



## Dynamics of Regional Geopolitics and Challenges to CPEC: The Afghan and Iranian Perspectives

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**Abstract-** The concentration of global politics has been shifting from the West towards Asia due to China's substantial role in the continuing antagonism on the chessboard of international politics. The shifting embryonic paradigm of the region will challenge the status-quo showing a strategic change with severe ramifications for Pakistan in the evolving trends of security in South Asia. China's enormous investment in CPEC is raising apprehensions from neighbours in the region, specifically by Indians, which is anxious about China's growing influence and its ambitions in the region of the Indian Ocean. China desires to contain India as it deliberates that the US and Indian desire to counteract China's presence in the Indian Ocean. In this way, there exists Indo-US nexus against China. The challenges to CPEC prolong from the existing regional paradox of security environment in Afghanistan to conflicting geostrategic interests of instant neighbouring states like Iran and India. The spillover effects may destabilize the security environment of Pakistan and the region. The successful execution of the CPEC project depends on the region's geopolitical climate, precisely India's stance on the project and instability in Afghanistan. This research aims to analyze regional geopolitics dynamics and challenges to CPEC with respect to Afghan and Iranian perspectives. Despite apprehensions, it is viewed as a win-win situation for Pakistan and China and for Afghanistan Iran and the entire region.

**Keywords:** South Asia, Security Environment, New Great Game, Chahbahar, Hegemony.

### I. GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS OF THE REGION

The Continent of Asia has an enormous and increasing requirement for the development of infrastructure. There are incredible prospects for cross-border collaboration with respect to regional connectivity and infrastructural developments. The Asian Development Bank has estimations for 2016 and 2030 that emerging nations of the region will be in the need of spending US\$1.7 trillion per annum in order to build infrastructures required for maintaining the momentum of its growth (Baruah, 2018). South Asia consists of 3<sup>rd</sup> world nations considered to be most of the developing countries (Shoukat, 2015). The US and Japan have been amongst the principal contributors to the development of ventures since World War II in Asia (Baruah, 2018). The concentration of global politics has been shifting from the West towards Asia due to the substantial role of China in the continuing antagonism on the chessboard of global politics. The rivalry between the US being one of the most influential economies of the world, and China's emerging economy in the world coerces China for safeguarding non-stop supplies of energy through the region of the Persian Gulf for the growth of its oil-driven economy (Durrani, Bilal and Kalim, 2017).

The shifting embryonic paradigm of the region is going to challenge the status-quo showing a strategic change with severe ramifications for Pakistan in the evolving trends of security in the region of South Asia (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). Under the dynamics of the existing unipolar world, China is going to play an important role in creating a "new world order" built on equivalent prospects for all (Durrani, Bilal and Kalim, 2017). The emergence of China as a strategic and economic actor in the region is going to redesign opportunities for interconnectivity in Asia. Beijing is representing a new sense of political wisdom for undertaking initiatives related to connectivity in the region, supported by the surplus capital of the country as a transformation that has altered the environment of security in the neighborhood of India (Baruah, 2018). The focus of China is concentrated on four main concerns of geopolitics: territorial border and internal security,

upholding maintainable growth of the economy, counterbalancing the influence of the US in Asia, and development of friendly image in the region as a peaceful neighbor (Durrani, Bilal and Kalim, 2017). Some of the authors view CPEC as partaking larger implications of geopolitics. China's enormous investment is raising apprehensions from neighbors in the region, specifically by Indians, which is anxious about the growing influence of China and its ambitions in the region of the Indian Ocean (Markey and West, 2016).

Chinese pursuit to augment its extensive national power in the region of the Indian Ocean has to be catalyzed by the US hegemony in the West Pacific by its strategy of "Asian Rebalance" (Gill, 2019). The strategic interests of China in IOR are closely associated with the Malaccan Dilemma. China is fearful that in case of an encounter with the US or Indians, its adversaries may attempt to blockage of the trading routes of China through the Strait of Malacca (Baruah, 2018). Mearsheimer has noted that the military might of China will turn out to be more powerful with respect to the stronger powerhouse in terms of economy. Consequently, China's militaristic strength may be disadvantageous for the long-term regional interests of the US (Durrani, Bilal and Kalim, 2017). In order to become a global and regional military power, Beijing will have to develop itself as being a strategic player in IOR in relation to the protection of the strategic Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC's) and safeguarding maritime energy supply routes (Baruah, 2018).

