

## Pakistan at the Crossroads: Challenges and Opportunities

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### Abstract

*Geostrategic beauty attracts both the friends and foes. The former tend to cooperation, mutuality and symbiotic relationship, while the later bend to competition, rivalry and clandestine intrigues, either to tarnish it or to push it to the vanishing point. Natural beauty is both a challenge and an opportunity, in terms of protection from enemies and attraction for allies. This develops behaviors of synergy and cynicism, for cooperation and competition respectively. Pakistan, being the prisoner of its geography, natural endowments and strategic location is at the crossroads of challenges and opportunities. It sits at the nexus of the major powers geopolitical interests and growing prospects of Asian Century. Unfortunately, some regional and extra-regional powers, instead of pursuing their geopolitical interests through cooperative behaviors are tending more towards their competitive strategic options. These strategic calculations are creating strategic mess for the whole region in general and Pakistan in particular. This instant study analytically discusses the Sino-Pak geostrategic and geo-economic rapprochement and the Indo-US counterproductive responses in post-CPEC scenario.*

**Keywords:** Sino-Pak, Indo-US, Asian Century, Belt & Road Initiative,

### Introduction

Pakistan is at the crossroads of the Asian century. The 21<sup>st</sup> century dawned in multi-polarity, multi-conceptuality and multi-laterality. Pakistan is at the nexus of these three M[s], in terms of strategic rivalries, strategic dynamics, sea politics and terrorism. Two contrasting scenarios, sandwiching Pakistan are resulting different narratives and understandings in international relations in general and in the South Asian environment in particular. The post-9/11 scenario dictates the concept of “Terrorism”, while the post-CPEC scenario advances the idea of “mammoth connectivity”. Both are opposite and differing, open to

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rapprochements and counter-rapprochements, strategies and counter-strategies, and economic and strategic dynamics and counterproductive behaviors.

First, India and the United States use the concept of terrorism as a tool to further their national interests and to counter their strategic rivals. Afghanistan is at the heart of the Indian foreign policy. The post-9/11 scenario facilitates India to strengthen its relations with Afghanistan and to create strategic annoyance for Pakistan. Before 9/11, the Indian spy agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) clandestinely negotiated with Tajikistan for the use of its Farkhor Air Base. In the post-9/11 scenario, it constructed a hospital in this air base<sup>1</sup>, acknowledged its ambitions of setting up an Air Base over there<sup>2</sup> and then blatantly celebrated its acquisition, which is located at the Afghan-Tajik border<sup>3</sup>. In 2006, the Farkhor Air Base became patently functional and India stationed its 12 MiG-29 fighters in this base<sup>4</sup>. In 2011, India signed an Agreement of Strategic Partnership (ASP) with Afghanistan. This accord sanctioned India to train Afghan forces after the US pullout from Afghanistan<sup>5</sup>. In July 2018, the United States acknowledged Indian support for the Afghan forces, in terms of training and other attributes. India also provided Mi25 helicopters to the Afghan Air Forces<sup>6</sup>.

Second, the dethroning of Taliban government in Afghanistan leveled a ground for India. This provided an excellent opportunity for India, to ensure its permanent presence in Afghanistan and to use the soil of Afghanistan as a launching pad against Pakistan. Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar are the terror financing centers, providing fake Pakistani currency and weapons to the terrorists for anti-state activities in Pakistan. These financial and weaponry supports are strengthening insurgency in Baluchistan, in terms of Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and other separatist groups<sup>7</sup>. Pakistan has repeatedly showed its concerns about the Indian unscrupulous presence in Afghanistan and its interference and terrorist activities in Pakistan. In March 2016, Pakistan arrested Kulbushan Yadhav, an Indian RAW agent in Baluchistan. During prosecution, Yadhav confessed his designation [as RAW agent] and intentions, in terms of planning and engineering subversive activities in Pakistan<sup>8</sup>. After few days, to push this incident into the black hole of blame game, India speeded up its already under consideration bid of designating Mulana Masood Azhar, the Jaish-e-Muhammad chief as internationally recognized terrorist in the United Nations Security Council. However, to silent the Indian diplomatic assertiveness, China blocked this bid under the technical hold.

