Pakistan-China Strategic Engagement after 9/11: An Assessment in the Perspective of Indian Ocean

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Abstract
The New Silk Route and its consolidation of regional states in terms of economic integration, in the form of official rhetoric; One Belt One Road (OBOR) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), are on the way to flourish. Pakistan’s mainstay and the ‘irony’ of Pak-China friendship “higher than the Himalayas and deeper than Indian Ocean”, amidst OBOR and CPEC’s implementation has hitherto been fetched the major geopolitical shifts in the region. The Indo-US “Pivot to Asia’s” policy and Chinese pledge to economic-cum-strategic ambience has been redrawing the geostrategic map of the region, surrounding Indian Ocean. The emerging Sino-Russo alliance and their policy of regional integration under Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for multi-polar world's advocacy has spill over effect for geopolitical supremacy of US, whilst the tension between India and Pakistan is at its peak. The asymmetrical competition, policy confusion for littoral states especially, Afghanistan and Iran and, unchecked arms race are the natural outcomes of the prevailing overtures.

Keywords: Strategy, China, Pakistan, CPEC, Indian Ocean, Geo-politics

Introduction
“The Indian Ocean area will be the true nexus of world powers and conflict in the coming years. It is here that the fight for democracy, energy independence and religious freedom will be lost or won” (Kaplan, 2011).

The Indian Ocean region with its immense economic and commercial potential (account for 80 per cent of the total world petroleum products) and, geopolitical and geostrategic significance is entering into a new phase of “New Great Game” (Kaleem, 2014). The upcoming political dynamics and strategic uncertainties in the region has many critical prospect in terms of stability and strategic shift in balance of power for littoral states in particular and great powers. The prevailing geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics such as volatile Afghanistan, the dialectic of Iran-North Korea-US tension over nuclear arsenals followed by India-Pakistan race for acquisition of arms, emerging regional blocs (Indo-US, Sino-Russo, Pakistan-China etc) and its impact on peace process in Afghanistan, and, the divergence over regional interest between Pakistan and India backed by Sino-Russia and US respectively has further complicated the geopolitical scenario of the Indian Ocean Region (Farwa, 2016). The president Xi Jinping’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) vision under new Silk Route erstwhile meant for cultural and religious exchange is in the process of transformation of West Asian economy, is the determining factor in the Indian Ocean region and its current swing of economic cum strategic connectivity (Farwa, 2016).
Indeed, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its ensuing strategic implications is the discourse vibrantly discussed in Asian politics. This paper discusses the strategic dimension of OBOR and CPEC in particular, with a focus on assessing the regional prospects of China-Pakistan strategic engagement in Indian Ocean. As such strategic marriage has further facilitated the Indo-US alliance, Chinese position in the “Pivot to Asia” policy turned into new direction. Nevertheless, history has repeated once again, same power (US) but containing another Communist (China) of-whom Pakistan choose to disagree with history by engaging the later in Indian Ocean (Khan J. , 2017). Whether this new experiment is optimistic in nature? The ongoing Russian engagement and Iran willingness to join OBOR and CPEC, amidst the process of connecting Central and South Asian regions through Afghanistan vindicate the Pakistan stance of optimism (Butt, 2017). But, as the enigmatic and baffling nature of the Asian region had always compelled the adroit and vigilant power in terms of proxy manoeuvre and political tactics, the region is fertile enough to germinate another seed of conflict.

**Pak-China Responses to Regional Dynamics: Theory and Practice**

From Chinese perspective, CPEC is an essential component of 21st century strategy of economic expansionism -One Belt One Road, regional integration -SCO and strengthening its status as a global player in international politics. The Pakistani approach of CPEC and OBOR is more or less same to Chinese except the fact that she is trying to seek the above mentioned objectives on regional level while China on global level. CPEC and OBOR discourses can be studies under the prism of neo-liberalist and neo-realist paradigms because it involved both the elements of cooperation and competition influencing the states conducts (Maini, 2016).

