

South Asian Geo-Politics from the Prism of Pak-China Relations

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Abstract

With the emergence of non-state actors, South Asia regional significance has augmented. The dynamics of the region were already governed under the shaky foundations due to declared nuclear status of Pakistan and India. However, growing Sino and US interests have shifted the dynamics of the region in divergent strands; where one promotes economic integration while the other calls for defensive up gradation measures. The very element calls for development of alliances of different natures. To focus over Pak-China relations, despite belonging to different cultures and belief systems, both states have enjoyed strong bilateral relations. They are a clear challenge to players such as, US and India.

This article is steered towards addressing the ever changing dynamics of South Asia via providing a qualitative analysis. The ambition is to unravel the steering objectives of this alliance and address the potential challenges of the upcoming future. This research has tried to answer the following questions. What is the geo-political importance of South Asia? Which regional and extra-regional powers have geo-political and geo-strategic interests in this region and how their interests converge and diverge with each other? The relations amidst Pakistan and China have been investigated under the realist paradigm; under application of Balance of Threat Theory. Regional integration in the form of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) are analyzed through the lens of Theory of Complex Interdependence. Research is based on qualitative methodology having secondary sources. It is interpretive, and critical in nature.

Keywords: Pak-China Relations, Regional Integration, Geo-political, South Asia

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Introduction

The existing geopolitical dilemma's within South Asia has not only given birth to new alliances but has also strengthened older ones. Pakistan has been pushed forward to rethink about its regional alliances in the wake of the Civil Nuclear Deal between Washington and New Delhi. Pakistan China relations have always been friendly and both have supported each other on various national, regional and international issues.

Realist school of thought stresses over “Balance of Power” as a system to avert wars; the notion dictates that once states are in equilibrium in terms of power, they will unlikely pursue war. Walt's focused over the theory from another angle and presented “Balance of Threat theory (BOT)” which made a significant impact within the neorealist paradigm. His notion focused over the presence of security threats, and asserted that “alliances are formulated to balance out the existing security threats rather than balance against power” (Dwidevi, 2012).

In case of Pakistan and India, antagonistic perceptions have long fueled their bilateral relations. South Asia has been eyed critically on the geopolitical canvas due to their nuclear status; which has generated a rough balance of power, and deterred both to engage in an all-out war. To maintain the strategic equilibrium Pakistan has opted towards “credible minimum deterrence as a cornerstone of its national security” (Jalil, 2017). For example, according to Adrian Levy, “India has been developing a top-secret nuclear city to produce thermo-nuclear weapons” such reports further stamps Indian ambitions to boost its nuclear power—conversely, dismantles the regional stability. (Levy, 2015) India has pushed forward and succeeded in the development of nuclear submarines, and in pursuit of six more under the “project P-75I”. (India,

2017) These ambitions are to an extent steered towards countering Chinese swift maritime expansions in the Indian and Pacific Ocean (Unnithan, 2017). The subsequent closeness between Washington and New Delhi provides the latter with the desired strategic depth to destabilize BOP between Pakistan and India.

Under the forces of globalization and growing state interdependencies, Theory of Complex Interdependence becomes more relevant in the case study of South Asia. Pakistan China relations have embarked over new horizons under the initiation of China Pakistan Economic Corridor. The BRI agenda and its flagship project of CPEC projects calls out for regional integration to diffuse any regional political challenges. (Amighini, 2017) China is also initiating a plan to develop oil and gas pipeline with an oil refinery at Gwadar port which would assist China's energy supply from Persian Gulf and Africa to Western China. (Kalim, 2017)

Literature Review

What remains evident is that a gradual shift of power from West to East is under play. More importantly, China is actively engaged in filling the power vacuum generated in the global political system by this shift. This shift has also been witnessed by South Asia at its core of regional politics, and has profoundly affected the shifting regional alliances. For example, the emergent bilateral relations of Pakistan and Russia.

In case of South Asia, Pakistan and India largely dominates the geopolitical spheres. Despite political tensions China has pursued sound trade ties with India (around \$100 billion). Yet, it has not forgotten the geopolitical importance of Pakistan in the larger realm of its national goals. Since Pakistan-China relations have all times tested, Beijing attributes towards Islamabad as a more reliable and attractive than New Delhi, in South Asia. Sino-Indian relations have been

marred historically, their security interests on divergent paths; in case of South China Sea issue and India's international standing on the Tibet issue.

