

Territorial Revisionism via Belt and Road Initiative: Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on South Asia's Conventional Deterrence

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Abstract

The fluctuating strategic environment in Southern Asia is witnessing enhanced interactivity between politico-military-strategic and operational issues, by virtue of many projects. This includes, most prominently, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a part of China's grand project, the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which seeks to consolidate the China-Pakistan strategic relationship. As far as regional geo-strategic calculations are concerned, the CPEC has emerged as a vital lynchpin among the variables of deterrence that India will seemingly have to cater to, ranging from conventional deterrence in the Indo-China border areas, to campaign planning for developing flexible deterrent operations (including joint operational planning). India is facing the growing complexity and pressure as it strives to ensure continuing and survivable deterrence at varying levels. The presence of China and Pakistan is becoming progressively compelling in so far as planning and achieving deterrence at operational levels is concerned. Recurring Chinese transgressions in the border areas in India's north-eastern and western theatre could well be part of a plausible military strategy to keep both fronts tactically active and build up tactical pressure on the Indian Armed Forces—thereby placing the existing conventional deterrence equations in South Asia under considerable strain. In wake of the violent clashes between the Chinese and Indian armies on 15–16 June 2020 in India's eastern Ladakh sector that caused casualties for the first time in nearly 45 years, India's shift from a dissuasive deterrence posture, to one of credible deterrence is gaining traction.

The foundation of conventional deterrence theory espoused by John Mearsheimer hypothesized that war is most likely to break out during a crisis when the aggressor firms up on belief and capability by means of which, he is sure to achieve rapid results in terms of a victory or decisive outcomes in its favor. In the chain of crises events, deterrence is most likely to fail if a potential attacker thinks that it is possible to win a quick and decisive victory.¹ Mearsheimer states that conventional deterrence is a subset of deterrence that seeks to prevent the outbreak of conflict during a crisis by maintaining the ability to deny an opponent its goals on the battlefield through the use of conventional forces.²

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¹ For an extensive discussion on conventional deterrence see John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, Chapter 2, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

² Conventional deterrence described by John J. Mearsheimer, p. 15.

The fluctuating strategic environment in Southern Asia is witnessing enhanced interactivity between politico-military-strategic and operational issues, by virtue of many projects. This includes, most prominently, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a part of China's grand project, the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), which seeks to consolidate the China-Pakistan strategic relationship.³ The BRI comprises of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Route, thereby aiming to connect Asia with Europe and Africa by means of a widespread infrastructure network along the routes of the ancient Silk Road. The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic) so as to link China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Route stretches from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean on one route, and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific on the other.

Conventional Deterrence and the Southern Asian Milieu

The CPEC project running through Pakistan in a linear fashion was launched in 2015 with the objective of linking northwestern China to southern Pakistan's Arabian Sea coastline through a network of roads, railways, and pipelines. Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform confirmed that construction of 650 km-long road linking the port city of Gwadar in Baluchistan to Sorab (a main town in the province). This road will link Gwadar with Quetta (the provincial capital of Baluchistan). The rest of the western route will link Gwadar with the Chinese city of Kashgar through Baluchistan and the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, covering a total distance of 2,517 km.⁴ Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform describes the CPEC as "a framework of regional connectivity... enhancement of geographical linkages having improved road, rail and air transportation system... a journey towards economic regionalization in the globalized world."⁵

As far as regional geo-strategic calculations are concerned, the CPEC has emerged as a vital lynchpin among the variables of deterrence that India will seemingly have to cater to, ranging from conventional deterrence in the Indo-China border areas, to campaign planning for developing flexible deterrent operations (including joint operational planning). India is facing the growing complexity and pressure as it strives to ensure continuing and survivable deterrence at varying levels. The presence of China and Pakistan is becoming progressively compelling in so far as planning and achieving deterrence at operational levels is concerned. All this comes in the midst of a looming question—in a potential conflict/war scenario between India and Pakistan, would China open up a second front, even if it were to be restricted to a limited zone? Recurring Chinese transgressions in the border areas in India's northeastern and western theatre could well be part of a plausible military strategy to keep both fronts tactically active and build up tactical pressure on the Indian Armed Forces—thereby placing the existing conventional deterrence equations in South Asia under considerable strain. Not surprisingly, India's shift from a dissuasive deterrence posture, to one of credible deterrence is gaining traction.

