



Rise of China: Regional Power Politics

Vol. II, No. I (2017) | Pages: 441 – 453 | DOI: 10.31703/grr.2017(II-I).32

p- ISSN: 2616-955X | e-ISSN: 2663-7030 | L-ISSN: 2616-955X

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Abstract

China uses its wide-spreading economic policy as a tool to maintain the balance of power in the region. In the case of Afghanistan, China wants the peaceful transition of power to the government of Afghanistan. Similarly, besides this region, China looks for economic development and bilateral trade to satisfy its energy needs. The study argues that most of the regional countries are having solid reservation over the Indian “hegemonic ambitions”. This has led to persistent tension amongst the South Asian giant and its smaller neighbor states. To counter the upper handed treatment of New Delhi, the rest of the countries have intended to have friendly ties with China. China insists that problems and disputes should be handled strictly according to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence without the use of force or other means. It is further argued that China is acting as a balancer in the region to counter the aggressive attitude of other regional or global powers. China, at every point, complains against the ‘big brotherly’ and ‘hegemonic attitude’ of India against its neighbors, pointing out that all the regional states must be treated equally irrespective of their size and geographical location.

Key Words: US, China, Afghanistan, CPEC, Regional Connectivity, Security, India

Introduction

China is the second-largest and one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. The constantly rapid growth and modernization of China shifted the primarily agrarian economy into a substantial industrial entity. Besides substantial economic growth, China is also developing its military capabilities in order to compete in international military politics. The fast Innovation of the armed forces and the establishment of the military-industrial compound is an important objective for the People Republic of China (PRC). The phenomenal economic growth, the strengthening of its military muscles, strong nuclear power and is the permanent

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member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are the main aspects of the Chinese pledge to build a 'comprehensive national power' and to shape its policy towards its neighbors. Along with national economic growth, China has started to adopt the policy of development of the region. China, being a \$10 trillion-plus economy, has started making massive investments in Central Asian and South Asian countries. If its plans are properly materialized, they could undoubtedly be the game changer and fortune maker of the regional economies in general and that of Pakistan and Afghanistan in particular.

There is a major difference in the policies of the US and China towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US remained fond of having its physical presence in the region following the Chinese encirclement policy. While China, on the other hand, believes in the use of soft power and wants peace and harmony in its neighbor that would encourage socio-economic growth of these countries, which is inevitably important for the overall development of China. To implement its plan, Beijing focuses on the materialization of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that primarily focuses on energy import from the Middle East and Africa and the future trade from and to Western China. Gwadar is cardinal to CPEC as it provides not only an alternative route but also provides more than 8000 km shorter distance. New Delhi is suspicious of the growing Pak-China collaboration, particularly, CPEC as it would provide China with an opportunity to enhance its naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The United State is also not happy with the Chinese military spread in this region. China wants to have secured and piracy free business routes to carry out trade with the rest of the world. Consequently, Pakistan has received Chinese investments in the field of infrastructure like the construction of Gwadar seaport, SEZs, industrial parks, Karakoram Highway (KKH) etc.

China sponsors the mega projects in the region particularly, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, to make Pakistan a transit state in the region. But on the other hand, The region is facing multi-faceted security threats, i.e. Indian growing military cooperation with world superpowers, the presence of US/NATO forces in Afghanistan which Beijing interprets as steps towards China's encirclement, Pak-India hostile relations and last but not the least, the increasing presence of terrorist networks in Afghanistan and Pakistan are of great security concern for Beijing.

Chinas' Concerns in the Region

South Asia ranks third, after the Northeast and Southeast Asian regions, in Beijing's policy of development towards Asia. China has common borders with four out of seven South Asia states, i.e. Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan, which makes it an integral part of this region. China's military security concern with the other Asian joint, India, having territorial clashes with it needs to protect its 'soft strategic underbelly'. ([Malik, 2001](#)) China's geopolitical insights are deep and

uncertain about US success in Afghanistan and Pakistan in its war against terror. However, China does not want a prompt US military departure from the region, but it wishes a reduced US military presence in Afghanistan. On the other hand, China does not want the terrorist and separatist actors to succeed in the war and become a long term threat to the stability and development of the region ([Small, 2010](#)).

The disproportion of size and strength remained a key hurdle in establishing cordial ties among South Asian states. India, being the bigger military, economic and territorial power, has been driven by hegemonic designs against its South Asian member state. New Delhi is consistently drawn into a small state versus big state chaos in relation to its smaller neighbor states that compelled these states to look towards China. Whenever South Asian states have attempted to use ‘the China card’ in their dealings with India, problems have arisen between New Delhi and Beijing and also between India and South Asian countries ([Malik, 2001](#)).