China's foreign policy in recent years has two objectives; energy and security. Consequently, China has invested in projects and agendas to ensure the following; safe supply routes, successive exploration and extraction of energy reserves for its booming economies. Therefore, development of Gwadar Port and materializing CPEC has been of critical interest for China under BRI project. (Kalim, 2017:466) Within South Asia, Chinese interests can be broken down into four major goals; to counter the growing Indian regional hegemonic ambitions, intensify the trade activity within the region, enhance its route access within the Indian Ocean and lastly, successfully counter extremist and terrorist roots in the region. Overall, these objectives in a larger prism counter and diminish US influences in the region and world.

On the other end, US policies have strategically supported India to counteract China's emerging rise in the global politics. Regrettably, this strategic tilt towards India has disrupted the BOP in the region. For instance, to sway Chinese influence within the region and South China Sea, Washington has passed the "Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement" (LEMOA); further impeding the strategic balance between India and Pakistan. Being the first hand victim of war on terror, regional stability of the South Asia is of pivotal importance for Pakistan, along with China. The other notion talks about how Pakistan, Russia and China are emerging as a triad to establish regional stability and resultantly weakens the Indo-US nexus. (Singh, 2017)

Progressions under CPEC

With progressions under CPEC, China and Pakistan trade volumes recorded around "\$13.77 billion in 2015-16". (Saeed, 2017) According to the State Bank of Pakistan reports,

“FDI inflow to Pakistan has increased by 14% year-on-year (YOY) to US\$2.45 billion from July 2017 to February 2018”. (Research, 2018) Moreover, other reports highlight over various Mineral Resources Development projects engaged within Pakistan; which on larger scales target towards energy explorations and explorations of alternative energy sources, for instance, the Saindak Copper and Gold Mine Projects etc. (Siddique, 2014)

Infrastructural Development

The various projects within CPEC initiative targets to achieve infrastructural developments to boost Pakistan’s strategic position; they touch over attributes of achieving technological innovations within agricultural industry, health sector, education, transportation and employment etc. all are encompassed. In June 2017, H.E Zhao Lijian (Deputy Chief of Mission at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad) marked the CPEC progression as one of the best performing projects within BRI agenda. (Munir, 2017) He also highlighted over the smooth progress of “19 early harvest projects within CPEC (worth \$18.5 billion)” which provided a promising blueprint for the successive nature of BRI agenda as a whole. (Munir, 2017)

Gwadar Projects

12 projects are initiated to solely to boost Gwadar Port’s strategic importance as a major trading hub. In early 2018, the First Gwadar Expo was held in January 2018 and Economic Free Zone has also been successfully operationalized. By the end of 2019-2020, the Gwadar East-Bay Expressway and the Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan are expected to be completed. The New Gwadar International airport is also expected to be completed by 2019. (CPEC Projects Update:GP)

Energy Projects

To meet Pakistan growing energy demands and to counter the energy crisis, under CPEC projects major emphasis has been laid upon “thermal power, hydropower, coal gasification, renewable power generation and modernizing power transmission networks”. Such developments are envisioned to restart the halted industries of the state to switch start the economic boom. For instance, “the speedy completion of the Sahiwal 2x660MW Coal Power Project and United Energy Pakistan 100MW Wind Farm etc.” are all steered towards overcoming the looming electricity crises. (CPEC Projects Update: EP) Overall, the projects target to provide “11000 megawatts of electricity to the Pakistan’s national grid” enhancing the states growing domestic and industrial needs. (CPEC Projects Update: EP)

