

Pakistan's Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities in the Neighborhood

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Abstract

Pakistan's geopolitical engagement with the region and the outside world has been driven by the compulsions of its geographical location and its security concerns vis-a-vis India and Afghanistan. In the early decades' its vulnerability vis-à-vis India and consequent fear directed its geopolitical quest for seeking strategic stability. However, the western world saw Pakistan as a bulwark in the containment of the Soviet Union during the cold war. Post 1979, events in Afghanistan drastically changed the geopolitical environment facing Pakistan. Meanwhile, Pakistan established and deepened its strategic engagement with China¹. Historically, both states shared a common Indian threat to their security that caused them to create a strong bond of entente². This unique relationship, in due course, emerged as a stabiliser in Pakistan's regional geopolitical challenges as evident in emerging geo-economic partnership between the two countries. Currently, broader geopolitical landscape is a mix of challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. The challenge is to navigate through a complex minefield of geography, and adopting viable strategies to increase Pakistan's geopolitical space in the neighbourhood and beyond. The article discusses contours of Pakistan's geopolitical environment, and challenges that the country faced during its engagement with neighbours, and emerging opportunities arising out of intersection of geopolitics and geo-economics. The article also explores the questions of the correlation between geography, politics and strategic relations of Pakistan with its neighbours (India, Afghanistan and China). Furthermore the article traces the opportunities of cooperation with other states for Pakistan to achieve regional stability, economic development and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords

Geopolitical, Geo-Economic, Regional Stability, Geo-Strategy, South Asia, Central Asia, West-Asia, Status-Quo

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Introduction

The geopolitical environment and challenges facing a nation-state is rooted in the concepts of geography, geo-strategy and geo-politics. All the concepts are correlated in multiple aspects of security, strategy, economic and political issues. At the outset an attempt is made to define these three concepts and determine their variables. The axiom, *'to know a nation's geography is to know its foreign policy'*³ is widely attributed to French statesman and military genius Napoleon Bonaparte. Even if otherwise, geography determines broad contours of geo-strategy and geopolitics of a state, operating in a complex regional environment and international system. Geography directly influences politics.

But what is the definition of geography in a political context? Geography alone cannot explain changes in foreign policies and political evolution of states and empires. There is a certain degree of difficulty in defining with clarity the exact meaning and nature of these concepts and their inter-relationships. Broadly, however, three geographical variables determine definitions of these concepts: trade routes, presence of resources and frontiers of state. The former two influence the course of geopolitics, while the latter guides geo-strategy.

Geography represents physical reality of land, sea and air environment. It comprises geological features such as mountains, rivers, seas, etc. A crucial attribute of geography is that it is a constant. There are only two exceptions: natural disasters such as seismic activities etc. that change the topographical features of a certain area; and political events such as imperial expansions, war, and/or changes in demarcation lines between states⁴. Geography, in this sense, forms the very bedrock of geostrategy and geopolitics. However, geography, in itself, is not sufficient to analyze changes in foreign policy of a state.⁵

Geopolitics is the human conduct within a territory⁶. Geopolitics, objectively, is the 'outside' environment faced by a state where fellow states are also pursuing interests and competing for advantage. Subjectively, geopolitics is how a state views its external environment and deduces lessons based on its experiences. Subjective interpretations of the environment shape state's reading of its geopolitical environment. It comprises distribution of limited material resources within regions,

establishing lines of communication and connectivity between regions, and prioritizing regions according to their strategic significance.⁷

Geopolitical environment is the outcome of interaction between technological advancements and geographical landscape which can lead to variations in the economic, strategic and political significance of a certain region. A good example would be discovery of new routes that shorten distance or using technology to carve out mountains or build canals to connect seas. Such routes, thus, usher in economic development due to technology and consequently change the geopolitical realities.

Meanwhile, economic factors also influence distribution of material resources and hard power between nations. Requirements for access to coveted natural resources have undergone transformation due to technological revolution that has changed modes of production. In this sense, geopolitics is a variable that can explain changes in distribution of resources across regions and advent of new routes.

