

## **PAKISTAN’S ROLE AS A LYNCHPIN IN THE “ARC OF AUTOCRACY” AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA**

*Nishtha Kaushiki\**

Department of South and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies,  
Central University of Punjab, Bathinda 151401, Punjab, India  
E-mail: nishtha.kaushiki@cup.edu.in

*Jagmeet Bawa\*\**

Department of Political Science, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dehra  
Campus, Dehra Gopipur 177101, Himachal Pradesh, India  
E-mail: jagmeet.bawa@hpcu.ac.in

*Vikash Roushan\*\*\**

Department of South and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies,  
Central University of Punjab, Bathinda 151401, Punjab, India  
E-mail: vroushan1993@gmail.com

*Hansraj\*\*\*\**

Department of South and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies,  
Central University of Punjab, Bathinda 151401, Punjab, India  
E-mail: hansrajhs689@gmail.com

*Gurpej Singh\*\*\*\*\**

Department of Political Science, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dehra  
Campus, Dehra Gopipur 177101, Himachal Pradesh, India  
E-mail: gurpej570@gmail.com

Published online: 31 July 2024

To cite this article: Kaushiki, N., Bawa, J., Roushan, V., Hansraj and Singh, G. 2024. Pakistan’s role as a lynchpin in the “arc of autocracy” and its implications for India. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 20 (2): 189–220. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2024.20.2.7>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2024.20.2.7>

## ABSTRACT

*This study examines how Pakistan's strategic location and evolving ties with Russia and China position it as a potential lynchpin in the nascent "arc of autocracy". Pakistan's unique geographic position bridging Central Asia and the Gulf historically made it strategically valuable during the Cold War. Today, the growing Sino-Russian partnership seeks to reshape the regional order, fostering greater cohesion between the countries with autocratic tendencies to counter the established Western-led liberal model. Pakistan's role as a crucial land bridge connecting Central Asia to West Asia has spurred Russia's recent efforts to build closer ties with Islamabad. Through a descriptive analysis of Russo-Pak bilateral relations and Pakistan's potential involvement in crucial regional infrastructure projects led by China, this study argues that Pakistan could become a vital player in solidifying an autocratic bloc in the region comprising Russia, China, and Iran. By focusing on the specific case of Pakistan and its strategic significance, this study aims to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing debate on the arc of autocracy by analysing empirical evidence and exploring the potential global implications of such a regional grouping.*

**Keywords:** Arc of autocracy, Iran, lynchpin, Pakistan, Sino-Russo strategic synergy

## INTRODUCTION

The unipolar moment came to an end with the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The cost of the wars, as estimated by the Watson Institute, Brown University, stands at USD8 trillion (Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs 2021). This led to an imperial overstretch and a simultaneous rise of the new countries as important geopolitical players. Russia and China, which are inherently strategic competitors, deepened their bilateral relations with the common objective of containing the US and its allies. Thus, the arrival of the new world order was marked by a relative decline of the US, the ups and downs of global financial health, the rise of the new and emerging powers and a simultaneous decline of democracy. These developments led to the rise of new powers, which prominently include Russia, China and Iran, apart from the violent non-state actors (VNSA).

Amongst the aforementioned countries, Russia and China have left no stone unturned to put forth an alternative vision of the world order that has little or no space for democratic ideals and principles. This gathering storm of authoritarianism and the role of Sino-Russo strategic synergy was first pointed out in the study by Kemp (2002), which has strategically foreseen and

warned the liberal democracies about the emerging geopolitical fault lines in the vicinity of India. Kemp's (2002) study points out two important unstable arcs, "one running from Turkey through the Caucasus to Iran, the other from Iran through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India" (62). Sino-Russo strategic synergy made efforts to merge the two arcs mentioned above into a single arc by encouraging the autocratic regimes in South and West Asia. China and Russia have rapidly advanced their vision of regional interconnectedness and an alternate form of world order, utilising various instruments of state power, such as finance and their veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), to influence the politically vulnerable states with autocratic tendencies in their geographical vicinity. These regional black knight powers, i.e., states that challenge established international norms, rules, or orders within a specific region, such as China and Russia, prefer autocratic governments in their vicinity so as to form a "block" of countries with similar autocratic tendencies. This is because it is easier for Russia and China to intensify their cooperation with the autocratic countries to systematically exploit their natural resources as well as military facilities to fulfil the larger agenda of leading an anti-West block of countries. These autocratic countries are not, or less, accountable to their citizens; it becomes relatively easy for China and Russia to bring such states under their strategic influence. Thus, the autocratic system convergence leads to a democratic decline in the region of the black knights. Contrary to this, on their part, the black knights cannot arbitrarily drain resources from democratic nations for their own development since the leader is accountable to the people (Bader et al. 2010).

The 2017 US National Security Strategy (NSS) clearly outlines the geopolitical competition for power between the free and the repressive regimes, mainly in the Indo-Pacific region. The document highlights three future challenges to be faced by democratic countries, namely "the revisionist powers of China and Russia, the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organisations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups" (White House 2017: 25). This chilling warning was confirmed by the highly debated role of China in the COVID-19 crisis, debt trap policies in the Asian and East European countries, the consequent rapidly withering away of the democratic regimes, and finally the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The 2022 NSS doctrine identifies and pinpoints the malicious intentions of the revisionist states to change the liberal international order by supporting autocracy in their respective regions and beyond. Russia and China were again listed as a significant threat in the 2022 doctrine, which minced no words to state, "autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and

export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad” (White House 2022: 3). In practice, however, Russia and China, do not intentionally seek to undermine democracy solely because of the system of government but rather because of the “potential consequence” of activities undertaken by these potential black knight states to achieve their strategic and economic goals. As a result, democracy in the targeted states diminishes, and authoritarianism thrives (Tolstrup 2015; Way 2015).

As these developments profoundly impact the Indo-Pacific region, former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison categorically warned the liberal countries that “a new arc of autocracy is instinctively aligning to challenge and reset the world order in their own image” (Hurst 2022). Additionally, the Bennett Institute of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge has similarly noted that “across a vast span of countries stretching from continental Eurasia to the north and west of Africa”, countries have moved closer to China and Russia, and “the world is torn between two opposing clusters: a maritime alliance of democracies led by the United States; and a Eurasian bloc of illiberal or autocratic states, centred upon Russia and China” (Foa et al. 2022: 1). These studies highlight that Moscow and Beijing firmly support each other, and their recently concluded “no limit partnership” affirms this point.