China has been helping with the construction of Gwadar port in Pakistan for containment of the US regional influence (Durrani, Bilal and Kalim, 2017). The enhancing relations between Pakistan and China and substantial venture in Gwadar by Chinese is speculated by India to be a hurdle for its ambitious strategy to outreach Central Asia through Afghanistan for possibilities of trading connections (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015). The newest strategy of China has additionally strengthened links between China and Pakistan in order to support each other under the shifting dynamics of geopolitical fixations by means of adjoining mutual interests (Durrani, Bilal and Kalim, 2017). Gwadar may be capable of allowing China for keeping an eye over (SLOC's) the Sea Lanes of Communication located nearly 460 Km of a distance from Karachi, and for monitoring marine posts of the US in the Gulf of Persia, and more so Mumbai and Gujarat bases of Indian Navy (Hussain, 2020).

China desires to contain India as it deliberates that the US and India desire for counteracting the presence of China in the Indian Ocean and in this way there exists Indo-US nexus against China (Hussain, Hussain, Ahmad, Quddus, Rafiq and Tien, 2021). The US has been trying to counterbalancing China from all around and creating obstacles, so that China may not be able to attain its regional objectives with respect to economy and specifically energy (Durrani, Bilal and Kalim, 2017). China has become the main concern of the US external policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and there has to be a likelihood of China by having its notions of improvement and growth, it could challenge regional order. The more Chinese have been perceived as empowering Pakistan for intimidating India, it (India) would require more foreign support from the US. This perspective of CPEC may be in a sense an opportunity for enhancing Indo-US strategic partnership which should be exploited by policymakers of the US for the years to come in the future (Schwemlein, 2019). In this way, CPEC would become a cause of strategic rifts between Pakistan and India with respect to their relationship in the future (Gill, 2019).

The increasing cooperation of Beijing with Pakistan has produced a sense of uneasiness in New Delhi (Baruah, 2018). The global players are witnessing India as an emergent naval power of the region within the framework of vertical and horizontal maneuverings for increasing its role as a power of the region alongside the South Asian periphery (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). India looks towards the US as being a potential balancer of power vis-à-vis China and its emerging existence in the IOR (Gill, 2019). The emergent Indo-US strategic correlation during the earlier decade is an indication of the US encouragement and support for the naval power of India to contain the expanding influence of China in the IOR (Hussain and Hussain, 2017). India for such reasons has been financing the development of the Iranian port of Chahbahar lying 72 Km in the west of Gwadar (Fazil, 2016) as an alternative trading route and an entrance way for admittance to Central Asia through Afghanistan. India views CPEC as a geostrategic and geo-economic advancement of China for its influence in the Arabian Sea and for naval presence in the region (Markey and West, 2016). Most of the researchers have exposed their apprehensions about several deliberations with respect to the region for the execution of the CPEC venture. The challenges to CPEC prolong from the existing regional paradox of security environment in Afghanistan to conflicting geostrategic interests of instant neighboring states like Iran and India. The spillover effects may destabilize the security environment of Pakistan and China's western regions (Ali, 2015).

The major contest is the prevailing proxy war with the neighboring country India and its resilient influence in Afghanistan. The status quo of Russian monopoly in the Caspian region is concerned with the pipeline of oil

spreading to European countries and far beyond has also threats due to the construction of new oil and gas pipelines under CPEC (Siddiqui, 2014). In the aftermath of 9/11, Pak-Iran's mutual collaboration level has reached its height in terms of maritime relationships in IOR. There has been existing close-fitting geostrategic and commercial rivalry with Iran and India due to the initiation of CPEC. Political uncertainty and the worsening security situation of Pakistan may transmit reactions for the development of infrastructural networks under CPEC in the vicinity of the Afghan borderline (Karim, 2017).

