

China Pakistan Ties: Challenges and Implications for the region (2013-2018)

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ABSTRACT

China's active role in South Asia is based on a "win-win" approach which is also beneficial for the economic progress of the regional states. China's rapid economic integration represents its intention to maintain peace and stability in its vicinity. To hold its presence in the Indian Ocean region it is developing strong economic and trade ties with South Asian states. This region has become a center of attention where the interests of major powers China, India and the United States intersects. The joint venture of "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" strategically holds huge significance for China, Pakistan and major powers like India and the US being rival to China. This corridor will enhance the economic conditions of not only China and Pakistan but also the other developing and the landlocked states of CARs and Afghanistan.

Key words: China, Pakistan, Indian Ocean, CPEC, Challenges, India, United States

Introduction

The tale of the relationship between China and Pakistan started in 1950. Pakistan was one of the first group of states which recognized the People's Republic of China. Though the states developed good ties after more than a decade with the advent of war between China and India in 1962. The relation became stronger and supportive later opened doors for a strategic partnership. India's dispute over Kashmir at the time of independence with Pakistan forced the later to ally with China relying on the notion who said? "Enemy of an enemy is a friend", while Pakistan remained a part of the anti-communist security accords led by the United States. There was no hurdle getting the two countries into a coalition towards their mutual threat "India". The onset of the India-Pakistan war in 1965 brought them even closer. Another factor that made Pakistan look at China was the United States' refusal to aid Pakistan against India during the war in 1965.

The new shift came to China–Pakistan ties in 1966 when China started providing Pakistan with military aid. The relationship went into strategic partnership after the 1971 war between India and Pakistan which resulted in the emergence of "Bangladesh" which was initially a part of Pakistan named "East Pakistan". China and Pakistan never concluded any defense pact but always

supported each other at times of need. Pakistan acted as a bridge between China and the Muslim world helped it to establish diplomatic ties with the Muslim world. Pakistan also played a historic role in developing the relationship between China and the United States in 1972 when US President Richard Nixon visited China (Hussain, 2017).

The ties between China and Pakistan are based on mutual interest both states are boosting their trade and economic relations. The government of China is encouraging its people to invest in Pakistan regardless of its investment laws. Mutual trade is contributing positively to the economy of Pakistan. Initially, there were less economic dimensions for investment but during President Musharraf's era, special attention was given to the economy especially between China and Pakistan.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor

Due to transformation, the Indian Ocean region has gained huge importance for several countries around the globe. It has the potential to influence blue water in the future. China is economically aggressive and invests wherever it obtains economic benefits. China and Pakistan established trade and economic relations and gradually China became Pakistan's one of the major trade partners. They started their economic ties in 1963 by concluding a long-term trade agreement. In 2006 both countries concluded the "Free Trade Agreement (FTA)" which was implemented in 2007. In May 2013 Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang urged to build an economic corridor to further strengthen the ties between the two states. The Pakistani government also showed huge support towards the project namely "China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) linking the Gwadar port in Pakistan with Kashgar in China. Since then development work has started at the Gwadar port to transform it into a commercial port that will serve as a "gateway" for China to the Middle East, Central Asia providing the shortest route of 12,000 kilometers (Sial, 2014).

Economic integration in the South Asian region through cooperation is one aspect of China's soft power strategy that will best serve the state's interests which is clear through Xi's remarks in 2015 during his visit to Pakistan. China has been developing independent bilateral relations with different states of South Asia as these countries have huge market potential which China can best utilize.

"Economic corridors" serve as inter and intraregional connectivity while generating multiple job opportunities and investment prospects. Hence Ahsan Iqbal emphasized the importance of the economic corridor by saying:

"Pakistan-China Economic Corridor is not the name of a single route or alignment, it is a comprehensive package of cooperative initiatives and projects encompassing regional connectivity, information network infrastructure, energy cooperation, industry and industrial parks, agricultural development and poverty alleviation, financial cooperation as well as livelihood improvement including municipal infrastructure, education, public health and people-to-people

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communication which will result in the thousands of new ventures and millions of jobs in every part of Pakistan” (Ahmar, 2014).

