

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**

(Tartu Ülikool)

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M.A. in International Relations and Regional Studies

**China's Geopolitical Stratagem:**

Bridging the Post-US Withdrawal Power Gap in South Asia and  
Middle East through Diplomacy with Pakistan and Iran.

**Master's Thesis**

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Tartu 2025



## **Authorship Declaration:**

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Word count of the thesis: 23,606

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*08.01.2025*

## **List of Abbreviations:**

1. AISS – Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies
2. BLA – Baluchistan Liberation Army
3. BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
4. CASA-1000 – Central Asia-South Asia 1000 Power Transmission Project
5. CIIS – China Institute of International Studies
6. CPEC – China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
7. COPHC – China Overseas Port Holding Company
8. CSIS – Center for Strategic and International Studies
9. ETIM – East Turkestan Islamic Movement
10. FMPRC – Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China
11. HRW – Human Rights Watch
12. IISS – International Institute for Strategic Studies
13. IMF – International Monetary Fund
14. IPIS – Institute of Political and International Studies
15. ISIS-K – Islamic State of Khorasan Province
16. ISSI – Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad
17. MSSD – Most Similar Systems Design
18. NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
19. PIPS – Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies
20. SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization
21. SIIS – Shanghai Institute for International Studies
22. TAPI – Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline
23. TTP – Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan
24. UDB-CMESS – Iranian Strategic Studies (University of Defense, Center for Middle East Strategic Studies)
25. UN – United Nations

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## **Abstract:**

This study explores China's geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies in South Asia and the Middle East in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, through diplomatic engagement with Pakistan and Iran. It investigates whether this withdrawal created a regional power vacuum and explores how China's economic and diplomatic mechanisms aim to fill this gap. This study uses neorealism as a theoretical framework and a Small-N Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), to analyse China's initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the 25-year strategic agreement with Iran. The findings demonstrate that China strategically integrates economic investments and diplomatic engagements to maximize its regional influence to realign the power dynamics. This study contributes to neorealist theory by illustrating how economic and diplomatic mechanisms are increasingly an important tool for achieving geopolitical objectives.

Keywords: China, U.S. withdrawal, Afghanistan, CPEC, Pakistan, Iran, neorealism, geopolitics, geoeconomics, South Asia, Middle East.

### **Eesti:**

See uuring analüüsib Hiina geopoliitilisi ja geomajanduslikke strateegiaid Lõuna-Aasias ja Lähis-Idas pärast USA lahkumist Afganistanist, keskendudes diplomaatilisele koostööle Pakistani ja Iraaniga. Uuritakse, kas USA lahkumine tekitab piirkondliku võimuvaakumi, ning kuidas Hiina majanduslikud ja diplomaatilised mehhanismid püüavad seda tühimikku täita. Uuring kasutab neorealismi teoreetilise raamistiku ja väikese valimi mudelit "Most Similar Systems Design" (MSSD), et analüüsida Hiina algatusi, nagu Hiina-Pakistani majanduskoridor (CPEC) ja 25-aastane strateegiline kokkulepe Iraaniga. Tulemused näitavad, et Hiina integreerib strateegiliselt majandusinvesteeringuid ja diplomaatilisi tegevusi, et suurendada oma piirkondlikku mõju ja kohandada võimudünaamikat. Uuring panustab neorealismlikku teoriasse, illustreerides, kuidas majanduslikud ja diplomaatilised mehhanismid on muutumas geopoliitiliste eesmärkide saavutamisel üha olulisemaks vahendiks.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction and Historical Background:

The year 2021 was the time when United States of America completed its military withdrawal from Afghanistan which also ended the 20 years of longstanding war on terror in Afghanistan. This war was initiated by U.S. led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members after the deadly September 11 attacks back in 2001 in New York and the Washington DC cities of America, conducted by Al-Qaeda, which was taking shelter in Afghanistan (BBC, 2021). This withdrawal was the turning point in the geopolitics of South Asia and Middle East when the U.S. President Joseph R. Biden on 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2021 announced the aim to withdraw all of the remaining troops from Afghanistan before the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of September 11 attacks (Al Jazeera, 2021). As this decision was announced, the NATO members also announced to withdraw their forces from Afghanistan following this decision and as a result, the last batch of U.S. led NATO troops departed from Afghanistan on 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2021 (Cronk, 2021). This withdrawal was not immediate but was a result of the Doha Agreements in the year 2020 between the Afghan Taliban and the Trump administration signed in Doha, Qatar. These agreements were mainly conditioned on a point that Afghanistan will never provide shelter to the terrorist groups in future who attacked U.S. and its allies (BBC, 2020). Within a week and a half after the withdrawal, the Taliban forces captured the most of the Afghanistan's provincial capitals and then entered the Kabul city, the capital of Afghanistan on 15<sup>th</sup> of August without any significant retaliation for Afghan security forces (Thomas, 2021). As a result of this development, the Afghan government collapsed, and the President Ashraf Ghani fled the country and Afghan Taliban took control of the entire country as a result (Al Jazeera, 2021). The U.S. and its allies conducted a major evacuation operation to airlift their citizens and Afghan people but majority of them were left behind under the fears of civil war and a humanitarian crisis (HRW, 2024).

The war on terror in Afghanistan was initiated by the Authorization for the use of Military Force (AUMF) on September 18, 2001, granted the President authority to use force against those who were involved in the September 11 attacks (Roberts, 2021). Operation Enduring Freedom begins on October 7, 2001, when the U.S. Military with the British support launches a bombing campaign against the Taliban inside Afghanistan. Over the next

decade, the war in Afghanistan escalates and reaches its peak in 2011 with over 100,000 U.S. troops positioned in the different regions of Afghanistan to combat the Taliban (Qazi & Chughtai, 2020). This mission was aimed to dismantle terrorist networks, symbolized by the killing of Usama Bin Laden in Pakistan's Abbottabad city in May 2011 (CNN, 2021). President Obama, in June 2011, announced a timetable for withdrawing most U.S. forces from Afghanistan (BBC, 2011). By the end of 2014, he announced to maintain 9,800 troops after combat missions are concluded (BBC, 2014). President Trump, in 2017, outlined a new policy contrary from Obama's timeline-based approach, emphasizing ground conditions over arbitrary deadlines (BBC, 2017). Peace talks between the U.S. and Afghan Taliban reached a peak in 2019 in Doha, with negotiations between Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad about the withdrawal of U.S. forces in exchange for the Taliban's commitment to prevent terrorist organizations from using Afghan territory (BBC, 2020). Despite progress, peace talks were paused after a Taliban car attack in Kabul killing over dozen people including a U.S. soldier and left many of them injured, prompted President Trump to pause meetings with the Taliban and Afghan President Ghani at Camp David (BBC, 2019). Eventually, an agreement was signed between Baradar and Khalilzad, outlining assurances from the Taliban that Afghanistan would not harbour terrorists. The agreement paved the way for a major withdrawal of American forces and Intra-Afghan talks were set to begin the following month but without any immediate cease-fire. As a result, Taliban fighters continued attacks, resulting in counter U.S. airstrikes in different provinces (BBC, 2020).

After nearly two decades of conflict, representatives from the Taliban, the Afghan government, and civil society convened in Doha, Qatar, aiming to establish peace following the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners by the Afghan government (Al Jazeera, 2021). Talks were delayed due to a U.S.-Taliban agreement suggesting a prisoner swap. Acting U.S. Defense Secretary Christopher C. Miller announced plans to reduce troops in Afghanistan to 2,500 by mid-January, fulfilling part of President Trump's promise to end the "forever wars" following the agreement with the Taliban led to further troop withdrawals in February. Days before the May 1<sup>st</sup>, withdrawal deadline set by the U.S.-Taliban agreement, President Biden declared a complete withdrawal by September 11, 2021, emphasizing the need to end America's longest war (Terri Moon Cronk, 2021).

The United States and allies completed their chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, which initiated the series of transformative developments where the

Taliban launched a countrywide military offensive to capture the provincial capitals and rural areas, and they took control of the Kabul city by the mid of August 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2021). The Afghan government, led by President Ashraf Ghani, collapsed, and the President, with his family and government crew, escaped to Uzbekistan (Al Jazeera, 2021), and later landed in UAE on Humanitarian grounds. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, the Taliban took control of Kabul city without any significant retaliation to end the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and re-established the Islamic Emirate under Taliban 2.0 (BBC, 2021).

Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport experienced a chaotic situation when thousands of Afghans wanted to flee, fearing the Taliban retribution and loss of freedom they had gained over two decades. The U.S. and its allies conducted a mega evacuation operation that airlifted over 120,000 individuals, including foreign nationals and at-risk Afghans (Dawi, 2022). This evacuation became further difficult when the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) attacked the airport with a suicide bomb, resulting in the loss of 170 Afghans and 13 U.S. military officials on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, showcasing the critical security situation and the emergence of ISIS-K as a threat the regional security (Matthew Olay, 2024).

The international community decided to freeze Afghan assets and suspend development aid, which constituted a significant portion of the Afghan economy, which resulted in a liquidity crisis and inflation and left millions of Afghans in unemployment and poverty (Al Jazeera, 2021). The United Nations report says that over half a million Afghans are facing acute food insecurity, and millions are on the edge of starvation. Public services, including education and healthcare, are disrupted, and the exit of skilled professionals, including doctors, teachers, engineers, etc., further disrupts the essential services, and humanitarian organizations struggle to address the growing needs of the population amidst logistical and political challenges under Taliban rule (UN, 2022).

The new Taliban government reversed many social advancements where they restricted women from employment, travel, and education beyond 6<sup>th</sup> grade (Guardian, 2022). This reversal excluded women from public life, and similarly, other ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Shia Hazara community, faced targeted sectarian violence and systematic discrimination, which further deepened the societal divisions in the country (HRW, 2024). The new Taliban setup struggled to control the security situation where the insurgency continued with attacks on both Taliban forces and civilians, particularly the Shia

Hazara communities, and the high-profile attacks, such as the one at Kabul Airport, also showed the challenges they faced to maintain internal security (Mackintosh et al., 2023). The Taliban's relationship with other militant groups, including al-Qaeda, also drew worldwide concerns despite their commitments under the Doha Agreement to keep Afghanistan away from becoming a haven for terrorists but the evidence also suggested al-Qaeda's presence in the country, which complicated Afghanistan's relationship with the international community, where many countries were still hesitant to formally recognize the new Taliban (Deutsch, 2024).

Following the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, the South Asia and Middle Eastern region experienced a massive geopolitical vacuum. China on the other hand the most important regional and growing international player took advantage of this power gap to further strengthen its geopolitical and geoeconomic position to consolidate its influence at this key juncture by strategically employing its relationships with Pakistan and Iran and took some important strategic manoeuvres to enhance its regional interests. The research challenge at hand is to thoroughly investigate China's post-U.S. withdrawal geopolitical strategies and diplomatic manoeuvres to bridge this post-U.S. withdrawal geopolitical gap and strengthen its regional influence. The current research problem examines the evolving dynamics in the region in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal, where the regional power balance is shifting and China's actions and strategies, notably in partnership with Pakistan and Iran, have a significant impact on the post-withdrawal scenario. This research intends to provide significant insights into China's status as a major regional power and its influence on the geopolitical order in the larger regional context by examining these interactions. The main aim of this research is to answer, **to what extent the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan left a geopolitical gap in South Asia and the Middle East, and how China strategically utilized its relationships with Pakistan and Iran to exert influence in this post-withdrawal scenario. What specific diplomatic and economic strategies has China employed in its engagement with Pakistan and Iran to solidify its regional interests and bridge the post-U.S. withdrawal geopolitical power gap in the broader regional context?** To conclude this research question and problem, it is essential to recognise the research's critical role in comprehensively assessing the complex post-U.S. withdrawal geopolitical landscape. This study seeks to provide significant insights into the evolving dynamics of regional power and the substantial

ramifications for the larger regional context through an examination of China's strategic manoeuvres with Pakistan and Iran.