Geo-strategy is the conduct of foreign policy to secure and advance national interests arising out of the geographical location of a state. Specifically, how a state employs its military prowess and directs its diplomatic efforts to describe the focus of its geo-strategic interests, and limited resources put a constraint on the pursuit of an ambitious foreign policy⁸. States, thus, direct their political and military focus towards their immediate neighborhood and extended regions. Geo-strategy better explains strategic foreign policy of a state, and not its decision-making processes. At the same time, states are not constrained by the geographical boundaries or geopolitical compulsions. A state can project power (in various forms) in a far-away territory due to ideological affinity, access to resources, economic interests, or simply on the whims of activist leadership.⁹

These three concepts (geography, geopolitics, geo-strategy) can be analyzed by identifying impact of change on them. Spectrum of change varies from tectonic (no change) for geography to swift adjustments in case of geo-strategy. The timeline for measuring geographic changes span thousands of years i.e. in terms of geological ages. Geopolitical changes proceed slowly, often spanning decades and in some cases centuries. For instance, discovery of new sea routes linking Europe to Africa and Asia was a geopolitical change that in few decades changed global map. In

contemporary world economic growth of China and its plans to build new continental and maritime routes signifies a geopolitical change that will occur in coming decades.

Geo-strategy is most adaptable to changes in the external environment. Geostrategic reorientation can take place in weeks or months due to policy reviews or leadership changes or an external event. For instance, Pakistan promptly altered its Afghan policy of supporting Afghan Taliban government as the US invaded Afghanistan after 9/11¹⁰.

In a way these three concepts are also three layers of international system which evolve at varying speeds for diverse reasons. They are inter-related but don't determine the course of one-another. Geo-strategy, a posture adopted by a state, is not solely in response to geopolitics. Meanwhile, geography alone doesn't define contours of underlying geopolitics, which consequently, doesn't strictly regulate geostrategic postures of states. As mentioned above, geopolitics explains geographic distribution of resources and routes, which are regulated by technology and geography combined, not geography alone. Likewise, geo-strategy is a subjective understanding and a response to evolving geopolitical trends but is not controlled by it.

Pakistan's Geopolitical Landscape

Pakistan's geographical location has guided its geopolitical pursuit during the past seven decades. As a geographical entity the newly independent country of Pakistan was a unique case. It comprised north-eastern and north-western regions of the Indian subcontinent, separated by its arch-rival India. The north-eastern zone was called East Pakistan, which later emerged as an independent state of Bangladesh in 1971¹¹ and the north-western region was named West Pakistan, which is the contemporary Pakistan. The geographical and political history of Pakistan underwent a major transformation after 1971. This analysis, thus, looks at geopolitical landscape of the contemporary Pakistan.

Pakistan is situated in southern region of Asian continent at the cross-roads of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East, particularly in the vicinity of oil-rich Persian Gulf. Pakistan as a successor to British India was also located on the Southern periphery of Soviet Union, next to Afghanistan, which was a buffer between British India and Tsarist Russia

in Central Asia.¹² Thus, for major powers of that era. Pakistan's geographical significance was apparent.

Pakistan borders India to the east, Afghanistan to the west, Iran to the southwest, and China to far-north, and Tajikistan through narrow Wakhan corridor in the north-west. Pakistan has 1046km long coastline along the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman and the country shares a maritime boundary with Oman.¹³ In 1958 Pakistan acquired the Gwadar district from Oman, which decades later has been developed as a port on the cusp of Strait of Hormuz near the Persian Gulf.¹⁴ Presently it is at the heart of new geopolitics of South Asia.

Geopolitics in Early Decades

Pakistan's primary geopolitical challenge comes from its immediate external environment. For a state which came into existence with the partition of Indian subcontinent, New Delhi emerged its geopolitical competitor. Over last seven decades India has only grudgingly accepted existence of an independent Pakistan.¹⁵ Animosity and distrust, however, developed and deepened over the years. Pakistan fears that as the largest state in Southern Asia, India has still not come to terms with a Pakistan that is outside India's sphere of influence.¹⁶ Meanwhile, an imbalance of size, resources and military prowess vis-à-vis India led to insecurities in Pakistan.¹⁷ The insecurity has been compounded by the fact, that, Pakistan lacks territorial depth and there are few natural barriers on India-Pakistan border that may obstruct the movement of the militaries, of both sides, from crossing the borders.¹⁸ Pakistan's major highways and communication lines run parallel to Indo-Pak border, making them vulnerable to Indian attacks. Border towns and cities on the Pakistani side are heavily populated, thus, defending territory and population becomes a major challenge to the country. To make it worse, India enjoys clear conventional military superiority over Pakistan.¹⁹ Thus, India has remained the primary and constant geopolitical challenge for Pakistan. Territorial dispute over Jammu and Kashmir has been at the center of political tensions between the two countries. Over the decades Pakistan has fought three wars with India, acquired nuclear arms and sought closer cooperation with external powers to shape the regional dynamics in its favor.

