

PAKISTAN'S GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

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ABSTRACT

Three interrelated concepts of geography, geo-politics and geo-strategy exert direct influence on shaping a state's geopolitical environment, attendant challenges and opportunities. Pakistan has had to deal with two difficult neighbours and role of major powers while enhancing its geopolitical space in the region and beyond. It essentially requires deciphering influence of geography and geopolitics on Pakistan geo-strategy in a difficult neighbourhood. Meanwhile, new trends in regional and global geopolitics also impact the way Pakistan respond. This paper analyses contours of Pakistan's geopolitical environment, impact of geography, and course of its engagement with neighbours and the great-powers particularly the United States, during and after the Cold War. It also assesses opportunities available to Pakistan, as it seeks to pivot from geopolitics to geo-economics by linking up with new trade routes and deepening economic cooperation to meet growing needs of energy and markets for economic growth. Here too, geography and geo-politics will shape extent of Pakistan's geo-economic success.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Geography, Pakistan, Neighbours, Geo-Economics.

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's geopolitical engagement with the region and outside world has been dictated by its geographical location and perceived security concerns vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan. Soon after independence, a constant fear of its encirclement by India through the support of irredentist groups in Afghanistan directed the geopolitical quest for seeking strategic security. At the same time, the United States-led western world also viewed Pakistan as a conduit in the northern tier of containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.¹ Post-1979 events in Afghanistan, however, drastically changed the geopolitical environment that was faced by Pakistan. During the past four decades, Pakistan has dealt with major powers present in its neighbourhood (Afghanistan) like Soviet Union in the 1980s and the United States since 2001.

Meanwhile, Pakistan established and deepened its strategic engagement with China. This unique relationship, in due course, emerged as a stabiliser in Pakistan's regional geopolitical challenges as evident in the emerging geo-economic partnership between the two countries. Presently, the broader geopolitical landscape is a mixture of challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. The challenge is to navigate through the complex minefield of geography, by adopting sound strategies to increase Pakistan's geopolitical space in the neighbourhood. Analysis in this paper traces contours of Pakistan's geopolitical environment, challenges that the country faced during its engagement with neighbours, and emerging opportunities arising out of the intersection of geopolitics and geo-economics.

Any discussion of the geopolitical environment and challenges facing a nation-state is rooted in the concepts of geography, geo-strategy, and geopolitics. 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' is widely attributed to French military statesman Napoleon Bonaparte.² Even if otherwise, geography determines broad contours of geo-strategy and geopolitics of a state operating in a complex regional environment and the international system.

¹ John D. Stempel, *Research Series on US-Pakistan Relations* (University of California: Institute of East Asian Studies, Berkeley, 1985), 47

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 37.

Geography directly influences politics. But what is the definition of geography in a political context? Geography alone cannot explain changes in foreign policies and the political evolution of states and empires. Broadly, however, three geographical variables determine definitions of these concepts: trade routes, presence of resources, and frontiers of a state. The former two influence the course of geopolitics, while the latter guides geo-strategy.

Geography represents the physical reality of land, sea, and air environment. It comprises geological features of the earth such as mountains, rivers, seas, etc. A crucial attribute of geography is it being a constant. An exception is two events: natural disasters such as seismic activities etc. that change the topographical features of a certain area; and political events such as imperial expansions, wars, and/or changes in demarcation lines between states. Geography, in this sense, forms the very bedrock of geo-strategy and geopolitics. A caveat, however, is that geography in itself is not sufficient to analyse changes in the foreign policy of a state.³

Geopolitics is the human conduct within a territory. 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. It comprises distribution of limited material resources within regions, establishing lines of communication and connectivity between regions, and giving importance to select regions according to their strategic significance.⁴

The geopolitical environment is the outcome of an interaction between technological advancements and geographical landscape which can lead to variations in the economic, strategic, and political significance of a certain region. Meanwhile, economic factors also influence the distribution of material resources and hard power between nations. Requirements for access to coveted natural resources have transformed due to technological revolution that has changed modes of production. In this sense, geopolitics is a variable that can explain changes in the distribution of resources across regions and the advent of new routes.

³ Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Lanham: Rowman& Littlefield, 2015), 04.

⁴ Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2006), 13-17.