This study aims to apply a neorealist approach which focuses on geoeconomic and geopolitical dynamics in the region in the aftermath of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and China's strategic interactions with Pakistan and Iran, allowing for a structured and in-depth examination of the complex regional landscape (Jilberto, Hogenboom, 2007) (Springer et al., 2016). Neorealism, a subfield of realism in international relations, is well-suited to assessing power shifts and competitive dynamics in the context of this research (Guzzini, 1993). This theoretical framework aims to the investigation of geoeconomic and geopolitical initiatives. Neorealism emphasises the balance of power, focusing on the distribution of power among states and its impact on their interactions (Kocs, 1994). This study aims to examine how China's rise in South Asia and the Middle East following the U.S. withdrawal may alter the regional balance of economic and geopolitical power. This study also explores the concept of relative gains, as framed by neorealism, to analyse how China's growing geoeconomic and geopolitical influence, particularly through its engagements with Pakistan and Iran, reflects its strategic pursuit of maximizing power and securing advantages in the region. Furthermore, this study also aims to look further into to what extent China's engagements with Pakistan and Iran align with neorealist principles, specifically in terms of economic interests and geopolitical manoeuvring. The examination will be centred on whether these alliances have been built to maximise China's economic and geopolitical benefits and affect the regional economic order. In short, by applying a neorealist approach, this research systematically examines the geoeconomic and geopolitical power dynamics in the regional context following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. This approach provides a comprehensive and structured analysis of the complex regional landscape, with a dedicated emphasis on geoeconomic and geopolitical aspects (Huasheng, 2016a). This study further serves as a testing ground for neorealism in the specific context of post-U.S. withdrawal power transition in South Asia and the Middle East. By applying the neorealist approach to study China's rise in the region and its interactions with Pakistan and Iran, the research aims to validate or refine neorealist assumptions about power shifts, geopolitical dynamics, and strategic alliances in this unique geopolitical landscape. Furthermore, by examining the post-U.S. withdrawal scenario in South Asia and the Middle East, the research fills a critical knowledge gap, specifically focusing on the geopolitical vacuum and China's strategic

utilization of relationships with Pakistan and Iran. The study offers a targeted exploration of this unique and underexplored aspect, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the region's geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics.

This thesis employs a Small-N comparative case study design using the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) methodology to explore China's evolving influence strategies in South Asia and the Middle East following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The study focuses on two cases i.e., Pakistan and Iran, selected for their geographical proximity, China's involvement there, regional dynamics and internal (in)stability. And this research design aims for an in-depth examination of China's economic and diplomatic strategies as causal mechanisms. By leveraging the MSSD framework, this study isolates and analyses critical variables to understand how China's actions adapt to the unique contexts of Pakistan and Iran, enabling nuanced insights rather than broad generalizations.

A qualitative methodology is applied through theory-testing process tracing, guided by the neorealist framework, which views states as rational actors pursuing power and security. This study hypothesizes that China uses its economic initiatives and diplomatic engagements as a tool to maximize its geopolitical and geoeconomic influence in the region. The data is aimed to be collected from the official government and ministry websites, media reports from the reputed media outlet and the reports from the leading thinktanks of IR and will be cross validated for to ensure reliability and accuracy. The analysis employs process tracing to investigate causal mechanisms, testing hypotheses, and identifying patterns that align with theoretical assumptions. While the focus on Pakistan and Iran enhances the depth of the analysis, the research acknowledges limitations, including scope constraints, restricted data access, and potential biases in official narratives. Despite these challenges, the methodology ensures a thorough and evidence-based examination of China's influence strategies in a complex geopolitical context.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Theoretical Framing and Literature Review:**

This Chapter serves the theoretical and the literature base of this study for the better understanding of analysis presented in the chapter.

#### **2.1 Neorealist Interpretations of Power Dynamics:**

The famous American political scientist Kenneth Waltz, argues in his book “Theory of International Politics” in 1979 that the international system is anarchic in nature, which is the most important feature of international relations (Waltz, 1979). He claims that the actions of the great powers can be described through the anarchical structure of world’s politics. Within this anarchical framework, neorealism examines how states, as unitary rational actors, navigate global political complexities. According to neorealism, the primary motivation of the state is to ensure security and survival in a self-help system. When studying state behavior within this anarchical system, neorealism explains the dynamics of the security dilemma. Neorealism recognizes the inheritance of security dilemma in which states, while seeking their own security, unintentionally contribute to increased tension and conflict (Jervis, 1978). Defensive measures taken by one state to ensure its security are frequently perceived as threats by other states which results in a never-ending cycle of arms races and growing tensions. This inherent tension influences the strategic decisions made by states seeking to maintain their security (Waltz, 1979). According to Kenneth Waltz, “[A] theory of international politics can describe the range of likely outcomes of state actions and interactions within a given system and show how the range of expectations varies as systems change” (Waltz, 1979).

Neo-realism is divided into two broad categories: defensive realism and offensive realism. According to defensive realists, nations prioritize growing their military power when threatened, rather than maximizing their relative power (Toft, 2005). Waltzian balance of power theory is a defensive, neo-realist approach. Waltz's Theory of International Politics suggests that governments can rely on their own power or build formal alliances for security. The first pertains to internal balancing, and the latter to outward balancing. According to Waltz, international politics is defined by the establishment of alliances and counter-alliances to maintain power balances (Schweller, 1997). A defensive realist strategy

might lead to a security issue as other governments may misinterpret the defensive reason and strive to maximize their power (Montgomery, 2006). Offensive realists present an opposing viewpoint. Some say that major nations are uncertain about the amount of strength required for security. Uncertainty drives states to seek hegemonic position and prevents others from challenging their power in the future. According to John Mearsheimer, a prominent proponent of offensive realism, a strong power advantage might lead to more aggressive behavior (Toft, 2005). Stephen Brooks takes a similar position, and argues that in the anarchical international system, states always seek to “advance their power over other nations, taking military advantage of weaker states whenever they have the chance (Brooks, 1997).

The distinction between defensive and offensive realism is simple: defensive realism suggests that states seek survival in an anarchical system, while offensive realism emphasizes that states, particularly great powers, seek power at the expense of others (Mearsheimer, 2001a). Defensive and offensive realism share a focus on the structural causes of state behavior. Defensive and offensive realists argue that the search for security is driven by the anarchic structure of the international system, as opposed to classical realists like Hans Morgenthau who believe power struggles between nations stem from the desire to dominate others (Snyder, 2002).

Waltz’ idea of neorealism was different from classical realism in two ways i.e., methodology and level of analysis. In terms of methodology, Waltz reconfigured realism as a rigorous social-scientific theory drawing in particular on macroeconomics in terms of level of analysis, he stated that traditional realist arguments about domestic institutions, the quality of diplomacy and statecraft, national morale, and human nature was mostly irrelevant. He stipulated that states as unitary rational actors exist in a self-help system where each state must fend for itself. The international system is defined by remarkable continuity across space and time, and the trajectory of international relations is explained by the distribution of power across units in the system. Waltz argued that the most stable arrangement was “bipolarity,” or a balance between two great powers (Waltz, 1979)

In neorealism, polarity or the number of great powers significantly influence the dynamics of global politics. This concept is also relevant in the context of unipolarity but according to structural logic, unipolarity is inherently unstable and the rationale behind this claim is

in the likelihood of balancing behaviours, where rising powers align to counteract the dominance of a unipolar state (Walt, 2009). However, the resilience of unipolarity is still being debated. Wohlforth, for example, challenges the notion that it is inherently unstable. Regardless, when unipolarity persists, international relations take on a distinct character. The dynamics of hegemony, as well as the resistance it faces, differ significantly from scenarios involving two or more great powers (Legro, 2011). Schweller has highlighted the distinct structural logic of tripolar systems, adding complexity to the understanding of how the distribution of capabilities influences global affairs. In multipolar systems, where power is distributed among multiple actors, even peripheral changes of equal absolute magnitude can have a significant impact on the overall balance. The implications of such differences are still being debated. The question is whether peripheral conflicts are more common in bipolar systems because of their perceived stability, or less frequent because there aren't enough compelling reasons to get involved. Scholars such as Deutsch and Singer, Waltz, and Rosecrance offer opposing viewpoints, advocating for bipolarity, multipolarity, and a nuanced 'bi-multipolarity' stance (Wayman, 1984). However, empirical testing of these theories is limited due to a scarcity of historical examples of bipolar systems over the last 2,500 years in Western history. Some notable bipolar systems include Athens-Sparta in the fifth century BCE, Carthage-Rome in the third century BCE, the Hapsburg-Bourbon rivalry in the sixteenth century, and the United States-Soviet Union in the twentieth century.

A central debate in the structural balance-of-power approach is about the effects of polarity, or the number of powers centre in the system, on the likelihood of war. Realists argue for the stabilising effects of a multipolar balance of power, focusing on shifting alliances. In contrast, Waltz proposes a theory of bipolar stability in which internal power capabilities are the primary source of stability (Waltz, 1979). While formal models and empirical studies produce inconclusive results regarding the stability of various polarities, scholars have investigated deductive analyses. Tri-polarity appears as a frequently proposed stable system in formal models. According to some studies, multipolarity has a lower frequency of international crises, whereas bipolar systems have fewer major power crises. Scholars studying the relationship between power distribution and international conflicts have shifted their focus from the structural to the dyadic level for theoretical and empirical reasons. Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman discover that structural variables such as polarity have no effect on the likelihood of war at the systemic level, prompting a shift towards dyadic power distributions. In understanding the concept of balance of power within the

framework of polarity, neorealism emphasises that whether states consciously pursue balancing policies is irrelevant in explaining the likelihood of peace or war (Cederman, 1994). The emphasis is on systemic conditions like power distribution, state behaviour, and conflict dynamics.

