

CPEC and Concerns of India

Is Afghanistan a 'New' Battleground of Sino-India clash?

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Abstract

Economic Corridors have emerged new models ensuring regional development and integration as well. There is a realization that South Asia despite the enormous problems it faces can become a 'Zone of Cooperation' through the revival of Ancient Silk Route. China launched the most ambitious trans-national project 'One Belt One Road' with a clear intention to emerge as a world leader in next three decades. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is all but a must project for the accomplishment, or attraction, of BRI. Established and Iron-Brotherhood of Pakistan and China, it argued here, is instrumentally important for Chinese ambition of major global power by her centenary republic celebration. This paper argues that CPEC is a critical concern for India ranging from economic; security to political. China will not displease India as is evident from her moderate stand over Kashmir Issue since 1978-79. At the same time, the 'all-weather' friendship with Pakistan is dear to Chinese interests for regional and global power politics. In the last four decades, China has, however, 'balanced' Indian concerns and Pakistan's anxiety in an 'act' of 'courting' and 'reassuring', respectively. Afghanistan opens up two-fold concerns to India—with China as becoming a major regional influence over Kabul, and also with augmentation of Pakistan's geo-strategic importance. Afghanistan has added complexity to the complex web of relations between and among India, Pakistan and China.

Keywords

One-Belt One-Road, OBOR, BRI, CPEC, China, Pakistan India, Afghanistan

Introduction: Context of Economic Corridors

South Asia is home to 33.4 percent of the world¹. It is also home to more than 50 percent world illiterates², and figures poorly on human development as none of the South Asian countries find a place in the first fifty countries. These countries inherit a shared past—British colonialism—and subsequent progress of their polities represents a peculiar diversity of political systems. The last seven decades illustrate tremendous chequered political experiences ranging from democracy, authoritarianism, monarchy to military dictatorship on the one side, and socio-political upheavals featured by pro-secessionism, pro-democracy and anti-system movements. The subcontinent also emerged as a hub for international terrorism and religious extremism including the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities. It has been featured with intense inter-state and huge intra-state crises making it a global 'Arc of Crisis'³. The post-colonial era has seen serious bi-lateral crises among south Asian countries including chiefly India and Pakistan who fought four wars in the last seven decades. The nuclear armament is all the more serious threat that can engulf

These bilateral tensions have, inter alia, hampered regional cooperation in South Asia⁴. The socio-political fragmentation within and bilateral tension without, have hurdled the development of these young economies leaving implication on the human security of almost one-fourth of the world population. The region as a whole faces peculiar challenges like 'low-skill base', 'rising (unjust) inequality in multiple dimensions', and 'rapid urbanization'⁵ and their redressal would largely depend on the political vision of the leaders of the region. Analytically, the wide-scale endemic poverty, deep inequalities, rich-poor gaps, and poor infrastructure are being linked to the 'tremendous' lack of connectivity between South Asia, South East Asia, or Central Asia and within South Asia as well, and this lack 'affects' South Asia particularly⁶. In contrast to other regions of Asia like South East Asia, the infrastructure in South Asia is 'abysmally inadequate and of poor quality'⁷ which, if addressed, can transform the 'Arc of Crisis' into a 'Zone of Cooperation'. The quality connectivity in South East Asia began with Greater Mekong Sub-region initiated by the Asian Development Bank as early as 1992 establishing three corridors like the East-West, North-South, and Southern Economic Corridors changed the economic landscape of the region ushering in the well-accelerated economic development of these states.

