

Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia: Security Imperatives

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the security of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in regional context, with special focus on China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Security environment of Afghanistan still remains uncertain and volatile having a direct bearing on the security situation of Pakistan and CPEC. Contrary to expectations, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) continues to operate from its secure bases inside Afghanistan under the Taliban regime and expand its influence in the areas bordering Afghanistan. Indian opposition to CPEC is driven by multiple motives apart from being a perennial adversary of Pakistan and a strategic competitor of China. China's central role in BRI and CPEC has ramifications from Indian perspective that is why it opposes BRI and CPEC. Bilateral relations of Pakistan and Iran has seen many ups and down, however, both countries have developed broad unanimity over Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Iran has indicated an interest in joining CPEC. BRI has further strengthened already deep ties between Pakistan and China. Following a qualitative approach and drawing on the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this study underscores the security challenge for BRI in the context of regional security environment.

Keywords: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Regional Security Complex (RSC).

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Introduction

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the Chinese government's infrastructure project launched in 2013. It aims to improve connectivity and cooperation on a global scale as it is spread over 71 countries across Asia, Africa and Eurasia via six land corridors.¹ China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been proclaimed a flagship project of BRI. CPEC, a network of highways, railways and pipelines to transport oil and gas, connects Gwadar Port in south-western Pakistan to China's north-western autonomous region of Xinjiang over a distance of approximately 3,000 km. Initial project cost was estimated to be US\$46 billion that was later increased to US\$62. It is one of the most significant Chinese foreign investment and is likely to be completed by 2030.²

CPEC traverses the entire length of Pakistan starting from the Chinese border at Khunjerab Pass to Gwadar seaport and assumes strategic importance because of Pakistan's central location in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Pakistan is located at the geo-strategic junction of South, Central and West Asia. Pakistan's strategic location offered opportunities as well as challenges for the entire region. Pakistan was a US ally against the Soviet Union during the Cold War and played key role in countering the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This partisanship in superpowers conflict had unintended consequences for its internal security. After 9/11, Pakistan's role in global 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan enhanced internal polarisation and compounded complex security situation of the country. Conducive security environment is vital for a fully functional and mutually beneficial trade corridor. Regional security situation, especially in neighbouring areas of Pakistan, is viewed as a grave challenge from the start of the project. Unstable neighbourhoods, regional militancy and geopolitical competitions have structural consequences for the project.

This study examines the security challenge vis-à-vis BRI in South Asia, with a key focus on CPEC. Data has been collected through qualitative methods using primary and secondary sources. Buzan's model of Regional

¹ Lily Kuo, "What Is China's Belt and Road Initiative?" *Guardian*, September 17, 2019.

² Shehryar Khan, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Challenges and Prospects," *Area Development and Policy*, November 23, 2018, 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2018.1534549>.

Security Complex Theory (RSCT) has been followed as the theoretical framework of the study.³ Primary focus of the study is to find out how the regional security situation in South Asia affects BRI. In this context, CPEC is given key importance given that it is a forerunner of BRI and considered vital for the success of Chinese economic outreach. To answer the question, the current situation in Afghanistan is examined as it is directly linked with the security landscape of Pakistan as well as CPEC. Further, Pakistan-Iran relations have been discussed in the context of CPEC keeping their historical background in view. Finally, China's central role in BRI and CPEC and its ramifications from the Indian perspective have been analysed.

Theoretical Framework

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is centered on the argument that security interdependence is usually patterned into regional-based clusters i.e. security complexes because most threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones.⁴ Regional Security Complexes (RSCs) exist across international system and “are defined by durable patterns of amity and enmity taking the form of sub-global, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence.”⁵ The South Asian RSC comprising Indian armed forces is Pakistan-centric as it presently lacks platforms necessary for the projection of conventional force beyond South Asia. The bulk of their tank heavy strike formations are unsuitable for employing across the Himalayas against China.⁶ RSC in South Asia is shaped by India-Pakistan enmity and enhanced by their geographical proximity. Effects of this mutual enmity and geographical proximity are reflected firstly in hostile neighbourhood and then in competitive regional security environment. This indicates that threats travel more easily over short distances and that their intensity lessens over long distances.

