



RESEARCH PAPER

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Change in the Geo-Strategic Outlook of Pak-China Relations

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ABSTRACT

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This research paper has focused the backdrop of Pak-China strategic relations. It also examined the prospects of bilateral relation between Pakistan and China while special focus remained on strategic relations. This research is based on qualitative method and secondary data has been utilized in this research. Pakistan and China are the two important players of Asian, especially South Asian region. They are reliable, time tested friends and have strong brotherhood throughout their bilateral diplomatic history. Pakistan is the most important Muslim country, as it is the only atomic power in Muslim World. It also occupies very important geo-strategic location. While on the other hand China being the most emerging economic, military and technological power has remained the focus of attention for regional and international political actors. Both Countries have travelled over 65 years of long journey of smooth relations. Currently both states are working jointly in all fields related to defense including nuclear cooperation and development of conventional and non-conventional weaponries. Free trade agreement boosted economics ties between these two neighboring state. Both states agreed to construct the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPCE) that was officially signed in 2015. Gwadar port is part of CPEC and has vital economic strategic position.

Introduction

Geo-strategic relations always remained important but in the changing world power structure it has become more significant. The bilateral relation between Pakistan and China has been developed in the very beginning of their independence from colonial powers. Both the states shaped their relation in such friendly way

throughout the history that it has become outstanding with the passage of time. The leaders of both side mentioned their relationship time and again as, higher than mountains as deeper than the oceans. This relationship seems to have specially place in the present time international politics. It looks more fantastic when we find no common religion, language or culture between these two states. Both the states are from two different civilizations, history, social, political and economic setup. Despite of all these differences Pakistan and China have developed such a good relationship that these differences have no place to disturb their bilateral ties. To be a realistic, one can say that these are common interest of both sides that made these two states close to each other. Moreover, geo-strategic realities and the changing international power structure provided circumstances to develop these exemplary relations. Therefore, the policy makers of both sides always keep such realities in their mind while making regional policies. However, no one can deny that Pak-China relations are yet unique in so many ways (Yaseen, et. al. (2017).

Development of Gwadar Port is one more significant development in the relations between these two states. This project has offered numerous opportunities for both states. Strategic significance of Gwadar Port for the region of South Asia cannot be denied. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the latest project between the two partners (Muzaffar, et. al 2018). It was properly signed in the year of 2015 during Chinese president visit to Pakistan. This project is actually sub-part of Chinese vision of One Belt One Road Initiative. It is aimed at enhancing the economic activities between the partners. Initially the project was worth of 46 US \$ billion dollars, the Chinese investment has increased and crossed the figure of \$62 billion in the year of 2020. The project is aimed at the development of economy, trade, energy, agriculture and development of communication sectors. Besides all these advantages CPEC has provided unprecedented strategic opportunities. Although this project is facing criticism from some group of analysts but overall this project is a beneficial for both partners. The main objective of this project in the eyes of China is the development of its Western part of China that is comparatively under develop region of China. China also has the objective of linking it with Arabian Sea. It will expand the trade of China with Africa, Europe and Gulf states. Gwadar has provided the shortest way for China to trade with the whole region extended to the other parts of the world. CPEC helped China to come out of 'Malacca Dilemma'. Gwadar port provided the opportunity of securing its sea line communication and uninterrupted oil supply. China was also feeling insecure with the possibility of an alliance of East Asian States. US on the other hand, is also developing ties with East Asian states to keep its hegemony in the South Pacific region. Pakistan with its Gwadar port and sea routs provided China with position to counter India in this region. Through its String Pearl policy, China involved some other regional states of South Asia that includes Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Bangladesh. Hence involvement of these states enabled China to have strategic position to restrain India to fulfill its hegemonic designs in South Asia (Afzal, et. al. 2020) & (Shah, et. al. 2020).

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Xi Jinping president of China during his first official visit to Pakistan in 2015 said that "This will be my first visit to Pakistan, but I feel as if I am going to visit the home of my own brother"(China Daily, 2015). This visit also resulted in the signing of significant project of CPEC. Initially the worth of the project was \$46 billion. It reached \$62 US billion dollar in the year of 2020. This project covered several sectors of activities in both states. This project targeted the areas like, energy sector, agriculture sector, trade sector, commerce sector, infrastructure sector and communication sector. Therefore, the project covers almost all the sectors of economy. This project of CPEC will offer China a land route to connect its landlocked Xinjiang area to the Indian Ocean via the Pakistani port of Gwadar. It also provides China an entrée into the Persian Gulf that provided a new look to Pak-China geostrategic relations. Under CPEC Pakistan has resolved its energy shortage issue. Some of energy projects have been completed and remaining are under process of development.(Wolf, 2019)