When a dominant power is declining in a specific region and a rising power seeks to expand its influence, neorealism provides a unique perspective. In this scenario, neorealism proposes that states, driven by the fundamental desire for security and survival within the anarchic international system, see the weakening of a dominant power as an opportunity to assert themselves. The theory holds that rising powers, acting in their rational self-interest, strategically engage in efforts to fill the void left by declining powers. While neorealism is known for its emphasis on maintaining equilibrium among states, its applicability extends when power undergoes transformative shifts. Rising powers play an important role in neorealism when powerful nations decline, resulting in power vacuums (Onea, 2014). Neorealism contends that the international system is currently changing, as evidenced by careful strategic decisions and clear motivations. The focus of neorealism on state behaviour during these shifts allows to better understand how rising powers fill these gaps. Countries, motivated by a desire for security, carefully consider these opportunities to increase their global influence. Neorealism emphasises that these actions are not simply expansionist, but rather strategic responses to the disorderly nature of the international order. Rising powers strategize to reshape the balance of power, weighing the benefits and risks. Neorealism also provides a framework that fills the power vacuum, the rising power may utilize both geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies to increase their influence and to establish a new balance of power in the regions where power vacuums happened. Since states are motivated fundamentally by the pursuit of security and survival in the anarchic system, a power vacuum can be utilized as an opportunity to assert influence (Onea, 2014). From a structural point of view, rising powers do not engage in these strategies for aggressive ambitions but as a well-calculated response aimed at securing an advantage of the evolving regional dynamics. Strategies including economic alliances, and trade agreements are integral aspects of rising powers in pursuit of regional dominance by extending their economic influence. Neorealism argues that rising powers use economic tools wisely, recognising the interconnectedness of economic and geopolitical power (Goddard and Nexon, 2016). In short, neorealism provides a comprehensive explanation for rising powers' dual use of geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies in regions

experiencing power vacuums, framing these actions as rational responses to opportunities for increased security, influence, and a potential shift in the regional balance of power in their favour (MacDonald and Parent, 2011).

The concept of relative gains refer to the idea that the benefits one state gets in the comparison to the other states and the neorealism prioritises relative gains over absolute gains. According to the theory, states prioritise relative power and security in the world politics over absolute gains. As a result, states must rely on their own strength and security to survive. Neoliberal institutionalism on contrary, argues that states are primarily concerned with their own absolute gains and have little regard for the gains of others. But neorealism or structural realism argues that states are primarily concerned with relative gains rather than the absolute gains. In the international politics, "relative gain is more important than absolute gain." These differing assumptions about state preferences result in varying expectations about the prospects for international conflict and cooperation. The more states care about relative gains and the more is a gain for one state is perceived as a loss for another, making cooperation more difficult (Powell, 1991).

Neorealism has also received extensive academic criticism on a variety of levels. One major criticism concerns its structural determinism and oversimplified assumptions about state behaviour. Critics argue that neorealism presents states as monolithic, unitary actors motivated solely for the pursuit of power and security. This reductionist viewpoint tends to ignore internal complexities, domestic factors, and competing interests within states, resulting in an overly deterministic account of international relations. Polarity, which is also an important idea of the theory of neorealism, is also criticised by many scholars. They argue that neorealism fails to address the complexities of power distribution in today's globalised and interconnected world, where non-state actors also play important roles in shaping the power dynamics (Legro and Moravcsik, 2014). The neorealist concept of the security dilemma which is acknowledged as an important aspect of state interactions is criticised for its limited approach where the critics argue that neorealism is insufficient to provide viable mechanisms for addressing the security dilemma, resulting states in cycles of arms races and mistrust with no clear path towards conflict resolution (Schweller, 1996). Scholars argue that the emphasis on relative gains, in which states compare their gains to others, oversimplifies the motivations that drives the state behaviour (Baldwin, 1993). So, neorealism is also facing a lot of criticism for its structural and state-centric focus. As the global politics evolves, scholars advocate for a more dynamic and inclusive approach that

considers a broader range of actors, power dynamics, and global challenges (Freyberg-Inan et al., 2009).

## **2.2 Neorealist Reading of U.S. War on Terror in Afghanistan:**

The origin of neorealism theory can be traced back to international state-to-state relations. The element of opportunity and preference determines the behavior of states. States choose self-defense, which is carried out using either a defensive or offensive strategy. However, it is not assumed in this context that states automatically consider survival as an alternative or offensive strategy as a contrast. All states desire material power to uphold their structures (Pashakhanlou, n.d. 2018). At the end of the Cold War, the world recognized that possession of material power has value, transforming states into powerful and weak ones. States that gain significant power engage in political skills and build a strategy that propels the state to the top; however, this is not the case for small or weak states. The United States' post-Cold War goal has been to maximize military might, and with that help, American military invasions have jeopardized the Middle East and oil supplies (Brown, 2013).

In the international politics, the United States is recognized as a great power with a continued interest in maintaining its dominance around the different regions of the world. After the World War II, the United States has been involved in the conflicts such as the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Soviet Afghan War, the Arab Spring, the Afghan War, the Iraq War, and the Syrian War which clearly highlights U.S.'s ambitions to pursue its global dominance and power. To sustain its unipolar position and ensure its security, the U.S. often engages with political issues, intensifying regional tensions (Bromley, 2006). Weak states, unable to navigate such political pressures, frequently descend into anarchy and conflict (Pashakhanlou, n.d. 2018). The U.S. intervened in Afghanistan after the September 11 terror attacks, which also resulted in the regional instability and created security challenges for the neighbouring countries in the region. Pakistan, in particular, faced a significant consequence from U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in the form of a wave of Afghan based terrorism across country and also faced a migration crisis when hundreds of thousands of Afghans gathered on the boarder to take refuge (Ansari, 2011). Similar consequences were also faced by other neighbouring countries in the region and the deployment of U.S. led NATO forces and their continuous military engagement with terrorist organizations, including drone strikes also escalated the security situation in the region (Matthew, 2020).

After the deadly September 11 attacks, the United States decided to start a war against terrorism to eliminate the threats from al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. The main goal of this war was to dismantle the operations of terrorist organizations taking shelter and using Afghan territory to attack other countries and this war was considered as an important national security measure to prevent such attacks in future on American soil (Khalid and Shah, 2015). This initiative was also backed by the broader U.S. ambitions to show its dominance in the strategically important region which was predominantly under the influence of its rivals such as China and Russia. President George W. Bush's neoconservative ideology further shaped the idea of "War on Terror," emphasizing the use of U.S. power to promote democracy and American values in Afghanistan. This perspective, alongside with the strong public demand to retaliate in the wake of September 11 attacks created a dilemma where this invasion was not just inevitable but also morally justified (Khalid and Shah, 2015).

Neorealists see this invasion as a response against both immediate and long-term security concerns (Mearsheimer, 2003). The primary stated justification aligns with the neorealist principle of state survival. Afghanistan which became a safe haven for the terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda was being seen as an existential threat to U.S. after September 11 attacks. Within the anarchic international system, the invasion to eliminate Al-Qaeda's operational bases in Afghanistan was the main objective to ensure the U.S. security by neutralizing the direct security threats. However, this invasion also had the objectives of showing the power and maintaining the balance of power in that region which maybe not be the immediate objectives but turned out to be a supportive of this argument in the long-term (Mishra, 2023).

The establishment of longstanding U.S. presence in Afghanistan can also be seen as a geopolitical move to showcase the power and influence in the region in order to counter the regional competitors such as China and Russia from challenging the U.S. hegemony, which aligns with the neorealist concept of dominance to maintain its hegemonic influence in the international system. Additionally, Afghanistan's geostrategic location also offered significant strategic advantages, to monitor and exert influence over neighboring states such as Pakistan and Iran ("U.S. Afghanistan policy," 2017). This focus on securing a strategically important region underscores the neorealist idea that states act in their own self-interest to maximize security within an anarchic international framework.

The long-standing U.S. presence in Afghanistan also created the some protentional regional security challenges, specifically hiking the terror attacks inside Pakistan. This situation explains the unstable nature of power dominance that the actions taken for state's own security can generate the counter threats for the security of other states. The overall U.S. invasion in Afghanistan can be seen from neorealistic lens as an initiative to counter the perceived security threats, controlling regional power dynamics, and to pursue the self-preservation in the international system (Baral, 2013).

The question whether the U.S. invasion in Afghanistan was also driven to gain relative power or the maintain the existing influence is complicated and with both of these objectives playing an important role here. After the end of Cold War and the fall of Soviet Union, the U.S. remained as a single global power and hence this invasion can also be seen as another effort to maintain its global hegemony or a dominance. The security threats posed by Al-Qaeda provided an opportunity to U.S. to further solidify its global dominance and eliminate any potential threats if any, challenging its global influence (Mishra, 2023). Similarly, the decision to establish a longstanding presence in Afghanistan also reflects a strategy to counterbalance the influence of the neighboring countries such as Iran, China and Russia. This strategy closely aligns with the idea that states continuously strive to increase their relative power in the international system (Freeman, 2012).

However, this invasion may also have underestimated the complexities and the consequences of the invasion because of the optimism to eliminate the security threats and achieving the victory to fulfil the desires of the American public which also may have led to underestimate the risks connected with prolonged conflict for the regional stability (Biddle, 2002). The financial cost to finance the war, the potential of significant loss of life of the troops and innocent people, the possibility of the resulting into a destabilized region may not have properly been considered before initiating the invasion. Furthermore, the urgency and the moral responsibility after the September 11 attacks may have overlooked the properly structured long-term cost-benefit analysis as a result of this invasion (Crawford, 2011).

Following the catastrophic September 11 attacks, the United States sought international support for its mission to eliminate the terror threats coming from Afghanistan. For the first time in history, Article 5 of the NATO Treaty was invoked to secure collective backing. Coercion was not a significant factor within NATO; the shared threat posed by al-Qaeda

provided a strong rationale for unified action. Beyond NATO, the U.S. administration launched a global diplomatic campaign, securing the support of nearly 40 countries (Altun, 2015). A critical yet delicate alliance was also established with Pakistan, a country with historical ties to the Taliban regime. While Pakistan officially condemned the September 11 attacks, the U.S. also asked Pakistan for its cooperation for logistical support and getting access to the Afghan border (Altun, 2015). The U.S. government used a mixed diplomatic strategy to secure this complex cooperation, which includes the threats of imposing international sanctions and promises for the substantial aid to cover the losses as a result of this invasion. This approach depicts how U.S. leveraged its power, resources, and influence to acquire a strategic partner in this critical security situation. Similarly, U.S. also approached Post Soviet states including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan where these countries ensured their logistical support and giving access to their military bases to the U.S. forces. This strategy provides U.S. a strong foothold in a region which was historically under the Russia's sphere of influence (uz Zaman, 2016).

According to neorealism, when small states perceive security threats, they may engage in a band wagon by aligning themselves with the powerful state to ensure their stability (Carter, 2022). The Afghan War provides a clear example of this principle. These Post Soviet republics such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which were traditionally a part of Russia's sphere of influence, quickly aligned themselves with the United States following the September 11 attacks in order to secure their existence during the U.S. invasion in Afghanistan (Sulaiman, 2002). This alignment can be interpreted as an effort to maintain their internal security aligning with the dominant global power in the face of a newly emerging regional terror threats. Additionally, these smaller states likely anticipated potential benefits from their cooperation, including economic aid and protection from regional instability.

While apparent counterbalancing against the United States was limited in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, a neorealist perspective advises caution in interpreting this as complete U.S. dominance (Parent and Rosato, 2015). These developments suggest the possibility of a gradual shift in power distribution, potentially transitioning toward a multipolar regional order where U.S. influence may be less absolute. Prospective balancing strategies may focus on long-term objectives and utilize methods beyond direct military confrontation. The growing strategic interests of Russia and China, coupled with their increased investments in regional stability initiatives, indicate their efforts to play a greater

role in shaping the regional balance of power (Kim and Indeo, 2013). However, the pace and extent of this transition remain uncertain. Long-term rebalancing depends on the internal stability of states seeking greater influence and the United States' ongoing ability and willingness to project power in the region.

