

Trump Administration's Strategic Perspective about CPEC

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Abstract

The American geopolitical analysts perceive the steady rise of China as a strategic competitor and challenger to the United States' sole superpower stature in the twenty-first century. The vibrance of the United States (US) economy is on the wane as the Belt and Road Initiative of China is heralded as a vision of shared prosperity. Therefore, Trump administration adopted a hostile-cum-containment foreign policy posture towards China. The main fear of the administration was that China could transform the prevalent global geopolitical order to its advantage. Therefore, the administration constructed and publicised the anti-China narrative internally and externally which seems detrimental to Pakistan's geoeconomic pursuits through CPEC. Besides, Washington's reservation over the CPEC undermines Pakistan-US strategic cooperation. The study systematically analyses how the US ruling elite, academia and media constructs, shapes, and rebuilds anti-China and CPEC narratives to pursue their geopolitical objectives during the Trump administration.

Keywords: US, China, Strategic Discourse, BRI, CPEC.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War and the demise of the former Soviet Union, the United States (US) has been enjoying stature of a sole superpower in global politics due to its military prowess, technological innovations, vibrant economy and allies' cooperation. Moreover, it contributed to the economic prosperity and security management of its allies. However, the US relations with its allies were

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immense to its advantage. Post-World War II was a critical juncture when devastated economies of Europe needed capital to revive, and the US introduced Marshall Plan in 1947 for the reconstruction of Western Europe. The plan aimed “to lead to the recovery of production abroad which was essential both to a vigorous democracy and to a peace founded on democracy and freedom and which in the eyes of the US, the Soviet Union had thus far prevented.” Moreover, “It would support world trade, from which the US businessmen, farmers and workers could benefit.”¹ Subsequently, Western European nations overcame their economic difficulties and positively contributed to the political, economic and strategic dominance of the US. As a result, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members have shared much of the burden of the US geopolitical pursuits including the war on terrorism.

The US progressed from a superpower to a hyper power due to its vibrant economy and security alliances, which prevented military threats to both the US and its allies. China’s vision of shared prosperity and steady rise to the global center stage have posed a challenge to the US and belittled its soft power image. The outbreak of Covid-19 has tested the sheer capacity of nations to respond to this global pandemic and contribute to the world through preparing and sharing vaccination with developing and underdeveloped states. China stood out to be a global player with the responsibility to protect nations from Covid-19. Ironically, President Trump labelled COVID-19 as a Chinese virus. Despite, the fact that the causation, i.e. ‘how COVID-19 came into being is still unknown. Some academics even argue that it emerged during experiments made in the US in a joint group with Chinese experts.² Therefore, Islamabad openly condemned identifying COVID-19 as a Chinese virus. During the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Council of Foreign Ministers meeting held on September 9-10, 2020, Pakistan recommended that organisation’s members oppose politicising the pandemic and using it for stigmatising regions, religions or communities.³

¹ Secretary of State, George Marshall presented the plan at Harvard University in June 1947, “The Marshall Plan and the Cold War,” *National Archives: Harry S. Truman*, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/marshall-plan-and-cold-war>,

² Jing-Bao Nie, “In the Shadow of Biological Warfare: Conspiracy Theories on the Origins of COVID-19 and Enhancing Global Governance of Bio-safety as a Matter of Urgency,” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, August 6 (2020), <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11673-020-10025-8.pdf>

³ “Islamabad Favours ‘One China’ Policy, Qureshi Tells Chinese FM,” *Dawn*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1579018>

