

# Geopolitics of the Modern Indian and a Changing World

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## Introduction

The geopolitics of India must be considered in the geographical context of the Indian subcontinent — a self-contained region that includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and, depending how one defines it, Nepal and Bhutan. We call the subcontinent “self-contained” it is a region that is isolated on all sides by difficult terrain or by ocean. In geopolitical terms it is, in effect, an island.

This “island” is surrounded on the southeast, south and southwest by the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. To the west, it is isolated by mountains that rise from the Arabian Sea and run through Pakistan’s Balochistan province, stretching northward and rising higher and higher to the northwestern corner of Pakistan. There, at the Hindu Kush, the mountain chain swings east, connecting with the Pamir and Karakoram ranges. These finally become the Himalayas, which sweep southeast some 2,000 miles to the border of Myanmar, where the Rakhine Mountains emerge, and from there south to India’s border with Bangladesh and to the Bay of Bengal. The Rakhine are difficult terrain not because they are high but because, particularly in the south, they are covered with dense jungle.

## What is Geopolitics

The word is from the term geo which is a Greek word that means earth and the rest of the word is politics, it mainly focuses on the relation that could be and result of politics and territory. Whether this territory is on the local or international scale. The term was created at the beginning of the 20th century by Rudolf Kjellén a Swedish political scientist. Kjellén was inspired by the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, who published a book in 1897 titled political geography.

The geopolitical world framework consists of two great landmasses North America, and Eurasia, South America, Africa, and Australia and five major sources of water, Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans besides the North Polar Sea the South Polar Sea.

The term encompasses analyzing, describing, forecasting, and using of political power over a given territory. It is a main method of foreign policy analysis which helps understanding explaining and predicting international political behavior through specific geographical variables. Those geographical variables are geographic location of the country, climate of the region the countries are in size of the countries, , topography of the region, demography, natural resources and technological development. Traditionally, the term has applied primarily to the impact of geography on politics, but its usage has evolved over the past century to encompass wider connotations.

It is multidisciplinary in its scope, and includes all aspects of the social sciences with particular stress on political geography, international relations and, the territorial aspects of political. Also, the study of geopolitics includes the study of relations between the interests of international political actors, interests focused to an area, space, geographical element or ways, relations which create a geopolitical system.

## How Geopolitics Works

A good way to explain this is by detailing what's needed for geopolitics. Geopolitics requires at least two actors to be separated geographically (usually in different countries or continents). Both (or more) actors must be aware of each other. Geopolitics is reliant upon this kind of knowledge and geographical location.

Knowledge of each other is important because that assumes that both actors will act strategically. For instances, if two people owned parts of a forest, it can be assumed that both people would be interested in how the other approaches fire safety, because a fire could harm everyone's land. Someone would be accountable. If no one knew of other owners, a fire could be treated as a force of nature.

But here's the thing: both actors have to have the ability to interact. If both actors keep to themselves and don't disturb the world around them, then geopolitics isn't present. So how can actors interact? There are too many to name, but some examples of interaction you may be familiar with are trade, pollution, travel, and immigration.

### **The Geopolitics of Modern India**

Modern India has its origins in the collapse of the British Empire. Indeed, it was the loss of India that ultimately doomed the British Empire. The entire focus of imperial Britain, from the Suez Canal to Gibraltar and Singapore, was to maintain the lines of supply to India. Many of the colonies and protectorates around the world secured by Britain in the 19th century were designed to provide coaling stations to and from India. The independence of India resulted in the unification of the country under an authentically Indian government. It also led to the political subdivision of the subcontinent. The Muslim-majority areas — the Indus Valley region west and northwest of the Thar Desert, and the Ganges River basin — both seceded from India, forming a separate country that itself later split into modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was this separatism that came to frame Indian geopolitics. India and Pakistan, for the bulk of their mutual existence, have had an adversarial relationship. For a long time, the Indian sentiment was that Pakistan's separation from India could have been avoided. This attitude, coupled with Pakistan's own geographic, demographic and economic inferiority, has forced Islamabad to craft its entire foreign policy around the threat from India. As a result, the two sides have fought four wars, mostly over Kashmir, along with one that resulted in the hiving off of Bangladesh. As noted earlier, the Indian heartland is the northern plain of the Ganges River basin. This plain is separated from Pakistan's heartland, the Indus Valley, only by a small saddle of easily traversed land; fewer than 200 miles separate the two rivers. If India is to have any ambition in terms of expansion on land, the Indus is the only option available — all other routes end either in barriers or in near-wasteland. Meanwhile, the closeness — and sheer overwhelming size — of India is central to Pakistan's mind-set. The two are locked into rivalry.

