

## **India-Pakistan Rivalry: Military-Strategic Relationship, Great Power Proxies, And The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Cpec)**

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### **Abstract**

The ethno-religious disputes between India and Pakistan have started since Pakistan's independence from India in 1947. The disputes span events such as border clashes, wars, and nuclear standoffs. These disputes have further intensified after the introduction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013. Based on findings from unstructured interviews with experts and a study of projects tied to China-Pakistan's extended relations under the CPEC, this article contends that the phenomenon may possibly intensify the power rivalry in South Asia, especially between India and Pakistan. In this context, military-strategic tensions between both sides may potentially deepen South Asia's power struggles, thus serving geopolitical imperatives in the region. Therefore, this article aims to discuss the rising tensions between India and Pakistan, with CPEC serving as the main concern of current threat escalation. It examines the long-term power struggles involving India and Pakistan and how foreign powers, notably the United States (US) and China, influence the strategic rivalry. Three major argumentations are discussed, namely (1) the escalation of Kashmir disputes initiated by both India and Pakistan as a show of their opportunistic attempt at expanding territorial hold; (2) the backing of China towards Pakistan and the US towards India which embolden both sides to undertake more assertive actions and responses against military confrontation; and (3) the existence of CPEC which deepens the Cold War division in South Asia and acts as the economic-security nexus in the great powers' support for their regional partners. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will provide a modest contribution to existing knowledge on whether US-China's active role in South Asia and CPEC's deepened India-Pakistan power equations may potentially escalate the region's geopolitical complex.

**Keywords:** economic-security nexus, power struggles, game-changer, nuclear, economy, geopolitics

## Introduction

This article aims to address the rising tensions between India and Pakistan, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the focal point of contemporary threat escalation. It largely examines these power struggles in the regional context – India-Pakistan's long-term protracted dispute and foreign powers' (specifically the US and China) influence over the rise and decline of this strategic rivalry. In this context, three major argumentations will be discussed: (1) the escalation of Kashmir disputes initiated by both India and Pakistan as a demonstration of their opportunistic attempt to expand territorial hold; (2) China's support for Pakistan and the US' support for India which have emboldened both sides to engage in more assertive actions and responses against military confrontation; and (3) CPEC's existence as the economic-security nexus which deepens the Cold War divide in South Asia.

### *Background of India-Pakistan Dispute*

Cohen (2011) examined the entire spectrum of the India-Pakistan relations, including the origins of their conflict, features of contention, shared perceptions of threat, varying perspectives by each other and how to control it in each country, and third-party and unofficial diplomatic efforts made thus far to promote accommodation. With the background, Cohen (2011) came out with two argumentations. First, Pakistan's use of the two-nation theory to support its territorial claims to the princely states of Hyderabad which is located in the centre of Indian territory, Junagadh, and Jammu and Kashmir, which India annexed after Pakistan utilised irregulars to seize that state, had led the Indians to believe that Pakistan was determined to further divide their country. Pakistan's repeated attempts to seize control of Kashmir through war, by employing insurgent and terrorist organisations, and its expansion of material support for separatist groups elsewhere in India for decades convinced the Indians that Pakistan intended to destabilise India. According to Cohen, the All India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress both presented opposing post-colonial visions of India. While the League wanted to create an independent state for Muslims who did not want to live in a nation where the majority of the population is Hindu, Congress sought to unite India on the basis of a composite nationalism, a democratic polity, and a powerful central government. In other words, the League saw Hindus and Muslims as two separate countries, but the Congress saw them as one nation. In essence, the League advanced a two-nation theory, whereas the Congress advanced a one-nation theory - both states then saw the other as a violent, deceptive, dishonest, hostile, and irreconcilable rival. They have thus since been unable to forge a "normal" bilateral relationship. Cohen referred to it as a relationship based on "modified Westphalian terms", not the establishment of peace. States adhere to three fundamental rules of conduct in the traditional Westphalian order: respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-interference in internal affairs; and deterrence of non-state entities located in one state's territory from attacking another. A normal relationship also involves the peacefully regulated movement of goods, people, and ideas across borders in the modern, economically interdependent world.

