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GANGES WATER SHARING DISPUTE: AN ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL WATER LAW

HASINA AFRUJ SHANTA*

Abstract

The Ganges river water sharing dispute has long been a problematic issue for Bangladesh. Bangladesh has tried to resolve the dispute through the 1996 Ganges River Water Sharing Treaty with India. However, the dispute over Ganges river water sharing remains and has become a burning issue in Bangladesh-India water relations. This study follows the content analysis method and thoroughly examines the principles of international water laws for the settlement of trans-boundary river disputes. It finds that widely accepted principles of customary international water laws have not been properly followed to resolve the Ganges River water-sharing dispute which makes the 1996 treaty weak. The study emphasises the legal obligations of both Bangladesh and India in the case of trans-boundary river water sharing and aims to add to insights on dispute resolution.

Keywords: *Ganges River, Farakka Barrage, Water Sharing Treaty, international water law*

Introduction

Water is the most fundamental necessity for survival and becomes even more precious if it comes through an international river which is not limited within the boundary of one particular state. For,

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when a trans-boundary river runs through the territorial border of any country, it cannot claim the full utilisation right over the water of the said river. This entails that a trans-boundary river does not flow exclusively through one particular country. Rather, it is governed by the customary international rules to avoid disagreement over the common river water-sharing. Activities related to the utilisation of the trans-boundary river are supposed to be consistent with the guidelines of international law. International water law enables the co-riparian countries to settle the issue of the use of water resources of a trans-boundary river peacefully. Customary international law identifies the rights of the co-riparian countries over the water of a trans-boundary river and locates the co-riparian countries in terms of mutuality regarding the usage of the trans-boundary river water. A commonly acknowledged view is that no state has an unrestricted right over the utilisation of the water of an international river.¹

However, because of the growing demand for water, all the basin states try to ensure the best use of their river water, take new water projects, build dams and barrages, and store water for the lean season. All of these activities somehow hinder the rightful share of other basin states deliberately and sometimes not so deliberately, eventually resulting in disputes on trans-boundary river water. In this situation, international water law can play an important role in managing and resolving water disputes and can eliminate the impending threat of water wars. So far, water conflicts among many disputant countries have been resolved through the proper application of the rules of international water laws. As the present paper focuses on the longstanding dispute over Ganges water sharing, considering all the aspects, the legal issues of the Ganges water sharing dispute are discussed in this paper in light of the international water law and state practices.

Major International Water Laws

Trans-boundary water disputes have been emphasised by the world community mostly in recent times, though the issue has been in existence for long. Globally, there are 263 trans-boundary river basins. Thirteen river basins are shared between five and eight countries while as high as eighteen countries share the basins of the Congo, Niger, Nile, Rhine, and Zambezi rivers. Approximately, more than 40 per cent of the world's population lives in globally shared river basins.² More than 75 per cent of 145 countries are sharing trans-boundary rivers with other countries. Additionally, 33 countries have 95 per cent of their area inside international river basins.³ Vast areas covered by trans-boundary rivers and the increasing dependence of people on these rivers have forced countries to have water-related interactions with other co-riparian countries. Multiple uses of international river water and interactions among the basin states have raised complications and have drawn the attention of the world community to the international dimensions and rules for resolving water disputes as well as for sustainable water resource management. Internationally, there are some principles to resolve water-sharing problems which have emanated from major international water laws. Before the emergence of the widely accepted international laws on the uses of common river waters, disputes were mainly settled first under the provisions of the Vienna Act of 1815 and later under the provisions of the 1921 Barcelona Convention. These conventions, however, dealt with the navigational uses in the earlier times as conflicts on non-navigational uses were not as apparent as navigational uses. However, growing demands for water resources pushed for the modernisation of the law which is also related to non-navigational uses such as mitigation of floods, use for hydropower, water sharing, maintaining water quality, and so on. This eventually led to the formulation of non-navigational rules important for state practices and water conventions for dispute resolution.⁴ Two non-governmental organisations, i.e., the Institute of International Law (IIL)

and the International Law Association (ILA) contributed immensely to the establishment of non-navigational water laws. The work of ILA was incorporated in the Helsinki Rules 1966, Berlin Rules 2004, and also in the UN Watercourses Convention which is considered as the major international water law.⁵

The Helsinki Rules

In August 1966, in Helsinki, a set of comprehensive rules on the usage of trans-boundary river water was issued in the 52nd meeting of the ILA. The Helsinki Rules are the first legally authorised international apparatus covering widespread subjects including rules for navigational and non-navigational uses together.⁶ It made the co-riparian states aware of their riparian rights and to sort out the inter-riparian issues in a peaceful manner. The Helsinki Rules have six chapters and 37 Articles covering various aspects of riparian rights to maintain peaceful inter-riparian relations. The Helsinki Rules are considered the first authorised lawful instrument in this regard. The rules were later revised by the Montreal Rules on Pollution 1982, Seoul Complimentary Rules 1986, and Berlin Rules 2004. Despite the broad recognition of the Helsinki Rules, it enjoyed little gratitude as the official codification of international water law gradually led to the UN Watercourses Convention.⁷

Major Provisions Incorporated in Helsinki Rules for Amicable and Peaceful Resolution

The Helsinki rules entitled all the basin states to receive equitable and reasonable shares which have been mentioned in Articles IV to VIII. According to its principles, all the basin states can use a rational and rightful share of transboundary river water inside its sovereign territory. The terms 'equitable' and 'reasonable' share will be determined through the relevant factors mentioned in Article V. Considering these factors together, basin states could reach an understanding. The existing principle of 'reasonable use' of trans-boundary river water will be given more importance in case of preserving water for upcoming usage of a

basin state (Article VII). But basin states can continue the reasonable usage until the other justified factors emerge as more important than the reasonable use (Article VIII). According to the Helsinki Rules, if water use by any country causes any kind of water pollution and leads to damage to the co-basin states, then the injured state must be compensated by the offender state.⁸ The Helsinki Rules covered a wide range of issues related to the procedure to prevent and settle disputes arising among the riparian states. Article XXVII envisages settling the trans-boundary water disputes according to the lawful rights and other benefits of the basin states in a peaceful manner so that peace, harmony, and righteousness among the basin states are not put at risk. According to the Rules, every basin state must furnish related data about its use of such waters to other basin states of the concerned basin inside its territorial border. The Helsinki Rules also instruct that irrespective of their riparian positions, basin states should inform the co-basin states about their proposed construction activities if such activities can change the watercourse of the basin in such a way that might cause harm to other basin states and lead to disputes. Such information on the responsible basin state would help the other co-riparian states assess the likely impact of projected construction activities. Article XXIX also instructs the responsible state to intimate a period to make this assessment.⁹ In addition, the Helsinki Rules give importance to negotiation for dispute settlement. It also instructs the concerned parties to form a joint body to prepare plans and proposals for the best and competent use of water to ensure the interests of all the parties. If, in case, the riparian states are unable to sort out disputes, then the states can seek help from a third party for dispute resolution. Even if the concerned states fail to resolve the dispute, then, according to the Rules, the basin states can go for an inquiry commission or an ad hoc conciliation commission to find a satisfactory way for dispute resolution.¹⁰

The UN Watercourses Convention

The UN Convention was approved on 21 May 1997 in the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) to define the non-navigational uses of trans-boundary watercourses. After working for almost twenty years, the International Law Commission drafted a written document incorporating several articles which formed the basis of the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention. This Convention has seven parts, thirty-seven articles, and an annexure on dispute settlement.¹¹ The Convention got 103 votes in its favour and 3 votes against it with 27 abstentions. It remained open for signature in favour of its acceptance till 20 May 2000.¹² The 1997 Convention covered an extensive range of water issues. The major objective of the convention was to ensure a rational and rightful share of trans-boundary river water and participation of the basin states to attain optimum and sustainable development and benefit. According to the UNGA rightful and rational use by the basin states should be determined by several factors relating to nature, socio-economic needs of the co-riparian countries, population reliant on trans-boundary river water in each basin state, the impact of the present and probable use of water resources of one basin state to other, and so on.¹³ The basin states must be mindful of all these factors during the utilisation of trans-boundary river water as the other basin states are also reliant on the watercourse.

Significant Clauses for Avoiding Disagreement or Dispute Resolution

The UN Convention emphasizes the 'no significant harm' principle to avoid disputes over transboundary river water. Article 7 illustrates that during the use of trans-boundary river water, the principle of 'no significant harm' has to be pursued by the co-riparian countries. If any state's such use causes any harm, it must consult with the concerned state to mitigate the harmful effects and, if necessary, compensate the affected state. All the basin states must share all the available information (Article 9) about the watercourse, particularly

related to hydrological, atmospheric, hydrogeological, and environmental aspects to ensure the best utilisation of the watercourse for all the basin states of the concerned drainage basin. If the data is not readily available, they must take utmost efforts to collect data and make it available.¹⁴ The UN Convention entitled the basin states to report and discuss with each other regarding their planned actions. If there is a chance for substantial adverse impact upon other basin states, they must make all the technical data, information, and environmental assessment available on time to the states so that they can assess the likely adverse effects on them. The informed state(s) should be given at least six months to assess the planned measures and reply. During this process, if they need any further information, the notifying state should provide them with the said additional information and after their assessment, if the notified state does not consent or disagrees with the planned measures, the notifying state cannot implement it. Article 14 (b) mentions that the notifying state shall not implement the intended project(s) in the absence of the approval of the notified state. However, if the notified state does not respond to the notification, the notifying state may continue with the execution based on the announcement and the data and information delivered so far to the informed state.¹⁵

The 1997 UN Convention also incorporated miscellaneous provisions for dispute settlement. Article 33 refers to the procedure to settle a dispute between two or more parties through peaceful means. Any state can go for a third-party arbitration if they are unable to reach any agreement. There is a provision for the states to mutually form a watercourse institution. They can also escalate the issue to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for settlement. If the abovementioned procedures fail, the issue could be submitted to a neutral fact-finding commission which is entitled to decide its procedures and look for finding out a just resolution to the dispute.¹⁶

The Berlin Rules

After the adoption of the 1966 Helsinki Rules, the International

Law Association delivered articles on the mitigation of floods in 1972 and rules on the management of international waterways in 1976. Later on, several other rules were also adopted to deal with the international waterway like the rules of 1980 at the Belgrade Conference on the flow of international watercourses as well as on the connection of international water resources to other natural resources. An article on the contamination of world-wide drainage basins was also adopted in 1982 at the Montreal Conference. Complementary rules relating to global water resources were approved in the Seoul Conference in 1986.¹⁷ The ILA wanted to consolidate all the Rules adopted until then into one instrument. This attempt came to its completion in the year 2000. When the UN Convention was approved in 1997, the Water Resource Committee of the ILA decided to revise the Helsinki Rules at the ILA Conference in London. Following that, in 2002, at the New Delhi Conference, it was decided that the revised project would be completed by 2004. In August 2004, the revised rules were approved as the Berlin Rules on Water Resources in the seventy-first conference of the ILA held in Berlin. It carried fourteen chapters incorporating 73 articles covering a wide range of issues on water resources. As all the issues related to the watercourse are discussed extensively, it is argued that the Berlin Rules go beyond the Helsinki Rules and the UN Watercourses Convention.¹⁸

Major Articles and Clauses for Dispute and Disagreement Resolution under Berlin Rules

The Berlin Rules covered the management of transboundary river basins as well as all waters. It also discussed the implementation procedure of the rules related to water management in the course of judicial context. The key concepts of the Berlin Rules are largely delineated in Chapter III representing the provisions which apply to the internationally shared waters. Article 10 explains the right to participation of all the watercourse states in the management of the water of a trans-boundary river basin in a rational, reasonable, and justifiable manner. In this case, the basin states are also instructed to

cooperate to ensure mutual benefit under Article II. Articles 12 through 15 explain the provision of equitable utilisation and other related issues with it. The basin states should manage the water of the trans-boundary river basin inside their national territory rationally and reasonably without triggering noticeable damage to other basin states. To ensure equitable, rational and rightful use, states must consider the determining terms mentioned in Article 13. States are also instructed to avoid acts inside their area which can have harmful impacts on other watercourse states under Article 16 and disregard their riparian rights.¹⁹

The Berlin Rules covered a broad spectrum of issues to ensure environmental balance, strengthening collaboration among co-riparian countries and also for dispute resolution. Article 29 mainly directed the states to assess the environmental impacts caused by undertaken projects or activities on water in accordance with the assessment procedure described in Article 31. It also covers the provisions and rules for international cooperation among the basin states pointing to the exchange of important data and information under Article 15, notification of programmes, plans, and development activities (Article 57), consultation (Article 58), failure to consult (Article 59), request for impact assessment or other information (Article 60). All these aspects have been discussed elaborately for meaningful cooperation among the basin states. There are certain other chapters in the Berlin Rules addressing the importance of state responsibilities (Chapter XII), legal remedies (Chapter XIII), and the dispute settlement procedures (Chapter XIV) that contain several provisions to ensure state accountability for other basin states as well as for dispute settlement. In the concluding section, this convention gives the basin states the right to resolve the dispute through peaceful means. This convention has some provisions for peaceful settlement of contentious water issues. According to Article 72, states can go for consultation with one another as well as competent international organisations appointing an investigative body. According to Article 73, states are allowed to submit water issues to an ad hoc or

permanent arbitral tribunal or the international court.²⁰

What's New in the Berlin Rules?

Upon closer observation of the Helsinki Rules, the UN Watercourses Convention, and the Berlin Rules, some differences can be noticed. While the Helsinki Rules and UN Convention recognise and highlight the provisions of rational and rightful share for each basin state, the Berlin Rules urge all the basin states to 'manage' the water of the transboundary river basin equitably and reasonably. The term 'manage' in the Berlin Rules indicates the expansion, usage, sharing, regulation, protection, safeguard, and control of the waters. So, while the Helsinki Rules and the UN Convention established the right to use and develop trans-boundary river water in a rational, equitable, and reasonable way for all the basin states, the Berlin Rules referred to 'manage' it.²¹ Another major difference could also be noticed in the Berlin Rules. It gave the main basin states the authority to 'manage' the waters of the international drainage basin in a rational, equitable, and reasonable way so that it may not bring any significant harm to other basin states. It has incorporated this provision in a separate Article while the Helsinki Rules incorporated it along with the other related factors mentioned in Article V to define the just and rightful share for the basin states. Although the UN Convention incorporated the 'not to cause significant harm' principle in a single article, it was made subordinate to the principle of equitable and reasonable utilisation. Considering these facts, it seems that the Berlin Rules dealt with the provision of 'not to cause significant harm' to other basin states more cautiously than the earlier international water laws as after mentioning this provision in Article 12 under the provision of equitable utilisation, it again explained this provision in an independent article.²²

Though most of the principles of the Berlin Rules were drawn from the Helsinki Rules and the UN Convention, a significant difference made in the Berlin rules is that while the former water laws applied only to the common international waters, the Berlin Rules are relevant to

both national and international watercourses. Moreover, the Berlin Rules have outstripped the earlier water laws as they incorporated both the established customary international laws and the emerging principles.²³

Comparative Discussion on Ganges Water Sharing Dispute and International Water Law

In South Asia, water disputes on the trans-boundary rivers are generally stuck to definite principles of international laws. However, only a few bilateral treaties exist in this region and these treaties draw a little from the globally authorised instruments and judicial precedents. The larger co-riparian countries insist on following the principles of international water law mainly to resolve their disputed issues inside their own country rather than trans-boundary water disputes with other co-riparian countries. Lack of a balance of power, distrust, and worldwide lack of common compulsory legal management have complicated trans-boundary water-sharing issues. Resultantly, conflict on trans-boundary water-sharing issues could be a matter of concern as they pose a threat to the international discourse.²⁴ Like other South Asian countries, the water-sharing dispute between Bangladesh and India has been the most irritating issue in their overall bilateral relationship which involves not only legal matters but also technical, social, environmental, and strategic factors. Therefore, international legal aspects are also related to these factors.²⁵ So, analysis of the legal aspects requires comparative discussion on both legal and other relevant factors.

Legal Obligations of Bangladesh and India during the Ongoing Construction of Farakka Barrage

Legal aspects of the Ganges issue came to the fore with India's claim that it was completely free to take out any amount of water from the Ganges while flowing inside its territory and no basin state has any right to interfere. Mists thickened when, in response to this, Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, claimed the rightful share of transboundary rivers as lower riparian countries.²⁶ Theoretically, this claim of India is

supported by the absolute territorial sovereignty doctrine. However, because of its narrow and partial point of view about the sharing of water with lower riparian countries, it is not acceptable worldwide. The widely accepted laws on international water sharing such as the Helsinki Rules 1966 and the UN-Watercourses Convention 1997 completely contradict this point of view. It is also against the draft provision of the 1923 Geneva Conference regarding the use of hydropower which affects more than one state.²⁷

Countries that share transboundary river water with other basin states must follow some procedural principles of international law. These procedural principles bind the basin states to certain legal obligations. If a country intends to undertake any project in the transboundary river basin which is likely to adversely affect the other basin states, before implementing such schemes, it must fulfil the legal obligations, inform the other basin states about its planned project, share all necessary information about the project, and consult with the co-basin states in good faith and, thus, has to abide by the rule of notification, consultation, and negotiation. Generally, the upper riparian countries habitually oppose this principle as it makes them legally liable towards the lower riparian states.²⁸ This principle of prior notice and information was mentioned in the 1923 Geneva Convention, Helsinki Rules 1966, and UN Watercourses Convention 1997 which are widely accepted laws to resolve transboundary water-sharing disputes. Besides the 1957 Buenos Aires Resolution of the Inter-American Bar Association, the 1926 Convention between the French and Swiss governments, the 1938 Convention between Lithuania and Poland, the Montevideo Declaration of Chile and Bolivia in 1933 and many other declarations, UN the Convention recognised this principle, given its capability to avoid controversies over water issues through the principle of prior notice and information. This principle was also recognised even by India several times as a way to resolve water issues with neighbouring countries, such as the Indus water issue with Pakistan, the conflict with Nepal on the

Kosi Barrage issue in 1954, and the Gandak Irrigation Project in 1959. Like the other disputed issues, India was also bound by this principle in the case of the Farakka issue. When Pakistan first came to know about it, it claimed that the barrage would bring an adverse impact on the lower riparian East Pakistan. However, in response, India claimed that it was purely hypothetical. Moreover, defining serious injury or adverse effects is a complicated issue as there is no definitive way to determine the criteria for both. Besides, questions also arose about whether East Pakistan got enough time to assess the project after coming to know about it. Islam gave importance to the observation of Kulz to describe how the absence of the principle of prior notice turned the Ganges issue into a matter of concern for East Pakistan. According to the observation of Kulz, India not only failed to provide Pakistan with prior information about the project, it provided information only upon the request of East Pakistan, and not by its willingness. In addition, East Pakistan was not given reasonable time to assess the project and to reply to the prior notice as the second expert-level meeting was held in October 1960 and India started the construction of the barrage on 30 January 1961, meaning that East Pakistan got just about three months to respond. Whereas according to the rules of Article 13 of the UN convention, East Pakistan should have gotten six months to assess the possible harmful effects of the barrage.²⁹

However, India eventually went ahead with the construction of the Farakka Barrage and after completion, based on a mutual understanding, began the trial run of the barrage for 41 days in 1975. But even after the 41-day test run, India continued the unilateral withdrawal of water without the consent of Bangladesh. Thus, India violated the jointly agreed upon press release of 18 July 1973, the joint communiqué of 15 February 1974, and the joint Indo-Bangladesh declaration of the Prime Ministers of 16 May 1974, where they decided that before India commissions the Farakka Barrage, both sides would reach a mutually satisfactory resolution. Violations of the joint press

release were not thoroughly noticed by the international legal authorities. But, taking into account the international judicial decision taken on the legal status of the Eastern Greenland case between Denmark and Norway in 1933 and the Nuclear Test case between Australia and France in 1973, it may be argued that Bangladesh and India are bound to act as per the undertakings of the joint statements, declarations, and announcement.³⁰ However, it was completely overlooked and Farakka Barrage was commissioned in 1975. India's unilateral withdrawal brought about disastrous consequences for Bangladesh and due to the unsuccessful bilateral negotiation, Bangladesh raised the Farakka issue in the General Assembly of the United Nations. In general, the disputant countries should settle their disputes bilaterally in a peaceful manner. However, Bangladesh had to raise the issue at the international forum for arbitration by the world community. The purpose was to pressurise India, necessitating an immediate solution. Following Article 33 (2) of the UN Convention, the disputant states can raise the issue to any third party based on mutual understanding. Bangladesh's unilateral decision to internationalise the Farakka issue does not seem to go fully well with this provision. However, according to international practice, if bilateral negotiation fails to produce any solution, a neutral third party can assist the disputant states to reach a settlement. So, it seems that the quarter-century-long bilateral negotiation and deadlock on the Farakka issue compelled Bangladesh to raise the issue in the UN General Assembly.³¹ Consequently, after the UN consensus statement, Bangladesh and India signed the 1977 agreement which was followed by the MOUs of 1982, 1985, and then, after a long absence of mutual agreement on the allocation of Ganges water, in 1996, both parties signed the 30 years Ganges water sharing treaty.

