

## **The New Great Game in Central Asia: Pakistan's Interests in the Regional Power Play**

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The New Great Game is a power struggle for dominance and geopolitical supremacy in Central Asia, to control energy reserves, establish monopoly over supply routes and capture lucrative high-stakes energy projects. The huge energy reserves of Central Asia have paradoxically become a bone of contention, fostering an uncooperative environment, fuelling political differences, and exacerbating high-stakes power politics, thereby jeopardizing the collaborative relationships among the regional and global stakeholders. The primary objective of this research article is to undertake a comprehensive comparative analysis of the competing interests of Pakistan alongside with those of regional players including China, Russia, and India through examining the intricacies of convergence and divergence of their engagement in the region. The theoretical framework of Geopolitics provides a nuanced lens to contextualize regional dynamics, explain and analyse the patterns of cooperation and competition of different players in Central Asia. The paper argues that Pakistan's interests in Central Asia can be best served by harmonizing its policy with China and Russia, and forming cooperative partnerships with Iran and Turkey. This research paper will equip Pakistan's policymakers and diplomats with a deeper understanding of the competing interests enabling informed decision-making to achieve strategic and political objectives.

**Keywords:** New great game, geopolitics, energy, Pakistan, Russia, China, India.

The term "New Great Game" is a concept presented by Pakistani writer Ahmed Rashid in the 1990s. It is a power struggle for controlling energy resources in Central Asia (Rashid, 2009). Historically speaking, the term "Great Game" was adopted by Arthur Connally in 1834 (Connally, 1934) and referred to the 19<sup>th</sup> century struggle between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire for the control of Central Asia and Afghanistan (Abbas, 2012). Central Asia holds a huge amount of natural resources including oil, gas, gold and copper. According to estimates, the region possesses 31.246 billion barrels of oil reserves, 265 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, 38,704 million short tons of Coal, 928 thousand tons of Uranium, and 460 billion kilowatts of Hydropower capacity per year (Asian Development Bank, 2010). It is estimated that under the Caspian Sea lay the world's largest undeveloped fossil fuel reserves. These resources have attracted the interests of western as well as regional powers. There is a hard contest among extra-regional and regional players for access to these gas and oil resources (Edwards, 2003).

Energy security is the most important element of survival at present. The reward in this power politics is not just access to the vast amount of gas and oil deposits, but also monopoly over the energy supply routes, financial gains from oil and gas pipelines, and oil consortiums. Every country needs a smooth and cheap energy supply, not subject to any interruption. Considering the depletion of energy resources in the Middle East and North Sea region, Central Asian energy resources have emerged as a viable alternative. It has compelled both regional and extra-regional powers to give attention

to Central Asian energy resources. Basically, the New Great Game started for getting maximum benefits from the energy resources of Central Asia after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991.

The region's geo-strategic significance and energy resources have attracted regional and global powers to engage actively, increase their influence, and control the energy resources for their strategic advantages. The interests of these powers in Central Asia are influenced by its energy resources and the strategic location as a channel of crossroads for major economic corridors linking the East, West, North, and South. Thus it gave birth to geopolitics in the region. Their interests in this region are reflected in what Halford Mackinder observed many years ago. He asserted, he who rules the heartland, rules Asia. He who rules Asia, rules the world (Chowdhury & Abdullah, 2015). It is a very important region having abundant natural resources and significant strategic location, and maximum command and control on it will provide the main players with maximum economic benefits and strategic strength (Khan, 2022).