The unresolved and long-running dispute between India and Pakistan began in 1947 when British Governor-General Louis Mountbatten separated them into two dominions. According to the British's preliminary plan, Muslim-majority territories would become part of Pakistan, while Hindu-majority areas would become part of India. However, the plan fell through when India intervened in the first Kashmir war in 1947, leading to the first dispute with Pakistan. The dispute led to an arms race and indirectly, influenced both national states' security landscapes. India and Pakistan were then involved in the Indus Water Treaty dispute in 1960 in which the treaty was supposed to be an opportunity for freshwater sharing. Rivalry over river resources has been one of India-Pakistan's interstate tensions for a long time. This

happened when British India drew the borderlines between these two states which gave India control of the upstream, therefore intensifying tensions between both states.

Despite the ongoing military confrontation, Pakistan later tested India's military capability through border skirmishes in the Rann of Kutch in western Gujerat in 1965 (Chaudhuri, 2019). Pakistan's army intruded into India's boundary between Kutch and Sind in the northern part of the Rann, which is located a few miles south of India's claimed border. The Pakistani military was inspired to resolve the Kashmir issue through military force after the relatively poor Indian response and performance in the Battle of the Rann of Kutch. Campaign Gibraltar, a clandestine guerrilla operation in Indian-occupied Kashmir, grew into a large-scale conflict which was crushed by Indian forces. After an Indian push into Azad Kashmir and the seizure of several Pakistani mountain positions close to the Kargil area, including the Haji Pir Pass, the Pakistani army launched a counter attack on the Indian forces in the vicinity of Tithwal, UriBedore, and Poonch. However, they stumbled into a standstill in the latter stages of the fight, particularly the tank battle at Sialkot. The dispute was less widespread and ended in an accord following India's prompt action of seeking a ceasefire and referring the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to avoid a major war. After the skirmishes, both states set up a special tribunal that allowed Pakistan to own a small piece of the land.

The root cause of South Asia's instability stems from the unresolved Kashmir disputes between India and Pakistan which have led to three unconventional wars. During this era, Pakistan's military administration reassessed its military policy towards Kashmir as they observed that the dispute should be solved through military intervention. This led Pakistan to attack Kashmir in 1965 through a special operation known as Operation Gibraltar, which resulted in India's offensive response (Cheema, 2004). The progress of these two regional powers drew criticism from the international community, including the United Nations (UN) which saw the war as a major source of instability in the region. Prompt actions have been taken to impose an arms embargo on both India and Pakistan.

A few years later, in 1971, another dispute erupted due to actions of Bengali secessionists in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) which caused an influx of refugees into India. India manipulated this progress to establish a war against Pakistan on behalf of the Bengali secessionists. Nevertheless, the war was short-lived after India occupied Kashmir, recognized East Pakistan (Bangladesh) as an independent state, and retained Kashmir's status quo. The new Pakistani president, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, negotiated with India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, and concluded the Simla Agreement in 1972 as a mechanism to resolve disputes through bilateral negotiations despite the desire to preserve the "Line of Control" agreement in Kashmir (Blood, 1994). This agreement was to encourage peaceful bilateral negotiations and handle disputes without outside intervention.

Another peculiar development in the 1960-1970 era was the Pakistani defence policy review which was done due to various factors including the Sino-India border dispute in 1962, the Indo-Pak war in 1965, and the Bangladesh war issue in 1971. This progress witnessed the architecture of the stability-instability paradox when India emerged as a nuclear power and Pakistan started to initiate a nuclear program. Both sides' dramatic shifts seemed to reduce the gap in military capabilities and diminished the perceived threats towards each other. The security dilemma atmosphere could thus be observed, although India is the perceived cause of Pakistan's insecurity perceptions and its extra-regional affiliations which triggered the arms race. The Indian factor induced Pakistan's insecurity and indicated various balancing options

in terms of seeking a sustainable position vis-à-vis India, and counterbalancing India's current threats.

