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# *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*

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## *Russian, Chinese and US involvement in South Asia*

### Introduction

Although the South Asian region is halfway around the globe from the Western world, the ongoing violent conflicts, the rising potential of a nuclear confrontation in the region, growing radicalization among the youth and the presence of terrorist groups, must be addressed on an international scale since the events that take place there, inevitably impose a danger and affect the stability of the rest of the world. A successful approach for accomplishing such regional equilibrium needs to consist of constant and rigorous attention, conscious diplomacy, promotion of adequate educational programs, investment of substantial resources and more importantly, a realistic standpoint.

South Asia remains one of the most polarized regions in the world. The juncture of its various complexities exacerbate the differences between people who inhabit the region, even further. For example, the two nuclear powers India and Pakistan that both claim Jammu & Kashmir in its entirety have a history of eternal conflict, reoccurring wars, and ceaseless cross-border exchanges of fire.

The war in Afghanistan has left the country in a state of ferocious turmoil, resulting in a destabilized economy and a plague of military and civilian casualties. Such environment inevitably facilitates the incubation of expanding radicalization resulting in the birth of new terrorist actors.

This paper evaluates the development of Pakistan, Afghanistan and India, while simultaneously examining the influence of three powers at the global chessboard - US, China and Russia, and assesses the strengths and weaknesses of their interference in South Asia. While concluding that these countries are first and foremost serving their own interests, this

paper would like to address the question of which players can be considered the good, the bad and the ugly in this geostrategic milieu; who actually undertakes initiatives to improve the situation, who simply takes advantage and who exploits the political asymmetry.

### Regional Challenges

Pakistan imposes indeed some of the most intricate and severe challenges concerning foreign diplomacy. Its political inconsistency and unpredictability, powerful Army, extremist and radicalized inclinations, socio-economic weaknesses, and evident antagonism towards India have rendered its own claims of being a vibrant Democratic Islamic Republic, impotent. Furthermore, the country keeps providing safe havens to Islamist terrorists as a base for managing armed attacks in Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir and Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, in addition, obtains the position of a crossroad between overlapping geopolitical, strategic and socio-economic matters concerning Russia, India and China, while the outside US power further attempts to determine the main agenda. The country desperately requires a coordinated course of action, which compels the objective of its long-term stability, through political rapprochement, steady integration and encouragement of its regional criminal justice bodies, and economic rehabilitation built on the incorporation of regional units responsible for energy, transport and trade networks. Nevertheless, insofar as Russia, India and China share a mutual interest in defeating the Taliban, the three countries do not entirely counteract the still ongoing presence of American military and NATO troops in Afghanistan. Washington is not ready to withdraw its military personnel since besides its security concerns, this would additionally undercut its arms trade.

In contrast to the harsh US attitude, China and Russia are more likely to demonstrate susceptibility towards strategic defense cooperation in pursuing a genuine peaceful solution in the highly destabilized and war-torn Afghanistan. For example, the mutual desire to cease the unending Afghan issue and the shared willingness to establish informal diplomatic ties with the Taliban, altogether with the common mistrust towards the US, has brought Russia and Pakistan closer. These mutual interests have brought Islamabad and Moscow so close together that the two countries seem to have put aside their past of strained ties forged

during the Cold War. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2017, the two countries' Defence Ministers - Khawaja Asif and Sergei Shoigu held a meeting at the VI Moscow Conference on International Security in Moscow, where Pakistan declared its belief in Russia's vital role in promoting security strategies in destabilized Afghanistan.

*"The world is not getting calmer and stable, and in these conditions, we are again and again saying that fighting international terrorism requires the consolidation of all interested forces", - Sergei Shoigu, the Head of the Russian Defence Ministry.*

His Pakistani counterpart further underlined the significance of strengthening, the otherwise historically contaminated relationship.

The insistence on trilateral cooperation between Pakistan, Afghanistan and China appears more pressing than ever. However, such views are being maintained mostly on paper and through discourse, rather than in reality, where the trilateral fate of such collaboration does not look very promising. Especially because the powerful Pakistani military is inclined to patronize the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan in order to safeguard its own institutional interests.