The 1996 Ganges Water-Sharing Treaty and its Legal Aspects

According to Islam,³² after a close comprehensive scrutiny of the

1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty and the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention, the following differences could be noticed:

The 1997 Convention held the basin states responsible for ensuring the safety of the international watercourse in the procedure of exploitation of water, bearing in mind the provision of a just and reasonable manner in Article 6 (1). But, Article 5 (1) of the 1996 Ganges Water Sharing Treaty contains nothing to ensure sufficient protection of the international waterway.

Article II of the 1996 treaty applied the 'equity' and 'no harm' principles only when the flow of the Ganges falls under 50,000 cusec but Article 7 of the UN Convention talks about making concrete efforts to avert and lessen the harmful effects as well as to compensate (Article 5 and 6) the injured state. In this way, the UN convention established the no-harm rule dynamically, enthusiastically, and positively.

The 1996 Ganges Treaty envisaged that basin states will exchange information related to the planned projects with other co-basin states as per Articles I, II, and IV while Articles 9 and 11 of the 1997 Convention envisaged the basin states to exchange all related facts and figures on the watercourse condition, planned measures, and consultation.

To settle the dispute, the 1997 UN Convention urged the disputant states to go through bilateral negotiation first. In case of failure to settle the issue through bilateral negotiation, it envisaged a third-party settlement by including a fact-finding commission. The 1996 treaty did not incorporate any provision for third-party arbitration.

Part IV of the UN Convention has dealt with the environmental issues and made it obligatory upon the basin states to protect biodiversity, halt climate change, and not initiate any action that may cause environmental degradation. However, the 1996 treaty entirely overlooked the environmental issue.

Again, when the Indian government came out with its new plan for interlinking rivers, it raised new concerns in Bangladesh. Though

India supports this scheme contending that it will augment the dry season flow of the Ganges by diverting water from the Brahmaputra, Bangladesh assumes that it will harm Bangladesh in many ways. According to the Centre for Development and Environment Policy, this plan would have terrible consequences for the fisheries in South Asia which is highly rich compared to the other areas of the world and cause devastation to the Sundarbans.³³ This is against the 'no harm rule' and the 'precautionary principle' of the UN Watercourses Convention. Moreover, Bangladesh, which is a developing country and vulnerable to natural disasters, should be given a special priority. It is also supported by Principle 6 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992). Bangladesh also believes that the project has the potential to violate the provisions of the 1996 treaty between Bangladesh and India as it has envisaged that both countries would work together for the optimum utilisation of common river water for flood management, generation of hydropower, and river basin development for common benefit. The 1996 treaty also accepted the necessity of augmenting the Ganges flow as a long-standing solution for the mutual benefit of both countries. Thus, the Interlinking River Project of India violates the principles of the 1996 Ganges treaty.³⁴ From India's point of view, the Environmental Appraisal Committee of the Ministry of Environment and Forests and Climate Change of India, after considering all the impacts, has approved the implementation of this project. India also held the uneven flow and dramatic seasonal variation as the real reason for the water-related tension between Bangladesh and India. It also justified her position by stating: "Now keeping the Vienna Convention in mind, particularly the principle 61 which says that if the performance of a treaty becomes impossible as in the case of the Ganges water sharing treaty, 1996 during the lean period the treaty will be void without putting any of the parties liable or responsible".³⁵

Conclusion

After observing the principles of international water law and the perception of Bangladesh and India as watercourse (co-riparian) states in the Ganges water sharing dispute, it looks like no principle can satisfy all the trans-boundary countries at the same time and at the same rate on trans-boundary river water rights as well as trans-boundary water conflicts. Different countries have different perceptions according to their national interest and each will judge its activities according to its objectives. Each country will try to ensure its maximum benefit at any cost. This is the fact which has turned water into a frightening source of contention in the twenty-first century. So far, the principle of rational and reasonable use is the most common method through which attempts have been made to resolve trans-boundary river water-sharing conflicts. Despite this, sometimes one basin state may cause damage to other basin states as sometimes implementing this principle in its entirety is very difficult and unavoidable circumstances may arise. But it is also true that if the basin states of transboundary rivers bound themselves by the terms and conditions of international river water sharing laws such as the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention or other international legal provisions and take necessary steps to avoid the extent of damage, the intensity and extent of harm might be minimised. Water conflicts not only create political, economic, and environmental problems but also raise humanitarian concerns. According to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, "the human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses."³⁶ Universal access to water is essential but it has been debated from different perspectives and this issue has turned out as a bone of contention among nations. So, to overcome this unavoidable situation, the basin states of trans-boundary rivers should have a broader perspective where countries have to cater to their national interest keeping the humanitarian concern and the rights of other basin states in view.

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GLOBAL MULTIPOLARITY AND THE INTERESTS OF MAJOR POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

As the international structure is moving towards global multipolarity, its implications are manifest in the Middle East as well. This paper attempts to explore the changing nature of the interaction between the Middle East and the international structure. It explains how the Middle East could become a central region in defining global multipolarity as multiple actors have stakes in the region. While using the qualitative methodology, the paper attempts to comparatively discuss the policies of three major powers, i.e., China, Russia, and the US, in the Middle East. The paper examines the traditional patron-client relationship between the global powers and the regional states and elaborates on the transition in this relationship while outlining the reasons. The paper also attempts to answer the query of how the interests of global powers change vis-à-vis the transformation of the regional geopolitical structure of the Middle East.

Keywords: multi-polarity, Middle East, great power competition, patron-client relationship, US-China competition

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Introduction

Since the collapse of the bipolar world structure in 1991, the US has enjoyed an unchallenged primacy on the global stage. The US assumed the role of a 'global policeman' by establishing its military presence across various regions like the Middle East, East Asia, and Eastern Europe while maintaining strong ties with its partners in western Europe and Oceania. Furthermore, as Russia became internally weak and China was reforming its economic system, it was expected that the dominance and hegemony of the US would prevail and the former two states would not only accept but actively participate in the US-led world order. However, parallel to the 'Pax-Americana' view, the alternative view challenged the sustainability of the unipolar world order. One such view was presented right after the collapse of the Soviet Union by Layne in 1993. He argued in his article that two factors would lead to the rise of a multipolar world which were the relative growth of the US power that would incite other states to balance against it and increase the economic burden on the US due to its security commitments.¹ With the advent of the 21st century, both these predictions came true. First, the unsuccessful military campaigns of the US in Afghanistan and Iraq coupled with its unchecked military growth prompted both Russia and China to echo their joint resentments against the US power and to call for a multipolar world. Since both Russia and China who were previously playing an active role in the bipolar world order, were left out of the US-led unipolar order, they formulated their 'strategic partnership', i.e., balancing, in 1996 to reflect their dissatisfaction with the US-led global system.² Second, the commitment to NATO and global security overburdened the US financial resources. The US not only contributes over 70 per cent of the NATO budget but it has also shared the maximum burden of the war cost in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere that is estimated to be \$8 trillion.³ The economic burden forced the US to minimise its engagement in the conflict-driven regions which left a

vacuum and provided other states the opportunity to substitute the US role.

While in economic terms, global multi-polarity is unfolding, the existence of only two states, i.e., Russia and China, which are actively challenging the US military dominance at the global level, is still noteworthy. Since 2012, Russia has been assertive in its foreign policy by cementing ties with the states of the Balkans, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa to thwart US dominance. In this regard, Russia has been utilising its vast energy resources and arms sales to these regions.⁴ On the other hand, since the inception of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has been engaging economically across the globe through strengthening trade, commercial, and investment ties. These investments have enabled China to grow its military might and contest the US's global dominance. China has already established its military base in Djibouti and has been conducting military exercises in the South China Sea.⁵ As both these states are challenging US primacy at the global level, one region stood out to be a common competing ground for the US, Russia, and China alike, i.e., the Middle East. Hence, in the wake of the shift in the world order, it is imperative to analyse the interests of these three states in the Middle East.

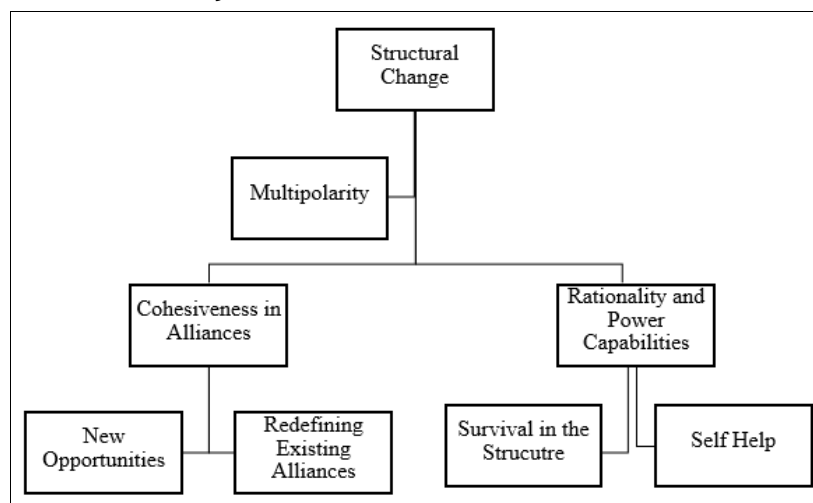
Theoretical Framework

Structural realism or neo-realism is the sub-theory of the realist school which deals with the international system. The pioneer of this theory was Kenneth Waltz who elaborated this concept in his book *Theory of International Politics (1979)*. Structural realism puts forth the idea of 'survival' and 'self-help' in an 'anarchic' world order. It enables the understanding of systemic constraints on the actors, i.e., states, and helps in explaining the set patterns which every state follows. Hence, Waltz mentioned that the structure encourages the states to behave in a certain manner, i.e., rationality, and those who fail to

comply with the structure get punished.⁶ There is no difference in the functioning patterns of the states, however, the difference emerges due to their capabilities and their capacity to project themselves at the international level. Some states have lesser capabilities than others to perform the same task and thus those with greater capabilities are more efficient and powerful. The difference in capabilities of the states dictates their position in the international system in terms of hierarchy.⁷ While working in the system, the difference in the states' capabilities creates polarity. Since the theory was developed during the cold war, it favoured the bipolar structure as it was deemed more stable due to the concept of balance of power.⁸ Despite the failure of structural realism in explaining the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union, Waltz argued that US dominance in the shape of uni-polarity was temporary and soon the void created by the collapse of the Soviet Union would be filled.⁹ Thus, the major variables identifiable through the aforementioned discussion of structural realism are inter-related with each other while at the same time extending towards other variables. These variables are mentioned in the figure below.

Figure 1

Major Variables of Structural Realism



In the context of emerging multi-polarity vis-à-vis the changing regional dynamics of the Middle East, each state of the region is adamant to embark on a quest for more opportunities. Traditionally, the US has enjoyed primacy over Middle Eastern affairs by consolidating its partnership with different regional states mainly with the Gulf monarchies. Externally, the presence of US bases in these states and the Gulf waters deterred regional foes like Iran from plotting the expansion of its revolutionary ideology into these Gulf states. Internally, the patronage of a powerful global player allowed the royal houses of these states to rule over their territories with impunity and thwart any opposition to their rule. However, as the US policies in the region faced setbacks, i.e., the failure to bring peace in Iraq, the rise of non-state actors, and the expansion of Iranian power coupled with its reluctance to actively participate in the Syrian Crisis, the space for other global players to gain a foothold in the Middle East became inevitable. Hence, the structure which was dominated by the US was replaced by the participation of Russia and China, leading to multi-polarity.

The arrival of multiple global players presented them with the dilemma of choosing regional partners. For this, China was able to provide economic incentives to regional states that were struggling with their oil-dependent and stagnant economies. On the other hand, the entry of Russia provided strategic patronage for states already resisting the US-dominated structure of the region. These opportunities forced the players to redefine their existing alliances in the region. Due to the tilt of the US towards containing China, it disassociated itself from regional proceedings of the Middle East. This policy of the US resulted in the re-orientation of the interaction between the regional states as they moved towards reconciliation as a viable solution for their security. This is true in the case of the GCC-Qatar rapprochement, Saudi-Yemen ongoing peace talks, re-admission of Syria into the Arab League and most recently, the Iran-

Saudi rapprochement. Therefore, in this environment, it is imperative to understand the contemporary objectives of the external powers in the Middle East.

US Interests

The US has been the most consistent international actor in the Middle East. Historically, the motives of the US in the region can be classified into four periods: the early cold war (1945 – 1979), the second cold war (1979 – 1991), the post-cold war (1991 – 2003), and post-Saddam (2003 – 2011) periods. Paul Jabber outlined five main policy objectives of the US in the Middle East during the cold war, i.e., consistent flow of oil, containment of the Soviet Union, unshakeable commitment to Israel's security, maintaining friendly ties with the Arab states, and preventing the outbreak of a regional war.¹⁰ In following these objectives, the US fostered cordial relations with the Arab states (mainly the GCC countries, Jordan, and Egypt), Türkiye, and Iran to prevent the expansion of the Soviet Union. The US also continued to provide security aid to Israel which amounted to nearly \$30 billion from 1959 to 1991.¹¹ Lastly, to prevent the possibility of a regional war between the Arabs and Israel, the US initiated the peace process, famously known as the *Camp David Accords* in 1978 between Egypt and Israel. However, with the onset of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the US faced a dilemma as the pro-US government of the Shah was overthrown. Resultantly, the US adopted a new policy called the *Carter Doctrine* that was based on two major aspects: assisting the regional friendly states to assert US influence and to secure vital energy resources of the Persian Gulf against external threats. Therefore, when Iraq launched an attack on Iran owing to the threat of Iranian expansionism, the US began providing military and political support to the Baathist regime. This allowed the US to counter both the Iranian threat as well as the Soviet expansion by bringing Iraq into its camp.

The US policy in the post-Cold War era reflected a continued rather growing support for Israel, clearly manifested through the peace process between the Arabs and Israel in the form of the *Oslo Accords* in 1993 which apparently settled the Israel-Palestine conflict and enhanced Israel's security.¹² On the other hand, the US adopted two policies simultaneously to thwart regional threats: *dual containment* (against both Iran and Iraq after the First Gulf War) and *increased military footprint* from less than 1,000 troops to over half a million personnel in the aftermath of the Gulf War.¹³ The increase in the military force reflected the growing commitment of the US to Middle Eastern security by deterring potential enemies and reinstating its global hegemonic status.

However, the attempt at pre-eminence by the US aggravated certain groups to contest their presence in the Muslim World. The most notorious one of them was *Al-Qaeda* which intensified its attacks on the US assets in the region and across the globe.¹⁴ Following the 9/11 attacks, the major policy objective of the US was shifted to curbing terrorism and its state-sponsorship, mainly *Al-Qaeda* and its associates. Eventually, for the first time since WWII, US troops were deployed in the region for overt regime change in enemy states. Cognisant of the anti-Americanism, the US ensured that the threatening regime would be neutralised and the democratic wave would sweep across the region to eliminate fundamentalism. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 reflected both of these US ambitions. As the US invasion of Iraq proved to be a debacle in the following years, the US desire for democracy in the Middle East rejuvenated. The *Arab Spring* protests in 2011 which led to regime change in Egypt and Libya further accelerated the process. Hence, while summarising, the US policies since post-WWII till 2011 in the Middle East largely revolved around consolidating the US influence in the region in political, security, and economic domains, though economic interests became

marginal as US dependence on Middle Eastern oil relegated. Hence, the contemporary US policies and objectives are as follows:

Security

Since the Arab Spring uprisings and the US military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the Middle East witnessed a new wave of terrorism in the form of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Still, the Obama Administration was reluctant to partake in any military operation against ISIS, fearing the return of similar complexities that had prevailed during the previous military presence in Iraq from 2003 to 2011. According to Paul Williams, the US adopted the strategy of *strategic absence* which entailed three features: limiting the scope of US interests, leading from behind, and allowing the regional allies to take up the task of regional security.¹⁵ Nonetheless, in 2014, when the US had to deploy troops on the ground in Iraq, it strictly followed the joint combatant approach while partnering with the Iraqi military and the Kurdish militias. The US also followed the same strategy in Syria by arming the anti-Assad rebels via Arab allies in their fight against ISIS while not directly associating itself with the Syrian Civil War.¹⁶ Obama's policy of disengagement continued to exacerbate things during the tenure of his successor, former US president Donald Trump. Despite his criticism of Obama's policies, Donald Trump continued to withdraw US troops from Syria and the Persian Gulf.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he resorted to the concept of *offshore balancing* by enormously arming US allies in the region. During Trump's presidency, Israel received arms worth nearly \$500 million from 2016 to 2019 (over 90 per cent of Israel's global arms imports), Saudi Arabia received arms of nearly \$3 billion in 2017-19 (over 80 per cent of its total arms imports), and the UAE received an average of approximately \$600 million worth of arms (over 75 per cent of its global arms imports) from the US.¹⁸ Under the Biden administration, the Middle East strategy has seen a setback mainly due to the haphazard withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Ukraine War. Thus, while the US attention remained focused on Ukraine in the

security domain, the Middle East remained a relatively silent arena for the US security objectives. However, the US tried to diplomatically resolve the energy crisis in Europe by asking the GCC states, mainly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), to increase oil production. Nonetheless, such an attempt failed due to Biden's strong criticism of the KSA over the human rights issue.