There may be some outside challenges to CPEC to be faced by the regional and extra-regional players such as India, Afghanistan, Iran, and the US has been playing a role for the disruption of the plan (Ikram and Rashid, 2017). To some extent in the reaction to CPEC, India, Afghanistan and Iran in May 2016 have signed a treaty under the framework of a trilateral working group with an investment of US\$500 million by India for the development of Iran's Chahbahar as a port for strategic purposes. This development scheme will provide them an alternative connection for accessing landlocked republics of Central Asia and in this way, they will be capable of bypassing regional trade through Pakistan (Baruah, 2018). It is due to the insecure conditions of Afghanistan that India has uncertainties with respect to the initiative. The US and Iran have also reservations regarding CPEC (Karim, 2017). Iran has not been happy with the development plan of Gwadar as being an unfathomable seaport and deliberates the China-Pak joint venture as a competitor to its port of Chahbahar situated at the aperture of the Strait of Hormuz to be built with the financial assistance of India (Hussain and Hussain, 2017).

China's intentions in IOR have to be another mode of impediments in the Sino-Indian geopolitics. In order to counterbalance CPEC, the port of "Chahbahar" is part of a grand Indian strategy with the collaboration of Iran and Afghanistan in the region. The US on the other hand envisages CPEC in the context of its long-term regional and extra-regional concerns. Port of Gwadar may provide leverage to the naval power of China against the supremacy of the US naval forces and will pose to be a potential threat to the US interests in the Indian Ocean (Markey and West, 2016). Pakistan has to encounter high-risk threats with respect to its sovereignty and national security from the western borderline alongside Afghanistan. From the perspective of the post-Afghan invasion by NATO forces, Iran, India, and Russia have been trying for the destabilization of Pakistan to their best. The emergence of greater geostrategic interests of India in Afghanistan has pushed for the establishment of the Pak-Afghan coalition in order to deter the challenges. Pakistan considers that India has increased its military support and financial assistance to the anti-state actors against Pakistan. To be more precise, Pakistan suspects India for financing Baluchi insurgents for intensifying violence in parts of Baluchistan and Karachi to disrupt the execution of CPEC (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019).

Afghanistan as a stabilized country may be equally significant for the success of CPEC. The security condition of Afghanistan has been worsening, in the worst-case scenario of the withdrawal of armed forces of NATO from Afghanistan and the refusal of the Taliban's to be a part of any engagement (Ali, 2015). Considering the links of the Taliban's with "Uighur militants" in the FATA belt, these groups have become a continuous source of threats to projects under CPEC in the northern areas of Pakistan. These militant groups have been associated with the murder and abduction of nationals of China employed in various CPEC projects in Pakistan and have constantly been threatening for further intensification of their terrorist operations (Markey and West, 2016). The struggle for hegemony in Afghanistan by various players of the region in the wake of the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan has to be interlinked with massive threats for the sustainability of CPEC. CPEC has been considered to be significant for countries of the region in general and particularly for Pakistan and China. The successful execution of the CPEC project depends on the geopolitical environment of the region, specifically the stance of India on the project and instability in Afghanistan. The establishment of peace and security in the region of South Asia is to be conditioned with the Indo-Pak productive role (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019).

## II. AFGHAN PERSPECTIVE AND CHALLENGES TO CPEC

The region of Central Asia is in possession of massive natural resources of hydrocarbon reserves on the basis of which this region has become an element of rivalry amid global players. This phenomenon is to be recognized as a New Great Game in the region under the changing dynamics, which started in the aftermath of the cold war (Jiang, 2015). Afghanistan is a land-locked country and it has always remained to be at the intersection of conflicting interests of exterior world powers (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The worsening situation of security in Afghanistan is a hindrance to the development of economic knots between Pakistan and the CARs. The main trading routes towards CARs pass through Afghanistan. Without the establishment of political

consistency in Afghanistan, neither Pakistan nor CARs could be able to move ahead for the creation of an economic zone in the region under CPEC. The confrontations and insecurity in Afghanistan have an adverse impact on trading linkages between Pakistan and the CARs (Jiang, 2015). Afghanistan may have repercussions with respect to security for the whole region which will be disadvantageous for the execution of CPEC projects and its role for the economic integration of the region (Javaid, 2016).