Apart from India, Pakistan's western neighbor Afghanistan presented a geographical challenge due to its territorial claims on parts of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP, now renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).²⁰ Kabul opposed inclusion of Pashtun populated areas into Pakistan. It also contests legitimacy of the Durand Line demarcated by the British representatives as the boundary of Afghanistan and British India.²¹ Geopolitically, this was compounded by Indian and Soviet support to the Afghan claims in 1950s and 1960s. Afghanistan, however, lacked military potential to challenge Pakistan²². However, since 1979, great-power interventions in Afghanistan have been marked by Pakistan's attempts to chart its geopolitical course, secure its interests and at times project power in Afghanistan.²³ At present, Afghanistan is the real geopolitical nightmare for Pakistan, as it continues to experience instability because of the ongoing conflict there²⁴.

Geopolitically, Pakistan aligned with western-led security order during the cold-war and sought and engaged in defense arrangements to build its conventional military forces. It also sought to counter-balance India's pre-eminent power in South Asia through its alignment with the west.²⁵ United States recognized Pakistan's geographical significance. A US military report on South Asia pointed out in 1949, that "Pakistan might be required as a base for air operations against [the] central USSR and as a staging area for forces engaged in the defense or recapture of Middle East oil areas" along with being outpost for conduct of covert activities against the Soviet Union.²⁶ Washington decided to provide economic and military assistance to Pakistan and in return the latter agreed to host a covert American base.²⁷

Pakistan's western-centric geopolitical alignment, however, raised concerns in China, its far-northern neighbor. Pakistan attempted to assure Peking (now Beijing) that this engagement was only India-centric. Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra explained to Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai that Pakistan will not become party to any hostile action against China and it will not prejudice Pakistan's bilateral relationship with Beijing.²⁸ Meanwhile, geopolitical environment in the Asian continent underwent transformation due to ruptures in Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian relations. During and after 1962 Sino-India war Washington provided arms and equipment to New Delhi without prior notification to Pakistan.²⁹ United States ignored Pakistani concerns that these weapons

could be used against Pakistan. As a geopolitical favor to New Delhi, under American pressure, Pakistan didn't take advantage of Sino-India conflict in 1962 and exercised restraint. However, Pakistan was disillusioned later with western, particularly American disinterest in the resolution of Kashmir dispute. This forced Islamabad to re-think its geopolitical posture.

Pakistan sought to balance growing Indo-US cooperation by forging geopolitical relations with China. The 1963 border agreement with China was a Pakistani maneuver to reject the status-quo in Kashmir. It opened up gates of Chinese military and economic assistance to Pakistan, while presenting a new dilemma to India. In few years Chinese weaponry constituted substantial part of Pakistan's military hardware including "one-quarter of Pakistan's tank force, one-third of its air force, and nearly two-thirds of its interceptor-bombers".³⁰

The 1965 Indo-Pak war ended in a stalemate and led to geopolitical distancing between Pakistan and the United States. Washington imposed an arms embargo, while Muslim nations and China provided substantial material and diplomatic support to Pakistan. Meanwhile, for Washington the need to rely on northern bases to contain Soviet periphery had reduced due to development of advanced missile systems. Also, anti-American sentiment in Asia had increased due to the Vietnam war. Consequently, Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) lost their prominence in the alliance system and Pakistan's geopolitical importance faded.

Yet, Pakistan facilitated Sino-US rapprochement in 1970 as a confidante which shaped the global geopolitical calculus for next four decades.³¹ In the process Pakistan earned ire of Soviet Union. Moscow put its geopolitical weight behind New Delhi during 1971 Indo-Pakistan crisis. Hence, despite being at the center of geopolitical activity Pakistan couldn't save itself from breakup in 1971, the first in the post-1945 world order. Washington had publicly tilted in favor of Pakistan, however political failures and inadequate military forces led to the debacle.³² Consequently, West Pakistan lost its geopolitical pre-eminence, as Washington looked to Iran and India to protect its 'regional interests'. Major focus was on dissuading Pakistan from pursuing development of a nuclear capability following the 1974 Indian nuclear test. PM Zulfikar Ali

Bhutto responded by pivoting Pakistan towards Arab world, deepening strategic relations with China and reaching out to Soviet Union. In making overtures to Moscow Bhutto offered use of Pakistan's Makran coast, a coveted access to warm waters.³³ Moscow remained non-committal and the west kept geopolitical distance during 1970s. In 1979, this geopolitical configuration underwent further transformation due to developments in Iran and Afghanistan.