President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 laid the basis for a new geopolitical and geo-economic order. It seeks to bind Asia, Europe, and Africa as part of an economic belt with China at its head. In short, the distribution of capabilities⁴ in the international system accentuates the rise of China as a strategic competitor to the US. One of the primary tributaries of the BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), to the value of US\$62 billion which seeks to lay the basis of a trade, business, and finance hub extending from Pakistan's Gwadar Port to China's Xinjiang region. Hence, China's rise and CPEC are the issues of debate among American and European academics, media and policymaking circles. The Americans and their allies are alarmed by the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) struggle to become a world-class military by the end of 2049.⁵ According to the US national security documents, China has developed advanced weapons and capabilities perilous for the US command and control architecture.⁶ On September 6, 2021, US Under Secretary, Bonnie Jenkins said, "Our current strategic environment is one of increasing geopolitical tension and competition. As we are all keenly aware that both Russia and China are engaged in an extensive, destabilising nuclear buildup which poses new threats to collective security and endangers the international rules-based order." He added; meanwhile, we also note that the People's Republic of China is carrying out an increasingly assertive foreign policy and intensifying its pursuit of expansive and unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea. The PRC also implements Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) — a national-level strategy to bootstrap itself towards global military and economic dominance. The PRC's approach hurts the business and security interests of many countries and organisations around the world."⁷ The Americans

⁴ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 97.

⁵ General Secretary Xi Jinping first announced the world-class military goal in 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/10/18/558548515/chinas-xi-jinping-lauds-new-era-of-strength-as-he-opens-national-congress>

⁶ "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," White House, Washington, December 2017, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=806478>

⁷ "Under Secretary Bonnie Jenkins' Remarks: Nuclear Arms Control: A New Era?," *US Department of State*, September 6, 2021, https://www.state.gov/under-secretary-bonnie-jenkins-remarks-nuclear-arms-control-a-new-era/?mkt_tok=MDk1LVBQVj04MTMAAAF_a2Q427D0uVFf7Fx2ZWmAHOkk01Md7nYZalx4Finty18TsPH7v_5Bbb69RSLE2hvQi6T06Z7NVlqq4QghrIfxTZ2VCvFIHtSnJUieVkoPWOU

declared China — a strategic competitor and India — a viable strategic partner in the 21st century.⁸ Besides, they have not appreciated BRI and its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the buildup of Gwadar international seaport.⁹

Trump administration's anti-China policy and endorsement of India's authoritative role in the Indian Ocean directly affects Pakistan's geo-economic pursuits through the construction of CPEC since 2015. According to C. Raja Mohan, "Today, Modi has drawn India more closely than ever to the US and the West and is locked in a deepening conflict with China under its President Xi Jinping."¹⁰ The administration's China containment policy and hostility towards CPEC raised three interlinked questions i.e., why did Trump Administration change its policy sharply towards CPEC? How is the strategic discourse generated and spread across the world? Third, is the Trump administration's strategic perception of China commonsensical? This study aimed to critically examine the construction of the strategic narrative building within the US and abroad. It systematically analyses how the US ruling elite, academia and media construct, shape, and rebuild anti-China and CPEC narratives.

Trump Administration's Censure of CPEC

The US has seen China as a strategic competitor rather than a strategic partner in global affairs. Therefore, Pentagon had a clear stance towards China about managing relations. The Trump administration had foreseen BRI and its flagship project CPEC having full potential of a game-changer

⁸ "US Security Cooperation With India," *Fact Sheet*, US Department of State, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india/#:~:text=In%202016%2C%20the%20United%20States,as%20a%20Major%20Defense%20Partner>

⁹ The American strategic enclave viewed Gwadar port strategically as challenging for the United States interests in the Indian Ocean because of its location adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz.

¹⁰ C. Raja Mohan, "Are Indo-Russian Ties the Next Casualty of Great-Power Shifts?," *Foreign Policy*, September 7, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/07/india-russia-modi-putin-geopolitics-china-pakistan-afghanistan-brics/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=36101&utm_term=Editors%20Picks%20OC&tpcc=36101#

for China. That is why it adopted a hostile foreign policy posture towards China in the form of a trade war vis a vis BRI and CPEC. It may lower the speed of China's foreign policy goals in Eurasia but may not hinder them. Similarly, it is unsuccessful in capping and rolling back the CPEC projects.