Neorealism highlights alliances as tools that states use to enhance their relative power and security. The U.S. response to the Afghan War reflects a comprehensive application of this principle (Ratti, 2006). By invoking NATO Article 5 and forming a broad international coalition, the United States effectively utilized existing alliances and created new partnerships to bolster its position and achieve its objectives (Weber and Hyde-Price, 2016). Through these security guarantees and offering financial compensations, U.S. successfully expended its influence in that region, which characterizes the neorealist emphasis on the alliance building as an important part of foreign policy (Cohen, 2003).

Hence, even with the immediate goal in hand to eliminate Al-Qaeda and the terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, this invasion seems to have long term strategic objectives in back of the mind for the United States (Biddle, 2005). A complicated mix of security concerns, resource constraints, and geopolitical goals most likely influenced the choice to invade and establish a long-term presence. The primary objective to eliminate the terrorist groups from Afghanistan was to convert the country into a secure nation which cannot turn into the safe haven for the terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda which aligns with the post-September 11 U.S. national security policy (Rogers, 2007). Additionally, a secure Afghanistan can also serve as a buffer zone to prevent the spread of terrorism from destabilizing the neighboring countries causing regional instability (Rogers, 2014). Afghanistan's geostrategic location makes it a viable on the junction of oil and natural gas trade from in the Arab world to profitable markets in the other regions. The United States' influence over these energy routes would bring substantial economic and geopolitical leverage in the region (YAR et al., 2023).

The Strategic location of Afghanistan was another significant factor which motivated U.S. for its long term stay in Afghanistan. By maintaining a long-term presence in the country, U.S. got an opportunity for the power projection into Central Asia and the broader Middle East to demonstrate U.S. hegemony and commitment to regional peace and security. This presence also enabled the United States to monitor and potentially counterbalance the influence of regional rivals such as China, Russia, and Iran (Baral, 2013).

Additionally, a less supported but widely claimed argument about American exceptionalism—the belief that the United States has a unique responsibility to reshape the world in its own image, may also have been in back of the mind before initiating the war in Afghanistan (Malik, 2021). These motivations likely operated simultaneously, with their relative significance shifting over time. It is also essential to differentiate between intent and outcome. While the United States may have genuinely believed in the transformative potential of its involvement, the legacy of the Afghan War underscores the limitations of achieving these ambitious objectives.

According to neorealists, Afghanistan's untapped mineral wealth, particularly rare earth elements, also holds significant strategic value. While immediate exploitation may not have been the primary objective but securing future access to these resources can add up in the U.S. economy, enhances strategic bargaining power, and reduces potential reliance on competitors. A core principle of neorealism is the effort to maintain regional, if not global, dominance (Kiggins, R. D. 2015). The long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan which is bordering Russia, China, and Iran, can also be viewed as a strategy to preserve U.S. dominance in the region full of U.S. rivals. Such a presence allows the projection of military power across entire region, controlling its adversaries from directly challenging U.S. authority and limiting their capacity to expand influence in the region. Additionally, Afghanistan would also serve as an operational base for extending U.S. power and influence into the Middle East and South Asia (Yar et al., 2023).

But after the killing of Usama and neutralizing Al-Qaeda, and staying in Afghanistan for 2 decades, the decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan was shaped by several political and domestic factors, including changing international power dynamics, change in the strategic priorities, and a changing global security landscape. The 20 years of war was also associated with huge cost of maintaining the military presence in Afghanistan was also in the back of the mind for the decision to withdraw forces. The human cost, the substantial financial expenditure, and declining public support for the war suggest a neorealist cost-benefit analysis, ultimately favoring the withdrawal. This decision reflects a possible strategic reallocation of resources toward regions or issues more central to U.S. geopolitical objectives (Pan, 2021).

Although the United States continues to be a global power hegemon but the chaotic nature of its withdrawal from Afghanistan may reflect a weakening of its relative power or its

capacity to effectively establish long-term nation-states and project influence in distant regions (Lieber, 2016). Such an event could signal to competitors a diminished ability to sustain prolonged engagements. However, it might also represent a calculated, strategic decision to reduce international commitments and redirect focus toward countering emerging powers such as China.

The withdrawal may further indicate a notable shift in U.S. geopolitical priorities. Ending the prolonged war in Afghanistan suggests a deliberate pivot toward addressing key strategic rivals, such as China, or engaging with rising power centers in the Indo-Pacific. This withdrawal could also be interpreted as a tactical retreat aimed at enabling resource redeployment and strengthening U.S.'s position for future strategic challenges (Yousif and Kakar, 2022).

The changing global security landscape, particularly with the rise of China may also have influenced the U.S. decision to withdraw from Afghanistan because China's growing economic and military strength poses also challenges the traditional U.S. hegemony and this withdrawal may also reflect as a strategic realignment to counter growing Chinese power in the global politics (Rasooli et al., n.d., 2023). But the Taliban's return to power also raises serious concerns about the regional stability in the aftermath of the withdrawal. The resurgence of the terrorist groups and the escalating instability in Afghanistan may also necessitate future engagements which would undermine the intended objectives of the invasion and may allow other regional actors like China and Russia to pursue their regional interest.

It is important to note that the U.S. withdrawal itself is a very complex decision which is also shaped by various factors behind this decision. The regional power structure, changing priorities, local political pressure, resource allocation, human cost of war, and the broader security dynamics also played an important role in the decision to withdraw forces. And the long-term consequences of this withdrawal will take years to unfold with its effects on U.S. power politics and the region which is left behind in a power void. Examining how these factors interact, provides critical insights into the current recalibration of global power and security objectives within the changing international system (UMAROV, 2024).

Neorealism emphasizes that states must consistently assess the opportunity costs associated with their pursuit of power. The resources the United States devoted to Afghanistan were substantial, encompassing human lives, financial investments, and political capital

(Crawford, 2018). Prolonged involvement may have hindered its capacity to address emerging threats in other regions effectively. From a neorealist perspective, this withdrawal can be explained in several ways such as this withdrawal is the acknowledgement of the limitations of U.S. power to transform the Afghanistan and the surrounding region, which necessitates the reassessment of its strategic objectives (Mearsheimer, 2003). Alternatively, this decision can also be a new approach to relocate the resources and to counter the rising China's influence while preserving U.S. dominance on the global scale (MacDougall, 2017).

The theory of neorealism also recognizes that the withdrawal can also serve as a strategic maneuver. The withdrawal from Afghanistan can also be a calculated measure that the resulting instability may also increase the dependence of the regional actors on U.S. from direct involvement in the future conflicts. It is important to note that neorealism just provides a lens to analyze the events which emphasizes state interests and power dynamics. It does not inherently justify the invasion or a withdrawal rather it just offers a lens to understand to actions taken for the pursuit of power in the World politics.

The real consequences of this withdrawal, the U.S.'s capacity to sustain its global power, and the critical question in hand that whether this withdrawal enhanced or weakened the U.S.'s dominance in international politics will take years to unfold, but this withdrawal accepts the changing regional, if not global, power dynamics, the evaluation of cost-benefit analysis, and U.S. ability to maintain its influence in the changing geopolitics (Bobkin, 2022).

The neorealists may interpret this withdrawal as a move to keep national interest, strategic reassessment and prioritizing the national security in the changing international political dynamics (Shively, 2020). The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan which resulted in response to the September 11 attacks driven by the continued terror threats from Al-Qaeda. However, this conflict extended for two decades with no clear resolution and the financial and human cost of this war began to overshadow the aims behind launching this intervention (Crawford, 2018). The withdrawal from this perspective can be seen from the neorealist idea about the pursuit of national security and the survival in an anarchic international system. The "America First" policy of Trump administration which aims to prioritize the national interests and avoiding the prolonged foreign engagement, which played a significant role in this withdrawal supports the neorealist principle that U.S. aims to

separate itself from the conflicts with no clear outcome, supports neorealist idea that states tend to prioritize their own interests in the pursuit of security and survival (MacDonald, 2018).

This withdrawal also points out towards the new changes in the U.S. foreign policy to prefer bilateral agreements over multilateral commitments (Bobkin, 2022). Trump administration's rhetoric on negotiating the peace deal with Taliban is supported by the neorealist approach of states as a rational actor striving to maximize their own interests in an anarchic international system (Shively, 2020). The Ashraf Ghani's administration in Afghanistan also showed deep the concerns about the Afghanistan's security and stability in the absence of U.S. military support. According to the Ghani's administration, the left behind vacuum may also spark the activities of insurgency, resulting into the weakening of Afghan government authority, leading to increased violence and instability (Sakhi & Pforzheimer, 2021). This situation also reflects the neorealist idea that the absence of a strong power may result in conflicts and unrest.

This withdrawal also has significant geopolitical implications more importantly in the context of China expanding its regional influence. This withdrawal clearly reflects the anarchic structure of international system, where this region predominantly was directly dominated by U.S. during the two decades of intervention, and now this withdrawal with the rise of Chinese influence in the region opens up as an arena of the great power competition. The enhanced Chinese presence in South Asia and Middle East, driven by the need to secure the critical assets in the region and increasing its economic influence aligns with the neorealist idea that rising powers challenge the dominance of existing power to safeguard their security and survival (Chen, 2020). The geostrategic location of Afghanistan at the junction of South Asia and Middle East also allows China to take advantage of this situation to expand its influence across the regions in the U.S.'s absence.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which is a massive infrastructure building and regional connectivity project aims to underscore the China's ambitions in the region of connectivity and economic engagements (Sullivan, 2022). The investments in the infrastructure building projects under BRI would allow China to enhance regional connectivity and gain economic and geopolitical benefits by connecting region under such projects (Wang and Xu, 2022). Neorealists may argue that this initiative of geoeconomics aligns with the pursuit of relative gains in the important geostrategic region for both U.S.

and China. Additionally, China also perceives the security threats from the terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and sees them as a potential threat for its Xinjiang region. Neorealism argues that states take proactive measures such as building alliances or using military interventions as a tool to address the security threats they perceive.

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, China is consistently engaging with the new Taliban administration and the neighboring countries including Iran and Pakistan over the post-U.S. withdrawal situation of the region. Neorealism also emphasizes the importance of strategic maneuvering and alliance formation in self-interests of the states in the geopolitically important regions. The Chinese maneuvers (explained in chapter 4) does not only have the regional repercussions but also opening a new geopolitical rivalry between U.S. and China. Since neorealism anticipates that the great powers seek to expend their influence by counterbalancing their rivals, the post withdrawal Afghanistan and the overall South Asia and Middle eastern region may become a new hotspot of new U.S. China political rivalry (Aria et al., 2023).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology:**

This chapter deals with the five main aspects of methodological protocols, i.e., the research puzzle in hand, what research design this study employs, the type of research methodology this study uses, the data sources this study applies, and finally, the methodological limitations of this research in the following way.