Fig 1: Major Projects within CPEC

Source: Council on Foreign Relations

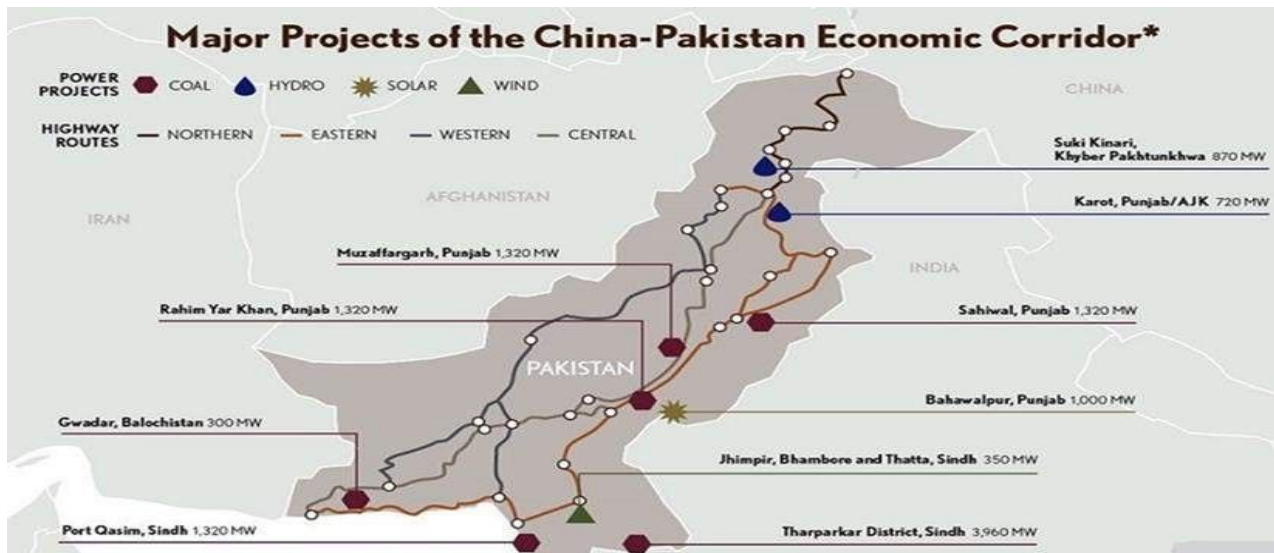




Fig 2: Map of South Asia

Source: Google Images

Geopolitical Importance of South Asia

South Asia's geopolitical significance becomes more complex under the existing US and Chinese interests. In the contemporary era, both states policies are steered to maximize their respective influences within the Asian sphere. This tug of war for power has also generated potential threats but is prevented due to two reasons; the high level of regional economic integration and the existence of nuclear weapons. (Tehseen, 2017) China has largely invested in

regional integration projects under BRI agenda to secure pivotal energy routes; hence CPEC garners immense importance as well. These interests are in clear violation of the greater US stratagems; which encircle goals of achieving political, economic, security and diplomatic ties within the region. (Tehseen, 2017:2)

CPEC initiative acts as a gateway to expand its strategic scope to Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. (Tikhonova, 2016) CPEC initiative will bridge the regions to develop robust economic connectivity within the region. (Arif K. , 2017) Gwadar port geo-strategically provides China with the shortest route to gain access to the rich hydrocarbons of the Persian Gulf, the Middle East and Africa—enabling Beijing to avoid the politically disrupted region of South-China Sea and Straits of Malacca. (Masood, 2017) For both Pakistan and China, the project is lucrative to develop their less saturated areas and leaves breadcrumbs for strengthened relations with the other regional and extra regional states.

It not surprising that South has become a playground of geopolitical interests by the superpowers; which have influenced the regional dynamics, in both progressive and regressive manners. Therefore, to say the least, the geopolitical significance of Pakistan, Afghanistan and India will not fade away in the long run but eventually will over power one another. The wild card Pakistan exercises is its connectivity with the Muslim world (Naseer 2016).

Geo-politics of South Asia: Post 9/11 Scenario

Challenges for Pakistan

Pak-Afghan diplomatic relations were crushed in the wake of 9/11 incident. Stability of Afghanistan is critical to achieve the fruits of CPEC initiative; yet, antagonistic perceptions have hindered any chances of much desired diplomatic engagements. Afghanistan's geo-strategic

location is also pivotal to link with CARs. (Haltermann, 2014) In that sense, Indian involvement has negatively steered Pakistan's ties with Afghanistan— as India's subsequent closeness with Afghanistan has generated both, economic and strategic threats for Pakistan. If the situation persists, Afghanistan will regrettably follow its previous footsteps of Cold War era and become another “ticking bomb of a proxy war”. Not to forget, that Indian aggressive designs open room for the conventional arms race. The worst case scenario calls for an all-out war between the involved actors, and would be detrimental for the region. (Haltermann, 2014:11-12)

