

China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan: Partnership for Regional Peace

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the prospects of strategic partnership for regional peace between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan through their mutual geopolitical interests. Chinese involvement with Afghanistan serves as a key factor in the successful implementation of its economic outreach through Central and South Asian segments of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it helps to rebalance China's economic and political aspirations. The paper also highlights the implications of China's relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan to counter Indian influence in the region. The trilateral relationship between these countries is of paramount importance for regional peace and security. Afghanistan is the most unstable country in the region; however Chinese constructive engagement with Afghanistan through diplomatic, political, economic and security measures can usher into a new era of peace, progress and development for the entire region.

Key Words: **Trilateral Relationship, Regional Peace, Belt and Road Initiative .**

Introduction

China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan hold the key position in changing the future dynamics of South Asia. The parameters of new regional order are commercially defined through a mutual approach towards the strategic fault-lines. Pakistan and China have always been reliable strategic partners for peace and stability in the region. China's interest in the region serves as a viable template on assuming its peaceful rise in the international system. Beijing's concerns revolve mostly around the deteriorated security and its possible impact on the region. Since China announced to revive the old Silk Route, through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has even more concerns in a stable immediate and wider neighborhood. The Silk Road initiative has already given a new impetus to China's infrastructure and development in Pakistan. The relations between Afghanistan and China have been dominated broadly by the Silk Road. Afghanistan, located at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, serves as a potential state in China's trade and investment network. However, the uncertain and precarious security situation is one of the main obstacles for China to promote peace and stability in the region.

Afghanistan shares its border with Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; all these states have been affected by the instability in Afghanistan. Therefore, China is striving hard to stabilize Afghanistan politically and economically in order to ensure regional peace. The ambitious drive of Chinese interests in Afghanistan is leaving deep imprints on the political course of South Asia. Afghanistan is being envisaged as the juggernaut of an energy corridor that is likely to establish its foundations from Central Asia to Gwadar from where the energy resources would be directed straight to China. Thus, constructive engagement with Afghanistan and Pakistan serves the Chinese strategic and economic interests due to its growing need for intra-regional connectivity.

Pakistan has played an important role in bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan, and it supports China's greater role to promote economic cooperation in the region. China has adapted a flexible course of policies pertaining to the region and unlike the preceding major powers that endeavored to subdue South Asia through coercion and realist means, China is striving for regional cooperation while also endeavoring to amicably resolve the security issues. China's active participation promotes inclusive peace process for the purpose of stability that helps to end the long-drawn conflict in Afghanistan.

Therefore, this paper endeavors to explore the possibility of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan trilateral cooperation to bring peace and stability in the region through the prism of structural realism.

Theoretical framework

One of the permanent aspects of International Relations is that it is always in transition. Thus, the continuity compels the analysis of any research to predict the future course of political action with the help of a theoretical lens. The given research explores the fundamental aspects of Structural Realism with different dimensions to broaden the understanding of strategic partnership for regional peace between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan for greater knowledge.

Realism has always been a popular paradigm in international politics. Realists criticize the illusions of utopianism as a product necessary for maintaining the status quo because ethics and morality as elaborated by utopianism are the product of self-interest (Evans 1975). In other words, as illustrated by E.H. Carr, there exist no harmony of interest rather there is and always will be conflict of interest between states (Ibid). Although similar but not identical, such ideas are also to be found in Hans Morgenthau's concept of power that has its deep roots in human nature (Solomon 2012). However, Kenneth Waltz known as the father of Structural Realism, elaborates that competition between the states are actually the product of anarchic environment that compels states to enter into alliances in order to balance the power. This concept makes survival as the ultimate security aim of every state (Doeser 2020).

In the light of this theoretical backdrop, the current pattern of diplomatic

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cooperation between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been on the rise. India, which was seen as a major state in Afghanistan is now shedding its proactive participation in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan brought forth China as an active and constructive state in Afghanistan. The ongoing dynamics of US-China strategic rivalry motivates China to form a well-coordinated strategic partnership with Pakistan and Afghanistan (Gallarotti 2011). China's current diplomatic engagement with the Taliban through Pakistan's role as a facilitator mirrors Islamabad strategic motive. The future of installation of an inclusive Afghan government with Taliban as a major stakeholder would enhance China's growing alliance with Pakistan. Therefore, the trilateral cooperation between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan serves as a counterweight to the Indo-US strategic partnership.

