



IMPACT OF CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR ON DYNAMICS OF PEACE AND CONFLICT IN SOUTH ASIA



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Abstract

South Asia is conflict-prone,¹ the least stable,² least integrated and the most impoverished sub-region of the World. It contains more of the world's poor-about 500 Million people-than any other region.³ As a result, it faces social deprivation, deep inequities, fragile democratic traditions and authoritarianism.⁴ Besides inter and intra-state religious and linguistic tensions, have resulted in polarised civil societies and repressive states.⁵ There are multiple factors for weak growth and development in South Asia. Prevalence of prolonged conflict, the structure of the region - rendering it to 'Kautilian Dictum',⁶ geopolitics, compartmentalisation and the hegemonic attitude of India maybe a few. Encumbrance of India with the Chanakya Doctrine renders it incapable of contributing towards peace and stability in the region. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is bringing prospects of growth, development, interdependence and conflict mitigation. However, based on Kurt Lewin's Model for Change, it is being contested by the restraining forces. South Asia (SA) is transitioning from India-centricity to China-centricity and by implication from strategic thought driven by conflict-based Chanakya Doctrine to mutual-growth-based Chinese Doctrine. CPEC promises the transition of SA from a conflict-prone region to an integrated region. In this milieu, the optimum dividends of CPEC can only be reaped if restraining forces behave responsibly for the region's greater good. South Asia has suffered for India being, "boorish, condescending or overbearing with its neighbours".⁷

Keywords

Conflict-prone, CPEC, Interdependence, South Asia (SA), Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), Global War on Terror (GWOT), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indian Ocean Region (IOR), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC).

Introduction

CPEC-Martial Plan of South Asia (SA), will directly benefit China and Pakistan whereas the region, which is in dire need of growth and development, is likely to be an indirect beneficiary. The prospects of CPEC to forge regional integration may not be well understood without analysing regional geostrategic compulsions that trigger conflict in SA. Conflict and integration have a cause-and-effect relationship as prolonged conflict precluding economic integration forms a vicious cycle. It is significant to see the historical perspective, resource potential and state of conflict, integration and connectivity of the region.

Simultaneously, issue areas of deprivation and poverty warrant a shared responsibility for economic integration. Ex Prime Minister of India Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee says that there has been a broad consensus that SA has been a major conflict-prone area of the World,⁸ thus, least-integrated. Resultantly, as described by Chandoke, SA is troubled by numerous problems i.e. social deprivation, deep inequalities, weak democracies and a tendency towards authoritarianism.⁹ The problem is further complicated by inter-state and intra-state conflicts, all of which have created polarised societies and repressive states.¹⁰ Admiral Stavridis has termed the Indian Ocean as the future sea and has said that it will remain a driving economic force in the world oceans for decades to come.¹¹ Alfred Mahan, a renowned naval strategist said over a century ago "whosoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. In the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided upon its waters".¹²

Literature Review

Conflict-prone SA is in dire need of growth and development and that is only possible through mutual interdependence, mitigation of conflict and emancipation. Swaran Singh in, "China - Pakistan Strategic Cooperation: Indian Perspective" has presented a comprehensive exposé of Sino-Pakistan relations as seen by Indian scholars.¹³ At the same time, the contestation mentioned by Robert D. Kaplan in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) seems to be occupying the centre stage of rivalry for the 21st century.¹⁴ An Indian author P.L. Bhola provides an Indian perspective on Pakistan-China relations having focus on the motivations and objectives of both, Pakistan and China.¹⁵ Indian writers and scholars have always

been concerned about the potential of Sino-Pakistan Road links which have always been seen as a threat by them.¹⁶

John Calabrese argues, "The CPEC will be pivotal in the geo-economics of the region that could provide a fulcrum¹⁷ for the regional connectivity under the dimension of Pakistan-China strategic cooperation". Bhabani Sen Gupta is also of the view that Pakistan's geostrategic location has made it a fulcrum of Asia.¹⁸ The aspiration of increased strategic partnership entails people-to-people contact as a prime factor in achieving the mutual goal of a shared destiny between Pakistan and China.