The concept and policy of Economic Corridors is a recent development in South Asia. With the announcement of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013, it has almost become a buzzword that engages politicians, policymakers, academics and economists in assessing the benefits of varied nature amidst the skepticism of regional disparities and security issues. There are national and transnational economic corridors in South Asia like the Bengaluru-Mumbai Economic Corridor (India), the Amritsar Delhi Kolkata Industrial Corridor (India), the East Coast Economic Corridor (India-Bangladesh-South East Asia), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (India, Myanmar, Nepal, Tibet, China). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is taken as a 'game-changer' with the potential to enhance the geostrategic position of Pakistan to an 'Asian Tiger'. With this background, this paper attempts to make these arguments: a) admittedly, if CPEC is accomplished in its stipulated period, it would benefit the backward regions of Pakistan and bring them out of economic periphery to sophisticated Special Economic Zones and address the issues of endemic poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment and illiteracy; b) arguably, the all-weather friend of Pakistan "China" cannot be 'spokesperson' of Pakistan's bilateral issues especially with India and would carry Islamabad and Kabul together to present herself as a 'good neighbor' and an influential global power. Both the states are instrumentally important for Chinese ambition of major global power by her centenary republic celebration; c) critically, India has had concerns ranging from economic, security to political. CPEC violates territorial sovereignty of India as it passes through Pakistan-Administered-Kashmir (PAK) which is part of the Indian Territory as per the Constitution of India. Nevertheless, PAK is a disputed area as it is neither an internationally recognized sovereign state nor is territorial part of Pakistan as per the

Constitution of Pakistan. Additionally, the expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan is puzzling to both India's interests and investment in Afghanistan. This paper also argues that India may also fetch her share of benefits in CPEC by joining it, and, thus, sketch a 'new' chapter in Sino-India relations. China will not displease India as is evident from her moderate stand over Kashmir Issue since 1978-79. At the same time, the 'all-weather' friendship with Pakistan is dear to Chinese interests for regional and global power politics. In the last four decades, China has, however, 'balanced' Indian concerns and Pakistan's anxiety in an 'act' of 'courting' and 'reassuring', respectively⁸.

China-Pakistan: 'All-Weather Friends'

A nuanced understanding of Sino-Pakistan relations requires to situate the bilateral relations of these countries in a complex web of interactions among Pakistan, China, India, USA and (former USSR) today's Russia. As this paper underlines, Afghanistan is the latest addition to this web, and Sino-Pakistan relations are entangled in the pulls, pressures, and balances of the delicate threads of this complex web. Sino-Pakistan relations are not based on any ideological commitment rather are driven by the politico-strategic ambitions of the two countries. Pakistan's 'Muslim' character and China's 'communist' image have not created barriers in developing, sustaining, and strengthening Sino-Pakistan relations. Delineating objective understanding of Sino-Pakistan friendship, a noted expert Anwar Hussain Syed wrote:

Both China and Pakistan are sensitive to the dictates of political realism: They act from considerations of vital national interests; both pursue power (military and related capabilities) as the most reliable means of countering hostile pressure in a world in which rivalries of nations persist and where the restraining role of international law and morality is still fragile⁹.

Pakistan is located at a very important geo-strategic point. For being situated between the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, India and China, it occupies an important position in the regional power structure of both South Asia and Central Asia, and also in the 'broader Indo-Pacific geopolitics'¹⁰. In its pre-1971 territorial location, Pakistan's location was geo-strategically important for China. East Pakistan was important for China's interests in Southeast Asia, and West Pakistan was the route to the Middle East. In the very first few years after establishing the People's Republic in 1949, the Chinese leadership realized 'the value of India's rival Pakistan in case of a deterioration of Sino-Indian relations'¹¹. In the first decade of their bilateral relations, the two countries were not so close for the reasons that Pakistan sided with the United States and joined US-led CENTO to 'balance' India's friendship with the former USSR. China, on the other hand, grew close to India to resist the imperialist forces and extend diplomatic support to the nations fighting colonialism. By the dawn of the 1960s, the two countries understood each other's importance for the respective national interests. China and Pakistan were 'drawn together' by the 'common' hostility towards India. During the troubling years of the 1960s, to Pakistan, including war with India, China herself being 'a developing, and a relatively

poor, people' championed the cause of Pakistan in defiance of support of superpowers to India were 'seen as acts of sacrifice, self-denial, and courage'¹². In the backdrop of this unique development in South Asia, Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto underlined the mutual importance of China and Pakistan for each other's national interest for India's hostility towards both the countries had germinated a 'fundamental common concern' for them¹³. It became a factor for 'friendship', but the 'all-weather friendship' has been driven by economic, strategic and power dynamics from time to time. It must be noted that Sino-India relations have also evolved to a new level of understanding since the late-1970's, and China has had a calculated use of Pakistan in her bilateral relations with India.

