

*The Great Power Gambit*

# SOUTH ASIA CONUNDRUM

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B. M. JAIN



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LEXINGTON BOOKS

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books  
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.rowman.com

6 Tinworth Street, London SE11 5AL

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

ISBN: 978-1-4985-7175-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-1-4985-7176-0 (electronic)



<sup>TM</sup> The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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# Preface

*South Asia Conundrum* is the product of my long associations and prolonged discourses with scholars, academia, graduate students, and foreign policy elites in the United States, Canada, and India. The question that has been puzzling me is as to why South Asia was a tossing ball for superpowers during the Cold War period, and still continues to be so for extra-regional forces. By bringing their own policy agenda and goals in the region, they glossed over the impact of their myopic interests on regional peace, security, and stability. Gradually but surely, their strategic tentacles spread over to South Asia's extended neighborhood, including the Greater Middle East region. In this context, Robert O. Keohane has aptly observed, "States do not typically cooperate out of altruism or empathy with the plight of others, nor for the sake of pursuing what they conceive as international interests."<sup>1</sup>

Let me begin with whether it was a sheer accident that South Asia became the victim of the icy buffets of the superpowers' Cold War politics. Partly, it was on account of their well-orchestrated policies that South Asia was drawn into their strategic rivalry for ideological reasons. It is interesting to note that both the superpowers, instead of learning an appropriate lesson from the past history, threw themselves into an unknown but most tough and tortuous terrain of Afghanistan, which prepared the ground for their humiliating defeat. For the Soviet Union, the Afghan War proved a worst nightmare—its demise in December 1991. For the United States, it turned out to be a Waterloo. Though US troops had achieved swift victory over the Taliban with the launch of massive military attack on Afghanistan in October 2001, it gradually turned out to be an intractable and invincible war—one of the longest ones in American history.

This book churns out the enlightening narratives veering around the Afghan politics, and about extremists and jihadi elements in the Taliban and

Haqqani network whose sudden fall and remarkable resurgence has made it excruciatingly difficult for stakeholders to deal with the amorphous war situation in Afghanistan. Interventionist powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, as well as Iran and Pakistan, have further complicated the security complex in the extended South Asia. Their role reminds one of the “great game” in Central Asia. In this scenario, nothing has crystallized so far as to end one of the longest wars in history. Moreover, the hope for restoring internal peace and political stability in Afghanistan has been held hostage to congenial animosity between India and Pakistan. The latter looks upon Afghanistan as its natural sphere of influence, bent upon denying a strategic space to India. For India, Afghanistan is an indispensable component of its foreign policy and diplomacy to minimize Pakistan’s predominant role in and internecine interference with Afghanistan’s domestic and external affairs. The chess game continues in the region, and will continue in the future as well.

For the Trump administration, South Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan proved a permanent thorn in its strategic fabric. Neither could it plug it off to get some temporary relief nor could it bear its pain to go back into hibernation for introspection. Having faced this sort of dilemma the Trump administration thought it better to pull out US troops from Afghanistan, patently realizing that Pakistan was not going to oblige it in eliminating the Taliban and other jihadi forces engaged proactively in Afghanistan. Though the Trump administration announced suspension of American aid to Pakistan, it no longer has the leverage to get done from Pakistan what America wants to achieve. On the contrary, Pakistan is glued to China strategically. The latter has come forward to take care of Pakistan’s gnawing problems, whether it be development, or employment, or energy needs, with its announcement of a package of over 46 billion dollars through the CPEC flagship project.

Besides, China’s BRI project, perceived as a “counterpoint to Trans-Pacific Partnership,” is a direct threat to US trade, investment, and market interests. Its singular motive is to erode America’s economic leadership globally, and to accelerate global expansion of Chinese multinational companies in order to acquire American and European firms. The Trump administration, on the other hand, has embarked on a grand Indo-Pacific enterprise to contain China’s expanding influence. But it remains uncertain whether the Trump administration or the coming US administrations will be able to deliver on the enterprise.

This book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter offers refreshing narratives about South Asia as a volatile region from the very onset of the Cold War politics to the great power gamble in the post-Cold War regional security architecture. The chapter discusses how and why the region has been transformed into a perpetual theater of conflict and instability given the adversarial relations between India and Pakistan, between Pakistan and Af-

ghanistan, and a continued impasse between Afghanistan and extra regional powers.

It is interesting to note that China and Pakistan have consistently enjoyed robust ties without commonality in terms of ideology, culture, ethnicity, religion, language, and societal values. Keeping this backdrop in mind, the second chapter deals with how China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will address Pakistan's energy needs, its growing unemployment, and its infrastructure development as well as the potential of Islamabad's falling into Beijing's debt trap. Also, the chapter fleshes out the short and long term fallout of CPEC on South Asia, in general, and on India, in particular. Furthermore, it takes into account responses and reactions of the governments of Pakistan and China regarding the relevance and importance of the project.

Chapter 3 examines the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the background of Chinese veteran leader Deng Xiaoping's "lie low" policy in contrast to Xi Jinping's showcasing of China's accomplishments in economic and military domains. It also evaluates whether or not BRI will increase China's economic and political leverage in shaping the global political architecture, based on Chinese characteristics. It may be observed that President Xi Jinping is all set to boost global economic integration to ensure China's economic development and people's prosperity.

Chapter 4 critically examines President Donald Trump's Af-Pak policy, inherited from the legacy of the Bush and Obama administrations. The chapter addresses complexities and internal contradictions of the Af-Pak region in order to deal with the Afghan imbroglio effectively. The chapter argues that in view of the emerging strategic cooperation among Russia, Iran, China, and Pakistan, US policy options in Afghanistan have been curtailed. The chapter concludes that the Trump administration needs to introspect as to why its AF-Pak strategy has not delivered either in terms of ending the Afghan crisis or in terms of concluding a peace accord for an honorable exit from Afghanistan.

Chapter 5 evaluates implications of proactive engagement of Russia, Iran, and China (trio) in Afghanistan whose singular aim is to fill the strategic vacuum following US troops' full withdrawal from Afghanistan. The chapter argues that a common strategy of the trio is guided by the doctrine of deriving a maximum political mileage out of the "weakened and faltering" United States. It also assesses the long term fallout of an expanding strategic foothold in Afghanistan on regional peace and stability by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Further, it is argued that competing roles of India and the United States on the one hand and those of Pakistan and Russia on the other hand might further complicate the fragile regional security order.

Chapter 6 investigates the root causes that have contributed to producing mutual suspicion between India and Russia in the past couple of years, though interestingly they have been proclaiming in public their "time-tested friendship." Also, the chapter explores the extent to which the New Del-

hi–Moscow ties have been adversely affected following New Delhi’s tight strategic embrace of Washington, compelling India and Russia to redefine their old historic ties.

Chapter 7 discusses mutual compulsions that have spurred military and energy cooperation between Russia and Pakistan. It is argued that in the changing geopolitical contours in the Af-Pak region, Moscow and Islamabad have realized an imperative of working together to protect their respective national interests. To Pakistan, Russia is an indispensable source of weapon procurements and energy supplies in view of American suspension of military aid to Islamabad. So far as Russia is concerned, it perceives Pakistan’s support critically important in the process of peace reconciliation with the Taliban as well as in prevention of an expanding foothold of the ISIS beyond Afghanistan to help secure Russian borders.

In the concluding chapter, it is argued that Pakistan and the smaller South Asian states will remain a paramount factor in reshaping South Asia’s security architecture. Without their political support and security collaboration, neither can a stable and peaceful South Asia be envisioned nor can the idea of regional economic integration be realized. It is, therefore, incumbent upon India to pursue a patient, prudent, and mature diplomacy to help resolve bilateral differences and disputes, emanating from psychological complexes, through mutual dialogue and peace negotiations. For psychological problems, deeply rooted in old perceptions and belief systems of India’s neighbors, need to be resolved with an aid of psychotherapy. And the healing of wounds of the past between India and Pakistan necessitate that the ruling leadership on both sides address mutual grievances and outstanding bilateral issues within the framework of psycho-cultural prophylaxis. Toward that end, cooperative security between India and Pakistan in internal security domain may go a long way in scuttling the role of extra-regional powers in South Asia and the greater Middle Eastern region.

In brief, this book has been written not only for academia, researchers, and graduate students but also for the enlightened strategic community and media to understand the driving forces behind the great power gamble in South Asia. I have tried to put things in clear perspectives without using academic jargons. However, I alone am responsible for interpretations, arguments, and errors, if any.

## NOTE

1. Robert O. Keohane. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984, 2005), ix.

# Acknowledgments

At the outset, I am deeply grateful to the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, Canada, for honoring me as visiting professor in the Department of Economics, Philosophy and Political Science (EPP) in spring 2017. During that period, I had an enviable opportunity to interact with colleagues in the department. I am indebted to Professor Andrew Irvine, EPP Chair, for sparing his valuable time to discuss over coffee many and varied issues related to the book. Also, I am thankful to Dr. Ross Hickey for offering his insightful suggestions regarding the book. I want to thank the entire library staff at UBC for their prompt assistance and cooperation in finding the relevant source material as well as bringing new arrivals to my attention. In brief, the idea of writing this book sprouted from a convivial research environment at UBC.

My special thanks go out to Professor Kevin Clements (Toda Peace Institute, Tokyo), Professor J. Mohan Malik (Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu), and Professor Sten Rynning (Center for War Studies, University of Southern Denmark) for agreeing to write blurbs, in spite of their prior commitments.

I broached the idea of *South Asia Conundrum* with Joseph Parry, senior acquisition editor with Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, who followed up with the book proposal. For this, I am sincerely grateful to him. I am thankful to Bryndee Ryan and the production staff for their cooperation in facilitating the timely production.

I would like to thank my daughter Romi, my son-in-law Prince, my son Rahul, and daughter-in-law Raman (all in Canada) for their encouragement and support. Especially, I would like to mention the contribution of Romi, teaching at the management department, UBC, for her editing, proofreading, typesetting, and critical suggestions. Last but not least, I owe a great deal to my wife Manju—a pillar of great strength behind this work.



# Acronyms

AEP	Act East Policy
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRF	Belt and Road Forum
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CAATSA	Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act
CAG	Comptroller and Auditor General
CBMs	Confidence Building Measures
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSF	Coalition Support Fund
DEPO	Defense Export Promotion Organization
DTTI	Defense Technology and Trade Initiative

EU	European Union
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IAF	Indian Air Force
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INS	Indian Naval Ship
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
IPI	Iran-Pakistan-India
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
IS-K	Islamic State Khorasan
JeM	Jaish-e-Mohammed
KNPP	Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project
LAC	Line of Actual Control
LEMOA	Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement
LEP	Look East Policy
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
LoC	Line of Control
LSE	London School of Economics
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MEA	Ministry of External Affairs
MNNA	Major Non-NATO Ally
MoU	Memoranda of Understanding
MSF	Maritime Security Force
NA	Northern Alliance
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization



NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NIIF	National Infrastructure Investment Fund
NNPA	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act
NPCIL	Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd
NPP	Nuclear Power Project
NSG	Nuclear Suppliers Group
OBOR	One Belt, One Road
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PNE	Peaceful Nuclear Explosion
PoK	Pakistan-occupied Kashmir
PRC	People's Republic of China
R&D	Research and Development
RBTH	Russia Beyond
RDIF	Russian Direct Investment Fund
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SEATO	South East Asian Treaty Organization
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
SSD	Special Security Division
TAGP	Trans-Asia Gas Pipeline
TNS	The News on Sunday
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPA	United Progressive Alliance
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction



## Chapter One

# Introduction

### *The Changing Geopolitical Dynamics in South Asia—An Overview*

It is a profound paradox that South Asia, known as one of the six cradles of human civilization, has turned out to be an epicenter of terrorism and a fertile breeding ground of radical extremism and jihad. It may be recalled that the British had envisioned an undivided and stable Indian subcontinent in order to circumvent a potential deadly threat to their Empire. It was based on the two fundamental premises. First, Britain perceived that it was much easier in a disunited India to foster and sustain British rule with the support of more than 560 Indian princely states under its tutelage. Second, in the absence of both a systematic defense structure and an integrated political community, British rulers in India did not face much resistance save for the Gandhian non-violence movement that had created some law and order problems. This is how the British maneuvered to steer the destiny of millions of people of the Indian subcontinent for a century or so.

The British India's partition in August 1947 was one of the saddest tragedies in South Asian history. Migration of millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs on both sides witnessed a gruesome genocide of an unprecedented scale and intensity that resulted in loot, arson, and conversions. Its wild memories are still deeply entrenched in the peoples' psyche. Reflectively, peaceful transition could have occurred had British rulers abandoned the policy of divide and rule in India. On the contrary, they encouraged and supported the Muslim League leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah's demand for Pakistan as an independent Muslim nation out of an undivided India.

Be that as it may, the partition sowed the seeds of congenital hostility between India and Pakistan. Both countries have remained a perpetual victim

of self-delusions as well as enemy images, mainly because of fundamental differences in their political, economic, and cultural outlook as well as in their geopolitical perceptions, goals, and interests. Notably, their security and strategic perceptions are at cross purposes, resulting in the four bloody wars—1947–1948, 1965, 1971, and the May 1999 Kargil conflict.<sup>1</sup> It is also an undeniable fact that except for the 1971 War, which was connected with the Bangladeshi issue, Pakistan launched three major wars against India under the hope and belief to wrest the Kashmir Valley from India.

The purpose of the chapter is not to discuss the root causes of the Kashmir problem. Its main aim is to purvey a brief survey of South Asia and its extended neighborhood to find out how the region has been transformed into a perpetual theater of conflict and hostility between India and Pakistan, and between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The chapter will shed light on the interventionist role of extra-regional powers, namely, the United States, the USSR (now Russia) and China, which have further compounded regional problems.

Ever since India and Pakistan carried out nuclear weapon tests in May 1998, South Asia became a flashpoint of nuclear crisis. Based on the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates, Pakistan, in a feverish race for piling up nuclear weapons, has produced more nuclear warheads than India, although it is beset with domestic problems of a vast magnitude.<sup>2</sup> What is worrisome to the world community is that nuclear weapons are not safe and secure in South Asia. The United States and India strongly suspect that the home-grown terrorist groups and jihadi elements in Pakistan might have direct access to nuclear weapons, which might cause nuclear catastrophe and threaten regional and global security.

What I argue is that India and Pakistan, being the nuclear weapon states, are relentlessly locked in a psychological warfare to outsmart the other. Their nuclear command, control, and communication systems are far from being reliable. Neither the nuclear deterrence doctrine nor the rational choice model is applicable to Pakistan and India. What is the reason behind it? Its answer is very simple. Unlike the two antagonist superpowers of the Cold War, India and Pakistan suffer from the deeply rooted congenital hostility and hatred.<sup>3</sup> Though India may not be labeled as an exceptionally moral or sacrosanct nation, Pakistani rulers are openly threatening that they will not hesitate to exercise the option of nuclear first use against India if the latter's threat to Pakistan's national security becomes imminent. Their penitence clearly mirrors from public pronouncements that had Pakistan possessed nuclear weapons prior to the 1971 India-Pakistan War, India would not have dared contemplate Pakistan's dismemberment, resulting in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation. Though this may appear as an outlandish idea, it truly unfolds Pakistan's deep anguish and repentance over not being able to prevent its split. However, the nuclear obsession has gripped their psyche.<sup>4</sup>

The civil community on both sides apprehends that the nuclear gamble might turn out to be the worst nuclear nightmare. In order to avoid such eventuality, there are growing voices in support of concluding a no-nuclear war pact between India and Pakistan with reliable and verifiable mechanisms in place. Also, Pakistan needs to be sensitized by the world community for embracing the nuclear doctrine of no-first-use in line with India's nuclear doctrine. Though it might sound like a mirage, the idea has to be vigorously pursued by the leadership in India and Pakistan and the world community at large.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it will be a gargantuan challenge for the new Prime Minister Imran Khan to deal with such a sensitive issue.

Furthermore, over the last couple of years, the extra-regional power intervention has complicated the nebulous security scenario in an extended South Asia. Inevitably, geopolitical uncertainty in Afghanistan and the Middle East makes it harder to translate the vision of an integrated South Asia into a reality. This chapter critically focuses on how Afghanistan has been caught in a whirlpool of competing and clashing strategic interests of extra-regional forces. Perhaps, they are hardly concerned about seeing Afghanistan as a stable, peaceful, and prosperous polity.

Another critical factor that has escalated power rivalries in South Asia is China's maritime expansion, which clearly manifests from its undertaking of operational control of Pakistan's strategic Gwadar deep-sea port on a forty-year lease and Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port on a ninety-nine-year lease. This apart, China has been able to draft South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) members, except India and Bhutan, into its Belt and Road Initiative Project, including setting up naval bases in Seychelles and Myanmar. Beijing has further attempted to make inroads into the Maldives' Marao port. India perceives these acts as China's motivation to encircle it strategically, though China cannot be entirely blamed for this expansionism. The moot question is why the most of South Asian countries have given China *carte blanche* to intervene in their domestic, external and security matters.

After providing a brief overview of the trends in South Asia in the preceding section, the rest of the chapter reevaluates the key challenges to the extended South Asia, including the growing Taliban insurgency and the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan, nuclear terrorism, and China's maritime expansion in the Indian Ocean region.

### SOUTH ASIA: THE VICTIM OR SCAPEGOAT OF THE COLD WAR?

Given the above backdrop, an array of questions arises. Was the US anti-communism hysteria responsible for the onset of the Cold War in South

Asia? What motivated Pakistan to join the US-led military alliances of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1954 and 1955 respectively? Why did India embrace the non-aligned policy of keeping aloof from the superpower-led military alliances? As far as Pakistan is concerned, it militarily aligned with the United States not because of the Communist threat to its national security either from the Soviet Union or China. Pakistan's real intention was to procure American weapons as a security hedge against India's real or imaginary threat. Pakistan received US weapons on a massive scale on account of its military alliance with the United States. With American blessings, Pakistan got emboldened to wage wars against India in 1965 and 1971. Unfortunately, instead of concentrating its energy and resources on the state and nation-building enterprise, Pakistan sought to build military sinews with external sources and also to raise its nuclear arsenal. And in the absence of a responsive democratic system, Pakistani military elites, while having robust political connections with the White House and Pentagon, faced no problem in maintaining a stranglehold over civilian rulers in foreign, defense, and security policies. This situation continues even today. Not surprisingly, Pakistan's single-point program is to target India with the motivation to weaken and destabilize it.

Reverting to the Cold War history, one comes across the fact that India and Pakistan have been the victims of geopolitical aberrations. Instead of articulating a common geopolitical perception in the larger interest of regional peace, stability, and development, New Delhi and Islamabad got stuck up in a mutual blame game that further calcified mutual hatred and hostility. As noted earlier, Pakistan joined the US-sponsored military alliances in the 1950s in search of its national security and identity vis-à-vis India. On the other hand, India refused to be co-opted into a client state role. Rather, New Delhi adopted the non-alignment strategy to ensure its security, political autonomy, and economic development by protecting itself from "icy buffets" of the superpower contest.<sup>6</sup>

The point I wish to make is that during the Cold War project, the United States drew Pakistan within its strategic fold by using military aid as a political weapon to advance its geopolitical and security interests in the region. If viewed from a historical perspective, the United States perceived South Asia through Pakistani lenses. As mentioned before, US attempts at establishing an artificial military parity between India and Pakistan resulted not only in a fierce armament race in the region but also exacerbated hostility between them. Moreover, American military and strategic support to Pakistan fueled jingoism between the two historic rivals. That is how the United States' increasing strategic footprint in South Asia provoked the Soviet Union into cultivating India as its closer friend. As a pivotal leader of the non-alignment movement (NAM), India fitted well with the Soviet Union's strategic design to countervail the US influence.

Interestingly, the United States perceived no problem in the Soviet Union cultivating the non-aligned India, rather gibing that Moscow could lead the “mendicants” in Third World countries.

The geopolitical compulsion demanded the Soviet Union to come closer to India with fulfilling the latter’s defense requirement to the tune of nearly 70 percent to strengthen its defense sinews. India also needed the Soviet Union for its diplomatic succor over the Kashmir issue. It may be remembered that Moscow bailed out India in the Security Council in 1957 on the question of holding a plebiscite in the Kashmir Valley to determine the wishes of Kashmiri people. Though the Council’s resolution on the plebiscite had a full diplomatic support of the United States and other Western powers, the Soviet Union killed the resolution by exercising veto power in India’s favor. That was a huge psychological relief to India. This apart, the Soviet Union acted as a mediator at Tashkent (now the capital of Uzbekistan) to terminate the 1965 India-Pakistan War, with the signing of the historic Tashkent agreement in January 1966.

It is ironic that despite being much smaller than India, in terms of population, military, industrial, scientific, and soft power capabilities, Pakistan largely outshone India in diplomacy. It played both American and Indian cards so dexterously that it came closer to China strategically, without diluting its ties with the United States. In effect, Pakistan managed to procure military aid and arms from the United States on the one hand, and maintain the “all-weather friendship” with China on the other hand. On the contrary, Indian policy makers could not create even minor ripples, what to talk of political ruptures, in the Islamabad-Beijing relations. Rather, India’s heavy tilt toward the Soviet Union, by virtue of being a non-aligned nation, discredited it in Western eyes. Thus, entanglements of India and Pakistan with their respective political patrons intensified armaments race in South Asia. Also, there is a widely shared perception that had the United States been a bit introspective as well as circumspect in conducting its arms policy in South Asia, Indo-Pak relations would not have entered the worst phase.<sup>7</sup>

## WHY NUCLEARIZATION OF SOUTH ASIA?

South Asia has a long and tortuous nuclear history. To start off with India, its nuclear policy during the Nehru era (1947–1964) was chiefly driven and dictated by his soaring idealism. While projecting himself as a peace anchorite, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru time and again underlined that India’s nuclear policy fundamentally hinged on the principle of nuclear non-proliferation and world disarmament. In his policy utterances, Nehru made it absolutely clear that India would abstain from developing nuclear technology for military purposes.<sup>8</sup> It may be recalled that he outright rejected the suggestion

of his nuclear mentor, Homi J. Bhabha, that India should develop nuclear weapon capability for national security. “Instead of heeding Bhabha’s advice, Nehru rejected his security argument because he essentially believed that security threats from India’s neighbors could be addressed by employing a proactive diplomacy of dialogue and negotiation.”<sup>9</sup> It is also instructive to note that despite China’s unprovoked aggression against India in the winter of 1962, Nehru did not revise his nuclear policy.

It is not my intention to enter into a debate whether or not Nehru committed a blunder by ignoring the country’s security concerns vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. The point I need to underline is that it was Nehru’s deeply entrenched belief and faith that peace conditions were indispensable for the country’s economic development and public welfare. This philosophy loomed large in Nehru’s psyche that drove him to pursue a one-track nuclear policy—developing nuclear technology only for peaceful and constructive purposes.

After Nehru’s demise in May 1964, his daughter Indira Gandhi became India’s prime minister in 1966. She deviated from her father’s nuclear policy. Having sensed the geopolitical challenge to India’s national security from the emerging US-Pakistan-China strategic triangle, she took a bold and momentous decision to carry out the first nuclear explosion on May 18, 1974, in the Pokhran desert in western Rajasthan. It was described as a peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE). Undeniably, India’s nuclear test provoked Pakistan into developing its nuclear program.<sup>10</sup>

One might recall that following Pakistan’s dismemberment in December 1971, President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1973) became firm in his determination to make Pakistan a nuclear power, even if it were to “eat the grass.” He gave a clarion call to A.Q. Khan, the Pakistani nuclear scientist based in the Netherlands, to build an “Islamic bomb” as a strategic hedge against “the Hindu India” to ensure Pakistan’s national security. Khan and his team worked around the clock to develop nuclear technology with Chinese aid and assistance. With his concerted efforts, Pakistan ultimately attained the nuclear capability in the late 1980s. This is how India and Pakistan got interlocked in nuclear rivalry.<sup>11</sup>

It is pertinent to point out that Indira Gandhi’s dual-track nuclear policy lasted until 1997. Pakistan also pursued the policy of nuclear ambiguity. Thus, their policy of keeping nuclear options open went a long way in maintaining peace and stability in the region for at least three decades. Whatever may have been the political or security compulsions before the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, India carried out five nuclear weapon tests on May 11 and 13, 1998. Pakistan immediately responded by conducting six nuclear weapon tests on May 28, 1998, which opened up “Pandora’s box.”



In the meanwhile, the 9/11 (2001) tragic events diluted the US non-proliferation goal. The United States was obliged to redefine its non-proliferation policy since the Bush administration's priority was to decimate the al-Qaeda and Taliban operating from Afghanistan. Toward fulfilling that mission, the administration lifted sanctions against Pakistan whose logistical and intelligence support was indispensable. Further, India and Pakistan were asked to exercise nuclear restraint as well as to limit their "nuclear arsenals."<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, the Bush administration granted Pakistan the status of a front-line strategic partner in its bid to elicit Islamabad's military and intelligence cooperation to carry on the global war on terror against the al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan. On the other hand, India's loss of strategic preeminence following Pakistan's attainment of nuclear parity in 1998 further complicated New Delhi's relationship with Islamabad on the interconnected issues of Kashmir and cross-border terrorism.<sup>13</sup>

It was further observed that these two nuclear states hastened the process of fueling and deepening insecurity and uncertainty in the region. In particular, Pakistan felt psychologically more secure and confident with its attainment of strategic parity vis-à-vis India. Ostensibly, nuclear reprisals by Pakistan not only gave Islamabad a greater degree of security guarantee vis-à-vis New Delhi, but also emboldened it to use nuclear weapons as a convenient instrument of political blackmailing to resolve the protracted Kashmir issue. However, the contrived fear of nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan aroused profound fear and tension in the world community.<sup>14</sup> In the recent issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, three contributing authors have estimated that Pakistan's "[nuclear] stockpile could more realistically grow to 220 to 250 warheads by 2025, if the current trend continues. If that happens, it would make Pakistan the world's fifth-largest nuclear weapon state."<sup>15</sup> In this scenario, there is the likelihood of a fierce nuclear armaments race in South Asia, triggering greater risks to the regional security. In this context, the US Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats said, "Pakistan continues to produce nuclear weapons and develop new types of nuclear weapons, including short-range tactical weapons, sea-based cruise missiles, air-launched cruise missiles, and longer-range ballistic missiles. These new types of nuclear weapons will introduce new risks for escalation dynamics and security in the region."<sup>16</sup>

As mentioned before, one cannot vouchsafe for Pakistani nuclear weapons. They might fall into the hands of terrorists and jihadists who are freely roaming in Pakistan, though outright rejected by the latter. In this regard, *The New Yorker* comments, "Moreover, Pakistan, nuclear-armed and deeply unstable, is not a threat only to India; it is now the world's problem, the epicenter of many of today's most alarming security risks. It was out of *madrassas* in Pakistan that the Taliban emerged. That regime, which was

then the most retrograde in modern Islamic history, provided sanctuary to Al Qaeda's leadership even after 9/11."<sup>17</sup>

One might recall that the United States declared Hafiz Saeed, the mastermind of the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008, a global terrorist. On the basis of the UN's terror list, released in April 2018, it was reported: "Pakistan continues to be associated with globally censured terrorists with 139 Pakistani citizens and entities featuring in the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC's) consolidated list of terrorists or terror-supporting organizations. The individuals and entities from the country in the list include Mumbai terrorist attack mastermind Hafeez Saeed's outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba, mafia don Dawood Ibrahim Kaskar and the Haqqanis."<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, terror groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba's chief Hafiz Saeed had fielded more than two hundred candidates to Pakistan's National Assembly elections held in July 2018 with an intention to emerge as a balancing force in the case of a hung parliament, though Saeed's party could not win a single seat. This clearly proved that Pakistani people outright rejected indigenous terrorist groups. It should not be construed that extremist groups would decelerate their endeavors to access nukes, though Pakistan claims to have upgraded "security perimeters" around military bases and nuclear facilities to stave off terrorist attacks. Hasan Abbas, a "Pakistani-American academic," has also expressed similar fear about the safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, which might fall into the "wrong hands" due to "recurrent political instability and strengthening crime-terror nexus."<sup>19</sup> In this scenario, there might be the worst nuclear disaster for the entire region, while recounting that India's large population and its strategic assets fall within the range of Pakistani missiles.

It needs to be underlined that Pakistan has neither declared a unilateral moratorium on its future nuclear tests nor has clarified as to in whose hands rests the nuclear command—prime minister or president or army chief. This is a big question mark. In India, the nuclear-command authority rests with the prime minister—now with Narendra Modi. On the contrary, the absence of nuclear command and control systems in Pakistan might keep the United States and China in the dark about the state of Pakistani nuclear arsenal.

## CHALLENGES

South Asia is a highly volatile region in the world. Its dynamics are driven by the core challenge of terrorism and jihadi elements, actively operating across Af-Pak borders. To counter the common threat of terror, India-US relations are on the cusp. The Trump administration has asked Pakistan either to act fast on eliminating extremists or to face aid cut. But political analysts are of the view that President Donald Trump's policy announcements are hardly credible for a variety of reasons. First, he is highly unpredictable as to what

will be his next strategic or foreign policy move in the region. Second, the United States has virtually lost its political and strategic leverage over Pakistan, which has made the latter defiant whether on the issue of terrorism or security of its nuclear arsenal. Third, China is a reliable alternative source of economic and military aid to bail Pakistan out. Furthermore, China will scarcely miss an opportunity to exploit Pakistan's aid dependency both for its survival and deliverance of development benefits to the people.

Finally, the quantum of US military aid to Pakistan is on a fast declining trajectory. Having sensed it, Pakistan began forging military ties with Russia. The latter also has recognized Pakistan's strategic leverage over the Taliban in peace negotiations. Moreover, President Putin's strategy of diversifying Russia's weapons market has no political or ideological inhibition to sell military hardware to Pakistan, even though India expressed its reservations over Russian sales. The Russia factor has been discussed in details in a separate chapter of the book, spelling out the fallout of a new defense alignment between Moscow and Islamabad on South Asia, which India could scarcely imagine even in its wild dreams.

### **Confidence Building Measures**

The two interconnected issues of cross-border terrorism and nuclear risks make it excruciatingly tough to foster mutual trust between India and Pakistan. Congenital hostility between them remains a key psychological factor in their foreign policy and security decision-making. Therefore, it is essential to bring the high political temperature down on both sides. And, moreover, peace dialogue should not be allowed to freeze, otherwise their tense relationship might turn frigid.

It is important to underline that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had displayed political courage to initiate a peace dialogue with Pakistan in 2002, despite terrorist attacks on the Red Fort in Delhi in January 2001 and the Indian Parliament in December 2001. It was Vajpayee's master political stroke to break the icy relations between New Delhi and Islamabad. Also, the US backdoor diplomacy exhorted India and Pakistan to engage in peace talks to avert the possibility of a nuclear exchange between them. In 2004, Vajpayee underscored the need for reviving a composite dialogue process that involved eight contentious issues. Of them, Kashmir and cross-border terrorism were placed on a priority agenda. As a result of the follow-up action, a series of agreements were concluded under the banner of confidence-building measures (CBMs). Under CBMs, both the countries signed an agreement to launch Srinagar–Muzaffarabad bus services (2005) to boost the people-to-people contacts. Also, New Delhi and Islamabad agreed to resume the Muna-bao-Kokhrapar rail service (2006), including an agreement on a pre-notification of missile tests (2006).

It is important to note that Vajpayee's historic visit to Lahore by bus in February 1999 was a goodwill gesture toward Pakistan. Under the Lahore Declaration, Prime Minister Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Sharif agreed to an imperative of exercising nuclear restraint to improve and strengthen command, control, and communication systems to make their nuclear arsenals safe and secure from an accidental nuclear war or technical snags.<sup>20</sup> But the Lahore spirit was buried into obscurity when Pakistani forces at the behest of General Pervez Musharraf launched the Kargil operation against India in the summer of 1999. In the Kargil war, India lost more than 500 soldiers, and Pakistan nearly 700 hundred soldiers. Ultimately, with American mediation, Pakistan withdrew its forces from Kargil—the Indian territory. In brief, the Kargil episode was an act of betrayal at such a critical juncture when both countries were engaged in a peace dialogue, aimed at ending the persisting violence and bloodshed.

### **Cross-border Terrorism**

Cross-border terrorism has been a core issue for India since 1989 when Pakistan began proxy war against India. In cost-effective terms, Pakistan considered the low intensity conflict a most efficacious tool to bleed India. Initially, New Delhi failed to gauge the intensity of cross-border terrorism. The problem was further complicated when Pakistani military elites sought to blackmail India psychologically that Pakistan might deploy nukes against India if it ever dared threaten its national security. Emboldened by its nuclear capabilities, Pakistan has intensified cross-border terrorism against India. Following the gruesome Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, India handed over numerous dossiers to Pakistan as foolproof evidence of the latter's direct involvement in inciting and intensifying terror activities on the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir. But Islamabad has cared little to undertake concrete measures to stop terrorist operations from its soil. It should be mentioned that Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed was responsible for the terrorist attack on the Indian Air Force base at Pathankot in 2016. Their intention was to destroy fighter aircraft, helicopters, and air force personnel stationed in Pathankot.<sup>21</sup> Though Indian forces carried out surgical strikes against Pakistan in 2017, there had been no letup in terrorist activities across the LoC. According to Indian sources, more than 800 ceasefire violations were committed by Pakistan in 2017, while the latter blamed India for carrying out over 1,300 ceasefire violations. Such accusations and counter accusations have accentuated tension on the borders. As reported, "The Pakistani military provides covering fire to terrorists infiltrating the Indian side of the region, which leads the Indian side to fire in return."<sup>22</sup>

What is categorically important is that governments in Pakistan and India put their past legacies and bitterness to rest to give peace and development a

chance to flourish in the interests of their people. Will it be possible for the leadership under the current dispensation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan to resolve the problem? The answer is both positive and negative. It is positive in the sense that the new leaderships in New Delhi and Islamabad have realized that it is futile to engage in the blame game and that they rather ought to concentrate on development—the main agenda of their governance. The other side of the story belies such hopes. *The New Yorker* has noted, “But the current picture is not encouraging. In Delhi, a hardline right-wing government rejects dialogue with Islamabad. Both countries find themselves more vulnerable than ever to religious extremism.”<sup>23</sup> The fact remains that rivalry between India and Pakistan is becoming much worse and more threatening, stocking hatred and hostility toward each other. While adding fuel to the fire, the media on both sides are spewing venom against one another, leaving little room for rational and prudent voices to prevail.

In the past couple of years, the internal security situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir has turned more explosive than ever before. This is generally attributed to a host of intermeshing factors, which include domestic politics, religious divides, a precarious ceasefire situation, a growing unrest among Kashmiri youth, and communal polarization in the state of Jammu and Kashmir along religious lines. The situation in the Kashmir Valley has assumed an uglier shape. The local Kashmiri youth and separatist factions are directly challenging security agencies, including Indian army and paramilitary forces, as is evident from attacking army vehicles and smashing their glass windows. To take stock of the internal situation, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh visited the Kashmir Valley in June 2018. He lamented the increasing number of ceasefire violations by Pakistani forces along the LoC. As reported in the media, the plans are underway to unite the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to forge a “single army of terror” to fight India.<sup>24</sup> Also, ISIS is preparing a war strategy in the Valley.

As mentioned before, there has been a spurt in incidents of cross-border terrorism during the past four years (2014–2018), despite India’s surgical strikes against Pakistan. If the central government, in close cooperation with the government of Jammu and Kashmir, fails to undertake timely measures, internal security threats to India from across Afghanistan’s extremist groups and jihadists might become unmanageable.