#### **3.1 Research Puzzle:**

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was completed in 2021, can be marked as a historic turning point not only in the geopolitics of South Asia and Middle East but also in the global Politics, which left a geopolitical power vacuum in the already established regional dynamics over the period of last 20 years, since the war started in Afghanistan. The U.S. military presence was considered as a stabilizing force in the region by not only combating against the terrorism and regional security threats but also created a balance of power against the growing China's influence through its diplomatic and security maneuvers in the region. But the chaotic U.S. withdrawal raised questions about the redistribution of influence in the region and the strategic responses of the other international powers. The thesis aims to resolve the complex puzzle: Did U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan created a power vacuum in the region and if yes, how China as a rising power and the most important regional player around South Asia and Middle East, strategically leveraging its economic and diplomatic tools to fill the gap in South Asia and Middle East? The second layer of this puzzle is the theoretical ambiguity to study the complex Chinese actions in the region. Neorealism, which is a dominant framework to power in the anarchic international system argues that states act in the self interest in such system to ensure their survival alongside with maximizing their power. Under the traditional implementation of neorealism, China would rely on the military might to assert the influence in the wake of this geopolitical shift but contrary to the tradition, China opts for the economic investments such as strengthening Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the diplomatic engagements with the regional players including conflict mediation in the region. This divergence from the traditional neorealist expectations seeks an in-depth investigation into why China is prioritizing economic and diplomatic engagements over the traditional military mechanisms to increase its regional influence to fill the perceived power vacuum.

The third layer of this puzzle is about the contrasting regional contexts of China's engagements with Pakistan and Iran. Both countries are located in the region which can be regarded as highly important for China's ambitions, but they still have some significant differences. Pakistan serves as a heart of China's BRI through the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), while Iran's massive untapped energy resources and the 25-years of cooperation agreement signed in 2021 between China and Iran also offer the opportunities for China for the regional influence. However, there are significant differences which are puzzling the situation and need to be resolved. Pakistan has longstanding relationships with China while Iran's relations with China have been uncertain historically. Pakistan's internal instability and Iran faces international sanctions and regional isolation. This situation raises a question that How China aims to strategize its mechanisms to fit in this distinct context and what does this situation explain about the Chinese influence building mechanisms through its engagements with Pakistan and Iran?

The fourth layer of the research puzzle lies between Chinese investments and diplomatic engagements and the criticism they face in return. On one hand, China portrays its investments to foster the regional connectivity and economic development where critics refer these investments as a Chinese tool to create economic dependences aligning more closely with the China's long term geopolitical ambitions of gaining regional influence rather than achieving short term economic goals. These opposing arguments add another layer to the puzzle that to what extent China's actions showcase the regional cooperation versus the strategic leverage to maximize its power and influence?

It is important to solve this puzzle in order to understand the transforming regional geopolitics after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and also to understand that how state may reshape the conventional methods of gaining power to achieve their own goals in different geopolitical situations.

### **3.2 Research Design:**

This study uses small-N most similar system design (MSSD) as a research design to provide in depth analysis of the evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies used by China in South Asia and Middle East after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The MSSD approach offers a rigorous framework to identify the shared characteristics and key differences in the chosen cases, which influence China's strategic behavior.

### **3.2.1 Why MSSD?**

The Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) is a well-established comparative methodology designed to study cases that share significant similarities across most variables but differ in key aspects related to the research question (Przeworski and Teune, 1970; Landman, 2002). This design enables to isolate and analyse the role of those differentiating variables in shaping outcomes, making it particularly effective for studies in political science and international relations. MSSD is ideal for small-N studies, where the depth of analysis takes precedence over the breadth of sampling, allowing for a focused examination of specific causal mechanisms (Leuffen, 2007; Panke, 2018).

MSSD approach offers a comparative analysis of the China's strategies in Pakistan and Iran in the context of this study. These countries share geographic proximity, strategic importance including economic ties with China, which offers a controlled environment to examine how China strategizes to its strategies in differing contexts. The difference in the historical relations, internal stability and regional rivalries, these factors make MSSD a useful approach to solve the research puzzle under study.

### **3.2.2 Case selection and why Small-N?**

The small-N framework is justified by the complexity and the depth required to study China's geopolitical strategy. Large-N can also offer broader generalizability, but it can oversimplify the mechanisms in that particular geopolitical context. The small-N on the other hand, offers detailed yet context specific analysis, which helps this study to offer the richer understanding of the causal mechanisms under investigation.

Methodologically, choosing Pakistan and Iran as cases is grounded both in their relevance with the research puzzle and the small-N mechanism. Empirically, both these countries are important for China to play around the region for the fulfilment of its geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies. However, the contrasting factors add more value in the analysis. Pakistan on one hand, has a long history of strategic relations with China which are also driven by its dependency on Chinese loans and investments, where Iran offers an opposing case of limited integration with China and its regional isolation coupled with the international sanctions imposed on Iran by United States. These contrasting factors make this choice ideal to understand how historical ties, economic reliance and the regional dynamics influence China's geopolitical and geoeconomic calculus.

### **3.2.3 MSSD relevance to Research Puzzle:**

Since the research puzzle dissects the unclear and contradictory aspects of China's geopolitics and geoeconomics in the region in the aftermath of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and while China's overarching goals for power maximization and regional dominance align with the neorealist expectations, the mechanisms that China adapts in contrasting contexts require systemic investigation. The MSSD framework is solid enough to dissect these complexities focusing on the cases with controlled similarities and critical differences, provide insights into the causal dynamics of China's geopolitics and geoeconomics.

For example, the established Pakistan China relations through CPEC provide a clear pathway to understand how Beijing leverages the economic dependency for its geopolitical ambitions. But on the other hand, Iran's strategic isolation and strained terms with West offer a unique perspective that how China strategizes to overcome those barriers and integrate Iran into its geopolitical and geoeconomic calculus.

### **3.2.4 Operationalizing the MSSD Framework:**

The MSSD framework is operationalized through two key mechanisms that China uses to expand i.e., economic initiatives and diplomatic engagements. These mechanisms are aimed to analyse in the broader neorealist framework, focusing on how China pursues power maximization and relative gains in an anarchic international system.

#### **3.2.4.1 Economic Initiatives:**

The economic initiatives includes BRI investments and its subsidiary yet flagship CPEC project in Pakistan, loans and the trade dynamics between Pakistan. In Iran, the focus is on the ambitious 25-years cooperation agreement, including commitments to invest in infrastructure development, energy trade and connectivity alongside with the Iran China trade dynamics as well.

#### **3.2.4.2 Diplomatic Engagements:**

Diplomatic engagements include China's role as a mediator in the regional conflicts, the way it uses multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in its favour, the bilateral, trilateral and even multi-lateral meetings with Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to pursue its ambitions in the region.

Hence, this comparative analysis would allow to identify patterns of consistency and divergence in China's strategies, offering a nuanced understanding towards its regional approach.

### **3.2.5 Integration with Neorealism:**

The MSSD framework perfectly aligns with the neorealist framework used in this study. Neorealism emphasizes the pursuit of power, security, and relative gains in an anarchic international system, which offers a solid foundation to analyze China's actions. The controlled comparisons enabled by MSSD allows for a systematic examination of how China's strategies reflect these neorealist principles in the context of this research.

For example, the analysis of CPEC would allow how China uses economic dependency to enhance its power while to study of Iran would illustrate how China navigates geopolitical constraints to expand its influence and secure critical resources, consistent with neorealist predictions.

### **3.2.6 Strengths and Limitations of the MSSD:**

The MSSD offers several advantages, including the ability to control for shared variables, focus on critical differences, and provide in-depth insights into complex causal mechanisms. However, it also has limitations, such as potential challenges in generalizing findings beyond the selected cases and the difficulty to isolate variables in highly interconnected geopolitical context. These limitations are acknowledged and mitigated through rigorous data collection and analysis, as detailed in the methodology chapter.

## **3.3 Research Methods:**

This study applies a qualitative approach by using theory testing process tracing, which will be applied to test the neorealist assumptions in the China's geopolitical and Geo-Economic strategies in South Asia and Middle East via diplomacy with Pakistan and Iran.

### **3.3.1 Process-Tracing, a theory-testing approach:**

Theory-testing process tracing is a rigorous qualitative research method used to assess how an independent variable (X) impacts the dependent variable (Y). This approach delves beyond fundamental correlations and focuses on the specific steps, processes, or events that link the cause to the consequence (Mahoney, 2012). Researchers begin with an existing

theoretical framework that proposes a possible explanation for the causal relationship. To investigate this theoretical proposition, the researcher develops a thorough conceptualization of the causal mechanism. This entails identifying important actors (e.g., persons, organizations, and states) participating in the process, mapping out their actions, and determining how these actions may impact one another to generate the predicted outcome. Importantly, the mechanism's operation may differ based on the conditions, emphasizing the necessity for contextual sensitivity in the study.

Theory-testing process tracing involves a methodical, evidence-based method. Researchers collect a variety of data sources, including official statements, press reports, academic literature, and think tank reports. They methodically examine the data, looking for evidence to corroborate their hypothesized mechanism (Collier, 2011). Are the observed patterns consistent with the predicted phases and actions? Furthermore, comprehensive analysis investigates and excludes alternative hypotheses that could influence the outcome (Bennett and Checkel, 2015). This methodology recognizes that research is rarely linear. As data is analyzed, the initial understanding of the causal mechanisms can be modified, ensuring that the explanation is evidence-based while improving theoretical clarity. Finally, theory-testing process tracing is used to assess the validity of current ideas by determining if the hypothesized mechanisms withstand empirical inspection. This helps to refine and strengthen the understanding of complicated social, political, and economic phenomena (Bennett and Checkel, 2014).

### **3.3.2 Causal Mechanisms:**

This study delves into the specific strategies China employs to increase its geopolitical and geoeconomic influence in the region following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Using a neorealist lens, we examine how China, as a rational actor, uses its connections with Pakistan and Iran. This study further aims to look at economic processes such as strategic investments to secure resources and control critical infrastructure. Diplomatically, this study considers forming alliances with these countries to tip the regional power balance in China's favor.

The study adopts a neorealist approach to examine China's actions in the post-U.S. withdrawal scenario. Neorealism sees states as rational actors driven by the pursuit of power, security, and relative gains. Hence, this study assumes that China's plans are not based solely on collaboration or goodwill, but rather on a deliberate pursuit of its objectives

(Waltz, 1979). Neorealism predicts that China would aim to counterbalance other regional powers, prioritize decisions that maximize its advantages over competitors, and use its partnerships with Pakistan and Iran to increase its overall regional influence. This theoretical viewpoint provides a lens to systematically assess how China's actions and relationships may affect geopolitical and geoeconomic power dynamics in South Asia and the Middle East.

### **3.3.3 Defining Economic Mechanisms:**

The economic mechanisms will be refined into testable hypotheses. Based on a neorealist approach, the anticipated China's actions to be motivated by the rational desire for power maximization. It indicates that it focuses on gaining control of important assets, securing vital resources, and influencing regional trade patterns to increase its power relative to other regional actors. To thoroughly analyze this mechanism, it's essential to translate theoretical assumptions into testable predictions. Here's a breakdown of key areas of focus aligned with the neorealist framework:

#### **3.3.3.1 Investment Patterns:**

A careful examination of China's investment patterns is required. Projects in sectors such as ports, energy pipelines, and transportation corridors that provide strategic value will be prioritized, even if short-term profitability is uncertain. This demonstrates a long-term strategy of gaining control of assets critical to regional economic dominance.