Given the brief overview of the “arc of autocracy”, this study contends that Pakistan is a military authoritarian state deeply embedded in the Chinese constellation of its satellite states. Geographically, it is a connecting geographical link between South and West Asia. The objective of this study is to examine how Russia’s rapprochement towards Pakistan has the potential to form a regional authoritarian block led by Russia and China. This study will also examine how Russia has been increasing its strategic leverage in Pakistan with the purpose of decreasing the Western influence in South Asia.

Russia has turned to Pakistan because of the dominant role of military elites in Pakistan’s political functioning, which has been well acknowledged by the studies of Sheikh (2020), Sheikh and Ahmed (2020), Aziz (2007) and Shafqat (1997). Its military authoritarianism is a significant form of a non-democratic government in which its military elites have used various legitimisation strategies, which range from presenting its neighbour, India, as an eternal enemy in foreign and security policies to rigorous techniques such as “semi-competitive elections”, and giving civil portfolios to the military-backed bureaucrats, i.e., military-bureaucratic axis (Brooker 2009: 124). Pakistan, thus, fits well in the non-democratic group of countries, and Russia’s renewed interest in Pakistan is well-established.

The strategic cooperation between Russia and Pakistan has the strategic consent of China. Given the depth of Sino-Pak military collusion (Curtis 2009; Small 2015; Boon 2018; Wolf 2020; Ganguly et al. 2023), China has welcomed the upward trajectory of the relations between Russia and Pakistan. Pakistan's geopolitical leaning towards Russia would ensure Islamabad's distancing itself from the US, leading to the diversification of Pakistan's diplomacy to find new strategic partners and creating new geopolitical opportunities for it. From the perspective of Russia and China, the strategic rapprochement pushes the Sino-Russo larger objective of formalising a geographically congruent block of authoritarian regional countries with non-democratic political tendencies. Since contemporary international relations are based on highly calculative transactionalism instead of ideology, Russia and China will work jointly to decrease the bilateral differences between Iran and Pakistan to strengthen the arc of autocracy and are most likely to form an "anti-Quad".<sup>1</sup> Pakistan's role and importance are thus that of a lynchpin. However, as the core objective here is to trace the trajectory of Russo-Pak strategic relations and how Pakistan can play an essential role in strengthening the arc of autocracy, this article has thus excluded Pakistan's own challenges and risks in aligning with the arc of autocracy and the diverging interests of Russia and Pakistan.

The study explores how an arc of autocracy is being constructed and why Islamabad, in the long term, may prove to be a lynchpin for forming a regional block of authoritarian states backed by China and Russia. Given the specificity of the title, we hypothesise the following: First, the continuation of the India-Pakistan rivalry and Islamabad's client state status of China. Second, Moscow's limitations in strategic manoeuvring due to the ongoing Ukraine war and its strategic and financial dependency on China will make it more open to increasing strategic depth with Pakistan. On the other hand, India's position and status as a major non-NATO ally of the US makes it compelling for Russia to strategically distract India from the Quad.

The organisation of this study is as follows: First, it explores the academic debates as to how the development financing mechanisms of Beijing have an overall negative effect on the governance mechanisms of the recipient nations. Next, the emerging debates of Russian and Chinese attempts to form an arc of autocracy are discussed. The third section explores the rationale of Pakistan in the arc of autocracy and why Russia and China are nurturing Islamabad to be a lynchpin. Finally, the last section analyses the implications of the above developments on India's security.



## **ACADEMIC DEBATES ON THE ARC OF AUTOOCRACY**

China's Go Out strategy and its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) policy have resulted in economic aid and military supplies to countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan (Taliban), Iran, Myanmar, and Indonesia. Consequently, these countries have economically, politically, strategically, and, finally, militarily aligned themselves with Russia and China to shield their autocratic and illiberal regimes from international debates in various multilateral bodies and also from sanctions. One of the few examples in this regard is the promotion of the Code of Conduct on Information Security put forth by the four Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) states (China, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) in 2011 at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The proposed bill was later revised in 2015, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan supporting it further. Flonk (2021) highlights that the bill aimed to initiate the "content control norms" (1925), with the states "cooperat[ing] on the restriction of the distribution of information relating terrorism, secessionism or extremism, or conducive to undermining other countries' political, economic and social stability" (Flonk 2021: 1942). The passage of the bill reflects the tendencies of the illiberal democracies and authoritarian countries to cluster around Russia and China.

In the last decade, some studies have focused on how China's development financing has negative and adverse effects on the governance mechanisms, ranging from increasing corruption (Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018; Cha 2020; Kliem 2022) to discouraging economic reforms (Brazys and Vadlamannati 2021) and finally undermining the democratic governance (Kersting and Kilby 2014; Li 2017) which directly promotes autocracy in the recipient nations (Bader 2015; Cordesman and Hwang 2021). Thus, the increase in kleptocracy and political marginalisation of the moderates and dissenting voices are now the order of the day in such states. Additional studies (Bolt 2014; Hofstee and Broeders 2020) also point to the Sino-Russo strategic and military cooperation to reshape the existing world order. In another critical study, Wientzek (2022) highlights that China and Russia have shielded "other autocratic or semi-democratic states from criticism [which] leads to an 'unvirtuous cycle', i.e., stronger loyalty from the countries concerned toward Russia or particularly China" (234). Wehrey (2015) and Cooley (2015) respectively refers to these tendencies as "political quietism" (72) and authoritarian "counter norms and counter practices" (60). Russia and China aim to strengthen regional support for their respective authoritarian political systems in their attempts to reshape the global governance structure.

The above tendencies not only diminish the US influence in their respective strategic backyards but also garner support in military terms in times of actual conflict with the US by providing them with different layers of security. Thus, Russia and China actively engage the regional countries in such a way that they reconfigure the judging standards that legitimise authoritarianism. Moreover, the Russian tendency to present an “authoritarian resistance” uses five strategies, which are to “insulate, redefine, bolster, subvert, and coordinate” (Ambrosio 2016: 2). With specific reference to Pakistan, it is interesting to note that Russia has been redefining its bilateral relations with Pakistan and has the Chinese nod. This provides Pakistan with insulation for its military theocratic nature of governance.

