

CPEC AND THE BELT & ROAD: THE GEOPOLITICAL ASPECT OF PAKISTAN-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

The paper entitled “CPEC and The Belt & Road: The Geopolitical Aspect of Pakistan-China Relationship,” aims to study the importance of the Belt & Road program for Pakistan and China from a geopolitical perspective. While highlighting economic significance of the projects of CPEC and Belt & Road, the paper analyzes the economic integration within China as means of achieving political stability within the country. Moreover, the paper debates that Chinese policies across its borders, in partnership with Pakistan, can result in massive alterations in the regional and transregional geopolitical milieu.

Keywords: CPEC, China, Economic Integration, Regional, Borders, Geo-economic.

Retrospect

Since the late 1990s and the onset of the twenty first century, world politics have changed at a brisk pace. The ensuing events have greatly affected the patterns of international cooperation across the globe. Same effects can be seen in the relationship of international actors; Russia, USA and China alike. With periodic alterations in the number of players and slight modification in the nature of the game itself, the Great Game, which began in the nineteenth century, is still operational; the great powers of the world are as involved in the quest for exploitation and ownership of hydrocarbon resources as they were when the Great Game first ensued in Afghanistan and Central Asia. With the emergence of new regional powers like Iran and China, the protagonists of the Great Game had to adjust the course of actions accordingly. The world powers are now faced with lesser liberty for mercurial actions to suit unilateral profit. The implication of this

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notion is evident in context of Chinese relations with regional and non-regional actors.

Soviet exodus from Afghanistan was significant, but not only in terms of Russo-American relations. The Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan and its consequent demise ended an epoch in the history of international politics and diplomacy. Henceforward began an era where global affairs were to revolve around one superpower against the previously held practice of two such powers. However, the same event was also a prelude to the creation of multi-polar world where regional powers acted and affected governance around the world in various quarters. This transition presented its own set of problems and prospects which Beijing, however, was quick to adapt to and thereby take advantage of the emerging political scenario. But for a meaningful implication of the policy, a closer and cordial cooperation with other regional actors was indispensably required. Beijing therefore, established diplomatic relations with the newly independent Central Asian Republics (CARs). In a similar context, a healthy partnership with South Asian neighbors was equally important for Beijing. For many decades, the policy makers in China focused solely on fostering closer and cordial ties with Pakistan. The latter had been an important ally against Indian threat. But following the late 1980s and 1990s, when China established relations and opened its market to the west; the trend in China's policy framework was followed by settling regional issues and deadlocks. Beijing drafted its Asian policy to settle its larger concerns, which were;

- sustainable economic growth,
- countering US's influence in Asia,
- border safety and domestic security,
- and to develop its image of a friendly neighbor in the region.

One Belt & One Road: China's Marshall Plan

Within a matter of three decades China has grown from an agrarian nation to a global industrialized power. In view of the ever increasing economy of China, the administration in Beijing is looking for new modes of sustainable production. China thus plans to obtain maximum profit from the utility offered by its land and water routes. The quintessence of this policy is the One Belt One Road Initiative also called the Belt and Road (B&R) plan and Yi Dai Yi Lu in Chinese. The strategy proposed by China focuses on connectivity between countries through two main routes; the land based Silk Road Economic Belt and the sea based Maritime Silk Road. The plan, which has historical roots in the ancient Silk Road (consisting of a wide network of roads) that connected China with the Roman Empire, was proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013 and is expected to be a prominent feature in China's 13th Five Year Plan (2016-2020). As per details released so far by Chinese officials, the Silk Road Economic Belt of the B&R would be a planned network or road, rail routes, oil and gas pipelines that will stretch from Xi'an, Lanzhou, Urumqi and Khorgas into Central Asia and Europe. As for the Maritime Road, it would be a network joining ports and coastal communications from South and Southeast Asia to Africa and the Mediterranean (The Belt and Road Initiative 一带一路, 2016).