China's Belt and Road Initiative has inculcated massive investments in Pakistan, which seeks to reshape region's geo-economic landscape. China has also signed a strategic partnership with Iran on security, politics, trade and energy giving Beijing expansion in the Persian Gulf as well (Reuters 2021). China's strategic engagement in Afghanistan deepens the trilateral cooperation between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Minister Dialogue in June 2021 on deepening trilateral cooperation encapsulates cooperation in security, counter terrorism and political connectivity. The efforts that are put forward by trilateral cooperation underlines peace, stability and development as core objectives for the formation of new strategic alliance. In order to consolidate mutual interests, China reaffirmed its constructive role in promoting cordial relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. These aspects highlight the central idea of Structural Realism that promotes mutual interests between states as a fundamental prerequisite for alliance formation. With the aim to secure political agendas the three sides reassured to curtail any form of double standards to counter growing radicalization and extremism (Embassy PRC, 2021). The consensus on the trilateral dialogue can be seen as a milestone towards the formation of new strategic cooperation between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan for regional peace.

China's role in peace building by linking Pakistan and Afghanistan to BRI

China has always shown keen interest in Afghanistan as it has been the Chinese westward strategy. China never desired to militarily involve in Afghanistan (Rafiq 2017). Intention was a possible political solution in Afghanistan and in order to achieve this purpose, China brought Pakistan, United States and Taliban with the Afghan government on the same table (Syed 2019). China has been trying for a new trilateral dialogue among the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan since 2016. As a part of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), China is also engaged in talks with the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

China's active role is to set norms by promoting multilateral arrangements.

Beijing persuaded Pakistan, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Afghanistan Contact Group and Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) to promote security cooperation with Afghan Taliban. The possibility of a peaceful and a prosperous country with wellbeing of Afghan people considerably depends upon a successful reconciliation between various rival regional/ethnic political Afghan factions. Furthermore, to uplift the country from the ashes of internal turmoil, the infrastructure should be redesigned; for instance, improvising education, reconstruction of socio-economic system and countering illicit arms and drug trafficking.

Afghanistan is considered as a gateway for not only China's BRI but also for regional cooperation. Since May 2016, Afghanistan has been an official partner of BRI. Several discussions between leaders of Afghanistan and China were held in the following years regarding Afghanistan serving to connect China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China Central Asia West Asia corridors. As a land bridge in the heart of Asia, Afghanistan in future must play a key role (Kumar 2018).

In shaping the contours of BRI, stability in Afghanistan is a pre-requisite. There is a huge production of transit energy in Afghanistan. Afghanistan can produce 68,000 MW of wind energy, 23,000 MW hydropower energy and 223,000 MW of solar energy according to some estimation. Despite possessing all this energy, Afghanistan's 41 percent of population is using electricity and only less than 2000 MW of electricity is being produced. To fill the gap, Afghanistan has to import electricity from other neighboring countries while, Afghanistan has imported \$973 million electricity from 2007-2015 (Khalil 2017). On the other hand, Pakistan has the energy deficit issues and due to the current shortfall of electricity that was more than 6000 MW, Pakistan had only three ways; first, Pakistan can produce electricity at home; second, import it through planned CASA-1000 network; third, there is another way of transmission line (TAP-500) between Afghanistan-Pakistan-Turkmenistan. A plan has been already made to build a hydroelectric dam on the Kunar River in the Kabul river basin by China, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Kabul river basin has the potential to produce 2800 MW of electricity annually, according to the estimations of Afghan inter-ministerial energy commission (Yongbiao 2018).

Before anything else, the sharing of water agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the investment and mediation of China is very crucial. A water sharing agreement has twice failed to be signed by Pakistan and Afghanistan with the help of World Bank since 2006. If the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Bank of China, the Chinese Development Bank and the Silk Road Fund contribute to them financially then the projects which involve Afghanistan such as, CASA-1000, TAP-500v TAPI, TUTAP and other rail and road projects, can also become the part of CPEC.

Furthermore, the domestic infrastructural projects of Afghanistan can be integrated into BRI. Such as, the Afghan Railways Network in the northern zone where Afghanistan wants to build and start a railway line at the Sher Khan port on

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the Panj river that passes through Mazar-e-Sharif to Kunduz and then to Aquina-Herat. Due to which, a five-Nation Railway Corridor between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Iran, China, and Afghanistan would be open that have its link into Central Asia. On the other hand, other routes for instance, Lapis Lazuli Transit, Trade and Transport Route between Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Turkey and Afghanistan, could become the part of BRI (Cheng 2018).