The arc of autocracy theory, gaining traction in recent years, paints a concerning picture of a potential global shift. It posits the emergence of an alliance of authoritarian regimes, collaborating to reshape the existing international order dominated by liberal democracies (Hurst 2022). This “arc”, as envisioned, stretches from Russia in the north to China in the east, and aims to challenge Western hegemony and promote an alternative vision of governance based on centralised power, limited individual rights, and state control over key aspects of society (Goldberg 2020; Applebaum 2021). On the other hand, Pakistan and China also aim to carve out a new international world order. Pakistan is strategically located for Russia and China, which provide crucial access to the Indo-Pacific region via the Arabian Sea. Putin’s New Eurasian Order was proposed in 2011 to increase its influence on the global stage, and Pakistan is part of this new Eurasian order; subsequently, Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project was announced in 2013, and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) became a crucial project. Thus, Pakistan is an important lynchpin in the Russia-China arc of autocracy to reshape the international world order, which is anti-west and anti-liberal (Schindler et al. 2022). Pakistan’s increased restrictions on press freedom, political dissent, and civil liberties, align with the broader trend of autocratic consolidation within the arc of autocracy (Barany 2009). Pakistan currently harbours grievances against the West, particularly regarding its perceived interference in its internal matters, especially in Islamabad’s own War on Terror. Pakistan’s grudges against the US and its domestic political repressions have resulted in an increase in Islamabad’s strategic value to Russia and China.

## **THE RATIONALE OF PAKISTAN AS A LYNCHPIN**

Pakistan's unique geographical position at the cusp of Central, South, and West Asia has made it alluring for various powers to engage it at different times. Irrespective of the different permutation combinations, the triangular dynamics have always involved Pakistan. For example, whether it is US-India-Pakistan or China-Pakistan-India, the dicey role of Islamabad in extracting strategic and financial leverages is not new to the world. Siddiqi (2017) advocates for a stronger Russo-Pak relationship while emphasising that "Pakistan may be able to realise a newer version of 'triangular tightrope', a policy it tried to follow unsuccessfully during the 1960s in an effort to cultivate equally good relations with the US, Russia, and China" (59). Similarly, Shah (2022) also views the bilateral relations as an opportunity for Islamabad to counter the Indo-Pacific narratives.

Additionally, Putin's ambition to portray Russia as a resurgent power has led him to adopt a strategy of displaying military assertiveness in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Syria (2015), and now in Ukraine (2022 to present). Although Putin's military adventures currently focus on Eastern Europe and West Asia, they have sent strong signals to the countries located in South Asia, such as Pakistan. The military actions of Russia are symbolic of a power that does not hesitate to take on the West and is also not intimidated by its sanctions. Hence, Putin has been able to project Moscow as a lucrative power to countries with antagonistic perceptions about the US.

For example, immediately before the 2014 Crimea crisis, Putin announced the "Pivot to Asia" policy in 2012 with the sole objective of transcending the traditional bilateral relations and finding new probable partners that could not only help Moscow geostrategically but would also be acceptable to Beijing (Campbell and Andrews 2013). Pakistan, thus, seems to be a natural choice. Later, the "Greater Eurasia" was unveiled in 2016, mentioning Pakistan and Iran, apart from China and India (Kukartseva and Thomann 2022). The importance of Pakistan can be affirmed by the statement of Andrew Korybko, a prominent Russian strategic analyst who called Pakistan a "zipper of Pan Eurasian integration" (15) in 2017, raising eyebrows in New Delhi and the West. From there onwards, the strategic rapprochement between the two countries has gained momentum.

Second, the US has rapidly lost its geopolitical influence over Pakistan. Kronstadt (2023) highlights that "from 2001 until the second Obama Administration, Pakistan was among the leading recipients of US foreign assistance, with Congress appropriating \$11 billion in economic, development,



and humanitarian aid” (3); however, there has been no evidence that the grant assistance previously provided to Pakistan to strengthen its democratic institutions has been adequately utilised. After the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan in 2021, the question that looms large in Washington is whether its upcoming trajectory with Pakistan should constitute a full resumption and subsequent security assistance or whether it should be confined to merely sustenance services with regard to the previously supplied armaments. At a domestic level too, Pakistan, according to the strategic experts, is currently undergoing a “polycrisis” (Afzal 2023; Rafiq 2023; Zaidi 2023) wherein there is political instability, a balance of payment crisis, the threat of a joint Baloch and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)<sup>2</sup> threat, and, a dwarfed regional influence. In such a situation, there is little geopolitical space for the US and its allies to either engage or re-engage Pakistan and Afghan Taliban. Moreover, Pakistan is under the solid financial grip of China, whose commercial banks hold approximately 30% of Islamabad’s total external debt, totalling USD100 billion (Kronstadt 2023). The absence of the US from Afghanistan has created a geopolitical vacuum, and the strategic opportunity has been seized upon by China and Russia.

Third, Russia and China jointly recognise Pakistan’s geopolitical ambitions to carve out a role that makes it more susceptible to Russian strategic advancements. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks and the initiation of the War on Terror (WoT), Russia in 2010 was instrumental in organising a four-nation summit in Moscow on the Afghan issue, which also included Pakistan and Tajikistan. Later, in 2016, a new trilateral cooperation group of Russia, China, and Pakistan was established. The objective of both the groupings was to increase the cooperation between the regional countries to curb the menace of Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP).<sup>3</sup> Much later in 2019, Imran Khan’s call for Jihad in the UNGA when Article 370<sup>4</sup> was abrogated speaks volumes for the country’s keenness to portray itself as a “speaker” of the Islamic countries possessing nuclear capabilities. Russia has undoubtedly taken advantage of Pakistan’s aspirations and forged strategic relations with it.

Similarly, after the US withdrawal in 2021, Imran Khan, a “democratically” elected Prime Minister, stated that the Afghan people had broken the “shackles of slavery” (*Geo News* 2021). This official statement is based on the flawed logic of opposition to Western imperialism to highlight Pakistan’s prospective role in the emerging arc of autocracy. On the other hand, China initiated “neighbouring countries of Afghanistan plus Afghanistan” apart from the informal meetings between Russia, China, Pakistan, and

Iran (Sun and He 2023: 5). The rationale behind these developments is that Pakistan and Iran require fewer efforts to warm up to China and Russia instead of pleasing the US and its allies (Tikhonova 2021). Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Russo-Pak diplomatic relations, stated that Russia aspires to work for a “more just and democratic” world order and sees Islamabad as a “key international partner” (Arain 2023). Thus, Russia and China have meaningfully cultivated Pakistan’s desire to play an independent role in the region. Having explained why Pakistan fits in the regional autocratic block, the following section analyses the strategic bilateral developments between Moscow and Islamabad that lead us to believe that an arc of autocracy is rapidly upcoming.