### [Afghan-Pak Relations](#)

Despite the fact that Afghanistan and Pakistan have a lot in common – the two countries share a border - and their nations have practiced common cultural and religious customs, their historical and geopolitical relations have never been warmhearted. On the contrary, their relationship has been marked with many episodes of violence and hostility. One of the most vivid examples is the dispute over Pushtoonistan, native people of which, the Pashtuns, are politically separated by the Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since Pakistan's birth in 1947, Kabul has been disagreeing with Islamabad as no political formation in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, is willing to acknowledge the Durand Line as the legitimate frontier with Pakistan. Thus, any long-term process of rapprochement between Islamabad and Kabul must include diplomacy about the future of the Durand Line. Pakistan has also a record of aiding proxy wars in Afghanistan, which has deepened the distrust among

the common people of Afghanistan regarding their eastern neighbor. Afghan Jihad might seem as an exception and an example to trilateral cooperation, but rather than having state level relations, Pakistan and China acted jointly with Afghanistan's non-State actors, respectively the Mujahideen and subsequently the Taliban.

Overall, Afghan forces still preserve their multi-ethnic character, with often Pushtun officers commanding non-Pushtun officers. The Afghans would like India to operate with these forces and make them stronger, since they are aware that Pakistan cannot compete with India in this regard, besides the fact that the Afghans do not trust the Pakistani Army. In the post-Taliban period, India has played a crucial role in the rehabilitation and improvement of Afghanistan by offering assistance programs equivalent to \$2 billion, concentrating mainly on development of the infrastructural and social mechanisms, such as enhancing the capacity of the government and improving the fields of health and education. In contrast, Pakistan, itself being reliant on such programs, has not been in a position of ensuring any substantive support to Afghanistan. Islamabad has been very cautious of New Delhi's active role, as it wishes that India has only limited ties with the country, since they might counteract its own strategic plans and interests, especially the interests of the Pakistani Army.

What Afghanistan actually wants in return from Pakistan is not that the country meets India's levels of support, but to cease sheltering and assisting the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network and other terrorist groups. The President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, on multiple occasions has urged Pakistan to end its warfare and adopt measures in order to restrict and discourage the actions of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network on their soil. Islamabad must also tolerate that Kabul has the sovereign right to create alliances with other countries, since New Delhi is an equal player in Afghanistan due to its development contributions and protection. Pakistan oftentimes argues that both India and Afghanistan embrace the separatist movement of the Baloch people. This further deteriorates the situation, as Islamabad, despite having no substantial evidence, keeps accusing India of clandestine involvement in the conflict. There is growing realization among international observers that Pakistan should acknowledge that constructing foreign policies on covert proxy wars, merely intensifies distrust and has repercussions on the peace and stability of the region. Rather, it

must seek reconciliation through tackling problems, reaching a consensus and enhancing mutual sense of trust.

### China's Role in South Asia

The interest of China in promoting a triangular alliance has increased because of various reasons, such as the withdrawal of the majority of American troops from Afghanistan and the establishment of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC, part of the One Belt, One Road initiative. Afghanistan seems also to be interested in bringing China closer to itself, since the latter has a profound impact over Islamabad and Kabul well recognizes the significance of Beijing's supremacy over Pakistan and its Army.

Undeniably, sustained attempts must be made in order to move forward on Afghanistan's peace process and advance its defense and security strategies. However, the issue of major concern is achieving consensus on who would have power over Afghanistan and what would be the essential features of its foreign policy. A scenario where the country is entirely run by the Taliban does not fit with the desired political terrain of Afghanistan and its actual circumstances. In recent years, the Taliban has not been able to establish control over a single provincial capital, let alone appropriating a whole province, with the exception of Kunduz, which has been in their hands periodically and eventually after only two weeks of Taliban rule, was recaptured by the Afghan forces. Nevertheless, such arguments should not deceive the public that the Afghan Government has the whip hand in its battle with the Taliban. On the contrary, it demonstrate the polarization of Afghanistan's political situation.