Countering security challenges to CPEC

Instability in the region directly pose threats to the CPEC and Chinese interests. Therefore, in order to provide security to the corridors, especially CPEC, China has taken the complexities of regional security more seriously than ever. Since the security is inextricably linked to the economic interests of China, it has engaged into a robust political role in the region. China realizes that the presence of India could foment militancy in Xinjiang and its presence in Afghanistan would curtail its economic ambitions for South Asia.

Prior to the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan, India enjoyed cordial relations with the former to weaken the economic aspirations of China in the region. However, China in 2018 initiated dialogue mechanism to bring Afghanistan and Pakistan closer together (Khan 2019). In recent years, the Indo-Pak tensions have intensified over the issue of Kashmir. China backs Pakistan on Kashmir issue and opposes unilateral actions of India in the region. China is mindful of the fact that any sort of instable political actions can sabotage the economic ventures of China.

China is using soft power, but it is also mindful of the security threats that accrue from the Indian espionage and sabotage activities in the region. The Indian countermeasures are aimed at derailing the Chinese economic engagement in Afghanistan but political engagement with the Taliban and its effort to ink deal with Afghanistan and Pakistan to enhance counterterrorism cooperation gives China a perfect position to propose a new regional order under China, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Ibid).

Establishing peace in South Asia

Establishing peace is the paramount focus of China without which no efforts for Belt and Road Initiative can come true. Afghanistan is the epicenter of Chinese trade routes. Being at the junction of China Pakistan Economic Corridor and the West Asian Corridor, China is way too concerned about the future stability of Afghanistan (Ullah 2019). Without the stability of Afghanistan, the future of CPEC will also be rendered a failure because an instable Afghanistan has always been the breeding ground of militancy and extremism. History is witness that the militancy does not confine to Afghanistan alone; it spills over to the neighboring countries. Pakistan has been the most affected country in the entire South Asian region by terrorism as it is directly exposed to this wave of militancy that breeds in Afghanistan (Bhagawati 2017). The spillover of militancy from Afghanistan can

refuel the insurgency in Balochistan, which poses direct threat to CPEC and Gwadar. For the successful functioning of CPEC, peace and stability in Afghanistan is essential. Not only the CPEC, but also the entire success of the BRI hinges upon the stability of Afghanistan (Ali 2018).

China wants South Asia to be the launching pad of the world-class economy based on the models of its own structure where it has achieved economic liberalization without compromising its political system. Privatization is gradually making a strong ground in China, too. The new economic as well as political order based on the principle of Third World Solidarity is also helpful for Pakistan, Afghanistan and for the Belt and Road Initiative of China (Kolmas 2016). For Afghanistan, it is useful in a sense that the several decades of war have ravaged the country tearing the infrastructure apart and shattering the economy, the Chinese efforts to rebuild that will provide the former a new hope and a chance to reemerge on the economic scene as a potential regional economic power.

There is no denying the fact that unlike the preceding global powers of the world, China has emerged on the international scene as a global power at a time when the world has clung with interdependence, either it is cultural, economic or ideological, but the age of multilateralism and interdependence has come. Therefore, it is focusing more on South Asia as a cautious power to stabilize the region before fully asserting its global ambitions (D'Souza 2013). Another important reason for the increasing Chinese interest in the region is to check the balance of power in South Asia, which is the most paramount reason to worry for China at the moment when the Indo-Pak relations are on a historic low (Sultana 2015). India is dominating most of the political as well as economic and trade course of South Asia. Therefore, China is standing on the side of Pakistan so that it brings about a sort of balance of power among the nuclear states to make a balance between them (Ibid).

The positive element about Chinese approach towards South Asia including Pakistan and Afghanistan is that it does not impose its model of economy or its political setup on other countries. Rather the countries that wish to join the BRI or join hands with China for regionalization; they can develop their own frameworks and models of economy and cooperate with China accordingly (Kissinger 2011). For example, China's agreement to invest 400 billion dollars in Iran under the large ambit of BRI through Chinese several multilateral development banks, serves as a strong template of the latter's effort to stimulate Iran's economy. The agreement between Iran and China signifies Chinese investments in multiple sectors like information technology, health care, telecommunication, banking, ports and railways. In return to this hefty investment, China would be receiving highly discounted supply of Iranian oil for next 25 years. China's effort to modernize Iran's gas, oil and petrochemical industries can uplift Iran's economic development potentials (Reuter 2021). Looking at China's growing strategic ties with Iran, the possibility for the formation of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran can be seen as an important step towards the emergence of new regional order.

