

Chinese Securitization of Regional Connectivity in South Asia

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Abstract

China's foremost strategy of competing in international relations is principally based on connectivity and networking across regions. Chinese connectivity within the South Asian states explicates how China has prioritized its relationship with the Asian rim states for security, sustainability, and cooperation. The main elements of this strategy incorporate the development of maritime and land corridors across South Asia. This paper is based on a qualitative analysis that aims to develop a narrative that how securitization has been used within the South Asian policy matrix of China to attain regional connectivity. It signifies the Chinese policy to diversify economic partnership with other states. The study focuses that how China has effectively securitized its diplomatic, geopolitical and economic policies within South Asia? How did China strive to gain strategic and political leverage in the region? This research also unfolds potential threats for China concerning to the emerging developments in the region primarily India's quadrilateral designs and the Post-US withdrawal situation in Afghanistan.

Key words: Securitization, South Asia, Regionalism, Connectivity, China, BRI, CPEC

Introduction

Being the most populace and diverse continent, the Asian region has a central role in the political landscape of the world. In this context, connectivity politics has gained significance in the global political discourse. Global political dynamics are becoming more decentered and regionalized in nature.

¹. In this perspective, China being the second-largest economy of 20.4 trillion dollars² with a population of 1.435 billion, strives hard for its economic security and development. Energy, resource and economic security are prominent sources of connectivity. In this regard, the Copenhagen School has given a contemporary approach to security that signifies that how states specifically prioritize certain issues within the national policy making. Ole Weaver's concept of

securitization is based on the idea of priority fixation for a particular issue in which the issue is labeled and extraordinary means are invested by the state to deal with it. For this purpose, states seek resource maximization to resolve the issue. Besides this, political will acts as a motivational source through which state resources are shifted to attain the stated objective through diplomatic, economic, military, and social means. The construction of securitization is based on identifying the existential threat, and the political will to take extraordinary measures towards a particular issue. The devisers of securitization took it as a practice rather than only as a 'speech act' which aims at some intended action.

In the words of Barry Buzan securitization is "an intersubjective process that is the most extreme or the highest level of politicization in which the issue is presented as an existential threat to the referent object by a securitizing actor through so-called 'speech acts' and requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure."³ Therefore, the notion of securitization demands identifying a security problem by the state in the initial stage and taking speedy measures to contain and accomplish it in the later stage. For this reason, the phrase 'moving beyond normal politics' is mostly used by academia to describe the attributes of securitization⁴. In this context, China by securitizing the issue of regional connectivity has been able to gain maximum geopolitical and economic leverage. China's main securitizing move has two main constructions which include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and development of its maritime routes by outreaching the main strategic lines of communications across the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, China's securitizing of south Asian regional connectivity is characterized by articulating a rhetoric that is based on supporting regional peace, political engagement, economic connectivity and infrastructural development across the region. Under the framework of securitization, Indo-US bilateral strategic partnership and US-Indo-Pacific strategy of South Asia are the 'existential threats' for China. Consequently, this piece of research addresses the following questions:

- Why China has postulated regional connectivity as an unconventional strategy to increase its influence in South Asia?
- How far Chinese securitization approach in South Asia is successful to bring China in regional predominant position?

The following table illustrates the application of securitization approach in the framework of Chinese strategy towards South Asia. The main three steps entail identification of threats and the actions of China to secure her interest in South Asian region.

Table No I:

Chinese Securitization of Asia

STEP-I : Threat Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conventional and non-conventional security threats. • Regional dominance of India and growing influence of Quad squad particularly USA.
STEP-II: Emergency and extraordinary action	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC project, developing maritime silk route, policy of engagement and co-existence, reshaping alliances, encirclement of India and Quad squad through the attainment of maritime spaces
STEP –III: Moving from traditional rules	Outreaching new geopolitical hubs, connecting regions through networking

Source: Compiled by the researcher. Also see, Alexander Burns, "Securitization in China and Pakistan's Frontier Regions: A Comparative Account of Regional Security Discourses," *Lund University*, 2012, <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=3048176&fileId=3048438> (accessed 16 December 2020)

South Asian Landscape for China

South Asia constitutes a distinct geopolitical setting. The interest of major global powers including US and China, longstanding disputes and territorial claims between the regional states, grave issues of extremism and terrorism along immense potential for development has made south Asia an important regional zone. In south Asia, China shares borders with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan. South Asian region is central in China's grand strategy of

connecting the globe through land and maritime corridor. Therefore, China's main securitizing interest in the region revolves around the following trends

- Stability in South Asian region is directly associated with Chinese trade, commercial, energy and security interests
- An entry to Europe, Middle East, and parts of Central Asia
- Containment of Indian hegemonic designs
- Access to important chokepoints in the Indian Ocean region
- Outreaching South Asian markets for its export-based economy as one-fourth of the world population resides in South Asia⁵.