The spate of developments in India's western theatre with Pakistan and eastern theatre with China has added newer variables to the regional deterrence milieu. The deterrence relationship

³ For related references see, Daniel S. Markey and James West, "Behind China's Gambit in Pakistan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 12, 2016; also see, Daniel S. Markey and T.C.A. Raghavan, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," Discussion at Carnegie India, July 2, 2016, available at <http://carnegieindia.org/2016/07/02/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-event-5328>

⁴ As cited in a *Xinhua* news agency report, "Pakistan says works on key route of CPEC underway," October 9, 2015.

⁵ For more details see the CPEC Secretariat, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, Pak-Secretariat, Islamabad, Pakistan, available at <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>

between India and Pakistan has proven to be conventionally complex. In contrast, the deterrence relationship between China and India remains hard to be described in tangible terms at present and, therefore, far more difficult to evaluate in terms of stability/instability.⁶ Both China and India are aware that the other would be no “pushover” militarily and that clear deterrent signals (both conventional and nuclear) operate both ways.⁷ Amid the above two equations, the politico-military equation between Pakistan and China can best be described as strategically complimentary. In the cases of both, China and Pakistan, the role of the military in the affairs of the state remains vital. The authoritarian political-military partnership is found predominantly in communist states or countries with authoritarian political control. Power is concentrated in a single party, or in an individual, or group of people, who dominate the political system – as in China, where the People's Liberation Army (PLA) represents instruments of power, coercion and extraction, argues Ayesha Siddiqi.⁸ China's civil-military relations have rendered it a “political party-authoritarian military partnership” structure. In case of Pakistan, the military has assumed deep involvement in the politics of the state, at the cost of dominating all other institutions.⁹

With India, China shares a relationship of *constrained cooperation*.¹⁰ This description is significant while raising the question—will China play a pivotal role in preventing the total breakdown of status quo during any future military crises in the region? More so, since, China has a direct stake in the stability of deterrence in South Asia. The Chinese policy towards South Asia's deterrence today appears to be guided by its primary consideration—to “prevent South Asia from any possibility of conflict escalation.”¹¹ China has high stakes in ensuring that the India-Pakistan deterrence stays operational and potent, given, what appears that any debate on nuclear weapons' usage could draw/impact upon China's own stability. This was clearly visible in many Chinese commentaries that have emphasized the threat to stability of the entire region, of which, China too, is an integral part.¹² Since the outbreak of the Kargil conflict, China has increasingly been aware of the danger of a potential large-scale conflict that would deal a severe blow to China's strategic goal of maintaining a stable periphery.¹³

These interdependent variables render South Asian deterrence to be at a far more critical stage. A possible deterrence model for extended Southern Asia, keeping in mind all three primary players, i.e., India, Pakistan, and China, could be based on opacity on the ground. Propelling an informed debate is deterrence by generating credible and unidentifiable ambiguity about the expected response, which is deftly matched by a certain transparency of intentions and capability, as deterrence theory assumes. However, the triangular and unequal equation, respectively,

⁶ WPS Sidhu, “Operation Vijay and Operation Parakram: The Victory of Theory?” in E. Sridharan, ed., *The India-Pakistan Nuclear Relationship: Theories of Deterrence and International Relations*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007) p. 209.

⁷ K Sundarji, *Vision 2100: A Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, (New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2003) p. 81.

⁸ Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc. – Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, (London: Pluto Press, 2007) p. 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰ For more on the Indian and Chinese relationship being one of “constrained cooperation” see, Monika Chansoria, “India and China: Constrained Cooperation,” *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 6, no. 3, July-September 2011, pp. 327–336; also see, Monika Chansoria, “India-China Border Agreement: Much Ado about Nothing,” *Foreign Policy*, January 13, 2014.

¹¹ Zhang Guihong, “US Security Policy towards South Asia after September 11 and its implications for China: A Chinese Perspective,” *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2003, pp. 145–71.

¹² Shao Zongwei, “Call for Talks to End Fight,” *China Daily*, June 30, 1999, p. 1; also see, Jin Zeqing, “War Never Ends Disputes,” *China Daily*, June 5, 1999, p. 4.