Safdar Sial's article, titled, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: An Assessment of Potential Threats and Constraints" provides a good insight into the micro-level details of the CPEC. In the domain of the geostrategic environment of the region, the article stays very brief on Pakistan-China and the interests of the regional countries. The article focuses on the internal security dynamics of Pakistan and the Xinjiang region of China. It provides good insight into security threats in each region of Pakistan through which CPEC will be straddling.¹⁹ Each sector has been covered in ample detail but details of strategic security as well as relationship with Pakistan's economy have been found lacking.

Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) has published a book titled, "Changing Security Situation in South Asia and Development of CPEC". The dynamics of geopolitics in the wake of CPEC have been discussed at length. The prospective impact of CPEC on the mitigation of conflict in the region has been highlighted. The evolution of regional dynamics of SA in the post-Cold War scenario has been explained. CPEC has been envisaged to play a role in minimising fault lines in SA and improving trade between Pakistan and Iran.

A master's thesis by Muzaffar Hussain, titled, "China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Challenges and the Way Forward" has been submitted to Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey California. It looks at possible challenges, the implementation of the project may face, including the impact of instability in Afghanistan, conflicting interests of India/ Iran and Indo-US concerns about the initiative.²⁰

Historical and Geostrategic Overview of the Indian Ocean Region

Notwithstanding, the distant history, in modern times, Afghanistan and the regions now forming Pakistan have remained theatre of international rivalries for over last two centuries.²¹ Before 1947, the British presence in the subcontinent and Afghanistan had been the major source of conflict. However, after 1947, the division of the subcontinent, its unfinished agenda²² and the intransigence of India have become the major sources. The long-standing Indo-Pakistan competition over Kashmir has contributed to sustained regional tensions and the failure of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).²³ Within the region, Afghanistan and India have been most instrumental in the prevalence of the conflict. While, the US and erstwhile USSR-extra-regional powers, have remained contributors to the conflict.

Due to its geopolitical and geostrategic importance, SA has held a pivotal position in maritime trade for over 3,000 years.²⁴ The region has remained sensitive and strategic due to the interests of extra-regional powers. The Persian Gulf and Malacca Straits have played a significant strategic role in geopolitics and geo-economics.²⁵ The establishment of the US Base at Diego Garcia in early 1977, has further increased the importance of the Indian Ocean.²⁶ The energy flow of the world has made the Indian Ocean the hub of energy. The flow of oil, per day, is; 21 Million barrels through the Strait of Hormuz,²⁷ 16 Million barrels through the Straits of Malacca²⁸ and 6.2 Million barrels through Bab-al-Mandeb.²⁹

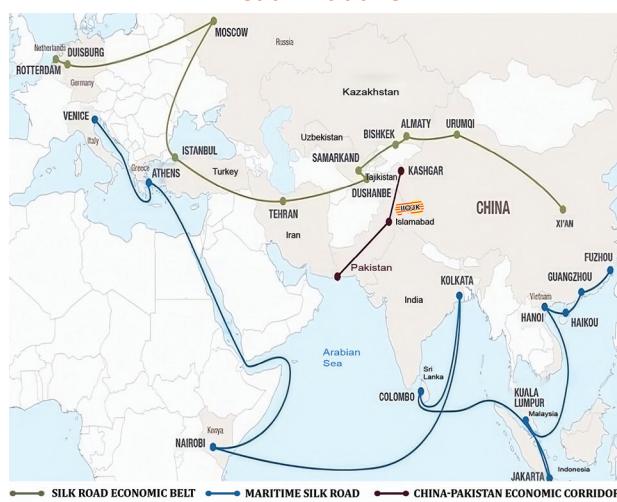
Admiral Stavridis has argued that the Indian Ocean has had relatively less human and geographical history as compared to the Atlantic and the Pacific. It is only in the post-World War 2 environment that its tributary seas—the Arabian and the Red Sea, have become particularly important in the geopolitical sense.³⁰ Robert D Kaplan in his book, Monsoon and article, "Centre Stage for the Twenty-First Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean" has aptly highlighted the future strategic significance of IOR.³¹ India and China are engaged in contracts for the development of various ports in the entire IOR following respective strategies of "String of Pearls"³² and "Necklace of Diamonds".³³