In this context, the Chinese have extended relations with the states of south Asia which explicates their long-term interest in the region.

Map of South Asia and Chinese Choke Points



Source: <https://southfront.org/chinas-string-of-pearls-project/> (accessed 25 June 2021)

Pakistan's Geopolitical Landscape and Chinese Interest

CPEC has altogether changed the political and economic optics of the Sino-Pakistan relationship. It is the most important part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiative started in 2013. Gwadar port provides the shortest distance to China in the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz which is central in the development of the economic corridor. In addition, Pakistan acts as a geopolitical balancer for China in its growing power contestation in South Asia with India and the US. In this context, it is pertinent to highlight that traditionally China extended its diplomatic and military support to Pakistan but Xi's approach incorporates the economic factor as well. Therefore, Chinese securitization of CPEC project by investing more than 46 billion dollars⁶ and prioritizing the development at Gwadar port is central in Xi Jinping's grand strategy of China's rise⁷. CPEC incorporates wide range of projects including energy, road and rail-based transit route, infrastructure, development of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), social sector development along with cross border optical fiber cable from China to Pakistan⁸.

Under new global trends geographical contiguity becomes largely significant for extending cooperation to enhance industrialization among states. It augments the trade output through economies of scale. Simultaneously the emergence of cluster industries through agglomerations among states has given a new orientation to trade patterns in a globalized world, that in case of Pakistan and China would facilitate its economic and geopolitical needs respectively. In the present world, states realize that oligopolistic strategies and externalities are linchpin to economic growth. Initially during Cold War era the compression of economies was witnessed to promote reciprocity with comparative advantages. Later in the Post Cold War era the phenomenon of competitive advantages compelled both state and non-state actors to come closer to each other for better prospects of economic growth. It made commercial linkages presumably more vibrant among states. In this perspective Paul Krugman encompassed the multilateralism between core and peripheral states to increase economic integration to achieve their strategic objectives. He explained in his theory of "New Economic Geography" that states were more concerned to reduce their transportation cost for maximizing trade returns. Now their priorities are different like to avoid centrifugal economic forces including market congestion and traffic gridlocks. It gradually diverted established economies to peripheries to avail low transportation and labor costs which further brought promising aggregate results⁹. Therefore, it is evident that China extended its partnership with Pakistan through bilateral and multilateral engagements. The

development of Gwadar as a city is central within the CPEC project. Gwadar has the potential of becoming a significant transit city. In this perspective, CPEC and Gwadar port project is significant as the total distance between the Chinese industrial Xinjiang region and Gwadar is just 3,000 km¹⁰. Therefore, the construction of road between Kashgar, a city in southern Xinjiang and Gwadar city, in Balochistan province of Pakistan is pivotal in China's strategy of regional connectivity and integration in south Asia. The completion of this corridor has ultimately provided a gateway to China in the Arabian sea as this road is further linked to Karachi, the main port city of Pakistan.

Furthermore, both Pakistan and China planed to develop the infrastructure of Gwadar including the construction of port facilities, airport, and technical development. Although, Pakistan remained entangled in various issues during previous decades of War on Terror i.e. terrorism, insurgency in Balochistan, ethnic discord and economic vulnerabilities but strategic incentives led to commercial liaisons between the entrepreneurs of both the states. Subsequently, emerging consortiums among several institutions trickled down the fruits of these networks to the local level. Here it is pertinent to highlight that from the past few years several attempts have been made by the militant groups, especially Baloch separatists, that are reportedly supported by India¹¹ as well to disrupt CPEC project and Pak-China engagement. In 2018, Chinese consulate in Karachi was attacked by Baloch militant groups¹². Then for instance, recently, a bus carrying Chinese nationals who were working on a dam-project in Pakistan were attacked through an explosion on 14th July 2021¹³. Then on 28th July 2021, a gunman attacked two Chinese nationals in Karachi¹⁴. Although, this is a major security challenge confronted by Pakistan and China but both the states have continued their policy of engagement that reflects their political will and deepening strategic ties.