¹³ The author's meeting and interaction in Shanghai in 2012 with Zhao Gancheng Director of South Asia Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Shanghai, China.

among China, Pakistan, and India, makes mutual understanding of their respective deterrence far more challenging.¹⁴

While deliberating upon the conceptual and operational aspects of India's national strategic doctrine, former Air Commodore, Jasjit Singh, maintained that India's future military capabilities would need to be situated in the strategic framework of an appropriate politico-military doctrine based on national aspirations—with the prevention of war, and removal of threat of war, becoming important constituents in the said framework. Thus, *deterrence* would have to be a central factor in the doctrine, while *détente* (at the ideal level) and *peaceful co-existence* (as the optimum framework) are pursued vigorously in a sustained way.¹⁵ Therefore, the primary strategic doctrine for India in the coming two decades (i.e., until 2025) would be *prevention of war*, whether that war is conventional or sub-conventional, regular or irregular, full-scale or limited. This requires adequate and credible deterrent capabilities—and, if deterrence fails, then to prosecute the war, conclude it, and disengage with maximum advantage to India's national interests at minimum costs, in the shortest possible time.¹⁶

Deterrence, therefore, has been the central pillar of India's defense strategy playing a major role in preventing war, as well as, in fighting a limited war, which could lead to success in the event of deterrence failure. While all components of military power are capable of providing deterrence through denial, the real challenge for defense strategy is the method of application of military power to achieve the desired levels of success militarily, and consequent political advantage. All along, the focus has to be keeping the war below a rationally credible scenario of nuclear weapons' use.¹⁷ China remains integral to the changing realities of the South Asian deterrence framework. Given China's centrality to the evolution and nature of the India-Pakistan deterrence relationship, the Southern Asian framework—consisting China, India and Pakistan will gradually replace the narrow South Asian (or India-Pakistan) framework of analysis, as the three states, are evolving a deterrence architecture that is three-sided.¹⁸

Historical Connect in South Asia's Territorial Disputes

Military strategists, classically, have at least three considerations in adopting a strategy for a war, or, military campaign. These include political objectives, opportunities, and constraints; conflict with the hostile forces; and the effect of physical features.¹⁹ A most-suited reference could be the limited war between India and Pakistan in Kargil in 1999. Among the many lessons that emerged from the Kargil war for India, the most significant one was that although the chances of a full-scale conventional war between India and Pakistan were bleak, however, as long as there are territorial disputes rooted in history—a continued proxy war (by Pakistan), or a limited border war (with China), cannot be ruled out entirely. The patrolling and other activities of the Chinese PLA on India's northern border during the Kargil war have been chronicled by General VP Malik, who was the Chief of India's Army Staff during the conflict. Malik narrates in *Kargil*:

¹⁴ For more details see Michael Quinlan, "How robust is India-Pakistan Deterrence," *Survival*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2000/01, p. 146.

¹⁵ Views articulated by Air Commodore Jasjit Singh (Retd) during many conversations with the author; for similar arguments see, Jasjit Singh, "Army 2020: Synchronizing Military Power with National Aspirations," in Vijay Oberoi, ed., *Army 2020: Shape, Size, Structure and General Doctrine for Emerging Challenges*, (New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2005).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sidhu, n. 6, pp. 305–06.

¹⁹ For more see, Archer Jones, *Elements of Military Strategy: An Historical Approach*, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996) p. 197.

From Surprise to Victory, how the Joint Intelligence Committee's (JIC) April 1999 review had predicted that the long-standing cooperation among China, North Korea, and Pakistan was likely to continue. Among the many tasks for the military, the immediate ones included maintaining alertness on the border with China.²⁰

Long-standing territorial and boundary disputes do not exist just between India and Pakistan, but also between China and India. Following the war with India in 1962, China negotiated and obtained a boundary settlement on the Karakoram with Pakistan. This settlement was finalized in March 1963, and with it, China obtained for itself, a new boundary. China secured the Shaksgam Valley and this pushed the Chinese territory further south towards Jammu & Kashmir. In hindsight, it would seem that the Chinese were willing to be involved in negotiating for territory²¹ as part of their larger South Asia strategy. In fact, the remarks of Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff, Gen Mirza Aslam Beg, on the impact of the Siachen conflict on Pakistan, point towards such complicity when he stated, "India had foiled Pakistan's attempts to have a common border with its ally China... (For which) Pakistan had in the past ceded territory in Karakoram to China, in order to realize this objective."²² The prominence of geopolitics in the policy chosen by a state, and the strategy it adopts to obtain those policy objectives, cannot be minimized. The actions of China and Pakistan in the Karakoram illustrate this precisely. The actions also depict how political exploitation of geographic realities for security demands skill, and a long-term perspective.²³ The CPEC, discussed in the subsequent section of this paper comes off as the latest variant of the long-standing China-Pakistan partnership and collusion.

