



**Power Politics in South Asia: Analyzing India-US-China-Pakistan  
strategic quadrilateral**

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**ABSTRACT**

*South Asian politics is currently marked by ever-enhancing power politics between India and Pakistan, which is exacerbated by the extra-regional predilections, particularly US and China, to the respective states. Against this backdrop, this research analyzes the security and nuclear dimensions of India-Pakistan power politics. Additionally, it holistically highlights various dynamics of Indo-US strategic partnership and Sino-Pakistan strategic convergence. The theoretical framework used is the concept of power politics to underlie the engagement of regional and extra-regional powers in pursuit of their realist goals in South Asia, while the type of research is exploratory. In the end, it is concluded that the extra-regional influences have been fanning the Pakistan-India contestation, causing instability in the region.*

**Keywords:** South Asia, power politics, US, China, India, Pakistan.

## Introduction

South Asia's geo-strategic environment is characterized by the complex power politics between the regional states- India and Pakistan, and the role of the extra-regional states such as US and China which back them respectively. Security calculus of South Asia is characterized by India-Pakistan relations and their relations' natures tremendously affect South Asia's political course of action. In order to keep the strategic balance of power in their favor, both India and Pakistan maintain strategic relations with key extra-regional powers such as China and United States due to the huge interests and involvement in the region.

The power politics between India and Pakistan is regarded as one of the enduring characteristics post World War II. The two nuclear states in the South Asian Region have fought four important wars and border skirmishes of small-scaler are also recurrent occurrences. Since 1998, when the two states become nuclear powers, ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan is characterized by a nuclear stalemate. Besides Kashmir, over which both states have fought three wars, the issue of water and ideological conflict remains the key reason behind the power politics of both states. This power politics has been exacerbated by the involvement of US and China as they view India and China in terms of their own interests, thus increasing the insecurity on both sides.

## Theoretical Framework: Power politics

As per Professor Martin Wight,<sup>1</sup> the term 'Power Politics' imply the relations between independent powers. This phrase makes power synonymous with the word 'International' with the key usage purpose of identification of international scenes. The incessantly encountered usage signifies the relations of the key states with respect to Power, and hence not all of the states,

Those states are entailed in this concept which dominates international politics hence making the other smaller or less powerful states as mere pawns of them. Additionally, this phrase doesn't merely entail the establishment of political subject under debate or commentary on the particular political behavior of the actor; rather, it is used to signify international politics' cardinal feature. A particular event can be taken into due consideration as power politics' case, which entails not the mere description rather suggests that states carry

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (Pelican Publishing, 1978).

themselves in this typical way. Furthermore, it can also be used to refer to international politics as a whole. Moreover, it can also be used to suggest that key aspects of international politics which are not present in national politics.<sup>2</sup>

In international relations, power politics signifies the distributions of national interests and power or alterations to those distributions are primary causes of war as well as system stability. Power politics as a concept provides the states incessant competition over the limited resources and its individual state advantage to be able to inflict harm on others. National self-interest is prioritized by the power politics over other state's interests or international community, and hence it entails threatening each other with political, economic, and military aggression in order to protect the national interest.

### **Power Politics between India and Pakistan**

The power politics between the arch rivals has its historical roots in the partition of 1947. The conflicts over ideology, territories, and water have led both states to compete for more power and attain power capabilities in order to guard their national interest, and get the advantage over another in various key areas such as military, etc. The key aspects signifying the power politics between both states are discussed below

### **Ideological Conflict**

The different religions and ideologies in the subcontinent gave rise to the Two nation theory propagated by Allama Muhammad Iqbal and later Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, ultimately leading to the partition of subcontinent into two states: India and Pakistan. India considers this partition as a division of subcontinent and hence adopted a hostile posture towards Pakistan since 1947.

### **Kashmir Issue**

The key reason behind the incessant power struggle between India and Pakistan lies in the territorial dispute of Kashmir as both states have colossal strategic, economic, and political interests over that chunk of territory and hence this territory is claimed as their integral part. The partition of 1947 gave rise to this issue and since then both states have fought multiple bloody wars over it such as 1948, 1965 and limited conflict in 1999 known as the Kargil conflict. Currently, the state of Indian Occupied Kashmir is that Hindu nationalist

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<sup>2</sup> John A Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics : From Classical Realism to Neotraditionalism* (Cambridge University Press., 1999).

government of Narendra Modi has abrogated the Article 370 of Indian constitution leading to the merger of disputed territories of Jammu and Kashmir into Indian administration, leading to intensification of the conflict between both states. The recent manifestation of this issue is the Balakot airstrike in 2019 in the Pakistan-administrated Kashmir part of Balakot which India alleges was against the terrorist training camp. The very day, Pakistan shot down the Indian aircraft and captured the wing commander Abhinandan who was later released by Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

### **Siachen Issue**

Another key issue between both states leading to animosity and resultant power struggle is the Siachen Issue which originated in 1984, causing more insecurity between both states. Forces of India and Pakistan stood up against each other in extremely harsh weather mountainous region above the glacier of Siachen in Karakoram range. Both states deployed their military troops and wanted other to step back from their respective claims. This region is still militarized and a reminder of aggressive India-Pakistan face-off.