Politics

The political interests of the US in the Middle East are more clearly defined and are persistent with a few exceptions. The foremost political interest of the US is to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict while ensuring the security of Israel. Despite having a strong defence system and maintaining a *qualitative military edge (QME)* over its neighbours, diplomatic isolation of Israel is a threat to its security.¹⁹ During Obama's period, the US facilitated two rounds of talks between Israel and Palestine in 2010 and 2013-14, however, both rounds were called off without any common agenda.²⁰ Despite facilitating the talks, the US continued to put its weight behind Israel by increasing the security aid as well as providing a diplomatic cover through the power of veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).²¹ Successively, during the tenure of former president Donald Trump, the US practically moved its embassy to Jerusalem as a symbol of recognising it as 'the undivided capital of Israel'.²² In contrast, Trump proposed \$50 billion in investments for Palestine and granted it 'limited sovereignty' under Israel's supervision.²³ The second major objective of the US is to ensure a perpetual Arab-Israel peace. The Abraham Accords which perpetuated the peace between Israel and the two Gulf states of the UAE and Bahrain, proved pivotal in ensuring the Arab-Israel rapprochement as Morocco and Sudan also established diplomatic relations with Israel.²⁴ The rapprochement between two major allies of the US (Israel and Arabs) can provide an opportunity to develop a regional security framework and decrease the security burden of the US. Both of these objectives of the US expanded in their scope during

the Biden Administration. President Biden sought to actively resolve the Palestine issue, especially after the May 2021 conflict through regional actors like Egypt while intensifying Israel's normalisation process. This was evident with the US insistence on Saudi-Israel negotiations which have so far yielded minimum results due to differences between President Biden and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman.²⁵ The third political objective of the US is to counter the Iranian threat in the region through political transitions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The policy during the Obama period was that of appeasement which was aimed at bringing Iran into the mainstream and revoking its revisionist policies by lifting the sanctions in exchange for suspension of the latter's nuclear activities. On the contrary, Trump's policy towards Iran went in the opposite direction by withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Deal and adopting the 'maximum pressure strategy' to cripple the Iranian economy. The US also went into a confrontation with Iran as reflected in the drone killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. After the ascendancy of President Biden, it was expected that the US might return to JCPOA and the tension between the two states would decrease. However, owing to Iran's advances in the region and the drone supplies to Russia in the Ukraine war, the US-Iran dialogue could not materialise. The relations between the two states have also nosedived after the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 which led to the deployment of a US aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean Sea and the activation of Iran-backed 'Axis of Resistance' that has sowed further complications in the bilateral relations between the two states.

Russian Interests

The Russian involvement in the Middle East dates back to the cold war politics. In an attempt to expand its influence, the then-Soviet Union tried to formulate ties with states that were primarily anti-imperialist. In this regard, three states proved to be major allies of the

Soviet Union during the Cold War: Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The Soviet Union cultivated strong ties with the communist parties of these states as well as the ruling Baath Party which promised the *socialist way of life*. The Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 allowed the Soviet Union to cement its ties with Egypt. It was followed by the economic assistance of 700 million Rubles by the Soviet Union in 1958.²⁶ In military terms, Egypt received arms supplies worth \$250-400 million in 1957 and a \$280 million loan which could be utilised for military purposes as well.²⁷ In the 1967 Arab-Israel War, the Soviet Union provided Egypt with 476 fighter jets, 6 destroyers, and 18 patrol boats along with other ammunition.²⁸ Yet, after the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser and specifically after 1973, Soviet relations with Egypt deteriorated as then-Egyptian President Anwar Sadat reoriented Egypt's policy towards the US.

Secondly, Iraq, after the revolution of 1958, also proved to be an arena where the Soviet Union could expand its influence. The nationalist coup of Iraq eroded its relations with the US and resultantly brought it closer to the Soviet Union as the counterbalance. In 1954-76, Iraq became the second largest recipient of any Soviet grant to less-developed countries with a total of \$699 million.²⁹ From 1968 to 1975, owing to Iraq's conflict with Iran and the resurgence of Kurdish fighters, the USSR sold weapons worth \$1.7 billion to Iraq.³⁰ However, once Iraq's issues with Iran were resolved and its huge oil revenue made it the prime state for the West, Soviet-Iraq relations remained weaker.³¹ Eventually, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) made Iraq a close ally of the US and the cautious policy of the Soviet Union towards the conflict further weakened the relations between the two states.

Lastly, Soviet relations with Syria also had its roots in the anti-imperialist and anti-Israel rhetoric of the latter. As Syria did not receive any military assistance from the West, it turned to the Soviet Union in 1956 for its military requirements. For thirty years, the Soviet Union provided Syria with security assurances in the wake of Türkiye's

offence in 1957, the Arab-Israel War of 1967, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon in 1982.³² Relations between the two were rejuvenated after the Baathist coup in 1966 when the Soviet Union granted an economic assistance of \$133 million to Syria and the trade steadily grew to 118 million Rubles in 1973.³³ On the military front, during the first five years of the 1980s, Soviet military support to Syria reached over \$8 billion, the largest in that era to any other country.³⁴ However, towards the end of the cold war, as the Soviet Union struggled internally, its relations with Syria experienced stagnation.

In the post-cold war era, the initial phase saw only the minimum and symbolic role of Russia in the Middle East largely due to its own fragmentation and internal crisis. After the rise of President Vladimir Putin, Russia started to play a more active role in the region for two reasons. First, the civil war in its Chechnya region forced Russia to reach out to Muslim countries to discourage the penetration of extremism into its territory. Second, being apprehensive of the US unilateralism, Russia tried to reassert itself as a global power.³⁵ The overall strategy of the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia was to nurture anti-US regimes in the Middle East during the cold war and to revive its political partnerships in the post-cold war period. In line with this policy, the major involvement of Russia in the region occurred in the post-Arab Spring period owing to two factors, i.e., the US military withdrawal and the Syrian civil war.

Strategic Interests

The strategic interests of Russia in the Middle East can be categorised into two branches, i.e., arms sales (security) and energy (economic). The Syrian civil war provided Russia with the opportunity to materialise all these objectives. Firstly, by maintaining a military presence inside Syria, Russia has been able to keep its access to strategic ports like Latakia and Tartus, which provide a path into the Mediterranean Sea. Both of these ports host Russian air and naval

forces, respectively, and hence are vital for an expanded Russian influence all across the eastern Mediterranean and in the Middle East. These military bases allow Russia to test its weapons in the Syrian civil war and advertise them to potential customers. Hence, Russia has already installed its S-400 air defence system in Syria and sold weaponry like T-72 and T-90 battle tanks, Su-25 fighter aircraft as well as Su-35 fighter aircraft for bombing purposes.³⁶ The utilisation and manoeuvrability of these weapons attracted many regional states towards their purchase. Türkiye, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have shown their interest in purchasing the S-400 air defence system of Russia while the UAE has also negotiated to purchase fighter jets from Russia.³⁷

Secondly, by assisting the Assad Regime and preventing it from collapsing, Russia has made inroads into the larger Middle Eastern region in terms of economy. Russia is already developing a gas pipeline that would run across Türkiye to finally reach the European markets. The Turkish Stream Pipeline project was signed in 2014 between Russia and Turkey and aimed at consolidating Russia's energy monopoly in Europe while thwarting rival projects like that of the Qatar-Türkiye pipeline proposed in 2009.³⁸ Similarly, another gas pipeline project named the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, signed in 2011—would run from the South Pars Gas Field of Iran to Iraq and Syria while eventually reaching Europe—is expected to generate competition for Russia's energy politics. Nevertheless, due to the sanctions on Russia after the Ukraine war, these gas pipeline projects are halted if not cancelled completely. In the oil sector, Russia also faces competition from the OPEC states, mainly Saudi Arabia. Both states have competed for the sale of their oil to China and Europe. Cooperation with the Gulf states becomes much more significant for Russia to turn competition into cooperation. Although Russia had managed to negotiate the deal with the Saudi-led OPEC group in 2016 over oil pricing, their oil war in 2020 manifested the growing discontent between the two parties. For

Russia, relations with the Gulf States are important for their investments within its borders. Saudi Arabia is aiming to invest \$5 billion in the Russian LNG sector while the UAE has shares in Russian helicopter companies.³⁹ Furthermore, the Russian inability to sustain oil production and prices for more than a week in the 2020 oil war with Saudi Arabia, forced it to resolve the crisis by agreeing to keep the oil output at the pre-crisis level. Hence, the Middle East has emerged as an important arena for Russia to revive its global status.

Politics

The political interests of Russia in the Middle East revolve around revitalising its image as a global player. Russia has always opposed the US military presence in the region and opposed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. To foster this view, Russia cemented ties with the anti-US forces in the region, notably Iran and its proxies. Russia and Iran have cooperated militarily in Syria against the US goal of deposing Assad from power. Russia has also collaborated with Hezbollah and jointly undertook military operations with Hezbollah fighters against ISIS and anti-Assad forces, especially in the liberation of Aleppo.⁴⁰ Moreover, Russia has also initiated diplomatic efforts to defuse the Syrian crisis through the Astana peace process along with Iran and Türkiye. Furthermore, Russia has agreed to jointly patrol the border region between Türkiye and Syria and, hence, shown flexibility over Türkiye concerns about the Kurds despite having opposing views regarding the future of Syria and the military conflict in *Idlib* which resulted in the deaths of over 30 Turkish soldiers in 2020.⁴¹ This has brought Türkiye into close cooperation with Russia despite being a NATO ally of the US.

Russia rejuvenated its ties with major GCC states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar in the second decade of the 21st century. Due to the oil and gas capacity of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it is in the interest of Russia to formulate economic ties instead of being apprehensive towards these states. This policy of maintaining close ties with both

Saudi Arabia and Qatar was reflected during the Qatar Crisis where Russia maintained a neutral posture and continued sharing mutual economic ties with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar.⁴² Likewise, Russia preferred to engage with every actor involved in the Yemen crisis without taking any sides and hosted Saudi-backed Hadi's government, Houthis' representatives and UAE-backed Southern Transition Council's delegation.⁴³ These evidences reflect that Russia does not have any substantial political strategy for the Middle East. Mainly, it relies upon its partnership with Iran to counter the US policies and maximise its interests. Nevertheless, Russian political interests in the region are vaguely defined vis-à-vis regional actors. However, if the US continues its policy of disengaging from the region, Russia could embolden itself to play into the political proceedings of the region more actively and assertively.

Chinese Interests

China has always remained a marginal player in the Middle East. At the event of its establishment in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) found itself engulfed in the bipolar proceedings of the cold war. Despite being associated with the Soviet Union, China adopted the policy of non-alignment after participating in the Bandung Conference (1955) and voiced its support for the liberation of Asian and African countries. The direct and comprehensive engagement of China with the Middle East was hindered due to two reasons: the strong diplomatic bond of Middle Eastern states with the US and the non-recognition of the PRC in the UN under US pressure.⁴⁴ However, against this backdrop, China did not stop to support revolutionary struggles against Western imperialism in the region. One such example is the Chinese support to the 1958 revolution of Iraq which overthrew the Western-backed monarchy and led to the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. China not only backed the 1958 coup but also competed with the Soviet Union

for influence over the Iraqi Communist Party which led to the deteriorating relations between the two states.⁴⁵ China also supplied arms to Palestinian guerrilla movements in their struggle against Israel in the mid-1960s in the form of light weapons: AK-47 assault rifles, Kalashnikovs, and anti-tank arms.⁴⁶ Similarly, to influence southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf in the wake of the British naval dominance, China supported the Dhofar Uprising during the late 1960s and early 1970s in Oman against the forces loyal to the western-backed Sultan by providing training and arms and ammunition along with the indoctrination of the Marxist views among the tribal forces called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG).⁴⁷

During the 1970s, China made a foreign policy shift by normalising its relations with both the US and its allies in the Middle East. In 1971, both Iran and Kuwait established diplomatic relations with China.⁴⁸ As the US recognised China as the “only legitimate representative of Chinese people” in the UNSC through the resolution of 2758, many Middle Eastern states like Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Kuwait along with the north African Arab states including Egypt, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco in 1971 favoured it.⁴⁹ This also led to the normalisation of ties between China and the other Gulf Arab countries of Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE which transformed into full diplomatic relations in the 1980s. China’s interaction with the Middle Eastern states also solidified after 1979 mainly after the opening up of its economy and provision of arms in the Iraq-Iran war. According to estimates, China sold weapons worth \$3.9 billion in 1986-90 to Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia combined, hence, preserving the delicate balance between all the three major powers of the region while maintaining the policy of non-interference.⁵⁰

In the post-Cold War era, China began to get involved in the Middle East to explore its economic potential. Ties with regional states were also important for China to prevent the US dominance of the

regional energy resources which could have been threatening for China given the souring of relations with the US over the incident of Tiananmen Square in 1989. Hence, through strengthening energy cooperation with the Gulf states, China prevented a backlash from the US while by collaborating with Iran over its nuclear program, it continued to challenge US dominance in the region in the 1990s. On the diplomatic front, China continued to oppose US policies in both Gulf wars (1991 and 2003) yet did not counter them directly. Instead, it accelerated its diplomatic and economic engagement with the Middle East. In the following years, China imported more than half of its oil requirements from the Middle East, especially from Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁵¹ Economic cooperation further strengthened with the inception of the 21st century as China formulated the foreign policy of *going global*. In the first decade, China imported a vast amount of oil and gas from the Gulf states in exchange for exporting material products like mechanics and textiles. As per the China Customs Statistics Yearbook of 2009, China imported 25.82 per cent from Saudi Arabia, 11.25 per cent from Oman, above 4 per cent from Kuwait and above 3 per cent from the UAE, of its total oil imports.⁵² The mutual investment relations also accelerated as China's stock of investments grew from \$33.63 million in 2003 to over \$1 billion in 2008 in the GCC states.⁵³ Hence, with this background, China's interests in the Middle East are primarily economic which entail in themselves security objectives as well that are discussed in the next section.

Economic

Middle East is of vital importance for China especially in the economic and energy sectors. China's engagement in the Middle East takes place on multilateral and bilateral levels. The multilateral engagement refers to China's cooperation with the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This started in 2010 when China established strategic cooperation with the Arab League and later expanded it into a strategic partnership in 2018. Bilateral engagement

refers to China's bilateral relations with individual countries of the Middle East like Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the UAE.

China's partners in the region can be classified into four categories as mentioned by Degang Sun.⁵⁴ The first category is the 'pivot states' that are hubs for China's global network like Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These countries are economically and politically strong and are vital for securing Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea. The second category is known as the 'node states'. These are the states that are given special status by China as they serve as a bridge between China and the great powers. This category includes Israel and Türkiye. Türkiye is a gateway that provides access to China to reach the European markets. Israel is a facilitator of cooperation between China and the US. The third category is that of 'key states'. These are the countries that do have developmental potential but are entangled in domestic instability. However, these countries can exert considerable influence on the neighbouring countries while promoting Chinese interests regionally. These countries include Iraq, Morocco, and Sudan. The last category comprises states like Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. These are small countries but exhibit a high degree of economic cooperation with China. These are strongholds for securing specific Chinese interests in the region.

In the Middle East, China moves with great caution. While expanding its interests in the region, it tries to avoid getting entangled in any conflict. Primarily, the Israel-Palestine conflict is an issue of concern for China. Moreover, instability in Syria and Yemen is also a concerning factor for China. China has economic and energy interests in the Middle East which sometimes take the shape of strategic interests when it comes to dealing with US interests in the region. Although China tries to avoid confrontation with the US, its rise in the Middle East threatens US interests in the region. For example, the US has a hostile attitude towards Iran but it is one of the first and the most

important Chinese allies in the region. Iran has the 4th largest reserves of crude oil and 2nd largest reserves of gas in the world which makes Iran an energy superpower. China and Iran have also signed the \$400 billion strategic deal which largely entails economic cooperation. China has also established relations with other important Middle Eastern countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Moreover, among the six corridors of China's BRI, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor passes through the Middle East. It connects China with Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Once this corridor is functional, there will be several economic and trade opportunities for the Middle Eastern countries as well. Israel is an important player in China's global ambitions. Both countries established formal diplomatic relations in 1992. Since then they have furthered their cooperation in sectors of energy, economy, technology, and military. Both have also cooperated closely in research and technology.

The Current Policies of the US, Russia, and China: An Analysis

The Ukraine conflict has brought a significant change in the international system which has impacted every region of the world. While a majority of the regions faced challenges like food shortages, energy crises, and economic and political instability, for the Middle East, the conflict brought opportunities as the majority of the regional states remained neutral.

For the US, the Middle East has again gained significance as an alternative source of energy for its European allies that have sanctioned Russian energy exports. This resulted in the intensification of US efforts to expand the normalisation process between Israel and the Arab states including the KSA. Apart from them, the conflict between Hamas and Israel after the October 07 attacks has invited the US military into the region as well. While the extent of the US military participation in the conflict is yet to be seen, it is highly unlikely that the US would get involved in another Middle Eastern conflict

alongside the Ukraine war and the South China Sea. It is so because the US participation might result in its over-exhaustion. Furthermore, given the unequivocal support of the US for Israel in its airstrikes and attacks on Gaza, the credibility of the US as an unbiased mediator is highly questionable. These developments suggest that the current policy of the US towards the Middle East is yet to be reshaped, especially after when the Arab-Israel normalisation process stalled after October 2023. As Russia became more sanctioned, consolidation of its ties with the regional states has become more important. The Russo-Iranian partnership blossomed in the wake of the Ukraine war in two aspects. First, Iran became the only country that supplied its weapons (drones) to Russia which proved valuable in Russian operations in Ukraine. Second, as the sea routes of Russia in the Baltic, Mediterranean, and Pacific waters came under increased scrutiny by the Western powers, it invigorated the 'International North-South Corridor (INSC)' with India for which Iran became the pivotal state due to its strategic location. With the Arab states, Russia has aligned its interests in the energy sector by maintaining high oil prices. This has brought Russia in close cooperation with the GCC states which are also the channels for Russia to re-export its energy into Europe.⁵⁵ Finally, for China, the Ukraine War came as an opportunity to scale up its interaction with the Middle East. As the US focused more on the Ukraine War and the issue of Taiwan due to the fear that China might follow in Russian footsteps, the neglect it fostered towards the Middle East allowed China to emerge as a new peacemaker in the region. This was reflected in the March 2023 diplomatic rapprochement between Iran and KSA that was mediated by China. In doing so, China not only elevated its position in the region but also consolidated its bilateral and multilateral engagements with regional states.