The geostrategic significance of SA is; for being a vital

Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) for energy³⁴ and for providing shorter access to the Indian Ocean to both China and Central Asian Republics (CARs). SA is a nuclear flashpoint and the coexistence of a third nuclear power China makes the matrix even more complex.³⁵ Thus, SA strategically influences regions beyond its own geographic and political boundaries. The regional actors instead of relying on each other, have been looking away from each other. Regional cooperation for regional peace and stability has remained a pipe dream. Due to this environment, Snedden has termed, SA as an incongruous region. Based on its population, economy and conventional military strength India is a regional giant.³⁶ It is surrounded by far smaller countries and suffers from the 'Kautilian Dictum'.³⁷ India as an expansionist power exercises dominion over 1382 offshore islands and islets of IOR³⁸ and hegemony over its all neighbours particularly Sikkim and Bhutan.

This regional structure has contributed to instability in SA with a peculiar security matrix, particularly with Pakistan, but also to a lesser extent with all other South Asian countries less Bhutan.³⁹ The final battle of the Cold War, as well as Global War on Terror (GWOT) both, fought in the region, have further compounded the structural instability of SA. Recently, the rise of China has been contested and challenged by the US.⁴⁰ Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and CPEC have also drastically altered the regional geopolitics and security dynamics which have led to Washington's predilection to use India to balance the rise of China.⁴¹

Figure-1: Routes of the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative



Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Map-of-One-Belt-One-Road-Initiative>



Given the enhanced strategic importance of IOR for the 21st century as well as China's global ambitions, SA is transitioning from India-centric SA to China-centric SA. Andrew Korybko, a Russian expert on the region has projected Greater SA.⁴² Akin to the Monroe Doctrine of the US, which declared the US sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere and declared it as a no-go area for the external powers; China is too seemingly, declaring its regional sphere of influence.⁴³ However, there are alarming as well as sanguine views about the intentions of China. Denny Roy, Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis ring alarm bells, whereas Robert Kagan has a sanguine view. Andrew Krepinevich went as far as urging the US to take countermeasures.⁴⁴

Figure-2: Greater South Asia



Source: Andrew Korybko, 'The Death of SAARC Gave Birth To "Greater South Asia"', Geopolitical.RU, 7, November 2016, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/death-saarc-gave-birth-greater-south-asia>.

The resurgence of geopolitics in SA has initiated a rivalry in IOR as India and China both have started a race to create a network of seaports in IOR through agreements with respective countries. At the turn of the century, the US media coined the term “String of Pearls” and China’s manifestation of the same has been discernible.⁴⁵ However, the Chinese Government continues to deny this theory. It has denied that it has any intention of seeking hegemony, military expansion, or encirclement of India but is only expanding its commercial and energy interests.⁴⁶ The String of Pearls will not only provide China with, safe energy, trade and shipping routes, but it can also allow

China to station its security and intelligence forces throughout the IOR.⁴⁷ China's motivations are for sure as geostrategic as these are economic.⁴⁸ Over a dozen ports are planned to be developed in IOR under the aegis of China. Myanmar's USD 1.3 Billion Kyaukphyu deep-sea port project, is closer to realisation.⁴⁹ In Bangladesh, Payra Port is being developed.⁵⁰ China has also proposed the building of new ports at Chittagong and Sonadia, but these projects have not proceeded due to concerns of India.⁵¹

Figure-3: String of Pearls



Source: Centre for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/string-of-pearls->

In Sri Lanka, the projects include the development of the port of Hambantota.⁵² In the Maldives, the most celebrated project is the multi-Million Friendship Bridge, funded mostly by the Import Bank of China. Port Louis of Mauritius is being developed.⁵³ In Tanzania, the construction of the China-funded, USD 11 Billion project of Bagamoyo port started in October 2015.⁵⁴ In Djibouti, since 2000, China reportedly has provided nearly USD 1.5 Billion for infrastructure projects including a USD 3.5 Billion free-trade zone.⁵⁵ In Kenya, China has already a single berth port at Lamu.⁵⁶ China is assisting Seychelles, in the expansion and modernisation of Port Victoria.⁵⁷ In 2016, Oman's government planned an expansion and modernisation of Salalah Port.⁵⁸ In addition, China has also invested more than USD 15 Billion in Sohar Port.⁵⁹