## **PAKISTAN’S EMERGING ROLE IN THE ARC OF AUTOOCRACY**

To validate Pakistan’s increasing role in the arc of autocracy, this section highlights three significant developments that strategic experts have largely ignored. First, the rise of Pakistan and Iran as Russia’s new alternative arms recipients; second, Pakistan’s increasing diplomatic activities in West Asia; and finally, an emerging China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran bonhomie.

### **The Rise of Pakistan and Iran as Russia’s New Alternative Arms Recipients**

There has been a downward trend in selling Russian military hardware to India. “With the US, France, and Israel aggressively building largely transactional partnerships with India, Russia’s share of India’s arms imports declined from 69% in 2012–16 to 46% in 2017–21. India accounted for the largest share of major arms imports, of 11%, in the 2017–21 period” (Bana 2022). Thus, Russia has been actively seeking alternatives based on like-mindedness and similarities in geopolitical objectivity. Although Pakistan does not have a market like India, it fulfils the objective of balancing the Indo-US ties. Russia and Pakistan have forged defence and strategic relations based on opportunism and shared interests. There have been multiple high-level military-diplomatic visits between 2011 and 2018 by Pakistan Army and Air Chiefs, which the Russians have reciprocated equally. These visits have concluded in various agreements between Moscow and Islamabad, such as the recognition of Pakistan as a terror victim state in the context of Afghanistan, followed by the 2014 defence cooperation agreement, the

lifting of its arms embargo from Pakistan in 2015, and the subsequent sale of Mi-35M Hind-E assault helicopters. There were also simultaneous joint annual military exercises code-named Druzhba beginning in 2016. The year 2018 proved significant for the two nations because of the formation of the Joint Military Commission, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on naval cooperation, a rare military cooperation pact, and the upgrading of their defence relations to a multidimensional strategic partnership. The Russo-Pak naval cooperation also received a boost from the foreign policy of the former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan. He tried initiating naval cooperation in an important meeting in Islamabad between the commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy, Admiral Nikolai Anatolyevich Yevmenov, and the commander-in-chief of the Pakistani Navy, Admiral Zafar-Ul Mahmood Abbasi. The meeting highlighted that one of the future contours of the naval cooperation would include “efforts to effectively confront the transnational challenges and threats in the maritime domain” (*DAWN* 2018). Thus, the emerging dynamics of relations between Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean Region highlights the changing security environment.

Pakistan is also a land and oceanic gateway to Iran. It is another country that Russia looks up to as a new geopolitical alternative. Between 2013–2017 and 2018–2022, Iran ordered twenty-four advanced air combat aircraft from Moscow (SIPRI 2023). Moreover, “the value of arms transfer agreements between Iran and Russia ballooned from \$300 million between 1998 and 2001 to \$1.7 billion between 2002 and 2005” (Beehner 2006). In the past decade, one of the most important acquisitions for Tehran was the Russian S-300 air defence system in 2016. Furthermore, in 2022, as a reciprocal exchange programme of drone sales to Russia, “Tehran sought Russian fighter jets, attack helicopters, radars, and combat trainer aircraft worth billions of dollars. Iranian pilots reportedly started training in Russia on the Sukhoi Su-35, an advanced fighter jet, in the spring of 2022” (*The Iran Primer* 2023). It is important to note that due to the tactical losses of Russia in the ongoing Ukraine war, Moscow has now resorted to arms imports, particularly the Iranian Shahed 136 direct-attack munitions or the suicide drones alongside the surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missiles, including the Zolfaghar (*Reuters* 2022). Furthermore, the transfer route that Iran is using is through the Caspian Sea, where the former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan have seaports.

Russia announced its Greater Eurasia Partnership in 2016, intending to synchronise its strategic policies with China’s. One of the most critical

aspects that has been largely ignored is the inclusion of Iran and Pakistan in the Partnership. Korybko and Morozov's (2020) study highlights Pakistan's importance to Russia. It stressed Pakistan's location and strategic utility for a "future trade corridor that will pass through bordering states and thereby create a new 'axis' of integration in Eurasia and would play a crucial role in bringing the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)<sup>5</sup> and the One Belt, One Road initiative closer" (Korybko and Morozov 2020: 13). In another simultaneous development, as a response to India's strategic relations with the US, Tehran publicised its intentions of interlinking Gwadar and Chabahar<sup>6</sup> (Reid 2019) and further with the port of Djibouti in which China keeps one of its overseas military bases (Kapur 2020). If Russia and China can convince Pakistan and Iran to sideline their ideological differences for mutual gains over time, the possibility of a new route passing through the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar would be an additional advantage that could potentially strengthen the arc of autocracy, which the former Australian Prime Minister Morrison had previously highlighted.

Also, if the Ukraine war persists, there are possibilities that Chinese reverse-engineered artillery and other small arms could be manufactured in Pakistan and Tehran, which will result in both countries emerging as small arms weapons manufacturers for the autocratic countries. This development can boost the economies of Iran and Pakistan, which have been facing increasing pressures from the international community for different reasons. With this possible development in mind, it is pertinent to point out that in 2018, upon the visit of Iranian Armed Forces General Mohammad Baqeri to Pakistan, the intent of joint manufacturing was announced. Baqeri stated, "we make efforts to jointly manufacture defensive arms with Pakistan, which can be introduced as the Islamic countries' joint product" (*Tehran Times* 2018). However, apart from this announcement, the developments are not in the public domain, thereby being shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, negotiations taking place between August 2021 and September 2021 led to a formal contract and the USD33.3 million deal for twelve aircraft was formally documented in the 2021 financial reporting of PAC (Pakistan Aeronautical Complex) (Van Herk 2022). There are also news reports that Iraq has shown interest in purchasing twelve JF-17 fighter planes from Pakistan (Baruah 2023). This provides an impetus for Russia and China to cultivate Pakistan and Iran for weapons manufacturing.

### **Pakistan's Increasing Role in West Asia**

In 2019, Pakistan was selected by Saudi Arabia as an “intermediary” in the official talks on the issues between the Gulf countries and Tehran and Riyadh, something that was unexpected by the West. The development was mainly owing to Islamabad's outreach to the groupings of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Shanghai Cooperation (SCO) with an additional nuclear capability. The increasing role of Pakistan in the Middle East geopolitics subsequently increased its stature in the Asian geopolitics. Pakistan and Russia are taking advantage of the absence of the US in the region by strengthening autocracy. The study of Khan et al. (2023) highlights that “China and Pakistan are already close allies of regional and international arenas, but the US withdrawal provided an opportunity for realignment of Pakistan with Russia and Iran” (38).