In addition to infrastructural and economic development, military cooperation has been a permanent part of Pakistan China relationship. In the 1990s, development of Al-Khalid tank, JF-17 thunder and collaboration in nuclear energy (Chashma Nuclear Power Plant) were the landmark joint ventures of China and Pakistan. In December 2020, two significant developments took place between both the states. Firstly, China's Minister of National Defense General Wei Fenghe visited Pakistan and met the apex military leadership to foster defense cooperation between both states¹⁵. Secondly, Shaheen-IX, joint air exercises took place between Pakistan Air

Force (PAF) and Chinese Air force in Pakistan¹⁶. The timing of these drills in the aftermath of US-India, Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) is significant to understand the strategic partnership of China and Pakistan. Therefore, Chinese securitization of CPEC, deepening military cooperation and active diplomatic engagement are main pillars of Pak- China relations.

China-India Equation in South Asia: A Combination of Encirclement and Rapprochement

The competition between India and China has a geopolitical, regional, and economic dimension as both states endeavored to gain influence in the region in terms of power, maritime dominance and economic development. Historically, China and India had been in the military confrontation on the Himalayan border in 1962 and skirmishes in 1967 and 1987¹⁷ to retain their supremacy. Then in 2017 China extended her troops and logistics to construct a road at the Dok La Pass near Doklam¹⁸. Consequently, Indian troops crossed the Sikkim border to contain Chinese construction. Eventually, the military standoff ended between both the states as they withdrew from the area. In terms of geopolitical setting, both India and China opted for a policy of encircling each other by outreaching the other South Asian states. Their extended policy towards neighbors through active diplomacy, economic cooperation and political rapprochement expounded their long-term designs in the region.

India in 2015 extended the policy of 'net security provider' for IOR (Indian Ocean Region), which aimed to provide security and assistance, to all states of the region. In fact, from a broader perspective, this policy of India reflected their hegemonic designs by increasing their influence on states like Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Myanmar and Bangladesh. In addition, it facilitated India to articulate an alternate map of connectivity vis-à-vis the Chinese belt road initiative. Indian active participation within the framework of Quad Squad¹⁹ in the Indo-Pacific region alluded to an extension of Indian partnership with the US, India, Australia and Japan in maritime security routes and SLOCs (Sea Line of Communication). Another Chinese concern is the growing strategic partnership of US and India in maritime cooperation²⁰. US and India maritime cooperation mainly aimed to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region. Mike Pompeo while explaining their maritime strategy said that, 'Binding together with the like-minded nations like Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea to make sure that each Indo-Pacific nation can protect its sovereignty from coercion²¹.'

In this regard, in 2019 Admiral John Michael Richardson, the chief of naval operations visited India to further collaborate on capacity building, military exercises and training. US inclusion in Malabar joint military exercises has been an important source of projecting power, influence and presence around the Indian Ocean Rim which has been a key strategic water gate-way for China. Recently, US also agreed to join India in the Milan exercise which was to be held from 18th March to 20th March 2020, but was postponed due to COVID-19. It was pertinent to highlight that China was not invited by India to join this exercise unlike Russia, the US and the other regional navies²². In addition to it, US-India defense trade has been significantly increased since 2008 from nearly zero to 15 billion dollars in 2019. The recent deal in February 2020 for the purchase of navy and army helicopters worth over 3 billion increased the defense trade up to 18 billion dollars.²³ Despite this contestation of power and presence, China-India rapprochement has also been visible on few forums since 2018 in particular when President Xi Jinping and PM Modi met in Hubei, China and then in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Qingdao. It was assumed as a new chapter in their bilateral relations²⁴.

The recent developments in the Ladakh sector yet again explicate the power contestation between India and China. Nonetheless, the Chinese preponderance of power has put India on the back foot. India has built a road and plans to enhance the infrastructure in the remote border area. In May 2020, both Indian and Chinese troops were seen in a physical face-off with the exchange of words and physical jolt at the border in a video release. This gradually led to acute crisis escalation approximately after forty-five years, when Indian troops crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Galwan valley into the Chinese side which resulted in physical provocation in June 2020 killing at least 20 Indian soldiers²⁵. In this context, the way Indians and Chinese have agreed to disengage reflects Chinese success to contain Indian assertiveness in the south Asian region. Hence, Chinese main securitizing move towards India is to contain the strategic orbit of India by deepening relations with the traditional partners of India in the region along with maintaining a diplomatic and military leverage²⁶.

