

Pakistan-Iran-China Triangle: A Game Changer in the Region?

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Abstract

The interaction of states influenced by their bilateral ties and the multilateral organizations in the form of triangles presents an opportunity to understand some interesting dynamics of the current international politics. This interaction is often the result of the similar (if not a common) strategic culture and geopolitical realities. This study on Pakistan-Iran-China ties is an attempt to underscore the potentials of the formation of this triangle and its ramifications for international politics. The subject is elucidated in the context of the impending drawdown of US and NATO from Afghanistan, the role of Shanghai cooperation organization (SCO) in the region with its impact on Pakistan-Iran-China relations, and the place of Pakistan and Iran in the Beijing's "String of Pearls" strategy. In this triangle Pakistan's longstanding rivalry with India and Iran's protracted antagonism against US are the significant factors that bring Pakistan and Iran closer to Beijing.

Keywords: Pakistan-Iran-China triangle, Shanghai cooperation organization, String of pearls, Strategic culture,

Introduction

“Foreign policy may be defined as an integrated plan to secure and enhance national interest”.¹ Consistencies and Variations in National interests are often the products of a state strategic culture. Strategic culture as Hassan Askari Rizvi argues is shaped by a historical narrative, perception of the enemy, and a state's conception of its self.² China and Iran share at least two things in common that is, pride in their civilizational histories and the threat posed by a hegemonic power (US).³ On the other hand, Pakistan and Iran has a history of cooperation and have a shared conception of being Islamic states.⁴ This research is based on the premise that for Pakistan and Iran China is the only state that does not negatively impinge on their bilateral relations. Besides, it can also mollify different tensions between Islamabad and Tehran.

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Pakistan-Iran ties are often troubled by their interaction with a third country. In the first place, Islamabad's relations with Washington cause serious apprehensions in Tehran.⁵ Iran's growing ties with India (Pakistan's key rival) especially in the post 9/11 environment has also serious repercussions for Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations.⁶ More significant in this context is Pakistan and Iran's rivalry in Afghanistan and their cooperation with Washington and New Delhi over Afghanistan respectively to the dismay of each other.⁷ Moreover, Russia can also not be fitted as a constituent of a triangle which consist of Pakistan and Iran because Tehran's distrust, and Pakistan's narrative of Russia as an ally of India.⁸ As long as sectarian tension persists to complicate relations between Islamabad and Tehran, the Saudi factor will loom as barrier to the eradication of trepidations in their mutual perceptions.⁹

For both Pakistan and Iran, China provides strategic attraction. Islamabad employs it as a hedge against Indian hegemony, whereas for Iran is an escape goat against the biting sanctions and increasing isolation imposed by Washington.¹⁰ Pakistan's persistent and potential value for US has been questioned after the slaying of Osama Bin Laden on Pakistani soil. In these circumstances the myth about the failure of this nuclear power presents significant challenges to the stability of south and central Asian region. Pakistan as some scholars opine, has become a cause of lose sleep for its neighbours, I.E India, China and Iran.¹¹ However the downward spiral in Islamabad's Relations with Washington necessitated a revisit of its foreign policy.¹² This trend was eminent throughout 2012, as a first short the President of Pakistan during a conference between the presidents of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan revealed his intensions to side with Iran in case of a war against Iran.¹³ The Chinese factor also hemmed into Islamabad's new orientations as a positive response to the forthcoming moral support provided by Chinese leadership after the death of Osama Bin Laden.¹⁴ On the other hand, Iranian quest to buttress economic and 'other relations' with India and China are construed to be as a strategy to outwit the mounting weight of political and economic pressures imposed by the Western states.¹⁵ The place of India and China in the Iranian foreign policy calculus was eminent even during the Shah regime. However, India's intimacy with former USSR and Iraq, and its Wars with Pakistan had largely shaped Iranian perceptions. Between China and India, China was more convenient for Iran because Beijing was a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The

post revolutionary Iran was mindful of New Delhi's relations with Moscow, a factor that deepened Iranian apprehensions regarding India after Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹⁶ Although India's engagement with Iran is substantial,¹⁷ but "For the Iranian regime, no country in the world is as important in ensuring its survival and helping to insulate it from international pressure as the people republic of China".¹⁸ For China, Iran is a significant strategic leverage against US, and also a potential market for the goods produced by Chinese industries.¹⁹

Against this backdrop, an attempt to highlight the different dynamics of Pakistan-Iran-China triangle and its significance for the existing geopolitical milieu will be a contribution to the literature. The subject has been explained in three major contexts: Afghanistan, SCO, and China's strategy of the 'String of Pearls'

China will truss in Afghanistan?