The linkage between geographical proximity and security interaction is “strongest and most obvious in the military, political, societal, and environmental sectors.”⁷ However, it remains much less uniform in the

³ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 4.

⁵ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 45.

⁶ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.

⁷ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.

economic area. True to the South Asian and Indo-Pakistani context, security is based on military and political concerns vis-à-vis unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Cooperation on issues such as transboundary water sharing in the Indus basin is a rare phenomenon in Indo-Pakistan context. Even this can potentially become a source of hostility as reflected by the Indian Prime Minister's threat to use water as a weapon against Pakistan. RSCT envisages that as a consequence of global powers' rivalry, conflict in a RSC can draw in outside intervention along the lines of its internal split.⁸ Pakistan and India had three wars during the cold war period which saw great powers' intervention of varying degree.

Pakistan's military alliance with the US during cold war and its strong relations with China from 1960s onwards was an effort to keep powerful neighbour India at bay. India, on the other hand, embraced the Soviet Union, especially after the Sino-Indian war in 1962. This way Indo-Pakistan divide in South Asia was reinforced and intensified by the rivalries of their respective patrons, the US and the Soviet Union. The current South Asian strategic landscape shows Indian strategic drift towards the US and Pakistan's towards China. Currently, Sino-US and Sino-Indian rivalries, especially the increasing economic influence of China in Pakistan and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) are drawing Indian and American opposition to CPEC and BRI.

Regional Security Calculus

CPEC traverses the entire length of Pakistan — starting from the Chinese border at Khunjerab Pass it goes down to Gwadar seaport. The corridor makes use of Pakistan's central location in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and enables China to bypass strategic Strait of Malacca. Pakistan is located in the Middle East, South, Central, and West Asia geo-strategic junction. It borders Afghanistan (2,430 km), China (523 km), India (2,912 km), Iran (909 km) and the Arabian Sea (coastline stretching over 1,046 km).⁹ Pakistan is located on the confluence of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Tajikistan is also a nearby neighbour separated from Pakistan by the narrow Wakhan Corridor in the North. Pakistan also

⁸ Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 104.

⁹ "Geography; The Borders of Pakistan," *Dawn*, October 17, 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/print/884966>

shares a maritime border with Oman. Such a location has security implications spread over the entire region because of the adjacency factor.

Afghanistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan are intricately interconnected by virtue of territory, history, society and politics. Any conflict or instability in Afghanistan has a spill over impact on Pakistan as witnessed in 1980s Soviet intervention and the US post-9/11 involvement in Afghanistan. Adverse security situation in Afghanistan poses threat to CPEC in two ways. First, insecurity and uncertainty in Afghanistan causes terrorist and insurgent threat to Pakistan, particularly in provinces bordering Afghanistan. Second, it hinders the possible extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. Realisation of this Pak-Afghan interconnectedness warrants an essential understanding of the historical context of relationship of the two countries.

Following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, Pakistan played pivotal role in the US supported campaign to defeat the Soviet forces. As Pakistan got deeply involved in Afghanistan and hosted Afghan refugees in 1980s, connection between instability in Afghanistan and its spill over effect on Pakistan further entrenched. After the collapse of Najibullah-led communist regime in 1992, another phase of the Afghan civil war started from 1992 to 1996. The power vacuum created by the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan gave rise to the Taliban movement. They were overwhelmingly ethnic Pashtuns from Kandahar and had Pakistan's support. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and controlled the capital Kabul and 90 per cent of the country. Pakistan's policy of siding with the US had dire consequences for the country particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. It had to face criticism and pressures over Taliban's controversial policies and their linkages with al-Qaeda. Further, Pakistan's all-out Taliban policy earned it deterioration of relations with the Afghan Northern Alliance and its closeness to India. Above all, Pakistan's support for the US counter-terrorism campaign made it victim of home grown terrorism that was abetted by the rival foreign security agencies. The rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its continuing persistence is the outcome of this phenomenon. This indicates instability nexus between Afghanistan and Pakistan has turned all the more complicated.