The Americans and their allies are worried about the BRI and CPEC projects because every great power has some extraordinary potential to influence the world. For instance, the United Kingdom had naval supremacy and the US had a strong military and robust economy to outpower the former Soviet Union during the cold war. China's BRI could prove its unique power potential by connecting Eurasia. President Xi said, "China will endeavour to build a closer partnership for health cooperation, connectivity, green development, openness and inclusiveness."¹¹ This vision has more significant implications for climate change, health, which emerges as a top priority after Covid19, trade openness and inclusiveness of other nations. History reveals that when England had power and global outreach, it colonised the countries. When the US assumed the leadership, it liberalised trade but with Western principles and order. Urging small economies to embrace liberal trade principles and maintaining American military bases across the globe to maintain so-called hegemonic stability. Conversely, China is a developing country with a vision to contribute globally by connecting Asia, Europe and Africa through land and sea routes.¹²

The American geopolitical analysts view China as a revisionist rising power which is not comfortable with the existing global order and, therefore, struggle to reform the world order for the sake of its own advantage. In the words of CFR's Elizabeth C. Economy, "Under Xi, China now actively seeks to shape international norms and institutions and forcefully asserts its presence on the global stage."¹³ However, the Chinese claim that their country has been a great civilization and it was there even when the US was not discovered. This claim of Chinese reveals that they

¹¹ Xi Xu Wei, "Shares Vision for BRI Cooperation," *China Daily*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202104/21/WS607f5cf8a31024ad0bab92d3.html>

¹² Paul Haenle, "Xi's Vision for China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*, May 9, 2017, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2017/05/09/xi-s-vision-for-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-69890>

¹³ E. C. Economy, "China's New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping," *Foreign Affairs*, 97, April 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-04-17/chinas-new-revolution>

do not view China as a revisionist power in the twenty-first century. If China is not a revisionist power, then at least it qualifies to be referred as a revivalist state. China's revival is natural due to its five principles of peaceful co-existence. China's rise is being debated in academia and policymaking circles across the globe. Nevertheless, the US is significantly concerned about China's rise as China's economic growth and active diplomacy as ever-increasing China's power stature. The main fear of the US is that China will overthrow the existing order.¹⁴

President Trump adopted a rigid posture towards Pakistan when he saw the US troops were stuck in Afghanistan, and there was no way to blame Pakistan. His tweet on January 1, 2018, "The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more!" reflected much of his foreign policy approach towards Pakistan. Daniel S Markey is of the view that "The Trump administration holds a decidedly critical view of China's infrastructure initiatives in Pakistan. Although there is much to criticise in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the administration's fixation on commercial and economic issues threatens to distract the US policymakers from deeper concerns."¹⁵ The Trump administration official Alice Wells openly criticised CPEC projects. In an interview with Michael Kugelman, she also referred to the Maldives and Sri Lanka. She said people were asking tough questions about the agreements between their respective governments and communist China. She termed China as a communist to give an impression to Western allies it was cold wartime China. Due to an increase in the cost of upgradation of Pakistan Railways from Karachi to Peshawar which was initially set for US\$8.2 billion but eventually it went up to US\$9 billion, and Wells claims that "Pakistan's a poor country, can't afford the huge burden of these loans. But recent media reports claim the price has now risen to US\$9 billion."¹⁶ During her

¹⁴ G. J. Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West — Can the Liberal System Survive," *Foreign Affairs*, 87, January 2008, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>

¹⁵ Daniel Markey, "How the United States Should Deal With China in Pakistan," Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, April 2020, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2020/04/08/how-united-states-should-deal-with-china-in-pakistan-pub-81456>

¹⁶ A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, US Department of the State November 21, 2019, <https://2017->