Map of Silk Road Economic Belt & Maritime Silk Road

The B&R has both geo-strategic and economic significance for Beijing. China is recently trying to manage with its new domestic policy of slow and more sustainable economic growth. Some of the B&R projects will run through China's most underdeveloped areas. Beijing hopes that by increasing connectivity of the underdeveloped western provinces with its developed eastern provinces and periphery states lying across the Chinese coast, China would thus achieve economic integration within its borders as well as enable balanced growth across the country. Moreover, to counter US and western influence in the regional geo-economic sphere, the massive project would be funded by institutions disliked by the western powers for being alternatives to World Bank and IMF. These include:

- Asian Infra Investment Bank (AIIB)
- Silk Road Infrastructure Bank
- New Development Bank

On the other hand, the B&R would aid in improving cross border relations with the participating states. If implemented successfully, the program would help achieve stronger cross-border ties, deeper

economic relations with the non-Asian partners, and more importantly it will guarantee a smooth flow of hydrocarbons from Central and Eur-Asia into China. Implementation of aforementioned prospects would also allow stronger economic and political growth in the countries and thus could also help to minimize political and economic instability, and terrorism. Conversely, inability to implement the plan or a failure to achieve the cited benefits would not only hurt Beijing's image in the region, but the negative elements of neighboring societies might also travel back to China. In addition to this, Beijing's designs in B&R are being looked rather seriously by Russia, America and Japan. While the US and Japan resist Chinese influence in East Asia, Moscow might have serious concerns against rising Chinese expansionism in Central Asia, a region long considered by Russia as its sphere of influence.

As regards the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the idea first emerged in Xi Jinping's visit to Southeast Asia in 2013 for extending cooperation between ASEAN and China. The scheme later widened to include other states as well. For the Chinese, MSR would cement ties with countries already enjoying sound relations with China as well as pacify and befriend countries threatened by Chinese policies in the South China Sea. Moreover, the MSR would also serve as supply station to Chinese vessels on MOOTW (military operations other than war). But for the US, B&R is a threat to power vector in East Asia. With USA being a major partner of many East Asian economies, a project as big and multinational as the B&R, can cause major changes in the regional and trans-regional geopolitical graph. The Asian Infra Investment Bank (AIIB), with an initial Chinese contribution on \$47 billion was launched in connection with the Silk Road project in 2014. Beijing invited international community to contribute in the funding. The US apprehension was slightly materialized when despite USA's dislike, more than sixty states (Griffiths, 2017) including 12 NATO countries became charter bank members (Berke, 2015).

Beijing's Designs in Asia

Beijing has been increasing its partnership with its Asian neighbors for the purpose of increasing Chinese trade activities in the region. In 2001, Pakistan and China signed an agreement for the development of the port of Gwadar. The \$1.2 project, funded by the PRC carries the prospects of converting Gwadar into regional trade and commerce hub in the near future. In addition, there are also plans to connect Gwadar and Xinjiang through a rail network, thus creating an additional energy conduit. Similarly, China has also financed the development of the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, modernization of the port of Chittagong in Bangladesh and the Kyaukphyu port in Myanmar. In 2008, China initiated an anti-piracy naval operation outside its waters in the Gulf of Aden. The move was highly debated upon by Chinese officials who called for the need to establish overseas bases for distant operations for a guaranteed delivery of food and fuel to civilians and forces miles far away from coastal waters. The proposal has been widely criticized in the west and India where the proposed policy was seen as Chinese military expansionism in the Indian Ocean.

In fact, B&R is often seen as a connection to the String of Pearls theory. The theory forwarded in 2005, hypothesized that China may be developing overseas naval bases in South Asia to support its naval deployments. The ports identified as parts of the String of Pearls are the Gwadar Port, Hambantota, Chittagong and Coco Islands (Myanmar) (Pejic, 2016). Nevertheless, a prudent analysis shows that these ports lack the features required for major combat operations, making the theory strategically incorrect. Moreover, placing Chinese naval assets in the String of Pearls, as advocated in the theory, in a close range of Indian missiles would not only put the PLAN ships at risk in the Indian Ocean, it would also divide Chinese naval force and thus make the security of the Chinese mainland vulnerable (Yung, 2015). Furthermore, there is no evidence to support that naval bases are being established along the Indian Ocean littoral to serve as

traditional bases for which they lack the logical strength and resources. Moreover, the very idea is against the Chinese principle of non-interference.