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 describe the focus of its geo-strategic interests. States direct their political and military focus towards their immediate neighbourhood and extended regions. At the same time, states are not constrained by 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 an activist leadership.⁵

These three concepts can be analysed by identifying the impact of change on them. A spectrum of change varies from tectonic (no change) for geography to swift adjustments in the case of geo-strategy. Geopolitical changes proceed slowly, often spanning decades and in some cases centuries. For instance, the discovery of new sea routes linking Europe to Africa and Asia was a geopolitical change that in a few decades changed the global map. In the contemporary world, the economic growth of China and its plans to build new continental and maritime routes signifies a geopolitical change that will occur in the coming decades.

In a way, these three concepts are also three layers of an international system that evolve at varying speeds for diverse reasons. They are interrelated but do not determine the course of one another. Geo-strategy, a posture adopted by a state, is not solely in response to geopolitics. Meanwhile, geography alone does not define the contours of underlying geopolitics, which consequently, does not strictly regulate the geostrategic postures of states.

PAKISTAN'S GEOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

Pakistan's geographical location has guided its geopolitical pursuit during the past seven decades. As a geographic entity, the newly independent country of Pakistan was a unique case. It was a non-contiguous successor to British India. 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 1971 and the north-

⁵ For more discussion on the geostrategy and its changing nature see, Tal Tovy, *The Changing Nature of Geostrategy, 1900-2000: The Evolution of a New Paradigm* (Albama: Air University Press, 2015).

western region was named West Pakistan, which is contemporary Pakistan.⁶

Present-day Pakistan is situated in the southern region of the Asian continent at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, particularly in the vicinity of the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Pakistan as a successor to British India was also located on the Southern periphery of the Soviet Union, next to Afghanistan, which was a buffer between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century.⁷ Thus, for major powers of that era, the significance of the geography on which modern-day Pakistan exists was apparent.

Pakistan borders India to the east, Afghanistan to the west, Iran to the southwest, and China to far-north, and Tajikistan through the narrow Wakhan corridor in the northwest. Pakistan has a 1001 km long coastline along the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. The country shares a maritime boundary with Oman.⁸ In 1958, Pakistan acquired the Gwadar district from Oman, which decades later has been developed as a port on the cusp of the Strait of Hormuz near the Persian Gulf. Presently, it is at the heart of the new geopolitics of South Asia.⁹

GEOPOLITICS IN EARLY DECADES

Since independence, Pakistan's primary geopolitical challenge has come from its immediate external environment. For a state which emerged with the partition of the Indian subcontinent, India emerged as the geopolitical competitor. Animosity and distrust 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

⁶ Ahsan I. Butt, "Looking Back at the Geopolitics Behind Pakistan's Genocidal Split of 1971", *The Wire*, December 28, 2017, accessed January 4, 2018, <https://thewire.in/208252/looking-back-geopolitics-behind-pakistans-genocide-1971/>.

⁷ Masato Toriya, "Afghanistan as a Buffer State between Regional Powers in Late Nineteenth Century", in *Regional Routes, Regional Roots? Cross-Border, Patterns of Human Mobility in Eurasia*, ed. 2017, accessed December 13, 2019, http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/rp/publications/no14/14-05_Toriya.pdf

⁸ "Geography: The Borders of Pakistan", *Dawn*, October 17, 2009, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/884966>

⁹ On background of Pakistan-Oman deal on Gwadar please see, section titled 'Oman and West Pakistan' in *Countries and Territories of the World*, Pedia Press, 303.

sphere of influence.¹⁰ Meanwhile, an imbalance of size, resources, and military prowess vis-à-vis India led to insecurities in Pakistan.¹¹ It has been compounded by the fact, that, Pakistan lacks territorial depth and there are few natural barriers on the India-Pakistan border that may obstruct the movement of the militaries, of both sides, from crossing the borders.¹²

Pakistan's major highways and communication lines run parallel to the Pakistan-India border, making them vulnerable to Indian attack. Border towns and cities on the Pakistani side are heavily populated, thus, defending territory and population becomes a major challenge to the country. India has remained the primary and constant geopolitical challenge for Pakistan.¹³ The territorial dispute over Jammu and Kashmir has been at the centre of political tensions between the two countries. Over the decades Pakistan has fought three wars, acquired nuclear arms, and sought closer cooperation with external powers to shape the regional dynamics in its favour.