The events of 9/11 considerably changed the geo-political and security calculus of the world at large and South Asia in specific. The security situation of Pakistan deteriorated drastically. After the events of 9/11, Pakistan was forced to support the US and denounce the Taliban. The US-led coalition forces were quickly able to oust Taliban regime for their role in providing refuge to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. Northern Alliance became a significant part of the Interim Afghan Government headed by Hamid Karzai. The Northern Alliance cultivated a strong relationship with India and Iran and completely sidelined Pakistan. Encouraged by the support of the international community and the US, Kabul started reasserting its irredentist claims on the Durand Line.

The US withdrawal and the consequent reduced Indian influence on the Taliban-led Afghanistan have decreased the threat for Pakistan being sandwiched between two antagonistic neighbours, India and Afghanistan. This does not rule out the fact that the hostile intelligence agencies are supporting the TTP and Baloch insurgent groups. Given their own insecurities, the Taliban Government in Afghanistan is reluctant to act against TTP. All they have offered is to facilitate negotiations and help broker a deal. The Taliban regime is not willing to take action against TTP. Militant attacks in Pakistan have multiplied since the Taliban regime took over Afghanistan and TTP and Baloch insurgents continue to find safe havens in Afghanistan.¹⁰ The fluid and unstable Afghanistan situation will further complicate Pakistan's internal security.

TTP in Afghanistan

Pakistan's internal security situation improved after operation Zarb-e-Azb in June 2014, and militant groups affiliated with the TTP relocated inside Afghanistan. As per Pakistan Security Report 2015, a total of 625 terrorist attacks were carried out in 76 districts/regions of Pakistan. The total number of terrorist attacks and people killed and injured decreased by 48 per cent, 38 per cent and 54 per cent, respectively, as compared to 2014.¹¹

¹⁰ Kathy Gannon, "Pakistan's Relations With Taliban Regime Worsen," *The Diplomat*, May 19, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/pakistans-relations-with-taliban-regime-worsen>

¹¹ "Pakistan Security Report 2015," Muhammad Amir Rana and Safdar Sial, "Pakistan Security Report 2021," Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), November 27, 2017.

Subsequently, the threat shifted inside Afghanistan. The victory of the Afghan Taliban seems to have acted as a catalyst for TTP, and the Taliban regime is seen to be reluctant to exercise control over TTP. In 2021-22 attacks from TTP, local Taliban groups and Islamic State, Khorasan Province (ISKP) increased, indicating the fallout of Afghanistan's fluid and uncertain situation. Even in 2022, TTP remains a source of trouble from across the border, as it still maintains operational capabilities to launch attacks inside Pakistan in Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).¹² TTP attack in unison with ETIM on Dasu Dam, a CPEC project last year, is a worrisome indicator. These attacks were planned and supported from across the border in Afghanistan. Pakistan Army's Director General of Public Relations has indicated nexus between TTP India's RAW: "The leadership of all these [terrorist] networks is sitting across the border [in Afghanistan] and have the support of [India's spy agency] Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)".¹³

India

Multiple motives drive Indian opposition to CPEC. Apart from being a faithful adversary with well-known reasons rooted in history. The officially stated objection is against the portion of CPEC which runs through Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) because India claims that GB is part of Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his visit to China, pointed out to Chinese President Xi Jinping that CPEC projects passing through GB, CPEC, are "unacceptable" and proposed that China should drop the plan.¹⁴

A Chinese envoy to India was summoned in May 2015 to the Ministry of External Affairs to record their official objection over CPEC. It is essential to point out that CPEC in GB is not a new road or corridor. Still, it

¹² Muhammad Amir Rana and Safdar Sial, "Pakistan Security Report 2021," Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), 2022, 21, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/book/pakistan-security-report-2021>

¹³ Niha Dagia, "Terrorists Target Chinese Nationals Working on a CPEC Project," *The Diplomat*, July 19, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/terrorists-target-chinese-nationals-working-on-a-cpec-project/>