Russia took keen note of the above developments and the subsequent policy document of Moscow such as the “Collective Security in the Persian Gulf” highlights the role of extra-regional powers while being cautious not to name any particular country (Adebahr 2021). The policy document advocates a multilateral approach via a “sub-regional collective security system” to increase stability and security. The document also affirms “consultations involving regional and extra-regional states, the permanent members of the UNSC, the GCC, the League of Arab States (LAS), and the OIC” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Russian Federation 2021). The Russian geostrategic inclination towards “extra-regional powers” such as Pakistan has increased the geopolitical opportunities for Pakistan and accelerated the process of Russia and China's strategic embrace of Pakistan and Iran. Simultaneously, the developments also provide a platform for Iran and Pakistan to temporarily sideline their bilateral differences and work for a common cause of an “Anti-West Alliance”.

Moreover, there are convergences of interests between Russia and Pakistan on the geopolitical issues of the Persian Gulf. These include combating ISIS terrorism, maintaining vital energy supplies, and ensuring strategic stability in the Persian Gulf. The 2023 Iran-Saudi Arabia Peace Initiative (ISPI) brokered by China has also enhanced China's strategic outreach in the region and significantly decreased the US influence. From a Sino-Russo perspective, the strategic convergences between Russia and Pakistan have given rise to a selective polycentrism in the region, which Russia and Pakistan might take advantage of in any geopolitical or military conflict in the future. For instance, in the current Israel-Hamas conflict, the



West has approached Beijing to exercise its leverage to resolve the crisis (United Nations 2023). The involvement of Beijing, Moscow, and Pakistan in future conflicts and issues will sharply increase the polarisations, and nation-states in the geographical vicinity might be compelled to choose sides, which can affect the regional security architecture.

Furthermore, Russia aims to integrate the China-Iran OBOR Project, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) initiative and the CPEC to strengthen the autocratic regional block. Russia's budding relations with Pakistan provide an additional route to the Caucasus route. It also opens another new sea route, thereby giving the much-required access to the warm sea of the Indian Ocean. In this context, the potential of Gwadar to be linked with Chabahar is high for direct Russian and Chinese access to the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Several studies (Moskalenko and Topychkanov 2014; Hilali 2017; Jamil 2017) examine this aspect. In fact, Golubchikov et al. (2012) point out that “vectors of the Eurasian railway routes of the 21st century terminate at the following points in three countries: Chabahar Port in Iran (on the border between Iran and Pakistan in the Arabian Sea), and Bandar Abbas Port (in the Persian Gulf)” (260).

The resistance against the Indo-Pacific policies of the West is another contributing factor that brings Russia and Pakistan closer. Russia has staunch views on the concept of the Indo-Pacific (Denisov et al. 2021; Harold et al. 2023; Liu and He 2023; Men and Yu 2023; Singh and Marwah 2023;). It cannot be ignored that Pakistan and Russia have a common friend, i.e., China, whose determination to change the status quo in the Indo-Pacific is well established by strategic experts (Fravel 2008; Shambaugh 2012; Chellaney 2014; Set and Pant 2023). On the other hand, Pakistan's strategic insecurity viz-a-viz India and its views on the Indo-Pacific strategy of the West have been prominent in the above studies, which point towards the growing importance of Russia to maintain a balance in the strengthening of the Indo-US relations. Further, Misson (2022) categorically states that India's strategic alliances with the US, Japan, and Australia, apart from its strategic overtures to Indonesia, Seychelles, and Madagascar, make it “difficult for Pakistan to counter India with any of these states and who can help it in standing up to the Indian attempts at domination” (Nisar 2021). Furthermore, the Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research also highlights the US's Indo-Pacific strategy as a “significant opportunity to strengthen its ties with Russia and advance its maritime capacity and capability by initiating joint ventures” (Deshpande 2023). The India-Middle East-Europe corridor also strongly impels the emerging trilateralism between Russia, Pakistan, and China. Islamabad thus

holds the potential to be a lynchpin due to its ulterior motives. Hence, this study asserts that a new sub-regional security architecture is being built, which is geographically, politically, and economically interlinked and provides an alternative to the US based regional and world order.

### **Emerging China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Bonhomie**

The above arguments demonstrate the potentialities of security cooperation between Russia, China, Pakistan, and Iran. Their joint efforts can give rise to an “anti-Quad” or a regional autocratic block or the formalising of an arc of autocracy. These countries also might engage the other peripheral countries of the regions to increase their strategic outreach. The cases of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan serve as important arguments. The evolving relations between Tajikistan and Pakistan, with the support of Russia and China, cannot be missed. In 2017, the agreement on the Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission project (CASA-1000) was concluded. The objective was to sell the surplus hydropower available in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, but it also created opportunities for Pakistan’s strategic involvement in the Central Asian states. Although CASA-1000 was supposed to be funded by the World Bank, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan delayed the project but did not stop the cooperation among these countries. Also, the decision of the Taliban to go ahead with the project creates new opportunities for autocratic countries like China to fund and increase their strategic hold in the region.

The speculations and unconfirmed reports of a Chinese secret military base near the Wakhan corridor in the Murghob district of Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR) near the Afghan-Tajik border (Bawa and Ashish 2023) also highlight the emerging symmetry between the autocratic countries. Nevertheless, the 2022 technical cooperation agreement between Uzbekistan (a consolidated authoritarian regime) and Pakistan is an important background for Pakistan’s potential to connect the three regions of West, South, and Central Asia. The agreement highlights the joint ambitions for the “Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway project as an important initiative to create a rail link from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea through Afghanistan and the Pakistani seaports of Karachi, Gwadar and Bin Qasim” (*KUN.UZ* 2022).

Moreover, one cannot ignore Pakistan’s international voting pattern in different multilateral forums. For instance, Pakistan stood by China and Russia in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on the issues

of democratic deficit and human rights violations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, apart from the debates and discussions on Sudan, Syria, and Belarus. In 2020 and 2022, Pakistan, supported by other non-democratic countries, blocked a motion against China on the issue of Xinjiang. Also, regarding the Chinese objective of changing the discourses on human rights, Beijing put forward a resolution on “mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights” (Piccone 2018: 4) adopted in 2021 and unequivocally supported by Islamabad. According to Wientzek (2022), the resolution created polarisations on the definitions of human rights. These examples highlight the growing convergences among the three and the subsequent re-configuration of the Asian world order.