Geopolitics and Relations with Neighbours

Geopolitics has been a constant in shaping contours and influencing development of Pakistan's relations with its neighbors. Pakistan continues to be a geopolitically active state because of its geography. This has influenced Pakistan's strategies of managing its relations with neighbors. Following sections survey impact of geopolitics on Pakistan's relations with its four neighbors:

India

For Pakistan, arch-rival, India remains a regional geopolitical competitor. Geography, however, has placed its own limitations on the geopolitical competition between Islamabad and New Delhi. Post-1971 Pakistan is geographically only linked to India in the larger South Asia. Pakistan doesn't have direct land access to Nepal, Bhutan, while Indian Ocean separates Pakistan from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In the geopolitics of South Asia, thus, India assumes the central position due to geography. India has attempted to influence domestic politics and regional engagement of South Asian nations to advance its interests as it views South Asia, as its sphere of influence Pakistan, however, contests Indian outlook towards the region.

The influence of geography has directly shaped the course of bilateral relations with New Delhi. The territorial dispute over Jammu and Kashmir region continues to define the enmity between the two neighbors despite more than seven decades of their independence. Three wars have been fought over the Kashmir region, both countries have developed nuclear weapons and their delivery systems to strengthen their respective postures. A consequence of nuclearization has been freezing of the conflict, and near-permanence of the status-quo between

Pakistan and India. A status-quo, which Pakistan contests, but is unable to change in its favor. An attempt was made in early 1960s to seek intervention from the United States for resolution of the Kashmir dispute. Washington and London supported Bhutto-Sarwan Singh talks but negotiations failed.³⁴ Pakistan, then, in a geopolitical move went ahead and demarcated its northern border with China, and consequently also made China a part of the Kashmir conflict, thus, constraining India. This status-quo has largely remained intact during past five decades.

During the cold-war Pakistan sought to balance a much-larger India through alignment with the west, particularly the United States. In the process Pakistan also joined SEATO and CENTO for other strategic reasons. New Delhi, while professing non-alignment, maintained close strategic relationship with USSR. During the cold war, Pakistan aligned broadly with west, while India entered into a defense cooperation treaty with the Soviet Union³⁵. Pakistan sought defense cooperation for developing strong India-focused armed forces. Similarly, Defense and technical cooperation with Beijing augmented Pakistan's defense capability to confidently deter India.

Decades later this trend has been reversed. United States has developed a strategic partnership with India. Washington's geopolitical goal is to contain the rising China by building India's capabilities. This, however, has a snowball effect on Pakistan-India relationship, as India is procuring advanced defense equipment and technology from the United States and other western countries. Consequently, Pakistan is doubling down on defense cooperation with China. Resource constraints, however, have stymied Pakistan's efforts, and increased geopolitical tensions with both New Delhi and Washington.

Similarly, India-Pakistan competition continues to dominate regionalism. An example is the sorry state of affairs of SAARC. India-Pakistan tensions led to the cancellation of the scheduled SAARC summit in November, 2016.³⁶ India, however, held a summit of BIMSTEC a sub-regional group, inviting five members of SAARC to assert its central position in the region.³⁷

Besides competition in the region, India and Pakistan are competing in Afghanistan and for access to Central Asia. For Pakistan, a prospect of India gaining foothold in Afghanistan is a strategic nightmare. Pakistan

contends that owing to its geographical linkage with Afghanistan, latter falls under its sphere of influence. To support its contention Islamabad points to historical connections between Pashtun peoples living on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border regions. Rivalry between Pakistan and India gets intense because of denial of access routes for trade and transit. India has not granted Pakistan an overland access to Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. Pakistan continues to deny India an overland route to Afghanistan. Kabul has attempted to condition its trade with Pakistan with access permission to India. Islamabad, however, has strongly objected to the Afghan demand. Pakistan has voiced its aspiration for being a regional hub of trade, transit and connectivity between South and Central Asia. Pakistan's geo-strategic posture, however, continues to be inward looking.