Apart from India, Pakistan's western neighbour Afghanistan presented a geographical challenge due to its territorial claims on parts of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP, now renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).¹⁴ Kabul opposed the inclusion of Pashtun populated areas into Pakistan. It also contests the legitimacy of the Durand Line demarcated by the British representatives as the boundary of Afghanistan

¹⁰ George K. Tanham, "Indian Strategic Thought: An Imperative Essay", *RAND Report*, 1992, 23-35, accessed January 05, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf>

¹¹ Peter R. Lavoy, *Pakistan's Strategic Culture*, Report for Defence Threat Reduction Agency, October, 2006, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/dtra/pakistan.pdf>

¹² Ejaz Haider, "Pakistan needs strategic depth", *The Express Tribune*, October 07, 2011, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/268921/pakistan-needs-strategic-depth/>.

¹³ On conventional military imbalance between India and Pakistan please see recent annual editions of International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance* (London: IISS, 2011-17 ed.)

¹⁴ Barnett R. Rubin, and Abubakar Siddique, "Resolving the Pakistan- Afghanistan Stalemate", *United States Institute of Peace*, February 03, 2015, accessed December 15, 2018, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2006/10/resolving-pakistan-afghanistan-stalemate>.

and British India.¹⁵ Geopolitically, this was compounded by Indian and Soviet support to the Afghan claims in the 1950s and 1960s. Afghanistan, however, lacked the military potential to challenge Pakistan.

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.¹⁶ At present, Afghanistan is the real geopolitical nightmare for Pakistan, as it continues to experience instability. After the US withdrawal and the consequent rise of the Afghan Taliban to power in Kabul in August 2021, the future of the bilateral ties remains bleak with dire implications for the security of the region. The outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) which operates from the Afghan territory has resumed its anti-state activities and has expressed its desire to annex the tribal regions by establishing an Afghan-style Islamic Emirate.

Geopolitically, Pakistan aligned with the western-led security order during the Cold War. Pakistan sought and engaged in defence arrangements to build its conventional military forces to counter-balance India.¹⁷ The United States recognized Pakistan's geographical significance, as 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 defence or recapture of Middle East oil areas' along with being an outpost for the conduct of covert activities against the Soviet Union."¹⁸ Washington decided to provide economic and military assistance to Pakistan and in return, the latter agreed to host a covert American base.¹⁹ This was symbolized by the Baghdad Pact signed, in 1955, by Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

¹⁵ Bijan Omrani, "The Durand Line: History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan Border", *Asian Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2009): 177-95.

¹⁶ Juan Cole, "Pakistan and Afghanistan: Beyond the Taliban", *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 2 (2009): 221-49.

¹⁷ Mohammed Ayub Khan, "The Pakistan-American Alliance: Stresses and Strains," *Foreign Affairs* 42, no. 2 (1964): 195.

¹⁸ Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 422.

¹⁹ "Airgram A-550 From the Embassy in Pakistan to the Department of State," October 6, 1969, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve07/d38>.

Pakistan's western-centric geopolitical alignment, however, raised concerns in China, its far-northern neighbour. Pakistan attempted to assure China that this engagement was only India-centric. Then Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra had also explained to the then Chinese Premier Chou En-Lai that Pakistan would not become party to any hostile action against China and it would not prejudice Pakistan's bilateral relationship with Beijing.²⁰ Meanwhile, geopolitical environment in the Asian continent underwent a transformation due to ruptures in Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian relations. During and after the 1962 Sino-India war, Washington provided arms and equipment to New Delhi without prior notification to Pakistan.²¹ The United States ignored Pakistani concerns that these weapons could be used against Pakistan. As a geopolitical favour to New Delhi, under American pressure, Pakistan did not take advantage of the Sino-India conflict and exercised restraint. However, Pakistan was disillusioned later with the West, particularly, at the American disinterest in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. This forced Islamabad to re-think its geopolitical posture.

Pakistan sought to balance the growing India-US cooperation by forging geopolitical relations with China. The 1963 border agreement with neighbouring China was a Pakistani manoeuvre to reject the status-quo in Kashmir. It opened gates of Chinese military and economic assistance to Pakistan while presenting a new dilemma to India. In a few years Chinese weaponry constituted a 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".²²

The 1965 Indo-Pak war ended in a stalemate and led to a 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 the Soviet periphery reduced due to the development of advanced missile

²⁰ Hafeez-ur-Rehman Khan, "Pakistan's Relationship with The People's Republic of China", *Pakistan Horizon* 14, no. 3 (Third Quarter, 1961): 212-232.

