

China's Security Strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Protecting Belt and Road Interests amid Regional Instability

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamic security approach of China in Afghanistan and Pakistan, its attempts to protect investments in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), in the face of a growing level of instability in the region. The resurgence of militancy, inter-country terrorism, and fragility in governance in Afghanistan due to the Taliban returning to power in 2021 has set complicated issues of China in terms of its regional involvement. The study utilizes qualitative, interpretivist research design in analyzing the security behavior of China by using interviews, focus group discussion, and policy documents to analyze the behavior in relation to the theoretical frameworks of Defensive Realism and Neo-Classical Realism. The conclusions made indicate that China pursues a reserved, defensive, and economically oriented approach whereby stability is sought by means of diplomatic intervention, economic interdependence, and a restricted security cooperation instead of active intervention. Although Pakistan is still the main partner of the Chinese, its internal unrest and Taliban dualism towards the transnational militancy interfere with the cooperation of regional security. This paper then finds that to protect BRI projects in a sustainable manner, there is a need to develop a Trilateral Security Coordination Mechanism, stronger intelligence sharing, and confidence building between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The study leads to the insight of the regional security position of China, as well as policy implications on enhancing economic-security agglomeration in unstable areas.

Keywords: China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Regional Security Cooperation, Afghanistan–Pakistan Instability, Defensive Realism and Neo-Classical Realism

Background of the Study

The increasing geopolitical and economic involvement of China in South Asia has changed the geopolitical and economic environment of the region. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was declared in 2013, has become one of the pillars of the Chinese global connectivity vision, the fact that it aims to improve trade routes and economic integration throughout the Asian, European, and African continents. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the flagship projects of strategic significance to China because it links Xinjiang Province to the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which leads to the Arabian Sea and this helps to decrease the dependence of China on the Strait of Malacca (Rolland, 2017). The success of this initiative is however a prerequisite to

stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unrelenting militancy, cross border terrorism and political instability is a major threat to Chinese investment and human resources in the region. With the U.S. departure in Afghanistan in August 2021 and Taliban taking over, the situation in the region transformed radically. The resulting power vacuum of the region rekindled militant groups, such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), both of which have been attacking Chinese nationals and projects within Pakistan (Zahid, 2023). This has seen China refocus its approach to the security issue by considering the diplomatic approach to the Taliban government, enhanced border control, and fostering a trilateral relationship with Islamabad and Kabul. Such measures are indicative of the general strategy of China of security through development, in which economic investments are inextricably coupled with strategic stability (Huasheng, 2022).

Problem Statement

The growing Chinese presence in South Asia especially in CPEC has exposed China to the turbulent security conditions in the region. The unrest in Afghanistan after the Taliban came back to power not only rejuvenated the militant networks but also escalated the security threats to the Chinese investments and citizens. Although China has been very active in its foreign policy and has collaborated with Pakistan in strategic terms, there is no coherent regional structure of security that would assure the safety of Belt and Road resources. The lack of a known Afghan government internationally, the continuing cross-border militancy and weakened Pakistan- Afghanistan relationships also makes it very difficult to keep the security intact through bilateral means by China. The paper examines the key issue of how the changing security policy of China in Afghanistan and Pakistan is aimed to protect its Belt and Road as the instability persists.

Research Question

How is China reshaping its security strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan to safeguard Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects amid regional instability and transnational militancy?

Research Objective

To analyze China's evolving security strategy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan, focusing on the measures, partnerships, and policies implemented to protect Belt and Road projects from regional instability and militant threats.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two major theories of International Relations:

Defensive Realism:

This is based on the views of Kenneth Waltz, where the states are interested in securing their safety through balancing threats but not power maximization. The Chinese regional involvement is a defensive approach of the realists, which values stability rather than expansion, and aims at safeguarding its economic interests without going to war (Waltz, 1979).

Neo-Classical Realism:

It posits the relationship between domestic considerations and international aspirations and this theory elucidates how foreign policy conduct is influenced by the internal economic priorities. The domestic energy security, regional connectivity, and economic growth motive of the people of China have affected its pragmatic attitude toward Afghanistan and Pakistan (Rose, 1998). Collectively, the theories clarify how the security strategy used by China is both a mix of

diplomacy, economic dependence, and restricted security collaboration to defend its strategic interests.