One of the major achievements of Chinese diplomats is the 'balance' they have evolved in maintaining entente cordiale with Pakistan and increasing rapprochement with India. There is a visible shift from the 1980s to the 1990s that gauges this 'balance'. Earlier at the time when Chinese hostility towards India found a coincidence in Pakistan, the joint communiqué of Pakistan President Ayub Khan and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in February 1964 state that the two countries 'expressed the hope that the Kashmir dispute would be resolved in accord with the wishes of the people of Kashmir as pledged to them by the people of India and Pakistan'¹⁴. China openly supported Pakistan over her demands to resolve Kashmir by the principles of self-determination endorsed by the United Nation's Security Council. Similarly, in the backdrop of Moscow's outrage against Pakistan for latter's support to fighters of Afghanistan against USSR, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian said in his press conference in Islamabad:

Pakistan is China's exceptionally friendly neighbor. If there is a war and Pakistan suffers a foreign armed attack, the Chinese government and people will, of course, stand on the side of Pakistan¹⁵.

Again in 1987 when India mounted pressure on Pakistan through a four-month-long military drill, the Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang during his official visit in June 1987 to Pakistan reiterated sympathy and support to Pakistan as follows:

The Chinese government and people will, as always, firmly support the Pakistani government and people in their just cause of safeguarding national independence, upholding stated sovereignty and promoting economic development¹⁶.

China made a careful distinction between the national security of Pakistan and her position on the Kashmir Issue. By 1980s China made a gradual but subtle diplomatic shift over Kashmir. Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then-External Affairs Minister of India, during his 1979 visit to China conveyed to China that her support to Pakistan over-application of UNSC Resolutions over Kashmir was creating 'unnecessary complications' in development of Sino-India relations¹⁷, and also contradicted the bilateral Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan which obliged the two countries to resolve all issues including Kashmir bilaterally. China responded positively and moved to a neutral position over Kashmir. Only the next year (1980), the Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua, in presence of Foreign Minister of Pakistan Agha Shani, presented the neutral side of China by stating that his country 'appreciated Pakistan's efforts to seek a just settlement of the Kashmir issue in the spirit of the Simla Agreement and accordance with the relevant

United Nations resolutions¹⁸. He reached both by referring to the Simla Agreement for India and 'relevant' UN resolutions for visiting foreign ministers. It continued till April 1990. In March 1990, the External Affairs Minister of India communicated India's resentment over China's reference to UN resolutions on Kashmir to his Chinese counterpart Qian Qichen during a later visit to New Delhi. China realized the importance of improving relations with India, and 'complied' with Indian concern. Since then, China dropped the mention of UNSC resolutions altogether but has consistently maintained that India and Pakistan must find a 'peaceful solution' to the vexing problem through 'negotiations', 'consultations', and 'dialogue'. It can be safely said that with the beginning of unforeseen developments in Kashmir including the emergence of widespread armed violence in the 1990s, China took a complete departure from 1960's position and was clear that 'the Kashmir issue was a bilateral matter to be solved by India and Pakistan through peaceful means'¹⁹. This shift reached its pinnacle during the Kargil War (1999) when China openly distanced itself from Pakistan's misadventure in Kargil. The Foreign Ministry of China issued an unambiguous statement:

We sincerely hope that stems from a desire to safeguard peace and stability in the South Asian region, India and Pakistan earnestly respect the Line of Control in Kashmir and seek, according to the spirit of the Lahore Declaration, a just and reasonable solution on this issue and other disputes²⁰.