The policies of both Russia and China are the continuation of their pre-existing objectives. The Ukraine War provided the impetus for both these states to further enhance and streamline their *modus*

operandi in the region which has borne fruit. For the US, however, it was a drastic shift in the policy towards the Middle East. As discussed, the US has been more focused on the Asia Pacific region and was in the process of decreasing its engagement in the Middle East. The neutrality of the Gulf allies and the energy crisis in Europe forced the US to re-engage with the region. Furthermore, the normalisation of Israel in the region and the joint bloc of US allies against Iran in the region did not materialise as it was initially anticipated mainly due to the persistent attacks by Israel on Gaza. The increased support of the US to Israel coupled with its relatively silent response over the humanitarian crisis that has persisted in Gaza, diminished the US scope for being the net security provider in the region. The perception was further strengthened when the GCC states managed to resolve their issues with Iran through diplomatic channels, facilitated by China. On the other hand, the border conflict between Syria and Türkiye is being managed by Russia to avoid escalation. These developments reflect that the traditional relations between external powers and regional states have been shifting as regional states are in the quest to find alternative global partners and elevate themselves for the indigenous security apparatus.

Conclusion

For the last 100 years, the Middle East has attracted the involvement of external powers for both its strategic location as well as vast energy resources. For the most part, the relationship between the external actors and regional states was that of patron-client relations, specifically in the context of the US-GCC partnership and USSR relations with the revisionist Arab states, i.e., Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. While utilising the patronage of external powers, regional states consolidated their status both within the region as well as for their domestic audience. However, certain factors like the Arab Spring, the decline of the Arab world, the global shift towards multi-polarity, and

the disengagement of the US, shifted the regional landscape as well as the status quo. This motivated regional non-Arab states to embark on a quest to fill the power vacuum left by the US. For the Arab states, the struggle to find alternatives to the US was paramount. This allowed both Russia and China to enter into the Middle Eastern region. Their mutual discontent towards the US policies along with their ambitions to showcase their global status brought both of them in alignment with the regional states. It is important to highlight that the entry of Russia and China and their dependency on the region for its energy resources and potential customers of defence equipment transformed the patron-client relation into a more equal partnership. This also emboldened the Middle Eastern states. This is evident from Russian dependency on Iranian drones and Europe's reliance on Middle Eastern oil. Chinese stakes are also significant as it moved towards assuming a more proactive role by mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, for the perceivable future, external powers, particularly China, Russia, and the US, are believed to enhance their presence in the region with close association of regional Arab and non-Arab states. While it is true that the US has shifted its focus towards Ukraine and the Asia Pacific, the persistence of the Palestine-Israel conflict and the reorientation of the GCC towards China and Russia, along with the rising power of Iran and its proxy partners, would inevitably force the US to rediscover its role in the Middle East.

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A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN'S GROWING ENGAGEMENT IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS REGION

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Abstract

India and Pakistan have been taking sides with states in the South Caucasus region since the start of the Azerbaijan-Armenian war in 2020. Pakistan strongly supports Azerbaijan and does not recognise Armenia as a state; whereas India enjoys cordial relations with Armenia and supports it against Azerbaijan. In this background, this paper seeks to answer the following question: how does the involvement of India and Pakistan in the South Caucasus region impact its political situation? In conducting research for this paper, a close examination of daily news, official documents, books, and articles was made for an objective analysis. The study found that the animosity between India and Pakistan has become a considerable factor in shaping the geostrategic environment of the South Caucasus region, particularly after the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Moreover, friendly relations between Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Türkiye have become stronger, triggering significant Indian support for Armenia.

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Introduction

The South Caucasus region lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Its geography explains its significance and the interests of great powers in this area.¹ Notwithstanding the geographical contiguity and shared history, the three countries of this region, i.e., Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia have followed different trajectories of foreign policies after independence in 1991. The oil reserves in the area and the association of the region with transit, transport, and transfer make it important² for many states. Similarly, the South Caucasian states have been searching for stronger partners for new trade possibilities and security arrangements to meet their economic and security needs. However, the geopolitical tensions within the Caucasus have had ramifications for their ties to other states. Given the geopolitical tension and continuous border-war situation, De Waal called the South Caucasus a 'broken region'.³

In 2020, the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, also known as the 44-day war, changed the dynamics of power politics. Azerbaijan got control of the last remaining parts of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 that were still occupied by the Artsakh Armenian population.⁴ Certainly, the 44-day war has led to a new shift in the regional dynamics of the South Caucasus and shaped the new geopolitical environment. These regional changes have also been of great concern to policymakers in Islamabad and New Delhi due to their allies in the South Caucasus region. In the wake of the 44-day war, both India and Pakistan entered a new phase of relations with the South Caucasian states. Several push factors have triggered the interests of India and Pakistan in the South Caucasus region. Russian invasion of Ukraine, rising tensions between European states and Russia, and emerging blocs such as Türkiye and Azerbaijan have led Pakistan and India to recalibrate their positions in the South Caucasus region. India

appears to be an important stakeholder in the region, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since the invasion, India has been trying to exploit its alliance with Armenia to reinforce its grip in the region in an attempt to materialise the concept of the North-South corridor via Iran and Armenia.

Azerbaijan's victory revealed the long-lasting amity between Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. The trio arranges joint military drills, supports educational exchange programmes, and engages in other joint trade ventures. This amity has aggravated Indian threat perception and to counter this strong alliance, India is growing its involvement in the region. In 2022, India and Armenia signed a deal to export anti-tank rockets and other ammunition to Armenia. They have also been cooperating in the education sector. Pakistan, on the other hand, has cemented its alliance with Azerbaijan and gave strong support to Azerbaijan in the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Thereafter, a trilateral military exercise between Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye named 'Three Brothers-2021' took place in Baku. The unexpected involvement and participation of India in the region raises questions about the Indian-Armenian partnership.

In this setting, the article tries to probe how the involvement of India and Pakistan in the South Caucasus region impacts the overall regional geopolitics. The article helps understand India and Pakistan's relations with South Caucasus states. It reveals that Azerbaijan's growing affinity toward Pakistan has begun frustrating India. As a result, both India and Pakistan had to recalibrate their positions in the region which has given birth to a new ambivalence. It also covers key analysis of the geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus region in the aftermath of the Second Karabakh War.

Since this article presents updated reflections on the involvement of India and Pakistan in the region, a close examination of secondary literature in the form of documents, daily news (from Azerbaijan, Pakistan, India, and other countries), and articles were

made for an objective analysis. For an understanding of the background, books and scholarly articles have also been examined. This paper first observes India's security partnership with Armenia, then looks at Islamabad-Baku ties. The last section of the paper addresses the impact of the involvement of India and Pakistan on the political situation of the South Caucasus region.

Growing Interests of India in the South Caucasus Region

Transcaucasia became the centre of attention for both India and Pakistan soon after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. India's interests in the South Caucasus especially in Armenia and Azerbaijan go beyond narrow regional dimensions. South Caucasus is important for India as its orientation affects its national security planning due to Pakistan and Azerbaijan's strong ties which are a constant concerning factor for India. Moreover, the geopolitical interests of India in the region are largely due to its desire to be connected with Eurasia. To bypass Pakistan, India has long been trying to connect the Chabahar Port with Eurasia through Armenia. Armenia is moving closer to India in the same vein as it seeks new trade allies to strengthen its economic position and security partnerships.

Yerevan has long been dependent on the Kremlin's political, economic, and military support which India is inclined to start for Armenia as Russia is busy in the Ukraine war. This emerging connection between India and Armenia is not worrying Russia because India has strong diplomatic relations with Russia in various aspects such as the longstanding Russia-India strategic partnership, membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). India is also trying to weaken Pakistan's alliance by bringing the neighbours, i.e., Armenia, Georgia, and Iran, into its orbit of influence. Overall, India and Armenia's political, social, and military relations have been growing. New Delhi has always responded adequately to Yerevan's outreach to

India and received the Presidents of Armenia on state visits in different years.⁵

India and Armenia before 2020

India has been trying to strengthen its economic and political ties with Armenia since its independence. India's emerging market has become an important factor in getting close to the South Caucasus. The fast-growing Indian economy is also factoring in its close ties with Armenia. Moreover, historical links bind India with Armenia. Both have been enjoying friendly relations for centuries when many Armenians settled in Agra,⁶ Calcutta (Kolkata), Chennai, and many other cities of India. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Armenian colony grew in size, richness, and influence in India.⁷ The Armenian population was famous for printing work and gun-making. They expanded their influence through trade with the East India Company. Moreover, they developed the bonds of cultural and scientific interaction along with trade in India.

Notwithstanding historical and commercial linkages, Armenian-Indian relations remained limited due to the instability in the Caucasus region during the initial years of independence. In 2017, the liberalisation of the visa process for Indian residents in Armenia and new business opportunities in the medical and IT sectors resulted in a fresh wave of Indian migration, and an estimated 2,200 Indians work and live legally in Armenia.⁸ Now Armenia considers India its development cooperation partner.

India's engagement with Armenia is based on both countries' priorities and needs. They collaborate under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC), which provides partner countries with short- and mid-term training programmes. At least two distinct areas of collaboration between India and Armenia demand special attention, i.e., development partnership and cooperation through project implementation and capacity-building through education and training programmes. The two countries concentrated

on the IT industry for long-term collaboration in the first category, while in the second category, they taught numerous Armenian officials from government and semi-government departments in India through short- and mid-term training programmes. Additionally, many Indian students are pursuing costly medical education at Yerevan State Medical University.

Furthermore, Armenia and India conducted a cultural exchange programme for 2017-2020 and youth activities. The most interesting deal, however, is India's commitment to developing an Earth Observation Satellite (EOS) for Armenia.⁹ As a part of the agreement, New Delhi undertook to teach Armenian scientists how to utilise the system and handle and understand its data.

Post-2020 Situation

The post-November 2020 relations between Armenia and India are strategic as the rising partnership of Azerbaijan with Türkiye and Pakistan engendered fear in the minds of Indian policymakers. Türkiye's rising anti-Indian stance on Kashmir and the Pan-Turkic conception cultivated by some groups in Baku and Ankara have pushed the South Caucasus to the forefront of India's attention. The Associate Executive Editor of the *Economic Times*, PD Samanta emphasised that India should not ignore the longstanding alliance of Pakistan, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye. By building a relationship with Armenia, India is finding a way to cut through the strong alliance of Türkiye and Azerbaijan. Naturally, any strategic actions of India in the South Caucasus would influence Pakistan's geopolitical alignments with Azerbaijan.

Since the war of 2020, Armenia has been gathering its lost strength and trying hard not to be politically isolated. It has already missed the opportunity to be aligned with China and could not participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) largely due to its inadequate infrastructure. Hence, China preferred Baku over Yerevan for the partnership. India seized the opportunity and started investing

in Armenia's defence sector. Yerevan has also been struggling to establish relations with emerging Asian countries including India and China. Resultantly, the Armenian diaspora along with the government successfully redesigned the political partnership.¹⁰ New Delhi and Yerevan expanded their cooperation in the three sectors of agriculture, Information Technology (IT), and pharmaceuticals. However, bilateral trade is still insignificant due to the lack of land connectivity between the two countries.¹¹

Nevertheless, a multi-million-dollar arms agreement between Armenia and India to sell Indian-made weapons to Armenia is in place. The aforementioned deal reflects solidarity on the part of New Delhi and Yerevan and also signals a deepening defence cooperation. The cooperation in the defence sector has been extended as New Delhi realises that close association with Yerevan will benefit India economically too.

Trade and Economic Cooperation

India will significantly profit from economic cooperation with Armenia since it may serve as a way for India to compete for global trade in the Eurasian corridor via the Persian Gulf to Russia and Europe. The IT industry and pharmaceuticals are two prominent industries that stand out for further economic collaboration. Armenia has had a boom in IT during the previous decade, with an average annual growth rate of 25 per cent.¹² Meanwhile, Armenia has to make a substantial leap in expanding this industry to become a significant participant on the global IT map. India is one of the world's leading IT industries, with the experience and financial resources to help Armenians compete with their rival counterparts in achieving the next growth stage. Armenian companies have started entering the pharmaceutical sector by establishing small- and medium-scale production in Armenia.

Armenia can play a significant role in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), supported by India, and the Black Sea-Persian Gulf Transport Corridor, supported by Iran.¹³ Additionally,

by entering into trade and military treaties, Armenia might position itself as a strategically crucial partner for India. India may establish a commercial and defence hub for joint manufacturing and Indian exports overseas. India benefits from being located within Russia's area of influence. This partnership might be an ideal option for Armenia to join the INSTC and gain easier access to Indian markets and Indo-Armenian trade through Iran would significantly expand bilateral trade.

Education is viewed as another factor where excellent prospects exist for cooperation. Thousands of Indian students pick Armenia as a destination for higher studies, however, the demand is far greater. Indian students will increase if Armenian institutions offer more programmes with English as the medium of instruction in addition to suitable accommodations.

Defence Linkages

Armenia has been gradually shifting its reliance in terms of defence imports from Russia to other states, as Yerevan seeks suppliers able to supply modern weapons to counter Azerbaijan. Despite the peace agreement signed in 2020, Armenia seems reluctant to accept and implement the provisions of the agreement. It appears that Armenia intends to get back the territory that it lost in the war. In this context, it is moving from Russia, a traditional arms supplier of Armenia. There are multiple factors in Armenia's shift from the Russian supplies. First, Armenia's defence requirements have been increasing day-by-day due to a perpetual state of tensions with its neighbour since independence. Second, Russia's concentration is more on the Ukraine war and the fear of short stock has some bearing on its trade too. Third, Western-led sanctions are impacting Russia's defence sector too.

Besides, New Delhi has become Yerevan's reliable military partner as India vehemently opposes Azerbaijan. Even before the 2020 conflict, Armenia expressed its interest in Indian military weapons.

Yerevan signed a \$40 million arms agreement with India in 2020 to deliver four Swathi weapons locating radars to determine the position of weapons.¹⁴ The radar system is intended to detect incoming artillery rounds, mortars, and rockets, as well as identify enemy launchers and positions. These radars have been successfully placed along the borders of India and China. Armenia showed its interest in buying these radars in June 2022 and an Armenian defence team visited India to negotiate the purchase of weapons along with drones.

The two countries again signed a defence deal of \$155 million between Yerevan and New Delhi for supplying 155mm artillery systems to the former over the next three years, continuing New Delhi's deepening defence cooperation with Armenia.¹⁵

Indian and Armenian Diaspora

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Armenian population in India played an important role in strengthening relations between the two countries. Cooperation between India and Armenia is also on the rise as its people-to-people contact is strong. India enjoys the world's most extensive diaspora and its businessmen are popular in Armenia. In contrast, Armenians were present in every central town and city in India.¹⁶ According to data, almost 28,741 Indians arrived in Armenia and 29,345 left.¹⁷ Although the Indian community in Armenia is small, Indian students go to Armenia for education, some of whom stay there for work.

India's ties with Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan and India have had close relations and have cooperated on various issues. Baku has been New Delhi's leading economic partner in the South Caucasus for several years. The website of the Indian embassy in Azerbaijan shows that India and Azerbaijan are also tied in civilisational links claiming that the 'Ateshgah', fire temple, in Baku reflects historical links between India and Azerbaijan. It further says that the inscription, in Devanagari and Gurmukhi scripts, is

surviving evidence of the trade relations and hospitality experienced by Indian merchants on the Silk Road to Europe in Azerbaijan.

However, both states could not establish further ties due to their differences on the issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir dispute. Both Azerbaijan and India are different in many ways. Their different approaches to the oppressed are disconnecting them. Azerbaijan has publicly supported Pakistan's position on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute and Pakistan in the same manner has backed Azerbaijan's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh.

The fluctuation of relations between Azerbaijan and India can be examined through the pre and post-war 2020 period.

Phase-I: Pre-2020

Several Indian pharmaceutical businesses are represented in Azerbaijan, which have already made significant progress. The mechanism of the India-Azerbaijan Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation, founded in 2007, has considerably expanded bilateral trade between the two countries. Another significant feature of the India-Azerbaijan cooperation is the establishment of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which will link Indian ports to Azerbaijan and Russia via Iran.¹⁸

On the other hand, India chose to be more vocal in its support for Armenia and maintain its 'principled approach' to the Karabakh conflict. During a fresh wave of border conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan on September 13-14, 2022, India's foreign ministry urged Azerbaijan to halt hostilities immediately. Leyla Abdullayeva, spokesperson of Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that Azerbaijan was ready for dialogue and welcomed any effort seeking to re-establish ties between the two sides.¹⁹ She further said that if India came to help or made a proposal, Azerbaijan was always willing to participate. The statement showed readiness on the part of Azerbaijan to work for peace and stability in the region.

Hydrocarbons have dominated bilateral trade between the two countries. Azerbaijan is attempting to diversify its economy and decrease its reliance on hydrocarbons. Food processing, pharmaceuticals, and technology are three areas with significant potential for bilateral trade. In this context, India can play a crucial role in facilitating such a collaboration.

Ironically, even though the two sides are seemingly not happy with each other, their trade volume has been rising since the last decade. For instance, bilateral trade between India and Azerbaijan has shot up almost ten times from 2005 to 2017, from about \$50 million to nearly half a billion US dollars. The bilateral trade further rose to \$1.093 billion in 2019 and \$1.184 billion in 2022.²⁰ The surge in trade was the result of old agreements before the war. However, the strained relations are limiting their interaction in the aftermath of war. For instance, India refrained from inviting Azerbaijan to the BRICS summit and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs called Azerbaijan an 'aggressor'.

Given the continuous rise in imports and exports, India has become Azerbaijan's fourth-largest trading partner. India mainly imports crude oil from Azerbaijan, while its exports include grains, telephones, medications, granite, stones, and tiles. Moreover, the position of Azerbaijan on INSTC makes it indispensable for all the stakeholders of Transcaucasia. INSTC is a 7,200-kilometre-long network that provides its members with the shortest route to connect with remote areas. The corridor offers enormous potential to improve regional trade and economic exchange which will significantly decrease the transit time between India and Azerbaijan. Notwithstanding the disagreements over Karabakh, the continuous collaboration between the two states in various industries such as agriculture, technology, health, and tourism does not reflect a negative picture. Furthermore, agrarian cooperation, such as agricultural machinery, plant breeding, and the interchange of

agricultural specialists, has already gained ground. As part of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Plan (E-ITEC), India also trains Azerbaijan's groups.

Phase-II: Post-2020

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions that followed opened new avenues of dialogue once again with India. In the first half of 2022, India became Azerbaijan's fourth-largest export partner. Azerbaijan's exports to India surged 107 per cent over the same time the previous year, reaching \$896 million.²¹ Likewise, as global food markets became more volatile, India emerged as a significant supplier of rice and cereals for Azerbaijan. These events once again highlighted the relevance of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) for Baku and New Delhi. This also demonstrates that India has the potential to restore relations with states through economic cooperation.