The US strategy reflects the signs of failure in the achievement of its objectives in Afghanistan. And the neighbouring states are flexing their muscles for reaping the fruits of US withdrawal in the near future.²⁰ President Obama's definition of transition from Afghanistan and the opacity surrounding American post 2014 Afghan strategy has surfaced many questions with respect to the future of Afghanistan. Total withdrawal is unlikely, as president said "transition would not mean an end to long-term US support of Afghanistan".²¹ The frustrations with American strategies in Afghanistan are visible. It is felt that NATO and ISAF are under crossfire for fighting Taliban and Al-Qaida. The fiscal burden for stabilizing Afghan forces also largely falls on American economy, where as others "enjoy free ride in Afghanistan". America with ISAF and NATO forces is paying the price, while the neighbours of Afghanistan are 'reaping the fruits'.

*"The Chinese developed lucrative projects like the huge Aynak copper mine south of Kabul, the Iranians planned a new car manufacturing plant in Herat, the Uzbeks pursued a major rail project in northern Afghanistan, and the Pakistanis played a double game of helping the Americans with one hand and succoring their enemies with the other."*²²

In the light of the past record of Pakistan's role (especially military) one analyst predicts, "As the United States eyes the exits in Afghanistan, the army is likely to become even more powerful as an arbiter of Afghanistan's strategic fate".²³ Nonetheless, Islamabad's security dilemma, strategic concerns and potential to

play a constructive role is often forsaken in the hullabaloo over its double game in Afghanistan.²⁴

The sole aim of Washington's Afghan policy is not only to counter insurgency in Afghanistan. As one analyst notes, Chinese strategists are concerned over American presence in Afghanistan. Their concern is grounded in the perception of American attempts to contain the rise of China through encirclement. American military presence in Afghanistan, in effect encircles China, because US retains large bases in South Korea and Japan. Moreover, Beijing questions the disproportionate presence of air power of US and ISAF forces in Afghanistan, which is perceived to be employed against the People Republic of China (PRC).²⁵ The extension of South Asian security Dynamics to Afghanistan along with the US factor confounds Chinese policy.

It is argued that 9/11 brought a significant shift in US policy towards south Asia. Indo-US ties suffered some setbacks in the short term, but in the long run they became the most important partners. Washington and New Delhi shared common concern over China "as a potential and major future threat; and, have common interests in circumscribing the rise of China".²⁶ It must be noted that China had joined the Security Council on September 12, 2001 to "condemn the 9/11 attacks as a threat to international peace and security and recognize the right of self-defense against such attacks."²⁷ Nevertheless, Beijing's attitude on Afghanistan is not active in the council, which perhaps offered Pakistan some solace during the council's deliberations on Afghanistan.²⁸ This argument should not be misconstrued as Chinese preference for instability in Afghanistan. Beijing doubtlessly prefers stability in Afghanistan for the security of its investments. It has a history of cooperation with Pakistan and is concerned over the instability in Pakistan which negatively impacts its geo-economic interests. One of the factors of instability in Pakistan, especially in Baluchistan is perceived to be the activities of Indian consulates in Afghanistan near Pakistan's borders.²⁹ The indo-Pakistan contention over Afghanistan in the light of their adversarial relations will be a major destabilizing factor in the South and Central Asia. China is deeply concerned over Pakistan's stability, a factor that consoles Pakistan in its Rivalry with India.³⁰ Pakistan's stability is central to Beijing's security policy in the region especially in Afghanistan. Beijing retains economic interests in Afghanistan which is a usual business. The major concern of China is security because in Chinese security calculus "Afghanistan is regarded as an important threat from outside", that not only threatens the rise of Islamic

militancy inside Chinese borders, but also impinges on its future economic interests in Afghanistan.³¹ This fear is not baseless as a Chinese Scholar notes “Afghanistan is the critical outside factor to impact security in all the regions surrounding Xinjiang, from South to Central Asia”.³² Resolution to the problem of Afghanistan is a key to the stability in the region which will serve Chinese interests as well. Nonetheless, geopolitically Afghanistan offers more significant threat for China. Competition among great powers in Afghanistan and the surrounding region is on the rise, military bases are established in Afghanistan and Central Asia, thus making the region more unfavourable for China from security and political perspectives.³³

This security and political complex is enhanced by clashing economic interests. As one analyst contends, “China and India have emerged as major investors throughout the region. They seek access to raw materials, minerals and lines of transportation and trans-shipment to the Indian Ocean”.³⁴ This competition over trans-shipment of resources has broader dimensions where American plans of Silk Road with India as a significant component presents an eminent challenge to Beijing.³⁵ India’s viable route to Afghanistan is Iran,³⁶ which is deliberately kept out of the plan because of its antagonism towards US.