¹⁴ Khalid Manzoor Butt and Anam Abid Butt, "Impact of CPEC on Regional and Extra regional Actors," *Journal of Political Science*, XXXIII (2015) GC University Lahore: 22.

follows the exact alignment as Karakoram Highway (KKH), except that KKH is only an up-gradation of old KKH which was constructed in 1959 and 1979. Secondly, developmental activity in Jammu and Kashmir does not affect its disputed status since Pakistan, India and China in the past have undertaken massive projects in the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region. Therefore, Indian objection doesn't stand any merit. India's former National Security Advisor (NSA) M.K.Narayanan views BRI and CPEC as a significant threat. He stated that CPEC was an attempt by China and Pakistan to undermine the Indian position in the regional context. India is viewing CPEC as an attempt at strategic encirclement of India and China's expansionist agenda in the wider IOR region. India is concerned about the deepening connection between Pakistan and China and is worried that China is getting direct strategic access to the Gwadar port and the Indian Ocean. In Narayanan's assessment, increased Sino-Pakistan connection and direct access to Gwadar are Chinese means to maximise power without purpose and thus incite a contentious atmosphere.¹⁵ India views China's increased presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) with mistrust as India's historical claims over IOR, of course, not as tenaciously as China has over the South China Sea. With China at Gwadar, India faces a double dilemma. Firstly in India's view, Gwadar will provide the necessary beachhead to the People's Liberation Army Navy PLA (Navy) linked to China via CPEC as part of the so-called "String of pearls" in IOR. Secondly, Indian project of Chahbahar Port in Iran is almost jeopardised after the fall of Afghanistan to Taliban. With the completion of CPEC, Chinese stakes and engagement in Pakistan, including GB, will increase, and so will the Indian limitations to act or react on any pretext, especially in GB. This is, of course, not a good sign for the Indian strategic establishment. India also foresees a turnaround in Pakistan's economy as a result of Chinese extensive economic and commercial engagement in Pakistan through CPEC. A fully functional CPEC is likely to make Pakistan economically more prosperous and more potent and will potentially change the power equation in the bipolar South Asia Regional Security Complex, which is currently in India's favour.

¹⁵ M. K. Narayanan, "To China with a Clear Strategy," *Hindu*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/M.K.-Narayanan-on-Indo-China-ties/article62119845.ece>

China

Pakistan and China have been enjoying close and friendly relations since the early 1960s, founded on different political ideologies, but the convergence of national interests brought them closer. Pakistan felt insecure about its hostile and powerful neighbour, India. China also felt uncertain about being encircled by hostile neighbours. Then, it shared a long, uneasy border with the Soviet Union. To the South, China shared a border with India, where it had a war in 1962 and hence a strategic unease. Pakistan, too, had a war with India in 1948 over the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Along with sharing a 523 km border China and Pakistan shared hostility with India. The necessity of a road link between Pakistan and China was felt soon after the border agreement in March 1963. Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 and the US neutral stance provided a compelling reason to extend the under-construction Indus Highway up to the Chinese border and convert it into KKH. China, too, was keen to have access to the Arabian Sea and the Middle East, while the KKH will help Pakistan improve links and facilitate logistics to Army troops deployed along LoC. KKH opened up and further integrated the GB with the rest of the country, a win-win situation for both Pakistan and China.¹⁶ Upgraded KKH, amongst the highest international paved road links, and Gwadar deep sea port now provides the basis for CPEC. China's western provinces will benefit from CPEC for being less developed than eastern provinces, including Muslim majority north-western autonomous region of Xinjiang. This will help China achieve balanced growth, counter separatist influence and fight terrorism. CPEC will facilitate exports from landlocked west Chinese regions and import oil and gas from the energy-rich Persian Gulf and Africa via shorter distances over 10000 km. Imports of oil directly into western China circumventing the busy Strait of Malacca will surely enhance China's energy security. To address her vulnerabilities of the Malacca Dilemma, China is more likely to diversify the pattern of her maritime trade by reducing her dependence on Malacca once Gwadar port and CPEC land routes become fully functional and secure.¹⁷

¹⁶ Muhammad Mumtaz Khalid and Akmal Parvez, *History of Karakoram Highway*. (Rawalpindi: 2006).