*"The government gives us some ammo, but we are using our own weapons and defending ourselves, our people, our village, our life. We can't rely on anyone else", - local Afghan Forces commander Jawid Kundozi, after he summoned hundreds of civilian fighters to establish their own front line after the Taliban attempted to seize the Qala-e-Zal district and launched a violent offensive in order to lay hold of Khan Abad.*

China also has no interest in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, since there is still a covert connection between the Taliban and the ethnic Uyghur Muslim militants, and such ties always come to surface. In recent years, alleged links between the Uyghur and jihadist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda have also imposed challenges towards China's counter-terrorism strategy.



*Pakistan keeps reassuring Beijing, which is de facto the guarantor of Pakistan's security, that the fallout of the Panamagate scandal on Pakistan's political system, will not jeopardize and delay Chinese investments, in particular the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, in Pakistan. [Picture credits ANI News](#)*

#### The Panama Leaks fallout

on Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has imposed a challenge over the construction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Although the two countries have agreed to move the CPEC project forward, regardless of the Panama-gate issue, the Chinese leadership's instruction was that the Pakistani Army-driven Joint Investigation Team (JIT) needs to guarantee that the CPEC remains the country's main priority, while Beijing and Islamabad improve and strengthen their defense and security mechanisms. The fact that both China and the Pakistani Army are trying to ensure that the construction of CPEC does not face any disruption makes it clear that Chinese strategic interests and the Pakistani Army's military interests are more important than the hard-earned money of Pakistani tax-payers. It is evident how after being dependent on the United States, the Pakistani Army has again found a buyer to sell its country's sovereignty and conceal its failures. The cover-up of this scam, orchestrated by China and the Pakistan military establishment in order to safeguard the construction of the CPEC is no less than a crime to camouflage many other crimes. For example, the corridor passes through the region of Gilgit Baltistan (part of the disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir), which besides being in contravention of international law, has also resulted in exploitation of local resources of Gilgit Baltistan and its indigenous people

and an increase in human rights violations in Gilgit Baltistan against those local voices which oppose the construction of this corridor and exploitation of their resources.

The construction of the corridor is of crucial importance for the Chinese since it is their only gateway to the Arabian Sea. If Nawaz Sharif's government would be sent home due to the Panamagate issue, it would create a political vacuum in Pakistan, which does not play in Beijing's advantage, while it has already pledged to invest 60 billion dollars into this infrastructural venture. Most likely, the Pakistani Army would like to keep the pressure on Nawaz Sharif by letting the courts investigate and perhaps even allow it to come up with a harsh judgment. The officers of the Pakistani Army are much more content in (de facto) ruling the country while having a weak Prime Minister in Nawaz Sharif or someone else from his party, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to continue if Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is disqualified, than having a military President, who has to deal with legitimacy issues. Nevertheless, voices in Pakistan itself believe that the Pakistani State should focus more on rooting out corruption and terrorism instead of selling its country and parts of Jammu & Kashmir (i.e. the disputed area of Gilgit Baltistan) under the rubric of infrastructural development.

### Russian Geopolitical Interests

Another pressing issue in the region is the emerging Russo-Pakistani ties, which have undeniably made not only India apprehensive, a very close military ally of Russia, but also the US. Despite the fact that Moscow and New Delhi are currently trying to deepen bilateral defense ties in the coming years and take economic relations to a new level, Russia's relationship with India's major adversary in the region may prove to create friction between the long-term allies.

*"Russia can sell guns to Pakistan, but in return has to be ready that the 'business as usual' principle will stop working,"* - Indian Vice Admiral (Retired) Anup Singh.

At a recent meeting held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2017, between the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in St. Petersburg, the Russian Head of

Government ensured New Delhi that Moscow is not planning to sever its stable cooperation with India at the expense of Islamabad. When questioned about the conflict in Jammu & Kashmir, the Russian president said that he was not in a position to decide whether Pakistan fuels terrorism in the Indian-administered part of the region, yet he assured Prime Minister Modi that Moscow will always support New Delhi in its fight against terrorism, irrespective of which country is involved.