Later in 1979, India and Pakistan were both involved in the war in Afghanistan. The Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan seemed to provide Pakistan the opportunity to counter the rise of Pashtuns in India and the Soviets' influence in the state, and foster a friendly relationship with Afghanistan. Although this attempt was known as the "jihad" movement against the Soviets, the international forums' standpoint had focused on Pakistan's strategic move of supporting the Afghan Islamist resistance groups (Rana & Sial, 2013). The religion factor was merely a tactical strategy to justify the war. The Pakistan-Afghanistan policy prevented Kabul from being involved in the civil war and later becoming a hotbed of proxy wars among other powers. Despite this, Pakistan also wanted to promote positive ethnic factions in the region and to change the Afghan people's perspectives of historical mistrust and grievances against Islamabad. The mistrust was rooted in past support for the Taliban regime and allegations of sheltering militants in Afghanistan. The war was also a chance for Pakistan to enhance its strategic approach in Afghanistan which served as a proxy war zone, and to counter the Afghanistan-India alliance. Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have always been tense due to factors such as Kabul's opposition to Islamabad's membership in the United Nations (UN) following its independence in 1947. This objection was due to Afghans' claim on Pakistan's territory near the Durand Line, despite their efforts to promote the idea of Pashtuns in Pakistan (Grare, 2006).

## **Literature Review**

This research examined many scholars' views, for instance Husain (2016) who opined that Pakistan's grand strategy should consider the Indian threat in order to neutralize Islamabad's interests. Despite this, according to Husain (2017), Pakistan's grand strategy has also led to Afghanistan's situation in the aftermath of the US troops' withdrawal; unstable and with direct threat to Pakistan. In fact, Husain (2016) outlined that the conflict in Afghanistan has spillover effects on Pakistan. Another scholar, Paul (2014) asserted that Pakistan desires to achieve strategic parity with India in a broad context, including political power, military influence, and civilization status. In this context, Paul (2014) seems to be in line with many other scholars like Rais (2005), Shahid (2008), Bukhari (2011), and Curtis (2012) in which they felt that Pakistan's fundamental national interests in contemporary international relations is to intensify its relations with great powers.

This argument seems similar to Paul (2014) as he viewed the US and China's presence in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan and its strategic interests, to have boosted a truncated symmetry with India, and this progress has projected Islamabad as a warrior civil-military government. However, Paul (2014) argued that Pakistan's inability to contain India for the long term has intensified its military-first policies to not only to focus on parity with India politically and militarily, but also in terms of international status, for instance in cultural strength as well as diplomatic clout. In this regard, Paul (2014) viewed the concept of India-Pakistan parity to not solely apply to the political-psychological concept, but also to the military-strategic balance.

The South Asian geopolitical scenario, according to Jervis (1976), seems to have dragged prior scholars' perspectives on the India-Pakistan rivalry. He demonstrated that Islamabad has designed its strategic power through a crucial relationship with China in order to balance and achieve a degree of strategic parity with India. Jervis (1976) further detailed his

argument on this scenario by believing that China's policy engagement approach in South Asia, particularly with Pakistan, is not only to engross itself with Islamabad's national interests, but also to contain India as an emerging regional power. On the other hand, Pakistan's national interest is partly to develop parity with India, as has been pointed out by Paul (2014), and this in turn serves as part of the fundamental factors of the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry. In this regard, Paul (2014) reaffirmed that the India-Pakistan enduring rivalry is masked by a truncated power asymmetry based on military strength, economic capability, population, and territorial size.