Challenges for China

China's challenges in South Asia can be narrowed down in these following pointers. First, the development of Xinjiang Province is critical for China, and in similar lines the Tibet and southwestern province of Yunnan also becomes critical. (Small, 2014) Second, the growing energy interest's, ultimately calls for continuous presence in regional affairs. It connects with the first objective because Beijing ambitions to stabilize its Xinjiang region to counter any extremist roots that appear to exist. Thirdly, the Tibet issue has been a head scratcher for China; in accordance to the second objective that Beijing fears that existing extremist roots will influence dynamics within the Tibet region as well.

Beijing priorities are threefold; to counter Indo-US nexus, eradicate terrorist roots, and extend its economic ventures. Within Afghanistan, Beijing holds the similar challenge as it does in the case of Tibet—“safe haven for Chinese Uighur militant groups persist in Afghanistan that impedes their developmental agendas”. In addition, presence of such insurgent groups violates the larger security of Pakistan and the Central Asian states. China ambitions to reduce US presence within the regional politics and the existence of extremist threats, indefinitely allows US to play a hand in the regional affairs—much to its own strategic interests. (Small, 2014:3)

New Phase of Pakistan-China Relations: Impacts on the Geo-Politics of South Asia

Washington has been pulling New Delhi in its close orbit to counter China's growing rise and aims to increase its independence upon actors such as Japan and Australia. (Mushtaq Ahmed Abbas, 2017:546) Under the infamous Nuclear Supplier Group agreement (2005) US has agreed to assist "New Delhi in development of its 'civilian' nuclear program"—despite India's non-membership of Non Proliferation Treaty of Nuclear Weapons. (Siddique, 2014:39) The deal targets to overshadow China's imminent rise in the regional security politics via augmenting India's strategic foothold in the region. (Siddique, 2014:39) China opposed India's accession into NSG considering it preferential treatment, and called out for similar treatment of Pakistan, yet, US ignored all the stances presented.

China: A Potential Threat to the West?

China's persistent economic growth under three decades has been contested and eyed critically by US. For instance, the recent US report, "National Posture Review (NPR) suggested US ambitions towards development of smaller nuclear weapons to retain effective deterrence capabilities". (Arif K. , 2018) Alongside China, the release of the report garnered clear disapproval by actors such as Iran and Russia. Such developments showcase US cold war mentalities which will indefinitely complicate the geopolitical securities of the international arena. Potentially further fueling the nuclear arms race within the system—"the report indicates China, Russia, North Korea and Iran as potential threats". For instance, China's successful tests of its anti-missile system cannot be ignored by security analysts. In wake of South China Sea

issue, China has been strengthening its naval might via “developing robust maritime Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities.” (Arif K. , 2018)

China’s defense allocation had “doubled up to US\$ 131.6 billion in 2014, this jump was also a 12% increase from its military budget in the previous year”. (Mushtaq Ahmed Abbasi, 2017:553) In the following year, “the official defense budget was increased up to US\$ 146 billion”. (China’s Defense Budget) Since 2007, China has pursued the development of next generation of strategic and tactical missiles, “to defend its naval shores and its outskirts” in wake of any crisis in South China Sea or with India. (China Missile Chronology, 2011) China’s geo-strategic position triggers its policy makers to opt for such defense policies, namely; Japan, India, and the ASEAN bloc, which together are engaged with the US. (Mushtaq Ahmed Abbasi, 2017:553) In addition, the acquired nuclear status of its rivals also gives birth to concerns that states such as South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan might also move down the same path. (Garver, 2016)

Chinese Converging Interests with Pakistan

Under CPEC umbrella, China and Pakistan have engaged in enhancing their security cooperation as well. The region has unfortunately been a victim of recurrent terrorist attacks. Both states have a mutual understanding of the issue and share similar objectives within and across their borders. Chinese interests are largely directed towards the development of Xinjiang Province, as “secessionist movement of Muslim Uighurs and rising terrorist activities by East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)” are instigating a perilous environment. (Butt, 2015:553) Reports have also highlighted over “strict Chinese policies on religious activities has pushed the Islamic radicalization ideology amidst the Uighurs”. (Kan, 2017)