To counter the String of Pearls, India has unveiled its "Necklace of Diamonds".⁶⁰ In 2012, India's former

foreign secretary, Lalit Mansingh, while addressing a conference organised by George Washington University, said India's answer to China's "String of Pearls" in SA, is its own "Necklace of Diamonds".⁶¹ Unlike, a merely ocean-based string of pearls, the necklace does not span the oceans alone. One bit of the strategic depth is nestled in the frozen heights of Mongolia.⁶²

Figure-4: Necklace of Diamonds



Source: <https://chanakyaforum.com/india-as-an-emerging-world-power-vision-2047/>

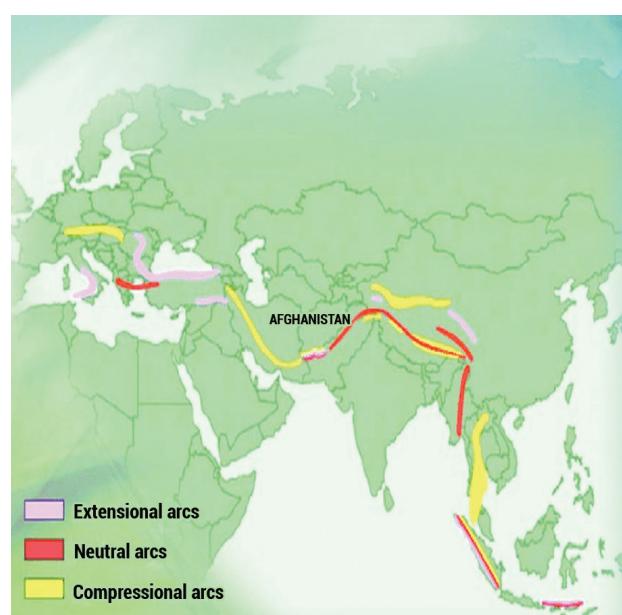
In 2018, India has struck an agreement with Seychelles to set up a new base. India has also secured a deal with Oman for military access to naval facilities at its port and airfields.⁶³ In 2017, a pact was signed with Singapore to allow deployments at each other's naval facilities. It seems ultimately India has realised that it has to challenge the growth and rise of China in Asia.⁶⁴ Through joint military agreements, Indian warships now have access to their own "Necklace of Diamonds", from Madagascar, via Djibouti, Oman and Seychelles and to Singapore.⁶⁵ India and Japan have envisioned an ambitious economic project called the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to counter China's BRI.⁶⁶ Sengupta argues that all of this has made Japan a pivot in what was being called India's "Necklace of Diamonds"-a strategic and economic countering of China's "String of Pearls". Since 2018, the Indian armed forces have had three new strategic bases-Changi, Singapore; Duqm, Oman; and Sabang, Indonesia. Sabang-on Malacca Strait, is the most noteworthy from the perspective of containment of China.⁶⁶

India and Vietnam have established defence ties and recently conducted a five-day naval exercise in May 2018. In Seychelles, India is estimated to be investing USD 550 Million into developing this base on Assumption Island.⁶⁸ India has also planned the extension of the runway on Mauritius's outlying Agalega islands and built a jetty.⁶⁹ India is investing USD 1 Billion in Mongolia to improve its first oil refinery to meet its fuel needs, ending its reliance on Russia and boosting its GDP by 10%. There now appears to be a semblance of a valid Indian challenge to China's String of Pearls.⁷⁰

Potential Resources in SA

SA as a region is bestowed with a few advantages and faced with certain competitions. In the fast-evolving geo-economical world, socio-economic potential can also be termed as the power potential of a state or region. SA as a region has had superior geography. History has amply proven that access to sea/ ocean plays a significant role in this superiority. SA is so strung on the world map that six out of nine countries have direct access to the Indian Ocean. Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal are the only landlocked countries. In the North, there are the highest mountain ranges of the World which form a strategic barrier as well these irrigate the lands in the South.⁷¹ In the South, Sri Lanka is so located that hundred percent of Eastbound sea vessels pass through its South.