#### **3.3.3.2 Contract Analysis:**

The provisions of China's investment agreements will provide important information. Contractual terms that heavily favor China, such as allowing it extensive control over assets or resources, give support to the neorealist assumption of power maximization.

#### **3.3.3.3 Trade Dynamics:**

Increased trade volume between China and its regional partners, particularly in resource-related sectors, indicates expanding economic power. Analysis of new trade channels is required to uncover patterns of dependency or diverted trade flows, which may suggest strategic repositioning within the regional economic landscape.

#### **3.3.3.4 Rhetoric and Policy:**

China's official announcements that associate economic cooperation with long-term strategic relationships or resource security support the neorealist approach. Similarly,

declarations from Pakistan and Iran emphasizing their rising reliance on China's investments or China's dominant economic position strengthen the analytical framework.

#### **3.3.3.5 Hypotheses:**

H.1: China will engage in strategic investments and negotiate favorable contracts to gain control over critical assets and resources within Pakistan and Iran, prioritizing long-term power projection over immediate economic gains.

H.2: Official rhetoric and policy statements from China and its partner nations will emphasize the deepening of economic ties as a means to enhance geopolitical alignment, secure resources, and reshape the regional balance of power.

#### **3.3.4 Defining Diplomatic Mechanisms:**

Neorealists perceive states as rational actors seeking to maximize power and influence in a competitive international system. In the post-U.S. withdrawal scenario, China's diplomatic ties with Pakistan and Iran should be examined through this perspective. This study expects China to pursue alliances or partnerships that modify regional power dynamics in its favor, giving it leverage over rivals and greater influence in the global geopolitical scene. To thoroughly examine this mechanism, here's a breakdown of crucial areas for analysis, each aligned with neorealist assumptions:

##### **3.3.4.1 Joint Statements:**

Language and themes in official communiqués or statements issued by China in collaboration with Pakistan or Iran. Neorealism predicts the emphasis on strategic alignment (rather than just collaboration), similar aims portrayed as counterbalancing other regional actors, and consistent expressions of mutual support in international forums.

##### **3.3.4.2 Multilateral Dynamics:**

China's behavior in international organizations including Pakistan and Iran. Does China take on leadership responsibilities, support projects favored by its partners, or attempt to form coalitions inside these organizations? These behaviors may indicate a deliberate pursuit of greater power inside established institutional institutions.

##### **3.3.4.3 Conflict Framing and Mediation:**

China's position in regional disputes. If China takes on a mediating role, would it prioritize a resolution that favors its own interests, or will it use the chance to reinvent itself as a powerful diplomatic actor with the ability to dictate regional outcomes?

#### **3.3.4.4 Beyond rhetoric:**

Concrete measures that back up diplomatic pronouncements. Do combined remarks lead to stronger military cooperation, coordinated economic endeavors, or voting blocs? Actions that are consistent with rhetoric provide stronger support for the neorealist perspective.

#### **3.3.4.5 Hypothesis:**

H.3: China will leverage diplomatic ties with Pakistan and Iran to project a unified front against regional rivals, with an emphasis on shared strategic objectives.

H.4: China will strategically position itself as a mediator or advocate for regional stability, particularly in ways that enhance its influence and reshape the regional diplomatic order in its favor.

### **3.4 Data Sources:**

This study aims to use three different types of data sources which include official government websites, then, this study also uses media reports from credible news agencies worldwide and finally, this study uses reports from the Think Thanks to further strengthen the analysis as well. Here I will dive deeper into the details of each of the sources, how it will be used, and what will be the reliability of these sources.

#### **3.4.1 Official government websites:**

This is the first data source this study is going to use which includes the official statements and press releases issued by the governments of Pakistan, China, Iran, and Afghanistan on the area of cooperation which is related to the research under study. These official narratives are either released on the websites of concerned embassies or from the websites of ministries of foreign affairs of each state. For example, the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC) website for official releases from China and websites of concerned embassies. Similarly, the official websites of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghan foreign ministries and the websites of concerned embassies will also be used to either take official press releases or official statements about the meetings, cooperations, or any event related to the questions under research.

This is a very important source in this study which directly gives the official, confirmed, and first-hand information from the official channel. To extract data from this source, first of all, a targeted search using specific keywords will be conducted e.g. China-Pakistan cooperation, China-Iran cooperation, BRI extension of Afghanistan, and CPEC, etc. A

specific timeline will be set to minimize the research burden e.g., only those official statements and press releases will be considered which were issued during and after the Afghan peace process and only those statements will be considered which are directly addressing the research question under analysis i.e., Economic and diplomatic cooperation. Since the official statements provide unfiltered access to official stances, stated goals, and cooperation, this is a very reliable source, but it can further be enhanced by the triangulation method. If a pattern emerges across official statements, news reports, and think tank analysis, it's much more likely to reflect an actual trend than if solely relied on a single source type.

### **3.4.2 Media Reports:**

Media reports are an important source of information about day-to-day developments about any issue, hence, They will remain an important source in our research where news reports from credible media outlets including CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, Daily-Mail, Guardian, The Economist, and other regional and international media outlets will be used to refer to correct information about any event, cooperation agreements, high-level meetings, and about any aspect which comes under the research questions under question. Furthermore, this study will also use country-specific media outlets from the states under study, e.g., the DAWN and Express Tribune newspapers from Pakistan are considered credible media outlets, similarly, the People's Daily and the Global Times and others from China, Tehran Times from Iran, The Khaama Press from Afghanistan, and Times of India from India.

The data extraction from these sources is very simple where only the information about any specific event related to the research questions under question will be used by adding references to their report in the study. This study will not rely on these outlets for analysis, rather will just rely on to refer any information, time, dates, and occasion of any event that happened between the countries and region under study which relates to the purpose of this study. That information will further be verified by cross-checking that information from different media sources so that only correct, reliable, and authentic information is used.

### **3.4.3 Think-Tank Reports:**

Think-tank reports are also an important source for writing the analysis portion of the study and the analysis of this study highly relies on the range of reports from the different think tanks of regional and international politics. This study will use different think tanks including top Western and Asian think tanks for the wider picture of the geopolitics of the

region under study. For example, this study aims to use Stimson center and many other well reputed international think tanks to the further strengthen the arguments presented in the analysis.

Since the think tanks issue a wider range of reports and analyses on a variety of issues, this study will only use the timeline of the duration of the Afghan peace process and its aftermath to focus on targeted reports on the different aspects which are related to this study and each borrowed argument or analysis will properly be cited with the name of the institute with the reference to the exact report or analysis. Think-tanks are highly reliable in terms of their analysis because their teams consist of top researchers from various fields of International Relations, with research careers and publications in top research journals of International Relations. Since, this study does not merely focus on one or two think tanks, so using a variety of sources from several think tanks with cross-examination checks of facts and the content of the report will further increase the reliability of the data used in this study.

### **3.5 Research Limitations:**

This study focuses on the application of neorealism as a theoretical framework to study the China's diplomatic and economic engagements in South Asia and Middle East after U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, by focusing on one region and the events followed by the withdrawal, the scope of this research is limited both in terms of the time period of the events under study and the region it mainly focuses on. This may result in overlooking other significant factors or regions that could influence international relations dynamics, jeopardizing the analysis's comprehensiveness. For example, this study does not investigate the impact of the U.S. withdrawal on other parts of the world, as well as the implications of other geopolitical events on the regions under consideration. To address this limitation, future research could consider broadening the scope to include more cases or regions, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of this important and less explored geopolitical event. Since this study uses the small-N MSSD approach, which allows for a thorough examination of specific cases, the results from such a small sample size may not be generalized to all situations, regions, or times. The cases under study have unique contextual factors resulting in different outcomes, does not allow to generalize results to larger contexts. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of international relations means that outcomes can change over time, limiting the findings' generalizability beyond the

specific cases studied. To address this limitation, future research could combine the small-N approach with larger-N studies or longitudinal analyses to assess the findings' reliability and generalizability across different contexts and periods.

Another limitation is the availability and reliability of qualitative data sources such as state narratives, media coverages, and think tanks analysis. Obtaining comprehensive and unbiased information is difficult, particularly in sensitive geopolitical situations or authoritarian regimes like China and Iran and also Afghanistan where the access to the ground reality is not that easy because of the war situation. The official text of state agreements may be censored or restricted from public access, whereas academic literature may vary in quality and reliability. The reliance on one theoretical framework can also be seen as a limitation of this research, which may overlook alternative explanations and viewpoints in international relations. While neorealism explains the state behaviors and power dynamics, it is not the only perspective which can explain the objectives of this study. Other theories, such as neoliberalism and constructivism, can also offer complementary or contradictory explanations for the same phenomenon. So, by using only neorealism as a lens, this study misses the other aspects of the same research questions which can be incorporated in the future research on this subject.

Another important research limitation concerns the methodological approach, specifically the Most Similar System Design (MSSD), which may oversimplify complex geopolitical dynamics while ignoring unique contextual factors in each case. While MSSD enables systematic comparison of cases with similar structural characteristics, it may fail to capture the complexities and distinctiveness of individual geopolitical contexts. This may result in a superficial understanding of the dynamics, limiting the depth of the analysis. To address this limitation, the MSSD approach can be supplemented with qualitative insights and contextual data to gain a more complete understanding of each case's dynamics.

## **Chapter 4**

### **China's Post U.S. Withdrawal Geopolitics and Geo-economics:**

This is the empirical chapter of this study, which mainly uncovers the two research questions that are the aim of this study. First, this chapter will answer whether the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan left any power gap in the geopolitics of South Asia and the Middle East. Secondly, this chapter will also explain China's geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomic strategies to fill the power gap by using diplomatic and economic mechanisms through their ties with Pakistan and Iran.

#### **4.1 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan: Aftermath, Power vacuum and Geopolitics in the region:**

Building on the earlier discussion in the introduction regarding the hesitation of International community to formally recognize Taliban government, this chapter continues the argument that, Pakistan, which was directly affected by the Afghan war, welcomed the U.S. withdrawal while showing concerns about terror threats in the region with the formation of a new Taliban government (MoFAP, 2021). Former prime minister Imran Khan described this exit as “the most sensible thing to do,” emphasizing the need for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan (Dawn, 2021). The security situation on the western Pakistani border escalated after the re-emergence of Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), leading to increased militant activities, where Pakistan blamed the Afghan Taliban for providing safe heaven to TTP which was denied by Afghan Taliban (Rehman, 2024). Pakistan also extended the validity of the registration cards of 1.5 million Afghan Refugees in response to international appeals for leniency toward Afghan Refugees on humanitarian grounds (Hussain, 2024).

Iran, on the other hand, labeled this withdrawal as a U.S. “Defeat” and viewed it as an opportunity to “revive life, security, and long-lasting peace” in Afghanistan (The Washington Post, 2021). Iran decided to keep its embassy in Kabul despite the historical tensions with Afghanistan. They showed a willingness to engage with Taliban 2.0. Yet, they condemned their military actions, particularly the assault on Panjshir Valley (Times, 2021). Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh stated the attack was “by no means acceptable in terms of International and Humanitarian law.” Iran’s approach can be viewed

as anti-U.S., backed by regional cooperation with a new Afghan setup to safeguard its interests and regional stability (Tehran Times, 2021).