The region of Central Asia has remained to be a key element of enmity between Russia and Britain during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This present-day competition for gaining access to the natural resources of the region may be seen as an extended view of the struggle for hegemony in the region by the emerging world powers, though its parameters have altered over time. The main reason of the significance of CPEC is to be ascribed by three key dynamics, first is the interlinking of landlocked CARs to nautical trading routes through Gwadar port, which may have attractions and advantages for adjoining states as the Central Asian region itself is known for being a linkage between the continents. Secondly, two major world powers like Russia and China have existence closer to Central Asia, which is an attraction for other countries. Thirdly, it is important due to the availability of extensive energy resources and other commercial benefits (Jiang, 2015).

Pakistan has desired for having entrance to CARs, and in this way, it supported the Taliban during the 1990s conflict in Afghanistan. The basis for this support was gaining power and influence in the Central Asian region as Afghanistan was governed by pro-Indians who usually disfavored Pakistan by all means. It forced Pakistan for adopting a strict strategy for Afghanistan which has been critiqued at the global levels (Javaid, 2016). The worsening security situation of Afghanistan has to be very disparaging for Pakistan because ethnic arrangements may produce a security dilemma in the tribal areas of the Baluchistan province of Pakistan and areas of the FATA region. From the perspective of an environment of political and economic instability in Afghanistan Pakistan has to face precarious challenges with respect to its interest associated with economic development and regional connectivity (Jia, 2017). The new players of the "New Great Game" have been trying for the achievement of their objectives of national interests and in the regions of South and Central Asia. Russia and China are significant players of the regional chessboard under the new Great Game. They have strategic concerns and commercial interests in this region (Javaid, 2016). The US is also going to follow its own geostrategic objectives by promoting its policy in the region. The US desires for containment of Russia and China in the region by the improvement of relations with the regional countries and Afghanistan which may be helpful for achieving commercial interests (Jiang, 2015).

Afghanistan has become a new front and a cause of uncertainty between Pakistan and India to be considered as traditional adversaries in the region. It has appeared to be an extension of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). It is believed that an established Afghanistan will be indispensable for the success of the CPEC venture (Javaid, 2016). A peaceable Afghanistan may be significant for futuristic improvements in the region. The project of Turkmenistan, Iran, India and Pakistan gas pipeline and its conclusion is reliant on security conditions in Afghanistan (Jiang, 2015).

Pakistan desires for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan and anticipates for ensuring that external powers will not exploit the destabilizing condition in Afghanistan and that its territory may not be utilized for insurgent actions against Pakistan. From the perspective of post-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, proxy war is inevitable which will further destabilize the war-torn economy. For China political stability and an environment of security in Afghanistan is imperative for its huge economic investments in the region under OBOR (Baruah, 2018). China is predominantly worried about a destabilizing Afghanistan which could disturb Xinjiang the western province of China and a strategic participant of CPEC in the advent. Thus China has been playing a very crucial role in the facilitation of negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives at the platform of the quadrilateral discussion forum (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). China has negotiated with the delegations of the Taliban and hosted a clandestine meeting of the two parties in May 2015 in China's Urumqi. China has participated in the Afghan government and Taliban dialogues together with the US held in July 2015, in Murree, Pakistan (Javaid, 2016).

China and Pakistan have desires for joining of Afghanistan to CPEC. China has attractions for untapped reserves of natural resources in Afghanistan. Pakistan could also be able to take the material advantages of accessing the CARs through Afghanistan. The development of infrastructure and uplifting of the economy of a war-torn, landlocked and militancy-prone state of Afghanistan with the help of investors from China would be beneficial not only for the region but also for China, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Naseer, 2017). Despite ETIM's role in jihad under ISIS and Al-Qaeda, its main concentration has to be for the destabilization of the western regions of China and to target exterior interests of China particularly China's workers under CPEC projects in Pak-Afghanistan bordering regions. ISIS has also declared a global jihad



movement against China with respect to allegations of ill-treatment of the Muslim population of its Uighur region. In this way, CPEC may have to face security threats by global networks of jihadists to be operating through Afghanistan (Ishaq, Ping and Ahmed, 2017). Considering the relations of the Taliban with the terrorist groups in tribal areas of Pakistan, they have become a continuous risk for projects of CPEC specifically in northern areas of Pakistan bordering along with Afghanistan. These insurgent groups have already been involved in kidnapping and attack on China's engineers and workers in the past and have also threatened for expanding operations against the interests of China (Javaid, 2016).