Washington’s ‘cold shoulder’ towards ‘Tehran and Beijing’ and its strategy of the new Silk road is devised to undermine the pre-eminent position of China and Russia in the region.³⁷ Russia aside (because of its complicity for inclusion in the NDN),³⁸ Iran and China form the major threats to the US Interests. China’s Mercantilism and Iran’s Militarism are major threats for US after the threat of Al-Qaida. This may be one of the reasons that in the ‘New Silk Road’ plan China and Iran are missing. This New Silk Road strategy has significant warnings for specially Iran and China because of its timings, which is close to the impending drawdown of NATO and ISAF from Afghanistan.³⁹ Beijing also rejects the possibility of its Inclusion in the NDN, thus further clarifying its strategy for Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Presumably, Chinese idea of the ‘New special economic zone’ is a counter-weight against Washington’s New Silk Road strategy. The “New special economic zone Around Kashgar” relies on Pakistan’s cooperation, and Pakistan will become major transit corridor for transporting goods from Kashgar to the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Islamabad is concerned over budding Indo-US cooperation in Afghanistan and Central Asia, which it regards detrimental to its interests. Islamabad’s wariness of the Indo-US nexus can be a

significant jolt to the 'New silk road' plan of Washington.⁴¹ Apprehensions regarding India amidst deteriorating ties with Washington brought Pakistan closer to Beijing. China was the only major power that voiced support for Pakistan in the aftermath of Osama Bin Laden's death as a consequence of US operation inside Pakistan.⁴² The subsequent months witnessed further corrosion in Islamabad's ties with Washington.⁴³ Given these circumstances, Pakistan recognized China to be the most dependable ally and neighbor on the one hand, while provided an embrace to Tehran on the other.⁴⁴

Pakistan's ingenuousness towards Tehran is a tactical ploy amid its weakening ties with Washington, which does not mollify their longstanding contest in Afghanistan. Any solution to the "Afghan imbroglio is not possible without Pakistan and Iran".⁴⁵

New Delhi's reach to Afghanistan is facilitated by Iran because of the convergence of their interests. Both have supported Northern alliance against Taliban during 1990s, and both are averse to the return of Taliban to Kabul after the drawdown of NATO and ISAF forces in 2014. It can be speculated that China can assert its influence to seek the avoidance of the chaotic security situation in Afghanistan. This argument carries substantial weight when viewed in the light of China's value for Pakistan and Iran along with Afghanistan. China has no ethnic minority in Afghanistan, nor has it a history of involvement in the Afghan internal affairs. Hence Afghanistan has no bad memories associated with China.⁴⁶ For Pakistan China provided solace amidst Islamabad's deteriorating relations with Washington and longstanding rivalry with India. And for Iran, China is the most important state that can be counted on amid Iran's vulnerable economic conditions.

SCO: Facilitating the Triangle?

China's relations with Pakistan and Iran in and around Afghanistan acquire an interesting dimension within the regional framework of SCO. The troubled situation in Afghanistan was a cause of concern for the SCO long before acquiring its membership. However, being a member of SCO now, Afghanistan's problem is directly linked to the security of the SCO region. This significance was underscored by Russian president Vladimir Putin when he pointed out "that Afghan situation was one factor leading to the establishment of SCO". In addition, throughout the history of SCO the member states mirrored distress over the spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan.⁴⁷

To solve the Afghanistan complex, experts have been contemplating over interesting way outs. For instance, on one hand Michael O'Hanlon and Bruce Riedel present "Plan A-minus, which is simply that The US "should tie its force drawdown to the growth and maturation of Afghan security forces".⁴⁸ On the other hand, Robert D. Blackwill speculates the "defacto partition" of Afghanistan.⁴⁹ More recently, Cronin (2013) has examined the possibilities and pay-offs of neutralizing Afghanistan.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the SCO's Afghan policy is more realistic which stresses the resolution of Afghanistan's internal tribulations, guarantee of its sovereignty, and suggesting a more active role for neighbouring states rather than neutralizing Afghanistan.⁵¹ In this strategy Iran and Pakistan have a significant role to play because of their undeniable influence over Afghan internal politics. As stated earlier, both Pakistan and Iran are vital to unravel the Afghan imbroglio.⁵² In my view Iranian sway in Afghanistan is often ignored in the Western grip over Tehran's nuclear program and Islamabad's much talked about double game in Afghanistan. As Hossein Mosavian notes, "Iran has been and remains one of the most influential countries in Afghanistan and an essential interlocutor, if not partner, in any regional or multilateral diplomatic process designed to limit the conflict there. Through this partnership, the Taliban were ousted, al-Qaeda weakened, and a new government formed in Kabul".⁵³ Nonetheless, Iran's cooperation in Afghanistan was not recognized by Washington which irritated the clerical establishment.⁵⁴ It also damaged the image of the reformists in Tehran, which further dented the hopes for rapprochement between Tehran and Washington.⁵⁵ Thus, the hardliners in Tehran disenchanted with Iranian attempts of reaching out towards the west no longer disposed to forfeit Iran's "image, security and commercial interests in exchange for humiliating western agreements". This line of thinking explains Ahmadinejad's economic strategy which was wedded to his political thinking. In his computation China was a significant denominator resonating Tehran's attempts to lessen the impacts of imposed isolation.⁵⁶ Energy is not the sole substance of Sino-Iranian relations. In effect "geostrategic balance against the United States" is also a critical factor explicitly or implicitly recognized on both the sides.⁵⁷