Chinese Emerging Interests in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has been a key state for China in the Indian Ocean Rim. In addition, it provides a strategic outlook to the Chinese overall maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) strategy of China is one of the major sources of connectivity with

Sri Lanka. For instance, in 2017, China FDI flows in Sri Lanka were worth 1.63 billion dollars which made China the largest investor among all other countries investing in Sri Lanka²⁷. Sri Lanka is an important pearl of China's maritime strategy of developing strategic choke points in the Indian Ocean region to protect its (SLOCs). For this reason, Chinese investment in the Hambantota port explicates their long-term economic and naval interest in the region. Initially, Chinese Exim bank gave loan for the construction of Hambantota port but eventually in 2017 a lease agreement was signed between the Sri Lankan government and China in which Hambantota port was given under lease to China for 99 years to Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited of China for worth \$1.12 billion.

Though it is for economic purposes but it has immensely increased Chinese influence and presence in the region. There are multiple opinions of analysts and economists on this issue. One of the common opinions revolves around the concept of debt-trap diplomacy. Sri Lankan government was unable to generate enough revenue from the port and was unable to pay back the loan to the Chinese company; therefore ultimately Chinese increased their sphere of influence by offering the lease option. Another reason which seems to be more realistic comes from the economist, which sees the debt crisis of Sri Lanka much more complicated as it seems to be. This decision of giving the port to lease was mainly to reduce and repay the foreign debt payment at that time, which did not include any payment related to the port to Chinese Exim bank²⁸. Therefore, the government of Sri Lanka to balance foreign debt servicing agreed on the lease agreement. Though, China has managed to outreach Sri Lanka in economic terms, but Indian relationship with Sri Lankan counterparts in terms of its security realm remains a challenge and concern for China in the region. India has been the main contributor to Sri Lankan military training. In 2014, China was allowed to dock its submarine in Colombo which intensified concerns among the Indian policy circles. As a result, in 2017 another Chinese submarine was not allowed to dock at the port. Extension of military relations and balancing Indo-Sri Lanka military relations remained a challenge for China. China in this regard has securitized its economic policy towards Sri Lanka which has also provided a strategic advantage to China in the region.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been a pivotal part of Chinese grand engagement in the South Asian region. Bangladesh is the second-largest recipient of Chinese capital inflows after Pakistan in the region. Bangladesh received Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of worth US \$1.159 billion from China in 2019²⁹. In addition, power generation investment has also increased. Therefore, Chinese interest in Bangladesh is manifold. On one hand, Bangladesh is a part of the maritime Silk Road strategy of China along with a potential market for China in terms of goods. On the other hand, strategically it is a significant geographic region to contain Indian hegemony in the Bay of Bengal. Chinese relations with Bangladesh can be analyzed through a longitudinal lens which entails a gradual shift in the Bangladesh government's posture towards China mainly due to the Indian factor. In the first half of the decade since 2000, a rise was seen in the bilateral ties in which the China-Bangladesh partnership had strategic and economic nature.

But in the second- half of the decade when Sheikh Hasina took office as a prime minister of Bangladesh in 2009, the government tilted more towards India. The growing military and infrastructure based partnership between China and Bangladesh was a concern for India. In 2002, China signed a defense cooperation agreement with China which set the direction of a new era between their bilateral ties. The agreement enlisted cooperation in military training and production. Later China also contributed to provide military hardware to Bangladesh³⁰. In 2008, a missile launching pad was installed near Chittagong. In 2010, during the visit of Sheikh Hasina to China, projects related to the development of road and railway infrastructure along with Chittagong port were agreed upon both the states.³¹ In 2014, it was evident that construction of the Sonadia deep-sea port³² would be given to China Harbour Engineering Company but in 2016 it was canceled by Bangladesh mainly due to the political maneuvering and pressure from India and the United States. Consequently, the Japanese company was given the contract instead of China. It is significant to note that Japan has been an integral part of the Quad Squad as well, which is seen as an alliance to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region. Nonetheless, China continued to outreach Bangladesh by funding and assisting road, railway, economic zones and energy sector-related projects. In 2016, Xi Jinping in his visit to Bangladesh announced a 24 billion loan program. In addition to it, megaprojects including Karnaphuli Tunnel³³, investing in SEZs in Bangladesh, ³⁴ construction of Padma bridge³⁵ of worth 3.7 billion dollars. Therefore,

despite several issues, Chinese continues its engagement approach with Bangladesh to balance out the Indian influence.