Map of the Chinese String of Pearls

The ports mentioned in the String of Pearls theory could be used as logistics support points for Chinese firms rather than as traditional naval bases for they lack the resources and strength required for the latter and make the Chinese national security pregnable rather than the reverse. However, as a result of the mistrust between China and the US, and between China and India, “each alleged pearl has been characterized as a nexus of Chinese economic and geopolitical influence which could be transformed into a military presence in the littoral of the Indian Ocean” (Marantidou, 2014). The principle of non-intervention has been the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy. Abandonment of this principle will cause a serious damage to China’s reputation with its trading partners, particularly with oil exporting economies. As a matter of fact, it is the principle of non-intervention that sets China apart from its western counterparts in the eyes of its trading partners; a considerable portion of which consists of underdeveloped nations of Asia and Africa.

Keeping the above mentioned facts in regard, China's significance in Asia and the inevitability of its partnership among European nations becomes obvious. However, for an absolute implication of Chinese foreign policy designs, Beijing must settle issues within its borders. Unrest within the Chinese periphery has invited severe criticism from the international community in the past. In addition to this, disturbance in Chinese territory effects Beijing's economic growth. Faced with prevailing US dominance in the region, China requires an all-round friendship with at least one of its geographical neighbors for maintaining regional influence and for settling conflicts in its strategically unique quarters.

Unrest in Tibet

That China is investing heavily for sustainable economic growth and countering US influence in the region cannot be negated. Beijing is, for these reasons, trying to win the confidence of nations other than its traditional partners. Nevertheless, foreign policy targets can sometimes prove tricky for Beijing in view of the security condition of two of its geo-strategically important regions, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

Often referred to as the "roof of the world," Tibet spans a territory of 471,700 square miles (12.8% of Chinese territory) and is surrounded by provinces of Sichuan in the east, Qinghai in northeast, XUAR in northwest and Yunnan in the southeast. Nepal, India, Bhutan, Myanmar and Jammu and Kashmir lie across the southern border of Tibet.



Map showing Geographical Location of Tibet

The first political contact between the kingdoms of China and Tibet started in the seventh century CE. The King of Tibet Songsten Gampo unified the two countries and established a dynasty that ruled for two centuries. During his time, Tibet's frontier extended and incorporated parts of the Xinjiang province, Kashmir, Ladakh, Kansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, many of which had been parts of Chinese Empire under the Tang Dynasty. Tibet also captured Changan, capital of the Tang dynasty, when China stopped paying tribute to the former. Finally, in 821 CE, the two countries put an end to almost two hundred years of war. Both kingdoms came under the influence of the Mongol yoke in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Mongols converted to Buddhism and established a priest-patron relation with the Tibetans. The same pattern of relation was drafted for relation with Manchu Emperor in the seventeenth century. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, state politics of Peking widely deteriorated and many areas of Chinese governance kept slipping in and out of central control. Shortly after Communist Party's victory in 1949, China gained control of Tibet. In 1965, Tibet was given the status of an autonomous region despite calls for

independence by some circles of the local population. Since that time, the centre and the TAR have been in a constant struggle for governance of the region. The same factor has been the reason for self-exile of the Dalai Lama. Moreover, foreign support of the Dalai Lama by western and Indian quarters has added to the foreign policy fix of Beijing. Many times China has been alleged of human rights violation in its counter-insurgency methods in the plateau. These factors greatly hinder China's geopolitical, economic and strategic interests as the geographical location of Tibet and its geostrategic importance is undeniable in the context of defense and economic policies of Beijing.