November 2019 visit to Pakistan, Alice Wells reiterated that CPEC would only add to Pakistan's debt burden, making Pakistan economically and financially weaker at China's expense. As she said, "It is clear or needs to be clear that CPEC is not about aid. This is almost always the form of loans or other forms of financing, often non-concessional with sovereign guarantees or guaranteed profits for Chinese state-owned enterprises that are repatriated to China,...Now, together with non-CPEC Chinese debts payments, China is going to take a growing toll on the Pakistan economy, especially when the bulk of payment starts to come due in the next four to six years."¹⁷

US Strategic Discourse

Strategic discourse is the intelligent and sophisticated way of doing things with words. Strategic discourse became more significant after September 11, 2001 terrorists attacked the twin towers. But it was not limited to the Afghanistan war. For example, former US President George W. Bush, in his State of the Union address in 2002, branded Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the axis of evil.¹⁸ The US President George W. Bush in 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) declared "threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones." Defence Secretary Robert Gates also claimed that "over the next 20 years, the gravest threats to America will come from failing states."¹⁹ The US Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines declared Russia and China the biggest threats to the US even termed China "a near-peer competitor challenging the United States in multiple arenas."²⁰ According to intelligence reports, *New York Times* published in April 2021, China poses the biggest threats to the US.²¹

2021.state.gov/a-conversation-with-ambassador-alice-wells-on-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/index.html

¹⁷ Anwar Iqbal, "CPEC to Push Pakistan Deeper into Debt Burden, Cautions the US," *Dawn*, November 23, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1518319>

¹⁸ A Glass, "President Bush Cites 'Axis of Evil,'" *politico*, January 29, 2002, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/29/bush-axis-of-evil-2002-1127725>

¹⁹ James Traub, "Think Again: Failed States," *Foreign Policy*, June 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/20/think-again-failed-states/>

²⁰ Neuman Scott, "Intelligence Chief Says China-Russia are Biggest Threat to US," April 14, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/987132385/intelligence-chiefs-say-china-russia-are-biggest-threats-to-u-s>

²¹ Julian E. Barnes, "China Poses Biggest Threat to US, Intelligence Report Says," *New York Times*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/us/politics/china-national-security-intelligence-report.html>

Leading American think tanks, including Belfer Center²² and Brookings generated a strategic discourse about whether China is a Status Quo or Revisionist power?²³ The purpose is to raise an agreement of the scholar community about China's rise and its implications for the US as well as the US-led order. Sean Illing quotes Trump's inaugural address, "From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this moment on, it's going to be America First."²⁴ Sean puts forth that "America First" has been the rhetorical stick of Trump since he started a campaign for the White House. Trump administration took challenging positions against China. In his video conferencing to Taiwan, President and senior US diplomats declared that Beijing was committing genocide against Uighurs and other Muslims in China's Western region. Instead of acknowledging Beijing's stance that it was confronted radicalised militancy and initiated a program to deradicalise and impart vocational training to radicalised militants, Trump claimed that the Chinese administration was involved in state terrorism.²⁵

Levels of US Strategic Discourse

The US has three platforms to generate strategic discourse. The first and top tier level is the President of the United States of America holds an approach towards any country or nation. Such a strategic discourse guides the US foreign policy, and other allies, including European allies, rarely differ, as was the case with post 9/11 policy when Article 5 of the NATO was invoked to support America's Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The second platform for generating strategic discourse is the US media that develops, shapes and rebuilds narrative. For instance, the US supported Afghan Mujahideen in the late 80s and declared them terrorists after 9/11. Then, it uninterruptedly bombed Afghanistan for

²² A. I. Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?," *International Security*, 27(4) (2003): 5-56,

https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/johnston_spring_2003.pdf

²³ Angela Stent, Stent, "Russia and China: Axis of revisionists," *Brookings Institute*, February 2020, 1-2, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/russia-and-china-axis-of-revisionists/>

²⁴ Sean Illing, "How America First Ruined the American Dream," *VOX*, October 22, 2012, <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/22/17940964/america-first-trump-sarah-churchwell-american-dream>

²⁵ "Xinjiang: China Defends Education Camps," *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54195325>

crushing the Afghan Taliban Movement from October 2001 to August 15, 2021. Currently, it is treating the Taliban as a political force. Otherwise, how could the US negotiate with the terrorists? Finally, this platform for generating strategic discourse is the most powerful as it has become more advanced in social media where disinformation can be spread with much ease.