Figure-5: Tethyan Belt of Minerals

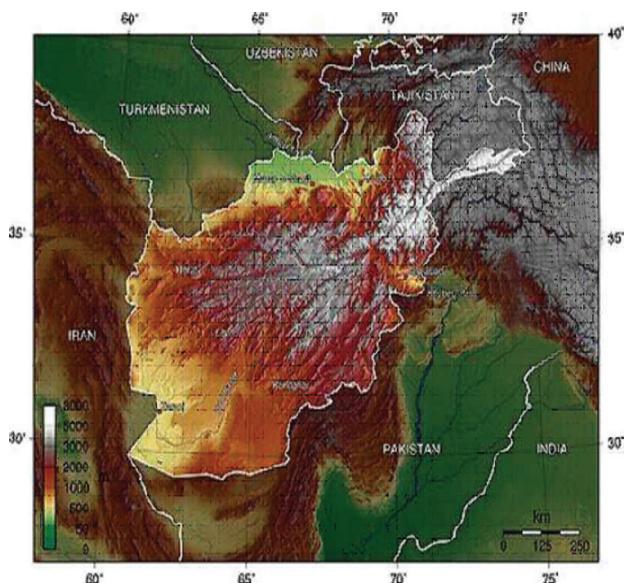


Source: Klaus Steinmuller et al. "The Metalliferous Mineral Potential of Afghanistan"



With a population of 1.749 Billion, SA forms one-fourth of the world's population.⁷² The littoral states of the Indian Ocean are highly rich in oil, gas, gold and minerals. Approximately, two-thirds of the global oil reserves, one-third of gas reserves, two-thirds of Uranium, over one-third of total Gold and three-fourths of total deposits of diamonds are found in the littorals of the Indian Ocean. These riches have made the region strategically important.⁷³ The mountain ranges in the North of SA are also endowed with mineral riches. The Tethyan Belt is extending as shown in the image.⁷⁴

Figure-6: Lithium in Afghanistan



Source: Michael Graham Richard, "Will Afghanistan Become the "Saudi Arabia of Lithium"? treehugger.com

Afghanistan in particular (though conflict-ridden) has been endowed with mineral riches by nature which also includes rare earth metals. The vast mineral resources of Afghanistan have been known for decades, including immense quantities of the main component of most portable electronics and electric car batteries: Lithium.⁷⁵

Conflict in South Asia

Before 1947, the presence of the British in the subcontinent and instability in Afghanistan had been major drivers of conflict. Post-1947, continuing instability in Afghanistan, unfinished agenda of partition and arrogance of India have been breeding conflict to date. Ex PM Vajpayee has argued that the uniqueness of conflicts in SA is in their regional dynamics and not in their intensity or frequency.⁷⁶ Thus, in SA, the intrastate and interstate conflicts have not been two exclusive categories, these rather have been interrelated and crisscrossed each other at various points. Regional stability has remained endangered because the negative synergy of intrastate conflicts has been far greater than the prevailing intrastate cooperative synergy to solve the conflicts.⁷⁷ The cross-cutting ethnic and religious composition and uneven economic and political growth in the region have generated such dynamics in the long run.

Conflict dynamics in SA have got further complicated due to two factors. First is the 'India Factor'; being the largest, most developed and centrally located country, India should have been a stabilising force in



the region, but unfortunately, it has not been.⁷⁸ Directly or indirectly, India is viewed as a major stakeholder in all major intrastate conflicts in SA. This dilemma has remained, inherent to the very nature of the conflict dynamics of the region. Recently, Bangladeshi-American author Mohammad Zainal Abedin has alleged RAW for active involvement in destabilising neighbouring SA states to gain control over them and the region.⁷⁹ The involvement of extra-regional powers has been the second factor contributing to conflict. ICI's verdict on Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav is another example of Indian involvement in destabilising Pakistan.⁸⁰ The way conflict has spanned in SA is shown in the table-1 below:-