The emergence of the “Golden Ring of Security”<sup>7</sup> (Altaf 2022: 50) in the geopolitical integration of autocratic countries is another important dimension that needs some attention. In 2019, when Iran formally joined the BRI corridor, it proposed the inclusion of Turkey in the Russia-China-Pakistan-Iran quadrilateral grouping for an energy corridor. According to experts such as Salik and Fatima (2018), Khalil and Khan (2020), and Ahmad and Hashmi (2021), the dimension of the “Golden Ring” can provide strategic leverage to its member countries. Altaf (2022) highlights the geographical span of the Golden Ring that is located “between the East and the West, [and] some countries’ natural gravitation towards the Eastern bloc is a source of motivation for Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan... China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey are among the countries that make up the proposed [Golden Ring of Security] GRS” (50). In this light, it can be seen that China has been encouraging a rapprochement between Iran and Pakistan, which could potentially change the existing security architectures.

The Golden Ring proposal suits Russia and Pakistan. China has been in dire need of diversifying its energy routes, which currently depend on the Malacca Strait. From China’s point of view, it is vulnerable to blockades by the Indo-US joint naval operations. On the other hand, Russia intends to speed up new energy routes because of the European Union’s efforts to find new energy options due to the Ukraine war. Moscow thus seeks international energy cooperation, building a new energy transport corridor and energy supply channels, and diversifying the energy transport corridor and energy import regions, which are new security and strategic considerations for China and Russia. In this context, Guo et al. (2019) put forward the idea that China, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey should instead rely on “some regional security organisation and security mechanism along the lines of the Shanghai Cooperation” (829). Experts such as Irina (2020), Ahmad and Hashmi (2021),

and Serenko (2021) also highlight that the Pak-China MoU on the Kashghar-Gwadar road-rail network has reoriented the interest of Russia, Iran, and the other regional powers towards a new multilateralism in which the US and its allies have no role to play.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE RUSSO-PAK STRATEGIC RELATIONS**

There are certain limitations to the Russo-Pak relationship. Pakistan's financial woes are a significant hurdle in its growing strategic partnership with Russia. Despite the strategic warming of their partnership, Russia has not directly invested in Pakistan since 2019, highlighting Islamabad's lack of attractiveness as an investment destination. For example, Russia successfully maintained a modest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of USD93.653 billion, yet Islamabad seemed non-lucrative. Recurrent economic crises fuel these vulnerabilities, making Pakistan less appealing than India's more potent economic allure. The looming shadow of sovereign default further reinforces the juxtaposition between Pakistan's strategic importance and its economic stature. For example, from 2019 to 2021, India invested USD28 million in Russia, while Pakistan invested none. With poor prospects of improving Islamabad's economic health, perhaps Russia might find it strategically unviable to pursue it further.

Pakistan's internal challenges and Afghan complexities hamper its strategic partnership with Russia. Taliban-Pakistan disagreements over the Durand Line<sup>8</sup> and the logistical hurdles of gas pipelines crossing Afghanistan have stalled energy cooperation despite their mutual interest. Financial and political risks for both nations have also cast a shadow on their strategic rapprochement. For example, the recent proposal of the North-South Pipeline (Pakistan Stream) and the CASA-1000 pipeline has encountered a major challenge of crossing over from Afghanistan.

The paper has made a modest attempt to contribute to the debate of how Russo-Pak relations are strategically moving ahead. Pakistan is a geopolitical dwarf that, on its own, cannot restructure the security architecture of South Asia. However, as a client state of China, it has an enduring strategic goal to distract India from deepening its ties with the Quad nations, particularly the US. In due course, Moscow will likely emerge as China's de facto client state. The reasons range from different factors such as the ongoing Ukraine war, the Western sanctions, Sino-Russo attempts to resist the Bretton Woods International monetary system<sup>9</sup> and, finally, to support the countries with

autocratic regimes. If that happens, the Indo-Russo ties would be affected, which may increase the depth of the Russo-Pak relations. In contemporary international politics, nations are not strictly confined to their respective traditional alliances and depend upon their specificity or the objective of a particular strategic goal, and any slight shift towards new partners can be seen. In this context, Basrur and Kutty (2018) have highlighted the following benefits of strategic partnerships, apart from constraining strategic alliances: (1) They are not aimed at any particular country and hence leave scope for strategic manoeuvring; (2) the balance of interests is maintained, and hence, states are not expected to take deep action-inducing commitments as strategic responses over varying issues; (3) the states gain mutually and on equal terms through joint military exercises, arms transfer as well as intelligence exchanges; and (4) they open other essential forums and platforms, such as economic cooperation between different partners, thereby avoiding a very myopic view of international politics. Thus, by tracing the trajectory of the strategic manoeuvring between Russia and Pakistan, we put forward that their synergy in the coming few years will benefit the arc of autocracy apart from constraining India's relationship with the US and the West.

## DISCUSSION

The above developments undoubtedly have implications for India's core national interests pertaining to security. These include: (1) India's interests in Afghanistan being sidelined; (2) the strategic divergences between Russia and India have increased; (3) Russia and the US have both denied the much-needed air-independent propulsion (AIP) technology for the Indian submarines; and, finally, (4) they test the Indo-US strategic cooperation. These implications are elaborated on in the following sections.

### **India's Interests Ignored in Afghanistan**

From the above discussions, it is clear that Russia and China have deliberately excluded India from the "regional" groupings on Afghanistan. As a result, India has been unable to put across its concerns on the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, and the only exceptional grouping in which it is a member is the Moscow Format. India's exclusion has contained its strategic outreach despite investing more than USD3 billion in Afghanistan (*Business Standard* 2022). Raza (2019) put forward that "Pakistan, China, and Iran understand



that the long-term US strategy of spreading and maintaining influence in Asia is pivoted on India” (45). As a result, the emerging regional grouping on Afghanistan “can play a major role in aligning their interests with one another to counter the Indian influence in this region as it means, in reality, overthrowing the US’ yolk of influence” (Raza 2019: 38). Pakistan has thus reoriented its strategy after the fallout with the West.