Chinese Influence in Nepal

Within the South Asian political matrix, traditionally Nepal has been under the orbit of Indian influence in the region. Because of its land-locked geographic vulnerability, traditionally India has been the most important state which provides a sea outlet to Nepal. In addition to it, India and Nepal not only shares a religious-cultural bond but Nepal had been dependent on India for its basic economic needs as well. On the other hand, Nepal acts as a buffer state between India and China due to its geographic location. In this context, for the past several years, Nepal has been gradually moving apart from Indian influence because of her new knitting with China. In this perspective, China took the opportunity of troubling relations between India and Nepal that was prevalent since 2015 when approximately a four month economic and trade blockade was imposed by India on account of their differences over the new constitution of Nepal. These four-months became central in gradually changing the geopolitical landscape between India, Nepal and China³⁶. Recently, on the strategic front, Nepal protested the unilateral decision of India to build a road on Kailash Mansarover³⁷ in Tibet through Lipulekh pass, a tri juncture territorial zone, connecting the areas of China (Tibetan region), Nepal (Kalapani territory³⁸) and India (Uttarakhand state). Nepal claimed that India took a unilateral decision to construct the road without any diplomatic consultation. Such developments in Indo- Nepal relations naturally built space for Sino- Nepal cooperation.

Moreover, Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal in 2019 on his return from India has been seen by the policy analyst as an important development in extending strategic choices for China in South Asia. Among twenty agreements that were signed between China and Nepal, the most central is Nepal continuing her support to BRI initiative along with the railway and road networks connecting both the states³⁹. Furthermore, Nepal endorsed its support to 'One China Policy', which would provide a strategic and diplomatic advantage to China. Foreign ministry of Nepal stated that, "Nepal reiterates its support to One China policy and considers Hong Kong as an integral part of the People's Republic of China."⁴⁰ Consequently, on the economic front, in the current fiscal year, Nepal received 90 percent of its Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China. This extensive inflow of investment entails that China has become a dominant investor in Nepal

particularly in the hydropower and cement sector⁴¹. Thus Chinese securitization in its relationship with Nepal revolves around the strategic, political and economic revision of their policies towards each other, which in turn provides China a strategic outlook against India in the region.

The Chinese Relationship with Maldives

The geostrategic position of Maldives provides access to Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Therefore, Maldives acts as a vital choke point in the Chinese Indian Ocean and Asian connectivity doctrine. The growing energy and commercial needs of China demands free and secure SLOCs in which Maldives can act as one of the pivots to develop Chinese command of the shipping lanes. Traditionally, China has not been able to develop closer ties with the Maldives due to its proximity to India⁴² but after the change of government in 2008 in Maldives, Sino-Maldives relations have significantly improved. China continued the policy of engagement with Maldives but it has been limited to infrastructural projects, tourism and trade unlike any strategic or military partnership that Maldives shares with India⁴³. From 2013-2018, under the presidency of Abdulla Yameen, the Sino- Maldives relations considerably improved as compared to the past. The central theme of the high-level visits between Xi Jinping and Yameen was based on the geopolitical significance of Maldives and its potential economic take-off with the assistance of Chinese investment.

In 2018, the construction of first ever inter-island bridge in Maldives was completed with Chinese investment. The Sinamali Bridge also known as China- Maldives Friendship Bridge has benefited the local population as it is the only 2,000-meter-long bridge that links Malé with the surrounding island of Hulhulé⁴⁴. But on the other hand, another perspective related to China's investment in Maldives is linked with the debt trap politics. In 2018, Yameen was defeated in elections and later it was revealed by the president Nasheed that Maldives owes between \$1.1bn and \$1.4bn to China⁴⁵. Therefore, Chinese securitization in Maldives is based on soft power ventures by initiating development projects and assistance. The recent report of World Bank (WB) revealed that half of the external debt of Maldives is due to China. In addition, due to Covid-19 pandemic external debt has further increased⁴⁶.