India is going to appear in the political environment of the region as an imperative player and trying for securing foot-holding and enhancement of influence in Central Asia (Jiang, 2015). The China's decision for playing a bigger role with respect to security and political stability in Afghanistan indicates the gravity of the conditions as an unending contribution with any settlement in the political affairs of Afghanistan which is in accordance to the declared policy of China's policy of non-interference in the matters of another's state (Shoukat, 2015). The spillover impact of insistent political instability may challenge the environment of security in Pakistan and the western areas of China (Javaid, 2016). The presence of RAW on the other side of Durand Line means insecurity in Pakistan. The situation becomes more detrimental when the footprints of RAW are being found in the province of Baluchistan to sabotage the law and order situation which would ultimately debilitate the charm of foreign investors in the area of Gawadar which has turned to be a game-changer for Pakistan. The CPEC has induced a new life into the financial structure of Pakistan's economy therefore the liaison between Delhi and Kabul means the diaphanous weakening of security and economy (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The security experts of Pakistan believe that RAW of India and NDS of Afghanistan has been behind terror and insurgent activities in Pakistan for delaying and disruption of CPEC by generating uncertainty in Baluchistan as being a RAW-NDS nexus (Javaid, 2016).

The emergent role of India in the framework of the regional geostrategic environment is based on the establishment of friendly correlations vis-à-vis Afghanistan and to be associated with the role of US being a hegemonic superpower and its relations with Pakistan and to what extent the US is willing to recognize India as being an interventionist power status-quo in the region of South Asia (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani during a visit to India greeted the new role of India's in Afghanistan and declared that Afghanistan may not be joining CPEC if Pakistan denied for allowing interconnectivity Afghanistan and India (Jiang, 2015). With the development of links between Afghanistan and India, Pakistan has to be worried regarding the contributions of India in the development of Afghanistan and has been viewing it as being a part of Delhi's geostrategic policy of encirclement. Pakistan's policy of strategic-depth vis-à-vis Afghanistan has failed and led towards dangerous conditions from the perspective of the evolving security environment. It has become significant for Pakistan to follow the policy of rapprochement and to address dissimilarities with neighboring countries (Naseer, 2017).

Pakistan is considered to be a key driver of the Indo-Afghan policies in terms of its bilateral associations (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The understanding of the Pak-Afghan relationship with respect to the security and commercial interests is imperative for the successful execution of CPEC. Pakistan considers that its exertions for the rebuilding of trust with the government of Afghanistan have to be maligned by the leading political party of Northern Alliance at the behest of India (Javaid, 2016). A continuous threat of security dilemma in Afghanistan plays the role of a deterrent for traders of Pakistan, who have reservations for the establishment of trading relationships in Afghanistan. The CARs have the most operative route of transportation through Afghanistan which is believed to be hazardous for trading (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The threats of the Taliban's attacks and to be robbed are predominant in minds of investors. Afghanistan being a peaceful and stable country is a substantial component for the development of the economic relations between Pakistan and CARs under CPEC (Jiang, 2015).

India for some time has always used Afghanistan as a second front, and it has over the years financed problems for Pakistan on that side of the border and that the tense, fragmented relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has been there for many, many years (Javaid, 2016). Kabul and Islamabad may find a practical solution to their concerns under the umbrella of a Quadrilateral Coordination Group. Afghanistan as a secure and stable country is not only a win-win situation for Pakistan and India but also for the entire regional (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The enhancement of the security of the Pak-Afghan border is necessary for CPEC, as an absorbent and unmanaged boundary has to be a continuous threat for the security of Baluchistan and KPK in the neighbor of the Afghan border. Nuristan and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan along the Pakistan border are safe havens for terrorist groups comprising Al-Qaeda, TTP, ETIM, ISIS, and also Uighur militant groups (Javaid, 2016).