The significance of this corridor for China and Pakistan cannot be neglected whereas it has certain hurdles and regional implications for this project which has somehow affected the developmental work at the port. States like India and the United States are not much happy with the development of the port and the closeness of China and Pakistan. Both states think that by growing China’s influence in the region they will lose their significance and hegemony in South Asia moreover, Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean is believed to be a threat for them.

Challenges and implications for the region (2013-2018)

Both countries are trying to strengthen their cooperative relations at the regional and international levels. The era 2013-2018 holds huge significance in terms of China-Pakistan ties. During this era, both states strengthened their ties and also transformed their relationship and made it more strategic and economic. The international situation and interests of major powers like India and the United States have the potential to influence or damage the economic cooperation policies between China and Pakistan by making allies with other countries like Afghanistan and Iran. The establishment of CPEC has some challenges and implications at the regional and international levels.

US factor

The United States has witnessed Pakistan as a strategic ally in South Asia countering the Soviet expansion in the region during the “Cold War”. The US did not like India choosing a non-aligned policy. Whereas initially opposed China thinking it an ally of the USSR, on the contrary, used China to halt Soviet enlargement. But during the wars of 1965 and 1971 between India and Pakistan, the United States supported India morally and militarily while it stopped Pakistan’s aid. At this time China assisted Pakistan. It was the time when Pakistan realized the interests of the US.

Similarly, after the nuclear explosions conducted by India, Pakistan also had nuclear explosions as a result the US imposed sanctions over Pakistan. Pakistan witnessed dual policy of the US and started looking up for some other ally. In such a scenario Pakistan found China who supported Pakistan in every time of need. China is not only India’s rival but the US also sees it as a competitor. The close relationship between China and Pakistan has become a matter of concern for both India and the US (Mahapatra, 2011).

In 2013, China showed its interest in developing close economic ties with Pakistan. For this purpose China is investing in Gwadar port to develop an “economic corridor” and it is very cautious and keen to manage its military strength and economic power to counter US influence in Asia. This project

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reflects China's effort to thwart the US from strengthening its area of influence in Southeast Asia and also holds massive implications for China-US strategic confrontation in Southeast Asia. Further, the US is supporting India with intentions granting it a leading position in the Indian Ocean, both allying together being strategic rivals of China.

However, the counter strategies of India and the US are bringing China and Pakistan more close to each other. A Gwadar-centred strategic naval alliance between China and Pakistan has the potential to smash India-US domination in the Indian Ocean. China has a broad military right to control the Gwadar port potentials offering it a passage to Gulf states and the opportunity to build a naval base at the Arabian Sea later (Butt & Butt, 2015).

Russia towards CPEC

Russia and Pakistan have never cordial relations as Pakistan allied with the US instead of the USSR after independence. Further supported United States against the USSR's intervention in Afghanistan which became the reason for the USSR's disintegration. But now, Russia sees Pakistan as an important actor bringing peace to Afghanistan. Moreover, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghan territory is hope for Russia to emerge as a strategically important actor in the region. While somehow opposes Pakistan's role because of China's involvement. On the other hand, it is interested in developing good ties with Pakistan to counter US strong relations with India to create balance. Moreover, Russia wants to get access to warm waters for ages, which was also the reason behind USSR's intervention in Afghanistan decades ago. To achieve this long-standing objective of Russia, it sees Pakistan as an important country which can provide Russia access to its warm waters (Purushothaman, 2015).

Beside all Russia's concerns, the present economic ties and the joint venture of China and Pakistan is quite attractive and now Russia is also interested to become a part of "CPEC". Including Russia in this project will enhance the capabilities of the project. It will be a "win-win game". Russia appreciated this project further willing to assist both states to make it operational. This corridor will enable Russia to get access to the Indian Ocean which will help enhance its economic and trade capabilities. In 2015 Russia concluded an LNG agreement according to which a gas pipeline will be constructed from Karachi to Lahore which will supply liquefied natural gas. The triangular alliance between China, Pakistan and Russia will also have huge regional significance. The respective states are cooperating with each other in different fields. Such involvement of Russia and China in the region is alarming for India and the US. They view that through this alliance dominance of the US and India will decrease in the region (Khan, 2020).