This article aims at to delve into a comprehensive comparative study of Pakistan's interests alongside those of Russia, China, and India-four crucial regional stakeholders. This research article discusses the complexities of their interests, recognizing areas of convergence and divergence, within the context of Central Asia. This article strives to contribute meaningfully to the debate on the New Great Game highlighting the complex web of interplay between the interests of Pakistan with other competing stakeholders in the region. This region has recently emerged as a geopolitical hotspot, where these countries are actively engaged in vying for their influence and strategic goals. This article will apprise the Pakistan's policy makers and diplomats with comprehensive understanding of the competing interest to take informed decisions about achieving their strategic and political goals. This article also highlights the potential of cooperation with friendly countries to align their objectives for gaining regional stability. Moreover, this article will also provide nuanced understanding of the potential risks of competition, enabling relevant stakeholders to make informed decisions about investments, partnerships, and strategic engagements.

### **Geopolitics: Theoretical underpinning**

Geopolitics is an interdisciplinary approach that posits the multifaceted relationships between politics, geography and international relations. Rudolf Kjellén, coined the term "geopolitics" and defined it as the "science of states as life forms, based on demographic, economic, political, social and geographical factors" (Scholvin, 2016). This theoretical framework seeks to understand how states interact with each other in certain geographical entity, influence each other behaviour in the pursuit of power or interests (Kaplan, 2009). This framework is rooted in the realist understanding where states try to maximize their power and self-interest in the anarchic global order (Anuchin, 2019). The classic geopolitics approach highlights the importance of geographical features where states and other actors compete for control over territory, resources, strategic locations and routes. On the other hand, the critical geopolitics approach criticise the traditional approach and instead focuses on non-state actors and their role in shaping the global politics (Fettweis, 2015).

The theoretical paradigm of Geopolitics helps to understand, explain and evaluate the intricacies of the New Great Game in Central Asia by taking into account crucial elements such as historical background, geographical importance, energy resources, security of the region, and the influence of external players. Additionally, it enables to predict their policy behaviour through geographical variables in the power politics play currently on-going in Central Asia.

At present, the term 'New Great Game' is applied to characterise contemporary geopolitics in Central Asia, referring to the rivalry of different regional and extra-regional players in the region for greater influence, control, hegemony, domination, and revenues. This Game is far more complicated, confusing, and serious than its precursor of the nineteenth century. Ahmed Rashid says that the crux of the Game is centered on Moscow's efforts to maintain control over CARs and regulate the movement of the Caspian Sea's region's energy resources via multiple Moscow-operated pipelines (Rashid, 2009). At the same time, the US attempts to prevent Moscow's dominant influence and control over the region. Likewise, other regional countries are working to establish ties with CARs to import energy resources and become the preferred path for energy pipelines connecting the East, South, and West.

Recently the US has intensified its focus on China. The scope of the geopolitical tension is far greater. Tensions between the US and China extend into economic, scientific, and military domains, as both countries compete for influence in critical areas such as the Indo-Pacific and Africa. China is establishing economic partnerships via programs such as

BRI, SCO and the BRICS coalition. Simultaneously, the United States has forged several bilateral economic and defence deals with nations around Europe and the Indo-Pacific while also spearheading alliances such as NATO and the Quad. There is a rising China-Russia alliance, supported by North Korea and Iran. The economic aspect of US-China rivalries is pivotal to the New Great Game, as both countries compete for technical superiority, international trade hegemony, and control over global financial institutions.

### **Method**

The data for this research paper was collected through qualitative and descriptive approach. The purpose of this paper is to understand Pakistan's interests alongside with those of regional players including China, Russia, and India through examining the intricacies of convergence and divergence of their engagement in the region. This research qualitative methodology is supported by interpretive epistemology. The literature comprises of collecting and confronting a variety of government and organization reports, articles, historical records, books, and policy papers. A thematic analysis approach was adopted for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a broad term that explains a common data analytic process for qualitative or interpretive research. This research study thematic analysis includes: reviewing the data collected from various sources, assigning meaning (coding), classifying data into basic themes, searching for developing patterns, assessing the applicability of findings to the questions posed in the study, and ultimately writing up the findings and interpretations.