²¹ Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 292.

²² Syed Rifaat Hussain, "Sino-Pakistan Ties: Trust, Cooperation and Consolidation," in *The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform*, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 126.

systems. Also, anti-American sentiment in Asia increased due to the Vietnam War. Consequently, Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (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 the next four decades.²³ In the process, Pakistan earned the ire of the Soviet Union. Moscow put its geopolitical weight behind New Delhi during the 1971 India-Pakistan crisis. Hence, despite being at the centre of geopolitical activity Pakistan could not save itself from a breakup in 1971. Washington had publicly tilted in favour of Pakistan; however political failures and inadequate military forces led to the debacle.²⁴ Consequently, West Pakistan lost its geopolitical pre-eminence, as Washington looked to Iran and India to protect its 'regional interests'. A major focus was on dissuading Pakistan from pursuing the development of a nuclear capability following the 1974 Indian nuclear test. PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto responded by pivoting Pakistan towards the Arab world and started deepening strategic relations with China.

AFTERMATH OF 1979 GEOPOLITICAL EARTHQUAKES

First, in early 1979 a revolution in Iran brought down the US-allied monarchy and forced America to retreat from the Persian Gulf nation. Second, in the last week of December 1979, the Soviet Union decided to intervene militarily in Afghanistan to save the Marxist Saur government. It posed a threat of Soviet forward push towards warm waters of Indian Ocean by rolling over Pakistan.²⁵ Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan was the beginning of a new phase in the Cold War and Washington out of its geopolitical compulsions saw it as an opportunity to turn Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

²³ "The Beijing-Washington Back Channel and Henry Kissinger's Secret Trip to China," *The National Security Archive*, February 27, 2002, accessed December 15, 2017, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/>.

²⁴ Gary Jonathan Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).

²⁵ For a background of U.S. engagement with pre and post-revolutionary Iran during Cold war see, Christian Emery, *US foreign policy and the Iranian revolution the Cold War dynamics of engagement and strategic alliance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

The US exit from Iran meant that only Pakistan remained a regional country from where an international effort to push back against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan could be mounted. Washington, therefore, revived its security cooperation with Pakistan. The Zia regime seized these openings and once again Pakistan became a Western ally and an anchor of stability in the region. Western nations and the pro-US Arab countries supported international efforts to push back against the Soviets.²⁶ The US offered Pakistan a five-year US\$3.2 billion economic and military aid package. Pakistan focused on the modernisation of its conventional land and air forces.²⁷ Washington granted Pakistan waiver from Symington-Glenn sanctions. The Western nations looked the other way, Pakistan developed the nuclear option, and refrained from the public declaration.²⁸ This continued till the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989.

GEOPOLITICS AND RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURS

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

India: For Pakistan, arch-rival, India is a geopolitical competitor. Geography has, however, 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 does not have direct land access to Nepal, Bhutan, while the Indian Ocean separates Pakistan from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In the geopolitics of South Asia, thus, India assumes the central position due to its unique

²⁶ For a concise history of covert international effort against Soviet Union in Afghanistan see, Bruce Riedel, *What We Won: Americas Secret War In Afghanistan, 1979-89* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

²⁷ For background on US-Pakistan relations during the Zia-Reagan era see chapter 10 in Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies*, (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center Press, 2001).

²⁸ "Pakistan's Sanction Waivers: A Summary", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 29, 2001, accessed 19 December, 2019, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2001/10/29/pakistan-s-sanction-waivers-summary-pub-10778>

geography. India views South Asia as its sphere of influence. Pakistan, however, contests Indian outlook towards the region.

The territorial dispute over Jammu and Kashmir region continues to define the enmity between the two neighbours.²⁹ 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.

During the Cold War, Pakistan aligned broadly with the West while India entered into a defence cooperation treaty with the Soviet Union. Pakistan sought defence hardware to modernize its India-focused armed forces. Similarly, defence and technical cooperation with Beijing augmented Pakistan's defence capability to confidently deter India. Decades later this trend has been reversed.

The United States has developed a strategic partnership with India and is engaged in extensive defence cooperation. Washington's geopolitical goal is to contain rising China by building Indian capabilities. This, however, is having a trickle-down effect on Pakistan-India relationship. Since India is procuring advanced defence equipment and technology to modernize its armed forces from the western countries, Pakistan is doubling down on its defence cooperation with China³⁰. Resource constraints, however, have stymied Pakistan's efforts and increased geopolitical tensions with both New Delhi and Washington.

