trump's return to power. A key

aspect of his first term was the strengthening of defense ties between the U.S. and India, with increased military cooperation, arms sales, and joint military exercises. The continuation of this policy could fuel a regional arms race, particularly between India and Pakistan. The U.S. has been a major supplier of defense equipment to India, and further strengthening this relationship could prompt Pakistan to increase its defense spending to counterbalance India's growing military capabilities. This arms buildup could exacerbate the already volatile security situation between India and Pakistan, especially in Kashmir, where both nations maintain a heavy military presence. The increased militarization could lead to more frequent skirmishes and raise the likelihood of an escalation into a full-scale conflict.

Trump's approach to counterterrorism could also affect South Asia's security landscape. During his first term, he focused on pressuring Pakistan to take stronger action against terrorist groups operating on its soil. A second term would likely see renewed U.S. pressure on Pakistan to fulfill its counterterrorism commitments, especially about groups like the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which have cross-border operations that threaten regional stability. However, Pakistan's growing reliance on China, both economically and militarily, complicates the issue. If U.S. pressure increases, it may lead Pakistan to further strengthen its ties with China, potentially fostering a closer Sino-Pakistani military and economic alliance that could shift the balance of power in the region. Afghanistan's instability would also be a central concern, as the U.S. may seek to stabilize the country through a combination of military and diplomatic efforts. This could have ramifications for Pakistan, which has long been engaged in Afghan affairs and would have to navigate any U.S. re-engagement while balancing its interests with both the U.S. and China.

Political Consequences:

Politically, the re-election of Donald Trump could influence the internal politics and governance of South Asian countries. Trump's "America First" policy, which emphasizes bilateral relationships over multilateral engagement, may encourage South Asian countries to realign their foreign policies to better suit U.S. interests. For instance, India could see increased pressure to support U.S. policies in international forums, such as the United Nations, and to align more closely with American economic and defense goals. However, such pressure might also create internal political challenges for India's leadership, as the country's large population and diverse political landscape demand a more balanced foreign policy that considers domestic concerns, including economic inequality and social unrest.

In Pakistan, the Trump administration's continued focus on counterterrorism could bolster the political influence of Pakistan's military, as it may be seen as the key partner in securing U.S. support for counterterrorism initiatives. This could lead to further militarization of Pakistan's politics, undermining democratic governance and potentially stoking internal dissent, particularly among civil society groups that have long been critical of the military's dominance. Additionally, Trump's emphasis on Pakistan's counterterrorism actions could provoke a backlash from Islamist political factions within the country, challenging the stability of its government.

South Asia's political landscape could also be affected by Trump's stance on regional alliances and rivalries. In his first term, Trump adopted an often transactional approach to foreign relations, prioritizing national interests over regional cooperation. This may lead to the further polarization of regional relationships, particularly in countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, which have historically balanced ties between China, India, and the U.S. With U.S.-China rivalry intensifying, these countries could find themselves caught in the middle, having to navigate a more complex geopolitical environment. Trump's focus on bolstering U.S.-India relations might drive a wedge between India and its neighbors, particularly Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, further complicating South Asia's delicate diplomatic equilibrium.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES:

The re-inauguration of Donald Trump as U.S. President presents both significant challenges and opportunities for South Asia, particularly as the region navigates its relationship with two of the world's most powerful nations—the United States and China. South Asia's geopolitical landscape is shaped by its complex relations with both countries, which often have competing interests in the region. The challenge lies in balancing these relationships, while the opportunity lies in leveraging this balance for greater regional cooperation and alignment in the face of global pressures.

Challenges for South Asia in Balancing Relations with Both the US and China:

One of the primary challenges facing South Asian countries under a potential second Trump presidency is balancing relations with both the United States and China. The U.S. and China, while two of South Asia's most influential partners have divergent strategic interests in the region. The United States, under Trump, has consistently supported India's rise as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. This support has manifested in increased defense cooperation, joint military exercises, and economic partnerships through forums like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). For India, which is a key partner in Trump's vision for the Indo-Pacific, this relationship provides economic and security benefits. However, it also creates tension with China, which views the U.S.-India alliance as a challenge to its regional dominance and a potential threat to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

On the other hand, China has steadily increased its economic and military influence in South Asia, especially through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which links China to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. Pakistan's strategic partnership with China has become a cornerstone of its foreign policy, providing economic investment and security cooperation in the face of U.S. pressure over counterterrorism policies. South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh also have growing ties with China, benefiting from its infrastructure investments and trade partnerships.