India, meanwhile, is engaged in development an International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) with Russia and Iran. Tehran and New Delhi inked a trilateral agreement with Afghanistan to develop Chahbar port and connecting with INSTC.³⁸ In May, 2016, India pledged investment of \$500 million in development of Chabahar port of Iran.³⁹ Chabahar port is merely 70kms from Pakistan's Gwadar port, being developed by China. In October 2017, India sent first shipment of wheat to Afghanistan via Chabahar. This corridor is aimed at advancing Indian-Afghan trade in future.

Afghanistan

Pakistan's relationship with its western neighbor has been shaped by geography, history and geopolitics. Historically, Pakistan as a successor state to the British Raj on the north-western frontier of Indian's sub-continent inherited the boundary arrangements concluded between Britain and Afghanistan. Kabul, however, didn't welcome the emergence of independent state of Pakistan. It claimed Pashtun territory of Pakistan, as it viewed the border dividing Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan, and Pakistan a British imposition. In 1949 Afghan government announced that it doesn't recognize the Durand line and any such boundary agreement. This issue continued to hinder development of bilateral relations till early 1970s.⁴⁰

The watershed year of 1979 led to fundamentally altering Pakistan's role and engagement with Afghanistan. It directly influenced Pakistan's foreign policy, domestic politics, and political-economy. Islamabad viewed the Soviet intervention of Afghanistan as a geopolitical threat, with the end goal of accessing warm waters of the Indian Ocean. In this, Pakistan was supported by the US, Saudi Arabia and western nations. In the process Pakistan ended up hosting more than 4 million Afghan refugees, whose second and third generations continue to live in Pakistan.

In 1989, Soviet Union decided to withdraw its forces and the US interest in Afghanistan also waned. Focus of international community also shifted towards historical developments taking place in Eastern Europe, as Soviet Union collapsed. Afghanistan, however, descended into a civil-war. Islamabad then decided to actively intervene in shaping of a political order in Afghanistan as it considered Afghanistan in its sphere of influence, beside a stable Afghanistan was in its interest. Pakistan believed that since it was instrumental in supporting and directing the resistance movement against the Soviet forces and had hosted Afghan refugees on its soil, it had the right credentials to play a role in stabilizing Afghanistan. In the process Pakistan earned antagonism of regional states, including Iran and India. Islamabad continued its pursuit and in late-1990s supported the government of Taliban in Afghanistan. It was a pro-Pakistan government.

9/11 attacks again marked a new watershed in Pakistan's engagement in Afghanistan. Islamabad withdrew support of Taliban government and backed US intervention by providing it with logistical support. US led international community brought in a new political dispensation in Kabul headed first by Karzai and subsequently by Ashraf Ghani. Pakistan's relations with Karzai and Ghani administrations have been a mosaic⁴¹. As Taliban spearheaded an insurgency against US led NATO forces, Pakistan decided not to act against Afghan Taliban on Pakistani soil. Meanwhile, an insurgency against Pakistan was mounted from Pakistan's tribal region, which Islamabad asserts, with active support from Afghan and Indian intelligence. This phase of violence destabilized Pakistan as a direct consequence of US led war in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, China, Russia, Iran and other regional states are also actively involved within Afghanistan. Pakistan, being a neighbor, is most affected by geopolitical turmoil in Afghanistan. The challenge for Pakistan is to manage the fallout of developments in Afghanistan, and not let instability have a foothold again domestically.

China

Influence of geopolitics on Pakistan's relationship with China has been most visible. Pakistan recognized communist China soon after its founding in 1949. During 1950s, however, both sides remained distant. Peking (Beijing) expressed concerns on Pakistan joining the western bloc, while Pakistan was wary of close India-China relationship. In 1962, however, a transformation occurred. India-China border war led to a freeze in their ties. Pakistan and China decided to demarcate their border and sign the boundary agreement, thus, laying the foundation of a strategic relationship. Over the next few decades both countries engaged in defense and strategic cooperation. China provided extensive collaboration in building Pakistan's indigenous defense industry. This cooperation enabled Pakistan to defend itself from a conventional threat emanating from its east.