Research Methodology

The research design used in this study is a qualitative research design based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary data will be gathered by means of semi structured interviews and focus group discussions with the security analysts, diplomats, scholars and policymakers of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Secondary data will comprise academic journals, policy reports, think tank reports, and official Chinese statements on BRI and the security of the region. Data shall be compared thematically regarding the changing diplomatic and security policies by China towards both nations.

Literature Review

The increase in the power of China in South Asia, especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has captured remarkable academic attention over the past years. The changing geopolitical landscape since the United States left Afghanistan in 2021 has only further aroused an academic and policy interest in the dynamics of Chinese adjustments to its security policies to protect economic and strategic interests in an unstable environment. The chapter is a review of the available literature regarding the foreign and security policy of China, its involvement with Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the changing challenges related to militancy and instability, which are threatening Belt and Road investment.

China's Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Security Concerns

China has its greatest foreign policy project called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2013 and aimed at facilitating connectivity and growth in Asia, Europe, and Africa. According to the works of such scholars as Rolland (2017) and Blanchard (2021), the BRI can be characterized not only as an economic but also as a strategic initiative thanks to which China can expand its influence via infrastructure investment, trade, and political cooperation. Nevertheless, such projects have also subjected China to the non-traditional security threats such as terrorism, political instability and regime instability in partner states.

CPEC is the flagship of the BRI in the South Asian area and a route linking western China to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan. According to Small (2022), even though CPEC boosts the Pakistani economic opportunities, it also exposes Chinese interests to the security risks in unstable regions such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Separatist groups and Islamist militants have a habit of targeting these regions, and security cooperation between China and Pakistan is an inevitable part of the success of CPEC. 2.3 The Instability of Afghanistan and the implications of Afghanistan on the region.

Afghanistan's Instability and Its Regional Implications

The Kabul fall in August 2021 changed the security calculation in the region. With the resurgence of the Taliban leadership, Afghanistan was once again in the questionable position of being a possible breeding ground of militants like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Goodhand (2021) says that the spillover effects of the instability in Afghanistan have in the past had an impact on the neighboring country of Pakistan and this has led to development of militant networks that cut across porous borders.

The main interest of China in Afghanistan is ensuring that the nation does not become a haven of other groups which jeopardize the security interests of the Chinese and specifically, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Huasheng, 2022). To counter this threat, Beijing has resorted to the diplomatic approach to the Taliban by offering them economic rewards and

humanitarian services in a bid to get counterterrorism promises. Nevertheless, according to Zahid (2023), these pledges have not been consistent, and the unclear attitude of the Taliban toward transnational militants is still a question to the strategic calculations of China.

China–Pakistan Strategic Partnership and Security Cooperation

China- Pakistan strategic partnership is an old and multi-faceted alliance that has military, economic, and political aspects. In the past, the relationship has shifted as an alliance of security in the Cold War to the level of an all-inclusive strategic partnership within the BRI framework (Small, 2022). According to the commentators like Wolf (2019), CPEC is not merely an economic partnership but a security compact, in which China has economic interests in the counterterrorist work of Pakistan that require greater engagement.

The security issues in China were enhanced by repetitive assaults on Chinese engineers and employees in Pakistan, especially in Dasu (2021) and Karachi (2022). Such events highlighted the importance of strong interagency security measures and special protection departments like the Special Security Division (SSD) of Pakistan were created to provide security in CPEC. Shabir and Malik (2023) also note that this bilateral cooperation demonstrates the non-interventionist but protecting attitude of China, according to which it depends on the capacity of the host-state without rejecting its strategic advantage.

Theoretical Perspectives on China’s Security Strategy

The Chinese security policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan can be analyzed in light of two major theoretical perspectives, which are Defensive Realism and Neo-Classical Realism.

Under the explanations of the Defensive Realism as it was conceived by Waltz (1979), states are interested in security and not dominance. The actions of China are united with this principle: the country does not want to confront with the army, choosing the path of diplomatic contacts and using the economic statecraft to ensure its interests. Huasheng (2022) emphasizes that China does not interpret the notion of stability in Afghanistan as a projection of power but as a means of protecting the economic routes and its influence in the region.