Tibetan plateau lies between two Asian archrivals; India and China thus making it the latter's heartland, the security of which must be maintained at all costs. Chinese withdrawal from Tibet can easily make it an extension of the Indian frontier. From a military point of view, the rugged mountains of the plateau make Tibet an in-traversable territory but the common border with India in the south cause serious threats to what China perceives as its anchor in the Himalayas. Moreover, concerns of cross-border migration and state sponsored factionalism from across the border also add to Chinese concerns in the TAR. The concerns are not baseless as Delhi's support for Dalai Lama has not gone unnoticed.

Other than military importance of the region, TAR is highly rich in water and mineral resources including uranium. It is, in fact, the third largest repository of freshwater after the Arctic and Antarctic. Some of the world's important rivers flow from the plateau, including the Yellow River, Sutlej and Indus. China, on the other hand is an arid country. One quarter of the country's landmass consists of deserts. A major national task for Beijing is to transfer freshwater from Tibet to its eastern and western provinces for industrial as well as domestic use. For this reason, China has built a network of dams and canals that divert the flow of rivers coming from Tibet. The electricity produced from these dams feed the burgeoning metropolitans in

China, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou etc. Although China considers this as its internal policy matter, the same strategy has caused disturbance among the cross-border recipients of Tibetan waters and consequently in Chinese relations with these states.

Therefore, China must not only maintain the security of the Chinese heartland for the defense of the mainland but also utilize the resource potential of the TAR for the survival of its industry. Nevertheless, for the latter part of the policy, China is confronted with an unappeased population which, along with the Indian factor, casts serious obstacles to Beijing's geopolitical designs in the periphery. Moreover, the TAR shares a common border with XUAR. Not only does the fact that unrest in Xinjiang prevents Beijing from attending completely to the problems of TAR but the fact that the former shares borders with states prone with insurgency makes the defense of the heartland further difficult. In fact, the defense of the Chinese heartland begins from Xinjiang.

The Situation in Xinjiang

There are important issues at home that China must address in relation to its geopolitical aims in the region and extended periphery. While the eastern border of China has an active coastline, the western front faces harsh climatic and geographical conditions. Located in the northwest of the country is the largest province of the country; Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). It is separated from mainland by the huge Gobi Desert. XUAR shares borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Ethnic unrest in the region has kept Beijing from making a Xinjiang-free policy with its neighbors. As in Tibet, the unrest in XUAR is fuelled by economic disparity with the mainland and lack of economic resources despite the regions' huge mineral wealth. "Xinjinag is home to a large portion of China's mineral wealth" (Starr, 2004) including uranium, oil and gas.

Since Beijing's primary focus remains to expand Chinese industrial growth, the natural resources of XUAR have been regularly utilized to meet the goal. China needs regular and massive supply of hydrocarbons to feed its industries. But since local gas and oil production in China is far from reaching the required provision, hydrocarbons must therefore be pumped in from neighboring states. To meet this purpose, China has undertaken many ventures at home and abroad.

Beginning its supply in 2004, the West-East Gas Pipeline is a supply system of natural gas across China. Stretching from east to west, the pipeline delivers natural gas from western China and Central Asia to the consumers in eastern and southeastern China. The West-East Gas Pipeline was launched in three phases:

- The West-East Gas Pipeline I stretches along Tarim Basin in the west to Shanghai in the east.
- The West-East Gas Pipeline II (mainly carrying Central Asian gas supply) runs from Horgos in Xinjiang, passes through 14 provinces and reaches Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shanghai.
- The West-East Gas Pipeline III (mainly carrying Central Asian gas supply) will transfer gas from Horgos to Fuzhou (Fujian) and Guangdong.



Map showing route of West-East Gas Pipeline (I,II and III)

According to the data provided by the US Energy Information Administration China's oil consumption is expected to hit from 4.78 million barrels per day in 2000 to 10.5 million barrels per day by 2020. As a consequence, the CNPC (China National Petroleum Company) is undertaking huge investments abroad. A significant example in this regard is the Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline also called the Atasu-Alashankou Pipeline. The project delivers crude oil from Atasu in Kazakhstan to oil refineries in Xinjiang at a rate of up to 20 mt/y (million tons per year).