According to Hussain (2017), India's nuclearization and its emerging close relations with the US have engrossed Islamabad in strengthening relations with Beijing as a soft balancer in the Asia-Pacific. Despite this, Hussain & Zulfikar (2019) argued that both sides have a commonality of interests regionally and globally. For Pakistan, China is a strategic partner for its security against hegemonic India, while Beijing views Islamabad as a viable corridor for energy resources from the Middle East. Relatively, the latest bilateral boost to CPEC is projected to strengthen strategic mutual interdependence between these states.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Escalation of the Kashmir Disputes***

Both India and Pakistan are involved in an international diplomatic war over Kashmir since 1947. Up to this day, the number of casualties from the Kashmir disputes has reached nearly 70, 000, and there have been numerous human rights violations (Brunt & Farooq, 2021). The root cause of this dispute is tied to its territorial and ideological parameters. Both India and Pakistan have put claims on Kashmir as part of their territory. At the same time, the Pakistanis are not satisfied with their current ruler who is a Hindu Maharaja in a Muslim-dominated state (Yarbou, 2020). Other relevant causes of the Kashmir disputes throughout the years include India's actions in violating the United Nations Resolution 1948; human rights violations by the Indian Army and authorities; and the Indus Waters Treaty. Other than that, the long-standing dispute over Kashmir also stems from the Muslim-dominated population in Pakistan, the India-Pakistan geopolitical rivalry, the India-Pakistan glacial fight, and the Ayodhya Mosque violation against the Muslim majority (Ansari et al., 2019). The disputes started after India and Pakistan's independence from Britain in October 1947 when the Pakistanis invaded Kashmir and led the past ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh to seek help from India. Help soon came, but with the cost of losing control over defense, external affairs, and communication (Bhat, 2019). In the same year, India and Pakistan fought their first war over Kashmir. India then brought the issue to the UN's attention. A ceasefire agreement was then signed in early 1949 (Haq & Sofi, 2019). However, the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution was never executed, leading to more wars (Majid et al., 2019).

Pakistan is recognized to internationalize the Kashmir disputes through international forums, including the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) which had voted for sanctions against human rights issues perpetrated by the Indian government. Pakistan's Labor Party had brought up this issue in Parliament and called on the British government to put pressure on India, which was answered with a positive response from the latter. Yet, Pakistan has failed to place international pressure on New Delhi due to India's military approach in Kashmir. Instead, evidence revealed by New Delhi to the international community portrays the Kashmir disputes as cross-border terrorism sponsored by Pakistan itself (Khan et al., 2018). Since then, there have been two more direct and indirect wars over Kashmir in 1965 and 1971 (Hronstadt, 2019).

Over time, the Indian union has undermined Kashmir's autonomy on internal matters of the state. The crisis then escalated into more of a militant movement starting in the early 1990s. This happened after the Line of Control was re-established following the 1971 Bangladesh war. The series of disputes over Kashmir includes the 1999 Kargil war and riots in 1992, 1993, 2002, and 2006 (Bhat, 2019).

India's relationship with Pakistan tumbled radically in 2019. A dispute happened on 14 February 2019 when a suicide bomber struck an Indian soldier convoy. This event clearly further worsened the dispute and was considered the single worst attack in Kashmir to have ever happened. Despite the fact that the offender is from India-controlled Kashmir, a terrorist organization based in Pakistan had claimed responsibility for the attacks. A second assault took place on 26 February 2019 when the Indian Air Force entered Pakistan's airspace over the Line of Control. Then, many airstrikes were launched from a suspected terrorist camp in the Pakistani province of Balakot. The Pakistani Air Force responded later that day just outside the Line of Control. The conflicts thus continue, with each side blaming the other for the attacks (Lalwania, 2020). India's Constitution's Articles 370 and 35A which granted Jammu and Kashmir a special status were revoked by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in August 2019 without engaging any participatory bodies or local Kashmiris, thus sparking a new crisis. The decision also contravened international law and UN resolutions that demand a democratic process. This also went against the Simla Agreement of 1972 which calls for both parties to respect each other's positions, end hostilities, and negotiate any changes bilaterally (Shafqat & Shahid, 2020).