The challenge arises for countries like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, which are caught in a delicate balancing act. These countries must manage their relationships with both the U.S. and China without antagonizing either side. For instance, while India seeks to deepen its strategic ties with the U.S., it must also contend with China's growing influence, particularly in terms of trade and infrastructure

development. Similarly, Pakistan, which has aligned itself closely with China, risks straining its relations with the U.S. if it continues to rely too heavily on Beijing. This balancing act is further complicated by the U.S.-China rivalry, with each country seeking to increase its influence over South Asia in ways that directly or indirectly affect the region's political and economic stability.

Opportunities for Regional Cooperation or Alignment Under a Trump Presidency:

Despite these challenges, a second Trump presidency could also present significant opportunities for South Asia to engage in regional cooperation and alignment. One of the key opportunities lies in the potential for deeper cooperation among South Asian countries themselves, driven by common security and economic interests. Trump's policies, particularly with China and the Indo-Pacific region, could incentivize South Asian countries to come together to safeguard their regional interests. For instance, the growing U.S.-India defense partnership, which focuses on countering China's influence, could encourage India and its neighbors, particularly Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, to strengthen their security frameworks. These countries, while maintaining their relationships with both the U.S. and China, could work together on shared concerns like maritime security, counterterrorism, and infrastructure development.

Another opportunity could be the potential for deeper economic integration within the region. As Trump's administration continues to push for fairer trade agreements and a reduction in trade deficits, South Asian countries could benefit from intra-regional trade and investment initiatives. With the U.S. focusing on bilateral agreements, countries in South Asia could explore ways to enhance trade relations among themselves, reducing dependency on external powers. This could lead to greater economic resilience, especially in the face of global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic or future trade wars between the U.S. and China.

Furthermore, South Asia could benefit from a re-invigorated focus on multilateral diplomacy, which has been a hallmark of Trump's foreign policy in his first term. Although Trump has often emphasized bilateral relations, his policies on issues such as counterterrorism and trade have led to discussions about greater multilateral coordination on these topics. South Asian countries could seize this opportunity to strengthen their ties with the U.S. and other global powers, creating a more balanced geopolitical environment that allows for greater regional autonomy and influence. Initiatives like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could gain new relevance under Trump's presidency if the region's countries can leverage their collective interests to promote peace and economic development.

CONCLUSION:

The return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency offers both challenges and opportunities for South Asia, a region at the crossroads of global power dynamics. As the region navigates its relationship with both the United States and China, the balancing act becomes even more delicate. The Trump administration's policies—characterized by a strong U.S.-India alliance, a hard stance on Pakistan, and a competitive rivalry with China—have already reshaped South Asia's geopolitical landscape. Under Trump's

leadership, the region faces the dual challenge of aligning with the U.S. while managing its relations with China, each of which exerts considerable influence in the region. South Asian countries will need to adapt their diplomatic and strategic approaches to avoid falling into the trap of zero-sum politics between Washington and Beijing. Balancing the benefits of U.S. defense cooperation, trade negotiations, and counterterrorism efforts against China's economic investments and regional initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative will require delicate diplomacy. In this context, South Asia's ability to strengthen regional cooperation and multilateral engagement will be vital for maintaining stability and fostering economic development. Despite the challenges, a Trump presidency also presents opportunities for regional alignment and cooperation. The potential for enhanced security collaboration, particularly in counterterrorism and regional stability, offers a pathway for collective progress. Additionally, South Asia could explore new avenues for economic cooperation, leveraging strategic investments and trade relations to reduce dependency on external powers. Ultimately, the trajectory of South Asia's future under a Trump administration will depend on its ability to navigate these complex geopolitical realities, balancing the demands of both the U.S. and China while fostering deeper regional cooperation and promoting its sovereignty.

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