Another Pakistani strategy has been to compete with India for influence within the South Asian sub-region. A case in point is the final phase of the Sri Lankan civil war. Pakistan provided significant military support, including training and weapons to the Sri Lankan army and air force.³¹ After the war, however, India began to influence political

²⁹ Alastair Lamb, *The Kashmir Problem: A Historical Survey* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 102-103.

³⁰ "From Procuring Drone Protection to Other Weapons, Indian Navy is Ahead of Other Services", *The Wire*, July 02, 2021, accessed November 08, 2021, <https://thewire.in/security/on-weapons-procurement-indias-other-armed-services-can-learn-from-the-navy>.

³¹ "Pak played key role in Lanka's victory over Tamil Tigers", *The Indian Express*, May 28, 2009, accessed December 20, 2019, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/pak-played-key-role-in-lankas-victory-over-tamil-tigers/467482/>.

processes in Sri Lanka by leveraging its economic linkages with the local communities, owing to its proximity.³² Pakistan's strategy, thus, faced a limitation, but India's role has been offset to some extent by extensive Chinese investments.

Besides competing in the region, India and Pakistan are competing in Afghanistan and for access to Central Asia. For Pakistan, the prospect of India gaining a foothold in Afghanistan is a strategic challenge. Pakistan contends that owing to its geographical linkage with Afghanistan, the latter falls under its sphere of influence. Islamabad points to historical connections between Pashtun peoples living on both sides of the Pak-Afghan border regions. This rivalry gets intense because of the 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. 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.

Iran: Pakistan's relationship with its south-western neighbour is primarily guided by geopolitics. It can be viewed in two phases: first from independence of Pakistan till the end of Shah's rule, and second from the advent of the Islamic Revolutionary regime to the present day. During the first phase, Pakistan had a close relationship with Iran, marked by both being US allies in West Asia.³³ As part of the Cold War strategy of containment of the Soviet Union, Washington viewed Tehran and Islamabad as critical pillars of regional posture in West Asia. At times, Iran and Pakistan competed for influence in Washington's regional posture. But in a broader geopolitical sense, the bilateral relationship remained steady.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 led by clerics came at a time when geopolitically, Pakistan and the US had drifted apart owing to Pakistan's pursuit of a nuclear option. But the 1979 revolution reversed the US presence and influence within Iran. It opened up new geopolitical space

³² "Sri Lanka keen to boost economic ties with India: Ranil Wickremesinghe," *The Economic Times*, April 22, 2017, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/sri-lanka-keen-to-boost-economic-ties-with-india-ranil-wickremesinghe/articleshow/58314320.cms>.

³³ For detailed study see, Alex Vatanka, *Iran and Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy and American Influence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

for Pakistan. Islamabad made attempts to keep communication channels open with the new Iranian regime.

Geopolitically, Pakistan maintained its distance from post-revolution Iran. During the Iran-Iraq war, Pakistan called for a cessation of hostilities between two Muslim nations. Pakistan's close ties with Gulf nations, particularly, Saudi Arabia also led to geopolitical tensions between Tehran and Islamabad. However, it was in Afghanistan, during the 1990s, that Iran and Pakistan clashed geo-strategically. Both supported rival Afghan groups in the ensuing civil war in Afghanistan. Tehran subsequently opposed the Taliban regime in Kabul.

Later in 2001, when the United States intervened in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran supported the US invasion and also provided logistical support. A year later, in 2002, Washington declared Iran to be part of the 'Axis of Evil' and invaded another Iranian neighbour, Iraq. Meanwhile, tensions between Washington and Tehran escalated due to the latter's nuclear program.³⁴ Islamabad sought to insulate itself from emerging crises in the region by aligning with the United States and calling for peaceful means to resolve the nuclear issue.³⁵

Afghanistan: Pakistan's relationship with its western neighbour has been shaped by geography, history, and geopolitics. Historically, Pakistan as a successor state to the British Raj on the north-western frontier of the sub-continent inherited the boundary arrangements concluded between Britain and Afghanistan. Kabul, however, didn't welcome the emergence of Pakistan. In 1949 Afghan government announced that it does not recognize the Durand line and any such boundary agreement. This continued to hinder the development of bilateral relations till the early 1970s.³⁶

The watershed year of 1979 led to fundamentally altering Pakistan's role and engagement with Afghanistan. Islamabad viewed the

³⁴ David Patrikarakos "A primer on Iran's nuclear crisis and the subsequent tensions with the United States" *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State* (I.B.Tauris, 2012).