India and Pakistan have fought four wars (1948, 1965, 1971, 1999 and Kargil)⁸¹ and numerous small-scale conflicts. Eyeball to eyeball situation at Siachen Glacier and along the active Line of Control (LOC) dividing J&K has created a perpetual state of conflict. Pakistan has enjoyed relevance for extra-regional powers as it is abundant with geostrategic location connecting energy-affluent Central Asia (CA) and the Middle East (ME) with energy-hungry India and China.⁸² As a consequence, of the 1971 war and machinations of India, Pakistan was dismembered and Bangladesh was created with the support of India⁸³ which has been confessed by the PM of India.⁸⁴ The short episodes of relative peace between India and Pakistan have

Table-1: History of Conflict in South Asia

2010	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR										
2000s	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
Escalation Escalation										
GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR										
1990s	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00
			Escalation					Nuclear Tests	Kargil War	
1980s	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90
Siachen Suspected Attack on Kahuta Escalation, Indian Forces Intervene in INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN 79-89										
1970s	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80
Indo-Pak War			Sikkim Annexed						SOVIET	
1960s	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70
		Sino-India War								
1950s	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
										Goa Annexed
1940s	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50
							Partition	Indo-Pak War Hyderabad Annexed		

Source: Compiled by Author



never been free of conflict. Pakistan's possession of nuclear weapons since the mid-1980s has nullified the conventional superiority of India which has abated chances of an all-out war.⁸⁵ However, ever since then, innumerable skirmishes along LOC and Siachen and war-like situations erupted in 1986, 2002,⁸⁶ 2008, 2014 and 2019.⁸⁷

There have also been intrastate conflicts. In the early 1990s,⁸⁸ India has defeated Sikh separatists. Nepal had a Maoist uprising from 1996 to 2006. In 2009, Sri Lanka finally and irrevocably defeated separatist Tamil Tigers after 27 years long insurgency which also involved an Indian peacekeeping operation from 1987-1990. Ongoing insurgencies, active or quiescent, include anti-Indian insurgency in Illegally Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K) that has become violent since 1989; Naxalites in Eastern Indian states, regarded as India's "greatest internal security threat";⁸⁹ insurgencies in North-eastern India, one of which-by Nagas, has the dubious honour of being SA's longest insurgency, dating from the mid-1950s.

Besides the Indo-Pakistan conflicts, India faced a humiliating defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian war⁹⁰-rooted in the partition of the subcontinent by the British. Conflict-plagued SA was caught up in further turmoil due to the revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The US had an opportunity in Afghanistan to fight the finale of the Cold War.⁹¹ Peace did not return to Afghanistan after the Soviets were defeated in 1989 as it was followed by a brutal civil war which in hindsight seems to have sown seeds of the next conflict in Afghanistan.⁹² During Taliban rule in Afghanistan, 9/11 occurred and the US alleged, Afghanistan-based Al-Qaeda for the attacks.⁹³ Consequently, Afghanistan plunged into another war to compound the perpetual instability of over two decades. The US built a coalition and started Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) in 2001. This war has been more menacing and dreadful than the last one, as the raged sole superpower ventured to hunt the perpetrators of 9/11.⁹⁴

The future also does not portend a conflict-free SA, as a contest is increasingly arising in the Indian Ocean between the maritime forces of China and India.⁹⁵ India is actively developing a blue-water navy endowed with aircraft carriers. Chinese Navy (PLAN) has

superior capability but, concerning the Indian Ocean, China suffers from geographic limitations.⁹⁶ These developments will create uncertainty, particularly for India, which is concerned about China's increasing maritime presence throughout the Indian Ocean, also manifested through PLAN Submarine's visit to Colombo and Karachi in 2015.⁹⁷ For China, this is partly important to address the Malacca Dilemma. Whereas, for India, it is about countering Chinese expansionism and domination of the region. India is also developing its first tri-service base at Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman and Nicobars near the strait's Western entrance.