The increased US factor is seen as a challenge by China for its geo-economic interests in the region. On the one hand, the US have an undeniable role in Pakistan’s foreign and internal affairs that may hurt the Chinese commercial interests and threaten its firms to lose access and opportunities which they enjoy in the country. On the other hand, the rising US- India geo-strategic collaboration can possibly hinder the Chinese growing geo-economic engagements in the region particularly, the construction of CPEC. China believes that the Indian growing involvement in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, near the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), can destabilize the region whether by seizing the ‘nuclear arsenal’ that played a crucial role in development in the region ([Small, 2010](#)).

Regional Security Situations

Geographically speaking, China is situated in an important region of the globe. The population of the region has reached approximately half of the world’s population. Blessed with both natural and human resources, the region has immense potential for socio-economic growth. But that could only happen if these nations have stable and friendly mutual ties. In fact, three out of seven states nuclear powers of the world are located in the region. Several countries have their own interest in this region, and the close linkage with CARs has further inflated the importance of this specific region (“Pak-China relations in the 21st Century,” n.d.).

The present-day scenario of regional and global situation poses a diverse atmosphere how Islamabad and Beijing’s Partnership can conceivably fit in or could play a positive role in the ongoing crisis. ([Abbas, n.d.](#)) While there are quite a few issues in this region that are associated with security problems; the negative impacts of the Afghan conundrum on the security situation in Xinjiang, the long-standing Kashmir issue that could result in a nuclear war between Pakistan and

India, The US-India growing ties and the US-China increasing rivalry is the main security concerns of Beijing (“Pak-China relations in the 21st Century,” n.d.).

Access to International Market

The interest of China in the establishment of Gwadar port is to have a strong strategic relationship with Pakistan. To secure and expand the crude oil imports and to expand its existence in the “Indian Ocean” for the very purpose of international trade and maintaining a balance of power in the region. The increasing trend of piracy and anti-china naval muscles in the Strait of Malacca has forced Beijing to search for alternate routes where China could easily carry out its international trade. That is the reason China emphasizes its rising naval presences in the Indian Ocean that would ensure the security of its energy-related shipments.

The Chinese officials have categorically said that the Gwadar port will be used as a transit corridor by China for importing oil and gas from the Middle East (ME) and Africa to China’s autonomous region of Xinjiang and for the export of the Chinese products to these regions and beyond. The new “Indian naval doctrine” particularly seeks to address the energy security supply routes through the gulf. The Chinese ambitions for having Chinese Navy close interaction with a ‘few neighbors countries’ which could ‘seriously endanger the Indian shipping routes in Gulf’. ([Haider, 2005a](#))

Using Pakistan as an Energy Corridor

The geo-strategic location of Pakistan makes it the most suitable and beneficial route to the landlocked regions of Central Asia and Afghanistan for transit traffic. The development of Gwadar seaport, the trans-national gas pipeline and the construction of the energy city of Gwadar can truly transform this country into an important energy channel in this region. Gwadar being the terminus, is also very vital for the proposed gas pipeline projects such Iran-Pakistan (IP) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI).

During the visit of the Chinese president in April 2015, China signed various agreements regarding energy generation in different regions of Pakistan. These projects would cost around US\$ 28 billion, which includes the Suki—Kanari hydel project in KP Province, solar power park in Punjab, 720-megawatt Hydal project in Azad Jammu Kashmir, wind power projects in Sindh and Coal power projects in Thar etc. The Geo-strategic location of Pakistan offers many opportunities while, on the other hand, unstable states in the neighborhood, drug trafficking, prolong the war on terrorism and extremism in the region offers many challenges too. Today, the biggest challenge is to restore peace and harmony in the country to

attract trade and investment from abroad and create economic opportunities by exploiting its strategic assets ([Islamabad & Beijing, 2015](#)).

Using Pakistan as an energy corridor, China can access the natural resources of Afghanistan and the energy-rich region of CARs to exploit their natural resources. With the construction of CPEC, China perceives to have a secure and sustainable energy supply in future and control over the energy resource of the Middle East like that of the United States. Around 60 percent of the Chinese oil is imported from the Gulf via Ships. CPEC will reduce the transportation distance, which will result in considerable financial saving, wide business opportunities and minimize the threat of blockade by the other rivals ([Zaheer, 2015](#)).