¹⁷ Sajjad Ashraf, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: India's Dual Dilemma," China-United States Exchange Foundation, June 25, 2015, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-indias-dual-dilemma>.

Chinese Stakes in Afghanistan

China and Afghanistan share only 75 km of the border via a narrow strip of Wakhan corridor that historically served as a buffer between the British India and the Russian empire. This border link remained closed and underdeveloped due to the influence and military presence of the USSR and subsequently to seal off Xinjiang from the spread of Islamic militancy. China and Afghanistan reached a border agreement in 1962 after establishing formal diplomatic relations in January 1955. While Afghanistan offered to recognise PRC in January 1950.

With the Invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR in December 1979, China could no longer ignore Afghanistan. China became an active member of Anti Soviet alliance with the US, Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It provided arms and even recruited mujahideen from its Muslim-majority autonomous region Xinjiang's Uyghur population and established training camps for mujahideen.¹⁸ After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the collapse of the pro-Soviet government in 1991, China turned away from Afghanistan like other partners. The neglect not to rehabilitate Afghanistan as a functional state affected the entire region, China, Pakistan, the US and the world at large. Muslim majority autonomous region Xinjiang, as a consequence, is still restive, due to various internal and external factors. East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Xinjiang constantly threatens China's internal security and CPEC passing through Xinjiang.

During the Afghan civil war in the 1990s, China, like many other countries, was not engaged in Afghanistan. ETIM was present in Afghanistan to fight not the Soviets but this time China. ETIM, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and other Central Asian militants established their base in Afghanistan in 1998 during the Taliban regime. China had always problems with the ultra-conservative Taliban regime, mainly due to ideological differences and the security threat it posed to Xinjiang. Still, Pakistan persuaded China to establish formal contact, assuring China that their concerns were still open to negotiation. Nonetheless, China did establish a discreet low-level connection, and

¹⁸ Lemar Alexander Farhad, "Promises and Pitfalls: Sino-Afghan Relations," October 21, 2015, 11.

from 1999 to 2001, Huawei Technologies and Zhongxing Telecom started operating in Afghanistan.¹⁹

9/11 changed the geopolitical matrix of Afghanistan as well as the region. While China accepted the US's right to respond to the 9/11 attacks, it did not tend to take military action against Uyghur's East Turkestan Islamic Movement. The situation in Afghanistan had a flip side, as the long-term presence of the US in Afghanistan was a source of concern for China. China's involvement in Afghanistan was derived from its interests and concerns, out of which stability in Xinjiang was, and remains, the foremost. Further, it was concerned about long-term US presence and India's growing influence in Afghanistan in a post-9/11 context. Finally, China is interested in a peaceful and friendly Afghanistan because this would pave the way for capitalising on untapped economic opportunities. Paradoxically, the US presence helped prevent not only the spread or spill over of terrorism in Xinjiang but also the Chinese pursuit of commercial and financial interests in Afghanistan.²⁰ Therefore, the dynamics and challenges of China's engagement in Afghanistan under the Taliban following the US withdrawal have undergone a fundamental change. China's support of the 'War on Terror' allowed it to handle Uyghur groups in Xinjiang as it wished without worrying about international human rights concerns or any outside moral support. ETIM was even placed on the list of terrorist organisations by the US and the UN. Soon after the invasion and establishment of the new Afghan regime, China got actively involved in Afghanistan, both diplomatically and economically.

Chinese companies like ZTE and Huawei came back and restarted to establish 200,000 subscriber lines of digital telephone services and construct a country-wide fibre optic cable network. Chinese construction companies started rebuilding projects such as the Kabul-Jalalabad Road, sections of the ring road in Faryab province, the Parwan irrigation project and the repair of hospitals at Kabul and Kandahar. Aynak copper mine was leased in November 2007 for US\$3 billion to the Chinese state-owned enterprise China Metallurgical Group (MCC), the most significant Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Afghanistan. China

¹⁹ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 140.