The entrenchment of China in SA is a definite and obvious future trend with immense potential for economic integration. Snedden has argued that Pakistan is seemingly betting the right horse, as some Pakistanis, see CPEC as not just a game-changer, but a fate-changer.⁹⁸ China is also seeking to advance its relations with South-Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Iran, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka. China is seeking to access Afghanistan through the Wakhan corridor by railway to transport copper extracted from the large Chinese-controlled Aynak mines South of Kabul. Bhutan and Nepal are also being offered trade and transport opportunities, e.g., extending the Qinghai-Xizang Railway line from Shigatse, South of Lhasa, to Kathmandu.⁹⁹ In Sri Lanka, China is financing 70% of infrastructure projects, including Hambantota port and a new port facility near Colombo.¹⁰⁰

Plans of India include participation in Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC), the Indian Ocean underwater energy pipeline to Oman and the so-called "International North-South Transport Corridor" (INSTC) through Iran with possible connectivity to Turkey and Eastern Europe.¹⁰¹ India's strategic outlook with enhanced relations with the US is a substantial change. India is now the largest arms customer of the US.¹⁰² Notwithstanding, minor hiccups, the India-US relationship is getting stronger due to the convergence of interests and both nations are concerned about a rising and increasingly assertive, China.

Pakistan is the only power in SA which is viewed by India as a hurdle to its hegemonic designs. India has

never come to terms with the existence of Pakistan and has kept hatching conspiracies to undo it.¹⁰³ The intransigence and arrogance of India have precluded the success of any of the dialogue processes. Lately, with the ultra-Hindu party-BJP's coming to power possibility of peace has further diminished. Politico-diplomatic and military coercion of Pakistan, blatant aggression of annexation of Kashmir through abrogation of Article 370 and 35 A on 5 August 2019, the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019, the state-sponsored rise of Hindutva and water aggression of India portend a conflict-prone future of the region. Indian hostility towards CPEC, a project of growth and development, has also increased the probability of the conflict.

The year 2020, has witnessed a menacing escalation on the Sino-Indian Border. In a dispute regarding Indian patrolling, soldiers clashed near the Pangong Tso Lake in Ladakh on May 5, 2020 and Naku La region of Tibet on May 9, 2020. The recent past has witnessed increased militarised incidents. Indians allege the Chinese military has crossed into Indian territory 1,025 times between 2016 and 2018.¹⁰⁴ One phase of such military escalation was seen in 1988. The two militaries had skirmished in the Sumdorong Chu Valley in Arunachal Pradesh and when Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited China, the two countries agreed to establish a forward-looking relationship. The pragmatism was rooted in economic and strategic considerations.¹⁰⁵ At that time, India and China were economically almost equal rivals.

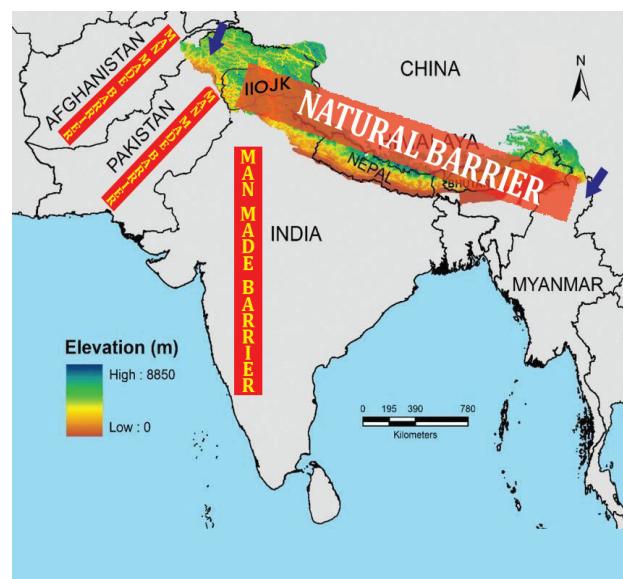
In 2017, Indian and Chinese troops were on the brink of a serious military clash over Doklam—an area claimed by both Bhutan and China. Although the crisis subsided, however, the standoff was indicative of a new phase in relations between the two countries. This phase was a lot different from the last phase of 1988 because economic asymmetry had grown between the two rivals. In 2018, China's GDP was USD 13.6 Trillion i.e. more than five times that of India's USD 2.7 Trillion. In defence spending, in 2019, China spent USD 261.1 Billion i.e. almost four times that of India's USD 71.1 Billion. In the past three decades although India has risen economically but far less than China.¹⁰⁶