Pak-China Counter-Terrorism Strategy

Most parts of the world are facing natural catastrophes, mishaps and disasters, which have always been remained a part of this world. Terrorism is slightly new but a serious threat to various nations. In the post 9/11 era, the “governments” and “energy sectors” are redesigning their security policies and evaluating the previously unpredicted liabilities of the energy infrastructures. ([Sahir & Qureshi, 2007](#)) The attack on the twin towers in the US on September 11, 2001, created challenges for the PRC. It is believed that the separatist movement in Xinjiang, the western province of China, is the result of Islamic terrorism-which is believed to have links with the Taliban and other militant groups and get training in the bordering areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan ([Chung, 2002](#)).

Even though terrorism is much lesser in China than in the other states of the region but the Chinese government being aware of its consequences, is taking necessary preventive measures. Pakistan and China are cooperating to purge the three evils, i.e. separatism, terrorism and extremism from the region. The strategic cooperation between Pakistan and China can help in the eradication of terrorism from the region. Mistrust has been created between Pakistan and US strategic relations because of the US attack on the army check post in Mohmand agency. However, Pakistan and China need stronger collaboration to curb the menace of terrorism and extremism irrespective of the commonalities of their interests.

Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) dismissed the chances of escalation of naval tension in the Indian Ocean and called it Indian “propaganda”. But the important thing is that Beijing has become more vigilant about huge investment projects in Pakistan due to security concerns. Taliban, sectarian and separatist violence has troubled the southwestern province of Pakistan (Baluchistan), where Gwadar is located ([MATTHEW, 2013](#)).

Rise of China in the US and Indian Perspective

In recent years China has captured many important sectors in the South Asian

region, which were previously led by India. Beijing not only increasing its trade ties with SAARC states but serious about increasing investment in the entire region. China has been gradually providing a certain amount for regional development and remains involved in a number of crucial projects, particularly in infrastructure development, that would help in the socio-economic growth of the regional states ([Sahoo, 2013](#)).

The border clashes have molded China's relations with South Asian states. China has settled its territorial disputes with Nepal and Pakistan, while boundary disputes with India and Bhutan are yet to be resolved. All South Asian states have cultural, historical, linguistic, and religious associations with India and all of them share borders with India rather than with each other. A key feature of Beijing's South Asia policy has been its 'India centric' approach, which in turn has seen military links with India's neighbors dominating the policy agenda. The major objective of China's Asia policy has been to prevent the rise of a peer competitor ([Malik, 2001](#)).

As an old Chinese proverb goes, 'one mountain cannot accommodate two tigers'. China knows that if India ever gets its financial and strategic acts combined while having intentions to match China would create setbacks for Beijing in the region. Some Indian scholars predict that China is viewing India as a weak and hesitant state that is on the brink of breakdown. To keep it under pressure, China needs to support the rebellious activities in India's minority regions and to arm its neighbors. China exports around 90% of its manufactured arms to the states bordering India. China's relationships with South Asian countries, particularly with Pakistan, overlay any other bilateral relationship. No other Asian country has armed another one in such a constant way for a long period of time, such as China has equipped Pakistan ([Dutta, 1998](#)).

Beijing has justified military relations with South Asian states as appropriate and standard government to government dealings well within the scope of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. ([Garver, 1992](#)) Expert predicts that the Chinese naval forces may operate in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). Availability of the sea ports facilities in Myanmar, Pakistan and probably Iran would be of key importance if China intends to expand its naval presence in the IOR. According to Indian security analysts, China would go for the progress to strengthen its naval existence in the Indian Ocean in the long run ([Dutta, 1998](#)).

The Balancing Role of China in South Asia

India is the main country in south Asia in term of strategic reach, geopolitical weight, population, trade and its pivotal location. The strategic location of India further magnifies its importance for China and other great powers. The Indian Ocean on the south and east; Myanmar, Bangladesh on one side while Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan on the westerns side, easy access to the west and central

Asia, China and Russia to its north etc., gives special importance to India ([Dutta, 1998](#)).

Sino-Indian relations remain poor, with or without risk of confrontation, despite a dramatic increase in bilateral exchanges at the political, economic and cultural levels, including some high-level visits. Beijing's strategic cooperation with Pakistan is strengthening with the passage of time which is further supported by nuclear and missile partnership. Chinese leaders regularly visit the South Asian States, i.e. Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, to prove persistent willpower to remain involved in this particular region and a desire to reassure Beijing's friends in South Asia that progress in Sino-Indian relations would not be at their cost. On the other hand, India keeps a close check and objects to the political and strategic relations of its neighbors with China ([Malik, 2001](#)).