A continuous and productive bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is the only best antidote to all problems that afflict the Indian Sub-Continent (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). Security analysts emphasize that China and Pakistan must play a dominant part in supporting political settlement in Afghanistan. It is also believed that China supports Pakistan for playing a constructive role in the Afghanistan issue and that it will work with Pakistan to advance the reconciliation process and smooth transition of power in Afghanistan (Jiang, 2015). China may also play its due role for the expedition of tensions and elimination of disagreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan to reciprocally acquire the advantages of CPEC (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019).

### III. IRANIAN PERSPECTIVE AND CHALLENGES TO CPEC

The Pak-Iran relations have been revolving around the fulcrum of security and geostrategic concerns. The socio-economic and political rendezvous between Iran and Pakistan has advanced under the dynamics of security-paradigm in the regional set up. The prominence of security formations of these states within apparatuses of strategic decision-making has assumed additional credibility for national security concerns in defining the nature of their bilateral knots. The strategic intentions of Pakistan have conflicted in the region with those of Iran with respect to Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and the politics of the Middle East from a broader perspective (Karim, 2017). The relationship between Pakistan and Iran has always been a long-standing problem in the historical context of the region, and because of China's CPEC plan in this region, the resolution of this problem has become particularly important. Due to separatists, terrorism, and armed control of the region by some powerful countries, the Baluchistan areas of Iran and Pakistan have been idle (Usman, 2020). The establishment of relations between India and Iran and the increasing role of the US in Afghanistan and Pakistan may have a negative impact on Pakistan and Iran relations in the coming years (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The close cooperation of Pakistan with the US in the global war against terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 and the presence of the US in Afghanistan did not play a constructive role in the improvement of Pak-Iran relations (Karim, 2017). The Indo-China competition underscores Baluchistan's geopolitical importance as the center of a new movement with the participation of India, China, and the US in Asia. Iranian port of Chahbahar is India's reply to Chinese investment in the Gwadar port of Pakistan (Usman, 2020). India believes that the development of Chinese bases and spies in the port of Gwadar poses a danger to the Indian Navy in the Hormuz Strait, Oman, and the Arabian Sea (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). Pakistan and Iran are located in the domains of their corresponding (RSC) the Regional Security Complexes, which describes that the prevailing environment of regional security is to be dictated by various non-state actors and stakeholders in geographical paradox (Karim, 2017). China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Pakistan are considered as key players of the regional New Great Game. All regional players have strategic interests with respect to their access to unexplored reserves of hydrocarbon and resources of energy in CARs. Iran has a profound religious and socio-cultural relationship with Tajikistan in Central Asia. Iran possesses port and nautical routes for CARs which may help in the development of the Iranian market (Jiang, 2015). At present, India, China, and the US are playing a new major power game in the Indian Ocean and Asia. The characteristics of the new great game are the same as before: fighting for resources, projecting power, pursuing benefits, and expanding the scope of influence (Usman, 2020). India has been investing in the development of Iran's Chahbahar port in order to acquire entrance towards CARs as well as it may also produce opportunities to India for interaction with Turkey, Afghanistan and countries of Eastern Europe (Shoukat, 2015).

New Delhi has been working for the development of Iran's Chahbahar which is deliberated to be an attempt by India for containment of China's expanding influence in Gwadar and the region (Karim, 2017). India signed the Chahbahar Agreement, which allows India to build Chahbahar Port in the Baluchistan Province of Iran as an important economic corridor connecting India with the Central Asian and Afghan markets. This transaction is regarded as an important response of India to the CPEC (Usman, 2020). In response to the projected development of Gwadar port, India, Afghanistan and Iran signed a treaty in May 2016 for the formulation of a trilateral framework in order to extend Chahbahar as a port of strategic nature with US\$500 million investment by India. Similarly, India's goal is to turn Chahbahar into an important economic, industrial, and trade hub in the Middle East, and to enter markets in Central Asia and Afghanistan (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019).