Third, as the Chinese-based mammoth connectivity initiative is translating the Asian century into reality, hence it will challenge the US global position and will leave India far behind. Feeling this trepidation, both India and the United States are embracing more enthusiastically to i) contain it, and ii) to counter and counter-balance it strategically. In August 2016, India and the United States formally signed Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), to cooperate in strategic contours, in terms of using each other's bases for refueling and other military benefits. India feels acute sensitivity about the Chinese military strength, strategic expansion and the Sino-Pak strategic closeness. Commenting on this development, The Hindustan Times frankly expresses, "*China's growing military strength and increasing belligerence has led to a conscious strategic choice by New Delhi to get closer to Washington*". It further comments that India feels consternation about the Chinese growing power and behaviour; hence, this development will reduce its perpetual trepidation<sup>9</sup>. The United States being the main actor in the war on terror is providing a safe route to India, to enter into Afghanistan in one way or the other. This behaviour is strengthening the Indian foothold in Afghanistan, which in turn is creating problems for Pakistan, both in terms of tensing the Pak-Afghan relations and engineering subversive activities inside it. Studies suggest that on one hand, India hypocritically disturbs the Indo-Pak peace process and on the other hand, it is "*actively supporting terrorist and insurgent movements in Pakistan*"<sup>10</sup>. These strategic dynamics are causing bitterness in this already terror-ridden and politically instable region in general and for Pakistan in particular.

### Rationale

The Asian century is witnessing an unprecedented economic development, in terms of a gigantic infrastructure-building image and its sensual concretion couples with the ghosting image of the post-9/11 environment. Samuel P. Huntington (1996) assumes, "*economic growth creates political instability within countries and between countries, altering the balance of power among countries and regions. Economic exchange brings people into contact; it does not bring them into agreement*"<sup>11</sup>. Both China and the US are trade partners and global competitors, sometimes referred to as "frenemies" i.e. friends and rivals. Regional actors including India also dislike the Chinese ambitious initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt & Road Initiative (B & R)<sup>12</sup>. Constructivists believe that ideas have power and big ideas are created after big events. They believe that

*“constructed images influence perceptions about the rules by which the game of nations should be played”*<sup>13</sup>.

New studies suggest that this sudden rise of China can cause regional conflagration. West (2018) rightly assumes, *“today, Asia is sitting on a knife edge”*<sup>14</sup>, where both hope and despair are swinging in a pendulum fashion, sandwiching South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular.

### **Geo-Strategic Significance of Pakistan**

Pakistan is situated at the most significant geo-strategic locus. It shares its southern border with the mammoth body of water. Thucydides in antiquity, while highlighting the importance of the sea politics assumed “he, who controls the sea, controls everything”. Alfred Thayer Mahan (1889), while mapping the strategic importance of a littoral state highlights, “nature has so placed a country that it has easy access to the high sea itself, while at the same time it controls one of the great thoroughfares or the world's traffic, it is evident that the strategic value of its position is very high”. Its Gwadar Port is situated near the Strait of Hormuz, witnessing roundabout seventy percent (70%) of world oil transportation and 100,000 shipments of annual trade transportation. This port has the ability to accommodate approximately 200,000 tons of supertankers<sup>15</sup>. Geographically, it shares borders with emerging economies [China & India] and resource abundant states [Afghanistan & Iran]. It has the ability to connect the Asian Giants with the resource abundant states embracing with the Central Asian Republics and finally lead them to the global market. To connect economic centers with each other and with rest of the world through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor is a great opportunity, not only for China and Pakistan but for the whole region as well. This can turn zero-sum games of regional rivalries into détente and a win-win trends and transformations. This can truly translate the Asian century into reality and can ensure economic prosperity and trading environment. How much a state is important strategically and economically is evident from the role it can play in international politics. The more a state can contribute to international community, the more it deserves to be important.

The New Delhi Declaration in 2003 turned the Indo-Iran entente into a strong strategic intimacy. This strategic *camaraderie* encouraged Indo-Iran strategic cooperation, in terms of training facilities for military personnel, upgradation of the Iranian fighter jets and that “New Delhi will have the right to use Iranian military bases for combat operations against Pakistan”<sup>16</sup>. Magnanimously, both the Gwadar port of Pakistan

and the Chabahar port of Iran sometimes referred as ‘sister ports’ can turn this region into an economic hub and can bring development for all. The Soil of Afghanistan can connect them with the Central Asian Republics and finally with the rest of the world. Chauvinistically and bigotedly, the Chabahar port of Iran and the soil of Afghanistan can challenge this economic opportunity. Instead of magnanimous clubbing in economic cooperation, India is chauvinistically creeping to the Chabahar port of Iran and on the soil of Afghanistan, to disturb the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and to create a strategic mess for Pakistan. Bypassing Pakistan, in May 2016, India formally signed the Chabahar Port agreement with Iran, to connect it with Afghanistan and to counter-balance China and Pakistan through these neighboring Muslim states of Pakistan<sup>17</sup>.