## THE CHINA CHALLENGE

China’s string of pearls theory has prominently figured in the discourse on India’s foreign policy. As an integral part of geopolitical theory, the pearls doctrine is Beijing’s well-calibrated and well-orchestrated strategic design to

expand its maritime influence in the Indian Ocean region. Toward that objective, China is seriously engaged in cultivating close and cooperative ties with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan to accelerate its political, economic, and security clout by pumping massive economic aid under the banner of infrastructure and development projects. As mentioned before, China's real motive behind it is to challenge Indian primacy in the region. To counter China's strategic designs, the Modi government sought to craft the "neighborhood first" policy to revamp India's relationship with SAARC members, and also to "recast India's Look East Policy as Act East Policy with emphasis on developing infrastructure in the East Asian countries."<sup>25</sup> While emulating Xi Jinping's model of frequent overseas visits, especially in Asian countries, including smaller countries such as the Maldives, Modi has left no stone unturned to visit the globe to outsmart Xi Jinping.

Prime Minister Modi's initial state visits to Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh produced a tremendous goodwill for India. And many strategic analysts described Modi's policy as one of injecting a new energy into the country's moribund foreign policy, inherited from the UPA government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. However, the Modi euphoria did not last long as smaller countries began to distance away from India. On the contrary, Prime Minister Modi managed to establish a remarkable political rapport with top leaders of Japan, Australia, Myanmar, and Israel, as well as Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany. This is rooted in the Modi government's quest for a "global outreach" to expand India's global presence as well as its political ambition to play an influential role in global affairs at the cost of ignoring India's productive engagement with its next-door neighbors. But Modi's over-ambitious approach to the global outreach has probably not delivered the desired dividends so far. On the other hand, President Xi Jinping's popularity and aura are on the rise. He is heard with much respect by the world's top leaders. Unlike India, the Chinese leadership is all set to showcase the government's specific roadmap, for instance its super mega projects such as the one-trillion dollar Belt and Road Initiative.

It is no secret that China has taken advantage of India's nonchalant attitude and approach toward its neighbors. As mentioned before, India has lost the initial zeal and momentum of Modi's penchant for developing closer ties with South Asian countries. Nor has New Delhi endeavored to fix the fault lines. One analyst observes in this regard, "As Beijing deploys its formidable financial resources and develops its strategic clout across the subcontinent, New Delhi faces significant capacity challenges to stem Chinese offensive in its own strategic backyard."<sup>26</sup>

Further, India's strategy to deepen its strategic partnership with the United States to counter Chinese influence did not work effectively. It is partly ascribed to the Trump administration's inchoate and indistinct China policy, further marked by its uncertainties in terms of priority and emphasis. The

“absence of a clear US strategy towards China is more worrisome for India.”<sup>27</sup> Though the Trump administration wants India to fully cooperate with its Indo-Pacific strategy to checkmate and restrain China, it is not clear how and on what terms the administration intends to rope in India in its strategy. Indeed, India needs to be wary of long-term implications of partnering with the United States in the Indo-Pacific region. What is strikingly consequential for India is that it should stop harping on the autonomous character of its foreign policy. While abandoning its ideological shibboleths, India needs to realize that it is not possible to adhere to the so-called pure and pristine autonomous foreign policy in today’s complex interdependent global order.

### **Pakistani Factor in China-India Relations**

Undeniably, Pakistan has remained and will continue to remain, unless some miracle happens, a vexatious factor in China-India relations. With China’s rapid ascent to power and its growing global influence, Pakistan’s psychological morale has been enormously boosted. Rather, a major change has occurred in Pakistani military elites’ thinking and approach that Pakistan’s all-weather friendship with China is a bargaining chip to withstand US pressures as well as dealing easily with India’s bullying tactics. Moreover, the China-Pakistan renewed strategic partnership, in the larger context of China’s Maritime Silk Road initiative, and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have sent chills to New Delhi’s South Block. Given this, India has been compelled to revise and refurbish its policy options and strategies as to how to befittingly respond to China’s direct strategic challenge to India in South Asia as well as in Southeast Asian political theater.

India has no strategic choice except to modernize and update its defense infrastructure and weapon systems through diverse sources, including the United States, Israel, and France. At the same time, India’s foreign policy bureaucracy must rise to the occasion to tailor its policy stance toward the outside world without harping on autonomy and freedom in conducting its foreign policy and relations. What is important for India is to wake up from a long slumber of traditional diplomacy to sharpen its foreign policy and diplomatic tools in tune with the novel challenges and impending threats to its national interests.

Instead of focusing on a Pakistani paranoia or the China-threat theory, Indian foreign policy elites should concentrate on grasping the complexity of a larger canvas of the policy challenges India has been facing at global and regional levels. Further, they need to transcend their hitherto narrowly structured mindsets, attuned to appeasing their political masters. Rather, policy bureaucrats need to summon moral courage to offer their frank, forthright, and creative suggestions so that Indian diplomacy could effectively deal with the fast-altering trajectories and dynamics of global political and security

order. India can neither afford to pursue an appeasement policy toward China nor can it afford to urge the latter to extend its unqualified support to New Delhi's proposal to the UN on designating Masood Azhar as a terrorist, and India's membership to NSG-48. Instead, India will have to devise its own ways and means to see how the China-Pakistan nexus can be diluted, without courting China.

### THE CHALLENGE OF "NEW BIPOLARITY"

What is new bipolarity? What is its impact on India's national interests? The "new bipolarity" came up for discussion when Ashley Tellis, Senior Fellow at Carnegie Endowment, spoke on the new US-China polarity at the London School of Economics (LSE) India Summit in 2017. He elaborated on the meaning of new bipolarity in the context of US-China relations. The old bipolarity involved the United States and the Soviet Union. With an ascendancy of China to power in the international system, a new bipolarity has emerged between the United States and China. Tellis argues:

China is becoming the natural hegemonic power in Asia. That is creating a change from the unipolarity that India found favorable to a new bipolarity, which poses specific challenges. The key challenge is the involvement of China, which has a series of bilateral security disputes with India. Unlike the old bipolarity, where neither the United States and the Soviet Union had any serious security problems with India. So the new bipolarity is really a change in the international environment, and it's not a favorable change for India.<sup>28</sup>

Tellis further argues that with the onset of the Trump administration there has been "a perturbation" in the "robust relationship" built up between India and the United States during the Bush administration. He is skeptical whether the Trump administration will be able to preserve and consolidate a strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi to countervail China's rise in Asia. It is also feared that the US-India security relationship might be jeopardized if India does not support Trump's agenda on Iran's nuclear deal, in light of his sanctions on oil imports from Iran. Though India has been temporarily given a minor relief, the Trump administration's policy clearly lays out that every country will have to implement oil sanctions against Iran. Moreover, challenges to US-China relations are more conspicuous at global and regional levels.

### AN INTEGRATED SOUTH ASIA?

At the conceptual level, the idea of South Asian integration sounds mellifluously sweet to the ear. Unlike the Association of South East Asian Nations



(ASEAN), SAARC nations have enormous complexities and contradictions in terms of demographic profile, systemic structures, economic and military capabilities, and linguistic and cultural divergences. Given the asymmetric power matrix, smaller countries like Maldives and Nepal perceive India as a regional hegemon in terms of its population (1.3 billion), its economic strength (the fifth largest but the fastest growing economy in the world), its military might (the third largest army in the world), and its scientific and technological prowess. The hegemonic perception of India is further magnified by Pakistan, projecting India as the real security threat to the entire region. In particular, Pakistani media and its strategic community have been portraying Prime Minister Modi, incredibly groomed in the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS) ideology, as “an anti-Muslim firebrand,” and Pakistan’s implacable foe. General Pervez Musharraf in an exclusive interview on the *News Nation* TV channel, January 20, 2018, praised the sagacity and vision of former prime ministers Atal Behari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. He said they were “sincere” in improving India’s relations with Pakistan. Also, Musharraf took the credit for himself for a successful implementation of the ceasefire agreement that lasted eight years during his regime.<sup>29</sup> Further, he described Prime Minister Modi as “aggressive,” and added that Modi’s foreign policy postures were hostile to Pakistan. At the end of the interview, Musharraf underlined that what his country expected of India was that it respected “equal sovereignty,” and Pakistan’s “honour and dignity.” His diatribe against India is widely shared by Pakistani media and military elites, dashing the hope for regional integration.

Moreover, diverging security perceptions between India and other South Asian countries make it virtually impossible to realize the idea of cooperative security. For instance, in India’s perception China’s strategic presence in the region constitutes a potential threat to the regional peace and stability. On the contrary, Pakistan and smaller nations consider China’s stranglehold in South Asia a necessary counterweight to India’s hegemony in order to maintain a balance of power in the region. In other words, strategic dissonance among South Asian states makes it a most onerous task to realize the concept of cooperative security into reality. Sten Rynning, Professor of International Relations at the University of Southern Denmark, observes that the complexity of the region is characterized by the “preeminence of India.” He writes, “A region marked by plurality and power asymmetry—or, ‘unbalanced multipolarity’—will naturally be dominated by fear, and those in fear will naturally will be the neighbors to the great power.”<sup>30</sup>

## INDIA'S AF-PAK POLICY

India's Af-Pak policy needs to be perceived in the context of President Trump's stern warning to Pakistan that it should stop harboring and nurturing the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network. What has irked Pakistan most is that President Trump wants India to play a robust role in Afghan affairs. The State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert said, "India is emerging as a very important regional strategic partner. It has played an important role in supporting the Afghan government and, in particular, supporting the economy."<sup>31</sup> The administration appreciated India's "financial support [worth \$3 billion since 2001] in rebuilding the war-torn nation."<sup>32</sup> For Islamabad, it is a big political rebuff, realizing that the Trump administration has lost complete faith and trust in Pakistan. More pertinently, President Trump was harsher in his public tone when he stated that Pakistan was able to bamboozle America by misusing its massive aid worth \$35 billion during the Bush and Obama administrations rather than making concerted efforts to nab the Taliban and extremist groups. Congressman Ted Poe, while chairing the Congressional hearing on Afghanistan and Pakistan, reinforced Trump's assessment about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. He said, "Pakistan directly or indirectly supports the Haqqani Network, in theory. That network as we mentioned earlier, has killed more Americans in the region than any other terrorist group. To me that is something that we should not accept. We should not accept sending money to a country that supports a terrorist group that kills Americans."<sup>33</sup>

Curiously enough, Pakistani military and civilian leaders accused India of using proxies in Afghanistan to further complicate the worsening internal security situation there. Not only this, Pakistan's former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi in his address to the Council for Foreign Relations in September 2017 frankly stated that Pakistan favored a "zero" political and military role of India in Afghanistan. He said, "We don't foresee any political or military role for India in Afghanistan. I think it will just complicate the situation and it will not resolve anything. So if they want to do economic assistance, that's their prerogative, but we don't accept or see any role politically or militarily for India in Afghanistan."<sup>34</sup> The above statement shows the mindset of Pakistani rulers who are psychologically obsessed with India's role in Afghanistan's political stability and internal security. As mentioned before, India provided Afghanistan with \$3 billion in assistance, apart from imparting military training to Afghan forces to enable them to effectively deal with the internal security challenges. But Pakistan's real problem is a psychological one. Its military and civilian leaders want the United States to intervene to help resolve the Kashmir problem so that the continuing impasse on Afghanistan could be resolved permanently. However, the United States has ruled out the possibility of its intervention in or mediation over Kashmir, instead favors its resolution through bilateral dialogue between New Delhi

and Islamabad. Pakistan is gripped by schizophrenia over India's increasing global role in the current international system. In this regard Mohammad Taqi, a Pakistani-American columnist, observes:

[Pakistan's] India paranoia is more ideological than geopolitical. Even if somehow the so-called genuine security concerns can be assuaged, Pakistan's ideological quest to seek parity with a country four times its size, with an economy even larger than that, is simply unrealistic . . . Real security fears can be mitigated but paranoia, and a feigned one at that, has no diplomatic remedy.<sup>35</sup> This clearly implies that Pakistan's behavior is not going to change even if the Kashmir dispute is resolved permanently, and Pakistan's national security concerns are addressed by India.

In response to David Sanger's question on US aid on September 20, 2017, Pakistan's then Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi replied:

We have really—there's no substantial aid at the present time. And in fact, if you look at the war against terror, we fought it with our own resources. In fact, as I said, we suffered about \$120 billion in economic losses. And I was just checking the record, and found we never billed the U.S. forces for ground logistics or for air logistics across our territory. So any conception that there has been a massive support to the Pakistan armed forces is not correct.<sup>36</sup>

When asked about the US military assistance, Abbasi said that Pakistan received just a marginal amount. He explained that because of its commitment to the war against terror, Pakistan never asked for a single penny for Coalition Forces' flying over a million sorties over Pakistani territory. He underscored that Pakistan since post-9/11 had lost "\$120 billion in economic growth . . . [which] is close to like \$5 trillion in equivalent terms. So these are not small numbers for Pakistan."<sup>37</sup> However, he evaded the question regarding free movements of Hafiz Saeed on whom the United States declared a \$10 million bounty. On the issue of Pakistan's cross-border terrorism on LoC, Abbasi replied:

There is Indian aggression along the Line of Control, mostly to draw attention away from the genuine struggle of the Kashmiri people, who have today risen against the Indian occupation there. And we fully support the right of self-determination. We've fully supported that at every forum since 1948, and we continue to support that. And that issue should be resolved as per the U.N. Security Council resolutions.<sup>38</sup>

From the above statement, it is clear that Pakistan has been irrelevantly harping on the resolutions that have outlived their utility inasmuch as after the 1972 Shimla Agreement and the 1999 Lahore Declaration, both India and

Pakistan agreed to resolve the Kashmir issue through bilateral peaceful means.

## CONCLUSION

The region has been a perpetual victim of myopic vision of the ruling class in India and Pakistan. Being the two major powers in the region, they have abdicated their moral obligation to keep the region united and integrated as well as to mobilize human and material resources to the benefit and welfare of South Asian peoples. On the contrary, the entire subcontinent has been held hostage to their adversarial relationship, structured on the persisting stereotypical prejudices toward each other. Instead of having a statesman-like vision of transcending narrow and short term national interests, ruling leaders are frittering away their energies on mutual bickering.

South Asia has been an inadvertent victim of both the Cold War and the post-Cold War geopolitical rivalry among major powers. It is by accident or design that a little-known and neglected region landed on the chessboard of world politics. During the Cold War era, South Asia was drawn into the superpower rivalry that prompted India into pursuing an independent non-aligned policy. Gradually but steadily, South Asia emerged as the fulcrum of the geopolitical rivalry in world politics.

Moreover, the proactive role of the strategic trio in Afghanistan has contributed to marginalizing India's role in Afghanistan's political, economic, and security affairs. Their role has been motivated by their desire to craft a new balance of power in the region. In fact, India is faced with a grave policy dilemma whether to align with the United States or cooperate with the strategic trio to carve out its future role in Afghan affairs. It is a patent fact that the Kabul government desires India's cooperation and support in strengthening Afghanistan's internal security mechanism as well as in its nation rebuilding process since the Afghan regime does not perceive India either a threat to its national interests or an interventionist power in its domestic affairs. But Pakistan will never like India's role as a driving force in determining and shaping the future course of Afghanistan. Perhaps, it leaves an unanswered question as to how India should respond to the emerging strategic realignment among Iran, Russia, and China on the one hand, and between Russia and Pakistan on the other. However, their political and security moves are still unclear. It is more than certain that the strategic triangle of Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing appears desperate to fill the strategic vacuum in the aftermath of the US troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. It may appear queer that China is in favor of the US military presence as a shield against the Af-Pak-based terrorist groups that might help bolster the separatist movement in China's Xinxiang province. But at the same time, Chinese eyes are

set on Afghanistan's natural and mineral resources as well as on fulfilling its grand dream of One Belt One Road (OBOR) in which Afghanistan is its partner. In this scenario, India will find it excruciatingly tough to fulfill a productive and meaningful role in the extended South Asia without a well-defined geopolitical strategy.

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13. For this part, see Jain, *India in the New South Asia*, 10.

14. Jain, *India in the New South Asia*, 24.

15. Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, and Julia Diamond, "Pakistani Nuclear Forces 2018," *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientist* 74, no.5 (August 31, 2018), <https://thebulletin.org/2018/08/pakistani-nuclear-forces-2018/>

16. Cited in Kristensen, Norris, and Diamond, "Pakistani Nuclear Forces." "According to the Federation of Atomic Scientists, Russia has the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons in the world, with 6,850 warheads, followed closely by the United States with 6,450 warheads." *Business Insider*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.in/a-new-report-suggests-that-pakistan-could-have-the-fifth-largest-stockpile-of-nuclear-weapons-in-the-world-by-2025/articleshow/65718738.cms>

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## *Chapter Two*

# **Contours of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor**

### *Implications for India, and the Extended South Asia*

Over the past five decades, China and Pakistan have enjoyed extraordinarily close, robust, and enduring ties without hiccups, even though they lack commonality in terms of ideology, culture, ethnicity, religion, language, and societal values. The Sino-Pak “all weather friendship” is commonly ascribed to their shared interest in keeping India’s rise in check, though with divergent goals and interests. For Pakistan, China is not only a reliable source of state-of-the-art weapon systems, economic aid, and diplomatic support in multilateral organizations but also a security assurance against India’s potential threat.<sup>1</sup> For China, Pakistan is a strategic hedge against India’s hegemonic ambitions in the region, which will be enormously helpful in offsetting India’s competing leadership role in Asia, in general, and South Asia, in particular.

What is the history behind the China-Pakistan bonhomie? Its roots can be traced to the 1962 Sino-Indian War in which India suffered a humiliating defeat at Chinese hands. India’s defeat provided Pakistan with an opportunity to develop solid ties with China as an antidote to the perceived or an imaginary Indian threat to its national security and territorial integrity. In March 1963, Pakistan concluded a border agreement with China under which it ceded an area of 5,010 square kilometers of the Pak-occupied Kashmir (PoK) to China. India’s persistent contestation has been that Pakistan had no *locus standi* to give away any part of the disputed Kashmir territory to China. But Indian protests went awry. On the contrary, the 1963 Sino-Pakistan border agreement laid a solid foundation for flowering ties between them. Since

then, their strategic partnership has played a central role in shaping the geopolitical and geostrategic landscape of South Asia and beyond. India remains at the center of their geopolitical calculations.<sup>2</sup>

To India's much awe and shock, a new element in the Sino-Pakistan relationship was perceptible with a ginormous shift from the traditional military-security relationship to infrastructure and energy cooperation between them. This is evident from China's heavy investment to the tune of over \$46 billion in Pakistan's energy and infrastructure sectors under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) banner. It can be termed as an additional pillar to their strategic partnership. The CPEC, a multipurpose project, entails an array of potential benefits for both countries, such as growth in new jobs, promotion of China's trade and energy interests in Afghanistan with Pakistan's cooperation, and sustenance of China's economic growth with the utilization of its oversized financial resources. In geopolitical terms, China is experimenting with CPEC as a benchmark model of its investment in infrastructure development to ensure the success of its 1 trillion dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project.<sup>3</sup> Considering Pakistan as its reliable ally, China has implemented the CPEC project, though it entails unpredictable risks and challenges.

More importantly, an uncertain domestic environment on the economic front compelled President Xi Jinping to articulate a new foreign investment policy in energy, transportation, and infrastructure sectors. Toward that end, Jinping launched CPEC with an aim of showcasing Pakistan's economic and infrastructural development with the Chinese model of investment. President Jinping announced an aid package worth over \$46 billion during his maiden visit to Islamabad in April 2015. During this visit, fifty-one agreements were signed between the two countries, valued at \$46 billion, which might spike to \$62 billion.

The transport and energy corridor between China and Pakistan represents a major shift from China's decades-old military and security ties with Pakistan to economic and investment linkages with the latter. There are some underlying reasons behind it. First, the special nature of the China-Pakistan relationship has imparted an irrevocable confidence to China that once the CPEC is taken to the logical conclusion it would help boost Beijing's confidence in the viability of BRI.<sup>4</sup> Second, China is not a new player to the geopolitically intertwining regions of South Asia, Central Asia, the Gulf, and Afghanistan, to which Pakistan remains at the center stage.

In light of the above backdrop, the chapter illuminates opportunities and security issues before the CPEC flagship project. It also evaluates its geopolitical implications for South Asia, in general, and for India, in particular. Furthermore, the chapter examines how China's expanding maritime influence might adversely affect the balance of power in the region. The chapter addresses a host of questions to examine the feasibility and relevance of the



project. How will CPEC lead to intensifying a naval confrontation between India and China in the Arabian Sea? Will the project augur “economic revolution” or disaster for Pakistan? What are security challenges to implementation aspects of CPEC?

With its meteoric rise as a global economic power, China’s strategy has been to invest its financial resources for infrastructure development in poor and developing countries in Asia and Africa. It is optimistic about better geopolitical and geo-economic returns in cost-effective terms. Undoubtedly, no other country in the world is financially capable of investing one trillion dollars in infrastructure development projects. From that angle, China has grown into the most “extensive commercial empire.”<sup>5</sup>

China is perhaps emulating the United States to replicate the latter’s famous Marshall Plan, though which was meant for reconstruction of the war-ravaged economies of Europe, in the form of aid and loans to expand its strategic foothold in different regions. In this context, Anja Manuel, a former State Department official, commented:

By way of comparison, after World War II, the Marshall Plan provided the equivalent of \$800 billion in reconstruction funds to Europe (if calculated as a percentage of today’s GDP). In the decades after the war the United States was also the world’s largest trading nation, and its largest bilateral lender to others . . . Unlike the United States and Europe, China uses aid, trade, and foreign direct investment strategically to build goodwill, expand its political sway, and secure the natural resources it needs to grow.<sup>6</sup>

## CONTOURS OF THE CPEC PROJECT

The CPEC is a flagship infrastructural project, financed by China. It is under the mega BRI, slated to be completed by 2030. A vast chunk of its financial resources, estimated over 70 percent, have been allocated to energy sector alone. As Boni writes:

[the CPEC] represents the flagship project of China’s Maritime Silk Route initiative, aimed at the construction of ports, infrastructure, as well as road and rail connectivity in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. What has been CPEC’s impact so far? According to a recent report by the International Monetary Fund, CPEC is going to boost investment in Pakistan’s economy and there is general optimism in the country about the positive changes that CPEC would bring about.<sup>7</sup>

What are China’s strategic motives behind the CPEC flagship project? Apparently, there are a host of core objectives. First, China wants to end its dependence on oil imports through the Strait of Malacca since over 75 percent of its oil is currently transported from the Strait of Malacca to Shang-

hai—constituting a distance over 16,000 kilometers. Once the Gwadar port becomes operational, the distance will be reduced to less than 5,000 kilometers. If seen from a broader perspective, China is engaged in

constructing a network of roads, railways and pipelines through Afghanistan and Pakistan, through Myanmar and Tibet down to Nepal and Bangladesh that will provide China with access to the Indian Ocean and allow a diversification of the country's trade channels while defusing the risks inherent to sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), which according to Chinese thinking are mainly controlled by the US. This is supported by Chinese investments in deep-sea ports in Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the proposed project will facilitate China's access to oil-rich Central Asia, whose oil resources would substantially contribute to boosting China's economic growth. It must be remembered that China has, in the past decade or so, emerged as a net importer of natural gas to fulfill its increasing demand.

The Chinese government aims to boost natural gas' share of the total energy consumption to ten percent by 2020 to alleviate pollution, and China is expected to continue importing natural gas in the form of seaborne LNG [liquified natural gas] and pipeline gas from Central Asia (mainly from Turkmenistan), Myanmar and Russia. Turkmenistan is the world's sixth largest natural gas reserve holder, and China has developed the Trans-Asia Gas Pipeline (TAGP) stretching from Turkmenistan to China through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.<sup>9</sup>

Third, given the shared understanding between Beijing and Islamabad, CPEC could serve as a strategic hedge against India's role and influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Fourth, it will not only promote China's trade and investment in the region but also help modernize its "aging infrastructure."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Origin of the CPEC Project**

The CPEC's blueprint was originally prepared by the China Development Bank and National Development Reform Commission's 2015 OBOR Vision and Action document. As reported, details of the document were leaked by the *Dawn* in May 2017, which contained

greater detail concerning agriculture projects suggesting that it is an additional key priority. This includes many different aspects of agriculture from provision of seeds, fertilizer and pesticides, operation of farms and processing facilities by Chinese enterprises, to logistics companies operating storage and transportation for agricultural produce. It also seeks to make use of work of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a state owned enterprise and paramilitary organization, to introduce mechanization, scientific techniques for livestock breeding, development of hybrid varieties and precision irrigation

to Pakistan. In addition to profitable opportunities for Chinese enterprises, the plan also places emphasis on opportunities for the Kashgar Prefecture within the Xinjiang Autonomous Zone.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the anticipated benefits of CPEC for China and Pakistan in geopolitical and geo-economics terms, there are lingering doubts about its hidden conditionalities. Though China claims that unlike Western institutions it does not attach its loans and grants with political strings, its infrastructure aid will definitely accelerate the recipients' economic dependence on China. It partly reflects from China's insistence on subscribing to the "one China policy." For instance, Pakistan has already been roped into the one-China theory.

Furthermore, it is apprehended that CPEC is not primarily confined to building road and trade routes from Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to the Gwadar Port in Pakistan's Baluchistan province. As reported in *The Hindu*, "the plan now includes leasing out thousands of acres of agricultural land to Chinese enterprises to set up demonstration projects in areas ranging from seed varieties to irrigation technology."<sup>12</sup>

In this context, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has suggested to Pakistan that it should ensure "transparency and accountability" in the management and proper monitoring of the project in view of the magnitude of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). It has called upon the Pakistani government "to ensure that the cost of power purchase remains favorable for the distribution companies and consumers."<sup>13</sup> More importantly, the IMF has further warned Pakistan about serious repayment obligations under CPEC, though it may temporarily lift the country from its cash-strapped economy. The US State Department has also cautioned the Pakistani government led by Imran Khan and his team about geopolitical implications of China's "debt trap diplomacy." In fact, Pakistan has already been grappling with the "third balance of payments crisis" in the last ten years.<sup>14</sup>

Though China is worried over Pakistan's balance of payment crisis, the Beijing leadership perceives long term benefits of CPEC's fifteen-year investment program to utilize its capital resources, enabling it to foster geopolitical influence in the region. As mentioned before, the project entails enormous economic risks that might "leave Pakistan trapped in debt and dependency on China, as has become the case in some other countries such as Tajikistan."<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Jayadeva Ranade, a former Additional Secretary in the Government of India, quotes a senior Chinese academic, close to the power corridor, who said that "while we [Chinese] had earlier purchased the loyalty of the Pakistanis, now we will buy Pakistan!"<sup>16</sup> This is not an insignificant remark. It shows the Chinese mentality as to how it treats its dependent allies.

## NATURE, SCOPE, AND CONDITIONALITIES OF CPEC

The CPEC project is an integral part of China's "much-hyped" Belt and Road Initiative. It originated as far back as 2013 when the governments of China and Pakistan signed an agreement on linking the Chinese region of Xinjiang to Pakistan's Gwadar Port—an alternative route to the Indian Ocean through Malacca Strait. "The port of Shanghai is 10,000 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz by sea via the Malacca route while Kashgar, the capital of Xinjiang, is about 4500 kilometers from the port of Shanghai. However, Kashgar is 2800 kilometers from Gwadar via the envisaged CPEC and hence just over 3400 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz."<sup>17</sup>

Marking progress on the project, the Chinese government declared in November 2014 an investment worth \$46 billion in Pakistan's energy and infrastructure sectors. Furthermore, the government earmarked \$51.6 billion as a "new loan deal" in September 2016. "In November 2016, part of CPEC became 'operational' when products were moved by truck from China and loaded onto ships at Pakistan's port Gwadar along the Makran coast for markets in West Asia and Africa."<sup>18</sup>

Some opinion-making sections have expressed misgivings about the nature of the project's operationalization. It is not yet clear how CPEC would be financed, whether in the form of grants or loans, and on what conditions, and how it would be implemented. Everything remains shrouded in mystery. On the contrary, Pakistani and Chinese officials have been eulogizing CPEC, arguing that it will help meet Pakistan's chronic power shortage and improve its road and rail networks. While apparently supporting the project, Pakistan's military primarily views the project from the security angle, especially to address the Chinese government's security concerns over safety of their workers and engineers, engaged in construction work in Gwadar port. Undoubtedly, China considers the Pakistani army's involvement indispensable for a successful completion of the CPEC flagship project. At the same time Pakistani military elites are keeping a close vigilance over the progress of CPEC. In view of the dismissal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on graft charges in the Panama Papers, China temporarily halted CPEC funds. Therefore, for the guarantee of the project's successful implementation, China seems to be keen that the military undertake control over various road projects under CPEC. If it materializes, the Pakistani army will be a major gainer. As reported:

The Pakistani military is an obvious beneficiary with its role in security and with its fingers in numerous infrastructure and economic projects around the corridor. Perhaps some underdeveloped regions in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa will also benefit. The Chinese are too savvy to invest in such a

project without counting the numerous economic, geopolitical and geostrategic returns to their investment and agenda of regional economic connectivity through their One Belt One Road initiative.<sup>19</sup>

## Implications for Pakistani Economy

The CPEC has both advocates and critics in Pakistan. Its arch supporters argue that Pakistan needs Chinese investment in order to bolster its economic growth and tide over the huge domestic energy crisis. But they have failed to provide evidence for this claim.

There is an array of problems associated with CPEC. First, Pakistan is faced with an unprecedented debt crisis that has reached approximately 800 billion rupees. And the interest accruing from CPEC's investment of over 46 billion dollars could further aggravate the crisis.

In this regard, Kaiser Bengali, a senior Pakistani economist, observes:

Those celebrating it must know that the above USD 50 billion loans and Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) will ultimately impact the country when there will be an outflow of loan payments and profit remittances to Chinese companies. This will put immense pressure on foreign reserves which are already dwindling. Unfortunately, Pakistan has done no planning on how funds and revenues will be generated for these payments.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the IMF's tough conditions for bailout are unacceptable to Pakistan. At this critical juncture, Saudi Arabia has provided it with temporary financial respite, though the Pakistani government has not disclosed the conditionalities attached to Saudi loans and grants. Second, how will Pakistan be able to meet the partial cost of road construction out of its dwindling resources? Third, there is no clarity as to how much cost Pakistan will bear to provide security to Chinese workers. Fourth, its environmental cost is inestimable.

Nevertheless, the Pakistani government is speaking volumes about CPEC's transformative role in its economic profile. Further, Islamabad has been refuting the insinuation that it might become a colony of China, arguing that China does not have a colonial and imperial history. Rather, Pakistani military elites contend that colonialism is the legacy of the "global north."<sup>21</sup> They firmly believe that CPEC is based on mutual respect for state sovereignty and on the shared Vision 2025 to build a rich and economically progressive Pakistan.

The Pakistani government further claims that the project will boost its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita income, and will also contribute to changing the face of the Gwadar port city, generating around 0.1 million jobs for locals. As noted by *The Pakistan Observer*, the CPEC is "on the way in realizing the goal of bringing mutual prosperity to the two countries with the development of Gwadar Port, fibre optical links, establishment

of new infrastructure and a host of energy-cooperation projects . . .”<sup>22</sup> Further, Simi Thambi offers below a comprehensive explanation as to how CPEC will address Pakistan’s growing energy needs.

Pakistan faces an average shortfall of electricity of 4000 MW to 7000 MW per year. Chronic power shortage, in the form of load-shedding and power outages, costs the economy as much as 7 percent of GDP. Of the 21 agreements on energy, 14 of the early harvest projects will be able to provide up to 10,400 megawatts (MW) of energy. . . . Along with the direct benefits of boosting power supply, indirectly the construction and maintenance value chain of the energy related investments will create additional income and jobs in the economy through various multiplier effects.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the rosy picture painted by the Pakistani establishment and pro-government media, there are numerous obstacles to CPEC’s implementation. First, since CPEC passes through mountains and rivers, the environmental ecosystem might be adversely affected. With the cutting of thousands of trees, a massive deforestation process has already begun. Second, the project entails negative sociocultural implications. Ayesha Majid notes, “The social and cultural impacts are likely to be of much higher significance, such as non-inclusive development in Gwadar and Thar, building the Karakoram Highway, and loss of environmental values in Gilgit-Baltistan region.”<sup>24</sup> She elaborates that Pakistan will experience an “unprecedented social change in the society, including intra-cultural marriages, [the necessity] to learn Chinese, experiencing [of] new tastes in food, [the arrival of] new fitness trends in Pakistan learnt from Chinese, and a blend of Chinese ethics and values in [Pakistani] culture.”<sup>25</sup> Third, apart from losing military autonomy, Pakistan will mortgage its “economic sovereignty” rooted in the fact that China will have an upperhand in economic gains from CPEC’s operationalization.

## Security Challenges

It is beyond a shadow of doubt that CPEC constitutes a serious security challenge to Chinese engineers and laborers working in the insurgency-infested Baluchistan. Media reports that extremist groups and jihadi elements are assaulting Chinese personnel there. Given the scale and magnitude of security risks, the Chinese government lodged strong protests with Pakistan, asking it to undertake efficacious security measures. The Pakistani government claims that it has provided tight security to Chinese nationals by deploying thousands of security personnel. As reported in *Dawn* on February 21, 2017, the government has “deployed 15,000 military personnel, as part of the Special Security Division (SSD) and Maritime Security Force (MSF) to protect projects under the umbrella of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).”<sup>26</sup>

Also, CPEC has manifold bilateral and regional ramifications. First, China is worried over the uncertainties veering around the civilian government's role in the project ever since former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was found guilty of corruption charges in the Panama Papers. But it is also a well-known fact that Pakistan's military institution has a predominant role in shaping the contours and future directions in its foreign, defense, and security policies. In that case, the civilian control over CPEC would be a marginal one. Political parties in Pakistan have already expressed their deep-seated fear that an indistinctive and amorphous nature of the civilian government's role might derail the project.<sup>27</sup> In a private roundtable discussion on "China-Pakistan Relations: A New Chapter?" hosted by Brookings India, Andrew Small, Transnational Fellow at the German Marshall Fund, observed:

CPEC could lead to political infighting in Pakistan as to who will supervise and implement projects under CPEC. Civil-military relations in Pakistan might suffer further as both struggle to gain control over Chinese-funded projects. The military and its allied companies as well as the civilian government stand to gain substantial financial benefits through these projects. However, China is wary of Pakistani military meddling as this would destabilize civil-military relations and would ultimately affect China's reputation and support base in the Pakistani establishment. A military takeover would also tarnish China's reputation in countries with similar interests.<sup>28</sup>

Since CPEC entails regional ramifications, China has reviewed its policies afresh toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. Although Pakistan has facilitated China's strategic presence in Afghanistan, the Beijing leadership is reshaping its own Afghan policy at the bilateral level to set up a direct dialogue with Afghanistan with an intention to strengthen mutual political, economic, and security ties. It is not yet certain whether the Pakistani civilian or military leadership will desire China to shape and articulate its autonomous policy in Afghanistan. However, China can ill-afford to play an independent role in Afghan affairs. Similarly, China's Central Asia policy is also replete with complexities so far as its political and strategic relationships with Central Asian states vis-à-vis Moscow are concerned. The latter would perhaps be reluctant to let Beijing's influence reign in Central Asia so as to prevent the negative fallout on Russian interests in the region. One might recollect that Central Asia has been Russia's natural sphere of influence. Further, though China has secured Russian support for its CPEC and OBOR projects, Russia could not be willing to abandon its strategic leverage over the oil and mineral rich region of Central Asia and Afghanistan.