Owing to Azerbaijan's growing economy in the world, it has the potential to become a full-fledged member of the BRICS as the organisation itself is a group of fast-growing economies. However, India prevented Azerbaijan from attending the BRICS Summit in 2022.²² Certainly, there is a growing chasm between the two because of diplomatic affinities in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir crises.

However, bilateral trade between India and Azerbaijan is different from political differences. Azerbaijan has become a key player for India as a supplier of crude oil. In addition, the two countries have effectively broadened their collaboration in trade, business, and energy. In September 2022, Azerbaijan hosted an exhibition, in which more than 60 Indian companies showcased some products as well as services such as rice, spices, tea, handicrafts, textiles, and cosmetics.²³ The interaction of relevant industries with traders from Azerbaijan opens up an avenue of economic cooperation.

Garment exports from India to Azerbaijan fell by around 70 per cent to \$0.357 million in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, however,

they increased somewhat in 2021 to \$0.516 million, and \$0.436 million in the first ten months of 2022.²⁴

According to Indian sources, 1,481 Indians are living in Azerbaijan and are linked with international companies such as the oil and gas sectors. Some businessmen are engaged in trading, catering and restaurant, and some construction workers are living on short-term contracts.²⁵

Azerbaijan-Pakistan Relations

Pakistan and Azerbaijan have been enjoying cordial relations since 1991. The close affinity between Pakistan and Azerbaijan can be gauged from the fact that Pakistan did not recognise Armenia. The relations between the two states are based on religion, history, tradition, culture, and politics. The old bonds between the two countries are engendering societal-level association and bolstering bilateralism. The leadership of both states is up for full collaboration in politics, security, and economics.

Diplomatic Relations

Azerbaijan and Pakistan's close cultural and religious proximity with Türkiye has shown common interest in the promotion of solidarity among like-minded states. Pakistan, just like Türkiye, recognised Azerbaijan and supported the stance of Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, Pakistan does not recognise Armenia and wants Yerevan to accept the right of Azerbaijan over the occupied territory. Furthermore, Pakistan has always raised its voice against the Armenian aggression inside Nagorno-Karabakh and supported Azerbaijan's stance since its inception. Having Pakistan's support on the Karabakh conflict, Azerbaijan has openly backed Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue for many years.

Both states' leaders paid a visit to each other many times. The first presidential visit was paid by President Farooq Leghari in 1995. Correspondingly, the then-president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev

visited Pakistan in 1996. In 2000 and 2002, the two states' presidents again met at the summit of the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) in Iran and Türkiye, respectively. Later, President İlham Aliyev also visited Pakistan in 2005. After the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by the Chinese president in Kazakhstan, geopolitical changes began to surface. Regional connectivity appears as a necessity of the regions to boost their trade and the overall movement of people and goods from one area to another area. While recalibrating their positions, many bordering countries entered into a state of tension once again and border conflicts resurfaced. The border clash between Armenia and Azerbaijan once again started on 27 July 2014. Pakistan's then President Mamnoon Hussain went to Baku in early 2015 and assured Pakistan's support for Azerbaijan. Another visit to Azerbaijan was made by then Prime Minister of Pakistan Mian Nawaz Sharif where he reiterated Pakistan's stance on Nagorno Karabakh.

The Prime Minister of Azerbaijan met the Prime Minister of Pakistan in Kazakhstan in October 2022 on the sidelines of the sixth summit of the Conference for Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) where both leaders showed their interest in promoting trade and connectivity.²⁶

Since Pakistan calls Azerbaijan a friendly state, Pakistan's officials reiterated many times that it would not accord recognition to Armenia. The parliament of Pakistan has a consensus on the issue and even the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations approved a resolution condemning the Khojaly genocide of Azeri Muslims and the illegal occupation of internationally recognised Azerbaijani land by the Armenian forces. In this regard, the Committee also called for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) on the withdrawal of the Armenian army from Azerbaijan's territory.²⁷

Economic Relations

For Azerbaijan, Pakistan could be an attractive buyer of oil and gas, while Pakistan sees a good buyer of agricultural commodities and sports goods in Azerbaijan. However, history does not present a satisfactory picture as both states could not sign any agreement for economic cooperation except one in 1995. There has been a complete disconnect between political and economic relations. Moreover, no particular attention was paid to trade and businesses. A positive trend was discernible after 2010, as trade volume grew from \$10.33 million in 2011-12 to \$37.45 million in 2013-14. Later, a sharp decline was seen in the bilateral trade between Azerbaijan and Pakistan in 2018. However, the year 2020 showed some positive trends.

As per the data available on the website of OEC, Pakistan exported goods and commodities worth \$11.6 million to Azerbaijan in 2020. The top products exported from Pakistan to Azerbaijan were soap (\$2.17 million), synthetic filament yarn woven fabric (\$1.17 million), and rice (\$1.03 million). During the last 24 years, Pakistan's exports to Azerbaijan have shown an increase at an annual growth rate of 11.1 per cent, from \$932 thousand in 1996 to \$11.6 million in 2020.

In 2020, Azerbaijan's exports to Pakistan were worth \$2.5 million to Pakistan. The main products exported from Azerbaijan to Pakistan were petroleum gas (\$1.23 million), non-retail pure cotton yarn (\$1.22 million), and refined petroleum (\$23.8 thousand). During the last 24 years, Azerbaijan's exports to Pakistan have shown an increase, at an annual growth rate of 20.8 per cent, from \$26.6 thousand in 1996 to \$2.5 million in 2020.²⁸ Another source shows the appreciation in commercial activities contending that from 2020 to 2021 Pakistan's exports to Azerbaijan have dropped whereas the imports from Azerbaijan improved in this period.²⁹ So, in 2020, the total amount of trade was \$13.2 million, in which exports were US \$1.6 million and imports were US 11.6 million.³⁰ Moreover, both states have

shown their interest in signing a preferential trade agreement (PTA) to boost their economic relations. It also appears that both states have shown their interest in collaborating in the sectors of information technology (IT), education, and food businesses.

Military Cooperation

The 1992 genocide of the Muslims of Azerbaijan by Armenians pushed Pakistan to extend help to Azerbaijan and support its stance internationally. During the 1990s, Pakistan got the status of a nuclear weapon state (NWS) followed by appreciation as well as severe criticism from different states. Nevertheless, Pakistan's military industry became an attraction for many countries and its armed forces were more advanced in comparison to Azerbaijan. Thus, the defence sector factored into Pakistan-Azerbaijan relations which were improving daily. Azerbaijan tends to further expand military cooperation and wishes to initiate joint production of defence products.³¹ Moreover, in 2003, both countries signed an agreement which allowed the armed forces of Azerbaijan to take part in military drills together with the Pakistani military. Azerbaijani military personnel receive training from Pakistani military experts. Azerbaijan's naval forces attended the naval exercise, for instance, the Aman Exercise in 2013 hosted by Pakistan.

Defence cooperation increased after the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Thus, diplomatic relations of Azerbaijan with Pakistan and Türkiye grew stronger and all three states took many defence-related initiatives thereafter. On several occasions, the leadership of Pakistan and Türkiye explicitly urged Armenia to stop aggression. Furthermore, the parliamentarians from Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Pakistan signed the Istanbul Declaration in July 2022,³² in which Ankara and Baku reaffirmed their support for the people of Kashmir and emphasised the need to resolve the conflict as prescribed under the provisions of the UN resolutions.

Analysis

The South Caucasus region acts as a link between Central Asia, West Asia, Russia, China, and Europe and also has great strategic significance for all these regions. The geopolitical importance of the region has made it imperative for South Asian states to connect with the South Caucasus states. The scenario of the South Caucasus region has been changing since the outbreak of the Armenian-Azerbaijani war of 2020 as the formation of alliances has had a cascade impact on the extra-regional powers and their responses equally impacted the regional dynamics of the South Caucasus. In this milieu, a clear change has been observed in the changing policies of India, particularly towards this region. Although India made substantial economic inroads, its political involvement in the region was low in the past. Soon after realising that Pakistan's open support for Azerbaijan has been growing constantly during peace and war times, India focused on Armenia's support against Azerbaijan. With this move, both India and Pakistan have also entered a new phase of relations with the South Caucasian states.

Certainly, Pakistan and Azerbaijan have concerns about the support of New Delhi to Yerevan during years of war. India has been extending its economic and military support significantly to Armenia since November 2020. India exported military hardware including the PINAKA Multi Barrel Rocket Launchers (MBRL) to Armenia.³³ The defence supply agreements and deals between the two countries proved as a headway in their growing relationship.

Interestingly, India is also trying to establish a rail link to go from northwestern Iran, across the southern Caucasus to the Black Sea. In this respect, India has two choices: one via the Caspian coast through Azerbaijan, and the other through Armenia's southern Syunik province. India has decided to choose the second option so far. However, it has already been proven that its decision to arm Armenia against Azerbaijan was wrong and had serious implications.

Nevertheless, India has to figure out the right option as Azerbaijan has defeated Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia has already been isolated and any wrong decision on the part of India could trigger a conflict in the region as the former's working with Iran and Armenia to access the Black Sea would be concerning for Azerbaijan and Türkiye who are definite allies of Pakistan. In this setting, Pakistan needs to wisely comprehend the growing influence of India in the South Caucasus region to form an effective Eurasian policy to move ahead.

Conclusion

Historically, the South Caucasus region has played a relatively lesser role in Pakistan and India's relations. However, due to the diplomatic and ideological affinities of Pakistan and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh and Kashmir conflicts, New Delhi decided to improve its ties with Yerevan. Although Baku tried to keep India-Armenia relations from spilling over into its diplomatic and economic relations with New Delhi, India's continuous support to Armenia in the Second Karabakh War in 2020 revealed its strong attachment to Armenia.

In response to India's planning for the South Caucasus region, Pakistan showed consistency in its relations with Azerbaijan. Both states are showing solidarity against the unlawful actions of states against their territories. It is believed that being prominent states in their respective regions, Pakistan and Azerbaijan have the potential to build regional and extra-regional organisations, to conduct joint conferences to gather the support of the world community on critical security issues such as the human rights violations in Kashmir and the Armenian aggression. The situation is causing a disturbance in India's diplomatic circle and an explicit reaction of India against Azerbaijan is discernible. Pakistan's defence cooperation with Azerbaijan has been

growing and empowering Pakistan, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan's regional alliance.

Pakistan should seize the opportunity to consolidate its trade with these states. Strengthening defence relations with Azerbaijan is not enough rather both countries need to work for the promotion of trade and economic linkages. The increased volume of trade between Pakistan and Azerbaijan will lead to a harmony of interests. Furthermore, instead of worrying over the growing defence ties between India and Armenia, Pakistan needs to work more on the educational linkages and cooperation in the IT sector with Azerbaijan.

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ADVANCING PAKISTAN-ASEAN ENGAGEMENT: LESSONS FROM ASEAN-CHINA RELATIONS

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Abstract

In the decades since establishing dialogue relations, China and ASEAN engagements have grown increasingly strategic and developed into one of the most resilient economic and political relationships in Asia. This paper examines major economic and diplomatic strategies behind that success, with key lessons to inform Pakistan's future approach to the 10-member bloc. It begins with a historical background of China-ASEAN relations, and their distinct motivations to deepen engagement. The paper highlights that the China-ASEAN strategic partnership was an important factor in helping low-growth Southeast Asian economies achieve domestic competitiveness post-1990s, open up new trade and investment opportunities in the region, and accelerate the Belt and Road progress. Based on ASEAN's experience with China, the paper offers concrete policy recommendations for Pakistan to advance its case for a full dialogue partner with the \$3.2 trillion bloc. Other recommendations include a long-term opening for diversified economic and trade engagement with ASEAN and accelerated progress for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in areas such as transport infrastructure, energy, and industrial cooperation. Pakistan can learn from three ASEAN states — Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam — that faced similar economic, trade, and growth challenges in recent years, and the strategies that they employed to address these impediments.

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Introduction

It has been about two decades since China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) elevated their dialogue relations to a strategic partnership. In agreeing to this shift in 2003, both sides acknowledged that political trust between them had ‘notably enhanced’ and that the steady cooperation in five economic engagement areas including agriculture, telecommunications, and two-way investments was evident.¹

The transition towards a strategic partnership with ASEAN can be understood as a part of China’s proactive neighbourhood diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region. China’s approach to partnerships typically invites emphasis on key features, such as “building stable bilateral relations without targeting any third party” and “routinising official visits” such as regular summit meetings.² In ASEAN’s case, Beijing has been able to generate enduring consensus on key considerations such as stepping up investments, aligning ASEAN’s long-term development strategies and visions with the Belt and Road, and promoting more top-level government engagement through platforms such as their ‘special summit’ and the ASEAN-China (10+1) Foreign Ministers’ meetings.³ Beijing serves as the bloc’s leading trade partner, with a two-way trade volume of \$975.3 billion in 2022.⁴

Greater alignment between the strategic objectives of ASEAN and China has also bolstered Beijing’s economic and political partnerships with individual Southeast Asian states. For instance, in the case of Cambodia, there has been frequent support for the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC), a Beijing-led maritime stability proposal with ASEAN to help reduce the risk of conflict in the South China Sea. Beijing sees the COC as a key instrument to support long-term consensus on amicable dispute resolution.⁵ At the same time, Cambodia, a relatively less competitive economy within ASEAN, also

emerged as a major recipient of the BRI projects with important lessons for Pakistan.⁶ Both countries are comparable based on two factors. First, Cambodia shares Pakistan's assumption that BRI investment will inevitably catalyse economic growth in the long-run. Second, China enjoys its status as a top bilateral donor, lender, investor, and trading partner for both economies, making it imperative to understand how Cambodia has supported BRI progression while leaning heavily on Chinese financing. The broader China-ASEAN strategic partnership played a key role in compelling countries such as Cambodia to reform domestic barriers to free trade and investment in a bid to facilitate their economic growth. Pakistan's modest economic profile and limited export potential make it critical to understand how specific ASEAN economies overcame similar challenges and how Islamabad can pursue post-reform engagement with the 10-member bloc.

"The gains in China-ASEAN cooperation over the past 30 years are attributable to our unique geographical proximity and cultural affinity and, more importantly, to the fact that we have actively embraced the development trend of our times and made the right historic choice," said Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Special Summit commemorating the 30th anniversary of China-ASEAN dialogue relations on 22 November 2021.⁷

It was at this summit that China announced the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) with ASEAN, a move that would signal deeper coexistence with ASEAN and expand common ground to new frontiers, such as stronger development synergies between Beijing's Belt and Road and ASEAN's All-inclusive Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP).⁸

Pakistan is the oldest Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) of ASEAN, a status that represents one of several tiers of close engagements between ASEAN and its external parties. Pakistan was conferred the SDP status in July 1993 and relations were

institutionalised during the first ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (APJSCC) meeting in Bali in 1999.⁹ The initial consensus was to focus on two-way cooperation in specific areas of trade, investment, industry, environment, science and technology, drugs and narcotics, tourism, and human resources development. Advancement in these areas could pave the way for an elevation in Pakistan's status with ASEAN. However, progress in all cooperation spheres has been very limited.

A joint feasibility study for the ASEAN-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement was completed in 2009, though a 2011 moratorium on the proposal suggests limited headway on its implementation.¹⁰ Pakistan's request for a Full Dialogue Partnership (FDP) with ASEAN is also pending since 1999, though envoys of select ASEAN states have expressed optimism for Islamabad to work towards upgrading its relationship.¹¹ A key challenge was ASEAN's moratorium on establishing new FDPs, which was lifted in 2022 for the United Kingdom to enter into partnership with ASEAN.¹² Fundamental to this change was London's relationship with ASEAN, and its track record of practical engagement, particularly in trade and economics.

The rare change for the United Kingdom suggests that Islamabad's road to an FDP status runs through tangible and measurable cooperation in areas agreed with ASEAN in 1997. These were later expanded to include counter-terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational crimes. In 2022, two-way trade between ASEAN and Pakistan reportedly exceeded a meagre \$11 billion, though the bloc continues to identify as one of Pakistan's major trading partners.¹³

Imports from ASEAN are well above Pakistan's total exports to the bloc, indicating significant room to pursue value addition of key products and identifying specific market sectors to facilitate access for Pakistani wheat and cotton exporters.¹⁴ Despite ASEAN states exporting such products to larger trading partners, there is evidence to suggest that the bloc remains open to importing wheat, cotton, and

other raw materials in substantial quantities from diverse suppliers.¹⁵ Both ASEAN and Pakistan enjoy time-tested relations with China, having aligned part of their signature policies and development aspirations with Beijing, to the benefit of the BRI.¹⁶

Given ASEAN's enormous market growth, substantial collective GDP, vast access to maritime trade routes, and a demonstrated interest in diversifying economic relations, it is imperative for Pakistan to learn from ASEAN's success strategies to pivot towards FDP status in future.

This paper builds on the existing body of research on China's strategic partnership with ASEAN to generate new knowledge and opportunities to inform Pakistan's future relations with the bloc. It also examines BRI's mixed reception in Southeast Asia to inform future progress under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The underlying aim of the research is to extract individual lessons from ASEAN countries to improve Pakistan's trade and investment profile in a highly competitive Southeast Asian market.

The paper answers the following research questions:

1. What factors have consolidated the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership in Southeast Asia?
2. How can Pakistan advance its case for a Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) status with ASEAN?
3. What lessons does the China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership offer to inform closer China-Pakistan development cooperation under CPEC?

Historical Background of China-ASEAN Ties

Since the advancement of the China-ASEAN dialogue process in 1991, the relationship has contributed significantly to political stability and economic diversification in the Southeast Asian region.¹⁷ ASEAN's economy was on track to record its lowest growth in decades, providing a meaningful opening to forge free-trade links with Beijing

and ensuring a \$676 billion increase in bilateral trade by 2020 facilitated higher growth rates.¹⁸

On the diplomatic front, China's rise as FDP with ASEAN in 1996 allowed the 10-member bloc to promote dialogue-based conflict resolution in the contentious South China Sea, support greater supply chain integration, and use upticks in high-level visits to manage competing expectations on maritime border security. Beijing's success in advancing the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea bound ASEAN and China to a peaceful settlement of all disputes, effectively preventing any maritime concern from having a detrimental impact on robust economic relations.¹⁹

The opening-up of China's economy to the world also brought lucrative opportunities for some low-growth economies to increase domestic competitiveness. Cambodia and Laos were among the poorest in 1998, but their growing integration in ASEAN rendered them beneficiaries of a 20 per cent annual increase in China-ASEAN trade and investment.²⁰ To increase their share of investment under the China-ASEAN partnership, some of these low-growth economies were also compelled to address some barriers to domestic growth, including rampant poverty and a small-sized industrial base, underlining the value of China-ASEAN engagements for policy reform.²¹

Larger economies such as Malaysia and Indonesia also remained closely engaged with Beijing through ASEAN's broader economic partnership and acquired strong incentives to advance their preferential trade terms with Beijing. Today, ASEAN's combined GDP tops \$3 trillion, identifying as the third largest in Asia and among the top ten economies of the world.