Bhutan

A small landlocked country existing between two competitors of the region defines the geo-political realities of Bhutan. China annexed Tibet in 1951 and shared a border of 470 kilometers. Before that, Bhutan shared border with Tibet. It is the Tibetan region that the people of Bhutan had strong cultural ties due to Buddhism. China and Bhutan not only have territorial disputes with each other, rather they have not established formal diplomatic relations. After the Tibet dispute, China issued maps and claimed parts of the northern and central territories of Bhutan⁴⁷. In 1984, formal bilateral negotiations were started between both countries. It was years later in 1998 that Bhutan was recognized as an independent state by China and both the states signed a treaty to maintain peace in bordered areas to retain the status quo that existed before 1959⁴⁸. Therefore, Bhutan and China share a peculiar settlement in their bilateral relationship, yet they have maintained the co-existence without any major confrontation in the past. Unlike China, it shares strong socio-cultural and religious ties with India. On the diplomatic front, it has been more aligned towards India since 1949.

The treaty signed between India and Bhutan in 1949 was central to define India's role and influence in the state affairs of Bhutan because Bhutan agreed to get Indian guidance on foreign affairs. Therefore, Indian influence remained a main source of direction in Bhutan's external relations as well as its domestic politics. This treaty was revised in 2007 between both the states. The revision of article 2 of the treaty provides some autonomy of decision making to Bhutan as compared to 1949 treaty⁴⁹. In this context, it is being observed that India has kept Bhutan apart from developing ties with China. For instance, in 2008, Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Sign visited Bhutan and extended further cooperation and agreed to facilitate Bhutan's trade and commercial activities with other countries except China⁵⁰. Therefore, India is a dominant factor in Sino- Bhutan relations. It was mostly after 2008 with the enactment of Bhutan's new democratic set up that to some extent their Indian centric approach was transformed into an approach of balancing act between India and China⁵¹.

But on the other hand, Chinese approach towards Bhutan is a combination of co-existence, coercion and power preponderance. Chinese territorial claims in Bhutan are a major factor in their relationship. In addition to it, these areas can provide a strategic advantage to China against India. For instance, as discussed earlier, the quick response of Indians in the Doklam incident was triggered because this plateau was as important to Bhutan as to Indians due to its

geographical proximity with Siliguri Corridor, which connects with the Indian northeastern parts. Similarly, the new Chinese claim of territory in eastern Bhutan in 2020 is yet another area that can provide leverage to China against India. Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in Bhutan was claimed by China which adjoins with Indian Andhra Pradesh. Though Bhutan rejected but it seemed that China used such tactics to enhance its bargaining position. Consequently, Chinese claim of territories in Bhutan acts as strategic competition between India and China. Policy of engagement and tacitly persuading Bhutan to diversify its foreign policy are the main objectives of China.

Chinese Concerns in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been an important backyard for Chinese security and stability. Unlike other South Asian states, the Chinese-Afghan equation is mainly based on the Chinese desire to have peace and security in Afghanistan. Traditionally, China has been cautious for having any security commitment in Afghanistan unlike United States and Russia. In addition to it, the presence of external forces in Afghanistan and the spillover effect of terrorism in the Xinjiang region and support to Uighur militants by the Taliban's had been security concerns for China. Moreover, the activities of East Turkestan Islamic Movement and the Islamic State are linked with China's national security paradox⁵². In the backdrop of chaotic US military withdrawal from Afghanistan and abrupt re-occupation of Afghan state by Taliban's largely ensuing of US-Taliban Peace Deal of 2020 enhanced Chinese interests in the country.

However, China is carefully observing the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan due to internal strife and is not interested to become a part of it. It seems that unlike US, China would prefer to avoid any military involvement into Afghanistan. However, China looks interested to fill the strategic gap in Post-US withdrawal. Apparently, China is executing its standard good neighborliness policy in Afghanistan however also looking for larger role in comparison with previous US involvement which remained confined to political and military control of Afghan state. The bigger role of China is pushed by following dynamics;

- China is keen for post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan leading to infra-structure developments primarily facilitating the BRI. China is also viewing Afghanistan as a potential source of transportation and mining projects as a part of BRI initiative.

Additionally, China is fully aware that dearth of communication and understanding with Taliban can increase the vulnerability of the region under BRI specifically CPEC to terrorist attacks. Previously, China did not build any cross boarder infrastructure on Wakhan Corridor to ensure a physical buffer with Afghanistan. Recent attacks on Chinese nationals working in Pakistan, constrained new ventures in Afghanistan by China.