During the Kargil conflict, the Chinese PLA had enhanced its level of activity and presence along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh and opposite Arunachal Pradesh—indicating a demonstrative posture. Reports in 1999 indicated deployment of additional PLA troops opposite Arunachal Pradesh, and major Chinese patrolling activities at Demchok in eastern Ladakh; Trig Heights in Ladakh; Pangong Tso (in Ladakh); and Chantze (in the West Kameng district of the north-eastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh). In his memoirs, Malik defines how the Indian army had, in fact, received intelligence reports that the PLA's director in the Department of Armament (handling the conventional weapons and equipment of the Chinese Army) visited Islamabad during the time of the Kargil conflict to help the Pakistan Army overcome its critical deficiencies in conventional armament, ammunition and equipment.²⁴

India traditionally adopted a strategy of conventional deterrence, based on strong offensive capability vis-à-vis Pakistan, and dissuasive deterrence vis-à-vis China—supported by limited out-of-area projection capability for the security of India's far flung island territories. India's long-term aim is to build capabilities and gain decisive competitive advantage in core areas of the spectrum of conflict.²⁵ Succinctly describing conventional deterrence, General K Sundarji, former Indian Army Chief (1986–1988) articulated that it consisted of two components: 1) a defensive posture that dissuades; and 2) a counter-offensive capability, which deters. A viable defensive posture, should, therefore, consist of strong defenses that are capable of extracting a high price before the aggressor achieves the almost inevitable penetration at points of its choice. A strong and credible conventional counter-offensive capability capable of inflicting heavy losses on the

²⁰ VP Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2006) p. 139.

²¹ Y.Y.I Vertzberger, *China's Southwestern Strategy: Encirclement and Counterencirclement* (New York: Praeger, 1985); also see, VR Raghavan, *Siachen: Conflict Without End*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 2002) pp. 24–25.

²² As cited in, "Keeping Pakistan Army out of Politics," *The Times of India*, September 18, 1989.

²³ Raghavan, n. 21, pp. 27–28.

²⁴ Malik, n. 20.

²⁵ Jasjit Singh, n. 15, pp. 108–113.

aggressor remains ideal. This threat of a riposte is likely to deter the aggressor from trying to change the status quo. Dissuasion alone, argue many, will not do without deterrence.²⁶ India's military strategy for 2020 should possess credible deterrence at the conventional level, given that conventional warfare places a premium on dispersion, mobility and the ability to regroup and disperse rapidly. While wars are likely to be of shorter duration, they will be intense with heavy casualty rates and attrition of men and material.²⁷

CPEC and BRI:

The Depth and Correlation of Geopolitics, Policy Objectives, and Strategy

According to the *Pakistan Economic Survey 2013-14*, "...gigantic collaboration extended by the Chinese government in construction of infrastructure projects like the China-Pak Economic Corridor and High Priority Early Harvest Projects will pave the way for multi-dimensional socio-economic and geo-political benefits to both the countries."²⁸ CPEC's framework enhancing geographical linkages with improved road, rail, and air transportation system²⁹ and frequent joint military exercises, such as well-advertised joint patrolling is likely to impact the operational military realities in the region substantially. The joint exercise undertaken by the frontier defense regiment of the PLA and Pakistan's border police along the stretch of the border connecting Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and Xinjiang in July 2016 remain of particular concern from an Indian standpoint.³⁰

The CPEC starts from Kashgar in China and subsequently passed through the 1,300 km-long Karakoram Highway (National Highway 35/N35), with 887 km falling in Pakistan and 413 km in China. Its endpoint is the Chinese-funded Gwadar Port (south of Baluchistan) in the Arabian Sea. China has invested in construction of breakwaters, dredging of berthing areas and channels, and overall infrastructure development of the Gwadar Port.

The Governments of Pakistan and China began construction of the Karakoram Highway comprising 85 bridges in early 1959. It was opened to the public two decades later in 1979, connecting the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China and Gilgit-Baltistan, across the Karakoram mountain range, through the Khunjerab Pass.³¹ In the midst, Pakistan established the Frontier Works Organization (FWO) in 1966 to construct the initially 805 km-long Karakoram Highway. Even after the completion of the Karakoram Highway, the organization was not disbanded. The new all-weather road, i.e., Karakoram Highway, connecting Rawalpindi/Islamabad with China's Xinjiang Province runs through what Pakistan calls the "Northern Areas."