According to Daniel Markey a US experts and James West wrote in the year of 2016 that this multibillion-dollar venture will highlights "an intensified and expanded bilateral cooperation at a time of rising Chinese geopolitical ambition and persistent concerns about Pakistan's security and development"(Siddiqi, 2018). Infact, CPEC cannot be estimated separately. Its actual picture becomes clear when it is analyzed by studying it with OBOR initiative. It was latter on renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This mega step was taken by President of China Xi Jinping in 2013. The OBOR/BRI is targeted at cooperation and economic betterment by linking several regions of the world. This idea aimed to connect all the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe. New maritime, land transport, information networks and pipelines are being established to achieve objectives of this connectivity. The role of Pakistan is noteworthy in fulfilling dreams of this project. China is very much aware of geographical and strategic importance of Pakistan. The route passing through territory of Pakistan enables China to reach markets of Eurasia. The strategic location had made position of Pakistan more significant. (Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 2018). Although there is some irritant that appeared in the relationship since 1990s. This shows that to a large degree, CPEC project is aimed at resolving such issues and providing the opportunities for development both at regional and local level(Choudhry, 2017).

CPEC: Economic, Security and the Changing Geo-politics of the Region

The presence of some issues in the partnership has not disallowed Pakistan and China to develop closer to ties with each other. The varying regional geopolitics and result in rearrangement of forces have proved the strong reasons of their strong relationship. From Pakistan sides, the distance in its ties with the United States and increasing tension with its traditional rival India have pushed Pakistan towards China. On the other side for China, it has analyzing its increasing support to Pakistan as the best response to the strategic relations between India and US.

Therefore, the project of CPEC is the outcome of such larger geopolitical tendencies. (Wolf, 2019)

The CPEC is aimed at to support connectivity across Pakistan with development projects in the sector of infrastructure and project of energy development that is the dire need to accelerate economic growth of Pakistan. The whole value of these infrastructures and power projects agreed under CPEC has risen from the \$46 billion to \$62 billion as investment initially announced in 2015. This surge in costs has resulted from the addition of financing for Pakistan Railways and rail-based mass-transit schemes in the greater Peshawar region, in Karachi, and Quetta, the respective provincial capitals of, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Baluchistan. Beijing has planned to provide finance for the greater part of the CPEC plan through soft loans, commercial loans, grants and private investment, Pakistan is also required to invest funds for transport projects. (Ali, 2015)

The final aim of CPEC is to develop 3,200-km energy and trade routes between the Chinese city of Kashgar located in Xinjiang and the Pakistani port of Gwadar located in the province of Baluchistan, thus it is connecting Western China to the Indian Ocean. "Regional connectivity remains high on Pakistan's growth policy as its geo-strategic location offers a unique opportunity to connect South, West and Central Asia" (Jiqiong & Keyu, 2017). Such Regional connectivity has remained on the Sino-Pakistani collaboration agenda since decades. The CPEC project was officially signed during the visit of the Chinese President Xi Jinping to Pakistan in 2015, the idea and the plan on the project covered several years under both of the military and civilian Governments of Pakistan. Therefore, the construction Karakoram Highway that is 1100 km long back in early the 1960s was a landmark to strengthen the connectivity between the two friendly states. The Highway mirror idea that eventually led to the renowned project of CPEC. Likewise, the Gwadar port, a pivot around that the whole CPEC project is built, was built in early 2000. (Aneel, 2017).

Pakistan and China Strategic Partnership

The strategic ties between these two states are being considered advantageous in the region of South Asia (Hussain, 2018). This Pak-China cooperation is resulting in continuous progress and getting more and stronger especially in present time. Such closeness is result of numerous changes that have occurred at the regional and international levels. In early 21st century strategic dynamics of South Asia have been changed entirely. Such change become more noticeable when US involved its military in Afghanistan. Now both China and Pakistan have felt the need of each other in the field of economy, politics and strategy. Like other players of international politics, it is the part of Chinese foreign policy to develop strategic ties with the developing states and to re-aligned or re-adjust its bilateral and multilateral relations. Such situation has made both China and Pakistan of paramount importance for each other. Comparing past, there were some more changes that attracted Chinese attention towards Pakistan. These changes were as enlisted below;

1. Nuclearization of South Asia
2. War of Kargil between India and Pakistan
3. War on terrorism (WOT)
4. Change in US policy towards India that is considered China centric

In this changing situation of South Asia, China needed a close and reliable partner for future politics in the region. The security position in this region has also become entirely different from past. Now it has become very complex where we find several players (regional as well as external) that are playing their role in the region. Other than traditional enemies like India and Pakistan, here some non-tradition security threats also emerged in the region. At this time there were several developments that have the potential to change the fate of whole region (Rizwan, 2012). China has already turned into a significant stakeholder in the region. It has to play important role in maintain peace and security in the region. China also seemed interested to resolve major issue between Pakistan and India to increase its influence in South Asia (Javaid, 2015). It has expanded its economic ties with all the states of the region. China is doing huge investment in the project of CPEC. This project is connecting both states via Gwadar port. Chinese policy makers Know economic significance of this port so China took great interest in development of this port. Moreover, a wide network of communication is also planned under this project. In this connection China went forward and involved in the activities for development of infrastructure in other states of the region like Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh (Hamzah Rifaat, 2016).