Besides defense cooperation, Beijing and Islamabad have closely collaborated in a strategic connectivity initiative. In 1960 both countries decided to construct a 1300-km highway, named Karakorum high way, linking Xingjian (region of China) with Pakistan's northern-most region Gilgit-Baltistan, and provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. Owing to proximity of India and also the conflict over Kashmir, the highway has political and military importance for China and Pakistan.

Significance of Karakorum highway as a geopolitical initiative gained further significance in 2013, when both countries decided to add a geo-economic component to their relationship and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative was launched. It aims to connect western China to Pakistan's south-western Gwadar port. Eventually, Karakorum highway will be connected to Gwadar port via three overland and rail routes running through Pakistan's heartland. As part of CPEC Beijing is also investing in Pakistan's energy and infrastructure sectors to build Pakistan's economy. In the next phase, both countries plan to commence

industrialization process, leading to manufacturing by Chinese companies in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) set up in Pakistan. The initiative has the potential to transform the Pakistani economy.

Sino-Pakistan geo-economic cooperation is influencing the regional politics, including conflict in Afghanistan. It will herald a new geopolitical era on the Asian continent. The cooperation between China and Pakistan has ushered in a geopolitical opportunity for Pakistan as a facilitator state just like in early 1970 when Pakistan became a bridge between China and the United States. Geopolitically, Pakistan was facilitator of China-US rapprochement, in early 1970s that changed course of international politics for decades to come as noted before. Decades later, now China has risen as a major power and its economy is set to become the largest national economy of the world in a decade or so. Meanwhile China and the US have positioned themselves as geopolitical competitors. Pakistan while expanding its strategic relationship with China has drifted away from the United States. Yet, geopolitically Pakistan continues to engage with Washington on regional issues, particularly, about conflict in Afghanistan and turmoil in Middle East. As Washington and Beijing compete for influence in regions across the world, the need for facilitating dialogue with inclusion of regional countries becomes a necessity. And therein lies an opportunity for Pakistan to maintain its geopolitical leverage.

Influencing Regional Geo-politics Through Geo-economics

Geopolitics in Pakistan's neighbourhood can be influenced and shaped through employment of economic and connectivity instruments. In the present era, economic and trade policies have direct geopolitical impact. Economic productivity, trade, and energy imports directly affect relations between nations. Geo-economics, thus, is a new tool for states to pursue their geo-strategic interests. In fact, it is geo-strategic exercise of economic instruments and resources.⁴² Policy-makers combine elements of geo-strategy and geo-economics to project power and influence.

Pakistan can turn its geopolitical engagement in the neighbourhood into geo-economic cooperation and in the process influence regional security environment. It requires exceptional clarity in strategic outlook of the country. An insight into contours of Pakistan's strategic viewpoint was

provided by Mr. Sartaj Aziz, former Advisor Foreign Affairs in June, 2014. In a policy-statement in the Senate of Pakistan he underlined that the government is seeking to “turn Pakistan’s strategic geographical location from liability into an asset through trade, transport and energy connectivity with China, Central Asia and West Asia.”⁴³ Pakistan considers it a way to ‘rebalance geographic and geo-economic priorities’.⁴⁴ Reference to geo-economic integration with South Asia was conspicuously missing. It points to Pakistan difficult neighbourhood and the admission of geographical paradox i.e. presence of a large rival India, whose geography obstructs Pakistani connectivity with South Asian nations.

Despite strategic pressure from its east, Pakistan has been striving to focus on economic development and a ‘peaceful neighbourhood’, while pursuing a policy of ‘non-interference in affairs of other countries’. This policy orientation essentially means Pakistan is seeking a less-adversarial relationship with Afghanistan and India. It also means that Islamabad is reviewing its strategic doctrine, including political and military, with the goal of pursuing economic development and integration. Any Pakistani effort for becoming regional hub of economic and trade corridors necessitates maintaining a crisis free regional environment that is not prone to sudden rise in tensions. Such an environment, however, cannot be achieved with efforts of a single country in the region. This is the space where geo-economic initiatives can positively influence regional geopolitics.