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The maritime Indian Ocean belt is the most desired trade route of the world with great advantages from the naval perspective. It is quite unfortunate that due to the mutual rivalries and not giving enough scope to the economic goals, South Asia has remained far backward as compared to the other regions of the world. China has the capacity of resources as well as of the capital to fuel the region with an accelerated economic growth of an unprecedented nature that the region has never seen before.

China has been able to transform the economic landscape of the world and it intends to do the same in South Asia. In spite of the trust deficit and extreme nationalism among the countries of South Asia, the region's strategic location by virtue of being positioned at the junction of many other regions and its access to strategic SLOCs like the Indian Ocean through which over 80% of the world's seaborne trade in oil transits through, has made it a very attractive zone for great powers like the UK, the US and now increasingly China to get involved in it (Ali 2018). The nature of the pursuit of goals by China is unlike the other great powers that used to pursue colonial and exploitative ambitions. Throughout the history of China, all the diplomatic approaches it has made towards the countries of South Asia have been bilateral in nature (Dittmer 2010).

China is doing a total trade of 250 billion dollars in the region, which is quite enormous, especially India with which it has a trade partnership of around 100 billion dollars. The Chinese involvement in the peace process and peace dialogues in Afghanistan also bears testimony to the fact that China is keen towards resorting stability in this region. Beside the platform of SAARC, China has also used other alternate sources like the sub-regional platforms and the sub-regional cooperation initiatives among which the CPEC and China-Nepal-India (CNI) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) stand visible. All of them are quite crucial transportation projects, which are essential for the economic and trade connectivity in the region (Mahnken 2016).

Beside the corridors, China has also offered the countries with lofty military packages and agreements, and aid. China is endeavoring to influence the region through certain convincing multilateral engagements by establishing forums like the Trans-Himalayan Development Forum, China South Asia Cultural Forum, China-South Asia Business Forum, China-SAARC Economic and Trade Forum (Ibid). Another factor that pushes China towards this region is the militancy it faces back at home and the threats for it fueling and growth emanate from South Asia; therefore, it aims at curbing these threats as well. This militancy has often tensed China and diverted its focus from economic expansion; thus, it needs to tackle this with the help of corridors. The peace and stability of Xinjiang is deeply related to South Asia, given this case in point, China is focused on maintaining a stable relationship with this region and always gives it a priority ever since it has announced the Belt and Road Initiative.

Opportunities for Pakistan

Numerous opportunities lie ahead for Pakistan as far as its relationship with China is concerned. Their bilateral ties have grown from politico-diplomatic to full-fledged strategic and economic relations during the past few decades. Central Asia is the most captivating region but being a landlocked region, it has been on the dependence of major powers that exploited the region. Pakistan is famous for its coastal belt that has the privilege of warm waters where the commercial activities continue non-stop (Ali 2018). It is also the shortest possible route to maritime trade for the CARs. Once CPEC gets fully functional, they can join the given project as they are in dire need of a project that can bring them access to the maritime trade.

The security issues can also diminish with the prosperity generated through CPEC, if Pakistan emancipate from an eternal political as well as security strife and chaos (Ali 2016). The most exuberating plus point of this project is that it can also bring an appealing connection among Iran, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and China; a true booster for the regional economic cooperation (Kennedy 2015). A prospect for greater regional connectivity can be the transformation of CPEC into India, Iran, and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (IICPEC). Through this agreement, both West Asia as well as South Asia can usher a new age of cooperation and connectivity (Jain 2017). However, before conceiving this idea, they must address their mutual differences that create wedge between them. If this concept is envisaged, a greater move ahead can be taken when the IICPEC will be connected to the TAPI gas pipeline agreement. In all these processes and agreements, the role of Afghanistan is quintessential (Wei 2017).

The connectivity between Chahbahar Port of Iran, CPEC and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) can nurture a new pathway for the development of South, West, Central and East Asia. The current ambivalence that hampers the progress towards certain projects is due to the lack of trust in each other (Johnson 2017). In the 5th ministerial talks of the Istanbul Peace Process, countries including Iran, India and Afghanistan vowed to promote their energy interests by developing confidence in each other with the goal of attaining energy security (Behind China...2017).