The change in geo-political situation of the region resulted in change of the already existing strategic partnerships. Pakistan has become non-NATO ally due to its role in WOT. US and India decided to cooperate in extra regional affairs. The relation between Pakistan and India once again affected in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008. The occurrences of such incidents have entirely changed the whole geographical paradigm of South Asian region (Ahmad S. , 2013). The security of Pakistan has confronted with enormous issues in the aftermath of 9/11. The whole region faced several negative developments, which put the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of state at risk. US drone attacks and strategic cooperation between US and India created a sense of insecurity for other member states of the region. All such changes provided the chance for China and Pakistan to come more close and developed bilateral ties in almost all sector of state and the main focus was economy and strategic ties (Munir M. , 2016). Nevertheless, along with these substantial developments, one can find that there are some sectors where new dimension was added in the strategic cooperation of both states. Such sectors included Afghan issue, war against terrorism and other security issues.

Many scholars have of the opinion that this strategic cooperation is mainly India-centric. But at the same time it can be conclude that there are several other

factors behind strategic cooperation, especially after 9/11. Following factors can be counted that played important role for the recent change in the nature of Pakistan-China strategic relations.

- i. Strategic ties between India and USA. It is considered to contain China's influence in the region.
- ii. China intends to develop its Xinjiang region for development policy and to fight religious extremism.
- iii. Indo- Pakistan military standoff.
- iv. China's character in providing stability in the South Asia.
- v. Geo-strategic significance of Pakistan, its position to provide energy corridor for the whole region.
- vi. The issue of security and stabilization of Afghanistan and importance of Pak-China cooperation mostly after the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghan territory.
- vii. Role of both Pakistan and China in regional organizations.

Hu Shisheng, who is a Senior Researcher at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), "the strategic cooperation between Pakistan and China has experienced some noticeable changes, from the Cold-War mentality, which revolved around confrontation, power-balance and mutual checking, to post-Cold-War thinking, which focused on common development, shared destiny and appreciation of responsibilities" (Munir M. , 2016). Bilateral ties between these two partners run smoothly throughout the history (2017).

At the end of 2014, the China declared that it would work to build several sub-projects in Pakistan under the project of CPEC. Such mega projects under CPEC in the fields of infrastructure, energy, and connectivity would help Pakistan to revitalize its economy and would be able to tackle energy crises. Pakistan is providing the shortest route of 2500 miles to China to reach Middle East. Otherwise it has to travel 9500 miles for the same destination. Before this new route China used to imports its oil through Malacca Straits. Keeping in view the security issues in case of any mishap the old routes are considered vulnerable. The energy supply of China can be blocked under such circumstances. Chinese trade through Malacca Strait is costly as compare to trade through Gwadar port. Furthermore, it has some territorial disagreements with its neighboring states like Malaysia, Japan, Brunei, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam in the South China Sea, which raise more security concerns about China's energy security and trade activities (Naiko, 2014).

Changing's in Strategic Interdependence

The incidence of 9/11 provided the grounds where both Pakistan and China have become strategically more interdependent. The strategic dynamics of the region have been totally transformed. The emergence of new waves of terrorism proved a major threat to the security of both states. Presence of US forces in the region is also a direct threat to strategic interests of China. Chinese were not satisfied with their dependence on Malacca Strait. It is considered that in case of disturbance in US-China relation, China will remain with no option for its oil supply lines. US is developing close relations with states of East Asia to keep its strategic hegemony in the South Pacific region. CPEC provided China with breathing space and now China has an alternate and better option for its trade in Indian as well as Arabian Sea. On the other hand, Pakistan that is surrounded with enemies from both East and West feeling itself in more secure positions while enhancing its strategic ties with China. China has proved itself as a counter weight of India where India has its hegemonic designs in South Asia (Rashid, 2017).

China is assisting Pakistan to counter terrorism through military means. Both the states decided to counter terrorist and extremist activities in the region through joint efforts. China always praised efforts by Pakistan to eliminate terrorism. Military operations were started against internal and external terrorists in North Waziristan Agency in the year of 2014 that was also commended by Chinese government (Ahmed & Syed, 2017). A regular intelligence sharing has been started between the two governments regarding terrorist groups, like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and many more (Mahmood & Akhtar, 2018). Pakistan always supports China on issue of its territorial integrity. Pakistan never allows using its territory for any anti-China activity. In this regards, Pakistan view the ETIM as a "common enemy" of China and Pakistan (Ahmad B. N., 2013). The existences of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan pose direct threats to peace and Stability of both Pakistan and China (Majeed, 2017).

