

# CHANGING US WAR POLITICS IN SOUTHWEST ASIA AND REGIONAL COOPERATION THROUGH CPEC

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## Abstract

*The changing dynamics of international politics with US military withdrawal from Afghanistan have affected the Southwest Asian geopolitical landscape. While international players have their interests, they involve regional and neighbouring states in their actions frequently; thus, regional complexities arise. Pakistan was engaged in peaceful execution of the US exit strategy from Afghanistan; however, it demanded an overall shift in policy in a changing regional environment. Besides, Pakistan's strategic and economic cooperation with China through CPEC has further enforced its prospects to be a significant player in regional politics. Pakistan's challenges are countering India's regional hegemonic designs and aggressiveness in Indian illegally occupied Kashmir, maintaining a neutral stance over the Iranian front vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia, and addressing the TTP factor. Despite international players' competition, Pakistan has multiple options for attaining balance through CPEC and shifting from competition to cooperation. This paper, therefore, analyses international players' security interests in the region and suggests openings for Pakistan through CPEC considering Regional Security Complex theory.*

**Keywords:** CPEC, Regional Security Complex Theory, JCPA, the US, Afghanistan.

## Introduction

Southwest Asia has been a centre of international politics due to its unique geopolitical and geographic connectivity with rich oil resources and untapped trade routes. It is a hotbed of international to intra-regional interests and conflicts, thus putting the region under constant pressure. Besides the role of multinational players, regional dynamics are also into play. Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have been exerting regional politics. However, the presence of great powers has remained evident since the Great Game left its mark in the region. Uncertainty in inter-state relations results from historical conflicts caused by extra-regional players, mainly the US, especially after World War II.

Bringing this analysis to current upheaval is also credited to US hawkish policies towards Iran sanctioning senior leaders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for alleged involvement in Yemen and Syria, and Lebanon, harming US interests in the region.<sup>1</sup> This conflict of uncertainty further increased with Iran's

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shooting of US drones, claiming it infringed Iranian airspace and brought the chances of war closer, thus making the Strait of Hormuz a hostile zone. President Donald Trump's unilateral decision of withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Programme of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, an agreement that Iran had reached with P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the UK, the US, and Germany) on July 14, 2015, also resulted in a deadlock situation.<sup>2</sup> JCPOA was considered a breakthrough in settling US-Iran hostile relations as Iran had committed to limit its nuclear program under the agreement. However, this move halted the process of peace and trade between both states, ultimately creating a challenging situation in the Gulf region, engaging regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, and Iran.

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever explain the Regional Security Complex theory while stating that geographical proximity exercises complex relations. It is not only geographical proximity that compels for inter-connectedness; international players' politics also forces them to strive for their interests, thus making the situation more complex. For instance, Saudi Arabia and the US intervene in the region. They engaged neighbouring states like Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan for different reasons, demonstrating a complex security feature through domestic, regional, and global levels.

Saudi Arabia has overwhelmed the divided Arab world against Iran, which has been possible with consistent US support. Saudi Arabia's animosity against Iran dates to the end of 1979 on nuclear policies and sectarian conflicts in Syria and Yemen. Similarly, over a deadlock with Iran, the Trump administration bypassed the rules allowing the Saudi government to strengthen its armed forces, pushing the region towards escalating nuclear proliferation, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This further spills over its effect on regional politics transforming Pakistan's role from a pacifying to diffusing tension with Iran and addressing Saudi Arabia's anxieties. Pakistan has its security challenges, and in the current deadlock, Pakistan would persuade Iran to avoid involvement in the Yemeni situation because the geostrategic environment around Pakistan is already perplexing, i.e., India on one side and Afghanistan on another. Pakistan cannot afford another dire state of affairs.

## **Changing International Politics and Regional Geopolitical Dynamics**

From different perspectives, the US-Iran impasse and international politics directly implicate the regional security environment. Pakistan's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia spread over decades to defuse the tension in the region. Pakistan opted for staying impartial but executed diplomacy to settle the war in Yemen. However, Pakistan's financial crisis pushed the country to ask for aid from Saudi Arabia. Similarly, \$ 6 billion aid to Pakistan and Qatar's investment show this inclination. Rupert Stone (2019) expresses that though Pakistan would not take sides despite pressure from Saudi Arabia, attaining balance with Gulf Cooperation Council states. It reflects that economics is an important factor in determining the future of conventional responses.