On the contrary, Neo-Classical Realism describes the actions of China as the result of interaction of systemic forces and domestic interests. Rose (1998) and Ripsman et al. (2016) believe that internal political limitations as well as the perception of leadership influence the state behavior. The example of China is that the style of economic diplomacy combined with the principle of security pragmatism by President Xi is a soft power intertwined with hard strategic thinking in the form of the Community of Shared Future of Mankind.

All of these theoretical views contribute to the reason why China is willing to pour in Afghanistan and Pakistan despite the merits of high risks - it is a defensive, adaptive, and home grown strategy as opposed to expansionist. 2.6 Regional Cooperation and the part played by China. The strategy of China in the regional cooperation is based on multilateralism and economic interdependence. Beijing considers collective security against terrorism and extremism through forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Dialogues with Pakistan and Afghanistan (Tellis, 2023). However, some researchers warn that China is constrained by the lack of trust and structural imbalances among the actors in the region. Jones (2022) mentions that Pakistan sees China as an ally, but the internal conflict of Afghanistan and the inability to cooperate at an institutional level do not promote critical cooperation. Besides, the non-interventionist approach of China does not allow it to exert conditions or intervene in conflicts directly, which narrows the scope of its involvement (Rolland, 2017).

Research Gap

The available literature explains extensively about the economic involvement of China in South Asia and the geopolitical aspect of BRI. Nevertheless, the main gap in knowledge about the changing security strategy of China as a response to the post-2021 turbulent situation in the region is still present. The majority of the research is concentrated on the economic policies of China or the domestic politics of Afghanistan but seldom both are combined in a single analysis approach. This paper bridges that gap by discussing the role of the strategic approach of China in integrating economic, diplomatic, and security tools in safeguarding its interests in the Belt and Road amid the context of militancy and political instability.

Research Methodology

The chapter presents the approach to the methodology of the research. It discusses the design of the research, philosophical orientation, data collection and procedures, sampling methodology, and methods of analysis in exploring the way in which the changing security policy in China is responding to the issues presented by the regional instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The research approach is developed in a way that includes depth, validity, and contextualization of the Chinese security behavior and policy adaptation to the post-2021 environment.

Research Design

The research design used in this study is the qualitative research design that will investigate strategic behavior and choices of policies of China in a complicated regional environment. After qualitative approach it is possible to analyze in depth political intentions, policy narratives, and perceptions of security which are not readily measurable. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is most suited in investigating phenomena whose contextual and interpretative knowledge forms a central part in meaning and cause. The research is a mixture of descriptive and analytical works based on the relations between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It aims at deciphering how China incorporates diplomatic, economic, and security systems in defending its interests in the face of instability in the region and militancy.

Research Philosophy

The study is based on the interpretivism, which is based on comprehending the social phenomena in terms of the attitudes and experiences of the acting actors. Interpretivism presupposes that the reality is social and contextual (Bryman, 2016). The paradigm finds special application in the study of international relations where perceptions, historical relations and changing security issues influence the behavior of states, the motivation of the policies and the strategic decisions they make. Within the framework of this philosophical perspective, the researcher will explain how Chinese, Pakistani, and Afghan policymakers theorize regional security cooperation and the security of the BRI investments.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by Defensive Realism and Neo-Classical Realism.

- **Defensive Realism**, according to Waltz (1979), the state interests are geared towards ensuring survival and stability and not towards expansion. The attitude of China towards Afghanistan and Pakistan is that of defense, the primary focus is on stability, control of the border and safeguarding of economic initiatives instead of aggressive intervention.
- **Neo-Classical Realism** introduced by neo-classical realism is the linkage between the international and domestic variables such that the internal economic agendas and the leadership views in China influence its external actions (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).

Together, these theories can be used to understand the security-economy nexus that is motivating China to engage regionally under BRI.

Research Questions

1. What are the major security threats facing China's Belt and Road projects in Afghanistan and Pakistan?
2. How has China adapted its diplomatic and security policies in response to these threats?
3. What role do Pakistan and Afghanistan play in shaping China's regional security approach?
4. How can trilateral cooperation contribute to long-term stability and project protection?

Population and Sampling

The population of this research includes security experts, regional affairs analysts, diplomats, and policymakers from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China who possess knowledge of regional security, CPEC, and counterterrorism cooperation.