The United States is not happy with the rapid influence and growth of China in the region. Washington is anxious about China's growing involvement in the "Indian Ocean Region" (IOR), where Beijing can check the naval activities of the US in the region. In future, Gwadar can be transformed into a Chinese naval base, thus "threatening" the IOR and the Arabian Sea. The development of Gwadar also fuels the feeling that the US has long felt towards the Islamabad-Beijing strategic partnership. The US thought that the control over Gwadar port by China would have negative implication over the war on terror, as it would open the prospect of a long land route across Baluchistan into Afghanistan. From the US/NATO point of view, "the Khyber Pass", in North-Western Pakistan, would be the ideal supply route for Western troops in Afghanistan ([Mir, n.d.](#)).

The intelligence sources of the US believe that Islamabad would not have been able to acquire a nuclear bomb without the active support of Beijing. The sudden visit of a Pakistani delegation instantly after the Indian nuclear test in May 1998 to China is evidence that it wanted Pakistan to carry out a nuclear test in response to India. New Delhi, on the other hand, believes that China has been pursuing a strategy to contain India. The Chinese containment strategy comprises upon its coalition with Pakistan and a steady military buildup in the Indian Ocean Region. ([Paul, 2003](#)) The US\$ 9 billion agreement for the Karachi complex (In Pakistan) indeed is a huge investment as compare to the other Chinese involvement in Pakistan's national nuclear energy sector. Collaboration in the field of nuclear technology has marked a "new sort" of advancement in the "all-weather" partnership between the two nations. Nuclear cooperation between China and Pakistan is evolving as a "growing counterpoint" to the US- India nuclear alliance that is considered as a challenge both by China and Pakistan ([Masood & Buckley, 2013](#)).

Pakistan reviewed its foreign policy and came closer to China while observing the changing security situation in the 1960s. Pakistan was left alone by its western ally (the US). Afghan War against USSR brought the two nations into close cooperation, but after the USSR's exit from Afghanistan, the US left Pakistan in a

lurch. After nuclear tests in May 1998 US imposed sanctions on Pakistan. Since then, the US started reviewing its foreign policy towards India and entered into a strategic partnership with it by signing a civil nuclear deal with India. And once again, it started seeing Pakistan as a strong ally in the war against terrorism since 2001-02 ([Chari, Cheema, & Cohen, 2007](#)). Similarly, after the Sino-Indian border dispute, Pakistan and China signed an agreement onboarded settlement; a road was planned to be constructed to connect the Xinjiang province of China with the Northern Area of Pakistan, which was completed in 1978. China supports Pakistan in the field of defence in order to contain Indian aggression in the region. India being a common threat made China support and strengthen the defence sector of Pakistan. From 1959 to 1963, India received a huge amount of \$US 4 billion from the United States of America. Pakistan, on the other hand, was not equally treated by the US. Pakistan felt fear that India would use this aid against Pakistan. Resultantly, Islamabad turned towards Beijing and received a positive response. That is considered as the origination of the new era of uninterrupted bilateral relation between Pakistan and China ([Jabeen, n.d.](#)).

Both China and India have expansionist tendencies. To materialize its 'Connect Central Asia' policy, India has started developing the Chabahar seaport of Iran while China, to reach out to the Arabian sea, has developed the Gawadar port of Pakistan. India is developing a road to Iran and Afghanistan for reaching the landlocked CARs for bypassing Pakistan. ([Fazl-e-Haider, 2009](#)) On the other hand, China has a strong geostrategic relationship with Pakistan since 1960. Furthermore, China intends to develop strong strategic relations with other South Asian countries to countervail India. ([Kumar, 2007](#)) New Dehli is worried about the ever-growing Sino-Pak strategic partnership because this relation is one of the greatest security concern for India. The Nuclear collaboration in the field of missile and weapons of mass destructions between the two states (is considered by India) a threat to South Asia. India also has reservation over the defence expenditures of China, while Beijing has no such security threats from its neighbors ("China's WMD assistance to Pak is enabling terror in South Asia'," 2013).

In term of economics, the trade ties between India with its neighbor states are not as good as needed. The member states of the SAARC considered India as a leader/protector and hoped that India would lead the whole region towards prosperity and development. While India considered herself as a hegemon rather than a leader of this regional organization. The unresolved political disputes of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal with India have hindered the trade liberalization of the region ([Sahoo, 2013](#)).