Liberalists are of the view that CPEC depends on the Pak-China relationship and their foreign policy principles of non-aggression and non-interference as mentioned in the Zhou En Lai ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.’ Among the five principles, ‘equality and cooperation for mutual benefit’ principle emphasis on the coordination and cooperation without violation of each other sovereignty for instance, CPEC project under OBOR can boost the economic activities in Pakistan along with socio-political maturity. At the same, Chinese investments in Pakistan’s in particular and other states infrastructure - human capital and businesses without disturbing sovereignty (non-interference in one’s domestic affairs) -can promote the soft image of China (Khan J. , 2017).

On the other hand, realists argued that though China is seeking to promote soft image and economic diversification but apart from these, political and geo-strategic interests are also involved in the project of regional connectivity under new Silk Route. Strategically,
CPEC will provide the shortest route to connect with Arabian Sea, as the corridor will link Kashgar with Gwadar as (in geopolitical context) other routes that China has are untenable because she lacks geographical contiguity with all her so-called friends. Moreover, Southeast neighbours are also not viable in facilitating China’s access to Indian Ocean which only left two options before her; India and Pakistan. But China has territorial disputes with India (Maini, 2016). Thus, attaining access to Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, Pakistan is best possible option because both states share a good profile of past relationship.

Pakistan perspective of OBOR especially CPEC has also some aspects covering realism. For instance, apart from economic transformation, internal and external interests exist as well. Internally Pakistan wants to strengthen its defence against any possible threats, most probably by India; countering terrorism, extremism and fundamentalism; seeking a reasonable solution for Balochistan, Gilgit and FATA issues. Externally Pakistan wants to counter the Indo-US nexus; regional integration (South Asia and Central Asia) through peaceful Afghanistan and a formula for Chabahar port adjustment which will also facilitate Chinese access to Middle East and African countries (Khan J., 2017).

In short ‘the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea act as a component of the Maritime Silk Route under the One Belt One Road umbrella, allowing China to connect economically and politically with the Middle East through Pakistan, which portrays that both liberalism (up to some extent) and realism prevails in the OBOR (CPEC) project because without considering the role of US and her allies, discussing regional dynamic is almost incomplete.

**Engaging China in Indian Ocean: Cause and Effect Analysis**

The end of Cold War and uni-polity has mixed impacts on international community of states. On the one hand, it gave a free hand to regional and middle powers to pursue an independent foreign policy making, releasing them from the constraints imposed by bipolar world, Washington and Moscow (Khalid, 2011). On the other hand, such uni-polity also has created serious challenges for weak states, i.e. they are under continuous attacks from internal (tribalism, nationalism, political dogmatism and religious fundamentalism) and external (globalism, integration, transnational regimes and multinational corporations) threats. Afghanistan, a weak and fragmented state, with the blessing of British, Russia and US, also faced/facing the above mentioned challenges. Such challenges (especially religious fundamentalism) lead to the drastic political change in the form of 9/11 attack on US. As the US interest in South Asian region was dwindled with the Soviet dismemberment, the 9/11 attack once again made this region centre of international politics (Mishra, 2014).
US felt that without peace and stability in Afghanistan, her Security cannot be ensured. Though it is/was the US objective behind Afghanistan intervention but not the top priority list, because if it would, then she would have to find a solution for it, which so far have not been seen yet. The US presence at Afghanistan is/was aimed to contain another Communist, China after Russia, and to keep an eye on new emerging regional block i.e. Shanghai Cooperation Organization members. To achieve the objectives of countering China and overcoming the potential threats from the uncertain converging Russian and Chinese in the Asian region, US embarked on the policy of much expanded relationship with India (Khalid, 2011). The emergence of new shift in regional politics has some grave implications for both China and Pakistan. China felt herself surrounded by US (Pivot to Asia) creating a new tension in the region while Pakistan felt herself insecure because Indo-US strategic partnership pushed her into international isolation. Moreover, Pakistan also felt insecurity over the issue of Kashmir because US had adopted the pro-Indian stance. Now, in order to counter such condition of isolation, Pakistan opt for the policy of engaging China into South Asian region through Indian Ocean (CPEC) in order to overcome the Indo-US nexus (Naqvi, 2010).