Both Tehran and Islamabad speculated paybacks of joining the SCO. Pakistan remains in the shadow of Indian preeminence that is why it finds Solace in SCO membership. Likewise Iran

seeks to assuage US pressure by knitting in to the organization that offers an opportunity getting closer to China and Russia.⁵⁸

The potentials of Beijing's role in bringing stability to both Pakistan and Afghanistan have assumed prominence since China is the largest investor in both the states.⁵⁹ If Tehran is on board, stability in the region can be assumed with China playing a positive role. In this scenario SCO can be presumed to be the venue for greater interaction of the neighbours of Afghanistan where Iran will also be present and interested as well. A consensus has build in the SCO on the rejection of the use of force against Tehran which proffers Iran with an instigator to cooperate with all the SCO members specially China. The last year SCO summit was significant because it opposed the use of force against Iran. At the end of the summit held in Beijing a statement signed by all the members said, "Any attempts to solve the Iranian problem with force are unacceptable and could lead to unpredictable circumstances that threatened stability and security in the region and the entire world".⁶⁰ A year earlier, the SCO summit criticized "Missile defense programs".⁶¹ In addition, President Wen Jiabao assured his Iranian counterpart that "Beijing is against any middle Eastern country seeking to acquire nuclear weapons".⁶²

Paradoxically, Tehran's full membership in the SCO is delayed in order to avoid giving the organization a tint of anti Americanism,⁶³ despite the fact that Moscow and Beijing both tight their grip over Tehran whenever they seek to cause discomfiture in Washington. There are reports that China and Russia aid Iran in modernizing its military, their economic dealings with Iran undermine the sanctions, coalition and are at the same time playing both the sides on Tehran's nuclear program.⁶⁴ Even if they do not support Tehran with modern weapons (this proposition is hardly acceptable), their response against these weapons in to the hands of terrorists organizations reflect their lack of concern. However as compared to Russia, Beijing's ties with Tehran are stronger. As recently Russian stance on Tehran's membership of SCO and its nuclear program has deepened mistrust in Tehran-Russian relations.⁶⁵

An examination of the question of enlarging the SCO reveals that China had issues in inviting India, whereas Russia was reluctant to invite Pakistan.⁶⁶ Concerns over Iran's invitation to SCO were even grave at the outset especially from Russia, however things changed and Iran was given an observer status. "The SCO's change of heart appears set to involve the organization in Iran's nuclear battle and other ongoing regional issues with the

United States”.⁶⁷ Regardless of Russian concerns over Tehran’s membership in the SCO, the anecdote of growing romance between New Delhi and Washington prompted a positive shift in Moscow’s stance on inviting Tehran to SCO. Russia also “supported” Beijing’s candidate and India’s rival (Pakistan) for membership before the 2008 SCO’s summit. This can be construed as a concession to Beijing that Russian enthusiasm for Indian membership failed, whereas the membership of Pakistan and Iran was considered.⁶⁸ Irrespective of the engagement between the SCO members with US on countering terrorism in Afghanistan, American inroads in to Central Asia with its military presence tapered the prospects of Chinese and Russian cooperation with US in the region.⁶⁹ As the episode on issue enlarging the membership of SCO it was noted that Chinese stance reflected disinclination for Indian membership, whereas Moscow dragged feet on inviting Pakistan. The significant aspect was Tehran’s membership which despite its problems with the US and the Western community was not contested by either China or Russia.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, the membership of SCO is political “lifeline” for Iran. Iran’s bid to acquire the membership of SCO, and the increasing regional power of this organization has troubled Washington. The rejection of Washington’s request for membership in the SCO has resulted in its push for integration of South and Central Asia as “greater Central Asia”. This has been done mainly through American efforts to influence SAARC, and more importantly rising prospects for cooperation with New Delhi over Central Asia. Nevertheless, with Iran’s full membership in the SCO, Washington’s regional strategy is likely to endure hardships in the way of its success.⁷¹ Since Russia is dominant in Central Asia, and China enjoys pre-eminence in South East Asia.⁷² In these circumstances China’s growing investiture in Pakistan and Iran with the potential Chinese-Pakistani-Iranian triangle at least against growing Indo-US nexus has significant ramifications for the future of the region (my own emphasis). Moreover SCO is only one of the meeting points for increasing cooperation between Pakistan, Iran and China. This triangle has a wider dimension that is not only limited to the security of Afghanistan or the energy resources of Central Asia.