Geographical Promise of Pakistan as a Hub of Regional Economic Initiatives

A constant theme in Pakistan strategic lexicon has been geographic significance of the country’s location. Pakistani leaders, over the decades, have expressed an interest in making the country a regional hub of trade, transit and economic activity. Particularly, after the independence of Central Asian Republics in early 1990s. Islamabad has been forcefully projecting itself as a natural linkage between South, Central and West Asia. With the emergence of CPEC on Pakistan’s economic and geopolitical horizon Islamabad refocused on its earlier goal of being a regional hub to focus on connecting ‘China, Central Asia and West Asia’.⁴⁵

Pakistan has the potential for energy corridors linking Iran and Gulf nations to India and China, and also from Central Asia to India. Gwadar could service as a regional energy port outside the crisis-prone Persian Gulf region. Gwadar can also serve as a regional transit port for Central Asian states, after being linked via road and rail connections. It will provide Central Asian Republics a shorter overland access to Arabian Sea.

Similarly, Pakistan can benefit from new corridors being established by China to connect with Central Asia and West Asia. China is investing in connectivity projects in Pakistan's three neighbours. A major Chinese initiative is to connect with Iran via Central Asia.⁴⁶ Similarly, Beijing has commenced a freight train project with Afghanistan's northern Balkh province.⁴⁷ Enhancing connectivity with Afghanistan remains a Pakistani objective and Chinese initiatives can become a good foundation for long-term regional cooperation.

Despite its policy of enhancing trade with Central Asia Pakistan has been slow in building infrastructure linkages with the region. For one, immediate neighbours of Central Asian Republics including China, Iran, Russia and Turkey have direct access to Central Asian markets. These countries also revived cultural and historical ties with newly independent states in early 1990s. New road and railway routes were constructed between immediate neighbours and Central Asian states. Islamabad also offered use of its Karachi port to the Central Asian Republics. To facilitate overland trade and transit Pakistan entered into a quadripartite agreement with China, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan in 1995. Two decades later, this agreement has yet to be operationalized due to lack of interest from the signatories.⁴⁸

Construction and operationalization of new deep-sea port in Gwadar have revived interest of Central Asian States to access Arabian Sea. In 2017, Tajikistan expressed an interest in joining the four-nation trade and transit agreement.⁴⁹ Once fully operationalized it will enable Pakistan to access Central Asia bypassing conflict-ridden Afghanistan. This alternate route will also address an irritant of transit access in Islamabad-Kabul relationship.

Belt and Road Initiative and Prospects for Pakistan

Pakistan's decision to pivot west-wards comes at a time when Beijing is leading a push for regional connectivity initiatives. China is focusing on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the goal to revive ancient Silk Road. BRI, and particularly, CPEC has added to complex geopolitics in Pakistan's neighbourhood. While announcing the commencement of CPEC, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang stated, in Islamabad, that Beijing "hope(s) to create a giant economic corridor that would not only enhance China's strategic significance but would also help in restoring peace and stability to Asia."⁵⁰ The goal of 'restoring peace and stability' on Asian continent is an indication of leveraging connectivity initiatives for influencing course of geopolitics.

The expanse of BRI covers three continents. It aims to connect China with parts of Asia, Africa and Europe through overland and maritime routes. CPEC connects Pakistan to Xinjiang province of China through overland routes. Beijing is at the same time undertaking infrastructure connectivity projects to link with Central Asia and West Asia through Xinjiang. Pakistan, thus, has an opportunity to enhance its connectivity with Asian and European markets through connecting with other BRI corridors. The new corridors connecting China to Europe via Central Asia and Russia; and to West Asia via Central Asia, can also transport Pakistani goods to European, Central Asian and West Asian markets.

Of the six BRI corridors, two are particularly relevant to Pakistan. First is China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC). It is planned to run from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan, and onwards to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran and ending at Turkey. CCWAEC relies on railway network of China and Central Asian states and also has an energy dimension for transporting Central Asian oil and gas to China.

Second corridor is New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB). It aims to ensure uninterrupted connectivity between Chinese cities in Xinjiang to Rotterdam, Holland. This corridor is being driven by push from Chinese manufacturing industry to ship goods via railways instead of sea. Railway network of NELB begins from China in Xinjiang and traverses through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Poland, and finally connects to ports in Europe on the shores of Atlantic.

Energy Projects and Geopolitics

In recent decades few energy projects in Pakistan's neighbourhood have been proposed as avenues of cooperation among regional states. Three projects are of particular note: a) Iran-Pakistan-India/Iran-Pakistan (IPI/IP) gas pipeline; b) Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project;⁵¹ and c) Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electricity transmission system.⁵² All the three initiatives have however been constrained by geopolitics.