1. **Countering Indo-US Nexus**

The 70th anniversary of WWII in March at China, which was boycotted by the West, where the leaders of Russia and China discussed the prospects of a multi-polar world, the event can be compared with that of one in 1990s, where President Bush in his New World Order speech calmed US geopolitical supremacy. For instance, if there exist an invisible hand which regulates the polarity of the world and international structure is moving to multi-polar from that of uni-polar, then, in this regard the US is already lacking behind (Ullah, 2017). As by analyzing the super power parameters, US infrastructure capacity and dire need of investments and, moving forward towards more extreme protectionist policies in comparison with other emerging powers (China and Russia) is surely a matter of concern. This shift in power structure is directly affecting the South Asian politics as well (Khan J., 2017). Since US is also engaged in Afghanistan, now to counter these challenges, ironically, US, after Iran and Pakistan, is conducting a new experiment on India as well. How and up to which extent these relations will work? Obviously, such questions would be defined by the regional developments in future because in current international political scenario, the regional structure is replacing the international structure (regional organizations and regional unions are some parameters in this direction) (Maini, 2016).

To understand in an easy way, the development of Indo-US relations and how it converted into an Indo-US nexus for Pakistan, it would be divided into phases. Initially, soon after the dismemberment of Soviet and the emergence of uni-polarity, India has
come out from Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) to a multi-alignment approach (Siddiqi, 2015). The 9/11 calamity and the rise of Chinese economy and economic expansionism created an opportunity for India to access US, as the later was in a need of having such a strategic partner, who can overcome the Chinese emergence at least, as when it comes to Afghanistan and Wars. Once after specification of the areas of convergence, both states embarked on the policy of win-win situation (more specifically the policy of give and take). For instance, on the Indian part, the Strategic partnership was aimed to bring India as a South Asian hegemon and bring Afghanistan into South Asia via SAARC in order to give the former some share in the later as well (Beg, 2015). The partnership is further extended to a civil nuclear deal, military exercises, entry into missile regime and NSG and, advocacy for UN permanent membership. Moreover, India has been recognized as a defence partner where the Lema pact (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement) will give India and US an access to each other military bases for the emergency spare part exchange and, refuelling and fuel exchange (Akram, 2016). On the contrary, India has supported US lead stance in South China Sea which makes her a joiner pivot partner that is aimed to contain rising China. In addition, US will/is also benefiting from the Indian rapid industrialization and availability of vast market economy (Khan, 2014).

Other regional stakeholders perceive these developments a threat for their interests in the region. To counter these strategic developments and major shift in geopolitical dynamics of the New World Order that will obviously be the multi-polar in nature, there is the possibility that the counterpart Russia, China and Pakistan may change the de facto alliance into a real alliance (Akram, 2017). As Pakistan cannot match the conventional supremacy of Indian navy and is in a quest for strengthening its external security and to develop a formidable naval doctrine, the US is no more the criteria because the later has used Pakistan when needed and abandoned when not needed. In this regard the China and Russia gives more prospects to the external security of Pakistan then the Non-NATO US alliance (Khan, 2014).

Today the Rising China, whose military might, is not yet that much dynamical but is focusing on economic expansionism coupled with attractive principle of non-interference policy, is heading a New Silk Road Plan based on the ‘Go Global’ policy. The Euro-Asian land and its maritime belts will help Chinese in gaining access to Africa, Middle East and Europe after Central Asia through Atlantic via Indian Ocean. Such engagement of China in South Asian region has formidable prospects for countering Indo-US nexus (Beg, 2015) for instance, the connectivity of Central and South Asia will increase the Russian and Chinese role in the regions and will help them in bring the Eastphalian state system (where order is preferred instead of democracy) (Iqbal, 2016). More specifically, China and Russia with the help of SCO are trying to give the existing regimes the
sustenance of decolonization good governance and oppose any sort of humanitarian interventions on the part of US, which so far have ambiguous results (Beg, 2015). These developments, in one way or other, are parallel with that of Pakistan’s interests in the region in general and against her conventional enemy, India in particular.