### **Belt & Road Initiative and Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities**

Economic development, infrastructure building and mass connectivity clouded by economic and strategic rivalries/competitions and the menace of terrorism is the salient feature of the South Asian political environment. The 21<sup>st</sup> century South Asia opened its eyes in an environment of hope and despair, cooperation and competition and challenges and opportunities. To analogize the 19<sup>th</sup> century European society, as depicted by Charles Dickens (1859)<sup>18</sup>,

*“It was [is] the best of times, it was [is] the worst of times, it was [is] the age of wisdom, it was [is] the age of foolishness, it was [is] the epoch of belief, it was [is] the epoch of incredulity, it was [is] the season of light, it was [is] the season of darkness, it was [is] the spring of hope, it was [is] the winter of despair”.*

The Chinese Belt & Road initiative is an umbrella concept of Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Maritime Silk Road. Its ‘belt’ part has six proposed corridors, including i) Bangladesh-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BIMEC), ii) The China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC), iii) The China-Central & West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), iv) The New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB), v) the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC) and vi) the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)<sup>19</sup>. Out of these proposed corridors, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the first and foremost flagship project. This corridor provides an excellent opportunity for regional and extra-regional connectivity for roundabout sixty-five countries of Asia, Africa and Europe. These countries include sixteen countries of Middle East and Europe, eleven countries of

Commonwealth of Independent States, sixteen countries of West Asia and North Africa, eight countries of South Asia, eleven countries of Southeast Asia and three countries [China, Mongolia & Russia]<sup>20</sup>. The number of countries can move upward as more participants join<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, studies also show concern, in terms of “a national vision and foreign strategy, sometimes resembling conceptual propaganda”<sup>22</sup>.



Source: Yang, L. (2015). Local governments' hopes for funds pie in the sky. CHINADAILY. com.cn. Retrieved From [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/17/content\\_20458469.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/17/content_20458469.htm)

This Chinese ambitious initiative invites both regional and extra-regional actors for cooperation and economic integration. Most of the countries show their desire for clubbing in this cobweb framework. However, India, being the strategic rival of China and Pakistan shows its concerns. India fears, it will facilitate China to gain access to the Indian Ocean Region.

First, to counter China conceptually with its own narrative, India announced its own projects, in terms of the Spice, the Mausam, the Sagarmala and the Bharat Mala Projects. Second, in May 2016, India documentarily signed the Chabahar Port agreement with Iran, to counter-balance the Chinese Gwadar port ambition, to bypass Pakistan and to ensure its strategic presence in Iran and Afghanistan. In March 2016, Pakistan arrested Kulbushan Jadhav, an Indian RAW agent in

Baluchistan. During prosecution, Jadhav admitted his designation [as RAW agent] and intentions, in terms of planning and engineering subversive activities in Pakistan<sup>23</sup>. Detailed investigation revealed that Kulbushan Jadhav having Indian passport and Iranian visa came from Chabahar, Iran. The Indian spy community [RAW] stationed in Chabahar had close links with Jadhav<sup>24</sup>.

Third, to cause diplomatic headache for Pakistan and to use the terrorism narrative in its favour, in 2016, India three times pleaded [supported by US] the United Nations Security Council, to declare the Jaish-e-Muhammad supremo an internationally recognized terrorist. Nevertheless, China all the times vetoed it under a 'technical hold' and with the protestation, that terrorism is an international issue, hence it must not be politicized for personal aggrandizement. However, in 2019, the UNSC listed Masood Azhar as internationally recognized terrorist<sup>25</sup>.

Fourth, India speeded up its strategic relations with the United States. In August 2016, India and the United States formally signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), complemented by the Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)<sup>26</sup>. This Indo-US cooperation on strategic contours, in terms of reciprocal using of bases for refueling and other military benefits is chiefly in response to the Chinese strategic expansion and the Sino-Pak strategic rapprochement. While highlighting this strategic background, the US Department of Defence (DoD), in its annual report in 2017 outspokenly stressed, that China is expanding its military bases to Pakistan and has territorial and maritime disputes with our strategic partners, "with whom there exist longstanding cooperation and security treaty commitments"<sup>27</sup>.

Fifth, fearing the Sino-Pak rapprochement and Chinese rise of assuming a global role in global politics, international water and international institutions, the United States is vigorously creeping closer with its new behavior, conceptual responses and strategic dynamics, either to contain it, or to counter it. The United States feeling trepidation about the Chinese rise, adopts strategies, both in terms of "on-shore" and "off-shore" strategic assertiveness<sup>28</sup>. In July 2018, the United States conceptually named the 'Asia-Pacific' as 'Indo-Pacific'<sup>29</sup>, to counter the Chinese maritime strategic and economic expansion through its own strategic narrative.