The biased policies of the USA in South Asia have serious concerns for Pakistan and China. Barack Obama the USA president made two visits to India to enhance economic ties with India. Both the states also decided to develop more close ties on defense and nuclear spheres. USA accepted India's case of securing position at UNO Security Council (UNSC) (Munir D. , 2015). Actually USA intends to see India a powerful partner in South Asia. US is trying to enhance its influence in Asia Pacific region by strengthening India. US policies in this seem as China centric. Recent US policies towards South Asia can disturb balance of power in the region. In this way the whole region will go towards more insecure position (Nankivell & Reeves, 2017).

Defense and strategic cooperation, particularly nuclear deal between the India and US, has been a serious issue of concern for Pakistan. Setting aside the efforts of Pakistan in its WOT, US has given an advantageous position to India in its foreign policy. During 2012-14, the US weapons trade with India reached 5.4 billion US dollars. this weapon supply was even greater than that of Russia that was of \$4.2

billion in military products. There was also a military logistic agreement signed between India and US on August 29, 2016(Khurana, 2017) ; (Muzaffar & Khan, 2016).

India has succeeded to make the US and Japan agree on its fears on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that India feels that it has severe consequences for its interests especially security interests in the connection with the project of CPEC. On the other hand, China suggests that if India continues its strategic partnership with Japan, India will lose a lot in future (Kapila, 2017). A divergence of interests can be noted in the relationship of Pakistan and USA during President Trump's administration. Trump accepted advice of his advisors and decided not to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan. Trump administration announced his South Asia policy on August 21, 2017, in which it was declared that the USA will carry on its military engagement in Afghanistan. Naturally, Pakistan is feeling not happy with this shift in US policy towards South Asian states. Presently US is giving more weightage to India in its policy towards this region. US has forget the role of Pakistan in the WOT (Davis & Landler, 2017 & Muzaffar, et al. 2017)

Defense Minister, Engr. Khurram Dastgir, said while addressing a conference in Islamabad that:

“There are strategic contradictions in the US approach and most key regional and global players have not supported this declared US policy since it envisages India to be a net security provider in the region. In South Asia's security matrix, there is no room for self-proclaimed and artificially boosted states. Regional security in the 21st Century can only be ensured through relationships and collaborations based on mutual trust and equality”(Jabri, 2017).

At this changing situation, both Pakistan and China seems standing together. China always supports Pakistan in protection of its national interests and dignity. China accepts Pakistan's claim on the dispute of Jammu and Kashmir. For instance, Li Keqiang, Chinese Prime Minister reiterated on September 20, 2016, the Chinese support on Kashmir dispute. He stated that “Beijing attaches great importance to Islamabad's position on the Kashmir issue. China is standing by Pakistan and will continue to raise their voice in its support at every forum”(Chansoria, 2016).Continuing the policy statement, the Chinese Foreign Minister said, China is siding with Pakistan on the issue of occupied Kashmir while he was talking with Tehmina Janju, Foreign Secretary of Pakistan. This meeting was arranged just a day after when Donald Trump stated that Pakistan is offering safe haven to the terrorists. In the response to Trump's remarks, the Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, Hua Chunying, asserted that “Pakistan was on the front line in the struggle against terrorism and had made great sacrifices and important contributions in this fight”. Chunying called on the international community to recognize Pakistan's role in the fight against terrorism (Saddique, 2017).

Conclusion

Bilateral relation between Pakistan and China remained praiseworthy since the very beginning of their independence. The changing world power structure provided the opportunities to both these states to strengthen ties on more solid grounds. CPEC is considered the most potential agreement in the history of bilateral relations of the two states. It does not have only economic significance but also covers strategic arena. US policy toward India is being considered as China centric. US intend to make India a counter weigh for emerging China. Moreover, presence of US troops in Afghanistan has several direct implications for Chinese strategic interests in the region. Dependency of China on Malacca Strait for its trade and energy supply has also been reduced with the establishment of Gwadar port in Pakistan. Gwadar is providing some points of strategic importance to China. It has provided China with an alternate sea route in case if there is any issue with Malacca Strait. Involvement of Pakistan in Afghan issue made Pakistan more vital for maintenance of peace in the region. Therefore, the project of CPEC did not provide economic opportunities to these both states but has a great strategic importance also. CPEC got both China and Pakistan at such a stage of their bilateral relationship where both are in a position to prove several advantages to each other. This project has the capacity to protect strategic along with other interests of both states. Though there are some statements from officials of India and US against CPEC but this is multifaceted project protecting national interests of Pakistan and China.

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