### **Issue over water**

The partition gave rise to the various issues between India and Pakistan and issue over water resources is one of them. Water's unequal distribution coupled with the flood control mechanism such as water's bulk areas in Pakistan with headworks in India aggravated the issues. India claimed its rights over the resources of water, but economy of water was fundamentally dependent on it. Despite the signing of Indus Water Treaty brokered by the World Bank to resolve water issue by specifying the usage of these resources by both states. Three western rivers were given to Pakistan, while Indian was given three eastern rivers, but India has been building barrages and dams over the share of Pakistan, thus violating the IWT and diverting share of Pakistan towards it and thus leading to conflict between both states.<sup>4</sup>

### **Security dimension**

The prevalence of these issues and history of wars, both states perceive the security threats from each other and their strained ties pose a threat to the regional stability. It is

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<sup>3</sup> Jaweriya Nasim, Khushboo Fatima, and Sajida Noureen, "Strategic Balance between India and Pakistan with Respect to 'Balance of Power Theory,'" *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 7, no. 12 (December 25, 2020): 236–49, <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.712.9466>.

<sup>4</sup> Zahid Yaseen, Iqra Jathol, and Muhammad Muzaffar, "Pakistan and India Relations: A Political Analysis of Conflicts and Regional Security in South Asia," *Global Political Review* 1, no. 1 (December 30, 2016): 1–9, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2016\(i-i\).01](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2016(i-i).01).

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alleged by India that Pakistan gives safe havens to the militant groups in order to engage a proxy war against India which was further aggravated by the relations of Pakistan with Afghanistan. On the side of Pakistan, the chief threat and security concern is India, given its violation of IWT, its occupation of IOK, its military adventures, and its clear hostile posture towards Pakistan coupled with the Hybrid warfare against Pakistan. The aforementioned reasons, as well as conflictual situations, generated insecurity among both states which led to mammoth increase in their defense budget. Additionally, the frequent military and armed confrontation and border skirmishes have become a common phenomenon between both states.

### **Nuclear dimension**

The power politics between India and Pakistan is evident from the arm race in nuclear domain. In 1964 the India started its nuclear program chiefly prompted by China which led Pakistan to embark upon its own nuclear program in order to ensure its stability and security. The conventional asymmetry left no option for Pakistan to place its security in nukes, predominantly when 'Smiling Buddha' or nuclear explosions were carried out by India in 1974. In 1998, both Pakistan and India carried out their nuclear tests, leading to a pattern of security interdependence and enmity after the nuclear weapons development by both states. Since then, both arch rivals have been engulfed in the action-reaction spiral with respect to development of the nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Additionally, when the hostile limited war doctrine also known as the Cold Start Doctrine was pursued by India, tactical nuclear weapons were developed by the Pakistan to ensure its security. Currently, India is incessantly developing the BMD capabilities which implies the limited Ballistic Missile Defense. As a response Pakistan has started creating the missiles in order to saturate and defeat the system of BMD, and similarly nuclear posture of Pakistan changes in accordance with India's nuclear posture. Initially, India's policy of nukes was no first use but now India has reconsidering it which led Pakistan to change its posture from minimum deterrence to full Credible minimum deterrence.<sup>5</sup>

The table below depicts the incessant struggle for enhanced military hardware and cutting-edge technology India and Pakistan in order to enhance their power capabilities which

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<sup>5</sup> Arfin Sudirman, "The India-Pakistani Military and Nuclear Arms Race in Post-Cold War Period: The Regional Security Complex in South Asia," *Jurnal Global & Strategis* 12, no. 1 (June 10, 2018): 165, <https://doi.org/10.20473/jgs.12.1.2018.165-181>.

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signifies the power politics between them, as both states try to protect their interests and gain advantage over other by acquiring latest weaponry and increasing their military capabilities.