³⁵ "Musharraf wants Iran to give up on N-weapons", *DAWN*, July 08, 2011, accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/642613>.

³⁶ See Mujtaba Razvi, "PAK-AFGHAN RELATIONS SINCE 1947: AN ANALYSIS," *Pakistan Horizon* 32, no. 4 (1979): 34-50. Riaz M. Khan, *Afghanistan and Pakistan: Conflict, Extremism, and Resistance to Modernity* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Soviet intervention of Afghanistan as a geopolitical threat, with the end goal of accessing warm waters of the Indian Ocean. Pakistan decided to push back against Soviet forces relying on a variety of Afghan groups. 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, the Soviet Union decided to withdraw its forces and the US interest in Afghanistan also waned. The focus of the international community shifted towards historical developments in Eastern Europe as the Soviet Union collapsed. Afghanistan, however, descended into a civil war. Islamabad decided to actively intervene in shaping of political order in Afghanistan since it considered Afghanistan as its sphere of influence. Besides, a stable Afghanistan was deemed as a national interest. In the process, Pakistan earned antagonism of regional states, including Iran and India. Islamabad continued its pursuit and in the late 1990s supported the government of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

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

With the abrupt withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, the war-torn country is overtaken by the Taliban, whose government is yet to be recognised by the global and regional states, including Pakistan. Despite a two-decade-long military campaign and multibillion, dollar economic aid and assistance by the United States and its allies, a political reconciliation process and settlement to bring an end to conflict in Afghanistan did not yield results. Multiple regional efforts aimed at stabilising the country have not materialized and future of the country continues to be uncertain. Pakistan, being a direct neighbour, is most affected due to the deteriorating political situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban government has yet to implement the promises it had earlier made

to the international community. If the Taliban persist in their obdurate approach to tackle the governance challenges, it will delay the recognition of their government by the international community. Any such political upheaval will aggravate the Afghan crisis with serious implications for regional states. The challenge to manage the fallout of development in Afghanistan will be burdensome for Pakistan, a country that is susceptible to domestic instability as a result of regional developments.

China: The influence of geopolitics on Pakistan's relationship with China has been most visible. Pakistan recognized communist China soon after its founding in 1949. During the 1950s, however, both sides remained distant. Peking expressed concerns about Pakistan joining the Western bloc while Pakistan was wary of the 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 which has witnessed extensive defence cooperation. Over the next few decades, both countries engaged in defence and strategic cooperation.

Besides defence 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 highway, linking Xingjiang with Pakistan's northern-most region Gilgit-Baltistan, and provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. Owing to the proximity of India and also the conflict over Kashmir, the highway has political and military importance for China and Pakistan.

The significance of the Karakorum highway as a geopolitical initiative emerged in 2013 when both countries decided to add a geo-economic component to the relationship. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative was launched. It aims to connect Western China to Pakistan's south-western Gwadar port. As part of CPEC, Beijing is investing in Pakistan's energy and infrastructure sector to build Pakistan's economy. In the next phase, both countries plan to commence the industrialization process, leading to manufacturing by Chinese companies in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Pakistan. This has the potential to transform the economy of Pakistan.

Sino-Pakistan geo-economic cooperation is influencing regional politics, including the conflict in Afghanistan. It will herald a new geopolitical era on the Asian continent. China has risen as a major power

and its economy is set to become the largest national economy in the world. Meanwhile, China and the US are 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 the Middle East. As Washington and Beijing compete for influence in regions across the world, the need for facilitating dialogue with the inclusion of regional countries becomes a necessity. And therein lies an opportunity for Pakistan to maintain its geopolitical clout.