Consequently, CPEC emerges out as a pivotal key to stabilize the turmoil within Xinjiang and its neighboring regions via extensive development projects. Pak-China interests converge over the geopolitical canvas to eradicate roots of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, which are impeding the developmental progresses. (Butt, 2015:30) Evidently, China-Pak strategic partnership balances out the Indo-US nexus and acts as a right counterweight to wreck the latter's ambitions. Moreover, Chinese control of Gwadar Port also enables China to establish desired naval bases within the Arabian Sea—boosting the maritime security of both actors. (Butt, 2015:31)

Nuclear Cooperation

China has not hesitated to support Pakistan in development of three other “Chashma Nuclear Power Plant (CHASHNUPP)” units for civilian purposes—“it was assessed that completion of Chashma-III and IV nuclear power plant will add up to ‘600MW and 340MW’ respectively in the national grid”. (Siddique, 2014:36) In 2017, its unit 4 and 5 were also successfully inaugurated, garnering as another hallmark of their steadfast bilateral ties. (Zaafir, 2017) Additionally, “the Karachi nuclear power projects namely K-II and K-III are also expected to add up to a total of 8,800MW electricity to the national grid by 2030”. (Dawn, 2016).

A Game of Interests

According to analyst Henry Kissinger, “China's growing ties with other regional players creates hurdles for US interests”. Consequently, US will strategically push forward its regional ally (India) to maintain its dwindling influence within Asia and grasp towards maintaining its unipolar status. China has been engaged in reshaping the global BOP via aligning with regional allies to support its lasting reign. (Khan, 2014:43) Pakistan is also opting towards a multi-

vectored foreign policy, and is engaged in intensification of its relations with China, and rebuilding its ties with Russia, Iran, Cuba, Uzbekistan and other countries. (Khan, 2014:55)

Close cooperation with China as well as Russia will benefit Pakistan in restoring the strategic balance in South Asia, and furthermore, close ties with China in various fields will boost its economy and defense positively. US cannot completely ignore Pakistan's strategic importance and continuous efforts to eradicate threats of terrorism, extremism and other models of violence; nuclear proliferation, instability, and conflict in the region. (Khan, 2014:55)

Pak-China relations are centered around threads of mutual interests, and starkly different to its bilateral relations with US. Pak-US relations steered over rocky roads in the wake of 9/11 and remains strained under the Trump administration as well. The undying truth remains that US has always adopted a far more biased approach towards Pakistan despite its continuous efforts to attain regional and world peace. Consequently, US policies have centered over establishing robust ties with India to extend its regional influences. Not to ignore, the Indo-US strategic partnership also further benefits New Delhi to counter any growing Chinese and Russian influences within the region. (Naqvi, 2010)

US strategic designs are steered towards rebalancing its position in Asia via building its robust military presence within the Asia Pacific. Hence, room for escalated tensions within the region escalates—as US interests are in clear collision with Chinese ambitions. US security agenda is to maintain its presence in regions such as Middle East and South Asia, for various geopolitical ambitions. (Mushtaq Ahmed Abbasi, 2017:546) However, US larger goals largely destabilize the strategic equilibrium of South Asia. Poking the strained relations between Pakistan and India; blurring the geopolitical picture of the region. US policies are largely driven to assist India gain a regional hegemonic status, and are pushing down Pakistan into accepting

the subordinate role to India. (Owais Ahmed Ghani et al., 2013:12) However, the tactical importance of Pakistan is not stained under these designs as India does not possess the right leverage to resolve the Afghan conundrum. What becomes evident is that the destabilized landscape of the region aides US in achieving its grandeur geo-political goals. Nonetheless, it also opens loopholes for establishment of a rough BOP under the Pak-China partnership. (Owais Ahmed Ghani et al., 2013:6)

Pakistan: A Reliable Partner of China in Global Politics

Evidences in contemporary era support the notion that Pakistan has been a reliable regional partner to China.(Owais Ahmed Ghani et al.,2013:12) Beijing also realizes Islamabad's constant efforts to attain regional security; the latter's strategic influences are not centered solely within South Asia— it also extends beyond. Pakistan acts as a bridge to establish its foothold with various military and financial mega projects in the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf to secure pivotal sea routes from any geopolitical uncertainties. (Kalim, 2017:464-466) Development of new ports abroad safeguards its shipping routes, and Beijing is keen interested to link newly established ports to promote an integrated network. (Kalim, 2017:464).