On defence and security, both ASEAN and China have striven to promote common understandings between Beijing's view of an acceptable maritime *status quo* in the South China Sea, and what ASEAN considers to be in line with its expectations on territorial and

maritime jurisdiction.²² To advance this objective, Beijing has increased its presence and influence within key ASEAN-focused institutions and dialogue frameworks, including the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+) format. In effect, this has enabled Beijing to reinforce the value of confidence-building with countries such as Indonesia, which has a complicated history of asserting its maritime rights at sea.

ASEAN's proximity to a wealth of mineral resources, critical maritime trade access routes, and major ports has proven strategically significant to Beijing. It has repeatedly acknowledged that the bloc's approach to non-interference in the South China Sea and mega trade arrangements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), make it opportune to maintain maritime stability for uninterrupted trade gains in the coming years.²³

Remarks by top Chinese officials in regional forums indicate recognition of RCEP as a major driver of multilateralism and free trade.²⁴ At the same time, ASEAN states have shown increased support for key enablers of security cooperation in the region, such as the China-ASEAN Code of Conduct (COC) for the South China Sea.²⁵ This Code continues to serve as a blueprint for enhancing "favourable conditions for a peaceful and durable solution of differences and disputes among countries" on the maritime front.²⁶ The acceleration of ASEAN-China trade to \$975.3 billion in 2022 strengthens incentives to maintain that upward trajectory without the costs of political instability in the region.²⁷

Countries such as Indonesia have also been important recipients of China's Belt and Road investments. They have chosen to align with Beijing on core infrastructure support and Indonesia welcomed prospects of synchronising its national development policies with win-win connectivity offerings under the BRI. However, the extent of the BRI's contribution to Indonesia's sustainable infrastructure financing capacities remains to be seen. In the post-

financial crisis era, Beijing has readily expanded its BRI footprint within ASEAN, prioritising support for key sectors such as transportation, road, and railways to help its strategic relations endure with the 10-member bloc.

ASEAN's Motivations for Closer Engagement

ASEAN's motivation for closer engagement centres on two major considerations, i.e., economic security with China and a *status quo* that is conducive to maritime dispute management.

On economic security, the potential for high complementarity between ASEAN's Economic Outlook Vision and China's Belt and Road has made it easier for Southeast Asia to reap the benefits of a win-win cooperation with Beijing. Pertinent signs of the aforementioned include the 2019 ASEAN-China Joint Statement on "Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)."²⁸ It acknowledged the progress and cooperation opportunities created by synergising the two development master plans. As statistics from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) noted in August 2022, China was ASEAN's largest bilateral partner in goods trade and its total trade value was "54 per cent higher than ASEAN's trade with the US."²⁹

For ASEAN states, the progression of China's Belt and Road allows it to be part of a broader conversation on connectivity with like-minded development partners spanning multiple regions. Vietnam and Indonesia, for instance, have narrowed some capacity gaps in their high-growth sectors in the lead-up to ASEAN stepping up their developmental cooperation with key countries in the Middle East.³⁰ The BRI's consistent returns for people's livelihood have also been demonstrated to ASEAN states over the years. These include a marked rise in employment through Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and a significant rise in Overseas Direct Investment (ODI) into ASEAN, averaging over 50 per cent annually between 2013 and 2017. This

momentum has significantly strengthened critical real-estate, ICT, and transport sectors across ASEAN economies.³¹

The absence of a viable alternative to ASEAN-China Belt and Road cooperation has also contributed to the 10-member bloc's economic security engagements with Beijing. Since the BRI's launch in 2013, China-ASEAN trade has more than doubled, and ASEAN was the recipient of 131 BRI projects, the highest figure across the Asia-Pacific.³² ASEAN leaders have also repeatedly recognised stronger Belt and Road cooperation as a major development priority, paving the way for stronger interactions to synergise the bloc's Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 with the BRI through high-level forums.³³ One case in point is the telephonic exchange between former Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, where the Vietnam-focused BRI component of the 'Two Corridors, One Economic Belt' was seen as a major upside to fostering bilateral trust.³⁴

On the multilateral stage, the China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) ensures that conditions remain conducive to such win-win development synergies. The 24th ASEAN-China Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) meeting in March 2023 was an important indicator of the 10-member bloc attempting to balance its development relations with the West while cooperating with China. The Committee promised to strengthen engagement in areas such as "political dialogue and cooperation, non-traditional security, trade and investment, food and agriculture, ICT, cyber security, digital economy, tourism, education, public health, culture and information, media, environment, and sustainable development."³⁵

ASEAN has also shown very little interest in heeding Washington's calls to distance itself from Beijing and continues to express dissatisfaction at US attempts to contain China technologically and militarily.³⁶ Countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines have been reluctant to endorse US intelligence

assessments about Beijing's Huawei-focused telecommunication instalments, and are unlikely to factor broad-based security concerns from Washington in their technology partnership decisions with Beijing.

Militarily, ASEAN shares common expectations with China on the principle of non-interference, which has significant weight in its foreign policy. A case in point is the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific which explicitly notes contributions to the maintenance of peace, freedom, and prosperity. Despite close ties with Washington, ASEAN's strategic vision does not endorse the US Indo-Pacific strategy's China containment focus.³⁷ These diverging views on the Indo-Pacific signal greater strategic alignment with China, which also views peace and security in the Asia-Pacific as a matter central to the interests of territorial powers and its immediate neighbours. "China and ASEAN will continue to promote the role of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia as a code of conduct for inter-state relations in Southeast Asia," affirmed China and ASEAN in their five-year master plan for the development of relations.³⁸

Maritime security in a complex South China Sea environment is also a compelling example of ASEAN's support for regional peace with China and its desire to manage any differences through consultative diplomacy. ASEAN is less willing to support any long-term roadmap for maritime cooperation that does not involve China, and this is reinforced through its staunch support for a UN-aligned, China-backed Code of Conduct (COC) to secure peace in the region.³⁹

This UN-aligned COC captures ASEAN's multi-decade willingness to use dialogue-based resolution as a way to build mutual trust with China and is specifically designed to prevent conflicts in the South China Sea. Doing so enables ASEAN to maintain its "centrality" in all strategic issues related to its neighbourhood, dampening US hopes to enlist the 10-member bloc's support against China in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁰

Challenges to Pakistan's Policy Towards ASEAN

As a major South Asian power, India has sustained a very strong economic and political relationship with ASEAN, making it difficult for Pakistan to muster a competitive edge on both fronts. India became a strategic partner in 2012 and has attempted to advance regional connectivity initiatives that take exception to Pakistan. These include the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project.⁴¹

The scale and frequency of ASEAN and India's economic and strategic engagement makes the situation further challenging. Their flagship ASEAN-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is itself marked by substantial liberalisation in tariffs, covering well over two-thirds of traded goods. In contrast, Pakistan faces an uphill task of increasing its modest basket of exports to ASEAN in even traditional goods. These span top items such as bed linens, rice, and cotton fabrics, collectively accounting for 22 per cent of Pakistan's major exports in 2022.

On the strategic level, India is keen to advance Washington's containment of China's ambitions in Southeast Asia, forming a core part of the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy. This is a significant concern for Pakistan, given India's hopes for strengthening connectivity with ASEAN's own Indo-Pacific Outlook. ASEAN's strategy does not share India's containment ambitions: it resists interference, military excesses, and a zero-sum approach to engagement. Recent trends indicate the extent of New Delhi's deepening outreach in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific at present.⁴² That includes key conventions such as the 20th India-ASEAN Summit in Jakarta. The outcome document suggested a consistent pattern from New Delhi to build a metanarrative around countering terrorism, a critical component of India's ongoing regional isolation campaign against Pakistan.⁴³

To counter Indian propaganda, Pakistan is consistently treating the ASEAN-Pakistan relationship on its own merits. For instance, in October 2023, Pakistan's Caretaker Foreign Minister Jalil

Abbas Jilani underscored Pakistan's commitment to "facilitating special relations with ASEAN member states," highlighting the need for common solutions to shared challenges, including "terrorism."⁴⁴

Benefits for Pakistan

A Path to Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) Status

The lead-up to the 2003 ASEAN-China strategic partnership carries important lessons to advance Pakistan's case for a Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) in the long term. Consider the 1996 ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Jakarta: China was successfully accorded the FDP status. This transition underscored a track record of substantive cooperation between China and ASEAN members, including the promotion of "economic growth, sustainable development and social progress" based on the principles of equality and mutual benefit. A 1997 joint statement between ASEAN and Chinese leaders in Kuala Lumpur made that fact fundamentally clear.⁴⁵

As a Sectoral Dialogue Partner (SDP) with ASEAN, Pakistan initially agreed to cover broad-based engagement in areas spanning trade, industry, investment, environment, science and technology, drugs and narcotics, tourism, and human resources development. However, Islamabad has fallen significantly short in increasing its value offerings to ASEAN markets, as well as supporting cooperation across softer targets, such as tourism. As a result, Islamabad faced an uphill task of convincing diverse economies—such as Vietnam, Singapore, and the Philippines—that it is in the interests of the 10-member bloc to welcome Pakistan's FDP prospects.⁴⁶

Islamabad can influence a shift by giving priority focus to human resource development and tourism, two of the eight initial cooperation areas agreed with ASEAN as its SDP.⁴⁷ Pakistan's dwindling economic growth, growing import dependency, and significant debt constraints make it difficult to deliver value offerings across other cooperation areas such as trade, industry, and investment

in the near-term. It should also put together joint legal, technical, financial, and management committees with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam to increase political, commercial, and economic links at the bilateral level, limiting resistance to its FDP request. This is important because, in 2018, Pakistan's Joint Secretary of Commerce Division Nazim Latif claimed before a parliamentary panel that three member countries—Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam—were opposing Pakistan's entry to the 'ASEAN plus six'.⁴⁸

Taking Pakistan's bilateral ties with these three ASEAN states as a test case presents two advantages. First, it compels Islamabad to link its domestic manufacturers and exporters with specific product markets within those economies, given that a lack of prior integration in ASEAN markets deprived exporters of valuable access. In contrast, countries such as India in the early 2000s focused on stepping up their exports from agriculture and textile, two sectors that go a parallel with Pakistan's current export strengths.⁴⁹ The fundamental difference was New Delhi's treatment of its relations with individual ASEAN states as an opportunity to bring down export barriers, learn from competition in existing sectors, and treat priority cooperation with ASEAN as an opportunity to give export visibility to domestic producers.

Many of Pakistan's current trade and cooperation challenges with specific ASEAN states are not exclusive to Islamabad. India has been an FDP with ASEAN since December 1995, and still shared a trade deficit of more than \$6 billion with the 10-member bloc between 2007-08.⁵⁰ As a result, Pakistan's meagre trade volume with Indonesia (about \$ 2.6 billion in early 2022) and a trade balance heavily favouring Indonesia, should inform—not discourage—changes in Pakistan's economic structure.⁵¹ As a World Bank analysis notes, "Through the 1990s, Vietnam's economic structure was not significantly different than that of Pakistan then or now. Vietnam exported textiles, agricultural products, and minerals."⁵²

A major difference was Vietnam's ability to leverage trade and investment integration within the global marketplace to spur productivity growth. Islamabad's debt-stressed economy, limited spending potential, and heavy import-dependence make integration with individual ASEAN economies a better alternative to going global. Prioritisation of joint legal, technical, financial, and management committees with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam can give exporters and governments greater clarity on which sectors to target, and begin to make headway on some of the eight cooperation areas agreed with ASEAN. In turn, stronger bilateral relations with all three ASEAN states can decrease their future resistance to Pakistan's FDP request.

Having an ASEAN strategy that is informed by bilateral partnerships is of critical value to Islamabad in the long run. Islamabad is among ASEAN's oldest Sectoral Dialogue Partners (SDPs), and the bloc has shown signs that it could relax its moratorium on new dialogue partnerships based on internal reviews.⁵³ This makes it opportune for Pakistan to pursue timely efforts that end up advancing its case for FDP status soon. As Ambassador Mohammad Hassan, Pakistan's former envoy to Indonesia, Timor Leste, and ASEAN, puts it: this would also require "working closely with the ASEAN Secretariat, as well as approaching individual ASEAN member states in their respective capitals."⁵⁴

An Opening for Diversified Economic Engagement

The China-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership offers a variety of lessons for Pakistan to inform closer economic cooperation with the 10-member bloc in the coming decades. Islamabad has enjoyed the status of a sectoral partner since 1993 but has struggled to diversify its basket of exports to the market in comparison with other countries. For instance, in 2022, Pakistan's total trade with ASEAN topped \$11 billion, yet ASEAN's trade volume with some of the other sectoral partners reached much higher sums.⁵⁵

The growth in trade between ASEAN and sectoral partners such as Brazil came at a time when the bloc had engaged in joint trade workshops and open-ended troika meetings to coordinate mutual expectations on trade advancement and lift bilateral trade by noticeable margins. By prioritising similar trade workshop channels and treating Pakistan-ASEAN sectoral engagements on a priority basis, Islamabad can emerge better positioned to expand its share of trade with ASEAN and examine growth opportunities in key sectors through ministerial and commercial links.

Pakistan's approach to a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) requires some semblance of predictable growth and political stability at home before gaining long-term traction with the ASEAN. It is a fact that Islamabad signed a landmark 2006 FTA with its iron-ally China, though two-way trade is yet to meet its optimal level.⁵⁶ By examining how ASEAN countries such as Cambodia have managed to advance their trade in key sectors such as agriculture, Islamabad could emerge better positioned to inform its approach to diversified trade engagements with ASEAN. For instance, Cambodia was a beneficiary of ASEAN's stated vision to strengthen and showcase agriculture and food security "as key pillars of cooperation" with China.⁵⁷ It is in Islamabad's interests to enlist ASEAN's support as a starting point for guidelines on sustainable agriculture cooperation and build on responsible agricultural investments from there.

During a major telephonic exchange between Vietnam's top leaders and their Chinese counterparts in April 2023, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh reportedly proposed that China "further promote imports, open up its market to Vietnamese farm goods, and increase the quota on Vietnamese goods shipped through China."⁵⁸ Vietnam's focus on agriculture to dial up trade is particularly relevant to Pakistan's prospects with ASEAN. Islamabad remains heavily dependent on its agricultural sector and can pursue value

addition in this space by increasing the presence of joint working groups and feasibility teams with ASEAN.

Evidence from the China-ASEAN strategic partnership suggests that countries with modest growth and limited spending revenue were still able to dial up trade, challenging assumptions that meagre growth will keep Pakistan's heightened trade prospects at bay. A case in point is the \$10.57 billion-strong trade increase between Cambodia and China in the first 11 months of 2022, and Cambodia's rise in trade with the nine other ASEAN countries to reach \$16.053 billion in 2022.⁵⁹

Closer engagement with the 10-member bloc can inform best practices in Pakistan to cater to investor sentiment in Southeast Asia as well. Leading economies such as Indonesia have bolstered their business-to-business interactions with Beijing, both through the ASEAN framework and bilaterally. One major upside has been the strengthening of two-way trade and the identification of key areas where Indonesia's export capacities align with consumer demands in China.

Pakistan can benefit from such an exchange with the 10-member bloc. Sharing of best practices allows Pakistan to get a sense of market expectations in distinct ASEAN economies. This leaves Islamabad better positioned to promote value-added products in its future export engagements. Beijing has also maintained close commercial and industrial linkages with countries such as Vietnam, whose agricultural produce became a major selling point in overall exports.⁶⁰

A key trigger was trade facilitation, including simplified customs procedures and lax documentation, to help link domestic manufacturers in the agricultural space to their buyers outside ASEAN. Pakistan's dependence on the agricultural sector and its desire to support sustainable food production and agricultural systems makes it critical to engage with ASEAN and build on Vietnam's fast-tracked export experience with China.

The level of priority attached to ASEAN-Pakistan commercial and ministerial links has also varied under different governments in Pakistan, making political will a critical consideration for diversifying economic engagements. Under the leadership of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the late 1990s, Pakistan agreed to “encourage and facilitate direct contacts” between respective government agencies on both sides and sought to match ASEAN’s priorities with the *Pakistan 2010 Perspective* plan.⁶¹ However, by 2010 it became increasingly clear that ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Sectoral Cooperation was largely driven by awareness campaigns and the focus was still on identifying new potential areas for economic cooperation.⁶²

As the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership demonstrates, acceleration of trade despite limited export potential is possible once integrated into ASEAN’s network of external partners. Despite the bloc’s substantial focus on the digital economy, countries have succeeded in dialling up exports of important agriculture and textile products and could welcome import diversity in the event of supply chain shocks.

The Covid-19 pandemic made clear that some Southeast Asian economies were witnessing a plunge in exports, and states reliant on a single product faced significant growth challenges.⁶³ Such growth shocks present an opportunity for Pakistan to step up its agricultural production and textile manufacturing, position itself as an alternative supplier, and link value-added products to specific markets in ASEAN. Through strong institutional linkages, Islamabad can succeed in advancing commercial links with the 10-member bloc, identify key sector products of value to ASEAN, and link its exporters to active buyers within the region.

Accelerating the Belt and Road Progress

The Belt and Road’s flagship \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is seen as central to Pakistan’s geo-economic connectivity ambitions. To inform progress in areas such as

transport infrastructure, energy, and industrial cooperation, ASEAN's own experience with China offers key lessons to maximise opportunities for the Belt and Road progression while minimising its challenges.⁶⁴

First, a stronger focus on joint working groups is key to consistently coordinating expectations on logistics and project targets. ASEAN member states have been able to step up their collaborations with Chinese construction companies and funding agencies in a bid to strengthen current and future investments in their countries.⁶⁵ Key platforms, such as the ASEAN Forum, have played an important role in reinforcing a high-level government consensus on BRI sustainability, underlining the value of Pakistan's engagement with the 10-member bloc at its flagship forum.