INFLUENCING REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS 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 a direct geopolitical impact. Geo-economics, thus, is a new tool for states to pursue their geostrategic interests. It is a geo-strategic exercise of economic instruments and resources.³⁷

Pakistan can turn its geopolitical engagement in the neighbourhood into geo-economic cooperation and in the process influence the regional security environment. It requires exceptional clarity in the strategic outlook of the country. An insight into the contours of Pakistan's strategic viewpoint was provided by Mr. Sartaj Aziz, former Advisor Foreign Affairs in June 2014. In a rare policy statement in the Senate of Pakistan he underlined that the government is seeking to "turn Pakistan's strategic geographical location from a liability into an asset through trade, transport and energy connectivity with China, Central Asia and West Asia."³⁸ Reference to geo-economic integration with South Asia was conspicuously missing. It points to Pakistan's difficult neighbourhood and the admission of geographical paradox i.e. presence of large rival India,

³⁷ Mikael Wigell, "Conceptualizing Regional Powers' Geoeconomic Strategies: Neo-Imperialism, Neo-Mercantilism, Hegemony, and Liberal Institutionalism," *Asia Europe Journal* 14, no. 2 (2015): 18.

³⁸ Strategic Vision of Pakistan's Foreign Policy - Statement by Sartaj Aziz, Embassy of Islamic Republic of Pakistan DC, June, 2014, 3, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://embassyofpakistanusa.org/press-releases-06-25-2014/>.

whose geography obstructs direct Pakistani integration with South Asian nations.³⁹

Despite strategic pressure from its east, Pakistan has been striving to focus on economic development and a 'peaceful neighbourhood'.⁴⁰ Any Pakistani effort for becoming a regional hub of economic and trade corridors necessitates maintaining a regional environment that is not prone to crises and sudden rises 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's strategic lexicon has been the 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. 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 serve 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 overland access to the 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.⁴¹ Similarly, Beijing has commenced a freight train project with Afghanistan's northern Balkh province.⁴² Enhancing connectivity with Afghanistan remains a

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Pakistan's focus shifting from geopolitics to geo-economics", *Dawn News*, March 25, 2021, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1614535>.

⁴¹ Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "First freight trains from China arrive in Tehran," *Financial Times*, May 9, 2016, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/e964a78e-0bd8-11e6-9456-444ab5211a2f>.

⁴² "First cargo train from China arrives in N. Afghan port," *Ismilkroad*, September 08, 2016, accessed December 22, 2019, <https://en.imsilkroad.com/p/57530.html>.

Pakistani objective and Chinese initiatives can become a good foundation for long-term regional cooperation.

Despite its policy of enhancing commerce with Central Asia, Pakistan has been slow in building infrastructure linkages with the region. 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 operationalize due to a lack of interest from signatories.⁴³

Construction and operationalization of a new deep-sea port in Gwadar have revived the interest of Central Asian States in access to the Arabian Sea. In 2017, Tajikistan expressed an interest in joining the four-nation trade and transit agreement.⁴⁴ Once operationalized, it will enable Pakistan to access Central Asia bypassing the conflict-ridden Afghanistan. This alternate route will also address an irritant of transit access in the Islamabad-Kabul relationship.

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND PROSPECTS FOR PAKISTAN

Pakistan's decision to pivot westwards comes at a time with Beijing is leading a push for regional connectivity initiatives. China is focusing on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) intending to revive the 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 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."⁴⁵ The goal of 'restoring peace and stability' on the Asian continent is an indication of leveraging connectivity initiatives for influencing the course of geopolitics.

⁴³ "Quadrilateral agreement", *Pakistan Trade Facilitation Portal*, accessed September, 7, 2020, <http://www.ptfp.com.pk/Transit/Content/quadrilateral-agreement/Regional-Transit>.

⁴⁴ Zafar Bhutta, "Tajikistan to join Pakistan road link bypassing Afghanistan," *The Express Tribune*, February 24, 2017, accessed December 22, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1337274/tajikistan-join-pakistan-road-link-bypassing-afghanistan/>.

⁴⁵ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "China's premier Li Keqiang in Pakistan," *Asia Times Online*, May 23, 2013, accessed December 22, 2017, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/SOU-03-230513.html.

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

The second corridor is New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB). It aims for 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 railway instead of the sea. The Railway network of NELB begins from China in Xinjiang and traverses through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Poland, and finally reaching ports in Europe on the shores of the 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-Pakistan⁴⁶ (IPI/IP) gas pipeline; b) Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project; and c) Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electricity transmission system.⁴⁷ These initiatives have been constrained by geopolitics.