Pakistan received a fact home that national securities of China and Pakistan are no longer 'identical', but China continues to support her in seeking a resolution to Kashmir issue. India grew confident in friendship with China for she received 'assurance' that Beijing did not side with Islamabad. Diplomatically, it is a win-win situation for all three countries –China, Pakistan and India. China maintains a 'balance' between rivals and friends, India gets support on the bilateral resolution of unsettled issues with Pakistan without intervention, or talk, of a third party, and Pakistan is happy to receive 'international support' over Kashmir.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Flagship of Chinese Ambition

Only five years back, China came forth with a massive transnational economic initiative that has the potential to alter the global power configuration. The revival of Ancient Silk Route under a new nomenclature Belt and Road Initiative aims to connect two-thirds of the world population amounting to almost forty percent of global GDP in One Belt to augment the economic potential, sustain development and employ by establishing Special Economic Zones along the various Economic Corridors. According to a Brief of African Development Bank, the economic corridors are not merely the means of 'transporting the goods and services', but are 'tools for stimulating social and economic development'²¹. These are also termed as instruments of 'regional integration'²² where political consensus is being thought of as an inevitable outcome of 'economic integration'. The cooperation to ease out the trade bottlenecks to improve Inter-State, or regional, trade bears a positive influence on the political understanding of 'cooperation'. The success

stories of Economic Corridors of South East Asia have led regional powers like China to believe in the efficacy of the revival of ancient Silk Route.

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping made two announcements within two months during his visits to Kazakhstan (September) and Indonesia (October). In Kazakhstan, he declared China's ambition of developing 'Land' connectivity through the Economic Corridor and Maritime Silk Road Initiative was launched in Indonesia along with Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In November 2015, President Xi Jinping presented the comprehensive plan of, what came to be known as, 'The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)' or 'One Belt One Road (OBOR)', in the republic's 13th Five Year Plan with two essential components of Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR). It aims to revive and improve the ancient Silk Road with an economic agenda to make development as a mutual endeavor of the countries and regions which would be connected by it. It is also seen as an act of Chinese 'Grand Diplomacy' to bring China into a central stage of global 'soft' power²³. Some analysts suggest that it is an instrument aimed to make China a world leader by the centenary year of her 'communist' revolution²⁴. China expects that BRI would ultimately lead “One Belt One Road Era”, “One Belt One Road Economy” to “Building a New Civilization²⁵”. It is, nevertheless, the most ambitious international economic and diplomatic project that China has undertaken with huge risks, responsibilities, and challenges. It can be gauged from the fact that the opening ceremony was attended by the executive heads of twenty-nine states and official delegates of more than one hundred states of the world²⁶. India, the United States of America, Germany, and some European countries boycotted the BRI Summit²⁷ and did abstain from joining it so far.

China is constrained to explore the alternative linkages to ease her excessive dependence on Malacca Strait for near about 85 percent of her oil imports come through Malacca. The surplus of manufacture requires an expanded and accessible market. BRI is expected to connect 80 countries of the world, and China is looked up as an 'undisputed' leader of the Belt. Through it, China will find access into the Pacific and the Indian Ocean; and through Gwadar Port (Pakistan) Xinjiang will be more close to the Indian Ocean than to the Capital of the country. It pursues to link China with Central Asia, East Asia, Europe and Africa; and equally important is for China to connect with Economic Zones of Europe and the Asia Pacific. The entire project of BRI depends on the successful completion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which, fairly for its potential, is called the 'flagship project' of Chinese ambitions. It is projected that China cannot afford to fail.