China, on the other hand, viewed this withdrawal as a shift in a regional power dynamic and sought diplomatic engagement with the Taliban by emphasizing the importance of preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorism again. The China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that Afghanistan now has an opportunity to "independently manage its future" but cautioned the Taliban to "cut ties with all terrorist organizations, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)," which China perceives as a direct security threat to its Xinjiang region (Yi, 2021). On the diplomatic front, Wang Yi hosted a Taliban delegation in July 2021, led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin, indicating China's readiness to engage with the new Taliban 2.0, where they showed a willingness to reconstruct the Afghan's infrastructure and link it to belt and road initiative (BRI) but these offers were directly conditioned on the Taliban's ability to ensure security and a stable environment (Yi, 2021). Afghanistan also attracts China via its mineral wealth, expressly its vast lithium reserves and rare earth materials (O'Donnell, 2023). However, all the economic cooperation offers depend on the Taliban's fulfillment of its promises regarding counterterrorism and stable governance. China also highlighted the urgency of International engagement in Afghanistan to provide humanitarian assistance, where they called to unfreeze Afghan assets and address humanitarian crises on the United Nations forum to prevent further instability (Huaxia, 2024).

This withdrawal significantly changed the South Asian and Middle Eastern geopolitics by creating a power vacuum that global and regional actors sought to fill. The U.S. had a dominant role in South Asia and the Middle East with its military might alongside political and economic contributions. However, this departure left many regional stakeholders uncertain about the region's economic, security, and diplomatic arrangements and commitments for the near future (Sharan et al., 2021). This geopolitical vacuum, with the addition of Taliban 2.0 into the matrix, shifted to focus of regional powers towards addressing the terrorism, refugee crisis, and economic instability where the lack of a comprehensive American policy towards Afghanistan further created a gap for other alternative powers to add influence.

China, on the other hand, actively sought to mediate or stabilize as a significant regional player. Its regional geopolitical and economic strategies perfectly align with its mega-

global ambitions under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This opportunity provided China a unique chance to deepen its ties with the countries, especially in the Middle East, under Washington's influence by offering them economic initiatives. Afghanistan's location at the crossroads of South and Central Asia and the Middle East links it to China's strategic calculus. After the withdrawal, China aggressively focused on leveraging the gap to enhance its regional presence, specifically through diplomatic and economic engagements in the region. The withdrawal also left Afghanistan reliant on other neighboring countries for financial assistance and reconstruction, which China has an opportunity to offer to integrate Afghanistan into its broader regional connectivity projects with a cautious and contingent approach to regional stability, underscoring Beijing's intent to play a leading role in reshaping the regional political landscape (Seerat, 2024).

The U.S. absence also reshaped the dynamics of China's relationships with key regional actors, such as Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan historically has been a U.S. ally during the Afghan war by providing space to the U.S. to target terrorist groups in Afghanistan and, while a close economic partner of China through its mega infrastructure building project, i.e., CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor), a flagship project under BRI. This shift also urges Islamabad to strengthen its reliance on Beijing for economic and strategic support, further aligning Pakistan with China's regional objectives (Lalwani, 2023). Iran, on the other hand, also finds an opportunity to recalibrate its regional strategy by having a hardcore anti-American stance which again offers an opportunity for China to solidify its ties with Tehran, particularly following the signing of 25 years of a strategic cooperation agreement in 2021. Iran's strategic location and resources make it a key ally for longstanding regional ambitions without immediate geopolitical counterbalances (IISS, 2021).

This U.S. withdrawal also urges the regional actors to consider China a mediating or a stabilizing force in the Afghan context, where Beijing also focuses on counterterrorism, safeguarding its economic investments, and maintaining stability in its western Xinjiang region. China's focus on negotiations with the Taliban and hope for an inclusive Afghan government is also a part of its strategy to prevent the emergence of a security vacuum that can destabilize its borders and broader regional objectives (Matamis, 2024). Hence, this power gap created by the U.S. pivots China as a central player in the emerging regional geopolitical order. All the China's engagements with Pakistan and Iran (explained in the next sub-chapter) aimed at filling the gap left by the U.S. and this transition also

underscores a broader shift in global power dynamics, with China increasingly asserting its influence where U.S. influence has receded and by capitalizing on the opportunities created by withdrawal, China can not only reshape the regional geopolitical order but also redefine its role as a significant global power.

## **4.2 Economic Mechanisms:**

The China's economic mechanisms with Pakistan can be analyzed using CPEC, which is the flagship infrastructure building project under BRI, and other foreign direct investments, aids, and loans provided to Pakistan. This portion will explain all these elements to better understand pre- and post-withdrawal patterns and to understand China's economic engagements with Pakistan.

### **4.2.1 CPEC:**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a flagship infrastructure buildup project worth \$62 billion under BRI that was initiated in 2013 and divided into three phases: short-term 2020, medium-term 2025, and long-term 2030, including the construction of Gawadar Port, road and railway infrastructure, overall, 19 energy projects including coal-fired, hydropower, and solar energy plants, and then building up the Special Economic Zones is in progress (Ahmed, 2023). The progress is not directly connected with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan because the project was started a long time before the withdrawal, but China is still careful about the security of its projects after new Taliban administration and also some of the threats from local separatist groups in Baluchistan Province of Pakistan; hence, this project is expected to complete in its timeline, despite there are some security threats to this project because of volatile Pak-Afghan border (Ahmed, 2023).

### **4.2.2 Foreign Direct Investment:**

China is also the biggest foreign investor in Pakistan other than CPEC projects and as per the official figures by the government of Pakistan, China invested \$751.6 million in fiscal year 2020-21, then \$531.6 million in fiscal year 2021-22, and \$432.2 million, \$568.2 million and \$174.7 million in fiscal years 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25 simultaneously (BOI, 2024). So, there has been no significant spike or decrease in China's FDIs after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

### **4.2.3 Loans and aid:**

Over the last five years, China's financial engagement with Pakistan has predominantly been characterized by loans without significant direct assistance. Between 2019 and 2021, China provided \$2.2 billion in loans to stabilize Pakistan's crumbling foreign exchange reserves (Khan, 2019). Similarly, in July 2023, China's Exim Bank rolled over a \$2.4 billion loan for Pakistan by extending the two-year repayment period to alleviate the economic crisis (Desk, 2023).

### **4.2.4 25-years Cooperation agreement:**

Similarly, China's 25-year cooperation agreement with Iran, signed in March 2021, is Beijing's long-term economic strategy in the Middle East. Despite no official announcement about financial commitments, many international media outlets have reported that this deal could be worth around \$400 billion over 25 years (Motamedi, 2021). This mega cooperation deal aims to connect Iran with China's BRI project while focusing on infrastructure, including ports, constructing energy, transportation, and technology projects, positioning Iran as a centre of regional connectivity. China aims to access this mega project's largest crude oil and natural gas reserves, reducing its reliance on maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. China considers this project crucial to sustain its industrial and economic growth (Marks, 2024). In terms of Infrastructure, the construction of transportation networks including roads, highways and railway networks, and ports, both China and Iran aim to integrate Iran into BRI to enhance trade between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, aims to increase China's influence in Central and South Asia via middle East (Marks, 2024). On the other hand, Iran sought to upgrade its much-needed infrastructure through China's investments to modernize the telecommunication and industrial sectors and the timing of this agreement coincides with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, where the U.S. departure has created a power vacuum and investments like this offer China an opportunity to extend its regional influence through regional strategic partnerships like the one with Iran, where China aims to secure crucial resources and establish itself as a dominant player in the Middle Eastern economic and geopolitical landscape.

### **4.2.5 FDIs:**

According to the "China Global Investment Tracker," China invested approximately \$618 million in Iran from 2018 to 2022, primarily in the construction sector. This figure is significantly lower than China's investments in neighboring countries during the same

period, including \$22.5 billion in Saudi Arabia and \$19.3 billion in the United Arab Emirates (Fadlon & Zimmt, 2024).

#### **4.2.6 Loans and Financial Support:**

In the past five years, specific details about China's loans to Iran have been limited, mainly due to the opaque nature of such agreements and the impact of international sanctions on Iran's financial sector. Although there have been reports of China's funding for several infrastructure projects, there needs to be more comprehensive details regarding these loans' terms and overall value.

#### **4.2.7 Analysis of Contractual terms of China's investments in Pakistan and Iran:**

The China's investments made in Pakistan, mainly under CPEC, are signed by contractual terms which systematically favor Beijing's long-term strategic interests, highlighting a deliberate China's approach to maximize China's geopolitical and geoeconomic goals.

##### **4.2.7.1 Gawadar Port Lease and Operations:**

The agreement signed between the two governments leased Gawadar Port in the Baluchistan province to the China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) for 40 years in 2013. This lease grants China extensive control over the operations and massive share in the finances of the port and its revenues, where 91% of the port income is allocated to COPHC, where Pakistan gets the nominal share of 9% of the income from the port. Furthermore, the agreement allows China to retain the generated transit fees through all the port activities, further enabling China to monopolize its economic interests. China aims Gadawar to provide a direct maritime link to the Arabian Sea, thereby reducing its dependence on the Strait of Malacca, enhancing its ability to secure its routes, and further enabling China to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean (Kanwal, 2018). Hence, this arrangement strengthens China's maritime ambitions, thereby minimizing Pakistan's economic and operational control over critical national assets.

##### **4.2.7.2 Energy Projects and Sovereign guarantees:**

The energy projects under CPEC constitute 60% of its total investments and are signed to operate under clauses that guarantee fixed returns to China's investors. Independent Power Producers (IPPs) received sovereign guarantees from the Pakistani government to return 17-20% annual return on equity in U.S. dollars (Rana, 2024). The contracts include "take-or-pay" clauses, obligating Pakistan to pay for the electricity even if it is not utilized. These

terms have twofold implications: they protect China's investors from market risks while transferring financial burden on Pakistan and exacerbate Pakistan's circular debt problems, forcing them to allocate a significant portion of their budget to serving energy payments (Malik, 2024). Hence, these terms would deepen Pakistan's fiscal challenges while creating long-term dependency on China's firms.

#### **4.2.7.3 Construction and Procurement Clauses:**

The majority of the construction raw materials and equipment are sourced from China's companies, and China's firms are dominating the execution of all the projects, thereby leaving or providing minimal room to local companies to gain profit, which would result in capital flows from Pakistan and limit technology transfer, undermining the long-term development of regional industries (Hanif, 2021).

#### **4.2.8 Financial Assistance and Loan Agreements:**

The financial assistance and loan agreements can be understood by looking into the interest rates and the repayment structures of those loans, Asset-Backed Financing and Collateralization and the exemptions and Tax Holidays that China get under the projects that they implement in a following way.

##### **4.2.8.1 Interest rates and repayment structures:**

Generally, China's loans to Pakistan are characterized by higher interest rates as compared to loans from the IMF or World Bank. For instance, the concessional loans from China provided for infrastructure projects are granted with an interest rate of 2-5% annually, higher than the average rates of 0.25-1% offered by the IMF. Non-concessional loans extended for non-CPEC purposes have interest rates up to 6% per annum. The repayment schedules with the short-term repayment periods (10-15 years) are also a concern, adding additional pressure on Islamabad by creating cyclical debt obligations, forces Pakistan to seek additional loans to serve the current one, increasing Beijing's financial leverage (Nagial, 2022).