²⁶ Sundarji, n. 7, p. 154; for related readings and references on deterrence and debate on changing of status quo, see, Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, "Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 185–199 and Keith L. Shimko, *International Relations: Perspectives, Controversies and Readings* (Fourth Edition) (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Publication, 2011), pp. 69–74.

²⁷ As articulated by former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (Eastern Command) Lt Gen KS Brar, and former Director General (Military Operations) Lt Gen VK Singh, cited in Oberoi, ed., n. 15, pp. 33, 68.

²⁸ Transport and Communications, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2013-14*, Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan, available at http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_14/13_Transport_and_coms.pdf p. 215

²⁹ Pakistan government's official information release on the CPEC available at <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>

³⁰ "Joint patrol along China-Pakistan border," *People's Daily Online*, July 21, 2016; also see, Monika Chansoria, "China not neutral on Kashmir, anymore," *The Sunday Guardian*, August 13, 2016.

³¹ Details of the Karakoram Highway, as stated by the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and National Heritage, Government of Pakistan.

According to Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation, the 805 km dual-carriage metaled road starts from Havelian 100 km from Islamabad and winds through Abbottabad–Mansehra–Thakot–Besham–Pattan–Sazin–Ghils–Gilgit–Hunza to the Chinese Frontier across the 4,733 meter high Khunjerab Pass.³²

In 2006, the Pakistan Highway Administration and China's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) agreed to widen the highway from 10 to 30 meters and upgrade it to make it accessible by motor vehicles during extreme weather conditions.³³ This was later confirmed in a January 2016 documentary that ran on China Network Television (CNTV)—a national web-based TV broadcaster. In the broadcast, Ye Chenyin, general manager, China Road and Bridge Corporation stated:

The Karakoram Highway is often seen as a symbol of the Sino-Pakistani friendship ... built in the 1960... with 24 main bridges, 70 small bridges, and more than 1,700 culverts... In 2008, the China Road and Bridge Corporation began KKH's extension... The Karakoram Highway line-change project was completed after five years of hardships...³⁴

The widening of the strategic roads by three times its initial specifications indicates that it is customized for rapid and smooth movement of heavy military machinery, troops, and material. The network of Pakistan's National Highway Authority (NHA) comprises 39 national highways, motorways, expressway, and strategic roads. Among all the ongoing projects of the NHA, priority is given to the re-alignment of the Karakoram Highway at Attabad.³⁵ Further, the completed projects also include the Raikot–Khunjerab section (335 km) of the Karakoram Highway. The *Pakistan Economic Survey 2013–14* listed “prioritized infrastructure projects” in collaboration with China, which included improvement/up-gradation of the Karakoram Highway (Phase-II) from Raikot to Islamabad (487 km) through credit financing.³⁶

In addition, the ongoing China-Pakistan Optical Fiber Cable (OFC) project is scheduled for completion in 2017. According to Pakistan's official information release, the CPEC Fiber Optic Project in Gilgit–Baltistan runs 466.584 km (making for 56.7 percent) of the total length 820 km between Khunjerab and Rawalpindi.³⁷ The OFC network provides a quantum jump in Chinese and Pakistani military capacities in order to connect ground-surveillance to their command-and-control. The OFC project allows for sharing information in a secure manner. The advantages of OFC include:

- 1) Tremendous capacity to carry digital data (including satellite imagery data)
- 2) OFC can be dug deep underground in the war zone area and, therefore, no amount of

³² More details on the Karakoram Highway, as per Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation, available at http://www.tourism.gov.pk/northern_areas.html

³³ For more details see, Vijay Sakhuja, “The Karakoram Corridor: China's Transportation Network in Pakistan,” *China Brief*, vol. 10, no. 20, October 8, 2010.

³⁴ CNTV report, “Karakoram Highway benefits Pakistan remote area,” cited in *Xinhua News*, January 18, 2016.

³⁵ For more on the Karakoram Highway see, “China-Pak relations: Sweeter than honey?” *The Pioneer*, March 29, 2014; also see, Peerzada Ashiq, “China has established its presence across PoK,” *The Hindu*, September 3, 2015.

³⁶ As per Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms; also see, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2013-14* on Transport and Communications, Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan, available at http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_14/13_Transport_and_coms.pdf pp. 196–99.