## IS THE CPEC A GAME CHANGER?

The CPEC, as discussed before, is fraught with uncertainties. Instead of conducting a thorough and intensive survey on its pros and cons, the ruling class in Islamabad has been pampered into acquiescing into the project. On the contrary, Chinese companies, having outsmarted Pakistan, ruthlessly worked hard to assess gains and losses to determine the feasibility as well as impending challenges to the unhindered operationalization of the project in view of the volatile political and security environment in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Kaiser Bengali, a senior Pakistani economist, is skeptical about the CPEC as a game changer. In an interview with *The News on Sunday* (TNS), Kaiser Bengali stated:

I see the Corridor creating threats for local businesses and fear that it won't be a win-win situation for both countries . . . For example, since Chinese companies are tax-exempt they will bring everything from China and hence they will have no reliance on Pakistani businesses to fulfill their demands. This has shattered the dreams of many local companies that planned to expand their production facilities in anticipation of receiving orders from these Chinese companies. The association of cable operators in Pakistan is one such entity that was expecting a big boost in its sale volumes, but now they are struggling to sustain their existing sale figures.<sup>29</sup>

There were over five dozen comments on Kaiser's interview as of September 2017. Interestingly, a commentator drew a parallel between China and the East Indian Company, apprehending that Pakistan might be turned into China's "province." It was further observed:

The Chinese have no loyalty, no sentiments! They are ruthless and self centered! Pakistanis will find out that they won't be able to practice their unfettered Islam—the very reason behind the partition of India and creation of Pakistan! Chinese think long term and are busy acquiring access to minerals, raw materials, trade routes and grabbing territory where they can! From South China Sea to South Asia to Africa, nothing is sacrosanct! They may have come bearing baskets of gifts! Just beware they don't contain snakes!<sup>30</sup>

The new government in Pakistan led by Prime Minister Imran Khan made it clear that his government would not allow China a "free hand" on the CPEC issue. He reassured the people that his government would review the project in its entirety and take necessary steps accordingly. Khan's Minister for Commerce, Industry and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood also lambasted the previous government, headed by Nawaz Sharif, for granting "too favorable" terms on several projects under CPEC, and also suggested to keep CPEC on hold for a year or so. He further added, "Chinese companies received tax breaks, many breaks and have an undue advantage in Pakistan;



this is one of the things we're looking at because it's not fair that Pakistani companies should be disadvantaged."<sup>31</sup> But the Pakistani military establishment and China looked askance at Dawood's views.

Whatever may be merits and demerits of the project, Imran Khan cannot afford to roll back the project. Pakistan cannot do without Chinese economic assistance especially when it is grievously seized with the dwindling foreign exchange reserves, as evident from Islamabad seeking twelve IMF bailouts since 1980s. As reported, "The country's foreign exchange reserves, meanwhile, are dwindling, plummeting to just over \$9 billion now from \$16.4 billion in May 2017. The central bank has been forced to devalue the currency three times since December. Rising global crude prices present another challenge, as Pakistan imports about 80% of its oil needs."<sup>32</sup>

### **Domestic Unrest in Pakistan**

Pakistani people have raised a hue and cry about CPEC's relevance and utility. Their lurking fear is grounded in a human predicament, which is manifest from displacement of people on a massive scale by grabbing their agricultural land, resulting in the loss of their means of livelihood. Especially, the people living within the vicinity of the Gwadar port have been hit hard. They have voiced their serious "concerns about the impact on the livelihoods of local fishermen and their potential displacement to locations with inadequate amenities and facilities to accommodate all of them so that they can maintain their current incomes."<sup>33</sup> Also, some mainstream political parties in Pakistan described CPEC as the return of "British imperialism."

On the contrary, Pakistani students perceive that CPEC will open up a floodgate for jobs and employment. Also, China has emerged as their preferred destination for higher studies. As reported by the *Xinhua News Agency*, 22,000 Pakistani students are enrolled in China's higher education program, and "2,700 Pakistani students are pursuing masters and doctorate degrees in top Chinese universities on fully funded scholarships sponsored by the Chinese Government."<sup>34</sup> In fact, CPEC has unleashed "a huge demand for Pakistani graduates from Chinese universities,"<sup>35</sup> which should be helpful in boosting China's soft power diplomacy. Pakistani senators are also coming in support of promoting Mandarin, the Chinese language, which they think will facilitate a better communication between the domestic employees and Chinese workers stationed in Baluchistan and other parts of Pakistan. Toward that end, Pakistani Senate passed a resolution on February 19, 2018, for imparting training in Mandarin to minimize "language barriers."

## India's Concerns

For Pakistan, CPEC may be a “game changer” or a fate changer, but the Modi government has raised its strong objection on a number of counts. First, India’s concern is over the sovereignty issue since CPEC passes through the disputed Kashmir region. Second, the Indian government argues that China has no *locus standi* in Gilgit-Baltistan, an integral part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Beijing has outright rejected India’s contention that it has violated India’s territorial sovereignty. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying clarified that CPEC would not “affect China’s position on Kashmir.”<sup>36</sup> It may be recalled that China does not recognize Kashmir as a part of Indian territory. That is why it has been justifying the CPEC project originating from Gilgit-Baltistan in the Kashmir region. Third, India fears that its security interests in the Indian Ocean region will be jeopardized with China’s increasing influence through CPEC.

Fourth, with China’s operational control over deep sea Gwadar Port, India’s maritime security interests would be adversely affected. Fahed Shah writes, “New Delhi fears that the port might become a Chinese naval outpost, thereby threatening India’s energy and economic security, as more than two thirds of India’s petroleum imports pass through the area.”<sup>37</sup> Fifth, India apprehends that with CPEC’s success, Pakistan might emerge as an “outsourcing destination,” especially for Western economies, for contract manufacturing. In addition, the CPEC might facilitate Pakistan’s access to international markets to compete with India. An analyst notes: “Pakistani exports, mainly in the textile and construction material industry, compete directly with those of India in the US and UAE . . . With the supply of raw material from China becoming easier, Pakistan will be suitably placed to become a regional market leader in these sectors—mainly at the cost of Indian export volumes.”<sup>38</sup>

## IMPACT ON INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

The CPEC is directly linked to India-Pakistan relations. As mentioned before, it passes through the disputed territory of the Pak-occupied Kashmir, which India considers as an integral part of its State of Jammu and Kashmir. It may be pointed out that Pakistan’s regular army attacked the Kashmir Valley in October 1947, and occupied its one-third part in the military operation. Hence, Indian argument is that its territorial sovereignty has been violated by allowing China to construct trade routes via the disputed territory—a 1,300-kilometer-long corridor. Indian fear is that “the increased Chinese presence in Pakistan, with an estimated 30,000 Chinese workers employed on various CPEC projects and protected by 20,000 Pakistani troops, rein-

forces the perception that the threat is serious, akin to opening up yet another Line of Actual Control [LAC] near India's western border."<sup>39</sup>

The Modi government lodged a strong protest with Pakistan that it should respect the "people's sovereignty." In his inaugural address on January 17, 2017, at the second Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, Modi stated "only by respecting the sovereignty of countries involved can regional connectivity corridors fulfill their promise and avoid differences and discord."<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar made a trenchant comment on CPEC, saying that "Beijing had not been sensitive about India's sovereignty and did not consult New Delhi on its \$54-billion project with Islamabad."<sup>41</sup> He made the Indian government's policy stance clear: "The CPEC passes through a territory that we see as our territory. Surely people will understand what [the] Indian reaction is. There needs to be some reflection and I am sorry to say that we have not seen signs of that."<sup>42</sup> In fact, what worries India is that the Gwadar port could end up as China's "military outpost" in the Arabian Sea, geographically close to India. While rebutting Indian criticism, Pakistani government contends that CPEC is not constricted by geographical boundaries nor has Pakistan any intention to leverage its "geographical position" to harm other countries' interests. Nafees Zakaria, Pakistani foreign ministry spokesman, set aside Indian concerns without addressing the issue of violation of Indian sovereignty. While justifying the corridor, he said that it would facilitate regional economic integration in South Asia and Central Asia. He told *Al Jazeera* that CPEC is a "comprehensive and broad-based economic cooperation project . . . which will contribute to the economic development of the entire region and not only for Pakistan and China."<sup>43</sup> In this context, a commentator notes:

The CPEC can be a catalyst for economic connectivity and integration in Central, South and West Asia. Objections by India or any other country to such an economic project are, therefore, beyond comprehension. CPEC is anticipated to boost Pakistan's economy, where the GDP is expected to grow by more than five percent by 2020. The 3,200 km-long corridor is intended to connect the world's second-largest economy, China, with the Middle East and Central Asia, reducing the alternative sea route distance via the Malacca Straits by 10,000 km.<sup>44</sup>

## India's Response?

Will the Modi government embark on a sound and effective counter-strategy to thwart the strategic fallout of the Gwadar Port's forty-year lease to China? Its answer is partly yes. It should be remembered that India and Iran had agreed to sign a deal under which India would develop the Chabahar strategic port as part of India's geostrategic goal to counter China's operational control over the Gwadar port, though Tehran has never expressed its opposi-

tion to Sino-Pakistan project in Gwadar. For Iran, China is also an indispensable partner in serving its core national interests. However, India's long-term strategic goal through the Chabahar project is to gain access to the Middle East, Central Asia, and Afghanistan since Pakistan is reluctant to provide direct access to India. The port will not only facilitate promotion of all kinds of Indian goods and products in Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia but also India's geopolitical role in the Middle East and Central Asia. Indian strategic community perceives the Chabahar project as a strategic leverage for India to reduce Pakistan's influence in the region, and to balance off China's role in the Greater Middle East Asia.

If seen from this context, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to India in February 2018 was an important milestone in their bilateral relationship. An agreement was signed to lease the Iranian Chabahar port to India for eighteen months. Accordingly, India will get the operational control of Shahid Beheshti port under Phase I of the 85 million dollar project. It may be noted that the Chabahar port is merely 90 kilometers away from the Gwadar port, creating "a transit route between India, Iran and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan."<sup>45</sup> In order to utilize full potential of the Chabahar port for increasing connectivity and economic cooperation between New Delhi and Tehran, India will support the construction of the Chabahar-Zahedan rail link. In principle, the project has a vast economic and strategic value but India's track record on the implementation aspect has been abysmally poor, mainly ascribed to the passivity of Indian bureaucracy and the ruling leadership. For instance, several key projects such as the Kaladan multimodal transport project for linking northeastern states to Myanmar's Sittwe port have been inordinately delayed.

Not surprisingly, the Chabahar project is fraught with numerous geopolitical and geopsychological challenges. First, the United States, India's close strategic partner, would never like that India and Iran should open a new strategic front on the gateway to Afghanistan. It should be noted that Iran's relations with the United States during the Trump administration have reached the lowest ebb with the US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal in 2018, concluded during the Obama administration in 2015. India's relations with Iran might be complicated with the Trump administration's reinstatement of oil sanctions on Iran in August 2018, though India is not likely to toe the US line either by cutting or reducing the quantum of oil import from Iran. Secondly, China and Pakistan will not sit idle. They might resort to using a variety of strategic tools and diplomatic tactics to impede the Chabahar project. For instance, Beijing and Islamabad might exploit India's political differences with Iran over the issue of the Taliban's inclusion in the Afghan reconciliation process. Third, India might emerge as an "economic rival" in the region, which could escalate geo-economic warfare between Beijing and New Delhi in the fulfillment of their respective geopolitical

ambitions. It is fundamentally rooted in their psychology not to lose ground to the other in the geopolitical contest. Fourth, New Delhi and Tehran have divergent perceptions so far as India's deepening strategic ties with Israel and Saudi Arabia are concerned. Iran and Israel consider each other an arch nuclear rival. The editorial of the *Indian Express* struck a similar note below on the impending difficulties before India and Iran in implementing the Chabahar project.

Delhi and Tehran hope to integrate Chabahar into the larger International North South Corridor (INSTC) that connects India to Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and Europe. No wonder Modi called Chabahar India's "golden gateway" to inner Asia. While Delhi celebrates the breakthrough on connectivity with Tehran, it is not unaware of the many difficulties looming over the horizon . . . Even in Afghanistan, where Delhi and Tehran have a long tradition of collaboration, there are questions about Iran's support for the Taliban. The Middle East has never been an easy place to deal with. But like all other major powers, Delhi is beginning to learn the arts of *realpolitik* in the Middle East.<sup>46</sup>

It merits a mention that the port's strategic location is highly valuable for India. As mentioned before, it is located hardly ninety kilometers off from the Gwadar port, operated by China. At the same time, India needs to be extremely cautious to stem any strategic threat from Beijing. Not surprisingly, China is keeping close vigil over Chabahar with an intention to spy over India. It was reported that during his visit to Pakistan in early 2018, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif made an offer to Pakistan and China to participate in the Chabahar project. He further assured Pakistan that the project was not intended to "encircle Pakistan . . . strangulate anybody."<sup>47</sup> Though India grew suspicious of the offer, it did not openly react to it.

Broadly speaking, CPEC is likely to have negative fallout on Sino-Indian relations. To India, CPEC is "unacceptable" since it entails the question of sovereignty, based on international norms and treaties. India's External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Ravish Kumar said that "we are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality, and must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity."<sup>48</sup> Though China has been reassuring India that it is willing to address the latter's legitimate grievances over CPEC, Beijing has not undertaken concrete measures so far to satisfy New Delhi over the sovereignty issue. Furthermore, the Indian fear is that the Gwadar port "might become a Chinese naval outpost, thereby threatening India's energy and economic security, as more than two thirds of India's petroleum imports pass through the area."<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The CPEC, “the crown jewel” of the BRI flagship project, is replete with paradoxes and controversies. Perhaps, Beijing and Islamabad cannot predict its precise outcome. In theory, CPEC has raised high hopes of the economic windfall for both Beijing and Islamabad. Pakistani military and civilian elites, for example, have termed CPEC a “game changer,” ushering in Pakistan’s economic development as well as catalyzing economic connectivity in South Asia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. On the contrary, some strategic affairs pundits apprehend that Sri Lanka’s worst debt experience with China might replicate in the case of Pakistan, which might end up as China’s “economic colony.”<sup>50</sup> Pakistan’s mainstream opposition leaders have also voiced their serious concerns that CPEC does not address legitimate grievances of the people of Baluchistan, already seized with mass unrest. This apart, Pakistani ruling leaders are unaware of CPEC’s hidden agenda. They are impervious to the lingering ambiguity in terms and conditions of loan repayments. It raises serious doubts in the minds of some intellectual sections in Pakistan, including media, that CPEC would perpetually keep Pakistan’s economic dependency on China, which might use the economic dependency as a leverage to secure future benefits in face of Islamabad’s strained relationship with Washington, as evident from the Trump administration’s suspension of aid to Pakistan. In this scenario, Pakistan has no option except to engage China as its “imperialist partner” in infrastructure and energy sectors. The real dilemma before Pakistan is how to get out of China’s opaque imperialism through the “debt diplomacy” on the one hand and to seek the IMF bailout on the other hand. In this murky scenario, Prime Minister Imran Khan exuded optimism about financial help from some friendly countries like China and Saudi Arabia. The latter came to Pakistan’s rescue, may be temporarily, agreeing to a \$3 billion bailout during Imran Khan’s visit to Riyadh in October 2018. But its terms and conditions have not been disclosed, lest it should further accentuate Pakistan’s economic woes. Pakistan would not have been facing this dismal situation had it not frittered away resources on defense expenditure in the arms race with India, and funneling aid to terrorist groups. Pakistan would not have been wandering around with a “begging bowl,” and would have had its self-respect and grace intact.

In addition, CPEC directly impinges on the autonomy and secrecy of Pakistan’s defense mechanisms, as exemplified by the Chinese Navy’s presence in the Gwadar port and army deployment at critical points on the land routes. In effect, China’s surveillance over key security posts in the Gwadar region might jeopardize Pakistan’s internal and external security. For China, the Gwadar port provides a most secure, safe, and feasible oil route in cost-effective terms, enabling it to stem over the “Malacca dilemma.”

So far as India is concerned, it has scarcely derived any concrete gain from its reiterated complaints with China and Pakistan that CPEC infringes on Indian sovereignty. Even Prime Minister Modi's political and diplomatic endeavors to convince the top Beijing leadership of India's legitimate concern over the sovereignty issue did not cut ice with President Xi Jinping. In effect, China is determined not to alter its CPEC plan to accommodate India's sensitivities. Furthermore, China least cares whether or not India participates in the CPEC or BRI project. It reinforces that India does not enjoy an iota of influence over China, though the latter may need India's diplomatic and moral support on the issue of the ongoing trade Cold War between Beijing and Washington. What is worrisome for India is that apart from the unresolved boundary issue, China's expanding strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea through CPEC has posed new challenges to India's national security interests.

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## *Chapter Three*

# **China's Belt and Road Initiative**

## *Impact and Assessment*

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR), is China's unique dream project of global outreach, transcending geographical barriers. It mirrors a monumental strategic shift in China's foreign policy that aims to shape the global geopolitical architecture within a broad tableau of its worldview. Launched by President Xi Jinping in September 2013, BRI is a humongous project valued at over \$1 trillion in infrastructure development, involving over five dozen countries. In terms of size, scope and scale, it has no "precedent in modern history."<sup>1</sup> The project is chiefly driven by President Xi Jinping's political ambition to refashion the global economic order based on Chinese characteristics. This adventurous and risky global enterprise has been designed to rekindle "the ancient Silk Road . . . [by] build[ing] a network of highways, railways and pipelines linking Asia via the Middle East to Europe and south through Africa."<sup>2</sup> Undeniably, China's increasing economic and military might has spurred the confidence of President Jinping and his team to undertake innovative, audacious, and adventurous projects reflecting China's role as an assertive global player.<sup>3</sup>

With the gradual US retreat from its "global leadership role," China's proactive diplomacy is focused on projecting its image as a global balancing force through the instrumentality of aid and investment for infrastructure development in developing and underdeveloped countries. It may be recalled that China launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a component of its well-calibrated strategy to accelerate its role in global geopolitical and economic affairs by financing "sustainable infrastructure and other productive sectors" of member countries. China is now all set to revive

and recreate ancient silk routes to boost its trade and investment portfolios across Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa. Also, China is determined to derive leverage from those countries that intend to lessen their aid dependence on the United States.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter focuses on multiple drivers behind China's new Silk Road diplomacy to rewrite "new global routes." The chapter argues that the geo-strategic shift in China's foreign economic policy is driven by a host of factors. Of them, the most critical factor is to utilize its large stock of dormant foreign exchange reserves in order to spur its declining growth rate over the past couple of years.<sup>5</sup> And finally, the chapter examines BRI's impact on Sino-India strategic competition in the Indian Ocean.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BRI

This multipurpose project represents 70 percent of the world population, three quarters of energy resources, and nearly 30 percent of global GDP. The centrality of Xi's framework of BRI is also being perceived as a new version of the US Marshall Plan to derive maximum strategic leverage over aid recipient nations by projecting "China's role as an agent of economic development in its own neighborhood and beyond."<sup>6</sup> By financing infrastructure projects across continents, China aims to expand its strategic foothold to advance its trade and investment interests globally.<sup>7</sup> China is not only poised to showcase its economic accomplishments to leverage influence over its neighbors psychologically but also to undercut the US economic preponderance as an unrivaled global political actor.<sup>8</sup>

China's former Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan in his keynote address on "Belt and Road-Shaping the Future Cooperation between China and Europe" at the 2015 World Chinese Economic Summit explained that Chinese vision for BRI was "not a one man show" or a "unilateral plan" but was rather "open and inclusive."<sup>9</sup> He further emphasized on fostering an unhindered trade, financial flows, people-to-people contacts, and infrastructural connectivity among Silk Route nations.<sup>10</sup> In brief, China has a long-term plan and strategy of massive investments to connect with Central Asia, Middle East, and Europe by rails, roads, ports, and airports in order to promote its trade and investment for better commercial returns. It is estimated that upon completion, "the BRI could cover over 4.4 billion people and generate a Gross Domestic Product of over \$21 trillion."<sup>11</sup>

From the historical perspective, BRI is a fundamental departure from the "lie low" policy of Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's economic reforms, to showcasing and displaying China's economic marvel. Deng ardently advocated keeping a low profile to hide China's growing capabilities, though his policy should not be construed as political pusillanimity to project

China as a weak and impoverished nation. Rather, it was dictated by his simple sense of prudence and pragmatism that it would be in China's interest to concentrate on economic development rather than fritter away its energy in boasting of its accomplishments—until China pulled out of the quagmire of underdevelopment. Further, Deng was an acerbic critic of Mao's ill-conceived Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that, in his perception, not only isolated China internationally but also catalyzed China's economic backwardness. Indeed, Mao brazenly ignored the country's economic development by failing to realize the imperative of uplifting the millions of people reeling under an economic and social morass.

To lift China from the sick and stagnant economy, Deng announced the open door policy in December 1978 to promote foreign trade and investment, and welcomed Western technology for China's economic transformation. With the launch of the four modernizations in a phased manner in the fields of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology, China miraculously developed its economic and military sinews under the leaderships of Deng Xiaoping (1978–1992), Jiang Zemin (1993–2003), Hu Jintao (March 2003–March 2013), and Xi Jinping (March 2013–).

Upon assuming the office of president in March 2013, Xi Jinping announced the “One Belt, One Road” initiative in September 2013. Interestingly, in a quest for fulfilling his vision of an inclusive globalization, Xi went ahead to bolster China's credentials as a responsible international stakeholder. He felt that it was the propitious time and opportunity for China to boost its economic diplomacy to make Eurasia China-centric along the trajectory of the US-dominated transatlantic capitalist order. While highlighting the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at the opening ceremony in 2016, President Xi stated, “Exchange will replace estrangement, mutual learning will replace clashes, and coexistence will replace a sense of superiority.”<sup>12</sup> At his initiative, the first Belt and Road Forum (BRF) Summit was held in Beijing on May 14–15, 2017, in which heads of state and government from 29 countries and delegates from more than 130 countries participated. It may be mentioned that except India and Bhutan, all other members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) attended the summit. President Vladimir Putin was the center of attraction amidst the presence of top leaders from the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. It was not a small accomplishment. It was a spectacular event for China with an impressive gathering of summit leaders, which added to President Xi's image and aura and testified to his towering personality in global politics.<sup>13</sup>

## RATIONALE BEHIND THE BRI

The BRI constitutes a multiple agenda to fulfill China's political, economic, and strategic goals. Politically, it is an instrument to project China's image and influence in Eurasia, signifying that it was capable of rewriting terms and conditions of international trade and investment. The "evolving narratives" in Asia shed light on China's capability to showcase its highest standards in the state-of-art engineering in building high speed rails, roads, and bridges. Xi's firm determination to demonstrate China's economic strength and technological breakthroughs spurred him to undertake such a complex and ever challenging project. In view of its "scale and scope," without a precedent, the project will be a litmus test for the Jinping leadership. Its economic rationale is to spur China's slow-paced economy by maximally utilizing over-production of infrastructure material such as steel and cement beyond Chinese shores.<sup>14</sup> *The Economist* further observes that China's driving force behind heavy investments in infrastructure development is to create "new markets for Chinese companies, such as high-speed rail firms."<sup>15</sup> In this regard, Jane Perlez and Yufang Huang observe that President Xi is "literally and figuratively forging ties, creating new markets for the country's construction companies and exporting its model of state-led development in a quest to create deep economic connections and strong diplomatic relationships."<sup>16</sup> Insofar as diversification of energy resources is concerned, the BRI project is expected to benefit China enormously. Benjamin Habib and Viktor Fauknor opine in this context:

China also can diversify its transportation routes for maritime energy supplies. This reduces its vulnerability to energy supply disruption at maritime choke-points in the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea . . . The establishment of port facilities in the Indian Ocean will also be advantageous to the emerging blue-water capability of the People's Liberation Army Navy. This would assist in keeping vulnerable critical sea lines of communication open for maritime energy supplies from the Middle East. Collectively, these measures could reduce the ability of the US Navy to blockade China's energy supply routes in any future conflict scenario.<sup>17</sup>

Strategically, China's aim is to create a "more stable neighborhood for China's own restive western provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet."<sup>18</sup> In his keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the BRF in Beijing, President Xi laid out principles and measures for advancing the open and inclusive plan. He stated:

In the autumn of 2013, respectively in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, I proposed the building of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which I call the Belt and Road Initiative . . . the pursuit of the [BRI]

is not meant to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it aims to complement the development strategies of countries involved by leveraging their comparative strengths.<sup>19</sup>

President Xi pointed out that China was prepared for enhancing cooperation and coordination with the interested parties that had undertaken policy initiatives such as “the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, the Middle Corridor initiative of Turkey, One Economic Circle initiative of Viet Nam, the Northern Powerhouse initiative of the UK and the Amber Road initiative of Poland.”<sup>20</sup> He further emphasized that China was in favor of encouraging complementarities between its development plans and those of Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Hungary, among others. He informed that China had concluded “cooperation agreements with over 40 countries and international organizations and carried out framework cooperation on production capacity with more than 30 countries.”<sup>21</sup> For this, Xi announced over \$100 billion for China’s development banks to spend on boosting infrastructure in BRI member countries.<sup>22</sup> Further, to clear the fog surrounding the BRI, he made it clear at a meeting of the Central Leading Group on Finance and Economic Affairs that China would like to remain “open wider” to foreign investment to “promote the sustainable and healthy development of the Chinese economy.”<sup>23</sup>

Xi further emphasized that the BRI plan was aimed at fostering open and inclusive economic globalization, based on fairness and equity, which strategic affairs experts perceived as a “backbone” of China’s economic and geopolitical agenda. In this regard, Charlie Campbell observes, “Beijing’s rationale is clear: these are large, resource-rich nations within its reach, with a severe infrastructure deficit, which China has the resources and expertise to correct. By boosting connectivity, China can spur growth in the short term, gain access to valuable natural resources in the midterm and create new booming markets for its goods long into the future.”<sup>24</sup>

On the contrary, some dissenters argue that from a long-term perspective BRI encompasses serious risks to the global economic order. There is a lack of transparency and clarity in terms of defining the rules regarding disbursement of aid and grants to recipient nations. There is a lingering uncertainty among aid recipients about the exact outcome of various projects in terms of delivery. It is also feared in some political circles that China’s grand strategy to acquire and control foreign lands and natural resources of debt defaulters might lead to China’s hegemony over “vast swaths of the developing world.”<sup>25</sup>

China’s overarching ambition is to set up a new global economic architecture with an intention to challenge the hitherto “Western-dominated institutions” and to bring Eurasia within its strategic fold on Chinese terms. In other words, BRI is perceived to be intended for China to replace the United

States as a global leader in the field of trade and investment. Some scholars believe that Xi is copying the US Marshall Plan, aimed at creating allies to support its military alliances, but with a difference that BRI does not envisage any military alliance or partnership. A question arises whether Xi intends to create “the new globalization 2.0”?<sup>26</sup> It remains uncertain as to what shape a China-centric global economic order will assume and what its future agenda will be. But it is clear that Xi is closely overseeing the Trump administration’s punitive postures vis-à-vis its old trade partners like Mexico and Canada in order to grasp the implications for the global economic order, such as those resulting from Trump’s snapping of ties with the Trans-Pacific Partnership. In this context, the *New York Times* editorial commented that “Mr. Trump, unlike his predecessor, Barack Obama, who worked to expand American influence in Asia, has ceded significant ground to China, especially by withdrawing from the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership and thus allowing Beijing an opening to set trade rules in the region.”<sup>27</sup>

## IMPEDIMENTS

The BRI road is bumpy. There is no consensus within China’s domestic constituency so far as the project’s rationale, feasibility, and overall utility are concerned. Conflicting interests among Chinese ministries and official departments do persist. For instance, the foreign ministry, planning commission, and the commerce ministry do not have convergent stakes and interests as well as common policy approaches to BRI. Rather, they perceive it through kaleidoscopic lenses.<sup>28</sup> Externally, China has suffered occasional setbacks in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. For instance, at one point in time, many Chinese infrastructure projects, approved by the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime, were “suspended” by President Maithripala Sirisena on the ground of “suspected graft, overpricing and [breaching] government procedures.”<sup>29</sup> But China did not give up: President Xi Jinping persuaded Sirisena to reevaluate those projects. Interestingly, with Jinping’s strategy of committing more grants and loans to strengthen Sri Lanka’s development sector, Sirisena turned somewhat soft toward China and readily agreed to resume Chinese projects with minor changes.<sup>30</sup> This displays China’s diplomatic oeuvre and political tenacity to clinch the deal, regardless of odds and obstacles, with an eye on reaping the fruits of the project it launches. China’s main critics such as the United States, India, and Japan could not smother the Chinese zeal and determination to stabilize its strategic presence in Sri Lanka.

In New Delhi’s perception, BRI encapsulated a hidden agenda and ambiguous terms and conditions, leading to “unsustainable debt burden for countries.”<sup>31</sup> Those who have studied the program in between the lines argue that China has no interest in providing aid to infrastructure-deficient coun-



tries. Rather, China insists that they repay the debt borrowed from Chinese banks. In that case, it might render the debt-ridden countries poorer with their economies held hostage to China's economic booby-trap. Moreover, the Chinese rate of interest is also creeping up from 2.5 percent to over 5 percent, which would make it harder for the loan recipients to repay the huge accumulating debt.

## IMPACT

China's projects, worth billions of dollars, have generated a heated debate given the fragile, corrupt, and politically unstable regimes in most of the Afro-Asian countries such as Zimbabwe, North Korea, and Myanmar. Undoubtedly, these countries welcome Chinese investments that involve huge money without China's insistence on strict compliance of ethical norms and standards such as protection of human rights of minorities and refugees. However, with its global stature and influence in the international system, China is bound by moral obligation to comply with high ethical standards in international transactions.

China's impact on loan recipient countries under various infrastructure projects will be tremendous. In case an aid recipient country is unable to repay the mounting debt, its natural resources or other assets will be acquired by China as it did in the case of Pakistan by taking over the Gwadar port on a forty-year lease. For China, BRI will have a positive impact on its image and lend legitimacy to its systemic governance. *The Atlantic* observes:

If China's geo-economic push continues, it will be its largest legacy and have a profound impact on the world—not necessarily all negative. Since the West doesn't have \$1 trillion to lavish on developing country infrastructure in a new great game, its best choice may be to coopt and shape this juggernaut. If the Belt and Road initiative is a success, asphalt will be smoother, logistics will run faster, and countries that were cut off from world markets will be able to trade more. If the research cited above holds true, that will lead to fewer interstate wars, although it will make many small countries beholden to China.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, it might accelerate China's strategic leverage over them. On the contrary, most scholars, especially those who have carried out research on China's foreign investment, are of the view that Chinese aid is neither driven by the humanitarian purpose, unlike the US Marshall Plan, nor is it guided by its intrinsic desire to improve living standards of aid recipients. China's sole motivation is to invest its money lying idle in the banks for better returns as well as to earn goodwill and hold its political sway over aid and grants beneficiaries.

As regards Russia and India, they are concerned about BRI's negative fallout on their regional roles. As Matt Ferchen, a strategic analyst, notes:

Even as traditional regional powers such as India and Russia publicly welcome new opportunities for trade and investment, they are alert to the potential ways that the Belt and Road Initiative and other sources of Chinese economic influence in South and Central Asia might impact their own interests and spheres of influence. . . . India, meanwhile, fears that China's promotion of potentially dual-use port facilities in South Asia, including the Gwadar port in Pakistan, could facilitate a greater Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal.<sup>33</sup>

Although it will be premature to assess the success or failure of the BRI at this juncture, China is very much likely to create a pro-China constituency since no other country is financially capable of undertaking such a mega project, though it entails unpredictable hurdles and uncertainties.<sup>34</sup>

### INDIA'S SECURITY CONCERNS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

India has open differences with China on the BRI. It preferred not to participate in its inaugural function. In response to a query on India's participation, the official spokesperson Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, made the following statement on May 13, 2017:

We are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs; and skill and technology transfer to help long term running and maintenance of the assets created by local communities. Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>35</sup>

The BRI, involving Central Asia and South Asia, in particular, has manifold implications for India in political, economic, and security terms. India has serious reservations over China's growing strategic presence in its backyard. It is an open secret that BRI is driven by China's trade and investment interests by rewriting the silk route through the Indian Ocean. Toward that end, China has already taken over the operational control of Pakistan's Gwadar port on lease and has also heavily invested in developing Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. Its ships are now freely docked in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Myanmar with a prime goal of expanding its maritime presence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). On the other hand, India perceives the IOR as its natural

sphere of influence, telling China not to intervene in the region. Realistically enough, in a new wave of “Asian regionalism,” China has emerged as an assertive and influential actor to reshape Asian economic and security architecture. Over the past one decade or so, China has emerged as India’s arch-rival in the Indian Ocean. Without exaggeration, China has already established its strategic beachhead in the region. This is manifest from China’s new strategic game plan to occupy the Marao port in the Maldives by offering the latter huge infrastructure aid during President Xi Jinping’s visit to Male in 2014. During Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom’s state visit to Beijing in December 2017, twelve agreements were signed between the two governments, including maritime cooperation and the free trade deal. Not only this, Chinese military élites are reportedly engaged in working out a roadmap to set up a naval base in the Maldives, although denied by the Maldivian government. In addition, China has already established its presence in the Chittagong port in Bangladesh, and exercises operational control over the Gwadar port, which will help China to encounter the Indian Navy directly.