First proposed as IPI between Iran, Pakistan and India, in the end became IP. In 2009, a year after operationalising nuclear deal with Washington, New Delhi pulled out of the project citing price and security issues. Islamabad and Tehran continued to pursue it, while the United States opposed Pakistan's gas-pipeline project that would bring gas from Iran. Despite immense US pressure Islamabad and Tehran made progress in technical negotiations and in 2013 the ground-breaking ceremony was held.⁵³ However, construction of the pipeline within Pakistan has not yet commenced. Pakistan cites US sanctions on Iran for not being able to get funds from international funding institutions, for the project. Tehran views it as US geopolitical pressure on Pakistan. With the establishment of China-led financial institutions, Islamabad can explore alternate financing arrangement and operationalise the IP project.

TAPI natural gas pipeline project is aimed at exporting 33-billion cubic meters of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India through a 1600 km long pipeline. Few issues however are yet to be resolved before any meaningful progress could be made. First, continued instability in Afghanistan means TAPI will be unable to get off the ground. Divergent interests of India and Pakistan in Afghanistan also obstruct the project. Second, countries undertook prolonged negotiations to arrive at a pricing formulae and yet a consensus agreement remains elusive. Third, arranging long-term financing mechanisms of up to \$15 billion for construction of the pipeline and allied infrastructure. Asian Development Bank has committed to finance initial construction of the pipeline,⁵⁴ and now Saudi Arabia has also expressed interest in investing in the project.⁵⁵ Despite these issues, a ground-breaking ceremony was held in December, 2015, but actual work has yet to commence in Pakistan.⁵⁶

Similarly, CASA-1000 project has been marred by mistrust and conflict in the region. It was conceived as a 750-km transmission line supplying 1300MWs of electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan via Afghanistan. Pakistan will consume 1000MWs and remaining 300MWs will be Afghanistan share. The project is part of CASA Regional Energy Market (CASAREM).⁵⁷ Four countries and US-backed international lending agencies, USAID and DFID are supporting the project. After years of delays and protracted talks the project has entered the construction phase. Now the major challenge is ensuring security of transmission lines in conflict-ridden Afghanistan. The successful construction and implementation of the project will positively influence relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. When completed it can emerge as a model for regional cooperation amidst geopolitical mistrust between regional nations.

Conclusion

Pakistan is situated in a tough geopolitical neighborhood having contentious relationship with two neighbors namely Afghanistan and India. On-going conflict in Afghanistan has also directly impacted Pakistan's security and its geopolitical engagement with the region. Meanwhile the United States is deepening its strategic engagement with India, Pakistan's arch-rival. On the other hand, India is actively investing in Iran's Chabahar port to gain access to Central Asia and Afghanistan. This way New Delhi is also providing Kabul an alternate route to sea via Iran. In this complex geopolitics, a constant has been strengthening Pakistan-China relationship, which provides Pakistan new avenues for expanding its geopolitical space in the region. Amid challenges, Islamabad's engagement with Beijing has also opened new avenues for positively influencing the region.

The foremost challenge for Pakistani policy-makers is to operationalize CPEC, a north-south corridor, while navigating complex regional security environment. It is imperative for Pakistan to engage its neighbors, particularly, Afghanistan and Iran in connectivity initiatives, while responding to India's growing foothold in the region. China is already pursuing bilateral connectivity projects with Afghanistan.

This provides Pakistan an opportunity to link up with Chinese projects in

these countries. As India expands its footprint and reach in Pakistan's neighbors, it is crucial that Pakistan also deepens its existing trade and transit linkages with them. This can be achieved by focusing on building an integrated road and railway network, maritime connections between Iranian and Pakistani ports, increasing aerial connectivity between the three countries, easing customs processing on borders for trade, and a transit facilitation agreement for containers moving onwards from these countries. The goal for policy makers should be to maximize the advantage of geographical proximity, develop common development plans, and avoid unnecessary securitization.

Besides CPEC, India and Pakistan are competing in Afghanistan and for access to Central Asia. Geography favours Pakistan. Financially, Pakistan is dependent on lenders, who could be China or US-backed international financial institutions and development banks. Here Pakistan would have to address concerns of regional countries and chart a way forward by building a minimum regional consensus on trade and connectivity. Each country has shown that it can thwart a regional connectivity initiative and deny access to the other. Geopolitical competition will ensure the status-quo, while, accommodation will lead to opening up the region for trade and connectivity.

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