### ***China's Backing of Pakistan and the United States' (US) Backing of India***

China and Pakistan have experienced a "glorious journey" as both develop multi-dimensional relations with each other in many areas including politics, economics, and people-to-people relations. Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Shariff during his first visit to Beijing in 2015 had quoted the Chinese President Hu Jintao's speech that China-Pakistan friendship is higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the deepest sea in the world, and sweeter than honey (Ishaque, Shah & Shah, 2019). Additionally, they also share common interests and perceive India as a security threat (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015). One of the primary interests that they have converged on is to weaken India's hegemonic role in the region. China's strategic ambitions in South Asia can and will be achieved by strengthening Pakistan's military and infrastructural developmental policies. Pakistan also values these "all-weather" relations. As quoted by former Pakistani ambassador to the US in 2006, Husain Haqqani, that "Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India, while for Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India" (Khanijo, 2014). Despite differing political postures and cultures, the China-Pakistan relations have been marked by durability. The most significant factors that have improved both sides' relations are their shared animosity and geostrategic focus on India. The quadrilateral order between China-Pakistan and the US-India started when China relatively rose and started to dominate the global defence and economic sectors. At the same time, the US' global dominance began to wane, and both countries eventually found themselves competing in the Asia-Pacific region for power, development, allegation, political beliefs, and geographical influence (Khan & Kasi, 2017).

In 1950, Pakistan was one of the first Islamic nations to recognize the People's Republic of China's independence. On May 21, 1951, the two nations formally established diplomatic ties. Despite this, the two nations' relations were tense due to their divergent foreign policies. Additionally, China had suspended Pakistan's membership in the Southeast Asia Treaty

Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) during the early stages of the Cold War, particularly when Pakistan leaned towards the Western Block (Naseer & Amin, 2011). The 1955 Bandung conference, however, offered the leaders of the two governments a chance to communicate with one another. By that time, the leaders of China and Pakistan had been to each other's countries to advance their diplomatic and economic ties. Initially, the China-Pakistan relationship was built on one main objective which was to balance India's influences in the South Asian region (Faisal, 2020). Pakistan also turned to China for diplomatic, moral, political, and military support after its relationship with the US turned sour following the 9/11 incident (Khan, 2020). Consequently, China has been backing Pakistan's defence and security with extensive military and technology (Faisal, 2020). In contrast to other smaller states in the Indian Ocean such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, Pakistan is a relatively large country with strong military forces and a strategic location – all of which will aid China in gaining control of the Indian Ocean (Ali, 2019).

In the early years of China-Pakistan strategic relations and after the Indo-China war in 1962, China embraced pro-Pakistan policies over Kashmir issues (Hussain, 2017). China has inclusively supported Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 and the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971 (Thoker & Singh, 2017). However, Chinese foreign policymakers lost interest in Pakistan after the downfall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. At the same time, India had begun efforts at reconciliation with China, therefore pushing Beijing to adopt a neutral stance on the Kashmir conflict, a well-accepted decision by India. During the 1999 Indo-Pakistan Kargil war, China maintained a neutral stance and urged both countries to resolve their differences through diplomatic dialogue, therefore was unwilling to support Pakistan (Hussain, 2017). Other than China, the US President Bill Clinton had also criticised and reprimanded Pakistan as the main perpetrator of the heinous war (Malik & Akhtar, 2021). China-Pakistan relations nevertheless extends beyond defence and security issues to include infrastructure and shipping routes. It was estimated that by 2013, both countries trade approximately 10 to 12 billion dollars a year. It is also well-known that China is the main supplier of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and missiles (Hussain & Khan, 2018). China and Pakistan are also actively involved in the joint development of fighter aircraft (Paul, 2019).

On the other hand, the US-India strategic relations started in the 1960s when China's dominance threatened India's hegemony in the South Asian region. Initially, the US provided military assistance to India during the war against China in 1962. However, the relationship turned cold when the US cooperated and provided military and economic aid to China and Pakistan from 1965 to the end of the 1970s. India's nuclear test in 1974 then forced the US to impose economic sanctions on the state. After the 1974 economic sanctions, the two countries once again cooperated in the area of military technology. However, the cooperation once again became strained following the 1998 Indian nuclear test (Farooq et al., 2018). An official visit by President George W. Bush to India in March 2006 resulted in a strategic civil nuclear deal called the "123 Agreement". This act allows the US to transfer its nuclear fuel and technology to a non-signatory (NPT) state (Hussain, 2017). With the intention of fostering greater collaboration in civil nuclear operations, civil space initiatives, high-technology trade, and missile defence, this historic pact looked as an implicit acknowledgment of India's nuclear weapons capacity. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which India was not a signatory to was intended to emphasise the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (Jangir, 2012).