China has good reason to support the stability of its neighbors. It shares an interest with the west in preventing the region from becoming a base for terrorists. A stable security environment for Xinjiang, the restive northwestern province that is home to China's largest Muslim minority group, the Uighurs, is of great importance to Beijing. Aside from the direct risk of cross-border flows of arms,

militants, and narcotics, the ideological influence of pan-Islamic jihadi groups has played an important role for some Uighur pro-independence groups. China has been the victim of attacks from militants trained in Afghanistan and the tribal belt of Pakistan. It is believed that the bulk of the remaining Uighur fighters are based between the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan and the eastern and southern provinces in Afghanistan. While many of these fighters are affiliated with other transnational groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, small numbers are still thought to be active in groups that target China specifically, such as the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) or East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that seeks to establish an Islamic state of East Turkestan in Xinjiang ([Small, 2010](#)).

In 1992, after a failed Islamist uprising in the town of Baren (near Kashgar) in which 22 people were killed, China closed its road links with Pakistan for several months. The Chinese closed the highway in response and wanted to send a strong signal to Islamabad that Beijing would not hesitate to freeze the close ties between the two neighbors if Pakistan did not take steps to overcome the Islamic militants ([Haider, 2005b](#)).

China played a reassuring role in the instant outcome of the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers of US, supported Islamabad's decision to withdraw its support for the Taliban, and developing a limited program of cooperation on counterterrorism issues with the United States, which included the establishment of a Federal Bureau of Investigation office in Beijing. Formal bilateral consultation mechanisms were expanded under George W. Bush's administration, which launched a South Asia dialogue at the assistant secretary of state level as a part of the package of new exchanges on regional issues established under the US-China Senior Dialogue ([Small, 2010](#)).

Conclusion

There are competitive elements as well as cooperative possibilities in the India-China relationship, both with wider political and security consequences. In the short run, both countries are likely to pursue peaceful ties, as they would grapple with internal security and political challenges, but at the same time, they would strive to enhance their defense capabilities.

The preceding analysis shows that military security concerns and the state of Sino-Indian relationship would largely influence China's relations with South Asian countries. The Chinese are at pains to emphasize that the improvement and development of Sino-Indian relations will by no means adversely affect the existing friendly relations between China and South Asian countries. Beijing insists on the resolution of bilateral problems and disputes in accordance with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and remains critical of India's coercive diplomacy to ensure its security interests there. Current strategic and economic

trends indicate that South Asia's importance in China's national security calculus is likely to increase further in the days to come. China's influence and actions are less consequential in Afghanistan than in Pakistan.

Being an international obligation, the key international players, i.e. United States of America, the European Union, Russia, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization of Islamic Conference etc., would welcome and support the Pak-China collaboration against the scourge of terrorism for the stability and harmony in the region. Due to the strategic location of China and its growing economy and 'peaceful rise', along with Pakistan, both can play a vital role in this regard.

There is a growing debate over the issue of China rise and how to deal with an "ascendant China". With the growing strategic ties with other states, China is certainly looking for the restoration of a "balance of power" in the region. The Chinese growth and development are peaceful and according to the five principles of the UN. History never suggested that Beijing wants to conquer a county in the region. But the rise of China is a serious threat and concern to the US as well as to the European countries and the prevailing "international regime".

The growing, developing pace of Beijing is considered a substantial challenge by the

US because China will become a military threat to its neighbors and apposition or challenger to the US interests in the region. Similarly, the cultural rise of China can have impacts on the west as well, but China is looking for Asian security, commerce, and international Balance of Power. Strong consideration is underway in the "Western and Asian" nations about the ways and means for the best management of the "rising dragon". The fastest growth in the fields has provided a lucrative cottage industry to the experts in academia corporations, banks, various governments and the media worldwide and created a debate for the alternative policy options

The rise of Asia in general and China, in particular, will considerably change/reordering in the global system in the upcoming decade. The centre of gravity remains in the west for almost three centuries which is now shifting to Asia. The most fast-growing nations are in Asia who has the growing means and capabilities to justify their perception of national interest.

CPEC is a welcome step that would ensure the smooth and unhindered flow of trade, businesses and investments. Where economic forces come into play, they establish dynamics of win-win situation and tend to avoid conflict or confrontation. Pakistan can become a good land bridge between West and East Asia. , And if and when the gas pipelines of TAPI and IP are materialized and become operational, they would prove beneficial to the whole region. Strategically, CPEC will provide China with an important port at Gwadar, in the Indian Ocean Region, where china can link her west with the rest of the world. The policy of China Containment would therefore become useless.

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