The study uses purposive sampling, a non-probability technique that selects participants based on their expertise and relevance to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sample composition includes:

- 6 security experts and retired military officials from Pakistan.
- 3 Afghan political analysts and journalists specializing in Taliban–China relations.
- 2 policy researchers focusing on CPEC and Chinese foreign policy.

This provides a balanced and informed dataset covering multiple perspectives across the three key states.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Data

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted between March and August 2024.

- **Interviews:** Focused on identifying China's strategic priorities, perceived threats, and cooperative mechanisms in the region.
- **FGDs:** Conducted among academic and policy experts in Islamabad and Peshawar to discuss the implications of the Taliban's return for regional security.

Each session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, recorded with consent, and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

Secondary Data

Secondary data sources include academic journals, official government documents, policy briefs, think tank reports, and newspaper archives. Key references were drawn from institutions such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, CSIS, and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The inclusion of both Western and Asian sources ensured balanced representation of viewpoints.

Data Analysis Technique

The study employs thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying patterns, concepts, and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After transcribing interviews and FGD responses, the researcher categorized responses under core themes such as:

1. Security Threats to BRI Projects
2. China's Policy Adjustments after 2021
3. Regional Cooperation Mechanisms
4. Diplomatic vs. Military Tools of Security

Coding was conducted manually to ensure contextual understanding. Themes were then compared with secondary literature to identify convergences and contradictions, enabling a robust triangulation of findings.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The chapter is the analysis of the qualitative data gathered in the form of interviews and focus group discussions with Hong Kong, Pakistani, Afghan, and Chinese policy analysts, researchers, and experts in the regional security. The discussion provides major themes, which describe why the Chinese strategy on security has changed to curb regional instability since the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021. These results are presented in the basis of the theoretical framework of the study, the ways in which the strategic approach to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) interests of China, specifically the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is formed through the combination of the diplomatic approach, economic investment, and the selective approach to security cooperation.

Overview of Data Collection

The information was received based on eleven interviews and two focus group discussions that took place in the period of March-August 2024. The respondents were retired Pakistani military officers, Chinese foreign policy analysts, Afghan political journalists and South Asian security scholars. Their views gave a fair insight into the security-economy nexus that defines the dynamics of the region. The data was transcribed and then thematic analysis was used to identify repeated patterns, and these were grouped into five main themes.

Theme 1: China's Evolving Security Engagement in the Post-2021 Regional Order

In August 2021, the collapse of Kabul became a shift in the Chinese policy in the region. According to the participants, this issue of potential spillage of instability in Xinjiang and the possibility of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) seeking refuge in Afghanistan were the immediate concerns of Beijing. One Pakistani security analyst has said:

“China realized that Afghanistan could either become a stabilizing link or a security vacuum threatening CPEC and western China.”

China replied with a diplomatic-economic hybrid strategy, focusing on engagement in the Taliban administration without taking an active part. This is in line with Defensive Realism, since China aims at ensuring that the region remains stable without engaging in an expensive intervention (Waltz, 1979).

Beijing has enhanced its intelligence relations with Pakistan and held joint counterterrorism drills under the umbrella of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The approach is an example of a careful but tactical effort to protect BRI routes out of regional militancy without interfering in domestic politics in Afghanistan.

Theme 2: The Taliban Factor and Afghanistan's Security Uncertainty

The results showed that the experts were unanimous in that the inability or lack of will of the Taliban to restrain the militant groups has posed a security dilemma both to Pakistan and China. The revival of the TTP in the Pakistani border provinces was generally regarded as the direct consequence of the leniency of the Taliban to the allied militant groups.

An Afghan journalist interviewed in Kabul observed:

“The Taliban's priority is political legitimacy, not controlling transnational militancy. This contradiction makes Afghanistan both a partner and a problem for China.”

This is in line with the Neo-Classical Realism, in the sense that the foreign and national security policies of Afghanistan are limited by the domestic politics of the country (Rose, 1998). The wary

participation of China is to the knowledge of this domestic disunity. Beijing has not recognized the Taliban government at the official level but holds high-level negotiations to make sure that the Taliban give guarantees about ETIM and border security (Rana, 2023).