Central Asian Republics and CPEC

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CARs hold huge economic benefits and tremendous natural resources unexploited. Russia and China are economically active in this region and they further want to enhance their trade links with Central Asian states. Pakistan also wants to get access to markets of these states further CPEC will connect these landlocked states with Gwadar port. This project will also bring various opportunities for these states. The corridor will also provide a chance to minimize Russian influence and get more markets for trading their resources (Butt & Butt, 2015). The position of Pakistan on the map of the world has always attracted CARs to get access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. On the contrary, the location of CARs offers China and Pakistan entrance to Central Asia and Europe.

Afghanistan factor

The unstable security situation in Afghanistan is a major threat to Pakistan and CPEC having a long and porous border is a huge concern for Pakistan and China. There is an increasing concern about the future of Afghanistan. The moment has arrived to fully overcome the Afghan quagmire. There have been a lot of recent concerns about the security situation and the withdrawal of the army of the United States from Afghanistan's land. Territorially, Afghanistan shares its boundaries with six states, among them China is the biggest and financially strong among its neighbors. Since Afghanistan shares the narrowest borderline of 76 km with China but a huge amount of feasible cooperation will be of enormous value to both Afghanistan and China but also for Pakistan. Currently, China is one of the world's largest economies. It is continuously expanding with the growing quest for energy-rich resources.

This is the reason China needs to develop close interconnected ties with the world. China is preparing to look beyond its borders for improving cooperation among the whole further bring unity and peace to these states. In order to achieve its objectives, it is important to be thoughtful toward Afghanistan. Stability and peace in Afghanistan will be in favor of China. In this respect, the minerals newly revealed in Afghanistan own significance for China. Besides, Afghanistan is also showing interest in developing ties with China and finds it an opportunity to open up its mineral resources for economic benefits (Opacin, 2014).

Beijing promotes the efforts of the US and NATO in Afghanistan but it is not willing to consider any military action. It has denied for the deployment of its army in Kabul. The two states help one another to fight terrorism. Both countries have agreed to establish closer economic ties with an emphasis on natural resource exploration and utilization. Hamid Karzai paid official visits to China during his regime. He focused on the significance of developing their diplomatic and trade ties. Moreover, Afghanistan looks over China for economic assistance for the development and strengthening of peace and security in its territory.

Afghanistan owns a huge geo-economic and geo-political importance, it lies at the South and Central Asian crossroads, a connecting bridge between Central Asian Republics (CARs), South Asia, East and West Asia. This is an inevitable

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attribute of cooperation between the respective states of different regions. Bringing peace to Afghanistan will positively affect the development of “China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)” and “The Silk Road Economic Belt”. Peaceful and secure Afghanistan is crucial to maximize inter-regional collaboration and bolster economic and trade relations among different states of the regions (Khan & Ayaz, 2017).

The rivalry between China and India has molded the Chinese strategy by which China is allying with smaller states of South Asia like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Burma to manage India’s growing influence in the region. Delhi sees Beijing supporting Islamabad as a threat because of establishing good ties in the region. China and Pakistan support each other on different territorial issues against India. For Pakistan, China is a more trustworthy ally than the US. China acknowledges Pakistan’s capability to control activities in Afghanistan hence, considers Pakistan an important strategic partner in bringing peace to Afghanistan (Ross et al, 2014).

Afghan stability is a crucial factor for the successful functionalization of CPEC, it is the main reason behind China’s participation along with the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan’s administration for peacemaking process in Afghan territory (Esteban, 2016). The CPEC-Afghanistan relationship is mutually beneficial where CPEC succeeds to enforce in Afghanistan will boost the outcome of the economic project by attracting more foreign investors not only to Afghanistan but also to the region.