The third platform in academia is where academicians write and publish. This sometimes generates a robust debate in academic circles globally. Huntington's article, "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs* in Summer 1993 triggered a debate globally that whether any such clash possible among nations. A careful analysis of *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The National Interest* and *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)* are among many more that do not promote cooperation between China and the US and publish a negative aspect of BRI and CPEC. Such sources are globally read and cited which takes such a discourse to each part of the world. The American strategists used similar platforms during the cold war to build a narrative about the former Soviet Union and then against Iran since the Islamic revolution led by Ayatullah Khomeini. China's rise has been in extensive debates about what possible ramifications it may carry for the US and the established world order.

Trump administration picked up a tough stance towards China, ranging from a trade war, Hong Kong and the outbreak of covid-19. Trump blamed Beijing and dubbed it "the China virus."²⁶ Such moves are not spontaneous rather well-orchestrated and planned. If the US president uses a word, it becomes a buzzword in media, academia and policymaking circles. For example, US President George W. Bush used the word 'crusade' to declare global war against terrorism in 2001. The *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial captioning, "Crusade Reference Reinforces Fear War on Terrorism is Against Muslims."²⁷ Similarly, any word or statement about China matters as it builds a narrative about China across the globe. The US allies (NATO members) adopt the same approach. For example, while

²⁶ Payne Adam, "Trump is Planning a Series of Confrontations with China in the Final Weeks of his Presidency," *Insider*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-china-sanctions-confrontations-before-he-leaves-white-house-2020-11>

²⁷ Peter Waldman and Hugh Pope Saff, "Crusade' Reference Reinforces Fears War on Terrorism Is Against Muslims," *Wall Street Journal*, September 2001, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1001020294332922160>

dealing with the Iranian nuclear program, the US built a discourse, turning many against Iran's nuclear program. Even Iran's nuclear program was not perceived as a threat in many European countries. Still, the US discourse about Iran generated a discussion where Iran's program was considered a threat to global peace and stability. Even celebrated scholar Kenneth N. Waltz authored, "Why Should Iran Get the Bomb, Nuclear Balancing Means Stability?"²⁸ Many turned against him and even called his writing insanity.

Andrew Chatzky and James McBride published a paper, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," in the Council on Foreign Relations. They termed BRI as a 'debt trap' and expansion of China's power. It also states that the US is struggling to offer a competing vision.²⁹ The majority of the world's think tanks and academia read CFR publications to know and understand the direction of the US foreign policy. Still, it also generates a discourse, which mainly hinges on the US approach. Is BRI a debt trap or a vision of shared prosperity? It is the responsibility of the countries to decide which are becoming parts of BRI projects. The world has witnessed all the great powers hegemonise, colonise and lay debt traps for small and medium-level states. Even the US-led system where countries went to IMF for loans turned out to be debt traps and never came out of that.

Pakistan remained a US ally during cold war times and received military and economic aid but when availed IMF loan package from 1958 till today, it could not come out of that. Pakistan got the 22nd IMF bailout package of US\$6 billion whereas there has been very fierce resistance to the PTI government to avail of IMF loans. Pakistan had to agree to IMF terms and conditions and compromised on several sovereign rights, including the appointment of the Governor State Bank of Pakistan coupled with an increase in electricity and petroleum tariff. A recent article entitled, "Why is the IMF So Unpopular?" published in the leading newspaper of Pakistan, *Dawn* holds that people in several borrowing countries staged protests against IMF exploitative policies it included Pakistan, Nigeria,

²⁸ Kenneth Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012), 2-5, <https://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~fczagare/PSC%20504/Waltz.pdf>

²⁹ Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, January 28, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

Tunisia, Kenya, Jordan, Greece, Egypt, Ecuador and Argentina among several others. The placards carried their sentiments as “IMF promoted debt imperialism and worsens economic inequality.”³⁰ No academic or media discussion and even discourses were generated in the US or elsewhere. However, some sane voices echoed in media and academia and they were labelled as socialists, communists, anti-US, anti-democratic, etc. These voices are/were unheard and, therefore, had consequences.