<b>Key Military areas</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>Pakistan</b>
<b>Military budget</b>	57.9 billion dollars	11.2 billion dollars
<b>Military expenditure as of government spending</b>	9.1	16.7
<b>Active troops (2019)</b>	1.44 million	653, 800
<b>Nuclear warheads</b>	140	150
<b>Military aircrafts</b>	2102	951
<b>Combat Tanks</b>	4426	2924
<b>Naval assets</b>	295	197
<b>Missiles with nuclear warheads (short range, medium range, intercontinental and intermediate range ballistic missiles)</b>	Prithvi II, Agni I, Dhanush, Agni II, Nirbhay, Brahmos, Agni III and IV, Agni V in development	HATF-4 Shaheen I, HATF-5 Ghauri, HATF-3 Ghaznavi, HATF-9 Nasr in development, HATF-6 Shaheen 2, HATF-7 Babur, HATF-2 Abdali, Shaheen 3, HATF-8 (RA'AD) in development

Table 1: India-Pakistan military competition<sup>6 7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Begüm Tunakan, "Arms Race, Brinkmanship Prevails between Pakistan, India," Daily Sabah, March 1, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/asia/2019/03/01/arms-race-brinkmanship-prevails-between-pakistan-india>.

<sup>7</sup> Alia Chughtai, "Nuclear Neighbours: The India-Pakistan Arms Race," www.aljazeera.com, August 10, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/8/10/nuclear-neighbours-the-india-pakistan-arms-race>.

## Power Politics and Role of Extra-regional Powers

### Indo-US nexus (strategic partnership)

The convergence of interests of US and China has been evident over the last fifteen years mainly. Since 2016, the remarkable shift in Indo-US relations occurred which led to the burgeoning strategic cooperation between both states in not merely geo-political domain, but also defense, maritime domain, civil nuclear cooperation, technology, and space program. As far as the pivotal interests of India in cultivating the strategic relations with India are concerned is to project itself to the regional great power, and on the US side, it considers India as an ally of US as counterweight to the latter's rival China. The support has been expressed by the US regarding the India's addition to the NSG-Nuclear Supplier Group that will tremendously enhance the nuclear power status of India and will become a mean to get modern technology. Additionally, in the domain of economics, US-India strategic partnership has brought about the numerous advantages which are shown in Table II.

<b>Investment</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2017</b>
	US\$7.7 billion	US\$28 billion
<b>Trade</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2014</b>
	US\$36 billion	US\$104 billion

Table II: Increase in US-India economic ties after strategic partnership<sup>8</sup>

### Indo-US defense cooperation

Since 2004, military hardware, services and equipment worth US\$10 billion has been acquired by India from the US. These entail various high-end assets including Apache attack helicopters, anti-submarine warfare aircraft, maritime surveillance, C-17 and C-130, CH-47 Chinook, transport airplanes, transport helicopters, and P-8. Various other strides have been made in India-US defense relations as both states expanded the agreement New Framework for Defense Cooperation for ten years. Additionally, the landmark agreement was the DTTI also known as the US Defense Technology and Trade Initiative signed in 2012 which led to

<sup>8</sup> Mahrukh Khan, "Growing India-US Strategic Cooperation: An Analysis," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (2017): 97–117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48537574>.

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the transformation of the US-India ties in defense domain making India the US partner of co-production and co-development from buyer-seller relation. This Initiative will also cover the India-US defense trade such as the C-130's purchase coupled with deals that would provide India access to technology and defense equipment of the US entailing the aircraft carrier. Six pathfinder projects are the key focus of the DTTI

- Formation of the biological-chemical protective gear for the troops
- Development of small-sized unmanned aircraft
- Formation of power stations that are mobile and electric hybrid in nature
- Surveillance and intelligence module
- Joint working groups, one on jet engine technology and other on development of aircraft carrier technology coupled with a mutual system for biological tactical detection
- Helmet-mounted displays that are digital.<sup>9</sup>

India has transformed into 'Major defense partner' of US which is evident from the huge budget of the US in 2017 passed by the Senate i.e., US\$618 billion.<sup>10</sup> In order buttress this relationship, IRRC-India Rapid Reaction Cell has been created by the Pentagon which implies the growing significance of India for US, and this IRRC is one of key efforts which aims at realizing the DTTI's all aspects. With respect to the nuclear deal of the US and India, US and India firms' Nuclear Power Corporation have mutually agreed to kick off the site design work and engineering for six nuclear reactors. Another key agreement is the BECA-Basic Exchange and Communication Agreement which aims at cooperation between Air Forces of both states coupled with giving India the military systems entailing the high-quality GPS in order to navigate the missiles.<sup>11</sup>

### Security cooperation in Maritime domain

With the launch of Belt and Road Initiative of the China and its enhancing foothold in the South Asian Region, India and US have enhanced their security cooperation in maritime domain, particularly due to the maritime component of BRI known as the 21st century

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<sup>9</sup> Neelam Mathews, "U.S. Offers Four New Defense Projects to India," Aviation International News, 2015, <https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/defense/2015-01-29/us-offers-four-new-defense-projects-india>.