Notably, China’s (People’s Liberation Army) PLA-Navy also docked its nuclear submarine in Colombo in 2014, causing a serious alarm in India’s strategic circles. Further, in order to rejuvenate its ties with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, China conducted joint military exercises with Sri Lanka in June–July 2015 that were in addition to the docking of two nuclear submarines at Colombo the previous year. India protested over the presence of nuclear submarines in its backyard but it did not cut ice with the Beijing leadership. In Indian perception, China’s objective is to establish a permanent naval base in the Indian Ocean, which might jeopardize India’s energy security, economic, and trade interests.<sup>36</sup> In real political terms, China’s strategic design is focused on keeping a close surveillance over India’s strategic assets and its naval activities offshore the Indian Ocean. Chinese submarines have been reported to be “permanently sailing in the Indian Ocean.”<sup>37</sup> Undoubtedly, such sensitive strategic activities are seen to constitute a serious threat to India’s national security interests, which might further erode India’s role as a security and stability provider to the region. The Modi Government, therefore, appears to be serious about helping the Indian Ocean littoral states with their “capability enhancements.”<sup>38</sup>

India, as a “resurgent maritime nation,” has myriad interests in the Indian Ocean, ranging from energy security, economic growth, and safety of the sea lanes to its maritime ambition to play a leading role in shaping the security architecture in the IOR.<sup>39</sup> With its growing military and economic capabilities, India is poised to develop its blue economy to ensure inclusive growth and job creation. Intertwined with its national interests, its maritime strategy is centered on providing security and political stability to its “maritime neighborhood” such as the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka in

the face of China's expanding naval and strategic activities in the region. By this reasoning, China's presence entails a direct negative impact on India's energy and security interests, and also undermines its role as a preeminent power in the region.<sup>40</sup>

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has attempted to redefine India's Indian Ocean policy to articulate India's interests in a much broader framework of seeking "a more integrated and cooperative future" to ensure peace, security, and sustainable development for all. Toward that goal, the Modi government has launched a new approach to "reach out to all friendly nations" to renew and deepen strategic partnerships in the Indian Ocean Region. Modi is the first Indian prime minister to have undertaken such a record number of foreign visits that injected a new energy and dynamism into the hitherto moribund maritime diplomacy of India. This resulted in the successful conclusion of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) agreement between India and the United States in 2016 permitting the use of each other's bases, something quite unimaginable in the Cold War era.<sup>41</sup>

### **India's Act East Policy: A Warning Signal to China**

Further, Modi gave a new nomenclature to the earlier Look East Policy (LEP) (1992) by announcing the "Act East" policy (AEP). The choice of name was perhaps not without sarcasm and may imply that his predecessor, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, suffered from passivity and policy paralysis, resulting in a failure to address effectively the warnings from China about India's maritime engagement with South-East Asia. He undertook a flurry of visits to ASEAN countries to convince their heads of state and government that India was committed to helping maintain peace and security in the Indian Ocean rim states. He gave enough hints that India might be a solid hedge against China's increasing geopolitical influence in the region and was reflected in India's joint naval exercises with ASEAN member countries such as Singapore and Indonesia. In addition, India and Vietnam signed two Memorandums of Understandings (MoUs) on bilateral defense and coast guard cooperation in 2015. As part of the agreement, two Indian warships visited Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam in 2016 and two other vessels Indian Naval Ship (INS) *Sahyadri* and INS *Shakti*, visited Subic Bay in the Philippines. Under the Act East Policy, the Modi government has boosted the morale of Indian Navy and expanded its strategic footprint beyond South Asia.<sup>42</sup>

Undoubtedly, India's recent maritime engagements with those South-East Asian states imparted a new sense of confidence among the Indian people that their country was capable of defending its maritime security interests against potential threats from its adversaries. In particular, with the induction into the Navy of the aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya* and ballistic missile

submarines, India has recalibrated its maritime security policy to better safeguard its various security and economic interests in the IOR. Maritime security policy under the Modi government was articulated in the 2015 document titled *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*.<sup>43</sup>

More pertinently, Prime Minister Modi has endeavored as never before to inject a new vigor and momentum into India's neighborhood maritime policy, by realizing the new geostrategic reality that China was consolidating its maritime presence in the littoral states of the Indian Ocean. In response to that expansion, Modi visited Seychelles and Mauritius in March 2015 and stressed the imperative for comprehensive defense and maritime security cooperation with the island states. During his visit to the Seychelles, he concluded five agreements with the Seychellois government covering renewable energy, infrastructure development, and hydrographic surveys. More important was the agreement pertaining to the lease of Assumption Island for the development of its infrastructure. This will enable India to keep a close vigil over any Chinese warships in the area. Apart from these agreements, Modi inaugurated the Coastal Surveillance Radar System to enhance India's maritime capabilities. Further, India has plans to set up more Coastal Surveillance Radar Systems in Mauritius, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.<sup>44</sup> Highlighting India's push for regional integration, Modi stated, "We also hope that Seychelles will soon be a full partner in the maritime security cooperation between India, Maldives and Sri Lanka."<sup>45</sup>

First, India needs to further elevate, strengthen, and deepen its security cooperation with regional partners such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius, as well as the United States, Japan, and Australia, to protect its core security interests in the Indian Ocean.

Second, India needs to develop hard and soft power resources to ensure its maritime security and to be able to deal with any contingent situation that might arise from any future Sino-US conflict in the South China Sea. Moreover, India must expand its strategic foothold in multilateral fora and organizations. Today, with the exponential development of modern weaponry, unprecedented communications technology, and vast intelligence resources, maritime threats have amplified. For India, the IOR is a "nerve center" for its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Third, any quadripartite partnership of India, Japan, the United States, and Australia should not be exclusively focused on isolating China as some kind of pariah state. Rather, China must be engaged as a cooperative partner in the process of negotiations to resolve mutual differences in the spirit of protecting the global commons.

Fourth, if the Chinese threat to India's maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region is to be staved off, India is required to develop a multipronged strategy of maintaining its constant maritime vigilance in the IOR by inte-

grating its army, air force, and navy in fuller cooperation and coordination with the central and state governments.

Fifth, India's focus should be on ratcheting up the security of SLOCs and resource management. Finally, India will need to undertake defense infrastructure projects in the Indian Ocean as an effective counterweight to China's much-hyped strategic encirclement of India through the "string of pearls" doctrine.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Though China's BRI project sounds alluring and appealing, its long-term implications for aid recipients' economies have not been evaluated. A festering unrest has surfaced among Central Asian states that do not perceive gainful returns in view of the BRI's hidden agenda to promote and consolidate China's political and strategic ends, that is, the accretion of Chinese political and economic influence in BRI partner countries. Though the debt liability has created anti-China domestic lobbies in Central Asia and South Asia, the Beijing government claims that there are no political strings attached to its loans and grants unlike the practices of the Bretton Woods institutions. But this is not true in entirety. Fearing an unprecedented debt burden, as alerted by the World Bank and the IMF, Sierra Leone is the first African country to have canceled in October 2018 the BRI-funded \$318-million airport.<sup>47</sup>

One might recall that President Xi Jinping launched the BRI project for productive use of \$3 trillion capital reserves to address structural issues, sustain and expand economic growth, and protect jobs in strategic sectors. If this mega project delivers goods in terms of economic growth and moderate prosperity in Chinese society, it will not only reinforce the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) legitimacy but also consolidate President Jinping's firm grip over the party cadre and the country.

If seen from a broader perspective, BRI entails an array of benefits to China. First, if the BRI is successfully implemented, it will increase China's "global assertiveness." Second, the Sino-Russian strategic tie-up is likely to constrain US naval activities in the Indian Ocean. Third, India's reservations over the CPEC will not deter China from advancing its myriad interests in the Indian Ocean, Gulf region, and the Arabian Sea. In effect, India and the United States will be unable to restrict China's maritime influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Fourth, China's deepening strategic ties with North Korea and Pakistan, including Russia, might render the United States' Asia pivot ineffectual. Also, the liberal international order will further weaken with the Trump administration's tariff regime, based on economic protectionism, accounting for \$60 billion tariffs on Chinese exports to America. In

retaliation, China slapped tariffs on US goods. Thus, the trade Cold War between the world's two largest economies has ominous implications for the global financial market. Finally, the BRI's geopolitical ramifications will be calamitous for India and the rim countries in the Indian Ocean region.

The underlying motive behind BRI is to enhance China's "economic and political leverage" in shaping the contours of global affairs. Jinping's proactive diplomacy, as manifest from his frequent foreign visits, is aimed at ensuring global financial integration and trade liberalization as the mantra for China's economic development and prosperity. The fact is that China's emergence from land power to sea power has fueled its political ambition not only to dominate the East Asian maritime theater but also to expand its strategic foothold in Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa through the Silk Road diplomacy.

India and China will remain strategic rivals due to their competing energy and security interests in the Indian Ocean region. By logical extension, India will need to improve its maritime infrastructure and upgrade its naval capabilities. Mere drum beating under the Act East Policy will not deliver the goods since India is faced with divergent maritime threats and challenges of a vast scale, magnitude, and intensity to its maritime borders and its energy security. For that, India needs solid cooperation from its regional partners. But cooperative security mechanisms cannot be developed unless there is a convergence of perceptions on common regional security interests among regional and extra-regional powers. Moreover, India needs to build strong and enduring ties with liberal democratic states such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. At the same time, Indian policy makers will have to make it absolutely clear that such partnerships are not directed against China. Also, India and its partners should not remain under an illusion to contain China since the latter has already established itself as a global power.

Rather, China needs to be fully co-opted into the evolving global and regional security architecture. Achieving that goal will better serve common interests of all states, including China, in a cooperative security mechanism.<sup>48</sup>

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## *Chapter Four*

# **The Trump Administration's Af-Pak Policy in South Asia**

### *Retreat or Reengagement?*

Afghanistan has virtually proved to be a Waterloo for the United States ever since President George W. Bush launched the global war on terrorism following the 9/11 tragedy.<sup>1</sup> The arrogant and self-assured America was caught off guard when the al-Qaeda terrorist group dared attack the “impregnable United States.” President Bush, though immeasurably shaken up psychologically, announced Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7, 2001, to decimate the Taliban and the al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden—the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. The Bush administration was upbeat over US forces’ swift victory over the Taliban, dislodging it from power in Kabul. Also, it was able to galvanize an unconditional succor of the international community against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. However, as fate would have it, the US mission of ending the terror remains unfulfilled as yet, even though its troops shed much blood in the Afghan war. Moreover, President Trump’s abrupt decision in the third week of December 2018 to withdraw half of US troops from Afghanistan has sent chills to the Pentagon and Kabul, fearing disastrous consequences for the internal security and political stability in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup>

One might recall that during intensive election campaigns, Donald Trump played up Americans’ sentiments by highlighting abysmal failures of the preceding administration, for instance, in defeating the Taliban and *jihadi* elements. He underlined that America fought the longest foreign war in its history, and left no stone unturned to grill the Obama administration’s colossal failure to end the war despite enormous investment in terms of blood and material resources. Trump vowed to pull out US troops from Afghanistan

upon being elected as the president. He later conceded that “realities of life” in the White House changed his perception on the issue. Driven by geopolitical realism, Trump committed more US troops to Afghanistan to prevent the comeback of the Taliban regime. Over a period of time, the Trump administration recognized that it was a Herculean task to defeat the Taliban, and was, therefore, forced to hold secret talks with the Taliban in Qatar.

Given the above backdrop, this chapter critically examines President Trump’s Af-Pak policy that he comprehensively outlined for the first time in August 2017. It also addresses inherent complexities and internal contradictions of the Af-Pak region to illuminate the impending challenges, and to evaluate policy options to end the Afghan war.

President Donald Trump was saddled with an intractable Afghan issue that he inherited from his predecessor. Having gauged its gravity, he committed four thousand additional American troops to win the war in Afghanistan. Rather, “in a surprise move President Trump claimed that a withdrawal of personnel would leave a power vacuum that [could] be filled by terrorists, as has happened in Iraq.”<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, the apocalyptic predicament facing Afghanistan is likely to assume an uglier shape with the Taliban’s firm resolve to mount the deadliest offensive against the local regime and foreign troops. How will the Trump administration deal with such a complex and murky situation? While addressing at the Fort Myer military base in Arlington on August 21, 2017, President Trump frankly acknowledged the paramount role of Pakistan in dealing with the Taliban as well as in eliminating terrorists’ safe havens. He said, “Pakistan has much to gain from partnering with our effort in Afghanistan. It has much to lose by continuing to harbor terrorists.”<sup>4</sup>

Irrespective of his fine-tuned statements, President Trump, known for his mercurial temperament, gives an impression to world chanceries as if America has no distinct and coherent Afghan policy, punctuated by his strategic capriciousness. It gives an easy handle to his foes to exploit the situation and discredit Trump in the eyes of the world community. Most importantly, President Trump’s “America First” policy, premised on his zero-sum logic as well as his insistence on redistribution of financial burden, has contributed to undermining the US credibility among its European allies and partners. In the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members’ perception, Trump’s policies toward his foes and friends are far from realism. To them, Trump flirts with foes like North Korea and Russia, and clashes with friends like Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France that struggle hard to “conceal their disdain for Trump’s populist impulses and brutish manner.”<sup>5</sup>

The initial evidence suggests that Trump’s reorientation of the US policy strategy to make “America great again” has catalyzed the emergence of a strategic front led by China, Russia, and Iran. How will the Trump administration and its core team be able to articulate an efficacious and well-coordi-

nated strategy to ensure internal security and promote economic development in Afghanistan?

## A SYNOPTIC BACKGROUND TO THE AFGHAN IMBROGLIO

This section examines the US policy muddle in Afghanistan during the Bush and Obama administrations, marked by contrary pulls of the domestic constituency favoring an early withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan on the one hand and the White House support for committing more troops to defeat the Taliban on the other.

### **The Bush Administration (2001–2008)**

President George W. Bush launched Operation Enduring Freedom soon after the al-Qaeda's "deadliest terrorist assault" on the United States on September 11, 2001. Given its strategic location, Pakistan was inducted as a frontline ally into the US Global War on Terror to assist in decimating the Taliban and al-Qaeda's network in Afghanistan. In exchange, Pakistan received massive US military aid. Though the Taliban regime was toppled in October 2001, the spirit and morale of the Taliban could not be defeated. The top al-Qaeda leaders were neither caught nor killed in search operations during Bush's eight-year presidency. Rather, NATO forces paid a heavy toll. Over two thousand American soldiers lost their lives and thousands were injured. This unfortunate situation arose mainly on account of the complacency and a gross miscalculation on the part of American intelligence agencies. The latter had "reported that the Taliban were so decimated they no longer posed a threat . . . The American sense of victory had been so robust that the top C.I.A. specialists and elite Special Forces units who had helped liberate Afghanistan had long since moved on to the next war, in Iraq."<sup>6</sup>

What disgruntled the United States most was that even though Pakistan was accorded the status of a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA), entitling it to an unrestricted access to weapons and massive military aid, it provided safe havens to terrorist groups and jihadi elements. Further, Islamabad's dereliction of its obligation under the treaty commitment over taking efficacious measures against the Haqqani network produced an unbridgeable mistrust between the United States and Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan was irked by the US failure to address Islamabad's genuine concern over an indiscriminate use of drones, causing deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians in the Af-Pak region. On top of it, Pakistan fumed that the United States did not even tender an apology.

President George W. Bush probably did not learn a lesson from the past setbacks suffered by British and Soviet empires in their attempts to conquer Afghanistan. In realistic terms, the Bush administration lacked a defined road-

map to wrap up its Afghan mission. Astonishingly enough, the administration, though equipped with a slew of intelligence agencies, failed to locate safe havens of terrorist groups targeting American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Similarly, US intelligence agencies were nonplussed when the 9/11 terrorist attack was carried out. In this context, Micah Zenko rightly observes in the *New York Times* that there was a fundamental misunderstanding “about the Sept. 11 attacks, where the hijackers passed undetected through border checkpoints 33 times and enjoyed the safe havens of southern Maryland, San Diego and Oklahoma City.”<sup>7</sup> This apart, the Bush administration did not know how to fulfill its mission in Afghanistan.

### **The Obama Administration**

Soon after assuming the office in the White House on January 20, 2009, President Barack Obama undertook his first official visit to the Middle East. While speaking from Cairo University in June 2009, he gave a loud message to the entire Muslim community that America was not their enemy. He is the first ever American president to have suggested the two-nation solution, indispensable for bringing permanent peace and stability in the region. His solution was based on coexistence of an independent Palestine alongside an independent Israel. Further, he laid down his foreign policy priorities very clearly. His “original foreign policy vision” was to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan. His administration carried forward the Afghan legacy of the preceding administration, albeit with a difference in style and approach. President Obama set “clear metrics” to review the Afghan situation in the backdrop of inadvertent strategic errors and policy fallacies committed by the Bush administration. In this regard, Kori Schake, then fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, writes:

[President Obama] outlined the resources necessary to carry it out: additional troops; greater participation by non-military departments; focus on training Afghan security forces; strengthening Afghan and Pakistani institutions of government; 5-year assistance packages for both countries; routine, high-level trilateral consultations with Afghanistan and Pakistan; creation of a Contact Group of neighbors and contributors; and trying to separate reconcilable from irreconcilables among the bad guys. Obama said he will set clear metrics to gauge progress, which is important and should be gotten underway fast.<sup>8</sup>

President Obama’s “long term goal” was to pull out US troops from Afghanistan. But in order to stabilize the internal situation in Afghanistan, he committed to increasing the number of US troops in Afghanistan in December 2009 with a multipronged strategy of controlling the Taliban, enlisting Pakistan’s logistic and intelligence support, and prioritizing economic development and prosperity for the people of Afghanistan. In his several National

Security Council meetings in 2015, Obama candidly shared his thoughts with key members of the Council that despite spending billions of dollars in an indefinitely prolonged war in Afghanistan, and losing more than two thousand American lives, America could not “transform Afghanistan into a semblance of a democracy able to defend itself.”<sup>9</sup> He, however, added that “the United States could not afford to walk away and allow the country to become a seedbed for extremists again.”<sup>10</sup>

Hoping against his hope to end the war in Afghanistan, Obama grew reluctant to commit more US forces in the war-prone countries like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, though he favored a “just war” in Afghanistan to bring the perpetrators of 9/11 to justice. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, acquiesced into the ground reality that America was losing more soldiers in the “bloody debacle” in the face of the resurgent Taliban. After long internal debates over the Afghan situation by Bruce Riedel, an intelligence analyst, President Obama agreed to send thirty thousand additional troops to Afghanistan. But his “strict time frame” to complete the withdrawal of US troops in July 2011 did not work.<sup>11</sup>

Also, Obama was intrinsically convinced that the “counterinsurgency” model might not work in Afghanistan. He firmly believed that military “can win wars and stabilize conflicts. But a military can’t create a political culture or build a society.”<sup>12</sup> Further in March 2009, General John Craddock, a senior NATO military commander in the Bush administration, stated that the coalition had failed to win the war against the “resurgent Taliban.” The Obama administration felt compelled to work out an alternative strategy of reaching out to the moderate Taliban in Afghanistan. US allies like France also realized that the military means were not a feasible solution to ending the Afghan war. Nor was the “Western style” of democracy found viable for implementation in Afghanistan. Psychologically, America’s allied partners got disillusioned with the toughest war in Afghanistan’s formidable terrains. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown who had committed 8,300 soldiers in Afghanistan, the largest European contingent, turned down President Obama’s request for committing more troops to Afghanistan. It may be recalled that in early 2009, President Obama ordered 17,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, an approximately 50 percent increase in over 36,000 troops already deployed. Besides, there were additional 30,000 foreign troops under the NATO command. But these combined forces could not prevent Taliban’s resurgence due to the fast changing security dynamics in Afghanistan and Pakistan. General McKiernan felt that Afghanistan would not be won by military power alone. “We’re not going to run out of people that either international forces or Afghan forces have to kill or capture,” he said. “It’s going to be ultimately a political solution.”<sup>13</sup> General McKiernan, time and again, cautioned that “the insurgency will not win in Afghanistan,”

and added that the “failed history of the British and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan should not be a predictor of America’s future in the country.”<sup>14</sup>

At one point in time, the Obama administration went to the extent of embracing an appeasement policy toward moderate elements in the Taliban faction. Obama underscored the imperative of opening the dialogue with them to end the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan. His initiative for reconciliation with the moderate Taliban was perhaps out of frustration—he was convinced that America could not win the war in Afghanistan. That policy made the Taliban more obstinate and resolute. Obama’s policy paralysis reflected from his inane formula, that is, to initiative peace dialogue with the “good Taliban.” The good-bad terrorist dyad made the United States appear as a despondent power, searching in vain to win the war without hope. Instead of fighting terrorism with a single-minded grit and determination, America got stuck in a meaningless debate over good terrorists versus bad terrorists, making itself the laughing stock in the eyes of the world community.

Despite Obama’s reiterated assurances to the American people that the “tide of war” was receding, he was unable to bring the Afghan war to an end during his two-term presidency, ending in January 2017. The war weariness left Obama with no other choice than not to commit American military engagements overseas. And NATO forces were also totally jaded on account of the prolonged operations in inhospitable terrains as well as the invincible resolve of warlords and mujahedeen. Paul D. Miller comments:

NATO has been strained badly by the war and almost certainly will not attempt another out-of-area operation for the foreseeable future. Ongoing instability in Afghanistan risks spilling over into Pakistan, a highly dangerous scenario . . . The failure to foster effective governance in Afghanistan means that transnational drug traffickers effectively have free run of a large swath of South Asia. The U.S. and Afghan failure to reign in corruption has tarnished democracy’s reputation both in the country and beyond it.<sup>15</sup>

On the question of prioritizing US ties with Pakistan, the 2010 Task Force Report sponsored by the Council on Foreign Affairs made specific recommendations to the Obama administration that it should liberally contribute to its “economic stability.” It recommended:

the United States should maintain current levels of economic and technical assistance to help military and civilian leaders reconstruct and establish control over areas hard-hit by the flood, including those contested by militant forces . . . To build Pakistani support for the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, the United States must move rapidly to implement high-profile assistance projects and should also reach out on a sustained basis to nontraditional allies in Pakistani society, including business interests, educators, local media, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>16</sup>



Pertaining to the US-Afghanistan relationship, the Task Force Report suggested to the Obama administration to encourage political reforms in Afghanistan, involving local and provincial leaders and political parties to help deal with the chronic problem of corruption and underdevelopment. To achieve American "security aims" at a lower cost, the Report recommended to the administration "to shift a greater burden to Afghan partners."<sup>17</sup> It further noted, "The present U.S. campaign requires a wider base of local and national political support than the Karzai government and its institutions are able to deliver . . . To address this major obstacle to stability, the United States should encourage an initiative with three complementary elements: political reform, national reconciliation, and regional diplomacy."<sup>18</sup>

The Report was allegedly said to be sympathetic to Pakistan in its assessment, praising Pakistani role in curbing terror groups, operating on the Afghan and Pakistani soil. The Report hinted at as to why Pakistan found it hard to defeat terrorism and insurgency across its border. It explained:

First, in Pakistan, terrorists find communities of sympathizers among a public that, for decades, has been inundated with extremist rhetoric and ideology. Islamist parties and sectarian groups are active throughout Pakistan's cities and institutions of higher education. Tribes along the Afghan border have offered sanctuary and support to terrorists for reasons of shared antipathy to the United States and its allies.<sup>19</sup>

Undoubtedly, neither the Bush nor the Obama administration was able to address the fast deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, emanating from Pakistan's terrorist groups. Both the administrations were taken in by Pervez Musharraf's repeatedly bluffing to bring terrorists to justice. On the contrary, Pakistan transferred a portion of American aid to the Taliban. Also, the latter was accused of providing safe havens to extremist elements, including al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden who was hiding in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad. It was reported that the "al-Qaeda chief was tracked down after a 10-year manhunt to Abbottabad, a garrison town north of Islamabad where Pakistan's military academy is headquartered, sparking allegations authorities were colluding with the terror group."<sup>20</sup>

It was further revealed that Taliban leaders were stirring up violence in Afghanistan. As reported, "From Quetta, Taliban leaders including Mullah Muhammad Omar, a reclusive, one-eyed cleric, guide commanders in southern Afghanistan, raise money from wealthy Persian Gulf donors and deliver guns and fresh fighters to the battlefield, according to Obama administration and military officials."<sup>21</sup> Consequently, US military efforts to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda were thwarted. In other words, NATO partners' lackluster approach dampened the morale of the Obama administration, though President Obama put forth his best efforts to help bring the internal security and stability prior to the exit of US forces from Afghanistan. The Taliban

leaders clearly sensed that the United States and NATO forces were psychologically exhausted to make a breakthrough in bringing about peace and stability in Afghanistan. Moreover, the lack of sincere efforts on Pakistan's part to nab the Taliban and control its home-grown terrorist groups worsened the security scenario in the region. In brief, President Obama's Af-Pak policy proved to be a disastrous failure. In this context, *The Arab News* noted:

After 16 years of war the resurgent militants show no signs of fatigue, ramping up their campaign against beleaguered government forces, underscoring rising insecurity in the war-torn country . . . Afghan police and troops—beset by a high death toll, desertions and non-existent “ghost soldiers” on the payroll—have been struggling to beat back the insurgents since US-led NATO troops ended their combat mission in December 2014.<sup>22</sup>

## THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Though President Donald Trump's South Asia policy is often characterized as indistinct and inchoate,<sup>23</sup> he announced his new Afghan and South Asia strategy on August 21, 2017, at the Fort Myer military base in Arlington, Virginia.<sup>24</sup> He expressed his unhappiness over fighting a long drawn-out war in Afghanistan without a tangible gain. He, however, reiterated his commitment to defeat terrorists and jihadists, albeit without specifying the modalities. In this regard, India's former diplomat observes that America “has spent more than \$800 billion and nearly 2,400 U.S. soldiers have lost their lives. The American people are now weary of this long war without victory—and Mr. Trump has characteristically promised, in the end, we will win!”<sup>25</sup> President Trump's anguish and frustration over the continuing impasse was obvious. He frankly conceded that

nearly 16 years after the September 11th attacks, after the extraordinary sacrifice of blood and treasure, the American people are weary of war without victory. Nowhere is this more evident than with the war in Afghanistan, the longest war in American history—17 years. I share the American people's frustration. I also share their frustration over a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy, money, and most importantly lives, trying to rebuild countries in our own image instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations.<sup>26</sup>

Trump then unveiled “the broad strokes of a new U.S. strategy” for the Afghan war. He asked his defense secretary and the national security team to work out “strategic options” in Afghanistan and South Asia. Trump also authorized former Defense Secretary James Mattis to deploy an additional four thousand troops to Afghanistan. He underlined “the core pillar” of the strategy: “Conditions on the ground—not arbitrary timetables—will guide

our strategy from now on. America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out. I will not say when we are going to attack, but attack we will."<sup>27</sup> He outlined core interests of the United States in Afghanistan, which included defeating terrorists in Afghanistan. He further stated in his speech on August 21, 2017:

Today 20 U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and Pakistan—the highest concentration in any region anywhere in the world. For its part, Pakistan often gives safe haven to agents of chaos, violence, and terror. The threat is worse because Pakistan and India are two nuclear-armed states whose tense relations threaten to spiral into conflict. And that could happen. No one denies that we have inherited a challenging and troubling situation in Afghanistan, and South Asia. But we do not have the luxury of going back in time and making different or better decisions.<sup>28</sup>

From his above speech, it is clear that Trump realized it very well that US troops were indispensable, with no deadlines, to help maintain the internal security and political stability against the Taliban's potential threat. Though President Abdul Ghani welcomed the Trump administration's firm help and support to Afghanistan, the rise of ISIS in Afghanistan contributed to the hitherto worsening internal security situation there. For the administration, it will be a new experience to deal with the ISIS and Taliban together, though not as cohesive as it was in previous American administrations. Besides, Trump's bracketing Pakistan with North Korea and Iran has fueled the anti-US hysteria in Pakistan. The new government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan has given clear hints that his government's priority will be to repair the fractured ties with the United States. The Trump administration needs to articulate a clear roadmap to deal with the Imran-led government. Irrespective of any government in power, Pakistani military elites understand it well that American troops would remain ever dependent on Pakistan logistically. It should be noted that Pakistan has already constricted movements of US troops on its soil. In this regard, it is difficult to agree with Harsh Pant's assessment that, "It is now for New Delhi to effectively leverage the positive trend in America's South Asia policy—not only for its own interests but also for the greater good of its regional friends such as Afghanistan."<sup>29</sup> It is not clear as to how India can benefit from the "positive trend" in the Trump administration's South Asia policy. It needs to be underlined that America embraced India when its power and influence were on the wane. This became evident from its old Non-NATO military ally Pakistan's U-turn from the United States and concomitantly bolstering its strategic ties with Beijing, and establishing military and defense cooperation with Moscow. Therefore, India need not be overjoyed that Trump rejected Pakistan and embraced India within its strategic fold. India must understand the logic of power.

In any case, the Trump administration has made it unambiguously clear to Pakistan that it must no longer harbor terrorism as an instrument of its state policy to consolidate its presence in Afghanistan. President Trump underlined that his Afghan strategy was “a stark break with the Obama administration, arguing that while his predecessor set artificial timetables for American involvement in Afghanistan, his strategy would be a comprehensive, conditions-based regional approach that would aim for a political solution there.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the Trump administration is likely to be firmer in executing its Afghan strategy once the administration is convinced that the failure of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan was due to Pakistan’s overt and covert support to terrorist groups. In this scenario, Pakistan will suffer on several counts. First, the US military and economic aid would be directly connected to transparency in Pakistan’s security role in curbing the Taliban’s influence in Afghanistan. Second, there would be no subsidies in sales of military hardware to Pakistan. Third, America will want to ensure whether its economic aid for modernization of *madrassas* in Pakistan is fruitfully utilized. Trump further explained that the United States would put “significant pressure” on Pakistan “to crack down on the terrorist sanctuaries that line its border with Afghanistan.”<sup>31</sup>

## THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND PAKISTAN

The Trump administration’s commitment to assign India a greater role in Afghanistan on the one hand and threatening Pakistan with revoking its major non-NATO ally (MNNA) status on the other hand will not only make Pakistan more obstinate to defy US dictates but will also encourage it to deepen and solidify its strategic partnerships with China, Russia, and Iran. As noted in a commentary, “And so, Pakistan won’t make any significant changes to its foreign policy on Afghanistan, regardless of U.S. ultimatums. Nevertheless, to try to pre-empt more pressure from Washington, Pakistan will attempt a fragile rapprochement with Afghanistan.”<sup>32</sup>

If we recall, Donald Trump during election campaigns lambasted the Obama administration for its soft policy toward Pakistan, saying that the administration did not take punitive measures against Pakistan even though the latter did not give full-fledged support to the US Afghan mission. Ironically, soon after assuming the office, Trump virtually observed a stoic silence without laying down a distinct US policy toward South Asia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. After more than one and a half years, Trump unveiled a new strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan on August 21, 2017. Underlining one of the pillars of that strategy, Trump stated: “We can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe-havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond.”<sup>33</sup> He clearly

stated that US interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan lay in stopping “the resurgence of safe havens that enable terrorists to threaten America.” Trump acknowledged that Pakistan was “a valued partner” in the past in dealing with “common enemies,” but he underlined that Pakistan had provided a safe haven to the terrorists.<sup>34</sup> In his words:

The Pakistani people have suffered greatly from terrorism and extremism. We recognize those contributions and those sacrifices. But Pakistan has also sheltered the same organizations that try every single day to kill our people. We have been paying Pakistan billions and billions of dollars. At the same time, they are housing the very terrorists that we are fighting. But that will have to change. And that will change immediately. No partnership can survive a country's harbouring of militants and terrorists who target U.S. service members and officials. It is time for Pakistan to demonstrate its commitment to civilization, order, and to peace.<sup>35</sup>

As though his anger at Pakistan did not subside, President Trump in his tweet on January 1, 2018, overtly regretted that the United States had “foolishly” dispensed to Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the past 15 years, while Pakistan gave back “lies and deceit” by giving sanctuary to “the terrorists we [Americans] hunt in Afghanistan with little help.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Cutting Aid**

Following up on the anti-Pakistan tirade, the Trump administration's aid philosophy was redefined with harsher terms. President Trump took upon himself the charge of reevaluating American aid to Pakistan. Accordingly, his first punitive step was to temporarily suspend \$255 million in military aid to Pakistan. Attributing the move to Pakistan's double game or its hoodwinking tactics, Nikki Haley, the former US Ambassador to the United Nations, said, “They [Pakistan] work with us at times, and they also harbor the terrorists that attack our troops in Afghanistan. That game is not acceptable to this administration. We expect far more cooperation from Pakistan in the fight against terrorism.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sternly warned Pakistan that it might lose the “major non-NATO ally” (MNNA) status by continuing to provide safe haven to Afghan terror groups. Notably, this status entitles Pakistan to access “some advanced US military technology banned from other countries.”<sup>38</sup> Secretary Tillerson further stated that America would not hesitate to stop economic, military, and security aid to Pakistan. Already in 2017, it withheld \$350 million in military funding to Pakistan for not making sincere and adequate efforts to fight terror.

One might recollect that the Obama administration had substantially cut off American aid to Pakistan as the year 2011 was the peak year for the

economic and military assistance worth more than \$3.5 billion. But later on, the US Congress heavily slashed the quantum of aid, below \$1 billion in 2016. In the same year, the Congress blocked sale of eight additional F-16s to Islamabad, citing the latter's continuing support for the Taliban and Haqqani Network.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, in June 2017, Republican Congressman Ted Poe and Democrat Congressman Rick Nolan introduced a bipartisan bill to revoke the MNNA status, arguing that Pakistan did not fight terrorism effectively. Poe said that Pakistan acted as "a Benedict Arnold ally of the United States"<sup>40</sup> who defected to the British army in the eighteenth century. On a similar trajectory, the Trump administration announced the cancellation of \$300 million in aid to Pakistan on September 1, 2018. As reported, "another \$500 million in CSF [Coalition Support Fund] was stripped by Congress from Pakistan earlier this year [2018]."<sup>41</sup>

President Trump further hinted at taking a more stringent measure of cutting off aid to Pakistan from international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. Pakistan is currently reeling under a severe foreign currency crisis. At this juncture, China and Saudi Arabia have come to its rescue by agreeing to an emergency bailout.

For Pakistan, the US economic aid is essential for upgrading its agriculture, energy and health sectors. But the fundamental question is whether cutting off aid or revoking Pakistan's MNNA status will force Pakistan to change its policy stance on terrorism or downsize its nuclear arsenal. It is important to bear in mind that the United States does not enjoy political leverage to pressure Pakistan to comply with American dictates. In the face of US aid cuts, the latter has continued to diversify its arms procurement sources. China has already been Pakistan's traditional defense partner, providing it with massive arms and building its nuclear and missile building capabilities. Further, in 2014, Russia lifted arms embargo against Pakistan and delivered it Mi-35 attack helicopters. In view of these developments, the Trump administration's harsh punitive measures against Pakistan might encourage it to embrace China more tightly. Also, one need not forget that Pakistan holds geopolitical primacy for America to offset the interventionist role of its rivals—China and Iran—in Afghanistan. Zaidi observes:

President Trump's speech has only aggravated the concerns that motivate Pakistan's behavior in Afghanistan. Mr. Trump's call for greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan has stoked the fire that burns deepest in Pakistan. On this, it is not the Pakistanis who are irrational but those who attempt to minimize Pakistan's concerns. Pakistan would not risk the wrath of the United States if its concerns were imaginary.<sup>42</sup>

Despite negative narratives about Pakistan, the Trump administration cannot afford to carry out its missions in Afghanistan without fastening Pakistan as a frontline state to the US strategic schema. Interestingly, Pakistan's strategic

location has always proved a boon for it whenever a conflictual situation occurs in Afghanistan, as manifest from inflow of US billions of dollars into Pakistan despite Congressional opposition. No US administration can afford to fully cease American aid to Pakistan as the latter's logistical and intelligence support is indispensable. A strategic analyst observes, "There is almost no scenario where the US can achieve its objectives in Afghanistan without the support of the Pakistan military. This is partly on account of the porous Durand Line and partly the logistics-heavy requirements of the US military, which makes supplies through Pakistan (in the absence of an alternative route) indispensable."<sup>43</sup>

US-Pakistan relations under the new government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan have raised some hopes for improvement in their relationship. Soon after winning the election, Khan said that he would seek "better relations with the United States after a series of aid cuts and the suspension of US military training."<sup>44</sup> The Trump administration also expressed its desire for constructive engagement with Pakistan. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in his phone call to Prime Minister Khan on August 23, 2018, "raised the importance of Pakistan taking decisive action against all terrorists operating in Pakistan and its vital role in promoting the Afghan peace process."<sup>45</sup> But Pakistan's foreign ministry disowned what Pompeo had said on the phone call. It said, "There was no mention at all in the conversation about terrorists operating in Pakistan. This should be immediately corrected."<sup>46</sup> But US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert countered the Pakistani complaint, saying that "we stand by our readout [on the phone]."<sup>47</sup> The situation arising from contradictory statements on both sides is likely to give an impetus to the persisting mistrust in their hitherto strained ties.