Moreover, the security situation in Afghanistan directly affects Pakistan’s stability which threatens CPEC. On the other side, Afghanistan requires the opportunity to acquire these aims. Whereas China has already invited Afghanistan to become a part of CPEC as it is necessary for regional connectivity (Ullah et al, 2020).

Iran factor

India is interested in developing Iran’s “Chabahar port” derived by its eye on Iranian oil and gas. While India considers this port as a competitor to China’s invested Gwadar port. Developing Chabahar is India’s strategy to counter China’s growing influence in the region. After Pakistan’s refusal to provide a land route to Indian goods supply to Afghanistan and markets of Central Asia has further increased the significance of Iran’s port for India. India is investing in Chabahar to fail and sabotage the CPEC project by imposing security threats and sponsoring terrorism in Pakistan.

Gwadar is perceived as a competitor port of Chabahar in Iran. Initially, Iran has shown resistance towards CPEC however, in September 2016, the Iranian President expressed willingness to become a part of China-Pakistan joint venture in a meeting with Pakistan’s leadership. China has achieved a peaceful position in the world which is attracting different states to become a part of the project. This project has also transformed China’s geopolitical position. China’s rise as a

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regional economic power is generating its area of the economic sphere. Further, Pakistan has unlocked the way for China to boom its geo-economic zone (Farooq & Khawaja, 2019).

Indian factor

India is distressed about China's growing influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. China's naval existence at Gwadar port is considered a major threat to Indian hegemony in the region. Though the China has denied this concern of India by calling Gwadar port a "commercial port" but still India has apprehensions. China's maritime presence at the port of Gwadar is a serious challenge for India. Indian leadership argues that the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan possess long-term security concerns for India.

Indian Prime Minister Modi clearly opposed CPEC during his visit to China especially the route that passes through the Pakistan administered Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan. Delhi has established a special wing in the RAW agency to sabotage the project. Modi accepted that they have established relations with separatist figures in Balochistan. India is increasing diplomatic ties with Afghanistan for the purpose to destabilise Pakistan by providing arms to the Baloch extremists (Javaid, 2016).

Delhi and Tehran established their diplomatic ties in 1950. Currently, India is getting involved with Iran more for economic reasons to counter China. Iran possesses the potential for India to establish an economic route which will provide a trade passage to Central Asia and Europe. India is laying a foundation for economic and geopolitical animosity by facilitating Iran establishing its "Chabahar Port" near Gwadar in Pakistan. India has indeed remained a hurdle for China and Pakistan in the developmental process of "Gwadar Port".

India is also developing Chabahar port in Iran to use it as a competitor port. India presumes it a doorway to CARs and Afghanistan to supply its products and use markets of other states for improving its economy further a strategy to counter China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia (Farooq & Khawaja, 2019). The states; India, Iran and Afghanistan have also concluded trade agreement. Currently, the markets of CARs are being utilized by China, Russia and Europe. Now India also wants to get access to these markets. The close ties between India and Iran are alarming for Pakistan. The relationship between India and Iran is not only economic but also have strategic and military purposes. Indian's nukutart are is present at Iran bases and providing military training to Iran is a matter of serious concern for Pakistan (Nisar, 2019).

Conclusion

The largest body of water between Africa, Middle East and Asia has become a key strategic maritime corridor for global trade. Due to the enormous significance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) China is investing in the development of Gwadar port in Pakistan which will provide China the shortest route to CARs, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf to secure its trade and energy purposes. China and Pakistan being “all-weather friends” will together reap the fruits of this corridor and involve other states to become a part of this venture to enhance the working of this project. Further involvement of Afghanistan, Iran and Russia will boost the working of this project. Moreover, this will bring economic prosperity to these states. While India and the US are challenges for this corridor both states are trying to counter China’s growing influence in the region. Being a rival to China and Pakistan, India considers economically prosperous Pakistan is more lethal than nuclear Pakistan as China is already stronger than India and through this project, Pakistan will also become a strong rival.

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