2. Access to Central Asian Region through Peaceful Afghanistan

The US withdrawal and the subsequent rise in the activities of IS, Taliban and others in Afghanistan is creating a new dilemma for Pakistan, since both the countries are sharing 2450km porous border with same ethnic communities living on both sides. In addition, War on Terror, cross border terrorism, growing Indian influence and new trade developments in the region through Afghanistan are some other indicators contributing in Pakistan’s security dilemma (Hussain, 2005). Afghanistan, an unstable country, is strategically so important that any development in it has direct spill over effect on the regional security generally and on Pakistan’s particularly. Afghanistan, where the top military in the world cannot bring peace and development and the constant change in international structure has brought serious concerns about the legitimacy of further US presence, is a matter of concern as well (Farwa, 2016). Apart from security, the economic and energy sectors of Pakistan are also facing the dire consequences. Regionally, Afghanistan is also affecting the Chinese internal politics. Afghanistan (and Pakistan but since 2008 the later is continuously conducting military operations in FATA and other regions of the country to eradicate the terrorist and their sanctuaries) is considered a safe haven for terrorist in general and Uyghur separatists in particular and a safe route for drug trade, smuggling and trafficking. Moreover, the prolonged US stay, the undefined trade and investment relations with India, and access to raw material in Afghanistan are some other matters of concern for China and Pakistan (Iqbal, 2016).

The One Belt One Road (OBOR) policy and Chinese engagement in South Asian politics through Pakistan maritime belt, CPEC, has many future prospects. Chinese economic developments and Russian Security umbrella in the Central Asian region and the upcoming integration of South and Central Asian regions through Pakistan are some of the responses to counter the Afghanistan problems and its ensuing regional impacts (Farwa, 2016). Moreover, Chinese investments in infrastructure and other economic spheres, in Central Asia in general and at Afghanistan in particular are also increasing her influence in the war torn country. These developments are welcomed by both regional and global powers because they are benefiting both Afghanistan peace process (US interest) and regional economic integration (Chinese OBOR), as without peace neither US objectives would be fulfilled nor would Chinese investments be successful, unless the Western route is safe (Amir, 2016).
In the great power politics, the US version of the silk route is to bring Afghanistan as the centre in the connectivity of Central Asia to South Asia and India. This will be the regional hegemon backed by US. The counterpart, China under OBOR is favouring Pakistan as the key regional player backed by China and Russia, are creating stable balance of power phenomenon. Coupled with that, the inclusion of Afghanistan in SCO, where a more legitimized stance of the member states will be followed, will eventually result in the formation of mechanism against terrorism, regime stability, border trust settlements and non interference in domestic issues, forge some US concerns (Akihiro, 2007). What is more important for Pakistan in current regional dynamics? One can conclude that, the de facto alliance between Pakistan, China and Russia and its possible prospects for the connectivity of Central Asia with South Asia to foster interdependency in the most instable region of South Asia (Afghanistan), will benefit Pakistan in addressing the vibrant issues of trans-national nature (security, terrorism, Kashmir issue and foreign interventions), agriculture, trade and energy sectors etc (Siddiqi, 2015).

3. Central Asian Region Integration through Chabahar Port: An Indian and Iranian Perspective

Without considering Iran and Iran’s Chabahar port, discussing South Asian politics in special reference to Afghanistan would be incomplete. Afghanistan and Pakistan are interdependent on each other culturally and economically (emerging phenomenon). For instance, Afghanistan, a land locked country and whose about 30 million refugees are still residing in Pakistan, is also dependent on the later for transit route in order to fulfil the country’s need of food and other livelihood goods. The current regional dynamics is also aimed at shifting such dependency (Singh, 2017). The increasing role of India in the region in parlance of developing highways and alternative routes in Iran to connect Afghanistan to Chabahar port, despite of the fact that US had/has imposed sanctions on Iran, portrays the image that one way or other, whether White House has the support with Iran? Interestingly, India is supporting the US stance of sanctions on Iranian regime in parlance of Iran’s nuclearization but at the same time India is showing reluctance to the imposition of Comprehensive Iran Sanctions Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA) imposed by US. (Thomas, 2017) Amid these critical exordiums, Iran conundrum in Indo-US strategic relations especially after revised US Iran’s policy is a matter of concern for US. Ironically, these overtures imply that India has learned from Pak-US relations a lot and is playing well in the great power politics.