Meanwhile, Pakistan realises the dynamics of India's regional strategy spreading to West Asian countries, i.e., Iran and Afghanistan. India has maintained good

relations with Iran while prioritizing its energy security and balancing good relations with the Arabian Gulf states. Having good relations with the US, India has become its strategic-ally. Indian foreign policy discourse is based on the multi-alignment model, which entails that India has to align with many partners or states in a multipolar world. With hegemonic goals to checkmate China and maintain threat perception against Pakistan, India expanded its diplomatic missions in Kabul through investments in road infrastructure and developmental projects. However, India lacks geographical access to Afghanistan, limiting its options compared to Pakistan. It is one motive through which the port of Chabahar project was signed between India and Iran in 2003, evading Pakistan. The seaport offered an alternate transit passage to Afghanistan and worked well for India in trade and regional dominance.

Iran is an essential part of India's energy security matrix for exporting oil much lower than alternative sources. Tehran's total oil supply to India is 10% of complete Indian oil requirements.<sup>3</sup> Its desire to spread through Central Asia is another long-term objective. The development of the Chabahar project and its success are critical factors in checking China's growing investment in Gwadar Port under the BRI. From an international aspect, Chabahar port serves India's geopolitical strategy, ultimately serving the US interests in containing China. India has played on geopolitical grounds through international and regional alliances with ultimate gain on securing energy resources and regional dominance ranging from economic to strategic levels. Unfortunately, Pakistan's foreign policy base depends on financial necessity due to the worst economic uncertainty.

International politics in Southwest Asia has to have its effects in South Asia. It depends on regional states to manoeuvre and work for their national interests. However, the current scenario has altered the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Despite convergence between the US and India over checking China's role, the US has drifted with Iran and China into a trade war. It has narrowed down options for India as the US would not consider India to exploit Chabahar port keeping its long stalemate with Iran. Progress has slowed down despite the US granting a limited-time exemption to Chabahar port. India is worried about the US not extending the exemption period for oil export through Chabahar port. Despite being partners in energy and trade, India has submitted to the US not sailing quickly compared to the rapid progress made on Gwadar Port. Compared with Gwadar port, India's dream to make Chabahar port at par with the former is not yielding results. Similarly, the operational environment has toughened over the port due to fear amongst the stakeholders. In this situation, India's ability has gone further limited for slashing its budget up to 50% for the development of Chabahar port.

India's energy security, which is mainly dependent on the situation in the Middle East, has undergone a compromise due to pressure from international powers on other regional stakeholders. After the US has stopped its allies from trading with Iran in any field, new alliances are in the process of formation. *The Hindu* reported that Iranian ambassador Ali Chegani regretted India's decision to succumb to the US and

thought over linking the Terminal-1 of Chabahar Port with Gwadar Port.<sup>4</sup> China has come up with filling the vacuum in time by offering billions of dollars investment in Iran. Pakistan would greatly benefit if Iran, China, and Pakistan came forward and connected Gwadar port and Chabahar port. Torfeh claimed that besides financial help granted to Iran, China had adopted a vast turn in getting maximum influence in the geopolitical scenario of the Middle East by shifting economic support to Iran, challenging the current global balance of power.<sup>5</sup> Both Iran and Pakistan realize that India is not a reliable partner. Torangham stated that it had already voted against Iran in 2005, 2006, and 2009 at International Atomic Energy Agency, showing India's inability to manoeuvre US pressure in the region.<sup>6</sup>

### **Taliban Take Over: Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan**

The twenty-year longest US war ended with a dramatic yet unprecedented takeover of the Afghan Taliban. The Neocons' ideology of the 'new American century' that started with President George W Bush came to a certain discredit US supremacy by ill-equipped religious militia, leaving profound repercussions for the US.<sup>7</sup> US President Donald Trump initiated the exit strategy with help from allies while President Joe Biden unplugged the war. However, this might be an early assessment that whether the US failed or achieved its foreign policy goals in Afghanistan, it was evident that the peace deal would not have a logical end without Pakistan's efforts. Pakistan might not be a strategic partner, though it played a crucial role. It outweighed India's US-Afghan peace process imbroglio that Washington faced with its embarrassing exit. Scholars explain this phenomenon as Christina Fair states that "the US relies on Pakistan for logistics... and logistics will beat strategy every time." While India did not see itself central in this game, it spurred harsh criticism from the Indian policy circles and hawkish media. Therefore, much to the dismay of India, the strategic utility of Pakistan significantly increased in the US-Afghan Taliban negotiations. Rehman states that the US decision to avoid India in the Afghan peace process has harmed its security interests in the region.<sup>8</sup> Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are not sailing smoothly on trade and economic fronts compared to India. The real motive behind India's crucial stance over its hold in Afghanistan aimed to access Central Asia to compete with Russia and China. India's position, therefore, is bleak, keeping international politics in view.