China's rising economic and military power in East Asia has influenced the US' stance

as indicated by its re-establishment of strategic relations with India in order to maintain its global dominance. A US-India bilateral logistics exchange memorandum agreement (LEMOA) was signed in August 2016 to provide mutual access to their corresponding military bases for logistics (Pardesi, 2017). Through these accords, India has been able to increase its military influence and maritime influence in a number of vital areas. In practical terms, when the various militaries are engaged in activities like humanitarian aid and disaster relief or even bilateral military drills, it saves a tremendous amount of time and lowers the overall cost of the time-consuming book-keeping exercises (Rajagopalan, 2021). The growing defence trade between the two countries also contributes to India's economy (Mishra, 2018). The US-India relationship does not only encompass the fields of defence and economics but also energy, research, and technology. However, the US' pro-Indian strategy is not well-accepted by other nations such as Russia, Pakistan, and China as it disrupts the balance of power in the region (Saud & Arif, 2018).

### ***CPEC Intensifies India-Pakistan Strategic Rivalry***

The expansion of Pakistan's economy has always been of particular concern to the state's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif (Cole, 2019). Due to their mutual economic dependence, China and Pakistan also have a strong interest in the development of Pakistan's economy. The advancement of Pakistan's economy will be helpful in addressing issues of independence and extremism in western China (Ahmad et al., 2017). Thus, the concept for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was initially conceived during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's 2013 visit to Pakistan (Sheikh, 2018). However, it was only when the Pakistani Prime Minister's diplomatic visit to Beijing in 2013 that a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the CPEC was signed between both countries. Three corridors—the western, central, and eastern alignments—that travel overland from the Chinese province of Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea via the port of Gwadar were planned (Cole, 2019). Asian nations will be linked to those in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa via the CPEC (Wolf, 2018). The project's price tag is USD 62 billion (Hussain et al., 2021). Energy-related investments account for roughly 71 percent of the overall cost, followed by 4 percent in investments in the Gwadar Port, 8 percent in rail, and 13 percent for road connectivity (McCartney, 2020).

The project's main objectives are China's regional development and Pakistan's stabilisation (Cole, 2019). CPEC is regarded as a "game changer" for Pakistan's economy and regional cooperation (Wolf, 2018). Economic growth in Pakistan also resulted in job creation for the locals (Verma, 2020). Additionally, the CPEC which is also known as the "New Silk Road" in Western literature (Iqbal, 2019) has altered South Asia's geopolitics (Sheikh, 2018). It is one of the six most significant developments in the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which aims to connect China with African and European countries (Ahmed Adawi et al., 2019).

This project places equal emphasis on increasing the capacity of renewable and non-renewable energy sources in addition to developing infrastructure. These will entice international financiers to put money into these regional projects. If the projects are completed successfully, Pakistan's economy would grow and local firms will have higher chances to succeed (Wolf, 2018). By producing about 25, 000 MW of electricity by 2030, it would also assist in supplying Pakistan with much-needed energy supply (Hussain & Jamali, 2019). Additionally, CPEC is meant to act as a mediator between Pakistan and India in their dispute over Kashmir. It may present chances to improve Kashmir's economic interactions with nations in Europe, the Middle East, and West Asia. Infrastructure, pipelines, and power transmission



lines will eventually be used, and these will improve trade in Kashmir and Jammu (Hussain et al., 2021).