Pakistan and Iran: The Most Important Pearls in the String?

The center of global politics is shifting from West to Asia. The US indeed has emerged as a sole super power for a time, but some rising powers in Asia differ with the US objectives in the region.

China, with its growing economy and strategic ambitions recognized the verity that competing US on global level will take some time. Therefore it has mainly focused on Asia.⁷³ In this context, China with its multi dimensional and multi directional growing influence became a threat to its competitors.⁷⁴ As one analyst contends, “China’s readiness to negotiate with other regional states and economically ‘responsible’ power is also a signal to other states that there are greater benefits to bandwagoning to China’s growing weight rather than opposing its rise in any manner”.⁷⁵ China’s economic rise, with its increasing diplomatic weight, and modernization of military is dubbed by some strategists in Washington as the ‘String of Pearls’ strategy. Although Beijing has not officially adopted any such label for its strategic designs, but the term ‘String of Pearls’ has become an eminent component of China’s Grand National strategy.

‘Regime survival, territorial integrity and domestic stability’ which are China’s major strategic concerns are inevitably associated with its economy which is at the same time its greatest strength and vulnerability. For sustaining the pace of economic growth Beijing relies on external sources of energy and raw material. For its energy shipments, intra regional and cross continental trade it relies on sea lines of communication (SLOCs). The security of these SLOCs is major Chinese concern. Securing SLOCs for energy and raw material supports China’s energy policy and is the principle motivation behind the ‘String of Pearls’. This is how the ‘String of Pearls’ relates to China’s “Grand national strategy”. If China’s Grand National strategy is called the ‘String of Pearls’ then let it be so.⁷⁶ The ‘String of Pearls’ is not merely a stratagem employed to enhance China’s maritime interests. It is indeed an element that keeps the growth of Chinese economy persisting at a steady rate (above 9 percent), China’s growing influence in the region, and an opportunity to provide Chinese goods with more promising markets.⁷⁷

“Simply put, a ‘pearl’ is a sphere of influence seeded, secured and maintained through the use of economic, geopolitical, diplomatic or military means”.⁷⁸ “The ‘Pearls’ extend from the coast of mainland China through the littoral of the South China sea, the strait of Malacca, across the Indian ocean, and on to the littoral of the Arabian sea and Persian Gulf”.⁷⁹ An interesting aspect of Beijing’s ‘String of Pearls’ is that the states that are ‘problematic’ or ‘unstable’ such as ‘Pakistan’ and ‘Iran’ (problematic, but not unstable like Pakistan) that are shirked by the

international community are “re-energized” through Beijing’s economic embrace.⁸⁰

The two competitors of China, India and US are significant in this calculus. In the wake of the “Arab spring” China is trying to increase its foothold in the Middle East. Since its strategic competition with US has spread across Asia, China has aligned itself with those states that have troubled ties with Washington. Some of these states (Pakistan and Iran in focus) are located at significant geopolitical points.⁸¹

China employs Pakistan’s card in its strategic maneuverings with India. Beijing has long been concerned (at least since the end of the cold war) regarding any moment in which India will firmly embrace Washington.⁸² On the other hand, India has been supported by Washington as an alternative power center in Asia. The strategic dialogs between New Dehli and Washington since 2010 and the potency of Indo-US strategic partnership has much to do with the rise of China.⁸³

The initial cordiality in Indo-Chinese relations evaporated with India providing refuge to Dalai Lama in 1959 and border dispute between the two. Thus the Chinese Hindi Bhai Bhai narrative was reversed in to a strategic competition since the brief border war in 1962.⁸⁴ In the recent past, China has consistently been asserting its influence in the border region with violations of the line of actual control (LAC). Since 2006 these violations are becoming frequent every year, whereas New Dehli repeatedly issues denials by pointing towards the opacity of the exactitude of Sino-Indian border. The presence of the hundreds of PLA soldiers in Kashmir on the Pakistani side of LOC has generated further anxieties in New Dehli.⁸⁵ Conversely, Pakistan’s ties with Beijing have been improved as a consequence of the deterioration in Sino-Indian ties. From the beginning of 1960s, every decade witnessed amplified geniality between Islamabad and Beijing. Only in 1990s there were signs of rapprochement between China and India with high hopes associated on both the sides, but this Sino-Indian rapprochement was not at the expense of Pakistan-China relations. Nevertheless, with Indian nuclear tests of May 1998, relations between Beijing and New Dehli suffered a serious setback. The statements of Indian officials regarding China as a long term threat to India “reinforced Pakistan’s importance in China’s South Asia policy”.⁸⁶ Beijing provided Pakistan enough “confidence to reestablish the strategic balance in South Asia by conducting its own nuclear tests”.⁸⁷ Since then, Beijing is successful at least in maintaining a rough equilibrium of the ‘balance of power’ in South

Asia by preventing India from acquiring an upper hand over Pakistan. It has been forthcoming with assistance to Pakistan's nuclear and ballistic missiles program. As an Indian analyst notes, "according to the US National Intelligence Estimates, Pakistan has developed an edge over India in strategic delivery systems".⁸⁸ He underscores that it is made possible mainly through Chinese assistance.