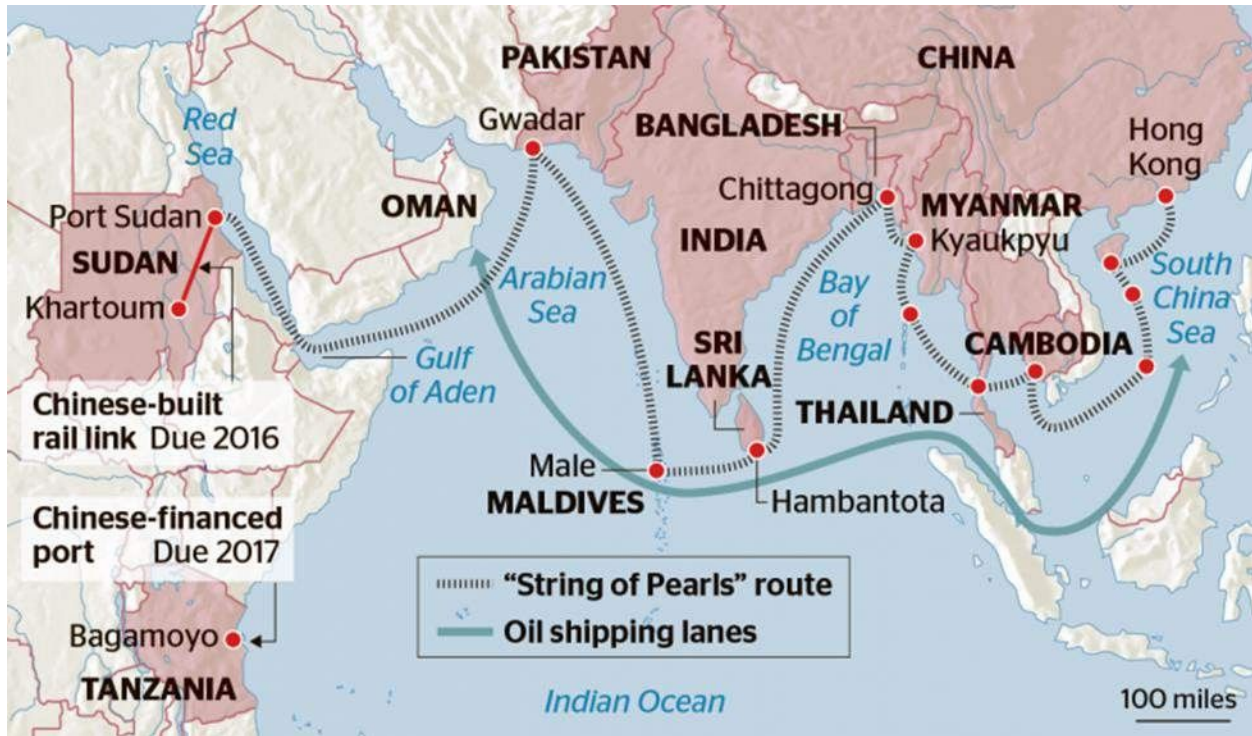


Fig 4: String of Pearls Route

Source: Google Images

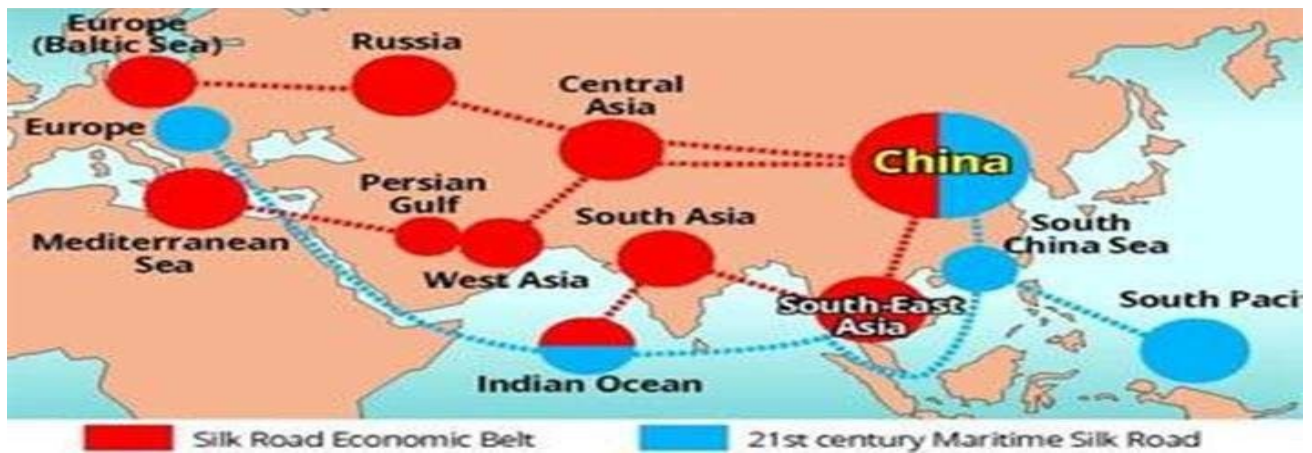


Fig 5: China's New Silk Road Economic Initiative

Source: Google Images

Regional Connectivity under CPEC

Iran and CPEC

In recent years, Pakistan and Iran also showed desires to rebuild their forgotten diplomatic ties. CPEC initiative therefore, becomes pivotal to achieve this goal. Strengthened trade ties can be an effective opportunity for both states to enter the untapped markets of the region—as both Gwadar Port and Chabahar Port holds significant geostrategic importance. Talks for connecting both ports have circulated and will definitely up the economic game and cooperation for Pakistan and Iran. (Arif A. , 2016) China already imports Iranian rich hydrocarbons and Gwadar Port is the key route to safely access the Gulf.



Fig 6: Gwadar and Chabahar Port

Source: Google Images

CPEC-Central Asia Connectivity

Central Asia's geo-strategic significance has only mounted in recent years, "as its rich energy reserves still remain untapped". Under these designs, "the pivotal economic links within the region ensures pragmatic presence of the global players to ensure their self-interests and tackle with the instability within Afghanistan which directly influences the security environment within Central Asia". (Arif K. , 2017) Chinese extensive visions for Central Asia aim to "limit the spread of Islamic fundamentalism into its Xinjiang Province and counter balancing Russian [and American] influences in the region." (Arif K. , 2017)