²⁰ Jonathan Ludwig, "Sino-Afghan Relations in the Twenty-First Century: From Uncertainty to Engagement," *Griffith Asia Quarterly* 3 (1): 23 (2015): 38-61

National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) got a 25-year contract to explore oil in the Amu Darya basin and started extracting oil in October 2012.²¹

In addition to security and commercial interests, BRI, based on regional connectivity, enhanced Chinese stakes and the urgency for a secure and stable Afghanistan after the fall of the Ashraf Ghani regime and the US withdrawal. China has established working relations with the Taliban Government. Chinese active engagement has created optimism. However, China is unlikely to assume any security commitment involving her active role as compared to NATO/ISAF before their withdrawal and will continue to play a constructive role in humanitarian aid; including food supplies and coronavirus vaccines.²² Taliban considers China an important partner and is hoping for Chinese assistance and investment in rebuilding a war-ravaged country and utilising its diplomatic, economic, and political clout with other like-minded countries.

Iran

Pakistan's relations with its southern neighbour, Iran, have seen many ups and downs. In the beginning, relations were very cordial and close, a sharp contrast to Pakistan's initial relations with Afghanistan; Iran was the first to recognise Pakistan as a sovereign state in August 1947. However, the situation changed in 1979. The emergence of the theocratic regime in Iran following the 1979 Islamic revolution and General Zia's military regime in Pakistan, marked the end of the "cordial" phase of relations.²³ Although in the Soviet-Afghan war from 1979 to 1989, both neighbours supported the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet invasion. The disagreement started as both countries tried to increase competing influence in Afghanistan in the 1990s through respective proxies. With the establishment of the Taliban government in Kabul in 1996, the relations further deteriorated and brought Iran and India together in the supporting Northern Alliance.²⁴ Further, they diverged from each other regarding regional and global political alignments;

²¹ Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis*, 132.

²² "China Offers \$31m in Emergency Aid to Afghanistan BBC," *BBC*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58496867>

²³ M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Iran Seeks Strategic Depth in Pakistan Ties," *Asia Times*, January 27, 2017, <https://asiatimes.com/2017/01/iran-seeks-strategic-depth-pakistan-ties/.01/25/2022>

²⁴ Najam Rafique, "Prospects of Pakistan-Iran Relations: Post Nuclear Deal," *Strategic Studies* vol.36 (2016).

Pakistan has been closer to Saudi Arabia and the US, while Iran is to India. Despite having closer relations with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has repeatedly aspired and tried to balance relations with the two Middle Eastern rivals. As an exception, Pakistan maintained a stance more inclined towards Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

In recent years, Pakistan has tried to maintain a balanced approach to Yemen and Syrian conflict even at the cost of relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Pakistan's refusal of Saudi Arabia to play an active combat role in the Yemen war was a welcome development for Iran. Secondly, the change of Iranian position over the role of the Taliban and its support for the Pakistan-backed reconciliation process in Afghanistan was a welcome move for Pakistan.

Before the fall of the Ashraf Ghani regime in August 2021, India had offered substantial financial capital to develop the Chahbahar Port in Iran and link it with Afghanistan. However, India's long-sought hegemony over Chahbahar Port was dashed when Iran was quick to disassociate itself from the Indian concept of exclusivity over Chahbahar Port soon after Prime Minister Modi visited Iran.²⁵

Iran has expressed its desire to be part of CPEC and BRI. Chinese State Councilor Wang Yi and Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif signed a cooperation agreement for Twenty-Five years in March 2021. A railway freight service has already started between Iran and Inner Mongolia, and plans are at work to connect Istanbul to Islamabad via Tehran under the framework of BRI.²⁶ The growing China-Iran relationship will hopefully bring a sobering effect on realising trilateral cooperation among Pakistan, Iran and China. The Chinese energy giant has agreed to build 700 kilometres long Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline under China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), CPEC²⁷ would provide Iran with an openness towards the east apart from boosting economic development in the restive province of Sistan-Baluchistan. Once Pakistan and Iran start addressing mutual

²⁵ KabirTaneja, "The Reality of India-Iran Ties,". *The Diplomat*, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/the-reality-of-india-iran-ties/>.