CPEC would connect geographically China's Xinjiang province with Gwadar Port of Pakistan. It is more than an Economic Corridor. It would further enhance Sino-Pakistan cooperation in areas like education, science and technology, trade, energy and defense. It is expected to bring economic development to the most backward regions of Pakistan by developing Special Economic Zones and develop effective and efficient road and railway connectivity to different provinces of Pakistan. For example, China has agreed to invest US\$11.8 billion in infrastructure projects, US\$622 million for up-

gradation of the Gwadar port, US\$1.27 billion for construction of Metro Line in Lahore and US\$6.5 billion for construction of nuclear power project in Karachi²⁸. It has already begun to work on six mega-projects in Gilgit-Baltistan. The four key areas of Chinese Investment are Energy, Roads and Railways, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and Gwadar Port. It is in this background of 'immense opportunities' CPEC opens up for Pakistan's socio-economic development and China's strategic interests, Mr. Ahsan Iqbal, formerly Minister of Planning and Reform, sketched its significance:

CPEC holds regional connectivity, information network infrastructure, energy cooperation, industry and industrial parks, agricultural development and poverty alleviation, financial cooperation and livelihood development including municipal infrastructure, education, public health and people-to-people contact that will produce thousands of new projects and millions of jobs in Pakistan²⁹.

There is a geo-strategic side to it. The corridor passes through Pakistan-Administered-Kashmir (PAK) which is claimed the part of the Indian Territory as per the Constitution of India. To Pakistan, it is an 'unsettled land' for it is an internationally recognized disputed territory. Both ways, 'disputed' sovereign claims of PAK make it a politico-legal issue. PAK is a disputed area as it is neither an internationally recognized sovereign state nor is territorial part of Pakistan as per the Constitution of Pakistan. The CPEC's potential to transform Pakistan has a strategic implication on Indo-Pakistan relations. Increasing importance to Pakistan in the regional power set is directly linked to concerns of India. Additionally, the expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan is puzzling to both India's interests and investment in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: A New Battleground of Sino-India Interests

Afghanistan enjoys a geo-strategic position that attracts China for a variety of reasons. The range of China's BRI gets a huge extension through Afghanistan. Having Afghanistan with BRI, or more specifically with CPEC, China would connect with Central Asia and West Asia through an economic corridor through Kabul. It is centrally important to augment the possibility of BRI with other countries and regions including Europe. China requires a strong Pakistan to forge a grand economic, energy and trade cooperation in Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia and North Africa, and Afghanistan is strategically indispensable for Pakistan's stability and security. China serves its own global power agenda by bringing Pakistan and Afghanistan 'close' and weed out the differences. The security apprehensions over CPEC are met in the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and also by restoring accessibility of Gwadar Port to Afghanistan. The CPEC has a great potential to transform the lives of Pashtuns living across Afghanistan and Pakistan Border, and also can reduce the chronic border problems between the two countries by bringing the border dwellers into the mainstream economic life of the respective countries. Such an understanding between the two countries would leave a positive effect on CPEC, and thus China sees more dividends in their cooperation. If Pakistan and Afghanistan re-align economic policy with China's economic expansionism

and launch a joint offensive against extremism in their respective countries, it would establish an image of China as 'influence' over a hotbed of extremism. It would strengthen China's role and embolden her image as a responsible country on the global political landscape. Against the Indian economic and political investment in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban, such a strategic engagement of China in Afghanistan with influence over the Pak-Afghan relationship do enhance India's economic, security and political concerns.

There are two major areas of conflict of interest between China and India in Afghanistan. Firstly, India has liberated Afghanistan of the latter's dependence on Pakistan for access to the sea and maritime commerce by investing in Chabahar Port in Iran. The trilateral agreement between Iran-India-Afghanistan facilitated the move of Afghanistan's cargo traffic Karachi Port (Pakistan) to Chabahar Port (Iran). Indian investment in developing and enhancing the capacity of the Chabahar Port meant that Afghanistan was no longer dependent on Pakistan and, more importantly, Kabul found its regional 'friend' –India. The expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan would connect it with Pakistan more efficiently through railway and motorway. China intends to initiate projects to connect Peshawar (Pakistan) to Kabul (Afghanistan) through rail and road, Landi-Kotal (Pakistan) to Jalalabad (Afghanistan) and Chaman (Pakistan) to through railways. This eventually makes Gwadar Port economically attractive to Kabul. The lease agreement and the termination condition of exemption of Taxes like sales, income, federal and import, at Gwadar Port, for 23 years to Chinese companies³⁰ would benefit Afghanistan too. Additionally, the trilateral electricity transmission project considered by China to connect the energy sector over CPEC between Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkmenistan would address the energy deficiency of the three countries mainly benefitting Afghanistan to come out of energy crisis which has hampered its potential development. It destabilises India's interest in investing in Chabahar Port and undermines the strategic spirit of trilateral agreement over the Port.