The future of CPEC appears to be quite bright because it is the juggernaut of intra-regional as well as inter-regional trade routes. If CPEC does not get functional, the West Asian Corridor, which stands in the Persian Gulf will render ineffective as it cannot link to the other regional corridors (Kai 2017). The Indian inclusion in CPEC will diffuse political tensions, which can ultimately reduce regional animosity and hostilities. The reduced hostilities can develop confidence building measures for the peaceful engagement towards resolving all long-standing issues among them, including terrorism, Kashmir, and trade (Wei 2017).

The security dilemma between the two nuclear states has never allowed the peace process to take place and it is detrimental for any future political engagement. Therefore, the regional economic cooperation can address this issue.

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Their bilateral trade is too low, which remains quite astounding because India is the sixth largest economy of the world and Pakistan is a potentially emerging market, yet their bilateral trade is very low. CPEC at the behest of regional connectivity can register a substantial boost in the given trade and can increase their cooperation on multiple platforms. They share the same culture, yet they are also dissimilar in their political and economic outlook (Kundi 2017). CPEC, beside strengthening the economy of Pakistan and bringing it on a parallel level with the market economy of India, will strengthen the position of China and its policy of Pakistan towards India and Afghanistan; thus, deeply expanding its influence further.

A stable regional order: China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan

Strategic partnership for regional peace for China, Pakistan and Afghanistan is a dream, yet it can come true and can be materialized if China plays a leading role in this regard. The triangle relationship between these countries is of paramount importance for regionalism. For China, the most instable countries are Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively (Ibid). If they are stabilized with a due process and through a triangle of diplomatic, political, economic and security measures, they can usher a new era of progress and peace (Wei 2017).

The differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan have roots in their history. In 1947 when Pakistan had applied for the UN membership, Afghanistan was the only country that had voted against the membership of Pakistan. Furthermore, the agenda of greater Pakhtoonistan had deteriorated their relations. As a matter of fact, the issue of Durand Line is another source of tension between them. Afghanistan believes that the Durand Line was a border that had been demarcated by the British; their rule ended; therefore, the legality of all the agreements also ended. On the other hand, Pakistan believes in the continuation of Durand Line and emphasizes on its continuity (Toje 2018). The lack of trust in each other is a glaring example of their failure to resolve their mutual differences including the issue of border, which Afghanistan does not recognize. The Durand Line had been agreed upon in 1893 for a period of hundred years and it expired in 1993. Since then, Afghanistan is emphasizing on the renegotiation of border settlement, but Pakistan reiterates for the continuity of the old one (Zhang 2016).

The cross-border terrorism between Afghanistan and Pakistan continues to fuel the trust deficit. The skirmishes between the armies from both sides continue to fuel this hatred. The political differences have impeded any chance of economic cooperation between them; the 1965 Afghan Transit Trade Agreement is not fully functional either, which further intensifies their tensions (Bhagwati 2017). The people from across the border are considered as spies and India has taken full advantage of their mutual tensions by increasing its espionage activities along with strengthening its strategic ties with the Afghan government. The closer ties of Afghan government with India have further deepened the trust deficit (Kundi 2017).

CPEC has given Pakistan a new hope of economic revitalization. China's ambition to link BRI with CPEC by using Afghanistan as a traversing point has given a new ray of hope for peace and cooperation (Zhang 2017). China has embarked upon bringing both these countries on closer ties from the platform of Quadrilateral Peace Talks. China is using its economic influence on Afghanistan to come to terms with Pakistan and resolve their political issues (Ibid). It has largely been perceived that CPEC is a game changer, and its success is going to change the fate of Pakistan entirely, rather the entire South Asia. It is going to be the edge for the economy of China whereas also benefiting Pakistan to a great deal by rushing in of the goods and inflow of the capital (Kundi 2017). It has the potential of enhancing exports of Pakistan as well as increasing its transit capacity which can attract other companies from other countries as well to invest in Pakistan; Russia and Saudi Arabia have shown keen interest in becoming partners of this project. Saudi Arabia has already pledged to build an oil refinery in Gwadar, which is going to be the main line of Chinese imports of oil from the Persian Gulf, thus, internationalizing the impact of CPEC (Goh 2016).