²⁶ Sebastien Goulard, "Iran China Signed a 25-Year Agreement: A BRI Milestone," *One Belt One Road Europe*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.oboreurope.com/en/iran-china-agreement/>

²⁷ Rafique, "Prospects of Pakistan-Iran Relations,". *Strategic Studies* 36.

concerns, this will further encourage Iran to rebalance its relations with India, thereby reducing Indian influence in Iran.²⁸

Though not conflicting, the security perception of the two countries is still divergent, as Iran's primary interest lies in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. In contrast, Pakistan's security concerns are traditionally India-centric. Still, Pakistan is affected by the Middle Eastern politics and South Asian politics influences Iran. Therefore, any development in the Persian Gulf, Middle East and South Asia will affect the Pakistan-Iran relationship directly. Relations involving Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran make an intricate triangle with far-reaching consequences for Pakistan, both internally and externally. Pakistan faces a dilemma of balancing its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's decision not to participate in the Yemen war was a balancing act that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States did not receive well. UAE is drifting towards India as a consequence added to this dilemma. Pakistan's way forward is to maintain a balanced approach vis-à-vis Iran and Saudi Arabia and stay engaged with both without becoming a party to the Middle East conflict. For Iran, CPEC would provide access towards the east apart from boosting economic development in the restive province of Sistan-Balouchistan. Pakistan and Iran addressing mutual concerns will further encourage Iran to rebalance its relationship with Pakistan, thereby reducing Indian influence in Iran.

Conclusion

The present study was undertaken using qualitative methodology to understand the security environment in which CPEC was initiated. Regional security situation tends to be complicated and poses challenges at every stage. RSCT is an appropriate theoretical framework to understand the interplay of amity and enmity within a region or among sub-regions surrounding the CPEC: Afghanistan, China, Iran, India and Pakistan. The central idea of RSCT is that threats more often travel conveniently over short distances than over long distances; hence, security interdependence is generally patterned into regional clusters. South Asian RSC falls in the category of conflict formation as it is driven by hostility between India and Pakistan. India projects itself as the regional hegemon and major power due

²⁸ Khalid Manzoor Butt and Anam Abid Butt, "Impact of CPEC on Regional and Extra Regional Actors," *Journal of Political Science* 22 (2015): 23-44.

to size of its armed forces, fast-growing economy, established democratic system, well-educated middle class and highly-skilled labour force. Despite exponential growth, the Indian aspiration for regional hegemony and great power status is hard to be accepted as Pakistan continues to be a pole of power in the South Asian RSC. China supports Pakistan in maintaining its viability as an actor in the South Asian RSC. Bipolarity in South Asia concerns India and suits China. India views BRI and CEPC in this context and feels it would facilitate Pakistan's revitalisation economy and help sustain bipolarity in the South Asian regional complex.

The current situation in Afghanistan is fluid and uncertain as TTP and Baloch insurgents are still active in parts of the country that has the potential to affect the CPEC adversely. With the fall of the Ashraf Ghani — Northern Alliance government, India's ability to use Afghanistan as a launching pad to effect internal security in Pakistan has been reduced. After being dislodged from FATA, TTP relocated to Afghanistan but lost the sway, vitality, and potency it enjoyed during its heydays. Pakistan and Iran have developed broad unanimity over the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, indicating convergence of their interests. While Iran has shown a desire to be part of CPEC, China-Iran relations will potentially pave the way for trilateral cooperation among Pakistan, Iran and China. India's opposition to BRI and CPEC is well known. It has termed it "unacceptable" and has shown open hostility towards CPEC. This opposition is driven by multiple reasons particularly military/political differences due to unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir among others. The only way out of this impression is that all regional players view CPEC and BRI as connectivity projects, mutually beneficial for the entire region rather than just a strategic gambit.