Interstate Connectivity in SA

Connectivity is a critical need for the integration of

the region. The geographic structure of the region is such that the Himalayas serve as a strategic barrier for the North-South movement. On the other hand, three countries i.e. Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal are land locked whereas two countries i.e. the Maldives and Sri Lanka are islands. In addition to that, animosities in the region preclude an ideal state of connectivity. India restricts Pakistan's access to Bhutan and Nepal only through the air and to Bangladesh only through air and sea. Conversely, Pakistan restricts India's access to Afghanistan only through the air and to Iran only through air and sea. Unstable Afghanistan inhibits Pakistan's access to CARs. Ideal connectivity comprising all modes i.e. road, rail, air, sea, fiberoptic and virtual may only be possible between India and Bangladesh. On the whole, SA suffers from compartmentalisation due to geographic layout coupled with animosities. The strategic barrier of the Himalayas can only be circumvented from the East through Myanmar and from the West through Pakistan. The barriers inhibiting connectivity in SA are shown in the figure-7.

Figure-7: Disconnectivity of South Asian Countries



Source: Compiled by Author

Integration in SA

Despite a shared colonial past, independent states in SA charted their future course of progress based on varying strategies of nation-building, statehood and development.¹⁰⁷ South-Asian countries have also faced challenges of terrorism, religious extremism, Jihadism and separatist movements.¹⁰⁸ These dynamics have



rendered the region into the world's most intractable intra as well as inter-state conflicts.¹⁰⁹ A few critical analysts have already identified the region as a part of the global "Arc of Crisis"¹¹⁰—which so far has largely prevented any effective and cohesive regional cooperation.

SA is affected by a serious lack of connectivity.¹¹¹ In 2017, intraregional trade in the SA (including Myanmar) amounted to merely 5.6% which is among the lowest in the World.¹¹² Trade of India-being the biggest and economically strongest country in the region; with its neighbourhood has ranged between 1.7% and 3.8% of its global trade.¹¹³ China, on the other hand, has consistently increased its exports to the region from USD 8 Billion in 2005 to USD 52 Billion in 2018, a growth of 546%.¹¹⁴ According to the World Bank Report, "South Asia: Growth and Regional Integration", "the intra-regional trade is less than 2% of GDP, compared to more than 20% on SA".¹¹⁵ "Only 7% of international telephone calls are regional, which is much below the 71% of such calls in East Asia".¹¹⁶ SA ranks second-last among regions across the world in terms of ease of trading across borders (the last being Sub-Saharan Africa).¹¹⁷

SA is one of the fastest-growing regions with its eight economies collectively boasting an average annual growth of 7.0%, but least integrated.¹¹⁸ Widespread and perpetual conflict with its frequent recurrence has held the region far from desired integration and mutual interdependence. The regional geopolitical realignments have altered the security paradigms in the region. The geopolitics of the 21st Century has brought India and the US as "natural allies" or "indispensable partners".¹¹⁹ While India seeks high economic growth and regional domination; the US aims at containment of China.¹²⁰

In the latest developments, both Afghanistan and Iran have shown their interest in being part of the CPEC.¹²¹ CPEC is seen by Afghanistan's Ambassador to Pakistan as equally important for Afghanistan as well as the region.¹²² On the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly session, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in a meeting with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has also expressed a desire to be part of CPEC.¹²³ CARs such as Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan may get an opening towards India through CPEC. If India and Pakistan can agree on regional integration

and connectivity, it will augur well for the integration of the region.¹²⁴ Moreover, CPEC will also provide an opportunity for faster implementation of the Iran-Pak-India gas pipeline to meet the growing energy needs of India.¹²⁵

Conclusion

SA as a region has suffered tremendously due to the prevalence of prolonged conflict. The conflict has been driven by internal structure and fissures in the region as well as extra-regional-powers-driven geopolitics. In the end, it's the people of the region who suffer. CPEC presents a unique opportunity for growth and development in the region. However, the true dividends of CPEC cannot be foreseen sans regional stability. Extra-regional and regional powers need to avoid another cycle of conflict-driven geopolitics. Only a conflict-free region can reap the true benefits of CPEC.

Pakistan needs to highlight to the world that, the region is craving for growth and development. The US should give it a break from geopolitics and India should behave responsibly for better integration of the region.

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