### **New Great Game and Competing Interests of Major Players**

As Hilary Clinton once declared, “the future of global politics will be decided in Central Asia, not in Iraq or Afghanistan, and the United States will be right at the centre of the action” (Rahim, 2017). All the actors who are engaged in the New Great Game have different types of interests. Russia seeks to increase the European gas dependence over its resources, while the United States tries to diversify the European energy supply and keep it away from Moscow's control. The United States' objective of containment of China and Russia in Central Asia has intensified the New Great Game. The US intends to prevent regionalism to stop regional hegemony and attain its foreign policy objectives more easily. America is specifically interested in using CARs and the Caspian region's untapped energy resources. The Baku, Tbilisi, and Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is an attempt to counterbalance the influence of Russia, China and Iran (Khan, Hussian & Rehman, 2017). Broadly speaking, the United States has three key strategic objectives in Central Asia. Its first objective is that CARs sovereignty and independence must be protected. The second objective is that they should share their gas and oil with each other. Washington's third objective is to counter Beijing's and Moscow's increasing influence in Central Asia.

The United States has signed several agreements with CARs to effectively maintain its influence in the region. The US also intends to help the CARs boost their oil and gas industries and ensure economic development while attempting to keep them out of Moscow's circle of influence (Oliker & Shlapa, 2005). It also proactively encourages and supports its firms engaged in oil and gas production and pipeline projects to export Central Asian oil and gas to Western countries. The US strategic objectives in the region and the presence of its military bases like Manas (Kyrgyzstan) and Karshi-Khanabad (Uzbekistan) (Adnan & Fatima, 2015) have also affected CARs relations with Russia and China.

China is another potential stakeholder in Central Asia and an important player in the New Great Game. Today, China and Central Asia have a 3,300 km long common boundary and share cultural ties. China is one of the principal trade partners of CARs. CARs expect that China can offer them easy access to the Asian-Pacific markets. Stable politics and advanced transportation facilities in China have inspired CARs to establish strong trade ties with China. Beijing's basic policy objectives towards Central Asia are FRI, constructing transportation routes, ensuring its energy supply, increasing trade, and stabilizing Central Asia. Beijing has constructed many pipelines to import oil and gas from the Central Asian countries.

One of the main problems for foreign investors in CARs is the sustainable transportation of energy resources to the international markets. The fact is that today's real “game” is the infrastructure development and the capability of the actors to get as smoothly linked as possible throughout the regions. The monopoly of Moscow on infrastructure and transportation routes of Central Asia and Transcaucasia during the Soviet era is gradually eroding. CARs struggle for

southern outlets is supported by the international community, resulting in more market access and bypassing of Russia. For instance, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the second Eurasian land bridge, the trans-Caspian pipeline, the Panj River bridges joining Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and many other projects are being planned in the region.

### **Post-US Withdrawal Scenario of New Great Game**

After the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the recapture of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021, some basic dynamics of the New Great Game have been changed due to the regional countries' changing priorities and policy options. The matter of handling Afghanistan under the Taliban is on the one hand a source of tensions between regional countries and on the other, this has further intensified the existing geopolitical rivalry between the US, Russia and China (Khan, Dawar, & Khan, 2023). Pakistan favours engagement with the Taliban to get access to Central Asia, tackle the issue of TTP, maximize its policy options vis-à-vis India in regional affairs, and “minimize Indian role in Afghanistan to stop its backing of separatist movements in Pakistan” (Fair, 2014); China is concerned about the potential spread of terrorism to the nearby Xinjiang Region; Russia is concerned about potential destabilisation of its Central Asian partners, ISKP, IMU and also has serious “concerns about the Chechen rebels” (Lewis, 2020); Iran is worried about the security of Shia community in the Afghanistan; and India, which had vigorously backed the previous democratic Afghan government, views the Taliban's seizure of power as a loss of its investment and influence in Afghanistan.