After the British author, Martin Jacques published his book titled, *When China Rules the World* in 2009 and was reviewed by several celebrated scholars in the US generated a discourse about China’s rise. He argued that the rise of China did not follow the Western model of modernity and will be challenging the global dominance of Western nations-state. “China, as a ‘civilisation-state,’ will soon rule the world. Its impact will be not only economic but also cultural, leading to a global future of ‘contested modernity.’”³¹ Cold war was centered on the survival of the Western global politico-economic model of capitalism. The US encountered an enormous challenge from the former Soviet Union to survive the US. ideological manifestation and its system. In the case of China, the issue is not the same, but the US response eventually is getting more challenging towards China. China’s BRI is a project that will change perceptions and propaganda about China. If the Western states change their perceptions about China, then the US alliances will get frail against China. Therefore, the strategic discourse maintains China as a strategic competitor and China’s BRI and its corridors, including CPEC, are seen as baits of economic imperialism.

Trump administration decided to take a more critical view of China’s infrastructure projects in Pakistan. It held that China’s infrastructure initiatives in Pakistan under CPEC will add to China’s political influence on Pakistan and curb Pakistan’s freedom to govern and decide. The US strategic discourse urges Washington to keep a critical eye on the region, including hostility between nuclear contenders (India and Pakistan) and geopolitical

³⁰ Usman Hayat, “Why is the IMF So Unpopular?,” *Dawn*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1634688>

³¹ Xu Ting, Book Review of *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* by Martin Jacques (2nd Edition. Penguin Books, 2012), 812, *LSE Blog*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2012/06/16/when-china-rules-the-world-martin-jacques/>

and geo-economic challenges posed by China.³² Trump administration's concerns over CPEC were carried away by the top diplomat for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells. She attempted to question the economic viability of CPEC projects. While speaking at the Wilson Center Washington DC, she raised a point that "CPEC doesn't give Pakistani young people, it doesn't give Pakistani companies the same opportunities that the Chinese themselves enjoyed decades ago. And that's one of the reasons why Pakistan's trade relationship with the People's Republic remains so lopsided."³³ She claimed that China offers loans in BRI-related projects and the leverage it gets is that China is not a Member of the Paris Club. Therefore, it does not report on its lending practices to debtors. Paris Club is a group of creditor countries that provide a solution to debtor countries' economic problems. She also claimed, "So, neither rating agencies nor the Paris club nor IMF can monitor those financial transactions."³⁴

Trump administration accused China of inking non-transparent agreements under the umbrella of CPEC. Alice Wells held that Pakistan would repay China's financed projects and failure to return payments may result in surrendering strategic assets and undermining sovereignty. She related such claims with examples from Sri Lanka and Maldives. "The case of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka and a runway in Maldives were among the projects cited as examples of China financing projects of questionable commercial viability resulting in unsustainable debt. In 2017, Sri Lanka handed over a majority stake and a 99-year operating lease to Chinese state-owned enterprises as it could not service the debt owed to China."³⁵

The US is eyeing so-called Quad members (India, U.S., Australia, and Japan) to provide infrastructure to countries looking for infrastructural development. The US has realised the potential of providing infrastructural development support will be long-term with developing nations and they can

³² Markey, *How the United States Should Deal With China in Pakistan*, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2020/04/08/how-united-states-should-deal-with-china-in-pakistan-pub-81456>

³³ "A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor," Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/conversation-ambassador-alice-wells-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor>

³⁴ "A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor."