Moreover, as Afghanistan is also welcoming such regional prospects and has asked US to develop an alternative route to limit the interdependency on Pakistan. Because historical analysis of the Pak-Afghan relations shows many apple of discord between the two unfortunate nations, like, the Pashtunistan issue and tension over Durand line (Khan J. ,
But the opening of Chabahar Port brought up more controversy despite official rhetoric the main purpose of the development of the port was to create hurdles and give a blow down to the Chinese New Silk Road and a manoeuvre for a new security paradigm and geopolitical shift (Singh, 2017). The apprehension was approved. Indian strategic ambitions in Afghanistan and Chabahar initiatives in the region were whirling around Pakistan positions in South Asian politics. But thanks to OBOR for reconciliation with Iran over the Chabahar port (and Afghanistan on the way), reconsidering the Pakistan’s role once again in South Asian politics in general and in Afghanistan in particular (Khalil, 2017).

Iran, Afghanistan and India nexus was a security threat to Pakistan and its implications can be seen on CPEC and vulnerability of the Western route of the game changer plan. Regionally, the strategic scenarios of South Asia is transforming into isolation of Pakistan by India, where the later is now part of the pivot to Asia polity whose core goal is to contain rising China (Beg, 2015). In addition, in the heartland South China Sea, Indo-US nexus can be coined as the principle point of the pivot to encircle the Chinese expansionism (Beg, 2015).

Though, the over exaggerated and self proclaimed Indian manoeuvre to give a new dimension to the new great game is not a success in the long run to get to Central Asia but will prove good to foster trade relation and get oil acres from Iran and the gulf. Because the Indian endeavour to get connected to Central Asia is limited, thanks to the strong hold of Russia and China over Central Asia and mountainous geographical hurdles. In addition, India requires oil and gas from Central Asia but she is lacking in pipelines which cannot be possible without Pakistan support (Khalil, 2017).

These upcoming trends in South Asian politics are influencing the Pakistani interests in the region but in spite of creating the competition between Gwadar Port and Chabahar Port, it would be better to integrate the later with CPEC. The strategic scenario is forcing Pakistan to invest all its egg in one basket i.e. China and Russia in the new Asian great game.

4. China, Pakistan and Russia Nexus

The strategic partnership of Russia and China apart from Central Asia is extending to south East Asia where the Chinese led OBOR is on the way to flourish and deepening of economic and military relations with Pakistan despite the fact that two were Cold War rivals. Russia and China jointly rejected Indian move at BRICS summit 2016 to declare Pakistan as a state which sponsor terrorism and reverse it in 2017 which left Pakistan to redefine her Afghanistan policy (Achom, 2017). But these summits limited Indian entry to NSG, cancelation of military and naval exercises and joint dialog over the future of
Afghanistan followed by diplomatic endeavours to thwart India’s efforts to isolate Pakistan are certain other developments in such direction (Reuters, 2016).

The new alignment of states whilst drastic changes in the international structure the suffering of Pakistan is more than the gain in the non NATO ally’s status in the US block. The asymmetrical and ‘use when needed and discard when not needed’ policy complied Pakistan to form a new security and regional alliance (Beg, 2015).

The trilateral talks in Russia (December, 2016) held by China, Pakistan and Russia for the restoration of peace and stability in the region especially Afghanistan were rejected by Kabul Administration because of her absence in the process. These countries agreed on fostering peaceful dialogue between the Taliban and Afghan government which Kabul has already started despite of disagreement to trilateral talks. Such strategic shift in Afghanistan clearly shows the emergence of two broad alignments: US and India, and the counterpart China, Pakistan and Russia. Besides Japan and Iran are on its way to join the former and the later blocs respectively. Are we witnessing another phase in the ‘New Great Game’ in Afghanistan? (Thomas, 2017). Moreover, after China, Russia’s extension of strategic relations with Pakistan that is full cooperation over CPEC, joint military training conducts and supply of military hardware toppled with US $1 billion support for construction of gas pipeline is inimical to Indo-US interests in the region (Saalman, 2017). The China, Iran, Pakistan and Russian engagement in Afghanistan, amidst Indo-Pakistan tensions at its peak, vindicated the new alignment and prove the de facto alliance of Pakistan Russia and China (Akram, 2016).