Most importantly, in the post-withdrawal era, ISKP presence in Afghanistan is a real and common security threat to all regional countries that compelled even past rivals to work together. For example, relations between Iran and the Taliban have transformed dramatically, started cooperation to eliminate ISKP since mid-2010s (Dreazen, 2016). After the Taliban takeover, Iran provided humanitarian aid, entered into a formal agreement to improve cross-border trade, provided 100 megawatts of electricity, and aligned its Afghan strategy with the other parties involved. In late October 2021, Tehran hosted a meeting of foreign ministers from neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, including China, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Masahiro, 2022). In the 1990s, Iran and Taliban relations were primarily hostile due to the killing of thousands of Taliban fighters by Shia and Northern alliance forces and then the revengeful persecution of the Shia Hazara minority in Afghanistan. Even Iran's assistance to the Northern Alliance was more than what Pakistan had provided the Taliban. Additionally, in 1998, Iran responded to the murders of its diplomats and a journalist in Afghanistan by threatening war against the Taliban by mobilising its troops near to the Afghan border. Now, after the US withdrawal, the neighbouring countries have established contacts with the Taliban due to their own security problems. However, this may not be the only factor influencing their policy decisions.

There is also another critical geostrategic issue in the post-US withdrawal period. If the Taliban fails to fulfil their promise to stop terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda or ISKP operations from their country and the latter get enabled to launch an attack on the US, then the government of the US will probably counter the threat through an ‘over the horizon’ method. Drone operations are potential, but now, the US lacks facilities in Afghanistan or in any neighbouring country for their deployment. While it is possible to control drones from US bases located in the Gulf nations, the geographical distance would make its operations ineffective. In such a situation, the US would strive to borrow airbases in Central Asia. On one hand, such a move will be strongly opposed by Russia as well as China and on the other hand, it will lead to serious rivalries between the airbase lender country and the Afghan Taliban.

### **Pakistan's Interests Vis-à-Vis Other Key Players**

Central Asia is very important for Pakistan for several reasons, including the plentiful natural energy reservoirs and other types of mineral resources, geographic location, landlocked nature, and sharing borders with China and Russia. All the actors who are engaged in Central Asia have different types of interests. Mostly, the economic interests of the countries involved in Central Asia are almost the same, but the political and strategic interests of different countries are different from each other. Being located at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, Pakistan is well positioned to serve as a route connecting different regions and offering easy access of landlocked Central Asia to the sea. From the beginning, Pakistan is attempting to have a preferred land route to Central Asia. For this purpose, Pakistan has prioritised the region in its foreign policy since 1991 and still working hard to bring CARs into its sphere of influence and connectivity.

Connectivity is one of the most important elements in the New Great Game. Regarding connectivity and provision of CARs access to the international market via Pakistani territory, Islamabad is facing tough competition with Russia and Iran as they enjoy many advantages despite the closeness of Pakistani ports to Central Asia. Pakistan is lacking the necessary infrastructure to persuade CARs. However, the Gwadar Port and the planned road and railway networks connecting CARs to the Arabian Sea and the People's Republic of China through the Karakoram Highway bless Pakistan with potential opportunities to provide an outlet for the region.

### **Pakistan's Interests vis-à-vis China**

China has many goals to achieve from its engagement in Central Asia, including the enhancement of trade relations, which is currently 28 billion dollars, FDI, construction of pipelines to import oil and gas, control drugs trafficking, ensure border safety and control the spread of extremism, terrorism, and separatism. China is following the five principles of peaceful coexistence in Central Asia while pursuing its interests in the region. Conversely, Islamabad's objectives are the same as those of the Chinese. Therefore, wide cooperation between both countries in Central Asia is possible and will be very beneficial. China's technical and economic help in the construction of the Gwadar port and operationalization of the QTTA route via China connecting Pakistan with Central Asia have the potential to integrate further the interests of Pakistan, China and CARs. China's engagement with Central Asia is fast growing, and CARs are also emphasizing their ties with China too much. Beijing's investment in Central Asia reached about 50 billion dollars (Khetran and Khalid, 2019). Chinese policies are soft, avoiding dictations and interference in the domestic affairs of CARs; therefore, they are compatible with China.