The CPEC was formally established on 20 April 2015 with the signing of 51 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) for various projects, totaling USD 46 billion. Nonetheless, the expenses have risen year by year with an accumulated total of USD 62 billion in 2021 (Chaudury, 2021). The CPEC has two primary objectives, which are to take part in the global economic governance and promote the opening up to the East and the West (Rana, 2018). The CPEC initiative entails 65 projects in total of which 25 are supported by Pakistan and 40 by China. Its goal is to create a trade route using railroads, roads, and oil and gas pipelines to link the port city of Gwadar in the Baluchistan province with the landlocked city of Kashgar in Xinjiang, China. Over the next 12 years, the CPEC is expected to add about 200 projects (Masood, 2018). The projects' goals are to improve the infrastructure in the provinces of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkwa to generate more than 17,000 MW of energy and create about 700,000 jobs for the locals, and to reduce the trade distance between China and the Gulf region from 12,900 km to 2,000 km (Pakistan Observer, 2016).

Nevertheless, the CPEC is laden with severe geopolitical threats not only to authorities guarding the Indian Ocean but also to the US. China's access to the Indian Ocean will help China rise as the strongest Indo-Pacific power (Fayyaz, 2019). Gwadar Port's strategic location helps strengthen the China-Pakistan relationship by connecting the Indian Ocean with the Arabian Sea. The port is used to shorten access to the Gulf and African markets and as an alternative route for China's energy supply. The Gwadar port will become a cross-over intersection for oil trade routes and international distribution paths while also connecting Pakistan with the three important regions (Muhammad Shafiq & Muhammad Saif, 2020). It will also be used as a Chinese military base (Hussain et al., 2021).

The CPEC presents a win-win situation for both China and Pakistan as the strategic relations also allow Pakistan to keep trying for a military resolution for Kashmir. In exchange for the economic opportunities and a place for its military base, China has supplied Pakistan with eight submarines worth USD4 billion to USD5 billion (Hussain et al., 2021). This however further aggravates the Indian government as they are forced to hold back their military forces and increase defense expenses due to China's increasing military influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Dahiya & Humayun, 2021). China's growing military power alongside land and maritime strength has generated massive military tension in India (Joshi & Mukherjee, 2019). There is also a chance that the CPEC may boost the development of nuclear technology in the South Asia region (Ahmad & Malik, 2017).

The CPEC relationship has also slowed down India's economic growth (Dahiya & Humayun, 2021). Indian experts have predicted that China will benefit more than India economically (Freeman, 2018). With that setting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had expressed his critique of CPEC being built over the disputed territory (Ahmad & Malik, 2017; Small, 2017). The US has openly supported India's criticism on this matter (Khan et al., 2018). India then launched alternative initiatives such as the "Act East Policy" and "Neighborhood First Policy" to balance out the China's rising strategic and economic presence in South Asian countries (Ahamed & Sikdar, 2020).

The Indian government is portraying the CPEC unfavourably since it is seen as a Chinese strategy to pile up debt in Pakistan, turning Pakistan into China's pawn and causing

domestic strife. Additionally, it's being referred to as a "white elephant" project (Small, 2017). Likewise, Pakistan's restriction on India for land access to resource-rich Central Asian states via Afghanistan is a source of concern (Owais, 2020). However, India is in a precarious position because its decisions will have an effect not only on the economy of China and India and the security of the Indian Ocean, but also on neighbouring nations (Muhammad Ijaz & Muhammad Tayyab, 2020). On the other hand, China's stance on being neutral has not only worn out India but also Pakistan. Over the years, China has still maintained its trade with India. In fact, China maintains over five times more trading with India compared to Pakistan, as of 2012. China aims to retain its 'all-weather' alliance with Pakistan while planning for a stronger trade relationship with India (Hassan, 2020).