Given CPEC's success in reportedly accumulating some \$25 billion in direct investment between 2013 to 2023, more frequent diplomatic exchanges with ASEAN could generate new synergies between the bloc's *Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity* and Islamabad's investment diversification plans for CPEC.⁶⁶

Evidence from Vietnam suggests considerable success in attracting BRI financing while forming an important part of the ASEAN connectivity master plan. The country has been able to evaluate the long-term success of BRI based on the performance of early-phase projects and their prospective returns for the citizenry.⁶⁷ That includes projects that are central to addressing Vietnam's long-term infrastructure investment gap of \$605 billion from 2016 to 2040, involving sectors such as electricity and road infrastructure which form common ground with CPEC's early phase.⁶⁸

As a result, one of Southeast Asia's fastest-growing economies has striven to attract different sources of funding to cover its long-term infrastructure financing needs. By increasing Pakistan's diplomatic exchanges with ASEAN, Islamabad stands a better chance to assess ASEAN's approach to sustainable BRI financing. New working

groups can offer a vantage point to evaluate ASEAN's approach to negotiating past BRI projects, particularly low to middle-income economies that have been keen to limit financial risk. Malaysia's success in restarting its BRI-focused railroad project in 2019 is a case in point. Both sides agreed to reduce project costs by over 30 per cent.⁶⁹

To maximise Pakistan's opportunities to benefit from these new working groups, sustained periods of political stability are imperative. It was only in May 2013 that an elected government completed a full democratic term in office, and proceeded with a peaceful transfer of power.⁷⁰ Addressing challenges such as sharp divisions over conducting elections, political protests across major cities, and the recurring threat of domestic terrorism is crucial to ensure that CPEC progresses smoothly towards its second phase projects. Significant mega projects include major upgrades to the Main Line 1 railway between Karachi and Peshawar. This \$10 billion project was part of the corridor's first phase but was delayed by four years, underlining the need to constantly reinforce CPEC in Pakistan's broader national consensus spanning all governments.⁷¹

One of the reasons ASEAN states such as the Philippines and Indonesia stepped up BRI investments is because of greater political will and limited desire to tie the BRI to the specific agenda of any single government of the day. The China-ASEAN comprehensive strategic partnership has enabled BRI participants to leverage frequent investments and long-term plans through key summits and initiatives, such as the 2021 ASEAN-China Special Summit. "ASEAN and China agree to explore cooperation on low-carbon, circular, and green economy by following the trend of the latest science and technology developments and industrial transformation, including through sustainable economic models and initiatives as inspired by regional and national action plans such as the Belt and Road Partnership on Green Development and the Bio, Circular, and Green Economy," read a joint statement from the summit.⁷²

By prioritising domestic political stability and multilateral engagement on the BRI, ASEAN states emerge better positioned to reinforce swift project progress on a bilateral level and maintain a noticeably high level of economic and political engagement with Beijing on common BRI challenges and constraints. CPEC witnessed a similar uptick in economic and political engagement with China during its early years, paving the way for successive Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) meetings of CPEC.⁷³

However, closer engagement with ASEAN can also offer valuable lessons on advancing specific policy reforms that could be unrelated to the BRI, but remain critical to delivering the benefits of infrastructure and power projects to its masses.⁷⁴ Moreover, stronger and more frequent diplomatic engagement with ASEAN can enable Pakistan to implement the BRI consensus reached through its joint working groups with China and help market CPEC—one of BRI's six main economic corridors—among Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. These six major ASEAN states are at the heart of the sprawling China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, i.e., another major BRI corridor.⁷⁵

Conclusion

China and ASEAN have succeeded in consolidating their diplomatic and economic ties by elevating a wide-ranging strategic partnership to a comprehensive engagement. This transition has enabled middle-to-low-income ASEAN economies such as Cambodia to unlock multisector BRI financing, diversify sources of investment, and support ministerial linkages between ASEAN and China to support their common interests in maritime security, defence, and conflict resolution.

It is in Islamabad's interests to learn from these experiences, strengthen its relations with ASEAN, and pursue targeted cooperation at the bilateral level in at least one of the eight cooperation areas

agreed upon with ASEAN. Demonstrated cooperation at the bilateral level is key to strengthening its case for an FDP status in the future. As this paper's examination of key ASEAN economies indicates, countries such as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam shared many of Pakistan's existing growth and export limitations, only to work towards navigating them.

ASEAN states also succeeded in identifying key areas where their export capacities aligned with consumer demands in China. All this makes it critical for Islamabad to learn from ASEAN's experience with China and implement best practices to get a sense of market expectations in distinct ASEAN economies. It should also increase the presence of joint working groups and feasibility teams within the 10-member bloc to support a track record of sustained engagement.

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THE POTENTIAL OF A PAKISTAN-TÜRKIYE-GCC TRILATERAL WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC)

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Abstract

The transformative shift towards a multipolar global order has significantly reshaped international relations, enhancing the emphasis on economic diplomacy, notably in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia. Within this context, Pakistan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Türkiye have undergone adaptations in response to these evolving dynamics. While Türkiye and the GCC wield influence in the Middle East, Pakistan holds a distinctive position within the Muslim world. Islamabad's deep-rooted connections with the GCC and Türkiye, initially stemming from religious commonality, have evolved to encompass political, security, and economic dimensions, exemplified by robust defence collaborations and the substantial presence of Pakistani expatriates in these regions. By using the regional integration theory, this research scrutinises the possibility of potential trilateral cooperation, particularly in domains such as energy and food security, within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The research findings highlight the alignment of interests and offer a comprehensive scrutiny of

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Pakistan's associations with the GCC and Türkiye, accentuating the potential for a more robust trilateral alliance within the context of the CPEC initiative

Key Words: *GCC, Türkiye, economics, CPEC, energy, food security*

Introduction

The transformation of the global order into a multipolar landscape has ushered in a new era where economic diplomacy has emerged as a foundational pillar of foreign policy. The fast changes in the Middle East and South Asia, particularly in terms of economics, have not only caused differences but have also made security issues more serious in these regions. These transformations have exerted a profound influence on the interests of key players such as Pakistan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Türkiye. While the latter two wield direct influence in the evolving dynamics of the Middle East, Pakistan assumes a pivotal role not only in its immediate region but also as a significant actor in the Muslim world. At its heart is a rebalancing of geopolitical and geo-economic influence, with a notable shift of global power from the West to the East, particularly focusing on the strategically important and economically significant oil-rich monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula. Additionally, the need to address the evolving dynamics arising from the global economic and financial crisis, in addition to the emergence of new international actors, has compelled all three parties to reconsider their roles on the global stage within a fluid and evolving global landscape.

Simultaneously, China's remarkable economic growth has driven its pursuit of essential natural resources. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-billion-dollar project, revolves around enhancing connectivity through diplomatic and economic means, aiming to strengthen trade and commercial relationships between China and its partner countries. The BRI signifies a noticeable shift in China's foreign policy from its previous stance of 'biding time and

keeping a low profile' to a more proactive approach to development. The exponential growth of China's economy has resulted in an increased need for essential natural resources. Consequently, the fundamental aim of the BRI is to foster connectivity by generating prospects, both diplomatically and commercially. This effort has two primary sections, namely land-based and marine routes, which are pursued concurrently. China's BRI encompasses many continents and serves as a strategic long-term investment plan to promote economic cooperation among countries, reminiscent of the historical significance of the Silk Road. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was presented by Chinese President Xi Jinping in April 2015, positioning it as the primary initiative of the BRI. CPEC comprises a comprehensive infrastructure network consisting of roadways, railways, and oil pipelines. These components are strategically developed to augment Beijing's sphere of influence in the regions of South and Central Asia.

During the preceding decade, CPEC has assumed a crucial position in mitigating a range of predicaments encountered by Pakistan, encompassing insufficiencies in energy provision, deficient infrastructure, and restricted capabilities for social welfare initiatives. As China and Pakistan strengthen their economic ties, joint efforts are being made to address a range of issues. Notably, Pakistan's thriving agriculture sector and the proposed Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under CPEC have become focal points for Chinese investments in the coming years. Several initiatives have been undertaken to modernise Pakistan's agriculture sector with Chinese support, exemplified by the launch of an online platform in January 2021 to facilitate agricultural and industrial cooperation. Similarly, in recent years, Türkiye and the Gulf countries have increasingly engaged with China, largely due to the latter's rapid emergence as the world's leading economy. Chinese investments in the Gulf region have predominantly focused on energy, infrastructure, construction, agriculture, and finance.¹

Islamabad maintains close ties with both GCC countries and Türkiye, initially founded on religious affinity but subsequently encompassing political, security, and economic dimensions. Notably, they have significantly cooperated within the defence sector, engaging in defence production, training, and military consultations. Moreover, within the economic sphere, the GCC and Türkiye have hosted a substantial number of Pakistani expatriates who have made significant contributions to the development of their host countries across various domains. Historically, trade has played a pivotal role in driving economic growth for countries at various stages of development. This phenomenon is not merely confined to the efficient allocation of resources within countries but extends to the transmission of growth from one part of the world to another. The economic theory of 'comparative advantage', originally formulated by David Ricardo, elucidates why countries engage in international trade even when one nation's workforce and resources outperform others. The fundamental principle of comparative advantage underscores that under conditions of free trade, countries should specialise in areas where they possess a competitive edge. This concept has become a cornerstone of international trade theory, guiding nations to optimise their economic strengths.²

In today's complex world order, characterised by intricate interdependencies, countries with robust economic foundations are positioned for success. Political and strategic objectives now necessitate the establishment of a *sound* economic framework. Michael Beckley, in his article titled *Economic Strength and Military Effectiveness*, asserts a positive correlation between a country's security and its economic prowess. He cites examples from the Indo-Pacific region, where countries, owing to their economic development, possess greater capabilities to counter potential adversaries than they did three decades ago.³ Consequently, most nations have recalibrated their national security strategies, placing greater emphasis on

bolstering economic security. CPEC represents a significant opportunity to enhance economic cooperation among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC. Amidst the ongoing economic challenges in all three regions, Chinese investments offer an ideal prospect for revitalising economies adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the article *Evolving Strategic Landscape: Exploring Opportunities for Pakistan*, the authors assert that the global strategic landscape in the 21st century is undergoing a rapid transformation, shifting away from the established dominance of unipolarity towards the rising influence of multipolarity. The article urges a departure from Cold War-era zero-sum thinking and emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts to achieve shared development goals. It suggests that Pakistan's ability to make the correct strategic choices, position itself effectively, and leverage its strengths intelligently are pivotal in fulfilling its historical promise in this evolving global landscape.⁴

While individual studies have explored the dynamics of Pakistan-Türkiye relations and Pakistan-GCC relations separately, there is a notable gap in the literature where these three entities are examined in conjunction. This research primarily utilises secondary data analysis as the chosen research methodology. Secondary data refers to existing data collected by other researchers, organisations, or agencies for purposes other than the current study. In this case, the secondary data will be derived from a range of sources including academic journals, newspaper articles, reports, and relevant publications about the topic. This article provides insights into the relationships among Pakistan, the GCC, and Türkiye, emphasising the imperative of their cooperation in an attempt to identify the potential benefits of enhancing cooperation between the three within the framework of CPEC and how this triad can fortify its economic ties by leveraging respective comparative advantages, notably in the realms of energy and food security.

Regional Integration Theory

Regional integration theory has evolved through contributions from scholars like Ernst Haas, Bela Balassa, and Robert Keohane. Ernst Haas emphasised economic interests, shared values, and institutional frameworks in promoting regional cooperation, while Bela Balassa focused on economic aspects, like trade liberalisation and economic convergence. Robert Keohane extended the theory by exploring the role of institutions in conflict management and trust-building. Collectively, these scholars laid the groundwork for the regional integration theory, which combines insights from economics, political science, and international relations. It provides a lens to analyse the potential of a trilateral alliance within the framework of CPEC for fostering economic cooperation, enhancing political stability, and strengthening security in the region. In the context of CPEC, the regional integration theory highlights how shared economic interests can drive cooperation among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC. It suggests that the alliance can intensify economic ties, promote infrastructure development, facilitate trade and investment, and foster regional economic integration. Additionally, the theory underscores the importance of reducing trade barriers, harmonising policies, and creating common institutions to aid integration efforts, which can be explored within the trilateral alliance.

Furthermore, Regional Integration Theory acknowledges the contributions of collective security arrangements to regional stability. The alliance can collaborate on security initiatives, share intelligence, and address common security challenges, enhancing stability and ensuring the success of CPEC. By applying the foundations of the regional integration theory, the article offers a nuanced analysis of the potential benefits of and challenges to the Pakistan-Türkiye-GCC trilateral alliance in CPEC. It provides a theoretical framework to examine the economic, political, and security dimensions of the alliance within the broader context of regional integration efforts,

contributing to a deeper understanding of its potential outcomes and implications.

Bilateral Relationships

Pakistan-Türkiye Relations

Ever since Pakistan's emergence as an independent country, Islamabad and Ankara have shared a consistently warm and cordial relationship. Initially, their ties were rooted in common cultural and religious practices, as well as shared geopolitical circumstances. The historical foundations of Pakistan-Türkiye relations can be traced back to the Khilafat Movement of the 1920s. These ties have evolved and strengthened over time, particularly after Pakistan's unwavering support for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during the failed coup attempt in 2016. Today, the two countries collaborate extensively across political, strategic, and economic domains, driven by shared challenges and mutual interests.

Pakistan and Türkiye confront similar issues with comparable nuances, including internal secessionism and terrorism. Pakistan firmly supports Türkiye in its dispute with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and reciprocally, Türkiye has been vocal in expressing its support for Kashmiri self-determination. This alignment of interests extends into the realm of defence cooperation, where Pakistan and Türkiye have maintained a robust relationship. Both governments collaborate on the development and production of aerial vehicles, aircraft, and shipbuilding; the latter encompasses the construction and modernisation of various types of naval vessels, including frigates, corvettes, and patrol boats. Through joint ventures and technology transfer, the two countries have enhanced their shipbuilding capabilities, developed indigenous designs, and incorporated advanced technologies. Joint intelligence-sharing and training techniques further strengthen their military cooperation, exemplified by their joint military drill in April 2019. Furthermore, discussions have

surfaced regarding the establishment of a joint patrolling force in Islamabad, mirroring a force in Lahore that received partial training from Türkiye. Ankara has also endorsed Pakistan's bid for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, emphasising that Pakistan's inclusion would enhance global non-proliferation efforts. In 2017, Türkiye made a noteworthy announcement on a substantial advancement in its military cooperation with Pakistan, signifying a remarkable achievement in their respective defence industries. The present communication provides a comprehensive account of the execution of an agreement of cooperation between the two countries, including the procurement of four corvette warships manufactured in Türkiye and 52 training aircraft created in Pakistan for the military forces of Ankara. Significantly, this was considered to be the most significant military export agreement for Türkiye at the time. The execution of the legal document for this agreement took place in 2018. The last corvette vessel planned for the Pakistani Navy was completed in August 2023. The completion of this project has strengthened the strong defence connections between Ankara and Islamabad. The official unveiling of the fourth MILGEM corvette, known as PNS Tariq, took place in the port city of Karachi, signifying the successful outcome of their joint efforts.

Both Pakistan and Türkiye actively participate in various multilateral organisations, such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Over time, these two countries have engaged in numerous agreements, including the signing of the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement in 1976. This pivotal agreement led to the establishment of a Türkiye-Pakistan Joint Economic Committee Mechanism. Furthermore, the Türkiye-Pakistan Business Council was established in 1988, aiming to strengthen private sector investments from both sides. Currently, Islamabad and Ankara are in the process of finalising a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which, upon implementation,

is expected to substantially boost trade between the two countries, with a target of reaching \$5 billion by 2022. In 2019, they also reached an agreement to establish a dedicated office for the implementation of the Strategic Economic Framework (SEF), focused on enhancing bilateral relations across various sectors, including trade, tourism, and healthcare. As of 2020, the trade balance between Pakistan and Türkiye leans in favour of Türkiye, resulting in a trade surplus of approximately \$190 million. Notably, in August 2022, Pakistan and Türkiye signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) to further strengthen trade in goods between the two countries. It is worth mentioning that an estimated 1,7000 Pakistanis were employed in Türkiye as of 2021.¹ Beyond bilateral engagements, cooperation extends to international platforms, with Türkiye, Malaysia, and China collaboratively assisting Pakistan in avoiding potential blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). This collaborative approach underscores the multifaceted nature of Pakistan-Türkiye relations and their joint commitment to regional and international cooperation.

In December 2021, a noteworthy development in Pakistan-Türkiye relations occurred with the revival of the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) cargo train service, which connects Pakistan, Iran, and Türkiye. After a hiatus of a decade, this initiative has the potential to yield annual earnings of \$32 million for Pakistan.⁵ The prospects of this initiative could even double if the ITI is seamlessly integrated with other major railway stations in Pakistan, including Lahore, Karachi, Faisalabad, and Sialkot. Such an expansion would facilitate the efficient transportation of goods not only to Türkiye but also to Europe and Central Asia, further enhancing economic cooperation. A pivotal moment in the strengthening of bilateral relations between Pakistan and Türkiye was marked by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif's visit to Türkiye in 2022. During this visit, both countries inked six bilateral

¹ Please see <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=The-Results-of-Address-Based-Population-Registration-System-2021-45500>.

memoranda of understanding encompassing diverse domains.⁶ These areas of collaboration included public debt management, cooperation between credit guarantee institutions to support SME financing, housing initiatives, public-private partnership models (with a particular focus on transportation and healthcare), knowledge sharing in economic and social policy planning, and technical cooperation in highway engineering. This visit was widely hailed as a success and served to underscore the deepening and broadening of ties between Pakistan and Türkiye across various sectors, promising further collaborative efforts in the future.

Pakistan-GCC Relations

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), established in 1981, comprises six nations: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain. Over the years, the GCC states have emerged as influential international players, particularly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, they have significantly expanded their engagement in global affairs, spanning from energy governance to climate change politics and reforms in the global financial system. Pakistan's longstanding relationship with the Gulf countries has its roots in religion and strategic alignment and has gradually encompassed economic dimensions. Historically, Pakistan's Gulf policy emphasised cultural and religious affinities over building sustainable economic linkages. Islamabad frequently offered to mediate tensions between regional powerhouses like Riyadh and Tehran while striving to avoid entanglement in ongoing conflicts. Although energy resources remained a priority, efforts to bolster economic ties with the Gulf have been somewhat lacklustre. Pakistan is now striving to leverage its geopolitical and geo-economic positioning in the Gulf by actively pursuing regional connectivity, trade, and enhanced economic relations. This shift aims to capitalise on geopolitical shifts to

strengthen its geo-economic advantages, as Pakistan faces pressing economic needs on the domestic front.

While the bedrock of Pakistan-GCC relations remains religious affinity, the relationship has evolved to encompass strategic, political, and economic facets. Bilateral visits between Pakistan's leaders and those of the GCC countries are frequent. Strategic connections include several forms of cooperation, such as cooperative military exercises, training initiatives, collaborative deployments, and weapons trade. Among the most notable instances are the Joint Gulf Shield military exercises, in which Pakistan partnered with twenty-four nations, including Bahrain, the Emirates, and Jordan.⁷ In the year 2011, Pakistan extended its support to Prince Bandar bin Sultan's appeal for aid in quelling a Bahraini anti-government rebellion, which had significant geopolitical importance since Bahrain was a crucial ally of Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, despite a historical association characterised by strong connections, many obstacles have emerged, mostly attributable to divergent sets of expectations held by each party involved.

It is worth noting that the extent of bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, notably Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has not yet reached its maximum capacity. The aforementioned connections are deeply entrenched in religious and historical contexts, although they are further propelled by the significant representation of the Pakistani expatriate workforce in these countries. Despite being politically secure, these connections have not yet fully realised their economic promise. Islamabad has continued to adopt measures to assist and support its workers in the Gulf region, who also serve as substantial contributors to foreign remittances. The Pakistani migrant labour force in the Middle East assumes crucial responsibilities in areas such as transport, building, sanitation, and a range of other industries, including both manual and professional occupations. The

COVID-19 pandemic presented significant difficulties for these individuals since a considerable number of them encountered unemployment and wage decreases.⁸ Pakistan's shift towards geo-economics has seen an increased emphasis on the rights of workers in the Middle East, evidenced by official bilateral engagements with Gulf countries. This shift is reflected in the remarkable growth of remittances from Pakistan's top two source countries, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which witnessed 187 per cent and 135 per cent growth, respectively, between FY11 and FY21.⁹ In terms of trade, Pakistan's leadership has actively engaged with Gulf countries, prioritising economic cooperation. Notably, visits in 2021 and 2022 including meetings with the highest echelons of Saudi, Qatari, and the Emirati leadership, all with a strong focus on enhancing trade links.