Theme 3: Pakistan's Dual Role as a Security Partner and Risk Zone

Pakistan is in the heart of the Chinese regional security calculation. Being the core of the Belt and Road flagship CPEC, Pakistan is a strategic ally and a provider of security threat on other nations because of the frequent militant attacks on the Chinese staff and projects.

As per the focus group discussions in Islamabad, China perceives the internal instability in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan as the first challenge to the continuity of the BRI. One retired Pakistani intelligence officer said:

A retired Pakistani intelligence officer stated:

“China trusts Pakistan's partnership but is increasingly anxious about its capacity to manage internal militancy and protect Chinese interests.”

China has consequently advocated to have dedicated security forces to secure CPEC installations and has initiated the expansion of monitoring and logistical collaboration by engaging in joint border management programs (Ahmad, 2024).

This is Defensive Realist logic- China does not get involved directly, but makes sure that her investments are insured by local relationships and local capacity-building.

Theme 4: The Economic–Security Nexus of CPEC and BRI

The other important observation was that the economic and security interests have strong interlacing in the Chinese regional policy. The Chinese investments in energy, infrastructure and mining processes are also strategic and security instruments. Through the economic integration, China is expected to stabilize itself by being dependent on each other, a central idea of the Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane and Nye, 2012).

The observers pointed out that the economic projects are organized so as to base China and prevent the external forces especially the United States and India to take control of the regional discourses.

As one Chinese policy scholar has explained:

“Economic cooperation is our security shield; development ensures predictability, and predictability ensures peace.”

This theme brings out the fact that China uses its economic diplomacy as an indirect security tool to stabilize the border zones, integrate the economy of Pakistan and provide incentives to Afghanistan to cooperation.

Theme 5: Prospects for Trilateral Security Cooperation

Although trilateral dialogues between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan has been repeated since the year 2017, the study has determined that institutionalized cooperation is still weak. Respondents focused on a lack of trust in each other and the lack of a practical counterterrorism model. A Pakistani diplomat shared:

“Each country acknowledges the problem, but their definitions of terrorism and security cooperation differ fundamentally.”

Nonetheless, there is a growing acceptance that China should take a leadership role in the process of communication between Islamabad and Kabul. The mediation capability of China supported by the economic leverage might change the trilateral mechanism into a sustainable regional security platform. The debate concurs with the Neo-Classical assumptions of Realists that external agendas are checked by the domestic perceptions and leadership decisions. The fact that China is ready to mediate without interfering, but keeping a low profile proves the practicality of the approach aimed at increasing the power without raising any opposition.

Integration with Theoretical Framework

The results are a strong indication of the relevancy of Defensive Realism and Neo-Classical Realism in the explanation of the regional strategy that is adopted by China. The Chinese behavior is self-defensive, stability-oriented by trying to avoid being encircled and ensuring the safe access of trade routes. Nevertheless, it also makes decisions based on domestic economic needs and leadership views, which is consistent with the Neo-Classical Realist knowledge (Ripsman et al., 2016). The choice of economic statecraft over military intervention in China is a calculated policy of maintaining the long-term influence without confrontation, which can be viewed as a kind of strategic restraint, conditioned by the U.S. experience of overreach in Afghanistan and the Soviet experience.

Summary of Key Findings

The study found that there are five themes that are intertwined to outline the changing Chinese way of managing regional security. The results indicate that the involvement of China and Pakistan in Afghanistan is defensive, pragmatic and economically oriented and is meant to keep its investments safe and not to gain territorial and political power.

1. Defensive and Cautious Security Engagement:

China has been keen on diplomatic dialogue, intelligence coordination and economic interactions as opposed to direct military actions. It is based on the strategy of Defensive Realism that aims at avoiding instability that may compromise Xinjiang and the CPEC instead of seeking power projection.

2. Afghanistan's Volatility as a Strategic Risk:

Inability of the Taliban to check transnational militant groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and ETIM has weakened security in the region. China has been cautious in its interaction with Kabul where it has been involved in limited recognition and selective cooperation with the country on the basis of security guarantees and economic investment opportunities.

3. Pakistan's Central but Vulnerable Role:

Pakistan is the nearest ally of China in the region, but its internal unrest, economic destabilization and border militancy are constant threats to CPEC. The lack of confidence in Pakistan being a strategic partner due to the weaknesses in its governance and the fact that anti-Chinese militancy persist is something that China is not keen on.