The major focus of China under this project is towards the development of infrastructure, which is crucial for the regional connection. If China wishes to connect the region, it must be through some linkage, which is only possible through giant projects for the development of infrastructure. Given this case, China has pledged a mighty 10 billion dollars for the given development of infrastructure in CPEC. So far, this linkage is only going to connect China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, but China is willing to provide a chance to India and beyond to join it as well. A connection like this can rejuvenate the peace process once again in South Asia which now has been hampered by the Indo-Pak rivalry and host of mutual mistrusts and conflicts ranging from Kashmir to water dispute. China offers a unique chance to establish peace in South Asia, a lasting peace that can restore the trust among the states by overcoming the security dilemma (Their 2017).

Another point in the direction of regional cooperation is the Indian willingness to join the Pakistan Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement. India at the moment has a heavy investment in Afghanistan, but it takes the longer route from the Arabian Sea to the port of Chahbahar and then it goes to Afghanistan (Ross 2016). If the Pakistan Afghanistan Transit Trade route is restored and India is allowed to join it, then the traversing route will reduce the distances for India significantly. However, the current political disagreement and the security dilemma have driven both the countries at loggerheads, and they are not ready to bow down to the other. CPEC is the only hope for Pakistan to bring India on board because it can use it as the launching pad to reopen this route, thus, a new phase of regionalism and peace can be secured (Zhaou 2018).

Peace and stability in South Asia are the most imperative things to achieve for China and for that the resolution of Afghan conflict and the resolution of the Pakistan-India conflicts must be sought with utmost priority. The changing landscape and geopolitics of the region demand regional cooperation through

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multilateral approach for deepening interdependence, and Pakistan ought to reorient its trade policy for the greater good (Papatheologou 2014). It has to be more elaborate in its policy orientation towards India and Afghanistan. Greater export-oriented economy is all Pakistan wants. The search for new markets in its neighborhood including India is also gradually becoming a priority for it. If peace is established, India can come to terms with Pakistan over the transit route to Afghanistan and then via Afghanistan to Central Asia (Bukhari 2013). The political rivalries have driven them towards an impasse, but the helpful hand of China in bringing about peace that can reduce the hostilities paving the way for confidence building measures. The first confidence building measure can be if both Pakistan and India agree to disengage their espionage activities in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The positive role of China can establish eternal peace in South Asia and stabilize the economies of regional states. The partnership with China has opened numerous opportunities for Pakistan, which can also lead towards a strategic partnership for regional peace between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their bilateral ties have grown from politico-diplomatic to full-fledged strategic and economic relations. Thus, numerous opportunities lie ahead for Pakistan as far as its relationship with China is concerned. In addition, establishing peace is the paramount focus of China without which there can be no Belt and Road Initiative. It is the foremost focus of China while dealing with the stakeholders in South Asia, especially, with India whom it has a long traditional hostility. The pursuit of economic objectives has allowed China to keep the political differences with other countries aside and move ahead. Prospects of cooperation are quite bright in South Asia if China plays a positive role in determining the socioeconomic and strategic course of the region.

All the countries in the region are on decline economically, and China is the booster they require. China has to be more tactful while dealing with India. A standoff with India is not in the favor of either of the major powers. Furthermore, the Chinese growing interests in South Asia strikes a strategic balance for Pakistan against India. The trade network layout in the shape of Belt and Road Initiative of which Pakistan is the main center, regional economic connectivity is now a reality. There are many countries, which have shown keen interest in developing the region and want to share this mega vision.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a major success not only for China, but for all those economies that have been dwindling due to recession and other constraints. Previously, the major countries of South Asia had too high rates of trade and investment with the countries of other regions, but their intra-regional trade and investment was quite negligible. Nevertheless, now they are getting closer towards establishing their trade ties anew.

Pakistan has benefited from siding with China over the years against its regional rivals and it has also benefited economically. Pakistan can take the

advantage of Chinese presence to deny India more influence and take advantage of the trade routes. In order to come on parity with India to restore the balance of power in South Asia, Pakistan needs the help of China. Like Pakistan, the Afghan government also wants a sustainable peace deal along with a regional connectivity, especially, between itself and Pakistan which promises to open new channels of progress and prosperity for the region. Therefore, the strategic partnership of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan is a win-win proposition for these states as well as for the entire South Asian region to bring peace, progress and prosperity.

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