The leapfrog approach of the autocratic countries can be ascertained from the fact that the Afghan Taliban are currently represented by Afghan embassies in Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow. Recently, China named Zhao Xing as its ambassador to Afghanistan, thereby setting a geopolitical precedent since the Taliban took control of the country in August 2021 (Lavania 2023). China’s developing links to the Taliban and its readiness to work with the new government have unmasked Beijing’s determination to push forward authoritarianism. The BRI, which encompasses more than sixty nations, has garnered interest from the Taliban (Yawar and Greenfield 2023), who would use it to promote its objectives, such as repressing dissent or gaining more power in the area, and providing geopolitical space to China and Russia to influence its approach towards India and the other democratic countries. Furthermore, China has significantly increased its presence in Afghanistan after the US exit, such as concluding its contracts for oil drilling from the Amu Darya Basin and establishing an oil field in Sar-e Pol province. Starting in 2023, Beijing has moreover invested USD150 million per year, which will gradually be increased to USD540 million by the end of three years (*Al Jazeera* 2023). Besides the ongoing talks between the Afghan Taliban and China on the upcoming operation in the Mes Aynak copper mines, these developments strongly indicate the role of Afghanistan as a building block in the arc of autocracy.

### **Increasing Strategic Divergences between Russia and India**

Russia’s military cooperation agreement with Pakistan has set the stage for new security architecture in Asia. Russia’s export of the Klimov RD-93 engine, which is crucial in the manufacturing of the JF-17 Thunder aircraft, a multi-role fighter, co-produced and developed by the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) and Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation (CAC), opens up new military cooperation opportunities for Russia and Pakistan. Lately, it has approached Russia directly by bypassing China as an intermediary, and the engine company Klimov is “now willing to supply the engines as well provides its associated repair systems and maintenance facilities”

(Gupta 2022). Associated news reports of JF-17 to be purchased by Iraq (*The Times of India* 2023) and Iranian intentions to buy Su thirty-five fighter jets (Stein 2023) not only militarise India's western neighbourhood but also open opportunities for their joint defence research.

Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan has been one of the contributing factors to the divergence between Russia and India. For instance, reports suggest that New Delhi cancelled significant defence deals, such as the purchase of forty-eight Mi-17 V5 helicopters and the inventory upgrade of eighty-five Su-30MKI fighters from Russia. The Indian government also cancelled negotiations with Russia to acquire ten Ka-31 airborne early warning and control helicopters for its navy (Chakraborti 2021). Although the reason stated was the supply delay caused by the Ukraine war, the factor of India trying to spread out its defence sources is evident.

Thus, it has become necessary for India to move towards making itself self-reliant in terms of defence supplies, especially jet engines, while broadening the base of its defence suppliers. The recently concluded US-India deal on GE Jet Engines for the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Mk2 programme is an essential step in this direction. Interestingly, Bhatia (2023) points out, "This is for the first time Washington is engaging in the co-production of jet engines with a non-treaty ally. Moreover, the deal will see GE transferring around 80 per cent of the jet engine technology to Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). Washington has never authorised this level of technology transfer before". Such a technology transfer is essential for India in light of the Chinese deploying J-20 fighters at the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

From another critical perspective, there have been increasing Russian demands on India to pay in the Chinese currency for its oil supplies. This is due to factors like US sanctions on Russia, and India's increasing dependence on Russian oil. The Indian government has categorically said it can pay in dirhams or dollars but not in yuan. On the other hand, Russia has categorically stated that it is open to discussing other payment options but also wants to increase its use of yuan (Verma and Ahmed 2023). In such a case, Pakistan can serve as a small but an essential market because its economic conditions are strongly tied to China's loan aid.

### **Denial of AIP Technology to India**

In August 2022, a shocker came for India when Russia refused to participate in India's Project-75I, which calls for technical cooperation concerning advanced submarines. The project required the partner country to transfer

the AIP system, which allows the submarines to stay underwater longer. Instead, Russia proposed upgrading the Kilo-class submarine India had previously purchased from Moscow. Thus, Russia's aim was to create a path dependency for India apart from concealing the much-required technology. It should be noted that Russia, in the past, had shared the AIP technology with China. Given China's reverse engineering capabilities, it has "shared the technology with Pakistan and rechristened the Type 039B Yuan class as Hangor submarines for its client state" (Kaushiki 2022: 7). These submarines are scheduled to be delivered anytime between 2022 to 2028. In a much-relieving development for India, France is ready to provide the technology that would be fitted in "three Scorpene submarines that India plans to acquire from France" (Siddiqui 2023). The above developments are undoubtedly significant signs of an emerging Russo-Pak bonhomie apart from the Chinese attempts to wean away Russia from India.

### **Tests the Indo-US Strategic Cooperation**

The Russian strategic overtures towards Pakistan have undoubtedly resulted in a kind of Stockholm syndrome for the US and India, wherein despite knowing the changes in the security architecture, both can do little about it. For instance, the US acknowledged the dicey role of Pakistan in Afghanistan, yet is forced to compete with China, and now Russia, for its presence in Pakistan. India faces the same dilemma concerning Russia. India and the US are compelled to continue the traditional approach, thereby slowing down the defence cooperation between the Quad countries. Although the Biden administration did not acknowledge the role of Pakistan in its recent Indo-Pacific strategies, "the United States has also committed more than [USD] \$200 million to flood relief, disaster resilience, and food security aid for Pakistan since mid-2022. The Administration's total aid request for FY2024 is [USD] \$173 million" (Kronstadt 2023: 3).

Furthermore, the US recently approved a USD450 million F-16 fighter jet fleet sustainment programme for counterterrorism measures (*The Times of India* 2022). Besides this, the recent meeting between the US Central Command (CENTCOM) Chief General Michael Erik Kurilla and Pakistan Army Chief Munir (Hussain 2023) also tests the India-US strategic relations. Pakistan, then, undoubtedly has become the Gordian knot of the increasingly regional autocracies of South and Central Asia. In this direction, Kapur (2023), a leading strategic expert of South Asia in Observer Research Foundation-India, categorically warned that the "American leaders must abandon their

decades-long dream of achieving strategic convergence between the US and Pakistan. Efforts to pursue it through measures such as expanded security assistance will not come to fruition. And they will damage the US' real strategic interests in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific" (1).

## **CONCLUSION**

Given the above arguments, it is evident that the autocratic tendencies of Russia, Pakistan, and China have created geopolitical interdependencies and a sense of security amongst them to thrive on anti-Americanism. Chia and Zheng (2021) are of the view that a "tri-power configuration" between the three will eventually play out in the South Asian region, which will change the security dynamics of South Asia and other Asian regions. Other countries such as Iran, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan have been magnetically pulled into this arc, laying solid foundations of an arc of autocracy, which the former Australian Prime Minister Morrison mentioned in 2022. He foresees a very bleak future of world politics, which has been sharply divided between the liberals and the autocrats, and states thus:

We face the spectre of a transactional world, devoid of principle, accountability, and transparency, where state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and liberty are surrendered for respite from coercion and intimidation, or economic entrapment dressed up as an economic reward (as cited in Statecraft 2022).