As China hardened its diplomatic trail with India during the last few years, it has given up its ostensible neutrality and has begun to openly side with its strategic ally Pakistan by stating publically the territory of Jammu and Kashmir as disputed. In addition, the presence of the PLA personnel in Pakistani control Kashmir for the infrastructural development and the provision of visas on "loose sheets" instead of passports have further irritated New Dehli.⁸⁹ Sino-Indian ties persistently deteriorated since 2005.⁹⁰ This deterioration is paralleled with the increased convergence on the region between Washington and New Dehli. The 2005 civilian nuclear agreement between India and the United States has re-enforced Sino-Pakistani ties. China has, at least privately, made it clear to Washington that "Pakistan is to China what Israel is to the United States". Beijing has advocated similar nuclear deal for Pakistan, however after failing in this endeavor China openly defied the nuclear suppliers group's (NSG) restrictions by entering in to the negotiations for 2000 mega ward nuclear reactor for Pakistan.⁹¹ Thus, China's "sustained support for Pakistan, a regional diplomacy that persistently seeks to counter-balance India, its negative perception of Indo-U.S. strategic partnership" is some of the factors explaining China's policy in the region.⁹²

Certainly, China is a significant factor that stimulated the current warmth in US-India relations. There is perhaps a miscalculation in these relations with respect to what "United States wants India to do and what New Delhi is best suited to do". Washington attaches significance to New Delhi's role in the region especially in the Indian Ocean. Although India is developing its maritime power, yet it is not sea but a land power.⁹³

The strident American-Indian partnership presents a considerable challenge to Beijing's interests in the broader Asian region. China has recently posed serious threat to US interests in the Asia Pacific. Although Beijing had adopted assertive posture in the Pacific Ocean with the aim of deterring Washington's allies in the region, it had nevertheless retracted from the point where it was in 2008-9. Any substantial change in Chinese maritime policy is

hard to predict in spite of myriad domestic and external challenges.⁹⁴ Indo-American maritime cooperation is of special concern to China. As it is argued that, With US assistance, India has gained confidence to navigate through the Strait of Malacca. As China cannot rely on US for its maritime security through the Strait of Malacca, therefore it is diversifying its sea routes. The deep water port at Gwadar is the first Chinese traction in the Arabian Sea. It is significant for China in many respects. The port deters India as a significant element of Chinese strategic investments that are perceivably aimed at containing India. The port at Gwadar also links the Strait of Hormuz with China's 'North-South' Karakoram corridor. Beijing has regarded Gwadar as significant as the Karakoram corridor. In case of war with India, the port offer strategic depth to Pakistan against the 1971 stale blockade. Moreover, this will enhance Chinese presence on both the sides of Indian peninsula, serving as deterrence to any attempt aimed at hurting China's maritime interests. "In the event of a strategic confrontation with the United States this safe corridor would prevent the interdiction of oil shipments to China's resource-hungry economy".⁹⁵ Thus,

"The Chinese Navy's port calls at Pakistani naval facilities and naval exercises between China and Pakistan come across as threatening to India. Conversely, Beijing feels India is trying to pursue a naval containment strategy against China and prevent its legitimate presence in the Indian Ocean".⁹⁶

Containing China is not possible for India without US assistance.⁹⁷ India's withdrawal from the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline is often associated with US pressures. When India considered backing out of the IPI, it embarked on the development of Iranian port of Chahbahar that serves as energy hub in the medium term, and will potentially serve as a military facility in the long term, which will be a strategic counterweight against the Gwadar port. Nevertheless, if one examines strategic viability of Gwadar and Chahbahar for China and India respectively, Gwadar is at an edge because of the geographic propinquity of Pakistan and China.⁹⁸

Against India, Pakistan is a strategic leverage for Beijing, whereas arguably Iran can serve as a game changer in Chinese global aspirations. Originally Iran has not been counted in the 'String of Pearls'.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Iran's significance in the 'String of Pearls' cannot be discounted. As John Garver notes,

"Unlike India, Japan, and Russia, Asia's other major powers, China has never been in conflict with Iran. Tehran, therefore,