### *Partnership with India*

Trump's next pillar of strategy is to develop a strategic partnership with India—a "key security and economic partner" of the United States. President Trump has recognized India's role as a stakeholder in Afghanistan and asked for India's help in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. But the critics say that India's direct involvement in Afghanistan's peace process would backfire for two principal reasons. First, it might disturb the strategic balance in the region, as Pakistan has been accusing India of destabilizing the region by directly supporting secessionist elements in Baluchistan, clear from Modi's clarion call for supporting Baluchistan in his Independence Day speech on August 15, 2016. Second, a China-Pakistan strategic alliance will be further consolidated to neutralize India's role and influence in Afghanistan. Trump's request for an Indian role in Afghanistan has irked Pakistan, losing a complete trust in the United States and vice-versa. Zaidi notes in this context:

Mr. Trump's call for greater Indian involvement in Afghanistan has stoked the fire that burns deepest in Pakistan. On this, it is not the Pakistanis who are irrational but those who attempt to minimize Pakistan's concerns. Pakistan would not risk the wrath of the United States if its concerns were imaginary. Pakistan's willingness to lose American patronage is the clearest indicator that its interests in Afghanistan are not a product of ambition, or grandeur, but of deep and existential fears about the damage an unchecked India can do to Pakistan.<sup>48</sup>

## Power Integration

Another highlight of President Trump's strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia is to focus on integration of all instruments of American power—diplomatic, economic, and military toward a successful outcome;<sup>49</sup> and the refusal to “be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban and other groups that pose a threat.”<sup>50</sup> However, such bold claims are a disconnect from reality. President Trump has not given a free hand to his close aides and advisors to produce and articulate a well-coordinated approach to deal with the new challenges to the US diplomacy, which is bereft of a distinct direction to its Af-Pak policy. There is no clearly defined policy as to how President Trump would produce a “new leverage” vis-à-vis Pakistan that has rejected the US strategy to resolving the Afghan imbroglio. On the contrary, the emerging strategic alliance between Russia, China, and Iran on the one hand and between Pakistan, Russia, and China on the other hand is assuming a new shape to establish a strategic beachhead in Afghanistan.

The Trump administration seems to be either oblivious of emerging strategic developments or appears to be shaky on regaining the US leverage over Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pitiably, there was more rhetoric in Trump's speech than a clearly defined pathway for a complete withdrawal of US troops. He said that from now on “victory will have a clear definition. Attacking our enemies, obliterating ISIS, crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.”<sup>51</sup> How? President Trump is not clear whether he prefers the regional stability or protection of American troops or elimination of the Taliban. There is neither a strategy nor a specific roadmap to achieve the stipulated objectives there.

## INDIA'S ROLE AND OPTIONS

India's Afghanistan policy is guided by its “enlightened national interests” that demand how to prevent Afghanistan from becoming Pakistan's client state. India's core security and economic interests will be better served provided that New Delhi's strategic engagement with Kabul remains intact even after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. It may be noted that



India is Afghanistan's key partner in developing its infrastructure, training its army and security forces, and building its civilian capacity. As noted in the *Huffington Post*:

India is today the largest regional donor and fifth largest global donor to Afghanistan with over \$3 billion in assistance. India offers 1000 annual scholarships to Afghan students, and has trained over 4000 Afghan military officers. New Delhi has helped construct key infrastructure inside Afghanistan from roads and highways (Zaranj-Delaram) to dams (Salma dam) and the Afghan parliament building. India has also built hospitals at Frarkhor and Kabul and donated wheat to feed schoolchildren in Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup>

On the contrary, Pakistan's policy has been to deny India the strategic space in Afghanistan for a variety of reasons. First, Pakistan's lurking fear is that India's expanding role in Afghanistan's economic reconstruction and internal security structure might further curtail a Pakistani grip over Kabul. On the other hand, Pakistani intelligence agencies are alleged to have intensified carrying attacks against India's diplomatic personnel as well as its workers tasked with development activities in Afghanistan in order to prevent India's increasing economic and security engagement there.

Second, Pakistan is highly suspicious of India's role in fomenting separatism in its Baluchistan province. Third, to perpetuate control over the civilian government Pakistan's military elites have been projecting India as a core security threat to their country's national security. However, to attribute the congenital hostility between India and Pakistan to the British legacy is not fair. To hold the British legacy responsible for all problematic issues is a well-calculated and well-orchestrated artificial construct by both India and Pakistan to cover up their governance failure in delivering goods to the people.

One thing is clear that India's options will be considerably curtailed after US troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. There are two main reasons. First, India has no reliable friends in the region to bank upon their solid support, whereas China has an enduring strategic partnership with Pakistan to serve its myriad interests in the region. Second, America's own limitations will scarcely permit it a free hand to do much for India once it leaves Afghanistan once for all. C. Christine Fair, a South Asia expert, has expressed consternation that while the United States may not be able to balance "its interests among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, India too is experiencing its own limitation in the very region over which it claims hegemony."<sup>53</sup>

India needs to be circumspect about charting its own course of action while dealing with Afghanistan in the altered geostrategic scenario, especially when China, Russia, and Pakistan are all set to fashion and reshape their new strategy of coordinating their military, political, economic, and strategic resources. Pakistan is no longer alone. It has cemented ties with Russia by

concluding an agreement on military cooperation. Thus, it is a clear signal to India that it should be ready to face the consequences for its strategic hobnobbing with Japan as is evident from announcing the joint Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to counter China's OBOR. Also, China and Pakistan are deadly opposed to President Donald Trump's new strategy of involving India as a reliable strategic partner in Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup>

Undoubtedly, Russia and China do not like India's coming strategically closer to the United States and Japan. Putin and Jinping expect that India will maintain a nuanced balance in its relationship with Tokyo and Washington vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing given the fact that India is one of the key partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS). Perhaps Modi's "over enthusiastic gestures" toward Japan and the United States overlook the basic norm of maintaining the balanced relationship with great powers.<sup>55</sup> In this scenario, what is important for India and the United States is to coordinate their strategies in Afghanistan to ensure political stability and internal security there while anticipating the impending reconfiguration of radical elements in the new Afghanistan. One critic aptly noted:

India, in close coordination with the US and its allies, could spearhead the development agenda in Afghanistan. While India has been doing this bilaterally and in a limited way through triangular cooperation with the US (where the US funds training of Afghan police in India), it needs to step up its game. New Delhi needs to play a bridging development role with Western donor countries, which it is reluctant to do. Such an initiative would secure India's development assistance and investment, and also ensure the sustainable development of Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The changing power configurations in the region have constrained US options in Afghanistan, as is evident from the emerging strategic alliance of Russia, Iran, China, and Pakistan. Undoubtedly, the Trump administration's lambasting of Pakistan for providing safe haven to terror groups clearly reflects that the United States does not consider Pakistan its reliable ally. Rather, the administration considers Pakistan a "duplicitous partner," which, in its perception, has hoodwinked the United States by doing nothing against terrorist groups and Haqqani network, despite receiving massive American aid. The United States is also disgruntled over a secret strategic pact between Beijing and Islamabad to weaken US-India efforts toward peace reconciliation in Afghanistan. Given this, the Trump administration needs to concentrate its efforts on meeting the impending challenges that involve high risks for America. They can be explained below.

First, it is suggested that the Trump administration focus on a complete elimination of the Haqqani network and Taliban elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an imperative for restoring internal security and promoting peace and development there. For this, the administration has not yet come out with a distinct roadmap to garner the support of the local people and like-minded forces to put up a stiff resistance to the resurgent Taliban. But at the same time, the administration's political woes are further compounded by the proactive role of major powers such as Russia, China, and Iran.

Second, the Trump administration's threat to withdraw the "major non-NATO ally" status to Pakistan or declare it as a sponsor of state terror is not likely to work since the United States has virtually lost the strategic leverage over Islamabad.

Third, the Trump administration needs to do an intensive introspection about what has gone wrong with the US Af-Pakistan strategy to deal with Pakistan whose intelligence and logistic support is indispensable for bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. Moreover, the administration has not been able to understand the complexity of the region in terms of ethnicity and also societal and cultural values of the Afghan community. As a result, the US emphasis on finding a military solution did not deliver the expected result. Moreover, the United States has been unable to find an honorable pathway for an early exit from Afghanistan.

Fourth, the suspension of American aid to Pakistan is a short-sighted and ill-fated decision as a pressure tactic to compel Islamabad to use its state resources to nab and destroy terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rather, the Trump administration needs to build on its diplomatic guts to encourage reconciliation between Afghanistan and Pakistan and simultaneously to rebuild its fractured ties with Pakistan.

Finally, the Trump administration should no longer remain under an illusion that it can ever win the war in Afghanistan. While keeping American national interest in view, the administration needs to wrap up from Afghanistan rather than get bogged down in the marsh indefinitely. However, the timing of withdrawal is critically important. It must be noted that President Trump's decision of premature withdrawal of nearly seven thousand US troops from Afghanistan at the fag-end of the year 2018 will not only escalate security risks and trigger the civil war in Afghanistan but also incentivize Russia, China, and Iran to set up a strategic beachhead in Afghanistan and Central Asia, which exposes the United States' strategic impotence.

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## *Chapter Five*

# **Russia-China-Iran Trilateral Engagement with Afghanistan**

### *Competitive Interests*

There are perhaps a few parallels in human history that Afghanistan, a landlocked multi-ethnic country, has been in the throes of one crisis after another ever since Alexander the Great invaded Afghanistan in 330 BC. In much of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan became an enigmatic victim of the “Great Game” in Central Asia between Russian and British empires, fiercely engaged in thwarting one another’s regional influence.<sup>1</sup> If seen retrospectively, the British-Afghan Wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily aimed at defending the British Empire in India to checkmate the impending expansion of Russia into India. But, as ill luck would have it, the British ambition to subdue Afghanistan was never fulfilled. However, the British managed to create an artificial Durand Line (1895–1896) between Afghanistan and Pakistan—the root cause of “countless conflicts” in the region. Struck by turbulent conditions at home, the Afghan ruler Abdur Rahman (1880–1901) pursued the policy of independence, neutrality, and non-alignment to maintain peace and stability in the country. Though conscious of a strong and powerful northern neighbor, Russia, Rahman crafted a pragmatic policy of keeping Russians at arm’s length by expanding Afghanistan’s ties with the West.

In a quest for the “Great Game” for dominance, neither Russia nor the United Kingdom was ever able to establish a sovereign control over Afghanistan. Both of them have had to eat humble pie. Without learning a lesson from the past follies of imperial powers, the Soviet Union and the United States blundered into a “hasty and ill-considered decision”<sup>2</sup> to invade Af-

ghanistan in December 1979 and October 2001 respectively. It would have been a sane, sensible, and measured step on the part of the Soviet Union and the United States to have better understood the geographical terrain and the history of Afghanistan as well as the latter's societal perceptions and cultural values, local traditions, religious affinities, and belief systems on a cost-effective calculus before jumping into the self-suicidal war in Afghanistan.

Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in February 1989, internal revulsions and convulsions along ethnic and religious divisions threw Afghanistan into a whirlpool of civil war with an ascendance of the Taliban to power in September 1996. The chaotic internal situation was further compounded when Osama bin Laden—the al-Qaeda chief—switched his loyalty to the new regime led by the Taliban until 2001.

The Taliban chief Mullah Omar provided sanctuary to bin Laden on the condition not to indulge in any such activity that might complicate Afghanistan's relations with the United States. Contrary to Omar's expectations, bin Laden, fired by religious zeal, planned to carry out the global jihad against the United States. Concomitantly, 9/11 was the culmination of bin Laden's jihadi doctrine. Soon after the US attack over Afghanistan in October 2001, bin Laden sought sanctuary in tribal areas of Pakistan. In a decade-long hunt, bin Laden was ultimately killed by a group of US Navy Seals in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011. Though it was a rare feat, credited to the political courage and firm determination of President Barack Obama, the terror network did not disappear.

Bin Laden's successor, Ayman Mohammed Rabie al-Zawahiri, reported to be hiding in Karachi, is considered a potential threat to Afghanistan's internal security and political stability. The UN Security Council designated him a top terrorist in its list, released in April 2018. The list included 139 Pakistani-based organizations, especially the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM).

Meanwhile, the jihadist group Islamic State (IS) is fast spreading its tentacles in Afghanistan, with an estimated presence of 700 fighters. Gradually, their number is swelling. Describing the situation, Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr. top NATO commander in Afghanistan, said, "By November [2017,] . . . U.S. forces had killed more than 1,600 fighters on the battlefield. . . . It's like a balloon. . . . We squeeze them in this area, and they'll try to move out elsewhere."<sup>3</sup> US forces used the "mother of all bombs" to target Islamist militants, killing its top leader Abu Syed in air strikes. But American forces could not "disrupt the terror group's plans to expand its presence in Afghanistan."<sup>4</sup> The IS jihadi group carried out high profile attacks in several parts of Afghanistan, including Kabul. The core reason behind the swift success is its familiarity with the terrain as well as the local support from the "radicalized Afghans." The security situation in Afghanistan has been further complicated by an interplay of interventionist role of extra-regional powers.<sup>5</sup>



The chapter argues that a strategic void might incentivize the trio—Russia, Iran, and China—to present a joint strategic front against the United States. It is yet to be seen whether the perceived triangle will be able to challenge the US leadership in the region. Also, the chapter critically discusses whether the Trump administration will be in a position to offset the penetration of Russia, Iran, and China into Afghanistan, primarily motivated by their shared interest in circumventing the vestigial influence of the United States. The chapter also takes into account competing perspectives on the emerging security scenario in Afghanistan in light of the Taliban's resurgence and a shrinking strategic swath of the United States in view of its European allies' reluctance to support its bizarre approach to deal with the Afghan conflict.

The chapter spells out futuristic scenarios from a realistic prism to offer an objective assessment of the Afghan dynamics, involving an array of major international actors. A proper understanding of internal and external dynamics of the region might help lay out a precise roadmap for Afghanistan. However, one need not take a philosophical view of the so-called humanitarian intervention in order to save Afghanistan from the internal shambles. Rather, their exclusive agenda is to serve their multiple interests, including security and energy ones, in Afghanistan. In the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran assessment, the United States would neither be in a position to win the war nor would it be able to stage a comeback once its troops left Afghanistan permanently. Perhaps, spurred by an illusion, Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing think that their concerted efforts might further escalate a strategic wedge between the United States and Europe, especially with the US withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Major European powers such as Germany, Great Britain, and France are strongly in favor of preserving the multinational nuclear deal in the larger interest of peace and stability in the Middle East. Notably, the growing differences between the European Union (EU) and the Trump administration have led to eroding the US leverage over the region. Against the above backdrop, the chapter offers a critique on the unfolding security architecture in the region.

### CONVERGENCE OF RUSSIAN-IRANIAN INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

It may be recalled that in the 1990s, India, Russia, and Iran shared the strategic perception that the Taliban-led Afghanistan constituted a potential internal security threat to the region. In view of their converging interests at that point of time, they extended a firm political and moral succour to the Northern Alliance (NA) to prevent the Taliban from establishing a firm control over Afghanistan. In Moscow's perception, the Taliban regime might

trigger the Chechen-led religious bigotry movement in Russia. A close cooperation between these three countries contributed to stabilizing an internal situation in Afghanistan, although with minor skirmishes along its border. To Pakistan's chagrin, India has been imparting training to the Afghan army and its defense personnel to enhance its security capacities to fight internal enemies. New Delhi also gave a free gift of four Mi-25 Russian combat helicopters to Afghanistan to build Afghan forces' offensive combat capability. In order to provide an alternate route to the sea, "bypassing Pakistan,"<sup>6</sup> New Delhi and Tehran inked a deal in March 2016 to develop the Chabahar port.

But gradually, the tripartite cooperation received some setback when Russia termed the ISIS, not the Taliban, a "bigger threat" to the region. In Moscow's perception, twenty million Muslims living in Russia have religious affinity with ISIS that might trigger the spill-over effect on its volatile North Caucasus. Russia is alarmed at the spread of the insurgency in its neighboring republics, which might jeopardize its national interests in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. Some critics observe:

Russia fears that these Russian-speaking ISIS members will set base in Afghanistan, particularly in the north, along the border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It is also feared that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has much in common with the Russian Muslims in ISIS and is already present on Afghan soil, could gravitate towards ISIS and help them secure a foothold. Russia crucially sees any organisation under the ISIS flag as a global threat.<sup>7</sup>

From the above observation it is clear that the Putin administration perceives the presence of an Islamic State in northern Afghanistan, geographically proximate to Central Asia, a potential threat to Russia's borders.

Not surprisingly, India favors a broader framework of peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan, which in effect means involving global actors in ending the Afghan conflict. It also means the Russian approach is the narrowly structured peace process, involving moderate Taliban to fight the ISIS in Afghanistan.

India entertained some misgivings about the "sustainability" of the Russia-led peace process without involving main stakeholders such as the United States. Interestingly, China is also not in favor of a complete withdrawal of US forces unless internal security is ensured in Afghanistan. In Beijing's assessment, Afghan security forces are not capable of controlling extremist groups and jihadists. As reported in *The Wire*, Beijing is

especially worried about a vacuum in Afghanistan if foreign troops were pulled out completely and how it would allow a fertile launching pad for Uyghur militants. . . . As per India's assessment, Russia's increased visibility in Afghanistan was partly to needle the Americans, but also to create a "bargaining chip" by creating a larger role for itself in the region. Moscow is also

worried more about the spread of ISIS in Afghanistan, rather than Taliban—convinced that this was a ploy by the US to keep it tied in Central Asia. Both, Afghanistan and India believe that most of the ISIS groups in Afghanistan are mainly TTP [Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan] militants—and many of them still maintain their links to the Pakistan establishment.<sup>8</sup>

In India's perception, an exclusive focus on fighting the ISIS without addressing the Taliban threat might reverse the strategic scenario in Afghanistan for two main reasons. First, the hitherto crusade against the Taliban as a global threat will turn weak in view of the fact that the Taliban has killed thousands of Afghan soldiers and civilians. Second, the international community's focus on Pakistan's role in abetting terrorism will be diverted. On the contrary, Pakistan will make a demand for more aid to respond to the ISIS menace in Afghanistan. In this murky scenario, India will have limited options. One of the feasible options before India is to tailor its Afghan policy to strategic maneuverings of Russia and Iran, essential for safeguarding its economic and security interests in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

### **Challenges before Russia**

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was faced with a gargantuan challenge of developing market economy to ensure its economic security. Initially, President Boris Yeltsin was leaning heavily toward the United States in the high hope that the latter would channel massive economic aid to Russia to bail it out from the chaotic economic situation. But his political honeymoon period with the United States ended soon when he realized that the US offer of a huge aid package was a political ploy. His advisors also counseled him to revive Moscow's ties with its old friends like Iran and India.

After the exit of Yeltsin, President Putin injected a new blood into Russia's foreign and defense policies. As a pragmatist and resolute leader, he embarked on a new strategic mission, while realizing that Russia would continue to be treated as a second-rate power unless it retrieved power and influence in the world politics. For this, Putin laid out a new foreign policy vision not only to carve out an assertive role for Russia but also to work out a pragmatic policy strategy to maintain a "balance of interests" vis-à-vis the United States. As noted, "In recent years, Russia has carried out a string of foreign policy maneuvers in the Middle East designed to bring political and economic gains and to position Russia as a key player in future conflict resolutions."<sup>10</sup>

For this, Putin began cultivating relations with the United States' arch adversaries such as Iran, Syria, Libya, and the extremist and radical organizations in Afghanistan. Russia's direct military intervention in Syria was an open challenge to the United States that Moscow was a die-hard opponent to

the idea of the regime change in Syria—the first condition of the United States for launching the peace process in Syria. This apart, Putin went ahead to militarily annex Crimea from Ukraine in February 2014. Although economic and trade sanctions were slapped on Russia by the United States, EU, and the G-7, the annexation of Crimea proved to be a huge psychological boost to President Putin.<sup>11</sup> Since then Russia has been aggressively pursuing an anti-West policy more as a diplomatic gambit and political stratagem to demonstrate that Russia is all set to play a decisive and assertive role in global politics.<sup>12</sup>

In a swift strategic move, Russia came down heavily on President Trump's threat of the US withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, endorsed by the Obama administration. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphatically stated in August 2017 that it was pity that “the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump was casting doubt on the 2015 deal to curtail Iran's nuclear weapons programme.”<sup>13</sup>

It may be recalled that President Trump told the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2017, that “Iran was building its missile capability and accused it of exporting violence to Yemen, Syria and other parts of the Middle East. . . . He criticized a 2015 pact that the United States and other world powers struck with Iran under which Tehran agreed to restrict its nuclear program in return for relief from economic sanctions.”<sup>14</sup>

Iran justified its carrying out of the Khorramshahr ballistic missile test on September 22, 2017, with a range of two thousand kilometers, arguing that the test would ensure its national security vis-à-vis its adversaries. Iranian authorities reiterated that they would not stop building missiles. In response to it, the United States imposed unilateral sanctions on Iran on the ground that its missile test violated the UN resolution. Though the UN observed that Iran's missiles were capable of delivering nuclear weapons, the latter strongly denied. President Trump also tweeted that “the missile test illustrates the weakness of the Iran nuclear deal reached by his predecessor Barack Obama. He also linked the action to recent aggressive moves by North Korea.”<sup>15</sup>

The Iranian nuclear controversy gave an easy handle to Putin to exploit the bedeviled relations between the United States and Iran with the motivation to come strategically closer to Iran. In addition, the Tehran-Moscow engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan gives clear hints that they are committed to reducing the American role in Afghanistan. “U.S. officials and analysts believe that hopes for peace have been undermined, particularly in recent years, by Russian and Iranian support for the Taliban. The Pakistan meeting might have presented an opportunity for an intensification of those operations.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to underscore Russian diplomats' allegations that the United States has been supporting ISIS in Afghanistan “despite an intense barrage of U.S. airstrikes targeting the terrorist group's members.”<sup>17</sup> But there is no proof about such a ludicrous allegation. On the contrary,

“Afghan regional officials have accused Iran of supporting a Taliban offensive in western Afghanistan near the Iranian border after President Trump renounced the nuclear accord with Iran in May.”<sup>18</sup>

## THE CHABAHAHAR CONTROVERSY

There are reports that Iran has invited China and Pakistan for investment in the Chabahar project, much to India’s chagrin. Though China and Pakistan are capable of manipulating the Chabahar project, India’s main concern is how to safeguard its interest in the region. Over the past couple of years, China’s strategic collaboration with Pakistan was not only to take over the operational control of the Gwadar Port, barely seventy-two kilometers away from Chabahar, but also to establish its permanent naval base there. It is not yet clear how India would respond to the implications of Chinese control over the Gwadar port to protect its energy and security interests in the Gulf region.

Interestingly, the strategic bonding between Tehran and New Delhi has recently grown more robust. Iran has also stopped supporting Pakistan on diplomatic forums to grill India on its alleged human rights violations in Kashmir. A new feather of friendship was added to India-Iran ties with President Hassan Rouhani’s three-day state visit to New Delhi in February 2018. He highly praised India as a “living museum of religious diversity.”<sup>19</sup> The New Delhi-Tehran relationship got a new “political impulse,” with leasing out of the Chabahar port to India for eighteen months. But some strategic analysts in India are skeptical about the bridging of the hitherto psychological divide between New Delhi and Tehran.<sup>20</sup>

Prime Minister Modi described Iran as a “golden gateway” to Afghanistan and Central Asia. A total of nine agreements were signed between New Delhi and Tehran. Also, India and Iran expressed their firm resolve to defeat terrorism in the larger security interests of both countries. Simultaneously, India and Iran have apparent political differences over the Taliban issue. Iran favors political dialogue with the Taliban, whereas India opposes it.

Nevertheless, the real challenge before Indian policy makers is how to balance off India’s relations with the Middle East and the Gulf countries on the one hand, and between India and the United States, and between India and Russia on the other hand. There is common public perception in India that the Modi government’s sturdy and positive tilt toward Israel reflects from extending an extraordinarily warm welcome to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu while a similar treatment was denied to other heads of state and government from the same region. It was reported by *The Wire* that Modi was uncomfortable in giving President Rouhani a warm hug. What message does it give to Iran? In diplomacy, personal likes and dislikes have

to be carefully groomed with an utmost caution and patience. *The Wire* cautioned, “Modi’s personal ambition instead required grander optics and a scheme that could not wait for the fruits of patient diplomacy.”<sup>21</sup>

## RUSSIA-IRAN TIE-UPS

Russia-Iran relations remained topsy-turvy during the Cold War. The past legacy suggests that Russia and Iran were at loggerheads when the Tsarist Russia militarily intervened in Iran in the early twentieth century. In the 1980s, relations between them were tense. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini described the Soviet Union as “the Lesser Satan.” But with the change of guards in Iran in 1989, a positive turn occurred in their relationship. As noted:

Since 1989, however, cooperation has increased between Moscow and Tehran. Russia agreed to complete the nuclear reactor at Bushehr, which was started by the German firm Siemens during the monarchy, but stopped after the 1979 revolution. Russia also began selling weapons, including missiles, to Iran. Both countries supported the opposition Northern Alliance against the Taliban in the 1990s. And along with China, Russia tried to weaken and delay U.S. and European efforts to impose U.N. sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program.<sup>22</sup>

It merits a mention that Russia transferred military hardware to Iran that fostered a better political and strategic understanding between them. It became manifest from their convergence on supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in 1990s. According to a Pew Research Center’s poll survey, 44 percent of Russians had a “favourable view” of Iran, and 35 percent had an “unfavourable view.”<sup>23</sup>

Currently, Iran and Russia have divergent strategic objectives in Afghanistan. Considering the geographical proximity with Afghanistan, Iran considers its legitimate right to play a major role in shaping and influencing the course of events in Afghanistan as part of the fulfillment of its larger interests in the Middle East and Central Asia. In effect, Iran is deadly opposed to the presence of US troops in Afghanistan any longer, whereas Russia and China do not want an “abrupt” US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

*The Washington Post* has reported that Moscow’s “selective engagement strategy” with the Taliban is driven by its perception that it would build its image and status as a “conflict arbiter.” *The Washington Post* wrote:

Russian officials view successful collaboration with Taliban factions on counterterrorism and counter-narcotics as a useful foundation to help incorporate the leaders of these factions into a peace settlement. . . . Since December 2016, Moscow has hosted regular diplomatic talks on resolving Afghanistan’s

political crisis. These talks include direct appeals to moderate Taliban factions to participate in peace talks with the Afghan government.<sup>24</sup>

### RUSSIAN ROLE IN THE AFGHAN PEACE AND RECONCILIATION PROCESS

Over the past couple of years, Russia has been proactively engaged in Afghan affairs to play a pivotal role in shaping its future, reflecting from the hosting of talks on Afghanistan's future security. At the first security dialogue held in December 2016, Russia invited China and Pakistan, while bypassing India and Afghanistan. The Russia-led trilateral dialogue carried an added importance. First, Russia wanted to demonstrate that even without the participation of the United States and EU, it [Moscow] was capable of playing its role as a leading negotiator in security and peace deliberations on Afghanistan. Second, with its diplomatic initiative on shaping Afghanistan's future course, Moscow's loud message to world chanceries was that Russia was still at the forefront of global politics, capable of redefining the future of a complex region.<sup>25</sup>

Third, in Russian perception, the Taliban is a "legitimate stakeholder" and cannot be ignored in peace negotiations to end the Afghan conflict. Thus, Russia's direct involvement in influencing Afghanistan's security architecture is perceived as a diplomatic punch to the West, and concomitantly a big morale boost for President Putin, who is battling US sanctions. It has been rightly observed:

Moscow's involvement in Afghanistan is an extension of this strategy and now goes beyond ensuring stability on the ground. . . . Russia's increased involvement in Afghanistan includes business investment proposals, diplomatic outreach, cultural programs, and financial and military support for the central government, power brokers in the north, and the Taliban.<sup>26</sup>

Since 2016, Russia has been providing military hardware, including tens of thousands of Kalashnikov rifles, to Afghanistan. Its impact has been tremendous. Notably, Russia took a new initiative under which the six-nation dialogue was held in February 2017. Russian efforts at brokering peace in Afghanistan were looked askance, primarily because of side-lining the role of the US and NATO forces. On the contrary, the Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani wants to engage the United States in the peace negotiation process in Afghanistan. Ghani does not approve of the Russian style of brokering peace without American involvement; whereas, Putin considers Ghani a puppet in American hands. In this context, a diplomatic correspondent at *The Wire* observes, "Moscow's determination to play broker in Afghanistan faces a major stumbling block—it does not enjoy equal levels of

confidence from both sides of the Afghan conflict. While Russia largely sees the Ghani government as directly under Washington's thumb, there is also no love lost in Kabul for the Putin regime."<sup>27</sup>

An important factor in Russian policy of projecting ISIS as a bigger threat to peace and stability in Afghanistan is rooted in the Kremlin's deep seated apprehension that "Russian-speaking ISIS members will set base in Afghanistan, particularly in the north, along the border with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It is also feared that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has much in common with the Russian Muslims in ISIS and is already present on Afghan soil, could gravitate towards ISIS and help them secure a foothold."<sup>28</sup>

Though Russia and the Taliban have a shared interest in defeating the Islamic State in Afghanistan, they have not yet spelled out the specific collective action plan pertaining to addressing the increasing threat of the Islamic State. As Julia Gurganus observes, "the key point is that Moscow has established a relationship with the Taliban's leadership that it will use to boost its influence and enable peace talks."<sup>29</sup>

Afghan officials have been accusing Moscow of supporting the Taliban. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that the peace settlement in Afghanistan could not "proceed without the Taliban's participation—and that dialogue with the Taliban would reduce the risk of terrorism diffusing from Afghanistan to Central Asia."<sup>30</sup>

## IRAN'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

Iran and Afghanistan share a porous border over five hundred miles long. Being geographically proximate to Afghanistan, Iran perceives the latter as its natural sphere of influence. Both countries have had enjoyed multifarious ties, oscillating between high hopes and a deep skepticism. Given the fluid and fragile nature of the Middle Eastern strategic profile, the region has borne the brunt of extra-regional powers that have exploited the region for advancing their narrow national interests. America, for instance, wiped out its sworn enemy, Saddam Hussein, in its bloodiest war with Iraq, resulting in internal chaos and stability there. After the US exit from Iraq in 2011, Iran became a real benefactor in the Middle East and Iraq reduced to the status of a weak and dissipated power. Though withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan is a matter of time, Iran has spread its strategic tentacles in Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban with weapons. In this respect, Carlotta Gall reports:

Iran has conducted an intensifying covert intervention, much of which is only now coming to light. It is providing local Taliban insurgents with weapons, money and training. It has offered Taliban commanders sanctuary and fuel for their trucks. It has padded Taliban ranks by recruiting among Afghan Sunni refugees in Iran, according to Afghan and Western officials.<sup>31</sup>



Paradoxically, Iran and the Taliban were at loggerheads when the latter was saddled in power in the 1990s. Iran's anti-Taliban plank was rooted in ethno-religious differences: the Shiite-Sunni syndrome ruled the Iranian and Taliban psyche. Their relations reached the lowest ebb following the Taliban's killing of eleven Iranian diplomats in 1998. Enmity and hatred between them gradually calcified, prompting Iran into supporting American intervention to oust the Taliban from power in 2001. However, US-Iran relations deteriorated when America slapped sanctions on Iran over the latter's nuclear program. Moreover, in Iran's perception, the US-calculated move toward NATO forces' expansion in Afghanistan was primarily motivated to consolidate its power and influence in the region. Naturally, Iran sought to bleed the United States and its NATO allies "by raising the cost of the intervention so that they would leave. Iran [had] come to see the Taliban not only as the lesser of its enemies but also as a useful proxy force."<sup>32</sup>

The central task of Iranian diplomacy in Afghanistan is to bring the latter within its strategic fold by exacerbating differences between Pakistan and the Taliban, and between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Kabul regime holds Pakistan responsible for fomenting the Taliban-led terror activities to destabilize Afghanistan. This was one of the reasons that Iran supported US drone attacks on Pakistan's Baluchistan province, which provided sanctuary to the Taliban. The situation has now completely changed with Iran's "bold gambit" of aiding and abetting the Taliban in military and diplomatic terms on the one hand, and indirectly restricting Russia's proactive engagement with Afghan affairs on the other hand.<sup>33</sup> This is, indeed, a Herculean task. First, the Afghan government does not look upon Iran favorably simply because it has been an arms supplier to the Taliban. Second, the Afghan government is neither politically nor morally convinced that Iran would ever like to see Afghanistan a stable and prosperous nation. Rather, Afghan officials view Iran's role as that of keeping Afghanistan "suppliant." As reported, Iran has been supporting criminals, spies, and secret agents in Afghanistan. Carlotta Gall wrote in the *New York Times* that Afghan officials contend that "Iran is set on undermining the Afghan government and its security forces, and the entire United States mission, and maintaining leverage over Afghanistan by making it weak and dependent."<sup>34</sup>

However, it will be in Afghanistan's interest to stay away from the great power rivalry in the region. Realistically enough, the strategic vacuum created by the United States has emboldened both Russia and Iran to play a paramount role in shaping Afghanistan's future. Moreover, Iran has its own national interests in connecting with the CPEC project especially when Tehran and Beijing have concluded agreements to bolster the bilateral trade. In other words, the CPEC will help ramp up Iran's trade with its regional partners. An analyst observes:

Furthermore, Iran is keen on connecting the CPEC with its own initiatives on the Chabahar port and the International North-South Transport Corridor. Iran and India have cooperated on these as well, but the impending storm from the U.S., where President Donald Trump appears to be preparing for a tough line on Iran, could push New Delhi and Tehran apart. . . . After all, a shift in the centre of gravity from the West to Eurasia and Washington to Moscow on Afghanistan's future could set off major tremors in the Indian subcontinent as well, along the bitter fault lines between India and Pakistan.<sup>35</sup>

## CHINA'S ROLE IN THE AFGHAN PEACE PROCESS

China's increasing involvement in Afghan affairs since 2014 is driven by encouraging Afghanistan and Pakistan to mend their strained relations so that they can tackle together the terror threat across the border effectively. Beijing is already a part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, consisting of the United States, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. This Group provides a key opportunity to China to play a more dynamic and productive diplomatic role in bringing Afghanistan and the Taliban to the negotiating table. What are China's key interests in Afghanistan? They can be listed as follows. First, China's principal focus will be on exploiting Afghanistan's natural resources to fulfill its energy needs. Second, China is keen to ensure a smooth operationalization of its flagship project Belt and Road Initiative that passes through the Middle East and Central Asia. Third, China finds it much easier to carry out counter-terror operations by deploying its small band of security forces across the border. Fourth, China wants to marginalize India's role in Afghanistan. Finally, China's interest in a secure and stable Afghanistan is driven by spill-over effects of terror groups on its terror-infested western region.

It should be noted that China hosted the fourth foreign ministers' meeting of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan in Beijing in October 2014. Premier Li Keqiang in his opening address expounded five propositions pertaining to resolving the Afghan issue. He stated that China would "continue to firmly adhere to the friendly policy toward Afghanistan, support Afghanistan to promote peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction process, help Afghanistan with capacity building and support Afghanistan to integrate into the regional cooperation."<sup>36</sup> The conference concluded with the Beijing Declaration under which sixty-four priority projects for cooperation in six major areas were confirmed.

In February 2015, the first round of strategic dialogue among China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan was held in Kabul. While discussing a wide range of issues, they reached a broad consensus on the imperative of ensuring internal security and stability in Afghanistan. China and Pakistan emphasized on the need for a reconciliation process on the "Afghan-led and Afghan-

owned” basis, acceptable to all stakeholders, including the Taliban. Besides, “China agreed to support relevant proposals such as strengthening highway and rail link between Afghanistan and Pakistan including the Kunar Hydroelectric Dam, pushing forward connectivity, and enhancing economic integration. Also, China and Afghanistan supported Pakistan for holding the fifth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan and the three sides agreed to strengthen coordination and cooperation on this matter.”<sup>37</sup>

The second meeting of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group in 2016 facilitated China’s effective role in building a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. The Group was set up to prepare a roadmap for peace dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Further, Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani’s Beijing visit in 2016 was aimed at bringing China into peace negotiations toward resolving the Afghan conflict. Initially, former President Hamid Karzai had taken a series of initiatives to engage China to play a pivotal role behind the curtain to help rebuild and reshape the economically tethered Afghanistan.