Like Islamabad, Beijing also needs secure energy supplies as its energy requirements are increasing day by day. It is importing energy resources from Central Asia to fulfill its growing requirements. Over the last two decades, China has made significant investments in Central Asia's transportation and energy infrastructure. The existing gas pipeline provides 55 billion cubic meters gas annually to China. Likewise, an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan exports 20 million tons oil daily to China (Khetran & Khalid, 2019).

China significantly benefits from its endeavours to enhance its financial, logistical, and political connections in this unstable and resource-abundant region. It could escalate the struggle among major regional powers (Sahakyan, 2021). From 2001 until the change in focus towards containment of China, the main focus of the national security strategy of the US remained counter-terrorism. At present, US foreign policy is focusing exclusively on the containment of China. The decline of Western influence in Central Asia, the clash between Western stake-holders and Russia, the escalating competition between the United States and China, and the deepening collaboration between China and Russia all significantly impact the region. In such a crucial political environment in the region, China seems to consolidate its position in regional affairs. It has been evident from its active participation and increasing role in Afghan affairs after the US withdrawal and holding of the China-Central Asia Summit in May 2023 in the Xi'an city of China- the starting point of the ancient Silk Road. It is pertinent to mention that the summit occurred at the same time as the G7 summit in Japan, where the US sought support for its policies against China.

### **Pakistan's Interests vis-à-vis Russia**

Russia is the most important player in this New Great Game. Russia wants to keep the region under its influence. Central Asia is dominated by its influence on Russian infrastructure for the oil and gas supply to the international market and for trade on its seaports. Russia has a significant economic and political hold on Central Asian Republics and does not want to undermine its economic, political, and strategic goals in the region. Moscow has four policy goals in Central Asia. First, to stop the entry of religious extremists, revolutionaries, drug dealers, and criminals into Russia (Alison & Johnson, 2001). Second, safeguard the ethnic Russian minorities residing in the 'near abroad' having a cultural and political affinity with the new Russian state. Third, to control the Turkish and Iranian influence in Central Asia as CARs have deep-rooted historical and cultural links with Turkey and Iran. Since the collapse of the USSR, Turkey, and Iran have been following a proactive policy to establish friendly relations with CARs. Fourth, to keep CARs dependent on its infrastructure for energy resources export to international markets and trade over its ports. Russia is using the Primakov

Doctrine in its foreign policy towards the region. Its aim is to increase the influence of Moscow in regional affairs and dominate it.

Moscow also desires to be the corridor of Central Asia's gas and oil export to the international market, keep CARs dependent on Russian ports, utilize its natural resources, invest in the exploration of natural resources, develop infrastructure to ensure interregional connectivity, collective security as Collective Security Treaty Organization has been founded aimed to abstain the member countries from the use of force against members and the member states may not join any other military alliance, maintain its military bases in the region, keep away the region from the influence of the US and other Western countries, sell weapons, fight terrorist and extremism, control drug trafficking and ensure regional integration.

There are many differences and similarities in the interests of Pakistan and Russia in Central Asia. Unlike Russia, Pakistan has no intention of dominating the region. Both countries share common interests such as to import energy resources from the region, became a preferred corridor for the CARs access to ports. It is true that both countries did not enjoy good relations because of Islamabad joining the Western bloc during the Cold War period and Islamabad's Afghan policy. The Russia-India close ties and CARs pro-India policies have also created challenges for Pakistan. Pakistan needs to establish good political and economic ties and promote collaboration in various fields in Moscow. However, in the last few years, relations between the two countries have significantly improved. Due to the changing regional and global geopolitical scenarios, their relations have normalized. Convergence and respect for each other's interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan are the primary driving forces behind this change.