In June 2023, a collaborative effort was undertaken by the leadership of Pakistan's civil and military sectors, resulting in the establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC).¹⁰ The primary purpose of this organisation was to function as a centralised access point, streamline investor connections, foster coordination among government departments, and expedite project development processes. The SIFC is composed of the Chief of the Armed Forces, provincial governors, and federal ministries, with the Prime Minister as its leader. A comprehensive and cooperative approach including all branches of government and relevant stakeholders was developed to streamline protracted business procedures. The primary objective of this initiative was to leverage domestic and foreign investments to tap into the untapped potential of Pakistan's key sectors, such as military manufacturing, farming, mineral extraction, technological innovation, and energy. It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made commitments to invest \$25 billion in Pakistan during the next two to five years.¹¹

Furthermore, the Pakistan Minerals Summit, held in August 2023, titled "Dust to Development: Investment Opportunities in

Pakistan," was organised via a collaboration between the SIFC and the Barrick Gold Corporation, a Canadian-based firm. The effective establishment of this collaboration was facilitated by the Ministry of Petroleum in Pakistan. It was highlighted that Pakistan is a country with substantial untapped mineral reserves, an invaluable asset estimated to be valued at over \$6 trillion. The Reko Diq gold and copper mines, situated in the southwestern part of Balochistan, have significant strategic importance. These mines, anticipated to commence operations in December 2023, are now poised for progress. In the same month, a group of investors from Saudi Arabia visited Pakistan and expressed a notable interest in exploring potential business prospects within the mining sector. Additional strategic efforts by Islamabad include the assignment of airport management responsibilities to Qatar and the UAE speeding the privatisation process of the national airline, and progressing extensive deliberations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), with the UAE. Furthermore, a notable event took place in June 2023, when Pakistan concluded a big investment agreement with AD Ports Group, a prominent Emirati port operator based in the United Arab Emirates. This bilateral agreement aimed to reinforce the marine industry connections between the two countries, with a specific emphasis on augmenting trade and commerce. The management and operation of the Karachi Gateway Terminal Limited (KGTL) at the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) was assumed by the AD Ports Group under a 50-year concession deal. Henceforth, as the GCC states continue to navigate a changing global landscape, fostering robust economic relations is poised to be a central theme in their evolving partnership with Pakistan.

Türkiye-GCC Relations

Since the early 2000s, relations between Türkiye and the GCC monarchies have experienced significant improvement, resulting in a gradual deepening of cooperation across various domains. This emerging partnership between Ankara and the Gulf rulers can be

attributed to pivotal changes in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The relationship between Türkiye and the GCC countries operates on multiple complex fronts, with the Gulf Arab states largely viewing Türkiye as an indispensable partner in addressing crucial regional issues. Furthermore, the economic dimension of this partnership holds substantial significance and exhibits a complementary nature. The GCC countries rank among the most prosperous in the Middle East, while Türkiye boasts one of the strongest industrial economies in the region.

It is essential to view the Türkiye-GCC relationship within the broader context of Türkiye's growing engagement with other Middle Eastern and Asian organisations. Türkiye actively participates in groups like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where it holds membership, and the Arab League, where it enjoys observer status. Additionally, Türkiye plays a pivotal role in NATO's Middle East cooperation through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). The cooperation between Türkiye and the GCC encompasses several dimensions, including political/geopolitical, economic, and cultural aspects.¹² While Türkiye may not be abundant in fossil fuel reserves, it possesses a developed industrial economy characterised by construction (residential and commercial buildings, infrastructure projects), manufacturing (textiles and automotive industries), and various services (such as tourism and financial services). Similarly, the GCC states have witnessed growth in the construction and tourism industries. Collectively, their economic structures compensate for each other's resource limitations. Since the inception of the strategic dialogue between Türkiye and the GCC, trade flows have steadily increased, with Türkiye receiving approximately \$30 billion worth of investments from the Gulf region since 2001.

The establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) in 2008 was a notable diplomatic endeavour undertaken by Türkiye and GCC. The framework established a basis for

conducting their relationship in a multilateral way, indicating the GCC countries' intention to raise Türkiye to the position of a strategic partner. This particular advancement represented a noteworthy achievement in the bilateral relations between the two parties. In 2010, both sides subsequently created an action plan to enhance their bilateral cooperation in several industries. The sectors included under this framework are investment, trade, communication, transportation, agriculture, and energy. The action plan highlighted the dedication of Türkiye and the GCC members to strengthen their collaboration across several sectors. The aforesaid efforts have led to the development of a complex relationship between Türkiye and the GCC nations, including several aspects such as politics, economics, and culture. This relationship is based on a shared recognition of the importance of tackling regional difficulties and taking advantage of emerging possibilities. The economic synergy between Türkiye and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states has emerged as a significant catalyst for the establishment of this alliance, resulting in a notable surge in trade and investments. Moreover, the increasing involvement of Türkiye in regional organisations has strengthened its status as a crucial participant in the Middle East. This has been achieved by enhancing its cooperation with the GCC countries and reaffirming its commitment to promoting peace and advancement in the area.

Türkiye, GCC, and the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was conceptualised and spearheaded by China, encompasses a comprehensive endeavour aimed at augmenting worldwide interconnectivity. This initiative revolves around two principal elements: the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The primary goal of the MSRI is to develop maritime pathways that facilitate connectivity between China, Europe, and Africa, including strategically significant areas like the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of

Aden, and the Suez Canal.¹³ Simultaneously, the terrestrial Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) attempts to establish resilient connections between China and Europe through Central Asia, with certain facets expanding into the Middle East. The BRI comprises four primary sectors: industrialisation, construction of infrastructure, energy, and finance, leveraging China's substantial expertise in economic governance and reform. China's considerable reliance on Middle Eastern energy resources, notably accounting for nearly half of its crude oil imports and a substantial portion of natural gas imports in 2013, underscores the pivotal role of the Middle East in the MSRI.¹⁴ Energy security is thus paramount for China's economic stability and development. Moreover, a secure energy supply in the Middle East is vital not only for China's energy needs but also for fostering a conducive environment for business and tourism in the region.

China has actively engaged with the Middle Eastern countries through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), with a primary focus on energy collaboration and infrastructure development. This engagement has manifested in the construction of seaports and transportation networks. The "1+2+3 cooperation formula"¹⁵ outlined in the Arab Policy Paper released by the Chinese Government in 2016 underscores the core role of energy cooperation, complemented by infrastructure development and trade facilitation. The third facet involves future collaboration in nuclear energy, clean energy, and space technology. China and Türkiye solidified their partnership within the BRI and the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI) in November 2015 during the G-20 summit in Antalya, Türkiye.¹⁶ Türkiye's connection to the BRI includes the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Corridor (BTK) and a proposed high-speed railway linking Kars to Edirne through Georgia.¹⁷ While the BTK is operational, discussions on the high-speed railway's construction are ongoing. This collaboration presents opportunities for enhanced market connectivity and commercial cooperation, but it may also stimulate competition for market access.

Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia stands out as China's foremost trading partner in the Middle East, primarily involving Saudi oil and petrochemical exports and Chinese machinery and consumer goods imports.¹⁸ Chinese investments in petrochemical facilities in Saudi Arabia indicate a strategic drive to secure alternative power sources amid domestic energy demand growth and hydrocarbon reserve decline. Subsequently, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) emerged as China's second-largest trading partner in the Middle East due to its strategic location and advanced infrastructure. This partnership is characterised by the export of UAE oil and gas and the import of Chinese textiles and light industrial products. Notably, 2019 witnessed agreements worth \$3.4 billion between the UAE and China, aimed at strengthening Dubai's role as a regional hub for Chinese goods and enhancing Dubai's Jebel Ali Port.¹⁹

The BRI's presence in the GCC encompasses comprehensive strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia (2016), Iran (2016), and the UAE (2018), along with strategic partnerships with Qatar (2014), Kuwait (2018), and Oman (2018). Diverse projects, such as Kuwait's Silk City and Five Islands Project, Saudi Arabia's Jizan Industrial Park, Oman's Duqm Port Project, the UAE's Khalifa Port and Khalifa Industrial Zone of Abu Dhabi (KIZAD), and Qatar's New Port, fall under the MSRI framework and are supported by various financial instruments, including the \$100 billion Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and multiple state-owned Chinese banks like the China Development Bank.²⁰ In summary, the BRI, particularly the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, plays a pivotal role in shaping China's engagement with the Middle East. Beyond addressing China's energy security concerns, it fosters economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and trade connectivity. The multifaceted interactions within this partnership have significant implications for the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and China, presenting both

opportunities and challenges for the region and the global economic order.

Opportunities for Türkiye and the GCC in CPEC

It is suggested that Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf states collaborate to develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at strengthening mutual collaboration. This may be achieved by strategically using Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as a central component of this initiative. The SEZs, which have been formed as a component of the CPEC, provide a distinctive prospect for fostering cooperation and facilitating economic development. They serve as designated regions specifically designated to foster industrial and economic growth. China and Pakistan need to proactively pursue partnerships with Türkiye and the Gulf countries to fully exploit the economic opportunities presented by these regions. Several Gulf countries have shown their inclination towards such projects, as seen by Saudi Arabia's proposition to develop an oil refinery at Gwadar in the year 2019.²¹ This proposition offers a favourable opportunity for the augmentation of economic connections.

A dual-tiered strategy should be used when making investments in SEZs. First, investments should focus on constructing and developing the SEZs themselves, providing the necessary infrastructure to attract businesses and industries. Second, emphasis should be placed on industrial development within these SEZs, fostering growth across various sectors. This holistic approach can inject vital momentum into Pakistan's domestic economy while creating profitable opportunities for all participating nations. In 2022, Prime Minister Sharif proposed the idea of transforming CPEC into a trilateral project involving Pakistan, Türkiye, and China.²² Such a trilateral initiative holds immense potential for regional cooperation and development. It can bolster defence arrangements, enhance connectivity, boost trade, deepen economic partnerships, nurture

cultural ties, strengthen political and diplomatic relationships, and collectively work towards the welfare of the public and the development of tourism facilities. Furthermore, Türkiye's expertise in the construction sector positions it as a valuable partner for infrastructure projects linked to CPEC, strengthening economic bonds among these nations.

Although Pakistan has maintained friendly relations with Türkiye and the Gulf countries, the true potential of trade and economic ties remains untapped. The potential in this context has largely remained untapped primarily due to bureaucratic obstacles from the Pakistani side coupled with issues related to political stability. Furthermore, up until 2021, the predominant focus had been on geopolitics, with Pakistan consistently viewing matters through the prism of its rivalry with India. Evolving geopolitical dynamics have shifted the focus from politics to economics. As a result, Pakistan recognises the significance of fostering economic activities in the region and beyond. Geo-political shifts have created opportunities for geo-economics to thrive, with infrastructure investments serving as catalysts for economic progress. In sum, cooperation between Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf nations holds immense promise across various domains. The SEZs within the CPEC framework and the exploration of trilateral initiatives can unlock opportunities for mutual growth and prosperity. These efforts bridge the gap between geo-economics and geopolitics, addressing challenges and nurturing economic development in the region.

Food Security: A Potential Area of Cooperation

Collaboration in the agriculture sector represents a promising avenue for Pakistan, China, and the Gulf countries to further their cooperation and capitalise on their respective strengths. Building upon existing MoUs, this multifaceted partnership can address food security challenges and boost agricultural productivity. Pakistan and China have a foundation for agricultural cooperation, and extending

this partnership to include the Gulf countries could yield substantial benefits. The agriculture sector is particularly conducive to collaboration because Pakistan possesses vast arable lands, Türkiye boasts the necessary industrial infrastructure, and the Gulf countries offer essential resources. Notably, the arid climate in the Gulf countries has historically limited their agricultural capabilities, making them reliant on food imports to meet their needs. However, recent global events, such as the Russia-Ukraine standoff, have underscored the vulnerability of relying solely on international markets for food security.

In recent years, Pakistan has become a food-insecure state, mainly due to the underutilisation of the export industry and a lack of legislation aimed at enhancing productivity. Simultaneously, Pakistan seeks substantial investments to modernise its agriculture sector. Expanding the existing MoU framework can transform these challenges into mutually beneficial opportunities. Collaboration among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf countries within the context of the CPEC has the potential to help reduce reliance on Western markets and enhance domestic capabilities. Türkiye, as the seventh-largest global agricultural producer,²³ is well-positioned to provide assistance and knowledge in enhancing Pakistan's research capabilities. Furthermore, Türkiye has the potential to provide grants to Pakistani students and establish exchange programmes that specifically concentrate on agricultural studies, therefore facilitating the interchange of information and the enhancement of skills. The establishment of a strategic alliance that encompasses the agricultural sector has the potential to make significant contributions to the domains of food security, economic development, and self-sufficiency. Agriculture plays a significant role in the CPEC as it presents substantial opportunities for both Pakistan and China. The agricultural sector holds immense potential for growth, employment generation, poverty alleviation, and food security. Under the framework of CPEC,

several agricultural projects and collaborations have been initiated to enhance productivity, improve infrastructure, and promote agri-business between the two countries. These initiatives include the establishment of SEZs for agro-processing, modernisation of irrigation systems, introduction of advanced farming techniques, and exchange of agricultural research and technology. Additionally, CPEC aims to promote agricultural trade, particularly in high-value agricultural products, by improving transportation networks and reducing logistical barriers. Through the use of the unique capabilities possessed by each involved country, this collaborative effort has the potential to effectively address disparities in the production of food and significantly augment agricultural efficiency. Moreover, it is per the overarching objectives of the CPEC, which prioritises the advancement of economic growth, enhancement of regional interconnectedness, and promotion of sustainable cooperation.

Hence, the establishment of agricultural collaboration among China, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the countries of the Gulf presents a strategic avenue for tackling food security issues and harnessing the latent capabilities of Pakistan's agricultural industry. By capitalising on established MoUs and harnessing the distinct strengths possessed by each partner, this collaborative effort corresponds with the broad goals of CPEC and makes a valuable contribution to regional development and the attainment of self-reliance.

Energy Security

Energy security is a key focus of CPEC. CPEC involves the development of energy infrastructure, including the construction of power plants, transmission lines, and pipelines, aiming to address Pakistan's energy deficit and promote sustainable energy generation. This focus on energy security presents an opportunity for a potential partnership between Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC. Collaboration among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC can enhance energy security within the CPEC framework in several ways. Firstly, Türkiye and the

GCC possess significant expertise in energy production, particularly in the fields of oil and natural gas. These countries can provide technical know-how, investment, and resources to support Pakistan's energy sector, facilitating the development of diverse and reliable energy sources.

Pakistan has the potential to gain advantages by procuring economically viable sources of energy from the Gulf countries. The Gulf states possess substantial reserves of energy, making them dependable providers of cost-effective energy for Pakistan. Moreover, Turkish enterprises exhibit a robust presence within the alternative energy industry of Pakistan and have a keen interest in allocating investments towards solar energy initiatives. Türkiye's advancements in the field of hydro and renewable energy make it a significant potential collaborator for Pakistan in the pursuit of sustainable energy options.²⁴

Diversification of markets, trading partners, and energy sources has significant importance for Türkiye. The country has entered into reciprocal trade agreements with several Arab countries, demonstrating its dedication to fostering economic partnerships in the Middle Eastern region. Türkiye has progressively seen the Gulf economies as a favourable prospect for its expanding economy. The GCC members provide appealing opportunities owing to their vast oil resources, resilient banking institutions, and sound public finances. The economies of the Gulf monarchies continue to heavily rely on the energy industry, though they have implemented diversification policies to mitigate their reliance on earnings derived from oil and gas.²⁵ These initiatives cover investments in many areas such as industry, infrastructure, finance, tourism, commerce, health, and education. Consequently, the Gulf states have generated prospects for Türkiye, a country that has a very resilient industrial economy in the Middle East. This economy is distinguished by its compatibility with the economies of the Gulf region. This collaborative effort is in line

with the changing energy environment, characterised by the increasing significance of renewable energy sources. Türkiye's proficiency in energy from renewable sources and the Gulf countries' dedication to expanding their energy portfolios provide a promising opportunity for collaborative endeavours in clean energy initiatives. These programmes have the dual benefit of enhancing energy security and addressing environmental issues while also fostering sustainable economic development.

In sum, the establishment of energy collaboration between Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf nations has the potential to facilitate energy commerce, promote the development of renewable energy projects, and strengthen economic relations. Pakistan has the potential to avail advantages from the import of energy at a lower cost, whilst Türkiye can use its proficiency in renewable energy and access the markets in the Gulf region. The Gulf states, via the implementation of their diversification programmes, have favourable prospects for fostering economic partnership. The establishment of this cooperation is in line with the global objectives of sustainability and represents a viable trajectory towards a more robust and sustainable energy future for all stakeholders, as the globe undergoes a shift towards cleaner energy sources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the shifting global dynamics towards a multipolar order have necessitated adaptations in international relations, with economic diplomacy emerging as a crucial aspect, particularly in regions like South Asia and the Middle East. Pakistan's unique position within the Muslim world, combined with its historical and religious ties with Türkiye and the GCC, has fostered various dimensions of collaboration encompassing politics, security, and economics.

Through the lens of regional integration theory, this research scrutinized the potential for trilateral cooperation, with a specific focus on domains such as energy and food security within the CPEC framework. The findings highlight the convergence of interests among the three entities and provide a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's associations with Türkiye and the GCC. The research accentuates the potential for a more robust trilateral alliance, showcasing the prospects for enhanced cooperation and mutual benefits within the context of the CPEC initiative.

The analysis points to the significance of economic relationships and the leveraging of respective strengths in furthering the objectives of all three entities. By capitalising on the opportunities offered by CPEC and the BRI, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC can reinforce their economic stability, promote industrial diversification, and tackle energy challenges collectively. Such collaboration not only benefits the participating countries but also extends positive implications to the wider geographical areas they reside in. It is imperative for the stakeholders involved to recognise and seize this opportune moment to establish a trajectory towards sustained economic expansion and stability. By embracing this potential trilateral alliance, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC can serve as a prime example of harmonious interaction and joint efforts within an increasingly interconnected global context. Through fostering mutual understanding, strategic partnerships, and institutional frameworks, these entities can contribute meaningfully to regional and global prosperity while exemplifying the value of cooperative synergy. The potential benefits of expanding industrial prospects and diversifying energy sources can be reaped by Türkiye and the Gulf states as well. This trilateral alliance presents an opportunity to establish a framework encompassing stability, security, and economic collaboration, exemplifying collaborative synergy within the evolving global context.

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