The Chahbahar port will let India guarantee energy transportation from the nations of Central Asia, the Middle East, and Iran, and develop India's commercial and trade market share. India is the second-largest

country in oil imports from Iran, second only to China. Chahbahar is committed to establishing the energy relationship between India and Iran and allowing India to obtain energy assets in the nations of Central Asia through Afghanistan (Jia, 2017). As Asia's third-fastest and largest growing economy, energy security is crucial in India's plan to move into Chahbahar and connect its ports to Central Asia via pipelines. Chahbahar's entry provides new impetus for energy and technology of India to the nations of Central Asia and to respond the growing influence of China in the region, and makes Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline from Iran and Oman to major natural gas pipeline options in the Indian Ocean (Usman, 2020). India's plan in Chahbahar is to catch up with its rival China, maintain its energy supply, bypass its opponent, and expand its influence in the nations of Central Asia and Afghanistan (Shoukat, 2015).

India will expedite its plan to connect to Chahbahar's Central Asia region by pipeline, which can be connected to the Oman-Iran-India submarine pipeline (Usman, 2020). It is due to the shifting interests of geopolitics and security alliances which have moved them apart in the regional framework. Iran's security agreement with India and Pak-Saudi Arabia's strategic relationship has furthermore contributed to the Pak-Iran relation to be more complex (Karim, 2017). Pakistan has to face challenges in terms of balancing its relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia under the dynamics of escalating Iran-Saudi antagonism in the region of the Middle East (Usman, 2020). Security experts consider that Iran-Saudi hostility may inhibit the development of Pak-Iran ties. In order to develop any rapprochement with Iran, Pakistan will have to look towards the attitude of Saudis towards Iran despite the strategic relations of Pakistan with Saudi Arabia. It is believed that Pakistan is in need of Iran for the fulfillment of its requirements energy, while Pakistan may not afford any risks for alienating Saudi Arabia by moving closer to Iran (Shams, 2016).

Pakistan has remained to be a long-time strategic partner of Saudi Arabia (Karim, 2017). Tehran believes that the Gwadar-Chahbahar competition is a way of cooperating with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, as well as its ultimate goal, is to reinforce Iran's influence in the Arabian region. Iran has apprehensions with respect to the Pak-Saudi strategic partnership in the security architecture of the region (Usman, 2020). The initial response of Iran to CPEC specifies that it has apprehensions regarding the development of Gwadar port and believes the venture as a competitor to its port of Chahbahar situated in the conduit of the Hormuz Strait and to be built with the financial assistance of India (Nazir, 2016). Chahbahar port, together with the India-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral relationship, will undoubtedly affect Pakistan and Iran relations. It poses a direct economic challenge to Gwadar, located 70 Km to the east of Chahbahar port (Usman, 2020).

Chahbahar has been professed as being an equivalent to Pakistan's Gwadar port by Delhi (Shoukat, 2015). Chahbahar and Gwadar have significance with respect to geopolitics and geostrategic implications for both countries (Usman, 2020). Chahbahar's India-Iran plan is seen as a winning step for Afghanistan, Iran, and India. It will intend to give India the power to challenge China's mounting power in Gwadar (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The competition between Chahbahar and Gwadar is actually a competition between India and China for Asian hegemony (Usman, 2020). Iran will use Chahbahar to challenge Pakistan, preparing to connect to Afghanistan and Central Asia through railways, land routes, and pipelines, thereby increasing the possibility of expanding trade with these countries and obtaining large amounts of energy assets. Similarly, the rapid entry into Chahbahar may free Afghanistan from using Pakistan's Karachi and Gwadar ports (Karim, 2017). Chahbahar's entry into Afghanistan means that Afghanistan could independently develop a strategy without worrying about Pakistan (Shoukat, 2015).