- Chinese multi-level involvement in Afghanistan could also increase her global ascendancy in providing rare earth materials used in electronic manufacturing industries.⁵³ China currently possesses almost 35% (44 million metric tons in comparison with US 1.4 million metric tons) of rare earth metals of the world and her future exploration of Afghanistan's mineral of worth trillions of dollars through its incredible mining power could provide China an unprecedented global power beyond mere strategic hold of Afghanistan. Previously, China asserted respective reserves as a threat during the trade war of 2019 while intimidating to cut off the supplies of rare earth materials to US as almost 80 percent of these earth materials imports of America come from China. Furthermore, Made in China 2025 focuses on quantum computing, Artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, new energy vehicles, medical equipment, high-tech ships and other industries relevant to national defense (Interagency Taskforce Report, September 2018). Therefore, Chinese securitization strategy towards Afghanistan in the contemporary times is largely based on supporting peace in Afghanistan to attain economic and strategic advantage.
- China seems pragmatic about power certainties of Afghanistan. China is largely indifferent towards religious radicalization of Taliban while looking at them as primary causes of US strategic loss in South Asian region. This provided China an opportunity to progress the model of its foreign relations based on economic and security interests however China is not ignorant of a potential strategic trap in Afghanistan. In the backdrop of prompt takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban, there are possibilities for instability in neighboring regions while providing a spillover effect on China in case of spread of Islamic militarism. China is endorsing Taliban's claim that war is over in Afghanistan while not raising any significant apprehension on Taliban's authority to

ensure peace in the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, August 16, 2021). In July 2021, Wang Yi; foreign minister of China while meeting Taliban delegation considered them an important military and political force of Afghanistan. However, this informal Chinese recognition would not be without some bargain with Taliban. China would pressurize Taliban for not providing safe heavens to Uyghur rebels to protect her interests at home as well as in Central Asia (Hass, August 18, 2021). In the said meeting, Taliban delegation was also informed about China's reservations regarding their probable connections with East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) while suggesting them a clean break with ETIM. Moreover, through Pakistan's influences over Taliban via its military led establishment and trans-national connections of Pakistani groups, threats of expansion of Islamic militarism would be curtailed. Furthermore, incentive of economic development and investment would compel Taliban to view Beijing as a balancer in the region against Indian opposition to them.

Conclusion

The above discussion illustrates that China has securitized its strategic objectives in South Asia through a combination of geopolitical, economic, commercial and diplomatic engagements. Pakistan is central in Chinese strategy in the South Asian region due to its geopolitical placement in the region which facilitates Chinese economic, strategic and political interests. Even within the power contestation between India and China, Pakistan acts as a balancer in Chinese South Asian discourse. Moreover, India perceived 'Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor' as controversial because it passes through northern and eastern borders of India which remained disputed since 1962 war between both the states. Similarly, the flagship project CPEC has been criticized as it covers the Kashmir territory which is also disputed between Pakistan and India. There were apprehensions among Indian military and political leadership that CPEC would magnify the Kashmir issue at the international level and put pressure on India to make negotiation for the resolution. Presently Indian government is facing multifarious resistance rather ethno-nationalist movements in more than 20 states including Assam, Nagaland, Maoist Movement in northern states, Farmers Movement led by Sikh (Khalsa) on the eastern side and Kashmir Independence Movement. Side by side the massive disaster due to COVID-19 strengthened India's tactical partnership with the US and its containment policy within the Indian

Ocean against China to deny a naval and strategic corridor by approaching towards the South Asian littoral states. Then 'India-Japan Act East Forum' and 'Indo-Korean Axis' are vital developments under Modi government. India has also launched project 'Mausam' to revive its maritime connectivity with South Asian states. In a similar way Indian investment in 'Chabahar' (Iranian Port) and 'Spice Route' with Oman manifest counter-strategies to Chinese BRI. However, these are the major concerns for China. Chinese securitization of regional connectivity is amalgamation of two factors; managing the threats in the region and fortifying the opportunities. The perceived threats of China from emergent US-India ties and its potential ability to sabotage the strategic goals of BRI has significantly transformed China's passive diplomacy over the years into an active one. The new approach of 'Wolf Warrior' 'diplomacy by China is primarily characterized by an assertive standing and 'justified defense' while representing Chinese interests abroad since 2020 Therefore, as a counter-strategy, China has prioritized its economic relationship and infrastructural development by securing choke points through its land economic corridor and maritime silk route across the Indian Ocean.

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