³⁷ For more on Pakistan government's official information release on the CPEC, see, <http://cpec.gov.pk/map-single/3>

artillery shelling can interrupt/disrupt the smooth flow of information

- 3) Since OFC does not emit any electronic signals, it's not likely to be prone to any jamming or electro-magnetic interference; and
- 4) End-to-end connectivity provides multiple options to connect large number of surveillance, display, steep-up, and transmitting/receiving devices.

Additionally, it is known that all Chinese PLA Air Force units present in the Tibet Autonomous Region are connected by satellite communication and that fiber optic communication is being steadily extended towards military installations along the Indian borders, with military regions being inter-connected through secure communications. This in turn ensures enhanced real-time command and control.³⁸ On the eastern front, India's strategic situation remain grave with China's increasing military presence and capabilities in Tibet that adjoin the eastern sector of India's borders. Moreover, projects funded by China in the Gilgit–Baltistan region, which include construction of dams, bridges, roads (including the construction, maintenance and expansion of the Karakoram Highway, with military specifications), along with an estimated 7,000–11,000 soldiers of the Chinese PLA Construction Corps reportedly deployed in the Gilgit–Baltistan region of Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir, make a “two-front war” scenario for India not unimaginable. The Chinese foothold in the Gilgit–Baltistan region provides a credible backdrop for China to ensure Pakistan's security—given its critical stakes inside Pakistan's territory.

India has officially raised objections to a specific section of the CPEC since China's growing connectivity with Pakistan is being linked through the illegally occupied territory of the Indian State of Jammu & Kashmir. This objection by India has been placed on record in the 2008-09 Annual Report (declassified) of the Ministry of Defence (submitted in the Upper House of the Parliament, *Rajya Sabha*) and states, “... enhancing connectivity with Pakistan through the territory of Jammu & Kashmir, illegally occupied by China and Pakistan will have direct military implications for India.” Further, commenting on the China-Pakistan relationship, India's Ministry of Defence stated the following on record:

China's stated objectives, in [the] White Paper, of developing strategic missile and space-based assets and of rapidly enhancing its blue-water navy to conduct operations in distant waters, as well as the systematic upgrading of infrastructure, reconnaissance and surveillance, quick response and operational capabilities in the border areas, will have an effect on the overall military environment in the neighborhood of India... [China's] military assistance and cooperation with Pakistan and other countries in our neighborhood, as well as the possibility of enhancing connectivity with Pakistan through the territory of Jammu & Kashmir, illegally occupied by China and Pakistan and with other countries will also have direct military implications for India. India will engage China to seek greater transparency and openness in its defense policy and posture, while taking all necessary measures to protect the national security, territorial integrity and sovereignty of India.³⁹

Infrastructure build-up facilitates the rapid deployment of integrated forces and the concentration of field formations in comparatively shorter time-frames and, consequently, over shorter warning periods. The overall conventional operational capability of the Chinese and Pakistan army will directly impact conventional deterrence in the strategic context amid the emerging spectrum of conflict, which is becoming far more asymmetric and which, requires

³⁸ Monika Chansoria, “China's Infrastructure Development in Tibet: Evaluating Trendlines,” *Manekshaw Paper*, no. 32, 2011, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi, p. 31.

³⁹ Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *Annual Report 2008-09*, p. 6.

a range of capabilities. By deciding to construct major civil, energy and military infrastructure projects in the CPEC, which runs through Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, India's strategic-security context faces the collusive presence and challenge of China and Pakistan. The environment is edging past the existing deterrence setting, especially under the nuclear shadow.

Conclusion

Given the latest upgrades to the CPEC and developments in the wake of its expansion, the possibility of China securing its investments and trade routes constructed in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir has increased. Growing Chinese stakes by virtue of heavy economic investments and presence of Chinese personnel (civilian workers, paramilitary and Construction Corps of the PLA) makes Beijing as a vital player in the conventional deterrence situation in South Asia. The latter might not remain virtuously "neutral" in the quintessential sense, both diplomatically, and militarily, in the event of a limited or protracted India-Pakistan conflict in the near or, distant future.

South Asia's conventional military balance needs to be viewed from a prism that highlights the collusive nature of China's security partnership with Pakistan and its impending military portends. The CPEC has played a vital role in strengthening the strategic alliance between Pakistan and China, not merely in economic terms, but more so, in military terms, thereby placing pressure on the existential conventional deterrence status in South Asia. The spectrum of threat in South Asia is becoming far more complicating and challenging for India—especially when it comes to maintaining a balance of power owing substantially to the China-Pakistan equation today.