The Afghan peace process was a tedious and energy-driven process that often faced failures or getting closer to the deal. Pakistan's critical involvement, in this case, made it possible to bring the Afghan Taliban for negotiations which annoyed India for not being taken in this process. After the Modi government revoked Article 370 from the Indian constitution, India's unilateral decision has upset the peace and security of South Asia. In the Regional Security Complex theory, international dynamics affect regional stability. In consequence, Pakistan is facing a challenging situation on its eastern borders. India has further denied any call of mediation by the US. The lethal move to curb Kashmiris' right to self-determination in IIOJK has brought South Asia to the brink of an active conflict. Munir Akram mentions that India has made a dilemma out of the Kashmir dispute as great powers involved in Afghanistan by their proxy years.<sup>9</sup>

From Pakistan's perspective, it has to work more for regional integration, and CPEC is the way to assess the changing situation. CPEC is the key to enhancing trade ties with Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran. Iran has 158 billion barrels of oil reserves and 34 trillion cubic metres of natural gas, making it worth advantageous and connecting its links through Gwadar Port. If both Iran and China get interlinked in the absence of India, the possibilities are Pakistan would naturally benefit from regional connectivity. Geostrategic compulsions put Pakistan in a win-win situation where both states are vital for Pakistan. Pakistan's participation in the Middle Eastern security matrix may be fruitful if CPEC is manifested positively. It will help Pakistan constructive play in Southwest Asia.

### **Hegemony to Integration: CPEC to Counter India's Hegemony**

Pakistan's geographical position has already strengthened with CPEC. With CPEC progressing full-swing through its phase-II, regional states consider it an opportunity to exploit the \$62 billion project with multiple benefits. China has already envisaged connecting to the Persian Gulf region, Africa, Europe, and Central Asia through BRI (CPEC). It is a prospect to restructure regions' economic and political array by promoting a network of trade routes, political cooperation, and cultural exchanges. The World Bank has also elaborated on the importance of CPEC for Pakistan in various perspectives from regional to global levels. It calls for the regional integration of CPEC and getting a consensus between civil and military leadership for expansion to these regions. It is possible through productive regional relations by using CPEC to liberate trade with neighbours.

As a gateway to the region, CPEC has offered an excellent opportunity for Pakistan to unlock this potential through exploiting measures. Easier said than done, the ever-changing dynamics of South Asia and the Gulf region affect such actions. CPEC is an opportunity for sustainable connections with regional states and regional dynamics; however, India presents a challenging scenario. Despite having a consensus among all regional states, there are challenges for materialising the vision into reality. These challenges are natural hindrances, such as at the SCO Summit held in Bishkek, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan endorsed BRI, whereas India publicly denied it.<sup>10</sup> In the interplay of geopolitics, India, an ally of the US against China, follows a path of competition. However, CPEC has shifted the regional balance towards Pakistan. BRI visibly reflects the results in economic and political terms globally. Given its geographical position and multilateralism, Pakistan has moved to a much better strategic place than India, keeping its association with the US.<sup>11</sup>

Strategically speaking, CPEC and Gwadar Port uniquely make the UAE nervous as it might be a new maritime logistical hub. The development of this port and CPEC has significant implications on the US interests and strategy in Southwest Asia.<sup>12</sup> It may not necessarily transit to any convergence with India on CPEC subversion. Pakistan can shift geopolitics through CPEC because the US and China are keenly interested in moving power alignments in the region for economic and security reasons. India has

always attempted to counter the influence of Pakistan in the area to maintain its hegemonic aspiration. The project of Chabahar Port, in this regard, grants India an uninterrupted yet lengthy passage to import Iranian oil. India initiated a considerable investment to import oil with an explicit exemption from the US. It perceives Chabahar Port as a competition against regional states. Singh stated that India's apprehension over Iran's openness to other regional states in the development of Chabahar Port would turn it into a conflicting zone and undermine India's commitment to seeing the port as an edge.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The analysis offers insight into what options exist for Pakistan to connect with Southwest Asia despite several challenges. The stalemate between the US and Iran has turned the region towards a more conflicting situation. Given the Chabahar port's uncertain and slow progression, Pakistan is improving its relations with Iran. Pakistan's commitment to fast progress towards phase-II of CPEC would make it more reliable than India. Gwadar Port is the pivot of regional integration, and the connectivity would result in pragmatic decisions to expand CPEC that could drive positive developments in the complex regional security environment.

Despite dissent on ideological convergence, regional states can unite for regional trade and socio-economic development. Pakistan needs to warm up its ties with Iran while keeping friendly relations with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan can work realistically on CPEC and utilize Chabahar Port in its best interests, vital for economic life. The answer lies in regional integration. Pakistan needs to offer a massive breakthrough to the new Afghan government through CPEC to create a trade route to the Central Asian republics. The shortest route to the warm waters through Gwadar Port will multiply trading activities in Southwest Asia. Therefore, the Regional Security Complex theory offers insights to Pakistan to turn the regional competitive environment into a mutual dividend.

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