Secondly, India has strategic concerns too, for instance, India has had a strategic interest to increase its presence in Kabul, and to isolate Pakistan driven by the issues of internal security. New Delhi-Kabul friendship has grown stronger in the Post-Taliban era, and the two states exhibit mutual understanding and determination to fight terrorism. Both the states believe in being the victims of terrorism and extremism; though the nature and intensity of such challenges do vary. Along with Iran, India gains access to Central Asia through Afghanistan, and cordial allying with Afghanistan gives India an added advantage in arch rivalry with Pakistan. The increasing presence of China, however, poses a challenge to India's strategic interests. In 2017, China took a lead in holding trilateral dialogue between the foreign ministers of Pakistan, Afghanistan and China³¹ China must get Pakistan and Afghanistan as good neighbours/partners along to impress Central Asia and Europe to come along with "One Belt One Road" as the future of the world economy. Reconciled Pak-Afghan tie in consonance with China's interest is a major diplomatic task for China in the region. The attraction of OBOR is contingent on the

success of CPEC, and Afghanistan is vital for it. Consequently, it has a positive impact on the geo-strategic importance of Pakistan. Pakistan's influence over the Taliban makes it important both for China and Afghanistan. Not only for CPEC, but Pakistan is also becoming increasingly important for entire OBOR that would connect more than eighty countries of Europe and Asia. Echoing this importance of Pakistan in 2012, the then-Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Liu Jian termed Pakistan as 'the fulcrum of Asia'³². This may perhaps give Pakistan leverage in Afghanistan affairs, and it would be a setback to India's interests. This opens up two-fold concerns to India –with China as becoming a major regional influence over Kabul, and also with augmentation of Pakistan's geo-strategic importance.

Conclusion

The past three decades of Sino-India relations clearly bear it out that China cannot afford to 'displease' India for the sake of her 'iron brotherhood' with Pakistan. For her own interests, Pakistan is 'dear' to her. Rather than leaving out, it interests her more to carry India along with her ambitious BRI, and through it, she would moderate US influence over the region. As the attraction of BRI is contingent on the success of CPEC which is a must-not-fail project, China must reach to India to sustain CPEC and BRI. India is important for CPEC, and CPEC has added to the strategic concerns of India in her western neighborhood. The 'unsettled' Kashmir question can put entire CPEC on the risk of failure. Hypothetically, if India takes a lead in holding 'referendum' in Jammu and Kashmir as it existed in August 1947, people 'vote in favor of accession to the Indian Union, CPEC would become obsolete overnight'³³. In the case of military adventure over PAK, the issue becomes 'serious' for China and her dream of BRI. The time-bound realization of CPEC without any 'hiccups' would eventually enhance not only the strategic importance of Pakistan but also improve Pakistan's defense capability. The involvement of China in Afghanistan will bring Pakistan to a position of influence in the triangular relationship between Pakistan, Afghanistan and China. This triangular web undermines India's role and potential influence in Kabul. India is led by a pragmatic approach as it is selectively 'reserved' against CPEC, not against Economic Corridors per se. India might see an opportunity to join the CPEC through the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and explore the possibilities of transforming Kashmir and Ladakh as Special Economic Zones (SEZs). It may lead the region from economic seclusion to the hub of international trade on a route that was the lifeline of world trade—the Ancient Silk Route.

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