As mentioned before, Islamabad enjoys political influence over Talibani factions in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s intention is to kill two birds with one stone. First, Pakistan’s prime concern is to deny India a critical role in Afghanistan. Second, Pakistan’s interest lies in bringing strategic roles of the United States and China into balance. Abdul Ahad Bahrami writes that “the Afghan government hopes the Chinese involvement in the process would be a milestone for the peace efforts. However, the Chinese engagement will also be a crucial test for success of possible future peace negotiations aimed at ending the long-lasting conflict in the country.”<sup>38</sup>

China has been playing a meaningful role in Afghanistan to garner other countries’ support for it. It may be noted that there have been frequent high-level exchanges between China and Afghanistan in the past couple of years. In February 2014 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Kabul to ensure China’s interest in and support to Afghanistan for a smooth transition in political, economic, and security terms. In November 2014, the state councillor Guo Shengkun paid a state visit to Afghanistan to discuss a wide-range of issues with the Afghan regime that “focused primarily on guarding against and combating the terrorist forces of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a separatist group from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China.”<sup>39</sup>

Given its multiple interests in Afghanistan, China has devised a formula that advocates an imperative of the “Afghan-led peace and reconciliation” initiatives toward ending the long Afghan war. In other words, China is opposed to the externally inspired solution to the Afghan War. In effect, China does not want to give strategic swath to New Delhi and Washington in Afghanistan’s peace and reconciliation process. In diplomatic terms, China is

likely to derive a maximum political mileage to enable it to facilitate the operational part of its Silk Route project.

### CHINA-PAKISTAN-RUSSIA ALLIANCE IN AFGHANISTAN

The emerging tripartite China-Pakistan-Russia coalition in Afghanistan is fundamentally an anti-American alliance with a shared objective of restricting the US influence in Afghanistan. These three regional powers are in favor of engaging the Taliban as a strategic necessity to deal with the Islamic State's expanding strategic foothold in Afghanistan. Pakistan has well realized that an indefinitely prolonged instability in Afghanistan is not in its national interests since it has heavily suffered at the hands of its home-grown terrorists. The new government led by Imran Khan in August 2018 has an onerous responsibility to address this issue seriously. One thing is certain that China and Pakistan will never like America and India as facilitators of internal security and political stability in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Pakistan is not optimistic about American economic and military aid. Keeping this hard-boiled reality in mind, Pakistan has virtually reversed its policy of extending a blanket military, intelligence, and logistic support to the last phase of the US engagement in Afghanistan. Paulo Casaca, in his interview with Shamil Shams of Deutche Welle (DW) on June 14, 2017, replied that "accepting Pakistan as the solution rather than the problem to the Afghan conflict will doom any US military effort in Afghanistan."<sup>40</sup>

When asked about the role of India and Pakistan in resolving the conflict in Afghanistan, he straightway replied: "I think this option is not on the table. Russia, China and Pakistan clearly favor the inclusion of the Taliban in the Afghan government. They do not consider India or even the US as potential partners. In reality, the only factor that has brought these three countries closer together is the aim to keep the US and India out of Afghanistan."<sup>41</sup> On the Chinese role in facilitating better ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Casaca replied, "The Chinese diplomacy is very active all around the world, and it is only natural that Beijing pays special attention to countries at its borders, and particularly when a country like Afghanistan is so destabilized."<sup>42</sup>

Though President Trump has given a green signal to his former Defense Secretary James Mattis to find a feasible solution to the ongoing imbroglio in Afghanistan, Mattis does not have a precise roadmap on how to garner support from regional allies to end the long-drawn conflict in the region. As a matter of fact, the Trump administration is in favor of engaging Pakistan as an important strategic ally in resolving the conflict. Nevertheless, the problem with the Trump administration is that on the one hand it has labeled Pakistan as an "unreliable partner." But on the other hand, it considers Pakistan an indispensable strategic

ally. In this awkward situation, the administration finds itself in a quandary whether it will be able to garner Pakistan's intelligence and logistical support, essential for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

## CONCLUSION

Afghanistan presents a complex and unique challenge to all the major powers that have been wrestling with finding a solution to ending the protracted war there over the last decade or so. It is an irony that the national and local Afghan leadership does not have a decisive say and political choice to chart its destiny along the parameters of ethno-cultural composition and religious affinities, belonging to all streams of social and political forces. On the contrary, extra-regional forces for their narrow and myopic national interests have contributed to transforming Afghanistan into a perpetual battleground. The ground reality is that each interventionist power, involved in an ignominious political gamble, may scupper the peace negotiation process while at the same time it can forge a common strategic alliance to end the prolonged war in Afghanistan. This kind of apocalyptic situation can be attributed to the interventionist role of extra-regional players rather than the internal dynamics. In effect, the Afghan people have borne the brunt of their dubious role in the region.

Undoubtedly, China and Pakistan are diehard opponents of involving India and the United States in the Afghan peace negotiation process. Incredibly, China is engaged in crafting its own strategy as to how to prevent the spillover effects of radical Islamists operating in its Xinxiang province, having nexus with the Taliban and several other extremist groups. For this, China is attempting to reduce its dependency on Pakistan. But for building a China-centric security order in the region, China is using Pakistan's services. One thing is clear to China that India, being China's geopolitical rival, constitutes a major hurdle in realizing its objectives in Afghanistan. Also, China understands that Kabul has robust ties with New Delhi. Moscow has its own political and security agenda to bring the region within its strategic fold to serve its manifold national interests. But, unfortunately, the Afghan national leadership is not able to apply out-of-the-box thinking to devise the Afghan-led solution.

Iran is a kind of strategic buffer between China and India as Tehran wants to maintain a balanced relationship with Beijing and New Delhi—its oil clients. In this scenario, Iran's diplomatic activism remains focused on supporting the Taliban as a bargaining chip in any future negotiation. At the same time, for Tehran, Moscow, rather than Beijing, will be the main competitor since Russia also plays up the Taliban card, which is evident from its arms transfer to the Taliban. However, Russia and China have a shared

interest in restricting Tehran's power in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

There are two alternative scenarios in offing. First, there is a strong possibility of formation of the Russia-China-Pakistan alliance with a common objective to fight the IS terror group in Afghanistan to end the longest conflict in Afghanistan and bring peace and stability in the region. The most arduous task before them is how to prevent ISIS, pouring in from Syria, from spreading tentacles across Afghanistan. This does not augur well for the hitherto war-ravaged Afghanistan. For Pakistan also, an indefinitely prolonged instability in Afghanistan will have a further negative spillover effect on Pakistan's hitherto deteriorating security situation and the chaotic economic condition. Realistically, the complexity in Afghanistan is accentuated by the clashing interests of major powers. The emerging Moscow-Islamabad friendship, for instance, has introduced a new factor in South Asian geopolitics, primarily driven by the shared interest in limiting the US influence in the region. Another emerging scenario is the likely formation of the US-India-Afghanistan triangle that does neither aim to prolong the Afghan war nor to obstruct an inclusive peace process in the war-torn Afghanistan. Their common agenda is to defeat terrorist groups, and to prevent the Taliban's return to power, and more importantly, to encourage and ensure the inclusive governance in Afghanistan.

However, it will be an arduous task for the US-led strategic front to stymie the diplomatic maneuvering of the Russia-China-Iran trio. Nor will India like to take any political risk to blindly support the Trump administration's Afghan policy in view of New Delhi's stakes vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing. Whatever may be the emerging alliance or a strategic front, unless there is a shared cause to defeat the terror from whatever quarter it arises, there cannot be a permanent solution to the Afghan crisis. Moreover, the Trump administration understands it very well that the Russia-Iran-China strategic triangle appears to be more eager to fill the strategic vacuum to reshape the geopolitical landscape of Afghanistan in order to better serve their geostrategic interests than to see a peaceful, prosperous, and stable Afghanistan.

It is important to bear in mind that extra-regional powers have no convergence on strategic objectives in Afghanistan. They have their respective political agendas to pursue them. For instance, Russia's relationship with the Taliban is driven by fostering its role and influence in the region, based on the premise that the Taliban's resurgence will offset the expanding influence of the ISIS, which might enable Moscow to shape the Afghan politics. Similarly, the common strategy of Russia, Iran, and China is guided by the doctrine of deriving the maximum political mileage out of the "weakened and faltering" United States.

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## *Chapter Six*

# **Changing Contours in India-Russia Relations**

### *A Reassessment*

Before heading off to China to attend the SCO summit at the Qingdao city in June 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted that his meeting with President Vladimir Putin at the summit would usher into upgrading the traditionally close relationship to “the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership” between India and Russia. Pundits of strategic affairs in India were also optimistic that Prime Minister Modi’s personal bonhomie with President Putin would not only take the New Delhi–Moscow strategic partnership to new heights but also contribute to help establish a peaceful and an enduring multipolar structure. At the same time, strains are visible in India-Russia relations. In Russian perception, India has been steadily coming closer to the United States, whereas, in Indian perception Russia’s priority has shifted to China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. These contrary perceptions and projections need to be analyzed dispassionately.

If one recalls, India’s “time tested friendship” with the former Soviet Union was rooted in the August 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. The Treaty was an eyesore to the United States, and a geopolitical rebuff to Pakistan. Furthermore, New Delhi’s robust tilt toward Moscow and the former’s ambiguous policy on the latter’s military presence in Afghanistan in the 1980s contributed to solidifying the US-Pakistan strategic tie up.

Though India was not in favor of the stationing of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, the South Block in New Delhi skillfully managed to maintain friendly relations with Moscow. Their relations not only survived during the

turbulent times but also flourished exponentially, primarily because of the shared geopolitical interests. Much to Pakistan's chagrin, the Soviet Union remained India's steadfast supplier of military hardware, fulfilling more than 70 percent of its defense requirements.

The end of the Cold War in 1990 and the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991 brought about a profound shift in India's foreign policy matrix. Its hitherto non-aligned policy no longer remained a political glitch to developing defense and security ties with the United States. Rather, spurred by advancing its economic and security interests in the changing dynamics of power configuration, India responded to US overtures for defense cooperation between Washington and New Delhi under the aegis of the 1991 Kicklighter proposals. Gradually but steadily, growing political ties between them resulted in an agreement on defense cooperation in 2005 for a period of ten years, which was further extended in 2015 for another ten years. Thus, the flowering strategic partnership culminated into the US decision to designate India as its "major defence partner" in June 2016 to "elevate defence trade and technology-sharing with India to a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners."<sup>1</sup> Under the new military-industrial complex, the US-India defense trade shot up from approximately \$1 billion in 2008 to over \$15 billion in early 2018.

These extraordinary developments in India-US relations produced a sort of political tremor in Kremlin's power corridors. In the Putin administration's perception, India's growing strategic partnership with the United States was tantamount to New Delhi's unilateral tilting toward Washington. Though eulogizing the special nature of Indo-Russian ties, President Putin is all set to clearly articulating his foreign policy priorities. Accordingly, Putin has heavily invested in political capital to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership with China on a much larger global geopolitical canvas, though China has intruded into Russia's sphere of influence in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Even then, Putin has developed a marvelous political chemistry with President Xi Jinping. In fact, Russia and China enjoy a broad strategic convergence on many international and regional issues such as Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan, with their common objective to limit US influence in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> This apart, without any ideological shibboleths or political inhibitions Russia has established military and energy cooperation with Pakistan—India's arch enemy. India was found baffled over the emerging political rapprochement between Moscow and Islamabad, thinking that the luster of the Indo-Russian relationship has begun to turn dull. In effect, the Modi government faces an onerous task to maintain the balanced relationship with both the United States and Russia. Interestingly, India has been consistently maintaining its public posture that New Delhi's growing strategic cooperation with Washington is not at the cost of its enduring ties with Moscow. It does not mean

that Moscow subscribes to India's political rhetoric or buys its argument. Rather, President Putin, a hard political task master, perceives Indo-Russian relations through a realistic prism. Broadly speaking, there is a common perception shared by the Indian strategic community that there are signs of rigor mortis in the Moscow–New Delhi relationship. Nevertheless, India's redefined non-aligned policy along the parameter of today's interdependent world order suits Russia's interests better in espousing and promoting a multipolar world order. If perceived in a larger global geopolitical context, the Russian objective in South Asia is to restrict the US hegemonic role in South Asia, Afghanistan, and the Middle East.

In light of the above backdrop, the chapter examines those underlying factors that have shaped the contours of multifaceted ties between India and Russia in an increasingly globalized world order. The chapter also evaluates how their geopolitical compulsions have prodded them to redefine their relations with each other, albeit punctuated by a mix of skepticism and optimism. Finally, it is argued that given the uncertain character of the current global political and security architecture, Indo-Russian relations need to be evaluated within the doctrine of strategic realism.

In light of the two dominant but mutually reinforcing trends of globalization and regionalization in international politics, Russia is redefining itself. In Moscow's perception, India's major shift from its traditional autonomous foreign policy approach to forging a "quadrilateral coalition" with the United States, Japan, and Australia might downgrade the Moscow-Delhi relationship. Also, speculations are rife that France is likely to replace Russia in India's military hardware market. It warrants mention that during French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to India, both the countries signed a strategic pact on March 10, 2018, under which they agreed to provide for the use of each other's military facilities, including opening naval bases to warships.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the growing Indo-French strategic partnership might further prompt them into reshaping the geopolitics of Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific region. In that likely scenario, India's relations with Russia might get mired in confusion and uncertainty. Not surprisingly, in perception of India's diplomatic community, Russia's strategic priorities have also changed. In fact, Moscow's foreign policy focus has shifted to embracing realism as the mantra with an objective to assert its role at the global and regional level. President Putin, a "diehard realpolitiker," is all set to building relations with any country that "helps fulfill a national narrative of Russia's return as a great power."<sup>4</sup> Russia's emerging military and security cooperation with Pakistan, its staunch Cold War foe, is a case in point.

In particular, Russia's foreign policy has undergone a dramatic transformation since its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in February 2014. The world community was deeply shocked at the Russian act of violating norms of international law and treaties. The United States and EU slapped an array

of sanctions against Russia, which adversely affected the latter's economic, trade, and investment interests across the global market. Psychologically bruised by the humiliation at Western hands, President Putin turned even more resolute and intransigent in dealing with the United States and its allies. Its negative fallout might be felt in Russia-India relations, especially in the economic and trade sector. Though Russia is very much likely to continue to be India's principal arms supplier, it has little to offer in boosting its trade with India, especially in view of Western economic sanctions against it. In this context, Dmitriy Frolovskiy, a Moscow-based political analyst, comments that:

shifting geopolitical dynamics driven by the rise of China, international sanctions against the Kremlin, and its never-ending economic stagnation point to imminent changes for India-Russia relations in the coming years. . . . Russia's exports to India are barely 2 percent of India's total imports and in an economic sense, Russia's struggling economy has little to offer to India in the long-term. The Kremlin's growing political and economic dependence on Beijing ultimately means that the current momentum of Russia-India relations will be imminently challenged in the upcoming years.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, India's blossoming relations with the United States as its "natural ally" caused an alarming consternation in Moscow that New Delhi was heavily tilting toward the United States. It was absolutely evident from concluding a series of important agreements and memoranda between New Delhi and Washington such as the US-India nuclear deal (2008), India-US maritime cooperation projects under the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), Joint Production of Military Hardware, and the US designation of India as a "Major Defense Partner." What did hurt Russia more was the conclusion of the US-India Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement in August 2016, authorizing Washington and New Delhi to use each other's land, air, and naval bases. All these developments reinforced the Kremlin's fear and suspicion about India's credibility as Russia's trustworthy partner.

However, to India's distress, China and Pakistan sought to whip up apparent ripples in Russia-India relations in order to play them off against each other. They have partially succeeded in sowing the seeds of mistrust between New Delhi and Moscow. At this critical juncture, Islamabad left no stone unturned in grabbing the propitious opportunity to come closer to Moscow in military and energy sectors. Moreover, Russian military hardware became indispensable for Pakistan with the Trump administration's cancellation of \$300 million in aid to Pakistan for the latter's inaction against terror groups.<sup>6</sup> In these circumstances, Pakistani military elites undertook a flurry of visits to Moscow to cultivate Russia with an underlying motive to kill two birds with one stone: to cause ripples in the "all weather friendship" between Russia

and India on the one hand, and to procure the latest version of Russian weaponry on the other hand.

What is more worrisome for India is that Pakistan is very much likely to exploit its military ties with Russia to water down its political and diplomatic support on crucial issues such as cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, on India's permanent membership to the UN Security Council, and also the NSG membership. Therefore, India needs to be wary about the possible fallout on its security and defense ties with Russia. There is no likelihood that Russia will stop its arms sales to Pakistan. Rather, Russia has boosted its weapons sales to earn foreign currency that it badly needs, especially when its economy has been hit hard by the US and EU sanctions.

As regards India, Russia's "Foreign Policy Concept" for 2016 clearly lays out that:

Russia is committed to further strengthening its special privileged partnership with the Republic of India based on shared foreign policy priorities, historical friendship and deep mutual trust, as well as strengthening cooperation on urgent international issues and enhancing mutually beneficial bilateral ties in all areas, primarily in trade and economy, with a focus on implementing long-term cooperation programs approved by the two countries.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, India's sense of vulnerability "has been compounded by the perception that Russia, a traditional ally, has been driven into the arms of China by its growing conflicts with the West."<sup>8</sup> This may not be true in its entirety. But Russia is not putting all eggs in the Chinese basket. Having sensed the complexity of Sino-Russian relations, Putin is gyrating between Russia's ideological proximity with Beijing on the one hand and his misgivings about China's outflanking moves to sidelining Russia, especially in Central Asia and Central Europe, on the other hand. That is why Russia has retracted from fully endorsing China's exclusive claims over the South China Sea. This apart, Putin has been cultivating Japan and Vietnam, the two confirmed adversaries of China. It should be recalled that Putin has invited more Japanese investments in Russia, which currently amounts to 2 percent only, although Japanese companies have significantly contributed to the Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-2 project in Russia.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Vietnam, Russia has not hesitated to supply arms and military equipment to it, much to China's frustration. Nevertheless, it should not be construed that India would be able to exploit the persisting differences between Moscow and Beijing. The core reason behind it is the tightening strategic embrace between Russia and China, based on a firm foundation, even though they may have divergences on some regional and bilateral issues.

So far as the Modi-Putin political rapport is concerned, Modi faces a tough balancing task to sustain India's "time tested friendship" on the one hand and to keep intact the strategic partnership with the United States on the

other hand. Interestingly, Modi, a hardcore right wing leader, shares “autocratic instincts” of both President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin. Strategic analysts opine that the commonly shared political instincts between Modi, Trump, and Putin might go a long way in ushering in the new era of an international system, led by the narrowly structured hyper nationalistic underpinnings.

This may not augur well for realizing the vision of an integrated and peaceful world order. However, atmospheric changes perceptible in the international system clearly suggest that an individual-centric conception of an international order would be fatally disastrous for global peace and security to take root in the hitherto chaotic world order. It is absolutely necessary to see whether an alternative world order structured on “sovereign equality” and distributive justice is feasible. What still haunts peace anchorites and political analysts across party lines in India is whether New Delhi and Moscow could jointly contribute to the emergence of a world free of hegemony.

#### INDIA AND RUSSIA: TOWARD A RENEWED FRIENDSHIP

A major shift in Russian foreign policy was perceptible with President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of reassigning “strategic priorities” to Russia’s old friends in an altered international political order. In his new foreign policy concept, announced in June 2000, Putin called upon the leading nations of the Third World, including India, to come forward to help establish a “democratic, fair and equitable” multipolar world order. He endeavored not only to revive old ties with India but also inject a new blood and energy into India-Russia relations. President Putin said in an interview that both countries were required to set new priorities. He stated: “[I]t’s clear that both we and our Indian partners have to take into consideration the fact that the world has changed, Russia has changed, the balance of forces in the world has changed and so have some of our priorities.”<sup>10</sup>

During his visit to India in October 2000, President Putin stressed on the importance of the institutionalization of defense and security cooperation between Moscow and New Delhi. It was reflected in the signing of an Indo-Russian agreement on defense cooperation. In accordance with the agreement, Russia promised to deliver military hardware worth \$3 billion, including the delivery of 320 T-90 Tanks, the SU-30 aircraft, the Admiral Gorshkov aircraft carrier, and the MiG-29 fighter aircraft. On the eve of the signing of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership, Putin stated that it would “take our (Indo-Russian) political and defense cooperation back to the stage of the good old special relationship between the two countries.”<sup>11</sup> An important component of the agreement was that India would indigenously manufacture

T-90 tanks under Russian license. It may be recalled that a top Russian official, Sergei Chemezov, once boasted that there was none other than Russia that provided India with the latest defense products and technology. He further said:

Russia will always be India's strategic partner despite New Delhi's growing ties with countries like the US, France and Israel as there are certain defence products and technology that "no one else will give" except Moscow. . . . We have our own niche, these countries have their own directions for cooperation. Therefore, this does not mean that if India will work with some other countries, cooperation with Russia will cease.<sup>12</sup>

A clear and loud message that Chemezov conveyed to India was that Russia was the "only partner to fully transfer manufacturing technologies to India, allowing Indian defence enterprises to set up full-scale production of their own defence products."<sup>13</sup> However, Indian armed forces have often complained about an inordinate delay in the supply of critical spares and equipment by Russia, adversely affecting maintenance of military systems procured from it.<sup>14</sup> The Indian Air Force (IAF) is faced with a similar problem in procuring Russian weapon systems in time. *The Economic Times* noted:

IAF currently has only three AWACS [Airborne Warning and Control System], with Israeli Phalcon radar systems mounted on Russian IL-76 heavy-lift aircraft, which were inducted in 2009–2011 under a \$1.1 billion deal inked in 2004. . . . Pakistan now has seven such platforms, with the Chinese Karakoram Eagle ZDK-03 AWACS being the latest inductions.<sup>15</sup>

## India-Russia Defense Cooperation

Since the mid-1960s, the Soviet Union had been a principal supplier of military hardware to fulfill India's defense requirements. In the heydays of their warm and friendly defense ties, India figured in a selective list of Third World countries to have acquired the latest version of a fighter aircraft from the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, India's growing defense partnership with the United States, Israel, and France raised eyebrows in Moscow, fueling the latter's doubts about India's friendship. The Modi government, in an attempt to address Russian concerns, emphasized that Russia was India's "time tested friend." During the eighteenth annual summit meeting with Russian President Putin at St. Petersburg in 2016, Modi brushed aside the misplaced assessment on Russian part that there was an "irretrievable drift" in India's foreign policy toward Russia. The Modi government said that India's growing ties with the United States, especially in the defense trade, was neither aimed at drifting away from Russia nor ever

directed at replacing Russia with the United States as a supplier of military hardware.

[But the ground reality is that] in 2012–16, Russia supplied 68% of our arms imports. USA with 14% was a distant second. Despite our best efforts over a decade, we still cannot get cutting-edge US defence technologies. We need to pursue these efforts, and use the Russian example to nudge others to part with more technology. . . . Russia is still the only foreign country involved in nuclear power generation in India. Much of the cost of the Russian collaboration plants is covered by soft loans. Our hydrocarbons investments have been mutually beneficial.<sup>16</sup>

The Indo-Russian relationship in the defense sector is not confined to a mere seller-buyer relationship. It reflects from undertaking joint research, joint design, and development of defense systems by Moscow and New Delhi. In the process of further privatization, India's opening to foreign direct investment in its defense sector up to 49 percent has incentivized the Russian defense industry to undertake coproduction of the state-of-the-art weapons in India, contributing to the Modi government's newly launched program of Make-in-India. But one cannot gloss over the ground reality that the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in its 2015 report took the Indian government to task by figuring out serious snags both in procurement and serviceability of the Russian-make Sukhoi-30MKIs, a deal worth over \$12 billion. The Report disclosed about the poor serviceability of Sukhois that "continues to be just around 55–60% (prescribed norm is at least 75%) despite the first fighter being inducted 19 years ago."<sup>17</sup> The real problem with Su-30MKI aircraft, Mi-17 helicopters, Mig-29K jets, and T-90 tanks is about their serviceability and maintenance, which the Indian government needs to address on top priority to ensure efficacy and effectiveness of the Russian-born weapon systems. As reported, India and Russia signed a \$5 billion deal to buy five S-400 air defense missile systems during President Putin's visit to New Delhi in October 2018.<sup>18</sup>

It was feared that the Trump administration might slap sanctions under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) to prevent countries, including India, from buying weapon systems from Russia. Nevertheless, the Modi government went ahead with the deal without inviting the Trump administration's sanction threat. Especially for Putin, the S-400 deal was a litmus test for the India-Russian friendship. The S-400 deal erased the lingering doubts about India's dittoing the American line.<sup>19</sup>

For India, an exemption from sanctions under CAATSA would facilitate the conclusion of pending defense projects worth over \$12 billion. Russia's "business in military hardware with India is [worth] over USD 30 billion, more than India has with all other foreign partners put together. And this business continues to flourish."<sup>20</sup>



Apart from the increasing bilateral defense cooperation in the field of military hardware, India and Russia have been conducting joint military exercises since the launching of INDRA exercise in 2003 to promote cooperation between the navies of the two countries. In October 2017, the first ever Tri-Services joint exercise between Russian and Indian forces, known as Indra-2017, was held at Vladivostok in Russia—in far eastern zones. It signifies strategic understanding and maturity of their strategic partnership. The exercises provided an opportunity to the Indian army to learn from the Russian experience of fighting the ISIS in Syria. Not only this, the Vladivostok exercise will also be helpful in improving Indian army's maneuverability on such a large Russian platform, which will further improve its adaptability capabilities.

### **Energy Cooperation**

Even prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Mikhail Gorbachev was committed to help developing India's nuclear energy sector as far back as 1988. But due to political uncertainty in Russia as well as an international pressure on Moscow to abide by the guidelines of the Nuclear Supplier Group, Russia's nuclear cooperation with India remained suspended for a long time.<sup>21</sup> During his state visit to New Delhi in October 2000, President Vladimir Putin recognized India's legitimate concern over nuclear energy requirements. He reiterated his firm support to India's peaceful uses of nuclear energy. He straightway set aside doubts of the international community that Russia had violated international obligations under the Nuclear Supplier Group—a watchdog institution—by supplying civilian nuclear reactors to India. During Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee's visit to Moscow in November 2001, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between two countries on the Implementation of Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KNPP). In March 2006, Russia agreed to provide 60 tons of uranium fuel for India's Tarapur Atomic Power Station. With the granting of the Nuclear Supplier Group's waiver to India in 2008, Russia did not face a legal issue to increase nuclear energy cooperation with India. Since then energy cooperation is perceived as one of the main pillars of strategic partnership between Russia and India. President Putin's visit to New Delhi in December 2014 was a landmark one in many respects in the context of Putin's first one-on-one meeting with the newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi. First, both the leaders agreed that "the special and privileged strategic partnership" between India and Russia has been "built on the strong foundation of mutual trust, bilateral understanding and unique people-to-people affinities."<sup>22</sup>

Second, both the leaders emphasized on an imperative need for carrying the bilateral friendship to a "qualitatively new level." Third, they underlined the natural complementarities between two countries in the energy sector. In

a Joint Statement issued at the end of Putin's visit, both the leaders agreed to jointly explore for oil and gas, build petrochemical plant, including cooperation in electric power production, nuclear energy, and renewable energy sources. The Joint Statement further read:

It is expected that Indian companies will strongly participate in projects related to new oil and gas fields in the territory of the Russian Federation. The sides will study the possibilities of building a hydrocarbon pipeline system, connecting the Russian Federation with India. They will also examine avenues for participation in petrochemical projects in each other's country and in third countries. The leaders have encouraged Indian and Russian companies to pursue greater participation in each other's power generation projects, as also in supply of equipment, technology for enhanced oil recoveries and extraction of coal, including coking coal.<sup>23</sup>

In order to ensure an uninterrupted supply of clean energy, Russia agreed to set up additional nuclear power plants at Kudankulam in India's Tamil Nadu state, where Russia had already set up four units of civilian nuclear reactors. Alexander Ugryumov, Vice President (R&D) of Rosatom's fuel arm TVEL, stated that Russia had agreed to supply advanced safe fuel for Kudankulam's nuclear plant. He further elaborated that "safe fuel will be reloaded into the two running reactors of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KNPP) and also into the subsequent units being built in Tamil Nadu with the technical assistance of Russian national atomic power corporation Rosatom."<sup>24</sup> The ongoing nuclear energy cooperation between New Delhi and Moscow has opened up new frontiers of energy security for India. It must be underlined that no other country, including the United States, was prepared to transfer a dual use nuclear technology to India.

Indo-Russian energy cooperation witnessed a new momentum with President Putin's announcement during his state visit to India in October 2015 that Russia would expand civil nuclear cooperation with India under the Strategic Vision to boost peaceful uses of atomic energy. The growing civil nuclear cooperation got an added boost when Prime Minister Modi and President Putin jointly dedicated Unit 1 of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant to "India-Russia Friendship and Cooperation" in August 2016. They characterized it as a *sui generis* example of the "special and privileged strategic partnership" between two countries. Prime Minister Modi said that 1,000 MW units in Tamil Nadu would not only "scale up" clean energy in India but also "pathways of partnership for green growth."<sup>25</sup> Modi and Putin also laid the foundation for Kudankulam Unit 3 and 4 at the BRICS Summit in Goa in 2016. It should be noted that the Russia-supported Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KNPP) is one of the largest nuclear power stations in India. It is scheduled to have six VVER-1,000 reactors with an installed capacity of 1,000 MW each.<sup>26</sup> At the nineteenth edition of the annual India-Russia

Summit in October 2018, President Putin and Prime Minister Modi inked the document in the field of civil nuclear energy cooperation. “The two sides concluded an action plan for expanding civil nuclear partnership, comprising a second site for Russian nuclear reactors in India and cooperation in other markets in West Asia, Africa and Latin America.”<sup>27</sup> Under the Action Plan for civil nuclear partnership, the two sides have agreed to develop a project of six nuclear power units of Russian design at a new site in India.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, the new nuclear project will pave the way for the involvement of Indian industries and enhance cooperation in developing “new perspectives” in the nuclear energy field in the interest of promoting nuclear energy cooperation between the two countries.

### CHINA FACTOR IN INDIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

In the changing power dynamics of the current international system, Russia and China have strategically come much closer than ever before, as manifest from holding of the largest ever Vostok-18 joint military exercises between their armed forces in September 2018. The shift in Russian policy toward China, based on their shared interests in global and regional affairs, has several implications for India. A strategic analyst observes, “As Russia and China go about aligning their interests for mutual strategic advantage, India has to take a closer look at its own options and opportunities. For instance, the Eurasian Economic Union—with which China is ready to align as proposed by Russia—shows that the two are looking at big targets.”<sup>29</sup>

With the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia encountered numerous obstacles in its way to carving out its new role in the emerging power structure. Interestingly enough, Russia’s loss of power and China’s meteoric rise in the world politics compelled Moscow to come closer to Beijing to find a strategic space in Eurasia where China has already expanded its strategic foothold through the BRI. An upsurge in Russia-China relations clearly reflects from their deepening energy, defense, and security cooperation. Also, they have carried out joint naval exercises in the disputed East China Sea, a controversial region between China and Japan. In addition, Russia has agreed to sell the latest version of SU-35 fighter jets to China. This is likely to boost China’s air capabilities to safeguard its sovereign rights over the South China Sea in the face of impending US threats.

The declining power of the United States has emboldened and encouraged both Russia and China to forge mutual strategic ties to offer a strong resistance to the US role in Asia-Pacific region. Moscow and Beijing have an increasing convergence on a host of global and regional issues such as civil war in Syria, Iran’s controversial nuclear program, the Afghan imbroglio, and North Korea’s emerging political rapprochement with the United States.

Further, China's role in bringing Pakistan closer to Russia and the latter's increasing military cooperation with Pakistan arouses Indian apprehensions lest an emerging Moscow-Beijing-Islamabad strategic axis should make a dent in the Delhi-Moscow relationship. In fact, Russia's growing comprehensive strategic partnership with China will be a litmus test for the Indo-Russia strategic ties. Nevertheless, it should not be construed that Russia would take a political risk to weaken its ties with India for the sake of its friendship with China. For Russia, India is not only the biggest buyer of its military hardware but also a potential hedge against an expanding Chinese influence in South Asia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. In this context, it ought to be remembered that Russia played a well-orchestrated role in India's admission to SCO as a full member to balance off China's overarching influence in the organization. At the same time, India needs to be sensitive to Russia's passing through tough and turbulent times by showing New Delhi's solidarity with Moscow, for instance, on the issue of stringent sanctions against Russia by the United States and Europe. At the same time, India is under Russia's close scrutiny for the deepening strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi. Therefore, China will not lose any opportunity to maximally exploit it to create deep suspicion in Putin's mind about India's heavy strategic tilt toward the United States. Rather, China might project India's heavy diversification of defense trade with the United States, Israel, and France as an anti-Russian move to exacerbate Moscow's fear and apprehension that its defense sales to India would heavily plummet.

Though Russia and India have political differences on some bilateral and regional issues such as China's BRI mega project, Indian policy makers need to win the Russian confidence and trust. Moreover, India should be wary about China lest it should win over Russia on the question of India's permanent membership to the Security Council, its membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and on such similar issues at the UN. Given the shifting global geopolitics, India needs to exercise prudence and caution by refraining from doing anything that might push Russia into Chinese arms.

## MILITARY TIES BETWEEN RUSSIA AND PAKISTAN

It is ironic that Pakistan, once one of the closest military allies of the United States, has established a security relationship with Russia—its sworn enemy throughout the Cold War period. One might recall, Pakistan not only played a crucial role in the 1980s in fulfilling US strategic goals in South Asia and Afghanistan but also presented a formidable challenge to Soviet forces by training Afghan and al-Qaeda groups to fight them. As a result, Soviet-Pakistan relations reached their lowest ebb.<sup>30</sup>

Besides that Moscow's special ties with New Delhi through the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation created a profound mistrust between Moscow and Islamabad. The 1971 Treaty functioned as an effective psychological deterrent against the United States and China, preventing them from directly jumping into the fray in favor of Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War. In other words, India's geopolitical propinquity with the Soviet Union was a catalytic element in the dismemberment of Pakistan, resulting in the birth of Bangladesh as an independent nation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, albeit with a gap of nearly one decade, Russia reassigned importance to India that culminated into strategic partnership between them in October 2000. Since then their relations have witnessed new heights with coproduction of state-of-the-art weapons.

However, the geopolitical dynamics in South Asia swiftly changed with Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014, inviting harsh sanctions against it by the United States and the European Union. This naturally prompted Putin into garnering moral and diplomatic succor from old and new friends. The political expediency and strategic realism drove Putin to redefine his policy approach toward South Asia in which Pakistan figured prominently.<sup>31</sup>

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu's visit to Islamabad in November 2014 fueled a strong apprehension in New Delhi. Russia lifted an arms embargo against Pakistan and sold it Mi-35 combat helicopters. Apart from the sale of Russian weaponry, it was in October 2015 that "the governments of Russia and Pakistan signed an agreement on cooperation in the construction of the 'North-South' gas pipeline (from Karachi to Lahore) [which could] boost the bilateral trade with the Russian investment of \$2 billion in the project."<sup>32</sup>

While administering one shock after another, Russia remained impervious to India's sensitivity over joint military exercises conducted in the Pakistani province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in September–October 2016. To India's surprise and agony, these exercises synchronized with Pakistan-based jihadi groups' attack on India's Uri sector in Jammu and Kashmir in September 2016. A commentator noted, "It would have been wiser to postpone the drills if not to cancel them at all, if Russia sought to take into account the negative feelings of India's bureaucracy. Yet, to India, Russian authorities seemed almost deaf to voices from Delhi."<sup>33</sup>

India's strategic analysts are of the view that an increasing military cooperation between Russia and Pakistan does not augur well for the enduring Moscow–New Delhi relationship. There is a widely shared perception that Russia ought to have evaluated long-term implications of its weapons sale to Pakistan for South Asia, in general, and for India, in particular. Based on the past experience, Indian fear is that Pakistan might use Russian weapons against India. There is also a tangible evidence that Pakistan transferred a

quantum of US military aid to the Taliban and Haqqani network to help them survive rather than to fight and eliminate them. Therefore, the strategic wisdom should spur Russia to learn a lesson from the US folly of reposing the trust in Pakistan's commitment to utilizing American aid for the intended purpose.