Pakistan is worried about Indian presence in Chahbahar. The Pakistani military suspects that India can use the port to monitor Pakistan and collect information about its maritime navigation in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). Iran has greater influence in Afghanistan and the Middle East, whereas Pakistan's common goal is to confront India (Usman, 2020). Chahbahar's entry is Indian policy to stop China's movements in West Asia, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Arabian Sea. Moreover, entering Chahbahar into Afghanistan has strengthened the cooperation between Afghanistan and India against Pakistan, and it has allowed India to enter Central Asia (Karim, 2017). The construction of the Chahbahar port in Iran further envisages the Indian designs to fail the CPEC and Gwadar port projects. Chahbahar is located at a distance of 70 Km from Gwadar in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, where India has invested about US\$100 million. It could be a second choice for China to use it as a transit hub if CPEC fails, and will connect China with Iran, Afghanistan, Russia and Central Asia through International North-South Transport Corridor (Ishaq, Ping and Ahmed, 2017).

Iran can benefit from the recently changing regional environment, where it has resumed its status in the world economy, with Indian involvement in Iranian Chahbahar port, if Iran is involved in this project, it will ultimately benefit the position of Pakistan and China. Both Iran and Pakistan view China as a confrontation

against American hegemony (Usman, 2020). In the meantime, Iran has already extended the invitation to Pakistan to join the Chahbahar Port trilateral agreement and also assured Pakistan that Chahbahar is not a rival to Gwadar (Bari and Mahnoor, 2016). Hence, Chahbahar and Gwadar ports could be associated as regional ports to further promote regional trade and integration (Ali, 2015).

The geopolitical influence of Gwadar and Chahbahar harbors is huge for the competition between Chinese Americans and Indian Chinese in the Indian Ocean (Usman, 2020). The observations of the US reflect that in a long period of time, China will become a superpower with a strong maritime advantage. The US also encourages Iran to deal with some dissatisfaction with Delhi's investment in Chahbahar port. It is regarded by the US as a strategic partner against China in Asia. Pakistan's cooperation with China and its instability in Afghanistan are another focus, which has pushed US policy toward Delhi. In this particular case, the port of Chahbahar is also useful to the US because it can balance China's US\$ 46 billion CPEC and open up another exchange route for Afghanistan (Awan, Alvi and Munir, 2019). The geopolitics and internal vulnerabilities between the two countries will affect the development of associations between the two nations. Because of the lack of trust between Iran and Pakistan, it is impossible to strengthen ties by expanding economic development and cooperation (Usman, 2020).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It is imperative to conclude that the global players are witnessing India as an emergent naval power of the region within the framework of vertical and horizontal maneuverings for increasing its role as a power of the region alongside the South Asian periphery. The more Chinese have been perceived as empowering Pakistan for intimidating India, it (India) would require more foreign support from the US. This perspective of CPEC may be in a sense an opportunity for enhancing Indo-US strategic partnership which should be exploited by policymakers of the US for the years to come. The struggle for hegemony in Afghanistan by various players of the region in the wake of the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan has to be interlinked with massive threats for the sustainability of CPEC. Iran has not been happy with the development plan of Gwadar as being an unfathomable seaport and deliberates the China-Pak joint venture as a competitor to its port of Chahbahar is part of a grand Indian strategy with the collaboration of Iran and Afghanistan in the region to counterbalance CPEC. The Indo-China competition underscores Baluchistan's geopolitical importance as the center of a new movement with the participation of India, China, and the US in Asia. Iranian port of Chahbahar is India's reply to Chinese investment in the Gwadar port of Pakistan.

Challenges to CPEC prolong from the existing regional paradox of security environment in Afghanistan to conflicting geostrategic interests of instant neighboring states like Iran and India. In order to counterbalance CPEC, the port of "Chahbahar" is part of a grand Indian strategy with the collaboration of Iran and Afghanistan in the region. India has been investing in the development of Iran's Chahbahar port in order to acquire entrance towards CARs as well as it may also produce opportunities to India for interaction with Turkey, Afghanistan and countries of Eastern Europe. The Chahbahar port will let India guarantee energy transportation from the nations of Central Asia, the Middle East, and Iran, and develop India's commercial and trade market share. The establishment of relations between India and Iran and the increasing role of the US in Afghanistan and Pakistan may have a negative impact on Pakistan and Iran relations in the coming years. The successful execution of the CPEC project depends on the geopolitical environment of the region, specifically the stance of India on the project and instability in Afghanistan. Hence, it is concluded that despite the threats and reservations CPEC is not only a win-win situation for Pakistan and China but also for the entire region.

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