Though China is opening up to Russia for the supply of gas from Serbia but China also understands that a long-term Russo-Chinese partnership might not be a simple endeavor as both the powers are driven by the need for acquiring maximum energy resources through Central Asia and the Caspian region. An example in this regard was the impasse in China-Russia gas pipeline talks in 2015 following a surge in Central Asian gas imports (Reuters, 2012). Moreover, the two are also equally determined for attaining supremacy in East Asia.

Significance of Pak-China Relations

Pakistan is neighbor to countries of defining importance in international affairs; Iran, Afghanistan, India and China. Landlocked Afghanistan is strongly dependent on Pakistan for its foreign trade. Iran, must build a strong partnership with Pakistan along with other regional players in order to meet its energy demands and to counter the much speculated western mistrust against the Shiite regime. India; an important regional actor, has high aspirations for its budding economy and for acquiring a permanent seat in the UNSC. But it also has a history with Pakistan that has been largely rather disturbing for both sides. Therefore, due to the fusion of multiple exposures on its borders, Pakistan heavily relies on Chinese support in settling its foreign, and at times, also its home affairs.

China and Pakistan share an unwavering partnership. One of the reasons for such a relation stems from the fact that both the nations share history of an uneasy past with India. Though, in view of India being China's chief trading partner in South Asia, China may also be cited as a unique example in harboring ties with the two archrivals; India and Pakistan. Since the past few decades Sino-Indian ties have been thawed at a gradual pace. Nevertheless, many issues remain unsettled between the two governments. As a result, bilateral ties between New Delhi and Beijing are affected by these issues. More than half of Chinese oil demands are met by imports through the Strait of Malacca in the Indian Ocean. Beijing sees this as a security and strategic threat in view of US and Indian presence along the route. Pakistan's geographical position increases its importance for Beijing manifold. Located at the edge of the Persian Gulf, Pakistan is China's bridge to the busy oil producing countries of the Middle East. Moreover, China's heavy investment in the port of Gwadar can also not go unnoticed. At a distance of 386 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar will be linked to the Chinese city of Kashgar in Xinjiang. 30 percent of world's oil shipments pass daily through the Strait of Hormuz (Hiro, 2015). The link between Gwadar and Kashgar

will reduce Chinese reliance on the sea route for Middle Eastern oil import.

Similarly, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is by far the largest Chinese investment in the country. Apart from creating a network of pipelines, road and rail links between western China and Pakistan, the plan includes colossal investments in Pakistan's energy, telecommunication and transport infrastructure. The project, if properly implemented, might be, as called by some observers, a "fate changer" (DAWN, 2016). In Pakistan's history. For Beijing, the significance of this program is enormous as it will be a part of Chinese B&R initiative. That is, China's intended linkage with Europe could be accomplished in connection to a successful completion of the CPEC. The CPEC will extend all the way from mountains in the north to central Pakistan. According to Beijing, the transport route links in Pakistan will lead to a job boom in the XUAR where economic disparity has led to a sharp increase in ethnic unrest in recent years.

China's reliance on partnership with Pakistan becomes further evident in view of the state of security in the latter. Even, the attacks in Xinjiang by East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) have been linked to terrorist groups in Pakistan. Although security threats in Pakistan cast serious doubts in international community over CPEC project, but it must be noted that China's economic rationale has also altered significantly in the past. Analyzing the correlation between economic depravity and terrorism, Beijing is now primarily driven by the growing sense of need to stabilize economic and security conditions of its western provinces. For this, a stable outer western periphery is indispensable, and this motivates Beijing to cope with security threats in Pakistan for a successful completion of the CPEC and the consequent Silk Road Economic Belt. \$46 billion investment by Beijing in the CPEC is evidence of PRC's interest in developing the project to its full potential.