In the changing geopolitical dynamics of the region, the US hegemonic attitude has also played a role in pushing Islamabad and Moscow closer to some extent and led to the synchronization of their policies. In the global arena, the post-Crimea escalated the rivalry between Moscow and Washington, and subsequent Western economic sanctions forced Russia to turn to the East and Southeast for new political, strategic, and economic allies. When the world order changed from unipolar to bipolar with the culmination of the Cold War, Moscow started searching for potential regional partners and allies to recover its previous position. The intensification of Russian conflict with the Western block has further compelled Moscow to prioritise regional countries in its foreign policy.

On the other hand, Pakistan became a victim of the US hegemonic attitude and suffered massive material and human casualties in the war on terror. Even the United States did not acknowledge the efforts and sacrifices of Pakistan in the war on terror, signed a nuclear agreement with India, jeopardized the balance of power in South Asia by making a strategic alliance with India, and assigned India the leading role in Afghanistan at the cost of security interests of Pakistan. As a result, Pakistan began seeking opportunities to strengthen ties with Russia to diversify its international connections. The reconciliation between Pakistan and Russia has also benefited from Beijing's strong partnership with Moscow and its long-standing friendship with Pakistan. Islamabad and Moscow have recently achieved progress in political, strategic, and diplomatic ties. It is helping Pakistan to consolidate its position in regional geopolitics. In the past, Pakistan faced problems due to its strained relations with Russia.

The normalisation of their relations also led to an increase in their bilateral trade; in 2020, it reached an all-time high of \$730 million (Khan, 2021). Recently, they signed an agreement to build a 1,122-kilometer-long gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore. It is a 2.25 billion dollar project called "Pakistan Steam Gas Pipeline". It is a major project that the two nations have planned since they chose to put their Cold War rivalries behind them and embarked on a new age of bilateral relationships. It became a landmark initiative for cooperation between Pakistan and Russia. It is going to consolidate their attempts to diversify foreign policy choices.

CARs would welcome Russia and Pakistan's partnership as they would be the eventual beneficiaries. Currently, the Russia-China-Pakistan axis is a source of regional stability, prosperity, and harmony. In light of the arguments of Buzan's regional security complex theory, regional security is linked tightly to a grouping of regional countries because of security interdependence. In this context, Russia, Pakistan, and China can perform a key role in ensuring cooperation and restoration of peace in the region. Iran can also work with this club and will be very important if join. Instability has

jeopardized peace, harmony, and economic development in the whole region. The region is self-sufficient in most of the basic requirements and the countries have much potential for each other, but political differences, uncooperative framework and power politics of extra-regional powers have jeopardised the establishment of collaborative relations among regional countries.

### **Pakistan's Interests vis-à-vis India**

By engaging with Central Asia, Pakistan has also cultivated a strategic interest beyond merely political and economic ones. Pakistan aims to defuse the Indian influence in CARs as it enjoys strong relations with CARs. Even India runs Farkhor air bases in Tajikistan. Basically, Pakistan is trying to connect CARs and make them dependent on its Gwadar port, while India is trying to develop the Chabahar port of Iran to decrease the importance of Gwadar for CARs. New Delhi is working to develop the Chabahar port and Chabahar-Zahedan railway line to create an alternate trade route to Kabul and Central Asia, bypassing the territory of Pakistan. For this purpose, India has allocated ₹1 billion in its 2021-2022 budget (Nag, 2021). A memorandum of understanding was inked between Iranian Railways CDTIC and Indian Railways IRCON for building this railway line during the Indian Premier's visit to Iran in May 2016. The rail project aims to connect the Chabahar port with Afghanistan and then with Central Asia. Uzbekistan is already involved in the Chabahar project. It is also already connected with Afghanistan through a 75km Hairatan-Uzbekistan rail link, which will further extend to Iran according to the Indian plan.