For an external observer, Moscow's maneuvers in the region might appear as detached strategical actions – the Russian government's public statements hinder any comprehensive action plan in South Asia. What appears as a sound explanation for such a matter of circumstances is the fact that Moscow could be motivated by external reasons, which are not directly orientated towards the South Asian countries. Such reasons could arise from Russia's current relations with the Western world, aspirations for a piece of the global power cake, its interests in Central Asia and the Middle East, and commitments to China. In that sense, partnerships Russia aims to establish with India and Pakistan and the support it tries to provide to Afghanistan becomes contingent on its external concerns and a reflection of short-term goals.

A successful cooperation with both New Delhi and Islamabad is feasible solely when Moscow comprehends and generates South Asia-oriented policies, safeguards its ties from third countries' interference, and avoids U-turns or any sort of inconsistency and contradiction in its regional strategic actions.

### [US Intervention in Afghanistan](#)

Meanwhile, US foreign policy further perplexes the situation and divides the region. The post 9/11 American-led NATO occupation in Afghanistan obtained a morally weak pedestal, which was not necessarily in accordance with the genuine aspirations of the Afghan people. Despite the involvement of Russia, Pakistan and China in Afghanistan, the US remains the largest stakeholder and leader of the initiative. The US needs to acknowledge that the war there is well in its 16<sup>th</sup> year with barely no prospects for a conceivable solution or certainty for a better future for this unfortunate country.



With ISIS virtually contaminating Afghanistan and its adjoining provinces with Pakistan, the regional and neighboring States, such as Russia and China openly evaluate the magnitude of the imminent danger of terrorism infiltrating their territories in a short time span, given the vulnerabilities of the Afghan political system. In order to further its interests and counteract both Russia and China, the US is suspected of using ISIS as a proxy in the region in order to exploit the Russian and Chinese weaknesses in Chechnya and Xinjiang.

As Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's former Ambassador to Washington illustrates the misbegotten love affair between Pakistan and the US:

*“The relationship between America and Pakistan is based on mutual incomprehension and always has been. Pakistan—to American eyes—has gone from being a quirky irrelevance, to a stabilizing friend, to an essential military ally, to a seedbed of terror. America—to Pakistani eyes—has been a guarantee of security, a coldly distant scold, an enthusiastic military enabler, and is now a threat to national security and a source of humiliation. The countries are not merely at odds. Each believes it can play the other—with sometimes absurd, sometimes tragic, results”.*

### Conclusion

Despite the numerous years of comparative marginalization and neglect, the South Asian subcontinent begins to strengthen its position at the stage of international affairs. All major powers, including the United States, China and Russia, are increasing their involvement in the region. An economically competitive, politically reliable and internationally integrated subcontinent would be able to claim back its lost power in promoting stability and balancing out the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. The South Asian region is at a crossroad in the rising Asian continent, which highlights its geopolitical importance.

The present framework portrays how Chinese strategic interests under the pretext of development projects are not advantageous for both India and US, and they are collectively articulating their objection. On one side the distribution of power is in the hands of growing

Indo-US strategic partnership, and on the other, China-Russia-Pakistan are trying to balance out the India-US odds in this South Asian geopolitical chess game. Where once the situation in Afghanistan was good - it was a functioning, prosperous sovereign State-, with the interference of the Soviets and the Americans it turned bad, and eventually the involvement of the Pakistani Army, the Taliban and other terrorist organizations patronized by the said Army transformed it into an ugly spectacle. What must not be forgotten is that multilateral relationships are fundamentally established on mutual interests, rather than based on unilateral strategic and economic advantages: the convergence or divergence of shared gains determines the character of State-to-State relations.

When the bad and ugly players are attempting to put in order without acknowledging that they have, in the first place, created this chaos, it is evident that their long-term objectives are selfish, and once again, not for the welfare of Afghanistan.



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