Although Russia may perceive some temporary gains in its military ties with Pakistan, it needs to desist from taking a potential risk of bedeviling its relations with India—a balancing factor in the extended South Asia. Russia will need to ensure that its arms transfer to Pakistan does not trigger an armaments race between India and Pakistan in the interest of peace and stability in the region. To me, India need not raise hue and cry over Russian military aid to Pakistan. Russia is under no treaty obligation to withhold armaments' supply to a third party. It is free to diversify its arms market. Indeed, Russia's military cooperation with Pakistan is the byproduct of its strategic realism. It should also be remembered that Russia did not force India to cease procuring weapons from the United States. What India needs to do at this stage is to keep a balanced relationship with Russia and the United States without hurting its national interests.

## WEAK ECONOMIC COOPERATION

In a "Partnership for Global Peace and Stability," India and Russia pledged to take their economic and trade relations to new heights. The idea behind the partnership was to "achieve sustainable development, promote peace and security at home and around the world, strengthen inclusive and transparent global governance, and provide global leadership on issues of shared interest."<sup>34</sup>

Practically speaking, economic cooperation is perhaps the only sector in which India and Russia have not done fairly well, despite enormous opportunities for stepping up their trade and investment portfolio. The bilateral trade in 2017 crossed the \$8 billion mark while it stood at \$6.59 billion in 2016. Both the countries agreed to set a trade target of \$30 billion by the year 2025. Given the size of their economies, Russia and India are working toward inking a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to achieve the stipulated target. Russian Consul General in Kolkata, Alexey M. Idamkin, attributed the slow pace of bilateral trade to the "geographical factor," obstructing the smooth and steady flow of trade.<sup>35</sup>

Prime Minister Modi has been reiterating the imperative of strengthening the "economic pillar" of Indo-Russian strategic partnership. As noted, "Both sides recognize the International North South Transport Corridor as a strategically important project, but progress remains slow. The Customs Green Corridor, direct diamond trade, banking links and other such trade promotion measures do not require complicated action, but they just do not get done."<sup>36</sup>

Though “poorer economic interdependence” between Russia and India is a wakeup call to reenergize their trade and investment ties, India and Russia need to dispel the lingering doubts, amplified by lobbies in America think tanks, and China. As one critic has rightly noted:

What is happening is that an orchestrated campaign is afoot to debunk the India-Russia relationship. This is a familiar CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] ploy—weakening the anchor sheet of strategic autonomy of other countries so as to dispirit them and make them subservient to American strategies. The pivotal relationship with Russia has given Indian foreign policy much strategic depth and its platinum grade quality of mutual trust is what counts most, especially in the prevailing international situation characterized by great uncertainties. So long as things remain this way, India retains the capacity to pursue independent foreign policies. That is the crux of the matter.<sup>37</sup>

Another problematic issue is the slackness on the part of Indian bureaucracy, which has hindered the momentum to pushing forward the bilateral partnership. The Modi government, though initially overenthusiastic, has not been able to alter Indian bureaucracy’s work culture in a fast globalizing world. Further, to boost bilateral trade it is absolutely necessary to undertake trade facilitation measures like making custom procedures simplified. During Putin’s visit to India in December 2014, Russia agreed to invest in India’s infrastructure projects such as smart cities and freight corridors and also in its telecom and power sectors. India has a tremendous opportunity to invest in setting up industrial parks and technology platforms in Russia, apart from pharmaceuticals, fertilizers, and coal and energy sectors.

At the Goa summit in October 2016, Prime Minister Modi and President Putin underlined the need for easing of business to boost bilateral trade and investment. They further noted:

the creation of bilateral investment fund by National Infrastructure Investment Fund (NIIF) of India with Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) to facilitate high-technology investments in Russia and India . . . welcomed the recent investment by India in the Russian oil sector and called on companies in both countries to finalize new and ambitious investment proposals in similar promising sectors such as pharmaceuticals, chemical industry, mining, machine building, implementation of infrastructure projects, cooperation in railway sector, fertilizer production, automobiles and aircraft construction as well as collaborative ventures in modernizing each other’s industrial facilities.<sup>38</sup>

These are laudable steps undertaken by both the sides. What is important for stepping up the bilateral trade and investment is the issue of connectivity, and of implementing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to promote economic integration in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Russia is today in the throes of a deep geopolitical turmoil, fundamentally grounded in its open confrontation with the United States on global and regional issues such as Syria, Iran's nuclear deal and the NATO extension into Central Europe. Their strategic divergences have created a trust deficit between them. How do US-Russian clash of interests affect India's relations with Russia? Overtly or covertly, the impact of their frosty relationship is clearly visible on the New Delhi–Moscow relationship. For instance, Russia scarcely brooks India's deepening strategic proximity with the United States. Nor does the United States tolerate India's upgraded and "privileged strategic partnership" with Russia. There is a lurking fear in India that in the future, the Trump administration might reconsider imposing sanctions on India for procuring weapons from Russia. In this scenario, India will need to walk the tightrope adroitly—neither to tilt toward the United States nor showcase its intention to assign an exclusive priority to Russia, especially on the sensitive defense and security issues. Signs of rigor mortis are already perceptible in the New Delhi–Moscow relationship on a number of strategic issues such as Russia's diversification of its defense bazaar, which is evident from selling its latest weaponry to Pakistan and China. At the same time, Russia and China have embarked on cementing their mutual ties on regional issues of common concerns and interests, for instance on the issue of supporting and espousing the causes of Syria, Iran (on the nuclear deal), and the Taliban in Afghanistan. In other words, the Russia-China strategic partnership is more mature, more comprehensive, and more enduring than Indo-Russian ties.

However, India and Russia ought to expand and strengthen their ties in critical fields such as cyber security, information technology, and artificial intelligence so that India can benefit from the Russian expertise and experience. Apart from this, the virtually nonexistent bilateral trade and investment portfolio should spur them to enter into a free trade agreement and push up the bilateral economic collaboration. As of now, the only robust area of their cooperation is the defense and nuclear energy sector. It must be underscored that no other country, including France and the United States, can provide nuclear reactors on a much cheaper rate than what Russia has offered to India. But, at the same time, France has lately emerged as India's strong defense and security partner, as is evident from the signing of a strategic pact in March 2018 on using each other's military bases, including opening naval bases to warships as a strategic hedge against China's expanding role in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>39</sup>

One need not forget that India feels at home while doing business with Russia in the fields such as defense trade, cyber security, and energy cooperation in comparison to the United States. In spite of that India needs to give a relook to its relations with Russia whose strategic priorities are different



from those of India. Russia feels cozy and comfortable in the company of China because of their better political synergy and strategic convergence on global and regional issues. In this scenario, India should no longer remain under illusion about permanence in its relationship with Russia given the latter's balancing act in forging military cooperation with Pakistan. Nevertheless, there is an imperative for mistrust-free relations between New Delhi and Moscow in the changing geopolitical dynamics of South Asia. Both the countries have enormous opportunities of promoting bilateral cooperation in new sectors such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, robotics, cyber security, and intelligence sharing on terror groups. Simultaneously, India needs to reevaluate the pros and cons of its ties with Russia by taking into account Moscow's close and solid strategic partnership with Beijing, on the one hand, and its developing close relationship with Islamabad in military and energy sectors on the other hand. In a nutshell, there is a lingering uncertainty about the future direction of India-Russia relations due to the changing power equations.

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## *Chapter Seven*

# **Russia-Pakistan Defense and Energy Cooperation**

### *Motivations and Long-Term Outcomes*

In international politics, the past bitter memories between nations are often brushed off when national interests are seriously at stake. Perhaps, this aptly applies to Russia and Pakistan, which have mutually agreed to forgo past enmity. Arguably, their past acrimonious relations were replete with inexplicable enigmas. In hindsight, Pakistan was the United States' close military ally during the Cold War, albeit with the occasional gyration in their relationship. During the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Pakistan served as a safe conduit for America's "overt and covert aid" to anti-Soviet mujahedeen to force an early retreat of Soviet forces. That strategy worked reasonably well. The Kremlin leadership was ultimately obliged to pull out Soviet troops in 1989, without tangible gains.

Since Pakistan was the US primary surrogate in its global network, it was committed to help defeat Soviet forces in Afghanistan by fomenting "the anti-Soviet movement" in tandem with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Pakistan's military trained Afghan mujahedeen in Kabul's terror camps and incited them into attacking Soviet troops that finally withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989. Naturally, the post-Soviet Russia could scarcely think of embracing Pakistan at the cost of its firm and enduring ties with India. For Pakistan also, it was psychologically tough and painful to gloss over the Soviet Union's overt or covert role in Bangladesh's emergence as an independent nation from the Pakistani womb. It may be recalled that the Soviet Union was not only India's principal supplier of military hardware but also its security guarantor under the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace,

Friendship and Cooperation. Frustrated over the Soviet Union's blanket support to India, Islamabad perceived Moscow as its *bête noire*.

Over the past couple of years, however, a geopolitical swing in Russia's South Asia policy is manifest from redefining its moribund relationship with Islamabad. Pakistan promptly responded to Russian overtures, especially in view of its growing estrangement from the United States following a huge cut in military and economic assistance to Islamabad. Pak-US relations reached the nadir when US Special Forces killed Osama bin Laden, hiding in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in May 2011. Pakistan denounced it as a flagrant violation of its territorial sovereignty. Goldberg and Ambinder observe, "The level of animosity between Islamabad and Washington has spiked in the days since the raid on Abbottabad. . . . Pakistanis, for their part, see the raid on bin Laden's hideout—conducted without forewarning—as a gross insult."<sup>1</sup> This apart, a big setback to Pakistan came about when America suspended military assistance worth \$2 billion.

On the other hand, the burgeoning strategic partnership between India and the United States, and a growing geopolitical proximity between Russia and Pakistan, produced mistrust in the so-called unshakable relationship between New Delhi and Moscow. The cumulative impact of these developments set off military cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad—the irreconcilable Cold War enemies. Apparently, it was interpreted as a win-win situation for both the countries.

For Pakistan, it was a propitious opportunity to break out of the straight-jacket of the Cold War psychology. Former Pakistani Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif publicly conceded that "his nation made a historical error by 'tilting 100 percent' to the West and was now eager to build alliances closer to home with the likes of China, Russia and Turkey."<sup>2</sup> In an interview to the *Times Now*, Asif said that the United States was no longer a "friend of Pakistan," and insisted on reviewing its relations with the United States.<sup>3</sup> For Pakistan, Russia is a critical source of arms and energy supplies, especially with the US suspension of aid to Pakistan. The latter's civilian and military elites also think that Islamabad's growing political and military relations with Moscow will be helpful in boosting Pakistan's "clout in multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Nuclear Suppliers Group."<sup>4</sup>

So far as Russia is concerned, its relations with Pakistan are broadly defined by its political and security interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Russia aims not only to combat the threat of the Islamic State's expanding presence in Afghanistan to prevent spillover effects on Russian internal security, but also to seek Pakistan's support in negotiating a peace settlement with the Taliban. In this context, the editorial in the *Dawn* aptly comments:

Moscow now seems to have overcome the trauma of Soviet dismemberment and feels strong enough to assert its Great Power status. . . . It has immense natural resources, oil and gas being only two of them. The monument to our economic cooperation with Russia is the—unfortunately, now rotting—Pakistan Steel. Reviving it with Russian help is one of the many benefits this country could reap from a renewed and robust friendship.<sup>5</sup>

In light of the above backdrop, the chapter illuminates and evaluates the core factors that have triggered the emerging friendly relations between Russia and Pakistan within the framework of the shifting regional dynamics in South Asia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. A host of questions have been examined. For instance, why has there been a sudden drift, instead of shift, in Russia's foreign policy toward South Asia? What will be its long-term fallout on Indo-Russian historic ties? The chapter will further examine whether the new Russia-Pakistani bonhomie is merely symptomatic of atmospheric changes in their relationship that has yet to pass the litmus test.

Before we discuss the emerging Russia-Pakistan relations, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of the robust US-Pakistan military and security partnership of the Cold War in order to better grasp the correlates that contributed to eroding their military alliance over a period of time.

## THE US-PAKISTAN MILITARY ALLIANCE

Pakistan was anchored in the US-sponsored South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955 in its global strategy of the containment of Communism. By virtue of being their member, Pakistan qualified not only for the US military and economic aid but also for its diplomatic succor on the Kashmir dispute at the United Nations, as was evident from exercising veto power on numerous occasions in Pakistan's favor. But Pakistan's real intention behind joining US-led military organizations was to bolster its defenses vis-à-vis India rather than fight the forces of Communism in South Asia.<sup>6</sup>

Since the very beginning of its independence in August 1947, Pakistan was gravely faced with the fear psychosis of India's threat to its national security. Also, unlike India, Pakistan faced a serious identity crisis as a newly born nation-state carved out of an undivided India. This was the biggest psychological dilemma before Pakistan. Maybe due to an accidental design, Pakistan lost no opportunity to join the US-led military alliances when India spurned the US offer to join them. To India, joining military blocs of the either superpower was tantamount to a "loss of freedom" and autonomy in conducting its foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Instead, India chose an independent course of foreign policy, known as non-alignment.

Throughout the Cold War period, South Asia was hamstrung by the superpower rivalry. With American blessings, the Pakistani military became a formidable force in the conduct of Pakistan's foreign and defense affairs, rendering civilian rulers subservient to the military leadership. Pakistan gave four military dictators—Muhammad Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul Haq, and Pervez Musharraf—who were all great favorites of the United States. No doubt, they (Generals) enjoyed a lion's share in the decision-making process in external and security affairs. Interestingly, Pakistan's top military brass skillfully manipulated to garner diplomatic and military support from both the United States and China. In that situation, India was faced with an impending international isolation, having no dependable friends to deal with an existential threat from its hostile neighbors. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had an onerous responsibility to ensure the country's security and territorial integrity against the potential threat from the strategic trio—America, China, and Pakistan. Indeed, geopolitical and security compulsions brought India closer to the Soviet Union, resulting in the conclusion of the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between New Delhi and Moscow. The treaty proved its utility as a psychological deterrent against a direct military involvement by China and/or the United States on behalf of Pakistan during the Indo-Pak War of 1971. Also, it contributed to the establishment of "special ties" between India and the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War period, the Soviet Union firmly remained India's "time tested" friend. And for Pakistan, it was a most turbulent period in its relationship with the former Soviet Union. Whether it was by accident or by miscalculations, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was a self-suicidal act. Concomitantly, Pakistan became a frontline state in the US strategic schema to fight the proxy war against Soviet forces. Naturally, Pakistan turned out to be the Soviet Union's sworn enemy. The latter also launched an "aggressive campaign" against Pakistan's nuclear program in the mid-1980s. According to the memorandum prepared by CIA's Officer of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis:

For the past few years Moscow has campaigned actively against Pakistan's Nuclear Weapon Program in the both the press and private demarches. Although Moscow's criticism is consistent with its longstanding desire to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, it also, is exploiting the issue to its own advantage in South Asia. Soviet attacks on Pakistani Program escalate during periods of tension with Islamabad—usually over Afghanistan—and subside when Moscow is seeking improved bilateral ties.<sup>8</sup>

As geopolitical compulsions dictated, the United States did not invoke its anti-proliferations legislative Acts such as the Symington (1976), the Glenn Amendment (1977), and the Pressler Amendment (1985) against Pakistan, though knowing full well that Pakistan was clandestinely progressing toward



nuclearization. It was disclosed by former Senator Larry Pressler, the author of the Pressler Amendment, in his newly released book titled *Neighbors in Arms* (2017). While recalling his efforts to prevent Pakistan from becoming a nuclear power, Pressler became frustratingly annoyed that the US president sought to reverse the Pressler Act by certifying that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear device.<sup>9</sup> There were two underlying political compulsions behind the United States' stoic silence over Pakistan's nuclear program. First, the United States assigned Pakistan the status of a frontline state in a proxy war against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Second, the United States feared that a rift in the US-Pakistan relationship might prompt Moscow to begin political rapprochement with Pakistan.

### RUSSIA'S NEW APPROACH TO SOUTH ASIA

Throughout the Cold War period, the Soviet Union's South Asia policy remained India-centric. Its historic legacy was carried forward under the Putin leadership—a diehard realpolitiker—in the post-Soviet era, albeit with minor political differences between New Delhi and Moscow. Geopolitically, Russia considered India as a counter balancing force in South Asia vis-à-vis the United States, including China to some extent. As mentioned before, India-Russia ties were mainly based on military and defense cooperation, with India being a major buyer of Russian arms. Gradually but steadily, their bilateral defense cooperation was upgraded to the level of co-development and coproduction of sophisticated weapon systems like BrahMos missiles.

Be that as it may, the deepening strategic partnership between New Delhi and Moscow prodded White House officials to weaken it by initiating strategic cooperation with India as early as in 2004. In 2005, India and the United States signed a defense pact for a period of ten years. As its defense partner, the United States captured India's market in defense sector, which culminated into its military sales valued at \$15 billion between 2008 and September 2018. The growing defense trade ties between Washington and New Delhi divested Russia of a large share in India's arms procurement (currently, \$620 billion). As such, Russia felt betrayed by, what it silently perceived, India's strategic shenanigan.<sup>10</sup>

Cumulatively speaking, a spate of developments such as India's increasing tilt toward the United States, the latter's diatribes against China, and Washington's slapping of economic and trade sanctions on Russia following the latter's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, led to a major shift in Russian foreign policy perception and approaches under the Putin leadership. As Russia's national interests demanded, President Putin went on a political spree to finding new friends and cultivating old ones in Asia to garner their political and moral support, essential for his beleaguered leadership. As a

part of that strategy, Putin crafted Russia's South Asia policy in such a manner that Moscow appeared to be more committed to maintaining the balanced relationship with India and Pakistan rather than tilting toward either of them.

Driven by the geopolitical realism in the face of the persisting security threat from extremist and jihadi elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also fearing the "takeover of nuclear weapons by a military group,"<sup>11</sup> Putin took a U-turn in his South Asia policy. He recognized the imperative of initiating dialogue with Islamabad in order to deal with an impending threat to Russian internal security, emanating from a strong presence of thousands of foreign terrorists on Pakistani soil, including Chechens and Tajiks. It is interesting to note that Vladimir Moskalenko and Petr Topychkanov, close watchers of Russian affairs, have advanced tangible reasons behind the emerging political chemistry between Moscow and Islamabad. To them, what brings Moscow and Islamabad closer is their shared security interests, ranging from containing the threat of terrorism and drug trafficking to nuclear insecurity. They write:

Moscow also has interests in South Asia that have forced it to develop its ties with Islamabad and other regional actors in recent years. And while Russia approaches Pakistan as part of its larger strategy in South Asia, Moscow and Islamabad have their own agenda that is not dependent on other countries. Further developing the relations between these two nations can be an important instrument of economic growth and security in both South and Central Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, President Putin prioritized the "privileged strategic partnership" with India. Interestingly, Pakistan did not figure in his 2013 Foreign Policy Concept. It was a clear message that India loomed large in Russia's strategic priority.

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, Russia's core concerns vis-à-vis South Asia may be summed up. There are a myriad of Russian interests in its geopolitical outreach to Pakistan. First, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is perceived "by Russia as advancing the trend of Eurasian integration and is therefore in alignment with the country's grand strategy."<sup>13</sup> Second, Moscow, unlike Washington, has an advantage that its relationship with Islamabad is not directed against New Delhi. Third, Russia's redefined South Asia policy, based on a "no-tilt policy" toward India or Pakistan, is driven by bolstering the Russian image as an assertive player in regional affairs. Fourth, Russia's diversification of defense bazaar is not intended to bypass India as its priority defense partner. Petr is of a firm view that "Pakistan cannot replace or even influence Russia's strategic partnership with India. India will always play a very special role in Russia's foreign policy and Russia is very much interested in keeping the strategic level of its ties

with India.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, Russia needs India to balance off China’s overarching role in Asia.

### **Pakistan’s Changing Perception**

It is no secret that Pakistani military elites played a pivotal role in bringing Moscow and Islamabad closer. A majority of Pakistani parliamentarians and political leaders conceded across party lines that it was their egregious blunder to fight a proxy war against the Soviet Union on behalf of the United States, which, in their perception, branded Pakistan as the “mother of terrorism” in South Asia and Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Without concealing their inner agony and laceration, civilian leaders have been accusing the United States of fostering the military regime in Pakistan, which, they contend, has resulted in curbing the growth of democratic institutions, as well as nurturing terror elements in Pakistan, including the Haqqani network in Afghanistan. Citing Haji Muhammad Adeel, then-chairman of Pakistani Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, Tim Craig writes, “Pakistan’s historical mistake after its inception was to establish close ties with the United States but to ignore the Russians. . . . We went to war with Russia in Afghanistan, and that brought us gifts of terrorism, extremism and drugs. Now Pakistan is trying to forge friendly ties with Russia to correct the mistakes of past.”<sup>16</sup>

In the course of policy correction, both Moscow and Islamabad, as mutual stakeholders, have embarked on reinvigorating their relationship. In the changing geopolitical dynamic, both countries have realized the importance of working together in the areas of common concerns and interest. Petr Topychankov, South Asia expert and Associate in the Carnegie Moscow Center’s Nonproliferation Program, said in an interview with *Russia Beyond (RBTH)* in May 2016, “Russia and Pakistan have common interests in economy and security. Russia also wants to work with different partners in the region and not be stuck with just one partner. Russia is finally getting a balanced approach towards the region and seems to be elaborating a strategic approach to South Asia. This is logical.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet, the ghosts of the 9/11 tragedy are still haunting South Asia and Afghanistan. Despite fighting the longest war in Afghanistan, the United States has failed to exterminate the radical jihadi organizations, ascribing the failure to “Pakistan’s role as a sanctuary for extremist groups.”<sup>18</sup> While learning from the United States’ worst experience, Russia has recognized Pakistan’s indispensable role in curbing and controlling extremist groups in Afghanistan. Given Pakistan’s strategic location, bordering on Central Asia and the gateway to Afghanistan, Russia is all set to engage Islamabad as a balancing force in Afghanistan vis-à-vis the United States—so far as dealing with the Taliban is concerned, in particular.

Some strategic analysts are, however, of the view that Pakistan would be a misfit in Russia's evolving regional strategy of diversification, and consolidation of its relationship with core and peripheries in the region. At the same time, many security commentators agree that Russia is firmly committed to rebuilding itself from the ashes of the Cold War that heralded the "self-destruction" of the Soviet empire.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned before, China's stable military and security partnership with Pakistan is also a factor that has propelled President Putin to redefine Moscow's South Asia policy. It would, however, be a fatuous estimate to draw parallelism with Sino-Pak relations, which are patently based on their shared interests in weakening and destabilizing India. But this kind of understanding between Beijing and Islamabad is inapplicable to Russia-Pakistan relations since they do not share common interests in containing India. Also, Russia has made it absolutely clear that its military and security cooperation with Pakistan is neither directed against India nor is aimed at destabilizing it. Rather, Moscow's interest in Pakistan lies in eliciting its strategic cooperation in managing the "swelling crisis" in Afghanistan in the face of an expanding influence of Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) there. As reported by Drazen Jorgic, "Both Russia and Pakistan are also alarmed by the presence of Islamic State (IS) inside Afghanistan, with Moscow concerned the group's fighters could spread towards Central Asia and closer to home."<sup>20</sup> In this context, some key variables can be identified behind Pakistan's growing inclination toward Russia.

First, the growing chill in US-Pakistan relations, especially in the aftermath of the US raid over Abbottabad to kill al-Qaeda chief bin Laden (May 2011), forced the Pakistani ruling class to begin political rapprochement with Russia. Second, the burgeoning strategic partnership between the United States and India prompted Moscow's nonchalant attitude toward New Delhi. Tim Craig writes, "As the United States forges closer ties to India, neighboring Pakistan is looking for some new friends. Officials hope they have found one in Russia—a budding partnership that could eventually shift historic alliances in South Asia."<sup>21</sup> But Craig also thinks that "Pakistani leaders grow increasingly nervous that their traditional alliances could erode, if not crumble, in the coming years."<sup>22</sup>

Third, with the imposition of US sanctions on Russia following the latter's annexation of Crimea in 2014, President Putin sought to cultivate Moscow's relations with its erstwhile adversaries such as Pakistan. It is interesting to note that "Pakistan helped Russia to ensure its food security, when after a self-imposed food embargo against Western countries, Russia needed to find food suppliers. Pakistan started supplying Russia with agricultural products."<sup>23</sup>

Fourth, with its full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Islamabad has an enormous opportunity to build a close relationship with Moscow. Pakistan can freely interact with Russia to bolster bilater-

al cooperation in the military and security domain. Russia is equally interested in doing business with Pakistan through the CPEC project worth \$46 billion. It was also reported that “Pakistan has approved Russia’s request to use the strategic Gwadar Port for its exports, signaling a new alignment in bilateral relations after decades of sour ties during the Cold War era.”<sup>24</sup> Also, Russia is serious about joining the CPEC which, in its perception, might be beneficial in advancing its economic and trade interests in Eurasia. Li Xing, Director of Eurasian Studies Center and professor at the School of Government, Beijing Normal University, comments: “Russia’s involvement in the CPEC is to serve its own interests in economy and geopolitics, which may complicate regional affairs.”<sup>25</sup> However, Xing did not offer a satisfactory explanation as to how Russia’s entry into CPEC could complicate regional affairs.

### **Russia-Pakistan Defense Cooperation**

At the invitation of President Vladimir Putin, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf paid a state visit to Moscow in February 2003. This was the first ever visit of Pakistan’s head of state in thirty-three years, heralding a new era of relationship between Moscow and Islamabad. Though Putin and Musharraf held discussions on wide-ranging issues, including Kashmir, their talks were chiefly aimed at “overcoming decades of mistrust”<sup>26</sup> between the two countries. Musharraf added, “The past has not been much to look back to. We have to lean on whatever good we had between our two countries to create a new working relationship.”<sup>27</sup> Without creating a fuss surrounding the intractable Kashmir dispute, Putin made it unambiguously clear to Musharraf that Russia would not intervene to arbitrate on Kashmir. Rather, he emphatically told Musharraf, “All problems between India and Pakistan must be resolved in compliance with the Lahore Declaration and the Simla Accord.”<sup>28</sup> India was happy over the Russian stand on Kashmir.

To explore the possibility of enhancing cooperation with Pakistan, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov paid an official three-day visit to Pakistan in April 2007. He held in-depth discussions with President Pervez Musharraf on regional and bilateral issues of mutual interest, especially on economic and trade cooperation. More interestingly, President Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012) declared Pakistan as one of the key regional powers in his Foreign Policy Concept of 2008. Indeed, atmospheric changes in the geopolitical thinking and outlook of the Medvedev administration prepared a conducive political background for Pakistan’s entry into the SCO. Though initially, President Putin was skeptical about Russia’s relations with Pakistan, he gradually realized that there was no point in avoiding Pakistan in the changing geopolitical equations in Afghanistan. In 2011, Putin endorsed Pakistan’s bid to join as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organiza-

tion (SCO) during Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani's SCO summit meeting at the Constantine Palace in November 2011.

After becoming Russia's president for the third time in 2012, Putin gave a serious thought to crafting a pragmatic policy toward South Asia. Though Pakistan did not figure in his 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, Putin was caught up in a dilemma to address Pakistan's concerns about Moscow's decision to sell S-400 defense systems to New Delhi, on the one hand, and his military cooperation with Pakistan in the hope of eliciting the latter's support to a future settlement of the Afghan problem with the Taliban, on the other hand. These clashing interests were shrouded in a mystery. In 2014, a sudden change occurred in Putin's policy strategy. As mentioned before, the Crimea episode forced Putin to derive moral and diplomatic succor from Moscow's old and new friends, essential for boosting his political morale. In this context, China and Pakistan exhibited their solidarity with him. They firmly stood by him in the difficult times when the United States and EU were relentlessly turning their heat on Putin. Under these circumstances, Putin played his first master stroke with an announcement in 2014 to lift the arms embargo against Pakistan, which concomitantly paved the way for building military relationship between the two countries.

A military cooperation agreement was signed in Islamabad between Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Asif and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu during the latter's visit to Pakistan in November 2014. As reported:

The agreement provides for exchange of information on politico-military issues; cooperation for promoting international security; intensification of counter-terrorism and arms control activities; strengthening collaboration in various military fields, including education, medicine, history, topography, hydrography and culture; and sharing experiences in peacekeeping operations.<sup>29</sup>

The agreement was hailed as a "milestone." In addition, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif discussed modalities on accelerating bilateral military cooperation with a view to enhancing the combat efficiency of both countries' armed forces. Both the leaders underlined the imperative of jointly fighting terrorism and drug trafficking. In August 2015, Pakistan signed an agreement with Russia, amounting to \$153 million, for the purchase of four Mi-35M Hind attack helicopters. The attack helicopters were delivered to Pakistan in August 2017, which would replace aging helicopters in Pakistan's air force inventory. It was confirmed by Brigadier General Waheed Mumtaz of Pakistan's Defense Export Promotion Organization (DEPO). As reported, "Based on the gunships' performance a follow-up order for additional helicopters is under consideration, Mumtaz said. The general also noted that other Pakistani orders of Russian military equipment might take place depending on the Pakistani

military's experience with the helicopters."<sup>30</sup> In this context, it should be pointed out that Russian government discarded any possibility of selling SU-35 fighter aircraft to Pakistan. Denis Alipov, Deputy Head of Mission in the Russian Embassy in New Delhi, clarified the Russian position on transfer of sophisticated fighter aircraft to Pakistan. He said, "I would also like to respond to the idle talk and pure invention of the media by reiterating that Russia has not discussed and does not have any plans to sell Su-35 aircraft to Pakistan."<sup>31</sup>

Though there is little possibility of Russia's sale of S-400 missile air defense systems to Pakistan, the latter would be under a close radar of the S-400 missile system, the deal for which was signed by Prime Minister Modi and President Putin during the latter's visit to New Delhi in October 2018. Nevertheless, Pakistan perceives Russia as an attractive market for updating its weapon systems, especially after American cuts and arms embargo. To put it on record, Pakistan annually spends nearly \$7 billion on defense—a huge money while compared to India's size.

It also merits a mention that Russia is in a quest for diversifying and expanding its defense industry to boost its weapons sale without ideological and political inhibitions, even at the cost of Indian sensitivity. Thus, an apparent shift in Russian policy toward South Asia has nudged Pakistan closer to Russia. Simultaneously, Pakistan is allured by the Russian offer of selling tanks, attack helicopters, and air defense systems at a comparatively much lower price, without bureaucratic bottlenecks when compared to US strict regulations and preconditions. In 2016, American declined to supply F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan under the Foreign Military Financing. As reported, "To adequately defend Pakistan airspace, the military would need to deploy at least three regiments of S-400 with total procurement cost potentially as high as \$2.5 billion."<sup>32</sup> Despite the expanding defense cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, the Kremlin leadership can ill-afford to bypass Indian concerns. Nor will Moscow risk losing India, as Russia has enormously invested in its robust friendship with India, at the expense of rejuvenating its ties with Pakistan. President Putin, a hard core realist, takes pragmatic decisions by weighing all pros and cons of Russia's relations with India and Pakistan in cost-effective terms.

### *Military Exercises*

The growing military cooperation between Russia and Pakistan is primarily driven by their shared security interests. On September 24, 2016, both countries conducted the two-week intensive joint military exercises for the first time at Pakistan's Special Forces training center in Cherat in the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, with the participation of around two hundred military personnel. The drills were codenamed "Druzhba-2016," a Russian word for

“friendship.”<sup>33</sup> India got offended with Russia for conducting military exercises with Pakistan, which coincided with terrorist attacks on India’s Uri military camp in Jammu and Kashmir on September 18, 2016. India’s strategic community was prompted to describe the Russia-Pakistan bonhomie as a “shift away from India.”<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, Pakistani Army opined that joint exercises brought a “value to both sides” (stated by military spokesman Lt. Gen. Asim Bajwa on Twitter).<sup>35</sup> Naturally, there was an inexplicable joy and enthusiasm in Pakistan. Indeed, the joint military exercise was “seen as a demonstration of closer defense ties between Pakistan and Russia after they signed a military cooperation pact in 2014.”<sup>36</sup> Another joint exercise DRUZ-BA 2017 was held between Special Forces of Russia and Pakistan Armies at Minralney Vody in September 2017. It focused on counter-terrorism operations and on hostage and rescue. The Pakistan Army stated, “The joint exercise will enhance and further strengthen military ties between the two countries and share Pakistan Army’s experience in war against terrorism.”<sup>37</sup>

Further, in a landmark development, Russia and Pakistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding on bilateral naval cooperation during Pakistan’s Vice-Admiral Kaleem Shaukat’s visit to Russia in July 2018. Shaukat called on Russian Admiral Vladimir Ivanovich Korolev at the Central Museum in Saint Petersburg, where they discussed the security environment in the Indian Ocean region. Admiral Korolev eulogized “the role and contribution” of Pakistani Navy in maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>38</sup> The naval cooperation between them is, however, watched in New Delhi with circumspection to assess its long-term implications for India’s security stakes in the Indian Ocean.

What are motivating factors behind these joint military exercises? They signify a major change in Moscow’s policy stance toward Islamabad, based on their mutually beneficial interests. Russia’s key interest, for instance, lies in fighting Islamic militancy and an increasing drug trafficking network across its borders on Central Asia and Afghanistan. And Pakistan’s interest lies in procuring Russian weaponry and accessing its energy resources. It may be noted that during Pakistani Foreign Minister Khawaja Arif’s visit to Russia in February 2018, Moscow and Islamabad announced plans “to establish a commission on military cooperation to combat the threat of IS in the region.”<sup>39</sup>

So far as the Moscow-Islamabad military cooperation is concerned, it is still at an embryonic stage. Russian Ambassador to India Nikolay Kudashev, in an interview to *The Hindu*, frankly admitted that Russia’s military relationship with Pakistan had been overly exaggerated. He stated:

Our relations with Pakistan in the military sphere are of a very minimum nature, and are strictly limited to anti-terrorism operations, and are not comparable in any way to the scope of our relations with India. Most importantly,



our ties with Pakistan cannot be viewed as an attempt to change the regional strategic balance. We strive to have normal relations with Pakistan, which I understand is the intention of India as well. We want to support those forces in Pakistan who have the same intentions as us, to fight terrorism in all of its manifestations.<sup>40</sup>

From the above statement, it is crystal clear that Russia is aware of the Indian sensitivity over Moscow's growing military ties with Islamabad. Time and again, the Kremlin leadership has been conveying to India in unambiguous terms that Russia's engagement with Pakistan would not jeopardize its age-old ties with New Delhi. However, one cannot deny that there is a clear-cut shift in Russia's geostrategic approach to South Asia under which Moscow is endeavoring to repair its fractured ties with Pakistan. India need not be oversensitive over it. New Delhi should realize that it has also diversified its defense trade with countries such as the United States, Israel, and France. The changing geostrategic equation in South Asia is a part of the ongoing strategic realignment among powers at the regional level.