Being part of the New Great Game, India is trying to strengthen its position in the region to preserve its strategic objectives in Afghanistan and restrict access of Pakistan to Central Asia. According to Indian policymakers, an extended role in Afghanistan is the most effective approach to counter Pakistan. India cannot afford to allow Afghanistan to be used as an instrument of Islamabad's regional strategy. New Delhi gained a good opportunity after the US occupation of Afghanistan to strengthen its footsteps in the country and deepen its links with CARs. The US presence in the region after the 9/11 attacks helped India develop strong connections with CARs.

The United States and India have increasingly aligned their interests since both countries are wary of having exclusive Russian or Chinese power in the region. New Delhi's key objectives in the region are to get access to energy resources, counter Pakistan's influence, establish good trade relations, and establish itself as a prominent actor in the emerging interaction of extra-regional powers. To counter Pakistan, India is looking for ways to get benefits from Central Asia (Singh, 2005). These power politics have jeopardised Pakistan's position in Central Asia.

### **Conclusion**

The new Great Game is meant to gain access to the resources of Central Asia and control the trade and energy supply routes in the region. Each actor in this Game has different policy objectives and interests. Russia wants to keep its hegemonic position in the Central Asian energy trade, India wants to import energy resources and bypass Pakistan in giving access to CARs to the international market whereas China's policy is to import energy resources and invest in energy and infrastructure related projects in the region. While Pakistan, being an important country at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, is strategically significant for CARs. Pakistan wants to import energy resources, become a regional trade hub by giving access to CARs to its ports, and make a strong political alliance with these Muslim countries. Pakistan has a strong desire and expectations for access to the economic opportunities, energy resources, the trade market of CARs and to exert its political and cultural influence in the region. Besides its significant strategic location, Pakistan is an important state in terms of its military strength and nuclear capability. Therefore, Pakistan's role in the New Great Game should not be underestimated.

Islamabad confronts strong competition from the India-Tehran nexus in the region, as they have distinct advantages. It is also worth noting that despite the rivalry with Tehran, there are certain areas of cooperation, notably in the oil industry. Iran also controls vital transport routes into Landlocked Central Asia and provides transit routes. A good option for Pakistan is to further synchronise its policy with China and Russia in Central Asia. It will serve its interests in the region and will defuse the impacts of the New Great Game over it. Normalization of relations between Pakistan and Russia, its close working with China, and formulation of cooperative partnerships with Iran and Turkey in Central Asia

rather than competition will support the future of Pakistan's interests in the region. Moreover, Pakistan needs to proceed carefully to maintain balance between its relationship with US and China to the possible extent.

Pakistan is positioned as a key participant in the New Great Game and as such it has the potential to develop and provide an energy export transit route not just to South Asia but to other parts of the world as well. Energy politics have been ferocious, combative, and vigorous, often changing the terms of the New Great Game. Its supply infrastructure is much more complicated now, and Islamabad could be a smart and conscious participant in the New Great Game to get maximum share out of it. Pakistan must take strong diplomatic steps to enhance its ties with Central Asian states. Its multilateral strategy to strengthen connections with regional nations, particularly via the SCO, is also commendable.

Pakistan has the opportunity to play a pivotal role in fostering regional cooperation. By advocating for economic integration and connectivity projects, Pakistan can position itself as a key player in regional stability and development. Strengthening ties with neighbouring countries through trade agreements and joint infrastructure projects can enhance its influence and portray Pakistan as a cooperative partner. Pakistan may establish itself as a pivotal contributor to regional stability and prosperity by promoting economic integration and connectivity initiatives. Enhancing relationships with regional countries via trade agreements and collaborative infrastructure initiatives may augment its influence and present Islamabad as a productive ally. The country's foreign policy needs to shift from a predominant emphasis on security to a more equitable strategy that prioritizes economic growth, regional integration, and multilateral partnerships. Last but not the least, Islamabad should focus on maintaining friendly relations with Kabul and restoration of peace and stability in its regions adjacent to Iran and Afghanistan.

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