³⁵ "A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor."

become self-sustained. Moreover, such a foreign policy measure can achieve tangible results from short and medium-range powers. Kurt Campbell, Joe Biden's Policy Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, during an online session hosted by Stanford University, Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Centre, stated, "We want to look this fall to convene an in-person Quad and the hope will be to make a similar kind of engagement on infrastructure more generally."³⁶ The US policy is undergoing readjustments regarding small countries in Asia to provide them with realistic alternatives of BRI.³⁷ On June 12, 2021, President Biden launched the Build Back Better World Partnership (B3W) at the G-7 Cornwall meeting. The G-7 nations (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan) endorsed B3W as their own version of China's BRI. The B3W members' committed to invest up to US\$40 trillion to plug the infrastructure gap in low-and middle-income countries exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis.³⁸

After the Twitter spat between Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan and the US President, Donald Trump, the former's maiden visit to Washington and his meeting with Trump was widely covered by international media. There were speculations about Trump-Imran bonhomie that Trump's offer of mediation on the Kashmir issue which was shocking for Indian leadership in return for reviewing the CPEC projects could entail a lucrative deal for Pakistan.³⁹ There were no official words on this, but *Eurasian Times* speculated about it. Such speculations were made in the light of diplomatic efforts of Republican Senator Lindsey Graham who was behind Saudi Crown Prince's Muhammad Bin Salman efforts to

³⁶ Sebastian Satrangio, "US Official Flags Future Quad Infrastructure Push," *The Diplomat*, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/us-official-flags-future-quad-infrastructure-push/>

³⁷ Sriram Lakshman, "Top US Diplomat Alice Wells Slams China's International Development Project," *Hindu*, November 23, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/top-us-diplomat-alice-wells-slams-chinas-international-development-projects/article30058605.ece>

³⁸ "Fact Sheet: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership," The White House, June 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/#:~:text=President%20Biden%20and%20G7%20partners,developing%20world%2C%20which%20has%20been>

³⁹ "Has Donald Trump Offered Pakistan a Secret Deal to Scrap CPEC Project," *Eurasian Times*, August 5, 2019, <https://eurasianimes.com/has-donald-trump-offered-pakistan-a-secret-deal-to-scrap-cpec-project/>

secure an invitation for PM Imran Khan. The lobbying included pumping more money into Pakistan's economy through Saudi Arabia and the Arab Emirates and asking Pakistan to rework its foreign policy towards China.⁴⁰

Strategic Miscalculation and Misperception

States are called rational actors in international politics because they have precise calculations about all possible happenings that could seriously undermine their national interest regionally and globally. The US has a strict watch on potential challenges emanating from state and non-state actors to the US supremacy. Even academia has been proactive in contributing strategic discourse about Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST). The debate about indispensable leadership of the US in global affairs reflects how policy makers' for generating strategic discourse use the platform of academia. Prominent academics, including John Mearsheimer, advocate America's proactive role in global affairs and discuss China's containment. Mearsheimer is of the view that the "US won't tolerate China as a peer competitor."⁴¹ Graham Allison using data from history, also predicts a clash between China and the US. In his article "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" he holds that "In 12 of 16 past cases in which a rising power has confronted a ruling power, the result has been bloodshed."⁴² Notably, the character of war has changed; the US and China will not be fighting a direct conflict; instead, they may engage in an indirect war. Fifth-generation war has already set in which is aimed at achieving limited aims and objectives. Cyber-attacks can achieve better results than flying jets and subsurface submarines. Such a clash does not cause an upswing on the escalation ladder between great powers. The US is not aware of China's true capability in the military and diplomatic affairs. That is creating a misperception among policymaking circles that China's capacity does not match with the US. Another characteristic of warfare is that capability is mere a satisfaction, whereas strategy wins the war. The US also fell prey to a miscalculation in the case of the Afghanistan and Iraq

⁴⁰ "Has Donald Trump Offered Pakistan a Secret Deal to Scrap CPEC Project."