<sup>10</sup> "With Senate Passing Bill, India to Become Key Defence Partner of U.S.," *The Hindu*, December 9, 2016, sec. World, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/With-Senate-passing-bill-India-to-become-key-defence-partner-of-U.S./article16783820.ece>.

<sup>11</sup> S.M. Hali, "BECA — a New Indo-US Bilateral Agreement," [www.thenews.com.pk](http://www.thenews.com.pk), November 2, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/737917-beca-a-new-indo-us-bilateral-agreement>.



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Maritime Silk Road. Maritime Security Dialogue between India and US was launched in 2016 with the aim of developing better cooperation between US and Indian maritime forces at operational level.<sup>12</sup> The key agreements between them signify the extent of their cooperation in maritime domain

Agreement	Year	Purpose
LEMOA-Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement	2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allows India as well as US to use each other's naval facilities for supply and services in frequent and formal manner</li><li>• Gives India the opportunity to use regional bases of India in Asia-Pacific region</li></ul>
COMCASA-Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement	2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Assistance of US to India for improved surveillance in the Indian Ocean</li><li>• Interoperability between maritime forces of US and India</li><li>• Provide access to India with respect to encrypted communication system and equipment</li></ul>

Table III: Key Indo-US agreements in maritime domain<sup>13</sup>

## Pakistan-China alignment

Without the aid of the China, Pakistan remains unable to counterbalance the growing influence of the India in South Asian region. Simultaneously, Pakistan is needed by the China for containing the regional influence of the India. Resultantly, strategies ties of both states are being strengthened in order to prioritize their interests in security domain. In present era, the cordial relations of the both have been continuously flourishing which are evident from the

<sup>12</sup> Abbas Hassan, "Growing China-India Competition in the Indian Ocean: Implications for Pakistan," *Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019): 77–89, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48544289>.

<sup>13</sup> Vivek Mishra, "India-US Maritime Cooperation: Crossing the Rubicon," *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 14, no. 2 (July 3, 2018): 15–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09733159.2018.1562453>.

increased missile and civil nuclear cooperation. The South Asian policy of the China is connected to the security and military threats from India as well as US and India alliance. Hence, in order to counter the regional policies of the India, China considers Pakistan as a valuable ally owing to latter's strategic position. Stronger Pakistan is perceived as vital for defense of China against the security threats from India. Consequently, Pakistan has always been supported by China in military as well as economic domain in order to balance the India and its partnership with US. In the relations of China and Pakistan, India remains a common key factor.<sup>14</sup>

### **CPEC-China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar Port**

In present era, special attention has been paid to the economic cooperation between China and Pakistan. Pakistan remains the first state that became part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI's pilot project-China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), worth \$64 billion would enormously help Pakistan in energy sector. It would colossally help Pakistan to get rid of the energy crisis and move towards energy mix. Additionally, transportation and the infrastructure projects such as Karakoram Highway's upgradation has also been included in the CPEC. Additionally, Special Economic Zones have also been a key priority under the CPEC and work is undertaken in this area as well. Till now, China has invested a huge amount of nearly US\$ 26 billion.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, China remains the largest trading partner and investor of Pakistan and more investment by the Chinese side is expected in future. This project would help Pakistan's emergence as regional as well as trade hub and would reduce Pakistan's development deficit. These developments resonate with the China effort to open its Western parts and its geographical proximity with the Pakistan provides economic collaboration's avenues. Owing to the unique advantage of Pakistan, it wishes to leverage it by acting as bridge between China and other regions such as South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia, through increased investment and trade. Mainly the maritime jewel of the CPEC-Gwadar port is the key port that will bridge the aforementioned regions and provide China the shortest trade route to the region. The deep-sea port of Gwadar has been handed over to China for lease and its

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<sup>14</sup> Parvaiz Ahmad and Bawa Singh, "Sino-Pakistan Friendship, Changing South Asian Geopolitics and India's Post-Obama Options," *South Asia Research* 37, no. 2 (June 13, 2017): 133–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728017700184>.