### **Russia-Pakistan Energy and Economic Cooperation**

Pakistan has been wading through the worst energy crisis, stymieing its industrial growth and economic development. To tide over the crisis, Islamabad is diversifying its energy resources, as is manifest from its energy cooperation with China with the launch of the CPEC project. In the past couple of years, Pakistan has been seriously exploring the possibility of accessing Russia's vast energy resources, while Russia is also in search of new gas markets. Notably, Russia is the world's largest crude oil producer and the second largest natural gas producer. A major development took place in 2017 when both countries signed an agreement for Russia's investment of \$2 billion in construction of "the 'North-South' gas pipeline (from Karachi to Lahore)."<sup>41</sup> Abbas notes:

Now, Russia offers new avenues for strategic and economic partnership for Pakistan. Both have many points of convergence. While Pakistan needs Russian investment for reviving its economy, Russia is also eyeing Pakistan as a good destination for its investments and trade. Afghanistan, India-US relations could be a challenging factor in Pak-Russia relationship, but both countries are determined to better their relations despite constraints that are manageable.<sup>42</sup>

Toward that end, the first strategic dialogue was held in Moscow in 2013, which "marked a new phase in Pak-Russia bilateral ties [providing] the institutional framework for rebuilding the relationship."<sup>43</sup> The second strategic dialogue was held in Islamabad in October 2014 to discuss modalities and adoption of concrete steps for increasing energy cooperation between two

countries. In these deliberations, the Russian side was represented by Deputy Foreign Minister Morgulov Igor Vladimirovich and the Pakistani side by Additional Secretary for Europe Nadeem Riyaz.

At the same time, the financial dispute with Pakistan is causing a grave concern to Russia. It was reported that Pakistani Bank withheld 160 million of Russian money that has been “impeding progress in ties.”<sup>44</sup> In spite of that, as reported on December 23, 2014, “Pakistan and Russia signed a most sought-after energy deal of \$1.7 billion for laying a liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline from Karachi to Lahore.”<sup>45</sup> Another Pak-Russia deal was signed in 2015 under which Russia agreed to invest \$2 billion in the construction of a gas pipeline from Lahore to Karachi.<sup>46</sup> Abbas writes:

Russia has offered Pakistan investment in the energy sector, and the export of 5000 MW electricity through Kyrgyzstan-Afghanistan route. It can play its part in meeting Pakistan’s energy needs. Russian company Gazprom is ready to invest in Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline. . . . Major Russian companies in the energy sector, including Techno promexport, Rostec-Global Resources, Rushydro International, Power Machines, Inter RAO, United Engine Corporation, and Stochinsky Institute of Mining have shown keen interest in cooperation with Pakistan.<sup>47</sup>

So far as trade and investment cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad is concerned, there is an environment of uncertainty and skepticism. Russian companies are primarily concerned about the security of their employees in Pakistan in light of persistently potential terrorist threats. Unless the Islamabad regime addresses Moscow’s security concerns, Russian investors are not likely to take any risks on the investment front. In Russian perception, “any further deterioration of the security situation between Pakistan and Afghanistan could entirely prevent Russia from implementing long-term projects there. Russian investors also question whether the Pakistani authorities can protect their investments.”<sup>48</sup>

Some strategic commentators argue that Russian investment in Pakistan is contingent on India’s perception whether or not it registers serious protest over Russia-Pakistan investment tie-ups. Vladimir Moskalenko and Petr Topychkanov note perhaps correctly that “if Russia, for example, were to take part in projects to modernize and develop Pakistan’s railroad network, India might interpret it as Moscow’s helping to increase the mobility of Pakistani armed forces. To alleviate Indian concerns, such projects should be as transparent as possible without compromising Pakistan’s interests.”<sup>49</sup> In order to address Indian concerns, Russia needs to muster the diplomatic finesse to strike a proper balance between its own core national interests and India’s legitimate energy and security interests without marring Moscow’s friendship with Islamabad and New Delhi.

## Dialogue on Civil Nuclear Cooperation

So far as the imperative of nuclear energy cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad is concerned, Pakistan needs to supplement its energy sources to overcome the energy crisis it is currently faced with. But the prospect of such cooperation appears to be bleak and a far-fetched imagination. There are a host of underlying reasons. First, the potential of nuclear cooperation is chiefly dependent on the degree and level of trust between two countries. Russia is fully cognizant of Pakistan's dubious record in the past over the transfer of nuclear technology to North Korea, Iran, and Libya, which might be a dampener on Russia's nuclear energy support to Pakistan. It is most unlikely that Russia will easily agree to setting up civil nuclear reactors in Pakistan. In an interview given on September 28, 2015, Denis Alipov, Deputy Chief of Mission in the Russian Embassy in New Delhi, clearly stated that "Russia is the only country practically collaborating with India in the nuclear energy sector."<sup>50</sup> Second, India's moral pressure on Russia also makes the latter cautious about dealing with the highly controversial nuclear energy issue. It must be added that the Modi government has been occasionally sounding the Kremlin leadership that unlike India, Pakistan does not have an impeccable nuclear record, in order to discourage Russia to set up nuclear energy plants in Pakistan.

Interestingly, Pakistan's strategic community has blown the issue out of proportion that the Putin administration's interest in treating Pakistan at par with India would go a long way in strengthening friendly ties between Moscow and Islamabad. It may be recalled that the United States had flatly declined to ink an agreement on civilian nuclear energy cooperation with Pakistan on the ground that unlike India, Islamabad did not possess a perfect record on nuclear non-proliferation. Nor did the Bush administration (junior) endorse the idea of granting Pakistan the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver, though India was granted the waiver in 2008 with the Bush administration's blanket support. But the ongoing military and security cooperation has at least sparked some "life" into Moscow-Islamabad relationship.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, India was taken aback when Russia and Pakistan signed in August 2018 a memorandum under which Russia agreed to deliver the civilian radar Surok to Pakistan to protect its nuclear power plant in Karachi against any attack [that is from India]. As reported in the *Telegraph*, "For the first time, Pakistan will be protected by Russian equipment against any hypothetical attack on its nuclear installations launched by India. Oddly, no one in India—in the media, in the strategic community or in government briefings—has discussed this deal which has been in Russia's public domain for over a month. In Moscow, however, the deal is integral to analyzing South Asia now."<sup>52</sup> This unique development in the Russia-Pakistan relationship is an eye opener for India. Even the Putin-Modi bonhomie may not work in dis-

suading the Putin administration from concluding such cooperation with Pakistan that might threaten the Indian security.

## CONCLUSION

Relations between nations are no more enduring and stable in today's world of "complex interdependence." They alter with a change in geostrategic landscape. In this context, the newly established military cooperation between Russia and Pakistan should not spring a surprise to India. It would be a fatuous estimate if Russian-Pakistani relations are strictly seen in a narrow sense of an Indian sensitivity over an increasing political rapprochement between Moscow and Islamabad. Rather, the growing strategic understanding between them needs to be perceived in a broader perspective of Russia's soured relationship with the United States and the European Union, which have imposed stringent sanctions on Russia since 2014. In other words, Moscow-Islamabad relations are neither directed against India nor does Moscow intend to dilute the Russian-Indian strategic partnership.

Essentially, it is a double-edged Russian weapon. First, it is a raucous message to its adversaries that Russia was bound to traverse the "path of assertiveness" on regional issues. Second, it is an unambiguous signal to India that Russian foreign policy is driven by its enlightened national interests that dictate it to diversify its defense and security cooperation, including sales of military hardware to Pakistan. Viewed from this perspective, India need not amp up its political temperature if Pakistan looms large in Russia's South Asia policy. Importantly, Russia's newly defined South Asia policy is aimed to pursue a balanced relationship with New Delhi and Islamabad without tilting in favor of either of them. Much against an immature assessment, however, by the inside watchers of South Asian affairs, Islamabad has been unable to cause stormy ripples in the Moscow-Delhi relationship. Similarly, President Trump's initial threat to slap sanctions on India under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act) did not work. On the contrary, India defied Trump's fiat when it signed the \$5 billion S-400 deal with Russia in October 2018. The deal sent a sturdy message to Pakistan's new government led by Imran Khan that Russia's growing military cooperation with Pakistan would not hamper the "special privileged partnership" between Moscow and New Delhi. In realistic terms, while cozying up to Pakistan, Russia's prime concern is focused on promoting its core strategic interests in South Asia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Russia understands it very well as to what price it will have to pay for losing the war against terrorist outfits, notably the ISI in Afghanistan. In Russian estimation, the regional destabilization will trigger the "tidal wave" of refugees flooding into its borders.

In brief, Russia's "envisioned balancing role," as an integral part of conceptualizing its foreign policy in the twenty-first century, will continue to form an anchor sheet of its relations with Pakistan. The latter has proved its indispensability in its dual strategic roles in addressing "the Afghan conundrum," and bringing Russia in Eurasian integration through CPEC. In both capacities, Pakistan is indeed alluring to Russia.

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# Conclusions

South Asia is sitting atop a deadly volcano. In its extended neighborhood, comprising Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Central Asia, the internal political, economic, and security environment is fast deteriorating. Each country of the region is afflicted with unprecedented problems of one kind or another, ranging from economic mismanagement to communal divide, in addition to illegal migration. Let us scan out their domestic surfaces before reflecting on the unfolding interplay of extra-regional powers in South Asia and its neighborhood.

## ONE

Pakistan has been wading through an unprecedented balance of payment deficit. With barely \$9.9 billion in foreign exchange reserves, Pakistan minimally needs a fresh bailout worth \$15 billion from various sources, including the IMF and its friendly countries such as Saudi Arabia, Arab Emirates, and China. Saudi Arabia agreed to lend \$3 billion in support of balance of payment and \$3 billion loan for oil imports during Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Riyadh in October 2018. China has also agreed to provide \$6 billion in aid to Pakistan. These are temporary relief measures, which can hardly solve its gnawing financial position. It should be noted that Pakistan has already received twelve bailouts from the IMF since the 1980s. Pertaining to a new IMF bailout, the Trump administration has cautioned the IMF to ensure that Pakistan does not divert the IMF funds to repay its mounting debt owed to China.

## TWO

Illegal migration to South Asia and its neighborhood is a writ large phenomenon, burdening the hitherto fragile economies and aggravating the internal security quandary. For instance, the influx of 40,000 Rohingya Muslims, hailing originally from Bangladesh, into India's different parts, notably in Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh and New Delhi, entails a potential security risk for law and enforcement agencies. Similarly, beginning in late August 2017, over 655,000 Rohingya crossed over from Myanmar to Bangladesh to escape "ethnic cleansing" by the Burmese military following a militant attack in Rakhine State.<sup>1</sup> Such a huge influx has caused an unprecedented strain on Bangladesh's "meager resources."

## THREE

The island state of Sri Lanka, in India's backyard, has not yet been able to restore ethnic peace and harmony between the majority-dominated community Sinhalese and a minority community of Sri Lankan Tamils ever since the wiping out of the (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) LTTE-led terrorism in 2009. The country suffered the worst civil war for over two decades, fundamentally attributed to discriminatory policies practiced by Sinhalese ruling leaders against Sri Lankan Tamils. Moreover, its nation-building process has been severely hampered by Colombo's failure to repay the mounting debt to China. Consequently, Sri Lanka was compelled to hand over its strategic Hambantota port to China on a ninety-nine-year lease, causing alarmingly grave security concerns to India in its backyard.

Yet in another dramatic political development, President Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in October 2018, and appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa, a former authoritarian president, as prime minister. It created a constitutional deadlock in the island nation, throwing it into a deep political turmoil. The Indian fear was that if Rajapaksa was confirmed as prime minister,<sup>2</sup> it might have spillover effects on India's economic and security interests in the Indian Ocean region. One might recall that Rajapaksa was responsible for bringing China's influence in Sri Lanka with leasing out Hambantota port to China and permitting the latter to dock its submarine in Sri Lanka. But President Sirisena was forced to reinstate Ranil Wickremesinghe on December 16, 2018, following the Supreme Court's nullifying of Sirisena's illegal sacking of Wickremesinghe, who later won the confidence vote in the parliament. This incidence serves as an example that the ruling class in South Asia, behaving in an authoritarian manner by flouting democratic norms and values, ultimately yields to the apex court's verdict.

## FOUR

Another island state of the Maldives sank into a political turmoil in February 2018 following the imposition of a state of emergency by the authoritarian President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, who suspended people's constitutional rights. Curiously enough, he sent the Supreme Court's Chief Justice Abdullah Seed, including former President M. A. Gayoom and political leaders, to jail on the charge of overthrowing the government. India's reaction to the emergency and persecution of political dissidents was mild and ambiguous. The world community undoubtedly expected India's appropriate response to help restore democracy and the rule of law in the Maldives. Perhaps, China's mild warning to India not to intervene in Maldivian affairs had constricted New Delhi's policy options. India's nonchalant attitude further reflected from ignoring the appeals of former presidents Mohamed Nasheed and M.A. Gayoom for intervention, while India had acted on the regime's appeal in 1988 to foil the military coup in the Maldives through India's military intervention, codenamed Operation Cactus.

President Abdulla Yameen got a severe political setback when he lost the presidential election to Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, a Maldivian Democratic Party candidate in September 2018. The Supreme Court rejected Yameen's petition on October 21, 2018, to cancel the allegedly rigged election. It cleared the dock, ending his five-year dictatorship, and paved the way for democracy in the Maldives. For India, the new power transition is a propitious opportunity to repair its fractured ties with Male. The Beijing leadership is upset over the possibility of reviews and audits of previous projects inked with China. There is a lurking uncertainty on President Solih's next political move on the fate of the China-sponsored projects. It may be recalled that when Maithripala Sirisena became Sri Lanka's president in January 2015, he ordered to review all previous projects concluded with China. But things suddenly changed in China's favor. President Sirisena's state visit to China in March 2015 was a landmark political development in the Colombo-Beijing relationship. President Xi accorded him a red carpet welcome and announced a huge package of infrastructure aid to Sri Lanka. The aid package psychologically mesmerized Sirisena who later agreed to resume Chinese projects with minor modifications.

The above brief survey of the domestic scenario in South Asian countries will be helpful in informing our broad conclusions on geopolitical and geostrategic profile of South Asia's extended neighborhood.

In common parlance, South Asia is termed as India-centric by virtue of its geographical size, population, economy, industrial strength, technological and military prowess, and nuclear and missile power capabilities. Resultantly, an insecurity syndrome seems to have afflicted smaller countries in South Asia inasmuch as they perceive India as a hegemon. India's hegemonic im-

age has been further magnified and widely propagated by Pakistan to stir up anti-India sentiment in the region. But Pakistani efforts have gone awry. Nor has its anti-India campaign among Islamic countries' organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Countries and the Gulf Cooperation Council, cut much ice with them. At the same time, India's hardened approach and rigid attitude toward Pakistan has contributed to stymieing peace dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad.

## FIVE

It is by sheer accident or design that India and Pakistan are at loggerheads. Their hostility got an added boost when they carried out nuclear weapon tests in May 1998. Pakistan celebrated its nuclear weapon tests, feeling more secure against the Indian threat with its claim to have attained strategic symmetry vis-à-vis India. Based on reliable sources, Pakistan possesses more nuclear warheads than India, and it might emerge as the world's third largest nuclear arsenal after the United States and Russia in a decade or so. Will it not be an irony if Pakistan leaves China behind in the nuclear inventory? If this ever happens, China will be responsible for the bizarre situation since it was China that helped develop Pakistan's nuclear sinews, including the bomb design. The other side of the coin is that India made an extraordinarily momentous decision to carry out its first nuclear blast in May 1974, provoking Pakistan into chasing India. In an interview, Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan made a claim to this effect, "it was an Indian nuclear explosion in May 1974 that prompted our nuclear program, motivating me to return to Pakistan to help create a credible nuclear deterrent and save my country from Indian nuclear blackmail."<sup>3</sup>

India's security problem might accentuate with its official declaration of the no-first-use policy, while Pakistan has not followed Indian suit. In effect, there is a strong possibility of Pakistan's first nuclear strike against India, maybe out of desperation or miscalculation. On the contrary, India has not come out with an unambiguous policy or tactical approach to deal with an eventuality of nuclear crisis. Moreover, both countries are relentlessly engaged in a kind of psychotic war and have not yet developed a precise plan to deal with a potential nuclear exchange between the two countries, inadvertently triggered by misperception and miscalculation or desperation, although the Indian government has announced its nuclear-command authority.<sup>4</sup>

The most troubling question is why India and Pakistan are rapidly expanding their respective nuclear building program, notwithstanding the scarcity of resources and economic hardships of the people. In this scenario, India's situation is likely to be far worse than the United States. It must be remembered that a nuclear Lilliputian like North Korea brought America to

its senses by giving a loud message to the Trump administration that Pyongyang was fully capable of wiping out its old strategic allies—South Korea and Japan—from the geographical map as well as challenging American supremacy in nukes. That is why President Donald Trump preferred to have a one-on-one summit meeting with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un in Singapore in June 2018, and February 2019 (Vietnam), bringing the hyper-superpower to its knees. The point I wish to underline is that India needs to derive an appropriate lesson from this episode rather than overlooking or downplaying the nuclear threat from Pakistan. Rather, India should adroitly assess, evaluate, and work out new strategies to ensure its own security as well as regional peace and stability.

The world community is seriously concerned about the safety and security of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and India, especially fearing that the nukes might fall into the hands of terror outfits. The persistently alarming situation warrants that India and the United States undertake concerted efforts to ensure that Pakistani strategic assets are safe, even though its civilian ruling leaders have discounted such conjectural notions. At the same time, Pakistan's military elites and the civilian government have overtly or covertly expressed their inability to control their homegrown terrorist groups. Truly speaking, it reinforces the widely held perception that Pakistan's ability to govern has sagged in the face of the paramount influence of non-state actors.

## SIX

### **Strategic Vacuum**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the resultant power vacuum bolstered China's ambition to expand its strategic footprint in South Asia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Indian policy makers were caught off guard when China drew smaller countries of South Asia such as Nepal and the Maldives into its strategic fold through an aid instrumentality. China succeeded in weaning them away from India, while knowing it well that the latter was unable to offer a huge economic package to them. For example, Nepalese Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli made a decision in September 2018 to revive \$2.5 billion Budhi Gandaki Hydro Power Plant project, which was canceled by his predecessor. Oli's last moment cancellation of Nepalese troops' participation in the BIMSTEC joint military exercise (September 2018) was in utter disregard to Prime Minister Modi's appeal at the BIMSTEC plenary session in Kathmandu in August 2018 to all BIMSTEC members to participate in it. It was a big diplomatic setback to India that Nepalese troops chose to stay away from participating in the joint military exercise under Chinese pressure. In other words, India could not anticipate that China could be a stumbling block, constricting its role and influence in the region.

It is still a debatable point whether New Delhi needs a robust diplomacy to carve out its own strategic vision in order to thwart Beijing's policy of India's strategic encirclement, known as the string of pearls theory. Notably, China has managed to win over Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepal as well as downgrade their traditional high voltage relationship with India. In this scenario, India should concentrate on eroding China's growing interventionist role in South Asia by offering liberal economic aid to its smaller neighboring countries and winning back their past trust. Though the Modi government may boast of regaining the trust of most of South Asian countries, the fact remains that Indian diplomacy not only lacks clarity and coherence but also a well calibrated and a well-integrated approach to deal with neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

India-China relations are hamstrung by strategic rivalry in the extended South Asia. The chasm may escalate and calcify the hitherto mutual trust deficit. Furthermore, China's frequent incursions into Indian territory, whether it be Ladakh or Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, belie any hope for an early resolution of the outstanding border dispute. Rather, strategic confrontation could ensue between them. Therefore, India will need to narrow down the "military gap" vis-à-vis China by modernizing and updating its defense and security systems.

The summer 2017 (June–August) incursions of the PLA troops into Doklam (the disputed area between China and Bhutan) should be a revelation to India. On the contrary, India's public policy elites and BJP's (Bharatiya Janata Party) political heavyweights began beating the drums that the Modi government succeeded in forcing China to withdraw its troops from the Doklam plateau, describing it as a great "Indian victory." Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that China has not completely ceased its incursion activities in Doklam. Rather, Doklam might prove to be a Waterloo for India if it fails to undertake efficacious counter-defense measures. Indeed, India has been caught in a dilemma of an offensive-defensive syndrome, unable to take a firm position against Chinese misadventurism. Unfortunately, India's strategic community is either not cognizant of China's strategic culture or has internalized India's inability to counteract China's strategic aggrandizement in the region. The Modi government, therefore, will need to articulate its vision for India's role in South Asia vis-à-vis China.

In realistic terms, India's foreign policy has suffered myriad buffets from diverse sources, including foreign service bureaucrats, extra-constitutional authorities, retired bureaucrats, and mediocre policy makers who have hardly grasped the complexities and nuances of foreign policy and diplomacy. As far as Indian political leaders are concerned, they may be super experts in manipulating and mastering domestic politics, but when it comes to foreign policy, they have proved themselves utterly incompetent. This naturally paves the way for an unconstrained space to India's top class bureaucracy to virtually run the country's foreign, defense, and security affairs.

Moreover, in a parliamentary democracy like India, Members of Parliament can be assigned any portfolio, including ministry of external affairs, regardless of whether or not they possess a sound background and experience in the field of foreign policy, especially in a complex interdependent world order. In this scenario, extra-constitutional authorities enjoy enormous powers to conduct diplomacy without constitutional obligations. In India's case, the National Security Adviser, a concept and model borrowed from the United States, overshadows virtually every ministry directly or indirectly. Given the multiple dimensions of the national security, consultation with all important ministries and departments is essential. The imperative of India's national interests demands reimagining, rethinking, and reevaluating the core challenges to its foreign policy and diplomacy in order to tailor it to the hard-boiled realities of an anarchic but an inevitably globalized world order.

## SEVEN

### **Lessons for the United States in Afghanistan**

The US grand strategy in Afghanistan has backfired in the recent past due to the mismatch between its security goals and resources, and between its mission and means to serve its strategic ends. As a consequence, America's NATO partners are psychologically fed up with an indefinitely protracted war in Afghanistan. They do not share the Trump administration's exit strategy in Afghanistan without a distinct roadmap. Instead of sympathizing with its NATO allies' tremendous sacrifices in Afghanistan's toughest and longest-ever war in American history, President Trump slammed them for not sharing the defense burden. In any case, NATO forces have virtually retreated from Afghanistan. The United Kingdom, once an arch supporter of the United States' global war on terrorism, has sought to maintain distance from America on the future commitment to its military role in Afghanistan. This is because Britain suffered heavily in Afghanistan in terms of human and material resources and, because of its political and strategic collusion with the United States, faced a spate of terror attacks. Similarly, France, Germany, and Belgium feel themselves insecure from the jihadi and insurgent elements. Thus, a political split between the United States and European allies is clearly visible. NATO partners' bitterest experiences in Afghanistan teach a hard lesson that the United States should desist from escalating war in Afghanistan as it has already lost the battle.

The Trump administration has neither a bright prospect nor a blinker of hope to defeat the Taliban either with the logistical and intelligence support of Pakistan or through its strategic partnership with India. The Taliban can be defeated provided all brands of multiethnic groups unitedly fight its threat with a single-minded approach. No externally inspired solution will pay off

given the complex, and strong nationalistic psychology that underpins the Afghan society. Furthermore, India's role in Afghanistan is limited. New Delhi's major concern is to safeguard its economic, trade, and security interests in Afghanistan. To serve them, India needs to maintain robust ties with the Kabul regime in power, for instance, through economic engagement for rebuilding Afghanistan. Moreover, the Afghan government led by President Ghani is morally convinced that India has neither a political ambition nor an ulterior motive to intervene in Afghanistan's internal and external affairs. Rather, Afghanistan looks upon India as a reliable source of upgrading its infrastructure, as its development partner, in health and social sectors. However, the challenge before the Afghan regime is to maintain a benign distance from a direct strategic confrontation between China and India.

Another important dimension of the Afghan imbroglio is that President Ghani does not trust Pakistan. He has been openly blaming it for sponsoring terror to destabilize Afghanistan. At the same time, Ghani's shrinking political base is a major concern to India and the United States. In this situation, nothing can be precisely predicted about futuristic contours of Afghan politics after Ghani's exit from power. In the post-Ghani scenario, Pakistani military is likely to make every effort to strengthen its strategic grip over Afghanistan with the help of the resurgent Taliban. In that case, India and the United States will have little leverage to shape and articulate Afghanistan's political future.

## EIGHT

### **Trump's Flawed Strategy**

The United States' Afghan policy is inertial. Despite its longest war engagement in Afghanistan, America has failed to develop a clear, coherent, and long-term strategy to deal with the AF-Pak region. It is time for the White House aides to plug structural loopholes or strategic flaws by addressing overt threats and risks emanating from the Taliban and ISIS. If we recall, the United States became the victim of its mistaken appraisal that Pakistan would help decimate the Taliban. In addition, the US assessment failed that its carrot and stick policy would change Pakistan's behavior on the question of supporting extremist groups. Nor does Pakistan's military establishment repose trust in the United States. Rather, a growing perception within Pakistani security establishment is that America is heading toward turning the Af-Pak region into "another Iraq."

It is true that the Obama administration was convinced that Pakistan was providing safe havens to extremists groups and siphoning off US aid to the jihadi elements. That game plan continued unabatedly throughout General Pervez Musharraf's regime. However, after Osama bin Laden was hunted



down and eliminated in May 2011, America became either too complacent or too nervous to finish the terror threat. This apart, the US drone strikes in Pakistan, causing civilian casualties on an unprecedented scale, have earned it the wrath and disaffection of local communities. It gave radical elements the political fodder to exploit the mass psychology to win sympathy and support of the Afghan society by projecting American acts as an assault on their honor and national pride.

President Trump carried Obama's legacy forward, albeit with a difference in style, pattern, and intensity. First, Trump was caught off guard when his ill-conceived Asia policy was discarded by NATO partners who perceived his "America first" principle as antithetical to American exceptionalism and its long-cherished liberal values. They foresaw an illiberal order in the making. Trump's new grand strategy of "illiberal hegemony" of projecting the United States as the "security arbiter" of the world order is a superfluous vision. Indeed, the United States appears to be sliding back into an "isolationist" power. This reflects on Trump's emphasis on NATO allies' sharing of the defense expenses, saying, "The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense, and if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves."<sup>6</sup> This stance has complicated Trump's foreign policy strategy—losing more friends and creating more enemies. It is quite often said that President Trump clashes with friends while flirting with foes.

Furthermore, Trump has fueled a staunch anti-US sentiment in the Arab world by granting diplomatic recognition to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, although the UN General Assembly disapproved of it by an overwhelming majority, except for nine member states. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas issued a policy statement that Palestine, along with Arab League members, would never accept an American role as a peace mediator or security manager in resolving the Arab-Israel conflict.

Also, President Trump has unnecessarily earned Iran's ire with his decision to pull out of the international nuclear deal signed during the Obama administration in 2015. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani vehemently denounced the US unilateral decision as a breach of norms and principles of international law. He lambasted that the administration's decision would only encourage "xenophobic tendencies" in the region. This scenario does not augur well for the Middle Eastern peace and stability. Moreover, Trump's bellicose speeches and statements against Iran, China, and Russia on Afghanistan have crippled the nebulous peace and reconciliation process in Kabul. This lends credence to the assessment that Trump lacks strategic clarity on his priorities in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Instead of creating conditions for peace and reconciliation, Trump seems to be jeopardizing the fragile and faltering security architecture in volatile regions.

## NINE

**China's Strategic Activism**

China's strategic activism in South Asia is likely to alter peace and security environment in the region in the coming decade or so. China has already established its strong strategic beachhead in South Asia. Through economic and trade cooperation, China has strengthened its relations with South Asian countries, whereas its offensive posture against India continues with PLA troops' incursions into Indian territory. The Doklam incidence is a benchmark of the Chinese toughness on the border issue, reinforced from the PLA's opening up of a new front of military incursion into Sikkim. Unless peace and tranquility are permanently restored on the borders, there is little hope for fostering mutual trust between the two countries.

Though Modi and Jinping enjoy a good political rapport, the persistent tension on the border issue has not lowered the rising political temperature. Their mutual threat perceptions are likely to magnify given Pakistan's negative role in vitiating the friendly environment between New Delhi and Beijing. The new coalition government, led by Imran Khan, threw unambiguous hints that his country's priority was on forging stronger ties with China. In effect, India does not figure in the priority list of Imran Khan's neighborhood policy. Partly, India is also responsible for it. Its neighbors feel the sting of alienation from India. Initially some of India's neighbors such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka were deeply drawn toward the Modi government, but that euphoria soon evaporated as Prime Minister Modi failed to deliver on his promises. On the contrary, their increasing penchant for China culminated into a cozy partnership with the latter. In this emerging scenario, India needs to address the genuine concerns of the region's smaller nations to win their trust. In other words, the Modi government should prioritize the "neighborhood first policy" that it announced in 2014. At the same time, Indian defense planners must reflect on how India's widening military asymmetry with China can be narrowed down. India's Cabinet Committee on Security needs to be revamped so that the magnitude and intensity of China's potential threat could be gauged, assessed, and effectively met with by preparing a holistic security blueprint on a long-term basis. As discussed before, India is fast losing its advantage over smaller nations like the Maldives and Nepal. It clearly reflects from India's inaction in the case of emergency declared by then President Abdullah Yameen in the Maldives. This extraordinary situation arose primarily because the Modi government gave in to China's stern warning not to meddle in internal affairs of the Maldives. Interestingly, it is during the Xi Jinping regime that China has been able to carve out its assertive role in South Asian region. Also, China is the largest exporter of weapons to India's neighbors. For instance, Bangladesh and Myanmar imported 71 percent and 68 percent of their arms respectively from China (2013–2017). And Paki-

stan accounted for 35 percent of China's arms sales (2013–2017). Thus, China has set up its arms bazaar in India's backyard, which might have long-term negative political, security, and economic implications for India. India's defense and security community either seems to be unaware of what is happening around the country or is not serious enough to chart out an appropriate course of diplomatic or strategic action to deal with any eventuality, resulting from China's strategic encirclement of India.

### **Persistence of India-Pakistan Adversarial Relations**

It is erroneous to attribute the India-Pakistan hostility to mutual misperceptions, as widely shared by Western scholars. Rather, both the countries know each other very well. The real issue confronting them is how to transcend the psychology of congenital hostility toward one another, which breeds mutual enemy images. It is further fueled by Pakistan's relentless involvement in building its nuclear arsenal with a paranoid obsession to excel India, even though its economy is in shambles and the nation-building process is inertial.

It is a profound tragedy for Pakistan that its military elites have never realized that their negative and obstructionist role in the nation building is a self-suicidal act. They need to be sensitized that it is the common people who are the real losers in terms of employment and jobs, quality of life, and economic prosperity. No political party in Pakistan has been able to muster enough political courage or moral stamina to show the right path to the military, which is an "omnipotent institution." Its recent example is the military's alleged manipulation of the July 2018 national elections in favor of Imran Khan, supposedly its "favored candidate."<sup>7</sup> This also confirms incompetence on the part of civilian leadership.

In addition, India's Pakistan bogey is a classic case of its propensity to accuse Pakistan for every crisis or bloody events in any part of India through media and indulgence in political mudslinging. It needs to be stopped. As a preeminent power, India has a major responsibility to help create a congenial environment in the region to give peace a chance to prevail. In brief, the single biggest challenge facing the region is to alter the old and rigid mindsets of ruling elites, media, and religious leaders and jihadists, who are threatening security, stability, and peace in South Asia. To that end, the geopsychology of accommodation based on the shared interests and threats needs to be cultivated through the cultural socialization of ruling classes, including religious leaders, intellectuals, and media personnel.<sup>8</sup>

In pursuit of improving India's relations with its neighbors, Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and also other heads of state and government of SAARC member nations, to his inaugural oath ceremony in May 2014. Modi followed up with his visits to Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan to improve and strengthen

India's relations with its immediate and extended neighborhood. Over a period of time, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Maldives began coming closer to China, primarily because of the latter's proactive economic aid diplomacy under the banner of infrastructure development. Gradually but steadily, China managed to consolidate its strategic stranglehold over South Asia and its extended neighborhood. On the contrary, India made no serious efforts to limit China's expanding strategic role in their external and security affairs, including the internal politics of Maldives and Sri Lanka. On the contrary, an anti-India sentiment among the smaller countries of the region is brewing up due to India's attitude of neglect toward them. Given this, it appears to be a Herculean task to translate the idea of regional integration into reality. Moreover, there is an absence of shared threat perceptions, common political values, and common strategic objectives and interests among SAARC members. The problem is further compounded by the fractured geopsychology of national elites of South Asia whose constrained vision makes it patently difficult to transform the region into a peaceful and prosperous one.

## TEN

Indian policy makers are deeply enmeshed in domestic politics with a sole focus on capturing and consolidating power at the Centre and in states. This naturally leaves them little time to debate, reflect, and contemplate on challenges facing the country's foreign policy, defense, and security interests. India possesses the essential power attributes to become an Asian superpower but in comparison to China, it lacks diplomatic maneuvering, political will, state-of-the-art strategy, and a sound foreign policy blueprint. Interestingly, China considers India neither a potential challenge to its leadership in Asia nor a threat to its overarching strategic role in South Asia and beyond. Not surprisingly, China is no longer completely dependent on Pakistan to keep India in check. Rather, China's economic and military might, in sync with its well-defined strategies, has enabled it to advance its interests in South Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia. In fact, Pakistan's importance has been marginalized in China's foreign policy in the past couple of years.

## ELEVEN

It is a sad commentary on India's electronic and print media that they hardly realize the imperative of engaging strategic analysts and experts in debates and discourses on India's foreign and defense policies. Rather, media anchors are sheerly wasting their time and energy on holding fruitless debates on narrow and provocative Hindu-Muslim divisive issues like cow slaughter,

building the Lord Rama temple, or Hindu icons and symbols. The media hype only contributes to flaring up communal tensions rather than making a meaningful contribution to the national causes. Similarly, strategic analysts and think tanks have hardly produced innovative research or first-rate policy documents to lay out a clear roadmap for India to navigate novel strategic challenges to its security interests in the Indian Ocean.

## TWELVE

Insofar as Modi's much-talked about "hug diplomacy" is concerned, it has scarcely delivered dividends except in building his personal political rapport. Instead, Indian policy makers must concentrate on modernizing and updating the country's defense infrastructure and weapon systems, indispensable for the country's security against multiple threats from diverse sources. It makes little sense in boasting of India's role as a global power. Rather, India needs to redefine and redesign its neighborhood policy to win the trust of South Asian neighbors who have been mesmerized by China's projection of an aura of power that overshadows India. Though China does not have a common political ideology and ethnic affinities with any of the South Asian states, its role and influence in the region has phenomenally been on the rise. Therefore, India will need to overhaul its inane and outdated policy approaches in order to regain its space and build its positive image in South Asia through its soft power instruments and resources.

Undeniably, Pakistan and the small South Asian countries will remain a paramount factor in reshaping South Asia's security architecture. Without their strategic cooperation and political support, a stable and peaceful South Asia can be scarcely imagined. It is, therefore, incumbent upon India to pursue a patient and prudent diplomacy to revive peace dialogue with Pakistan so that India-Pakistan relations get back on track.

Though India has entered the "Asian equation," in Henry A. Kissinger's phrase, it will be a Herculean task for India to surpass China in the military-industrial complex. Apart from this, China is a strategic heavyweight to outsmart India in its well-orchestrated diplomatic punches in the volatile regions of the Middle East, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. Despite the streak of pessimism, the chapter ends up with an optimistic note. Given India's upward graph in its economic profile and technological breakthroughs, it should be able to transcend the China phobia as well as shed off its inferiority complex vis-à-vis China.

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