⁴¹ "Mearsheimer: The US Won't Tolerate China as Peer Competitor," *DW*,
<https://www.dw.com/en/chinas-rise-and-conflict-with-us/a-55026173>

⁴² Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?," *The Atlantic*, 2015,
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

wars 2001, 2003 respectively. The Americans withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021 i.e. by virtue of a deal which they inked with their arch rival Taliban in February 2020. Moreover, it succeeded in defeating Saddam forces in Iraq but failed to restore writ of the state in the country.

Such advocacy leads to a miscalculation in the US foreign policy. Few examples can aptly underline strategic miscalculation in the US foreign policy. Al-Qaeda struck the US on September 11, 2001. The US intelligence pointed at Al-Qaeda and the US started a global war against terrorism. Bush Administration was sure to dismantle the Al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan within the short time possible. But it prolonged and became America's longest war of history. Al-Qaeda was dismantled but the Taliban posed fierce resistance. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban have become more organised than before, and they are controlling almost the entire Afghan territory. But this time, the Taliban are not terrorists or militants but a political entity of Afghanistan who was in negotiation with the US government and the then Afghan national government representatives (Afghan Taliban has assumed the power and announced the setup of a new government on September 7, 2021). This strategic miscalculation is just a single example whereas others include the Syrian war and the rise of the Islamic State (IS). The US neither could oust Assad from power nor IS whereas it expanded to other regions like Iraq and Afghanistan. That calculation went wrong and cost the US in Afghanistan and Iraq is about US\$2 trillion. It is such a massive amount of money which could change the fate of many developing countries. But despite such immense spending the US has failed to win hearts and minds. These countries for American citizens are more dangerous than were before the US invasion.

Small and medium states look for global leadership that can help them in international organisations and aid in natural or manufactured disasters. China is slowly overtaking the US in delivering public goods as the BRI can change the fate of many nations. The US strategic discourse about China's governance model creates hiccups in China-US relations on one side, but it also impacts the policy of US allies on the other side. The US perception of 1970s China persists and some of the academics find the US democratic principles of liberty, freedom, and pluralism as antithetical to China's governance. The misperception at the global level prevails that

“China seeks to deny its citizens freedom of expression and access to the outside world.”⁴³

The dilemma with the Pentagon is that it needs a threat to combat. After spending trillion dollars in Afghanistan and without achieving desired objectives, the US is now constructing a strategic discourse that China’s rise will reverse the established order of the US. It will prove a revisionist power and China’s foreign policy will undermine international financial institutions and democracies. However, there is one pertinent point to make: China has risen by embracing global order.

Conclusion

The Americans ruling elite have a consensus that the steady rise of China is not in the interest of the US. The former could derail latter’s stature in the global geopolitics. Therefore, the Trump administration not only expressed its reservation over the BRI’s flagship project CPEC, it also launched a systematic campaign to nurture a discord about the CPEC projects dividends among the Pakistanis. The American officials publicise the probability of debt trap due to Chinese investment. Besides, the Sino-US strategic competition and the strategic discourse over the BRI discouraged many investors to venture in the CPEC projects which aimed for the economic prosperity of Pakistan.

To conclude, the US strategic discourse about China and CPEC works quite well at all three levels, i.e., policy level, media campaigns and academia. Nevertheless, China’s approach towards regional and global partners is very pragmatic. Without compromising on territorial integrity, China will continue to share prosperity with Eurasian nations through the completion of BRI. Trump’s policy shift towards China has caused several challenges for China, but his policy would equally impact the US and its allies. For example, the US remained unsuccessful in thwarting Pakistan from CPEC completion despite a few lucrative economic offers that Pakistan refused to accept. This reflects China-Pakistan partnership is based on shared goals of development and prosperity.

⁴³ Daniel Hoffman, “How the US Effectively Contain China,” Belfer Center, 2020, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/how-united-states-can-effectively-contain-china>