**Critical Analysis**

In the context of geopolitics CPEC has many dimensions. CPEC, a part of One Belt One Road, has considerable implications for Pakistan and China in particular and South Central Asian states in general. This policy of regionalization will help Pakistan’s stability in security and economic terms while China in achieving the goal of economic expansionism (Iqbal S., 2015). But at the same time, this shift of operations (CPEC) raised some concerns among external stakeholders as well. Regionally such developments on the part of Chinese, is certainly a matter of concern for US and India, because CPEC is detrimental to geo-strategic and commercial interest of the later. As Gwadar port is located near the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf vindicating strategic vulnerability in the region, whilst Chinese access to vulnerable Sea Line of communication will facilitate her in monitoring where 60 per cent of crude supply passes from West Asia to China. Moreover, the position of Afghanistan (security situations) and Iran (Chabahar port and its role in regionalization and regional politics) are some other challenges and opportunities respectively, in the way of CPEC (Akram, 2016).
Though there are certain challenges in the implementation of CPEC, but these challenges are basically opportunities for Pakistan if she tackles it properly. For instance, the US Indian views on CPEC are creating dialectic of scepticism and optimism. Sceptically, the $46 billion proposed Chinese investment in Pakistan will enable her in securing security and economic stability. Optimistically, such conditions would be in best interest of US as Pakistan would be able to play an active role in Afghanistan stability (Hussain, 2005). At the same time, for the time being, it created a complex situation for New Delhi because such strategic divergences of interest can further deteriorate the Indo-Pakistan relations. But in longer run, such connectivity will be able to address the regional challenges i.e. stability and anti-terrorism measures especially peace process in the unfortunate Afghanistan (Khalid, 2011).

As stated earlier, the traditional NAM country India has waged a multi-aligned layer of strategic and diplomatic encirclement where the US is supporting India to contain China and involving India more in Afghanistan to make her the hegemon of South Asia. (Sharma, 2016). In the new geopolitical scenario, the Chinese engagement is always followed by Russia as the two are strategic partners in the step towards balancing US. Both states advocate a multi-polar world (Ullah, 2017). The marriage of convince of Russia and China is growing more and more prospects from regional to global level, where Russia is showing reliance while China is rising and US is losing its geopolitical supremacy, amidst Pakistan is balancing and re-gaining its geopolitical status while India is struggling for the hegemon position in South Asia (Akram, 2016).

What’s more important is the political and economic stability in Afghanistan, whilst the on-going exordium under the lingo of ‘One Belt One Road’ and the prospect of Sino-Russo engagement will counter the approved apprehension. Moreover, the clamour for connectivity via Indian Ocean by land locked Central Asian States and Iran’s cry against international isolation would best be inscribed by growing overtures of OBOR (Khattak, 2016). In conjunction with connectivity, the vociferous SCO and her patronage for ‘order’ in the region would be helpful in addressing the evolving nuclearization and its menacing affects. To not be overly influenced by China and to avoid the asymmetrical competition in future, it is now vital to involve Russia to balance China (Sharma, 2016).

Conclusion

The OBOR, primarily destined for economic linkage between Asia, Africa and Europe has more political and strategic prospects for the region. The new swing of Chinese
strategic partnership and her reluctance for alliance formation is surely because of past unsuccessful alliance with the Soviet. Nevertheless, Chinese assertion of different titles and mechanisms under the parlance of strategic partnership are meant to protect China’s core interests and peaceful rise, are defensive and assertive logics respectively in nature. However, the cumbersome list of strategic engagement under OBOR has mixed implications in the region adjoining Indian Ocean. For instance, economic prosperity which has direct effects on fundamentalism, peace and stability in Afghanistan and interdependence which will address the bilateral issues between states are views among optimists. But the possibility of rising new political blocs that will surely be India, US and Japan and their counterparts China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia, amidst the new race of expanding nuclear arsenals between India and Pakistan followed by Iran and North Korea and regional shift in balance of power are some concerns to be defined.

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