First proposed as IPI, later became to be called as IP. In 2009, a year after the operationalizing 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 pursuit of the gas-pipeline project. Despite immense US pressure in 2013 the

⁴⁶ Asian Development Bank (ADB) is serving as a secretariat of the project. It has undertaken studies and provided technical assistance to four countries on issues related to the projects. Its reports highlight the nature of issues facing the projects. For report see, "Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Natural Gas Pipeline Project, Phase 3", *ADB Technical Assessment Report*, May 2012, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-document/73061/44463-013-reg-tar.pdf>.

⁴⁷ CASA-1000 project is being supported by the World Bank. For details see, "Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000)", *World Bank*, accessed December 23, 2019, <http://projects.worldbank.org/P145054/?lang=en&tab=overview>.

ground-breaking ceremony was held.⁴⁸ However, construction within Pakistan has not yet commenced. Pakistan claims US sanctions on Iran prohibit it from procuring funds from international funding institutions for the construction of the pipeline. With the emergence of China-led financial institutions, Islamabad can explore alternate financing arrangements and operationalize 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 conflict in Afghanistan means TAPI will be unable to get off the ground. Second, countries undertook prolonged negotiations to arrive at a pricing formula and yet a consensus agreement remains elusive. Third, arranged long-term financing mechanisms of up to US\$15 billion for the construction of the pipeline and allied infrastructure. Asian Development Bank has committed to finance the initial construction of the pipeline,⁴⁹ and now Saudi Arabia has also expressed an interest in investing in the project.⁵⁰ Despite these issues, a ground-breaking ceremony was held in December 2015, but actual work has yet to commence in Pakistan.⁵¹

Similarly, the CASA-1000 project has been marred by mistrust and conflict in the region. It was conceived as a 1270-km transmission line supplying 1300 MWs of electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. Pakistan will consume 1000 MWs and the remaining 300 MWs will be Afghanistan's share. The project is part of the CASA Regional Energy Market (CASAREM).⁵² International

⁴⁸ "Pakistan-Iran gas pipeline defies US", *BBC*, March 11, 2013, accessed December 23, 2019, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-21736725>.

⁴⁹ Zafar Bhutta, "ADB offers \$1b loan for TAPI gas pipeline", *The Express Tribune*, November 19, 2016, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1236092/adb-offers-1b-loan-tapi-gas-pipeline/>.

⁵⁰ Kamila Aliyeva, "Saudi Arabia invests in TAPI project", *Azer News*, January 22, 2021, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://www.azernews.az/region/125877.html>.

⁵¹ Zafar Bhutta, "Incoming government to start laying TAPI pipeline", *The Express Tribune*, August 03, 2018, accessed September 20, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1772155/2-incoming-govt-start-laying-tapi-pipeline-pakistan/>.

⁵² "PM Nawaz, C. Asian leaders inaugurate CASA-1000 power project in Tajikistan", *Dawn*, May 12, 2016, accessed December 23, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1257914>.

development banks, American and British international aid agencies are supporting the project. After years of delays and protracted talks, the project has entered the construction phase. Now the major challenge is ensuring the security of transmission lines in conflict-ridden Afghanistan. The successful construction and implementation of the project will positively influence relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. CASA-1000 is slated to be completed in late-2018. It can emerge as a model for regional cooperation amidst geopolitical mistrust between regional nations.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan is situated in a tough geopolitical neighbourhood with a history marked by a contentious relationship with two neighbours namely Afghanistan and India. Recent political developments in Afghanistan have 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, Pakistan's ties with its south-western neighbour, Iran are a difficult balancing act due to Pakistan's engagement with the Gulf countries and the United States. Meanwhile, India is actively investing in Iran's Chahbahar 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 the Pakistan-China relationship, which provides Pakistan new avenues for expanding its geopolitical space in the region.

The foremost challenge for Pakistani policy-makers is to operationalize CPEC, a north-south corridor while navigating a complex regional security environment. In the wake of changing regional environment, particularly the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, an uptick in the terrorist activities by jihadists and other regional terror outfits is observed. Pakistan must engage its neighbours, particularly, Afghanistan and Iran in connectivity initiatives, while responding to India's growing foothold in the region. China has bilateral connectivity projects with Afghanistan and Iran. This provides Pakistan an opportunity to link up with Chinese projects in these countries. As India expands its footprint in the South Asian region, it is crucial that Pakistan also deepens its existing trade and transit linkages with its neighbours.