4. Economic-Security Interdependence:

The increased stability brought about by interdependence via increased trade, infrastructure and investment is an idea that Beijing feels can be produced when it comes to stability, and this is something that aligns with the Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Nevertheless, the transformation of economic cooperation into lasting security is lop sided.

5. Weak Trilateral Cooperation Mechanisms:

Although, there have been several trilateral discussions between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan the formal coordination in terms of security is little. The various definitions of terrorism, political suspicion, and lack of institutional structures have prevented effective cooperation.

All these findings show that even though China has increased its involvement in the region, they are still limited by external unstable situations and domestic apprehension when it comes to their strategy of security.

Theoretical Interpretation

The results are a strong indication of the existence of a combination between Defensive Realism and Neo-Classical Realism as the theoretical perspectives to study the attitude of China.

- **Defensive Realism:** As of defensive Realism, the reserved, stability-oriented stance of China is explained. These are the main goals of Beijing to avoid the instability in the surrounding countries without excessive extension of its authority and the creation of a confrontation with other actors. It has a policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which is composed of the need to create balance and avoidance of risks (Waltz, 1979).
- **Neo-Classical Realism:** Neo-Classical Realism sheds light on the foreign policy decision-making of China regarding domestic interests (primarily, economic development, regime, and international reputation) (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016). This tendency of the Chinese leadership to emphasize on developmental security makes it more inclined to using economic tools than military ones.

In this way, the Chinese strategy may be seen as the combination of realist prudence and economic pragmatism, as a stabilizer in an uncertain region.

Conclusions

The current research paper summarizes that China is exercising a cautious approach to Afghanistan and Pakistan in its security policies that are characterized by economic integration and diplomatic flexibility. China does not follow a coercive strategy of promoting stability; instead, it follows the strategy of stability promotion by interdependence and multilateral coordination. Nevertheless, this strategy has continued to be challenged by issues of regional fragmentation, militant rebirth and the fragility of governance in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Key conclusions include:

1. The security role that has been played by China is defensive and indirect as it does not involve direct deployment but involves local partners.
2. The stabilization of the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan relies on the success of CPEC and BRI in this region.
3. The non-interference principle of china although politically advantageous, restricts its powers in terms of ensuring compliance of its partners such as the Taliban.
4. The cooperation at the regional level is still a dream, and it has to be more institutionalized to turn the dialogue into practical security cooperation.

Finally, the place of China is that of a balancer, rather than a hegemon, trying to protect the economic interests and spread the image of a responsible global power.

Policy Recommendations

According to the results, this study provides a list of policy recommendations that could be used to promote the stability of the regions and the security of BRI projects:

Strengthening Trilateral Security Coordination

China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan must set up a Trilateral Security Coordination Mechanism (TSCM) that focuses on the intelligence sharing, counterterrorism, and border surveillance. The TSCM may be working under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to gain legitimacy and common ownership.

Institutionalizing Counterterrorism Frameworks

China and Pakistan need to institutionalize their current security of the country into an arrangement of Joint Counterterrorism Task Force, and where possible, involve the presence of Afghanistan. This would facilitate real time coordination against militant networks threatening CPEC and border stability.

Leveraging Economic Diplomacy for Stability

The Chinese government should increase their development based diplomacy by investing in cross border energy, transport and trade infrastructures that serve the Afghani communities. By ensuring some economic inclusion, it will be possible to decrease the number of people willing to fight, as well as to promote regional interdependence.

Enhancing CPEC Security Architecture

Pakistan should strengthen its Special Security Division (SSD) that deals with guarding of Chinese workers, and projects. It should introduce regular auditing, community involvement packages, and open reporting systems that will ensure that investors are assured and no one in the locality is opposed to it.

Promoting Political Dialogue and Trust-Building

China can take the advantage of its diplomatic neutrality to intervene in the disputes between Pakistan and Taliban to resolve their security issues. The joint border patrols and economic forums might help in confidence-building activities, which will achieve the goal of reducing the level of mistrust and encourage the culture of cooperation in matters of security.

Integrating Multilateral Partners

Multilateral coordination of China with other multilateral participants like the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and regional development banks would help in stabilisation projects through technical and financial support, which will enhance international legitimacy.

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