Even though many critics remain skeptical of Chinese ambitions coming true through CPEC and the 21st century Silk Road, the project has already started to show tangible form of evidence. In late 2014, an 82 container freight train covered more than 6200 miles distance in twenty one days and reached Madrid from Yiwu, a city on the Chinese eastern coast. The distance covered by the Yiwu-Madrid rail route is far larger than that of the Trans-Siberian Railway. The route of the Chinese railway crosses through Xinjiang, Central Asia, Russia, Eastern Europe and finally into Western Europe. Moreover, the “freight service takes a third of time less than by sea, costs a fifth of the price less than by air, and transports more than 4,300 containers” (Yiwu-Madrid Railway, 2016).



Road Map of the Yiwu-Madrid Railway

In many ways, China is seen as filling the vacuum left by the US in Pakistan and other developing nations. USA has invested heavily in Pakistan’s security and military paradigm. But the US was “just not interested in building dams, electrical power plants, railways, roads and bridges and ports in Pakistan” (Craig and Denyer, 2015). But Chinese government circles give a multi-dimensional direction to bilateral relations that involves military, political and socio-economic

outlook. Therefore, Chinese partnership can already be seen in Pakistan's military sphere where the former has continued its assistance even in times of western boycott of the same.

Furthermore, the tangibility of Chinese aid is what sets it apart from western donors in underprivileged societies. The same factor adds to local appreciation of Chinese funded projects in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Neither India nor USA can be completely comfortable with the idea of CPEC or B&R getting materialized. For USA, a successful completion and implementation of the B&R would cause serious damage to its influence in East Asia. In the past, many Chinese policies have been apprehended by Washington of reducing the latter's influence in the eastern periphery of China. However, in the current geo-political scenario, the conceptualization of B&R carries USA's trepidation even further. The B&R and CPEC will not only maximize Chinese influence in Asia but also further west in Europe. The CPEC alone will bring competition with Panama Canal as it will reduce 2000 miles in the passage of goods coming from the west. The B&R, of which the Yiwu-Madrid railway is an example, would be the first of such episodes in recent history where a country's influence will take a trans-continental mode.

In the case of India, the B&R is seen as a disguise to the String of Pearls strategy which carries enormous security implications for New Delhi. The latter considers it as part of Chinese policy in the Indian Ocean to create a network of friendly bases in the region so as to choke India in its periphery waters. As a matter of fact, Chinese naval presence in Sri Lanka, Pakistan or elsewhere in the Indian Ocean will also be a security threat to India. Although China has declined Pakistan's proposal of turning Gwadar into a Chinese naval base in the past but it cannot be ignored that the CPEC passes through some of the most unstable parts of the region. To secure Chinese supply lines passing

through the corridor, Beijing may have to increase its naval presence in the future. While this scenario is uncomfortable for India, Pakistan and China find a US sponsored solution of increasing Indian influence in the Ocean as highly unacceptable.

While New Delhi is threatened by choking points along the Indian Ocean, Beijing itself feels encircled by the former's designs on reaching Afghanistan through the Iranian port of Chahbahar. The port, lying at a short distance in the west of Gwadar, was built by India to gain access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. An Indian sponsored rail link connecting Chahbahar with resource rich Bamiyan province of Afghanistan is also underway. This also compels Beijing and Islamabad to further their partnership in every sphere. The sale of submarines to Pakistan during the current year can also be seen in connection to the CPEC and Gwadar project. Pakistan's procession of such naval vessels can gravely complicate any attempt at blockading its ports. Gwadar and CPEC will play a huge role in China's B&R program. The completion of these programs will also give China easier access into resource rich Afghanistan for its quench of oil and copper. The strongest blow coming from the project would be in direction of the US which would be replaced by China as Pakistan's major investor.

As criticism and skepticism continues to surround Chinese ambitions in B&R and CPEC, it is hard to sideline the historical importance of Pak-China bilateral ties. Pak-China partnership has given diplomatic strength to Pakistan. It has provided China with leverage against western and Indian criticism on Tibetan issue. It has given substantial military impetus to Pakistan. And it is in way of making China the only two-ocean power in the world. Thus, in the context of Pak-China relations, B&R and the CPEC "even a partial success would be pretty consequential."

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