<sup>15</sup> Sundas Durrani, Muhammad Bilal, and Inayat Kalim, "Pakistan-China Strategic Partnership: Capitalizing the Geo-Political Location of Pakistan," *Global Regional Review* II, no. I (December 30, 2017): 152–65, [https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2017\(ii-i\).11](https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2017(ii-i).11).

proximity to the Strait of Hormuz- a strategically significant choke point considerably enhances its importance. Most importantly, the maritime route of the CPEC would give China a golden opportunity to get rid of the Malacca Dilemma while reducing the time and cut costs in export's transportation to Middle East, Africa, and beyond. Additionally, it will establish connectivity network with Afghanistan and CARs. Besides benefiting China, this port will help Pakistan to keep a check on the Sea Lines of Communication in the Indian Ocean.<sup>16</sup>

### **Defense and military collaboration**

The deepening strategic and military relationships between China and Pakistan are the manifestation of the China's willingness to counterbalance the India and US. In 2020, VT-4 battle tanks made by the China's state-owned defense company were inducted by the Pakistan Army which signifies the consolidation of Sino-Pak strategic partnership in the changing regional environment. Additionally, UCAV-Unmanned Combat Aerial vehicles or combat drones made by China are used by the Pakistan and are important with respect to India as India is devoid of this ability in order to respond to stand-off weapon of the new age. Defense trade between China and Pakistan has its roots in history but the arms deliveries in present era are manifestation of deepening Sino-Pak strategic engagement. In 2020, A Memorandum of Understanding has been signed by the two states in order to increase the cooperation in defense domain after the visit defense minister of China to Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, military exercises between both states are also increasing and example can be given of the most recent joint exercise between both states proximal to LAC-Line of Actual Control in area of Tibet after the Galwan valley military stand-off between China and India. Moreover, Shaheen IX exercises between the Pakistan and China's Air Force aimed at promoting the military-to-military relationships between both states, buttress the two sides' actual-combat training level and strengthen the air cooperation between the two states. In the backdrop of China-India standoff at Ladakh, various advanced weapons such as tanks, fighter jets, drones, and ships were exported to Pakistan by China. Most recently, latest stealth warships known as PNS Tughril is engineered and designed by the CSSC- China State

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<sup>16</sup> Asia Maqsood, "China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership and India's Regional Ambitions in South Asia," 2021, [https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/4\\_SS\\_Asia\\_Maqsood\\_No-3\\_2021.pdf](https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/4_SS_Asia_Maqsood_No-3_2021.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Allauddin, Hongsong Liu, and Raja Qaiser Ahmed, "The Changing Dynamics and New Developments of China-Pakistan Relations," *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 1 (February 25, 2020): 73-88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928419901195>.

Shipbuilding Corporation. It comes under the type of Type 054A/P frigate and Pakistan is the first international customer of this ship.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

The key determinant of the South Asia's changing strategic environment is nexus of India and US against the alignment of China and Pakistan. Indo-US alliance emerged after the two states signing of the strategic partnership which has established as well as buttressed their consensus in the mutual interest i.e., China's containment. On the other hand, the relations of the US and Pakistan have moved towards the mutual trust deficit mainly due to differences over the Afghanistan peace process.

The belligerent attitude of India towards the Pakistan has resulted from the burgeoning military industrial complex of India, growing economy, enhanced military budget, comprehensive military diplomacy with US, military hardware's modernization. India has been strengthened by the US against the China as well as Pakistan (due to US incessant pressure to do more with respect to Afghanistan). The ever-enhancing strategic convergence of the US and India has aggravated the security situation of the region, particularly has enhanced the Pakistan's security apprehensions. Similarly on the other side, China and Pakistan cooperation particularly the CPEC and Gwadar coupled with increasing military cooperation is seen as a security concern by the India and US, and is seen as China's increasing its prowess through the Pakistan by establishing its foothold in the region.

Although the mammoth rule of extra-regional powers is evident in South Asia, the rivalry between Pakistan and India cannot be attributed to the diverging interests of external powers. US and China involvement in the region has been incessantly burgeoning and their involvement. External powers and alliances have intensified and prolonged the Indo-Pakistan rivalry, but at the same time, they played a potent role in diffusing them. However, the changing geopolitical milieu has led extra-regional powers to deepen their interests in the region and they perceive their relations with two prominent powers of region- India and Pakistan- through their own preferences, pre-occupations, as well as priorities. Resultantly, the Indo-Pakistan tensions have been fueled as they are being engulfed into extra-regional power politics. Indo-Pakistan de-escalation of tensions isn't the priority of extra-regional powers, rather they consider Pakistan and India as states suitable for their own interests,

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<sup>18</sup> Rajeswari Rajagopalan, "The China-Pakistan Partnership Continues to Deepen," *thediplomat.com*, July 9, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/the-china-pakistan-partnership-continues-to-deepen/>.

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reinforcing the volatility in region and threatening regional stability given the formation of firm alliances and ever-enhancing militarization of region.