Beijing strong ties with Central Asia, "allows it to sustain enhanced bilateral relations with the extended Muslim world rather than triggering any unwanted upheavals". China's involvements with CARs overtly counter balance Russian interests raising red flags for the latter. Despite economic competitiveness, talk of the town remains that, "under the development of CPEC; Russia, China and Pakistan might emerge as the key triad in the region whose interests in the Central Asia coincide and pave way for enhanced strategic and economic cooperation". (Arif K. , 2017) For instance, developments of "projects like Amur Bridge indicate new trade corridor between Russia and China" (Abbas, 2011)

In light of the many existing opportunities for their domestic industries, CARs have shown keen desire towards joining the initiative. On the sidelines, inclusion within the project will aid to gain access Indian Ocean, moreover, throwback any existing Russian dependencies that persist and connect with the globe freely. (Butt, 2015:34-35)

Conclusion

Threats to regional stability post 9/11 have risen under the continuous tussle of powers to achieve their respective interests. (Owais Ahmed Ghani et al., 2013:11) The BRI project and its

flagship project of CPEC ambitions to achieve greater regional integration of Asia with Europe, Middle East and Central Asia. The closer India pushes itself under the US orbit; China-Pak relations will also continue to prosper to challenge the developing strategic challenges. (Owais Ahmed Ghani et al., 2013:7) Pak-China partnership needs to strategically respond to any arising destructive or constructive changes within the region and need to share the convergent views. (Kabraji, 2012) Foreign policy lenses within South Asia have widened under the dynamic ties of Pakistan and China and moved from mere defensive links to economic, cultural, civil society and digital perspectives—overall, shaping the future geo-politics of the South Asian region in a positive way.

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