*may be likely to wholeheartedly welcome China's emergence as the pre-eminent power in Asia, and be Beijing's long-term, sincere, and strategic partner. Support for Iran now is an investment in that future partnership".*¹⁰⁰

One of the significant nodes in Sino-Iranian relations is their rejection of US hegemony and their fear of encirclement by US bases after Washington and NATO's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.¹⁰¹ It is hard to digest, but China and Iran were almost at the same side with respect to the question of US invasion of Iraq. As Garver and Alterman (2008) point out that China was less antagonistic in its statements during the Security Council meetings over the Iraq's problem in late 2002 and early 2003. Similarly China had reportedly stopped the Anti US demonstrations before they could hit the roof. This was all the outcome of US-Chinese back door diplomatic understanding.¹⁰² On the other hand, the Khatami administration in Iran has also decided not to adopt an uncompromising stance against US in Iraq.¹⁰³ As Barzegar contends, Tehran did not want a new round of rivalry with Washington, avoided further antagonizing different Arab actors, hence it moved cautiously before US invasion of Iraq.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, Iran's cooperative stance failed to make an impression in Washington.¹⁰⁵ Nonexistence of direct official contact often leads to the misreading of Iran's internal dynamics that impinge on its foreign policy. And so, from Reagan to Bush and even Obama administration failed to extract anything substantial from the overtures of Iranian governments.¹⁰⁶

Iran's antagonism with US is a significant factor in Sino-Iran relations. Iran with its ability to block the strait harms US interests in Iraq and Afghanistan with its history of conflict with US may be of great help to the success of China's policy towards Middle East.¹⁰⁷ As Garver and Alterman notes, "Sitting on the mountain, watching the tigers fight" is an ancient Chinese stratagem that perhaps fairly characterizes China's approach to U.S. policy in the Middle East".¹⁰⁸ Iran is best suited to serve this end because of its defiance of US hegemony. The threats of military strikes against Iran have long been on increase, but its capacity to Block the Strait serves as a significant deterrence against such action. When tensions escalated in January 2012, USA and Israel canceled a large scale missile defense exercise which had been scheduled for mid January. Though Israel issued an excuse of resource constraints, in effect the cancellation of these exercises had been aimed at appeasing Iran. The incentives of an

attack on Iran by either US or Israel have more costs than benefits for China. In Persian Gulf Iran is the second largest oil exporter to China after Saudi Arabia. This is not enough, as Michael Sing notes that Iran might serve as an ideal location for Chinese military base. If China cannot tightly embrace Iran, but for these reasons it cannot afford to alienate Tehran.¹⁰⁹

Another aspect of Sino-Iranian convergence where Pakistan also comes in is the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline (IPI). As India went to the rear on IPI because of US pressures, the Speculations about China's intentions to replace India has generated a new point of convergence in China-Pakistan-India relations. The IPI will thus become Iran- Pakistan-China (IPC) pipeline if China joins at any point in the future.¹¹⁰ Like Iran, Pakistan also suffers from severe economic problems specially the scarcity of energy supplies. The pipeline will thus serve as Pakistan's road to political stability by solving the problem of energy which often questions the performance of government. It also provides a rejoinder to the displeasure over American drone policy on Pakistan. Islamabad is indeed walking a 'fine line' by preserving smooth working ties with Washington, whereas strengthening relations with those states (Iran and China) which will benefit Pakistan, but will certainly cost US policies in the region. Pakistan's defiance of US pressure on IPI reflects a trend of anti-Americanism that strengthens the potentials for Pakistan-Iran-China triangle. There are speculations that China can announce its intentions to join IPI that on the one hand will realize Beijing's vision of 'land-based access to energy resources of Middle East', on the other hand will strengthen links between different regional organizations specially those who decry US hegemony. Because currently Pakistan and Iran are bidding for SCO's membership, which increases the weight of an already significant China for them.¹¹¹ The IPI if proceeds, it will be a significant jolt to the US influence in the region. It will help Iran's economy, will slacken the isolation imposed on Iran, will make Pakistan's relations with Washington further tense, and above all will weaken the sanctions regime against Iran. Finally if China comes in, it will bring more economic pay-offs for every one of the actors involved in the project.¹¹²