### **China and the Himalayan Wall**

Apart from this enmity, however, modern India has faced little in the way of existential threats. On its side of the mountain wall, there are two states, Nepal and Bhutan, which pose no threat to it. On the other side lies China. China has been seen as a threat to India, and simplistic models show them to be potential rivals. In fact, however, China and India might as well be on different planets. The two countries are irrevocably walled off from each other. The only major direct clash between Indian and Chinese forces, which occurred in 1962, was an inconclusive battle over border territories high in the mountains — both in the northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and the Kashmiri border region of Aksai Chin — that could lead nowhere. A potential geopolitical shift would come if the status of Tibet changed, however. China's main population centers are surrounded by buffer states — Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet. So long as all are in Chinese hands, the core of China is invulnerable to land attack. If, however, Tibet were to become independent, and if it allied with India, and if it permitted India to base substantial forces in its territory and to build major supply infrastructure there, then — and only then — India could be a threat to China. This is why the Indians for a long time championed the Dalai Lama and Tibetan independence movements, and why the Chinese until fairly recently regarded this as a major threat. Had a pro-Indian, independent government been installed in Tibet, the threat to China would be significant. Because New Delhi held open the option of supporting Tibetan independence, Beijing saw the Indians as engaged in developing a threat to China. Indian Maoists (Naxalites) and Nepalese Maoists have been supported by

Beijing, though that support is no longer what it used to be. The Chinese have lost interest in aggressive Maoism, but they do have an interest in maintaining influence in Nepal, where the Maoists recently increased their power through electoral gains. This is China's counter to India's Tibet policy. But for both, this is merely fencing. At the moment, therefore, there is no Indo-Chinese geopolitical hostility. However, these would be points of friction if such hostility were to occur in the distant future.

### **Russia, the United States and Pakistan**

In the absence of direct external threats, modern India's strategic outlook has been shaped by the dynamics of the Cold War and its aftermath. The most important strategic relationship that India had after gaining independence from Britain in 1947 was with the Soviet Union. There was some limited ideological affinity between them. The Soviets and Americans were engaged in a massive global competition, and India was inevitably a prize. It was a prize that the Soviets could not easily take: The Soviets had neither an overland route to India nor a navy that could reach it.

The United States, however, did have a navy. The Indians believed that the United States might well want to replace Britain as a global maritime power, a development that might put India squarely in Washington's sights. The Indians saw in the United States all the same characteristics that had drawn Britain to India. India did not want to replace the British with the Americans — its fundamental interest was to retain its internal cohesion and independence. The Soviets could provide economic aid and military hardware, as well as a potential nuclear umbrella (or at least nuclear technical assistance). The relationship with the Soviet Union was perfect for the Indians, since they did not see the Soviets as able to impose satellite status on India. From the American point of view, however, there was serious danger in the Indo-Soviet relationship. The United States saw it as potentially threatening U.S. access to the Indian Ocean and lines of supply to the Persian Gulf. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States was facing a series of challenges. The British were going to leave Singapore, and the Indonesian independence movement was heavily influenced by the Soviets. The U.S. solution was an alliance with Pakistan. This served two purposes. First, it provided another Muslim counterweight to Nasserite Egypt and left-leaning Arab nationalism. Second, it posed a potential threat to India on land.

The Soviets could not seriously threaten Pakistan from that direction, but the U.S. relationship with Pakistan made Afghanistan a permanent Soviet interest. The Soviets did not make a direct move into Afghanistan until late 1979, but well before then they tried to influence the direction of the Afghans — and after moving, they posed a direct threat to Pakistan.

From the Indian point of view, the borderland between Pakistan and China — that is, Kashmir — then became a strategically critical matter of fundamental national interest. The more of Kashmir that India held, the less viable was the Sino-Pakistani relationship. Whatever emotional attachment India might have had to Kashmir, Indian control of at least part of the region gave it control over the axis of a possible Pakistani threat and placed limits on Chinese assistance. Thus, Kashmir became an ideological and strategic issue for the Indians.

### **A Changing World for Geopolitics in India**

In 1992, India's strategic environment shifted: The Soviet Union collapsed, and India lost its counterweight to the United States. Uncomfortable in a world that had no balancing power to the United States, but lacking options of its own, India became inward and cautious. It observed uneasily the rise of the pro-Pakistani Taliban government in Afghanistan — replacing the Indian-allied Soviets — but it lacked the power to do anything significant. The indifference of the United States and its continued relationship with Pakistan were particularly troubling to India. Then, 2001 was a clarifying year in which the balance shifted again. The attack on the United States by al Qaeda threw the United States into conflict with the Taliban.

The realignment of Indian relations with the United States did not represent a fundamental shift in Indian geopolitics, however. India continues to be an island contained by a ring of mountains. Its primary interest remains its own unity, something that is always at risk due to the internal geography of the subcontinent. It has one enemy on the island with it, but not one that poses a significant threat — there is no danger of a new generation of Muslim princes entering from Pakistan to occupy the Indian plain. Ideally, New Delhi wants to see a Pakistan that is fragmented, or at least able to be controlled.

India will go with the flow, but given its mountainous enclosure it will feel little of the flow. Outside its region, India has no major strategic interests — though it would be happy to see a devolution of Tibet from China if that carried no risk to India, and it is always interested in the possibility of increasing its own naval power. India's fundamental interest will always come from within — from its endless, shifting array of regional interests, ethnic groups and powers. The modern Indian republic governs India. And that is more important than any other fact in India.

### Summing up

When geographical factors like oceans, seas, climate, land forms, mountain ranges etc. play a defining role in shaping political development and international relations of a country, it is said to be geo-politically influenced. Every country's geographic and natural attributes provide it with certain space for designing their foreign policy. The peninsular size of India, the spread of Indian Ocean on its three sides, the presence of the lofty Himalayan Ranges play a decisive role in shaping the international affairs of India. Geopolitics still influences international politics and has included in its fold economic and military factors.

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