As Pakistan's relations with China develop during this time, it is clear that both parties' pledges and understanding have matured since Beijing appears to uphold its "non-interference" posture toward Pakistan's internal and external issues. The CPEC appears to be a primary factor promoting relations between the two parties. Conversely, most scholars indicate that the CPEC is a "re-branding" collaboration that had originated in the 1970s with the construction of the Karakoram highway and other development projects, including Gwadar port that was built in 2007 (before CPEC was launched). In other aspects, despite the extensive economic partnerships under the auspices of the CPEC, China and Pakistan have already revitalised their relationship since the 1950s through various strategic partnerships. China-Pakistan strategic relations also appears to have strengthened in a number of areas, notably in terms of their military and defence capabilities. The CPEC thus seems to portray itself as not the primary driver of this enhancement. In other words, the CPEC may be considered as a distinct commitment of both sides' strategic alignments in the framework of China-Pakistan relations as they place emphasis on revitalising their economic demands.

The rising India-Pakistan rivalry may potentially develop South Asia's geopolitical impact, as examined by Hussain (2017) who mentioned that regional geopolitical dynamics and Pakistan's domestic challenges may hinder connectivity projects. From his perspective, factors that may impede the CPEC projects' execution are such as internal security challenges and regional stability, including concern over India. Even though he focused on geopolitical dynamics, he however only elaborated on policy recommendations for Pakistan in order to deal with potential hurdles instead of addressing South Asia's strategic impact as a whole. Noonari, Ali, Memon & Pervez (2017) had a different perspective on the strategic impact on South Asia when assessing Pakistan's interests via the CPEC. Their argument is that there is likely a "game-changer" impact following the China-Pakistan reciprocal agreements. However, their interpretation of "game-changer" seemed limited to the economic perspective rather than also including other factors which can lead to strategic outcomes for South Asia's international relations. Meanwhile, Ehteshmi and Horesh's (2018) argument on South Asia's impact has more analytical value as they illustrated that the updates may be a "divider" that polarizes the region into new world politics involving the US and China. Ehteshmi and Horesh (2018) commented that this new polarization may hasten the trade war among these two big powers and potentially divide South Asia's world politics in an enormous manner.

## **Conclusion**

The long-term disputes between India and Pakistan are rooted in territorial issues, violations of international resolutions or treaties, geopolitical interests, and religion. Both states have been very transparent in their dissatisfaction, especially involving three main subjects

namely the Kashmir disputes, international relations with China and the US, and the CPEC. The first argument which is the escalation of Kashmir disputes initiated by both India and Pakistan, shows their opportunistic attempt at expanding territorial hold to the point that both states are capable of manipulating their nuclear technologies to fight the war. Although both states have agreed to a ceasefire and a number of international resolutions, they continue to claim increasing responsibility for attacks on each other. The second argument is that China's support for Pakistan and the United States' support for India emboldens both sides to take more assertive actions and responses against military confrontation, therefore worsening the relationship between India and Pakistan. The expansion of military aid from both China and the US to both disputed states do not help in stopping the existing conflicts, and they still seem to be unwilling to coincide with each other. Finally, the third argument which states that the CPEC deepens the Cold War division in South Asia as the economic-security nexus in the great powers' support for their regional partners is true to the point that India continues to voice its continuous apprehension towards the project. The CPEC is seen as a tool for China to widen its economic and geopolitical territory while also controlling the South Asian region. However, Pakistan claims that forming economic ties with China through the CPEC will lessen its economic shrinkage and increase its regional power following less pressure from India.

Literature available on the CPEC's issues mostly center on China-Pakistan strategic interests, notably in the economic sector and the Chinese debt-trap diplomacy consequences. Nevertheless, limited studies have examined the spillover effects of the CPEC on the India-Pakistan power equation alongside the rapid influence of both the US and China in South Asia. India's antagonistic behaviour towards the CPEC's routes and increase of China's presence in Pakistan's territory points to an intensifying Delhi-Washington strategic partnership in economic, defense, and military calculations. In a nutshell, the CPEC and the increasing role of the US and China in South Asia hold a significant impact on the region's geopolitical outlook. For India, it needs the US to balance China's global ambitions. Although India may not perceive Pakistan as a strong rival, the rapidly increasing Beijing-Islamabad partnership may potentially influence its strategic interest in the region. Meanwhile, Pakistan requires China for its strategic survival in domestic challenges (economic and political) as well as to counter India's growing role in the regional space.

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