In conclusion, Pakistan's significance in the regional and global order has increased due to its strategic location in the arc of autocracy, supported by China and Russia. It has long been valued as an essential transit route due to its advantageous position, which links Central Asia with the Gulf area. Pakistan has become an important participant in opposing the liberal order controlled by the West, especially in light of the expanding Sino-Russo strategic partnership. Its assistance in establishing a connection between West Asia and the mountainous areas of Central and South Asia has reinforced Russia's attempts to develop closer relations with Pakistan. The present study has employed a descriptive methodology to decipher the complex web of bilateral strategic interactions between Russia and Pakistan. This study also underscores Pakistan's capacity to function as a pivotal actor in the establishment of a regional authoritarian bloc that includes China, Iran, and

Russia. Pakistan's strategic importance is evident as the arc of autocracy takes shape, influencing the geopolitical environment in the region and beyond, which eventually would have broader implications for India.

## NOTES

- \* Dr Nishtha Kaushiki, the corresponding author is an Associate Professor in the Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India. She is the Head of the Department and Dean, School of International Studies. Dr Kaushiki has eleven years of experience in teaching and research. Her research interests include security and strategic studies with an Indo-centric perspective. Dr Kaushiki has guided five doctoral theses, thirteen M.Phil. dissertations and over twenty-eight projects/dissertations at the Masters level. She has also authored around twenty-five research publications including book chapters.
- \*\* Professor (Dr) Jagmeet Bawa is a Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh (India), Dehra Campus. He has fifteen years of experience in teaching and research. Indian Political System and Central Asian Politics is his specialisation. He has guided ten students for their PhD degrees and written five books and more than thirty research papers. Currently, he is focusing on Central Asian Politics.
- \*\*\* Vikash Roushan is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India, and is working on Iran's geopolitical rise in West Asia and its consequences on India.
- \*\*\*\* Hansraj is a Junior Research Fellow at the Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India.
- \*\*\*\*\* Gorphej Singh is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh (India). He recently submitted his PhD thesis on "Exploring the trajectories of Kyrgyzstan's democratic experiments (1991–2021)".
- <sup>1</sup> Quad refers to a strategic forum between the US, India, Japan, and Australia, and aims for a free and open Indo-Pacific.
- <sup>2</sup> Pakistan faces a joint Baloch and TTP threat. The Baloch are an ethno-linguistic group spread between Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, and are a victim of political, social, and economic marginalisation in their respective countries. In 2004, the Pakistani Baloch initiated a low-level insurgency and since then have fought against the Pakistani military and the government. The separatist movement has intensified since the announcement of the construction of the Gwadar port by China as a part of the CPEC Project, and many fatal attacks have taken place on the Chinese engineers, workers, and the Pakistani security forces. On the other hand, Pakistani Taliban or TTP is that section of the Pakistani jihadis who have fought for the rise, expansion, and defence of the Taliban in Afghanistan since the early 1990s. TTP holds grievances against Islamabad's military decision to support the Coalition forces led by the US in its War on Terror. Thus, their main target is the Pakistani army, while other targets are Pakistan's paramilitary and



police forces, army schools, and judicial complexes. The deadliest attack has been the 2014 Peshawar school massacre. Having strong links with the Afghan Taliban, the attacks have intensified after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and there have been reports in 2022 that TTP has forged an agreement with the Baloch insurgents for the training of the latter.

- <sup>3</sup> ISKP, founded in 2014, is a Salafi-jihadist organisation comprising of the defected members of the TTP, al-Qaeda, and Taliban fighters. Mainly operating in Afghanistan, it has shown its network presence in Islamabad's KPK, Baluchistan, and the Punjab provinces. This group does not hesitate to conduct mass casualty attacks on civilian targets and has a stated objective to create a transnational caliphate comprising the territories of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. It targets the non-Sunni Muslims (Shias), Christians, Sikhs and Baloch's in Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- <sup>4</sup> Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan's open call for Jihad at the 74th UNGA session in 2019 was in the background of India's decision to abrogate the provisions of Article 370 that gave a special status to Jammu and Kashmir. More specifically, he called Jihad a "holy war" to "please" the Almighty. Through this message, he became the first Islamic leader advocating the cult of Jihad in contemporary times.
- <sup>5</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union is an international organisation for regional economic integration. It has an international legal personality and is established by the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union. The Member-States of the Eurasian Economic Union are the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Russian Federation.
- <sup>6</sup> In 2019, in compliance with the US sanctions on Iran, New Delhi stopped purchasing crude oil from Iran. Tehran responded by offering to connect its Chabahar Port with Gwadar as a geopolitical response. The same was announced by the former Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's Pakistan visit. Later in 2020, when Iran's former Ambassador Seyyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini visited Pakistan, he reiterated the vision and emphasised that establishing a rail network between the two ports would be crucial to link Iran and Pakistan to Europe and Central Asia. The announcement has expanded the potential for strategic cooperation between Pakistan and Iran.
- <sup>7</sup> Golden Ring is the grouping of China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, and aims to enhance geopolitical and geoeconomic cooperation. It was proposed by Iran in 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> The Durand line has always constrained the bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The line is a boundary between the two countries but cuts across the Pashtun-dominated tribal areas. Although the dispute is a colonial legacy, the nature of the unsettlement has contemporary relevance. After the resurgence of the Taliban in August 2021, the Taliban asserted that the border has separated families, and hence, they do not recognise it as an international border. Consequently, Pakistan's security forces entered 15 kilometres inside the Afghan territory, more specifically in the Chahar Burjak district, to erect fences. Several violent clashes between the Taliban and Pakistani security agencies have taken place on this issue.
- <sup>9</sup> In July 1944, the Bretton Woods system was negotiated, which required a currency peg to the US dollar, which was, in turn, pegged to the price of gold. The agreement also created two important organisations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the

World Bank, that continue to determine the rules and regulations of the international monetary-financial system. China's dispute with the Bretton Woods institutions dates back to 2010 when the US Congress refused to ratify the Chinese plan to recapitalise the IMF, which would have given large emerging economies such as China enhanced voting rights. Consequently, China has consistently raised international trade demands in other currencies, such as the yuan. Russia supports the Chinese demands owing to the sanctions it has invited, especially the Ukraine crisis.

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