Conclusion

Currently, "China is trying to balance between the desire to keep the United States preoccupied and the need to dissuade Washington from responding to provocations in an extreme way

that would harm Beijing's economic and political interests".¹¹³ In this situation, Both Pakistan and Iran are of great significance for the success of China's strategic interests in the wider Region of Eurasia, West Asia, South Asia and Middle East. If "Iran is of strategic importance in U.S. efforts to win control of the Middle East and Eurasia", China capitalizes on Iran's nuclear impasse not to antagonize Tehran for the protection of its interests in the Middle East. China's conduct on the Korean peninsula reflected its non accommodation with US on the issue of nuclear proliferation. After North Korea sank 'the South Korean *Cheonan* naval vessel', Beijing perceives that the US military exercises and strengthening its allies in the region can be directed aimed against Chinese interests. China has increased influence in its bargain with Tehran because Beijing is linked to the Iranian energy market. Cooperating intimately with US Agenda will impair Beijing's ties with Tehran. China cannot afford to Antagonize Tehran (at least at the moment) because of the 'Islamic card' or the "oil card" in the hands of Tehran.¹¹⁴ For Iran, the "either negotiate or we will shoot" situation developed by US has generated skepticism regarding US intentions to resolve Iran's nuclear impasse. MR Obama will substantially have to prove the efficacy of his intentions for resolving US-Iran standoff. Although, suspicions hovers over Capitol Hill as well, but Washington has to attest to its super power status by coming with something unexpected for Iran. In this air of uncertainty regarding the new sanctions, the Chinese trade which is estimated at around 40 billion for this year is specially damaging to the US interest.¹¹⁵ Thus, at present "For the Iranian regime, no country in the world is as important in ensuring its survival and helping to insulate it from international pressure as people republic of China".¹¹⁶

On the other hand, Pakistan is significant for China's interests in Indian Ocean and Afghanistan. Recently, US-Indo strategic convergence and Washington's ploy to employ India as a bulwark against China in the wake of growing rivalry between Beijing and Washington has significant strategic insinuations for Pak-China relations.

"The growth in the depth, and the extent of US-India cooperation, is likely to push Pakistan closer to China as a counterweight to India's possible hegemony in South Asia. US threats of sanctions against Pakistan because of its decision to proceed with the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project will further hasten this process".¹¹⁷

As one analyst notes, the Obama administration aspires to disturb the Rising China, change the regime in Iran, and balkanize and denuclearize Pakistan. For this reason, he states “The present US strategic position is the silent registration of targets in Pakistan, Iran” and ‘Chinese Sinkiang’.¹¹⁸ In my view the destabilization of Balochistan in Pakistan is detrimental to the interests of this triangle (Pakistan-Iran-China). The reports of Indian involvements in Balochistan, and CIA’s support to Jundallah can be interpreted as a part of the strategy to stall Gawadar and IPI which harm the Shared interests of this Pakistan, Iran and China triangle.

Amidst the prospects of economic future of the currently troubled Balochistan, specially as a consequence of China’s takeover of Gwadar port, the re-examination of the bids for Revising Balochistan’s boundaries or giving the right of self-determination to Baloches will have significant regional repercussions, specially for Pakistan, China, Iran, and India. Washington’s design of carving out greater Balochistan is aimed not only at the territorial and political fracture of Pakistan and Iran, but more to undermine Beijing’s involvement in maritime infrastructure development in Pakistan.¹¹⁹ As Selig S. Harrison states, “to counter what China is doing in Pakistan, the United States should play hardball by supporting the movement for an independent Baluchistan along the Arabians Sea and working with Baloch insurgents to oust the Chinese from their budding naval base at Gwadar”.¹²⁰ Some Pakistani analysts point at the Indian factor in this complex by claiming that the separation of Balochistan will result in a diluted Pakistan, which will allow India to focus on China directly. Analyzed in this context, the calls for Balochistan’s self-determination coupled with the lingering activities of foreign intelligence agencies make some logic for coalescing interests of Washington and New Dehli. Even if cooperation between RAW and CIA in Balochistan is questionable, there aims of destabilizing the regions hint at the possibility of their facilitation of each other’s interests.¹²¹

As a recent report of the Civil and Military Fusion Center outlined the problems that Afghanistan is likely to face after 2014, fiscal difficulties and the security of investments will be a hindrance in stabilizing Afghanistan.¹²² However as Raffaello Pantuchi notes, “it is not clear that Beijing has properly considered what it is going to do once NATO forces leave and pass the responsibility for Afghan stability and security to local forces”. He argues that China may increase its weight by acting as a responsible actor. If Afghanistan slides in to crises again it will

destabilize the region with the spillover in South Asia and Central Asia, both of which China cannot afford. Beijing believes in the more active role of SCO in Afghanistan, a proposition which is not likely to find support of many of the Afghan neighbours.¹²³ It can safely be concluded that China faces a major impediment in the shape of Afghanistan to bring Pakistan and Iran together (a bridge too far) because of their clashing interests in Afghanistan, this triangle, if it was easy to materialize, could have been the major force that will have not just dominated the region; it will have also proved to be a major stabilizing factor in the region. However, much about this (Pakistan-Iran-China) triangle has to be seen in the near future, especially which way the air of optimism in Iran-US ties blows, and what does Pakistan do to balance Pakistan's ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹²⁴

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