In compendium, Pakistan is at the crossroads of two extremes, in terms of challenges and opportunity and is sandwiched by the strategic dynamics of giant states [both regional & extra-regional]. The Sino-US

and Sino-Indian geo-strategic rivalries are creating serious geographical, strategic and diplomatic problems for Pakistan. Despite the fact, that Pakistan is the victim of the US-based war on terror, the United States is blaming Pakistan for harbouring terrorists. Despite the fact, that Pakistan has “suffered 75,000 casualties” couples with “\$123 billion economic lose”, (Imran Khan Twitter counterpunch to Trump’s interview, November 2018), Donald Trump brazenly states, “we are giving them [Pakistan] \$ 1.3 billion a year [and] they don’t do a damn for us”<sup>30</sup>. Despite the fact, that US military establishment in February 2018 acknowledged Despite the fact, that India is brazenly violating human rights in the Indian Held Kashmir, India is diplomatically struggling to list the Pakistani-based individuals as internationally recognized terrorist.

### **Major Powers and Pakistan: Challenges & Opportunities**

General Joseph Votel, the US CENTCOM [Central Command] head rightly says, “As a state possessing nuclear weapons that sits at the nexus of Russian, Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and US geopolitical interests, Pakistan will always be a country of importance to the United States”<sup>31</sup>. Pakistan, being a nuclear power couples with its political, strategic, economic and diplomatic importance is at the crossroads of major powers interests, which can turn regional and extra-regional rivalries into *détentes* and perpetual rapprochements. It can turn mutual suspicions, trust deficits and strategic competitions into mutual collaborations and pooling cooperation. It can develop an alliance of all, for all and by the all. Instead of making use of these opportunities, regional and extra-regional actors are pulling the region into the quagmire of blame game and strategic competitions. History tells that this region was the epicenter of trade activities and natural resources. Unfortunately, extra-regional actors sucked its life-blood and turned it into a hotbed of strategic rivalries and political/diplomatic vendettas.

Afghanistan, popularly known as the “Graveyard of Empires” remained an intriguing hub and victim during the Cold War era and a direct victim of the US-based war on terror for seventeen years. Despite its proximity to the resource abundant Central Asian Republics, it is facing social, political and economic instabilities. Afghanistan has become the epitaph of terrorist activities and a tug of war for the major powers. Its peace can bring peace in the region; its prosperity can prosper the rest of the world. Pakistan is the only player in the region, which can facilitate the US to have peace talks with Taliban, which in turn can bring peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. Recent development, in terms



of peace talks among the United States, Afghan Taliban and Afghan government is a glaring sign of this reality. Gen Votel (as cited in Iqbal, 2019) says, “Pakistan presents the US with challenges and opportunities in the execution of our South Asian Strategy”<sup>32</sup>. Now, it depends on the United States, to take Pakistan as an opportunity and not to consider it [Pakistan] a challenge for its strategic dynamics. Opportunities need consensus, acknowledgement and cooperation and challenges are the products of disagreements, denials and competitions. Opportunities give way to chances of progression and development and challenges give birth to responses and counter-responses.

Through the strategic lens, the United States strategic dynamics speed up the Chinese strategic behaviour, the Chinese strategic advancements catalyze the Indian strategic objectives and the Indian strategic progressions transform the strategic dynamics of Pakistan. This strategic chain is causing strategic race, strategic expansion, and strategic encroachment. This traditional behaviour is nurturing an environment of competition in the regional and international context, both in the strategic and diplomatic contours. Studies suggest, “Pakistan responds strategically to India, India responds both to Pakistan and China, which in turn responds both to India and the United States”<sup>33</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan is at the crossroads of the major powers geopolitical interests. A mammoth body of water, two Muslim and two non-Muslim states square it in between. It sits at the nexus of three nuclear powers plus its own nuclear capability. Due to its geo-strategic and geopolitical importance, it *was* and it *is* at the limelight of the major powers ambitions. Scholars believe that the 21<sup>st</sup> century economic development is encapsulating the Asian continent in its benefits. This development can bring both prosperity and the domain of power to the Asian continent. Nevertheless, some scholars also predict that economic development sloganeers political instability and political vendettas. Economic development brings political instability, because it threatens the balance of power within the region and among the regions. As power is the chief determinant of international relations, hence rival states tend to compete through advancing their geo-strategic and geopolitical designs. Pakistan sits near the emerging economic powers of Asia or Asian Giants. Both China and India, despite their trade partnership are strategic rivals and competitors in regional and international politics. China being the strategic partner of Pakistan and the strategic rival of India and the

United States is expanding its strategic and economic relations to Pakistan.

These challenging and responding strategic behaviours in the South Asian context are nurturing an environment of fear, suspicion, and insecurity in the region, which in turn gives way to ‘dog in the manger’ attitude in the strategic and economic frontiers of the region. Pooling behavior, cooperation, economic development and prosperity can limit these counter-productive behaviours. Cooperation among the major players in the region, in terms of China, US, Russia, India, Pakistan and Iran can develop an alliance of all, for all and by the all. All will be the stakeholders, all will enjoy it and all will strengthen it. This can blanket their war mongering and hyper-nationalistic attitudes and can turn them into *détentes*, *ententes* and friendly relations.

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