##### **4.2.8.2 Asset-Backed Financing and Collateralization:**

China's loans are also tied with the collateralized agreements, where Pakistan pledges its natural resources or revenues as a security where repayment for energy projects is linked to the revenue generated from those projects, thereby granting control to China's firms over the share of Pakistan's revenues. Such agreements could also result in China's firms taking control over strategic assets in case of default, raising the fears of "debt-trap diplomacy,"

where unsustainable borrowing creates vulnerabilities that China can exploit to gain geopolitical objectives (Nagial, 2022).

#### **4.2.8.3 Exemption and Tax Holidays:**

China's firms under CPEC also enjoy extensive tax exemptions where they import duty-free machinery, income tax holidays for 20 years, and exemption from sales tax (BOI, 2016). These incentives aimed to attract more investment yet resulted in significant revenue losses for Pakistan, disproportionately benefiting China's firms while depriving Pakistan of critical fiscal revenues.

#### **4.2.9 Strategic Implications for Power Maximization:**

The strategic implications of the power maximizing efforts by China can be understood by the following subcategories.

##### **4.2.9.1 Economic Leverage and Policy Influence:**

The contractual terms of the CPEC and associated loans allow China to exert significant economic influence over Pakistan. Beijing's ability to dictate terms ensures that Pakistan's economic policies are consistent with China's strategic objectives. Hence, Pakistan's increasing reliance on China's investments has reduced its negotiation bargaining power (Ali & Ali, 2024).

##### **4.2.9.2 Geopolitical Positioning and Long-term Dependence:**

Control of Gwadar Port and other strategic infrastructure strengthens China's regional power projection capacity. By investing in Pakistan's critical sectors, Beijing gains economic benefits and a foothold to counterbalance regional rivals such as India. So, the CPEC is both a financial and strategic tool for China's ambitions in the region and beyond by creating long-term dependency and aligning Pakistan's strategic trajectory with China's interests (Habibi & Zhu, 2020). This dependency ensures Islamabad remains a crucial ally in Beijing's regional strategy.

On the other hand, The 25-year cooperation agreement between China and Iran, signed in March 2021, is a significant strategic agreement with longstanding economic and geopolitical impacts for the regional dynamics. While the full text of the deal is not publicly available but analyses from reputable international relations think tanks provide a limited examination of its potential terms and long-term benefits to China.

#### **4.2.9.3 Infrastructure Development and Strategic Connectivity:**

The agreement covers significant infrastructure projects, including constructing transport networks like railways, ports, and highways. These projects seek to integrate Iran into China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), thereby improving regional connectivity and trade routes. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, these infrastructure investments are signed to facilitate trade and extend China's strategic reach into the Middle East by providing overland access to Europe while avoiding maritime chokepoints for future China's trade ambitions (Chivvis & Keating, 2024).

#### **4.2.9.4 Financial and Technological Investments:**

China aims to invest in Iran's banking and telecommunications sectors to modernize the Iranian economic infrastructure and increase digital connectivity. These investments include adopting China's technologies and standards, increasing Iran's reliance on China's systems. The incorporation of this technology leads to long-term dependencies, aligning Iran's technological infrastructure with China and increases Beijing's influence over Iran's digital infrastructure.

#### **4.2.9.5 Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Financial Assistance:**

According to the American Enterprise Institute's "China Global Investment Tracker," China invested \$618 million in Iran from 2018 to 2022, primarily in the construction sector. This figure is significantly lower than other China's investments in neighboring countries during the same period, for example, \$22.5 billion in Saudi Arabia and \$19.3 billion in the UAE (Shokri, 2023). More information about China's loans to Iran over the last five is not available due to the opaque nature of such agreements and because of international sanctions on Iran's financial sector.

#### **4.2.10 Barriers to the application of China's objectives in Pakistan and Iran:**

The CPEC project itself is facing continuous challenges, including security concerns, political instability, economic problems, local opposition, regulatory and bureaucratic hurdles, and broader geopolitical in the timely completion of the projects under consideration.

##### **4.2.10.1 Security Challenges:**

Persistent security threats in Pakistan significantly challenge the CPEC's implementation. The separatist group in Baluchistan (The Baluchistan Liberation Army, BLA) attacked the China's nationals in Karachi resulting in the killing of two China's engineers increased the

security threat to the construction and operation of Gawadar Port which is the flagship infrastructure building project inside the Baluchistan province (Saeed, 2024). These incidents raised serious concerns about the safety and security of China's nationals and their investments, calling for Pakistan to take strict security measures in the future to avoid such incidents.

#### **4.2.10.2 Political instability:**

Pakistan also faces internal political instability with frequent government and policy direction changes, creating a volatile situation causing project approval delays and inconsistencies in policy implementation, risking the continuity and efficiency of CPEC initiatives (Zaman, 2023). A stable political environment is necessary for the long-term planning and implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects like CPEC.

#### **4.2.10.3 Local opposition:**

Local communities in Baluchistan have opposed CPEC projects where they expressed concern about the lack of job opportunities and inadequate compensation to the locals while acquiring their lands and providing them work opportunities in the projects being constructed on their forefathers. These Protests disrupted project activities and required additional security measures, causing further delays (Hussain, 2024). This scenario further validates the allegations of unequal share in the benefits and work opportunities among the people of both countries.

#### **4.2.10.4 Bureaucratic hurdles and geopolitical tensions:**

The bureaucratic setup in Pakistan is very outdated and full of inefficiencies, which causes delays in land acquisition, obtaining permits, and navigating through the legal procedures, resulting into the further delays in project completion. (The Express Tribune, 2017). Regional geopolitical dynamics, particularly the tensions between India and Pakistan are also impacting the CPEC's progress, when Pakistan blames India for the unrest in Baluchistan province which also causes hinderance in the workflow of projects under construction. India's objections to CPEC projects that pass through disputed territories of Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan have further complicated the initiative in itself, causing more concerns for China for smooth CPEC operations (Shah, 2017). Similarly, implementing Iran and China's 25-year cooperation agreement faces significant challenges, including international sanctions, economic insecurity, political and bureaucratic impediments, security concerns, and regional geopolitical dynamics as well.

#### **4.2.10.5 International Sanctions:**

International sanctions imposed on Iran by U.S. are the most substantial barriers in the proper implementation of 25 years of cooperation agreement. These sanctions target the sectors such as energy, finance, and shipping, complicating China's attempts to invest and trade with Iran. Chinese companies also face secondary sanctions if they engage with Iranian entities which is resulting in limited Chinese involvement in Iran. These sanctions have deterred many Chinese firms from fully committing to projects in Iran because of the potential consequences on their other operations (Ford et al., 2023).

#### **4.2.10.6 Economic instability:**

Iran's economic environment is also a major challenge for China since it faces high inflation, currency depreciation, and a challenging business environment. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports that Iran's economy is contracted by 6% in 2020, and while there have been some economic improvements, but the structural issues still exist (The Iran Premier, 2021). These economic challenges make it difficult for Chinese investors to generate profitable returns and ensure the long-term viability of their projects in Iran.

#### **4.2.10.7 Regional geopolitical dynamics:**

The broader geopolitical situation also complicates the China's cooperation with Iran. Middle Eastern rivalries, particularly between Iran and other regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Shia-Sunni proxy wars also impact the stability and attractiveness of investment opportunities. Similarly, China's relations with other countries in the region, such as Israel, necessitate a balance in China's policies to avoid diplomatic repercussions (Divya, 2024).

#### **4.2.11 China-Pakistan, China-Iran trade Dynamics:**

China has strong trade relationships with both Pakistan and Iran, with a high volume of bilateral trade and economic partnerships. This relationship has evolved over the last five years, from 2019 to 2024, in response to regional developments such as the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.

China remained Pakistan's largest trading partner. In 2022, bilateral trade was approximately \$23.79 billion, with China exporting \$21 billion to Pakistan and importing \$2.79 billion from Pakistan (OEC, 2022). China's exports to Pakistan are diverse, including machinery, electronics, textiles, and chemicals. In 2023, China's exports to Pakistan were worth \$17.3 billion. Pakistan's primary exports to China have been raw materials and agricultural products. Pakistan exported \$2.79 billion in goods to China in 2022, with

refined copper (\$675 million), non-retail pure cotton yarn (\$419 million), and rice (\$385 million) being the most valuable exports (OEC, 2022).

The power vacuum in Afghanistan has increased security challenges in the region, threatening trade routes and infrastructure projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China has continuously expressed concern about the security of its investments and personnel in Pakistan, calling for increased security measures (Notezai, 2021).

Similarly, China also shares the highest trading volume in Iran's overall trade in the last 5 years, despite Iran facing a lot of international sanctions and limitations.

Bilateral trade between China and Iran totaled approximately \$23.02 billion, with Iran exporting \$13.43 billion in commodities to China, with a 34.3% decrease from the previous year (Financial Tribune, 2020). Bilateral trade reached roughly \$15.9 billion, with Iran exporting \$5.72 billion to China and importing \$9.44 billion. The main products exported from Iran to China were ethylene polymers, acyclic alcohols, and refined copper. In the first two months of 2024, trade between Iran and China hit more than \$2.8 billion, a 37% increase over the previous year (Tehran Times, 2024).

Even though security challenges appeared after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan did not cause any hindrance to the trade relations between China and Iran or China and Pakistan. Other factors, such as the internal economic situation or international sanctions in Iran, may cause problems in trading relations. Still, both Iran and Pakistan are highly dependent on China to gain financial stability.

#### **4.2.12 Testing H1 and H2:**

*H1: China will engage in strategic investments and negotiate favourable contracts to gain control over critical assets and resources within Pakistan and Iran, prioritizing long-term power projection over immediate economic gains.*

The empirical evidence strongly supports the first hypothesis. China's strategic investments in Pakistan as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are deliberately focusing on gaining access to critical assets. The Gwadar Port, leased to the China Overseas Port Holding Company for 40 years, exemplifies China's ability to maintain operational control over the most important future potential maritime hub. The lease agreement gives China 91% of the port's revenue, while Pakistan receives only 9%, highlighting China's

dominance in this critical infrastructure. Furthermore, energy projects under CPEC include sovereign guarantees and fixed returns of 17-20% in U.S. dollars, putting investor security ahead of Pakistan's fiscal sustainability. Such contractual provisions ensure long-term China's control and profitability, regardless of Pakistan's financial constraints.

Iran's 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement reflects similar strategic priorities despite more available data regarding this agreement. Despite full details are not publicly available, reports indicate that the deal gives China preferential treatment in the energy sector, including long-term access to discounted oil. Infrastructure projects like the Chabahar-Zahedan railway aims to connect Iran to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to enhance regional connectivity and securing critical trade routes. Such investments plans support the hypothesis in a way that China prioritizes strategic control over immediate economic returns.

These findings support Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that China's investments and contracts in Pakistan and Iran are strategically designed to maximize long-term power projection by leveraging economic mechanisms to maintain geopolitical influence.

*H2: Official rhetoric and policy statements from China and its partner nations will emphasize deepening economic ties to enhance geopolitical alignment, secure resources, and reshape the regional balance of power.*

China has never explicitly stated that these economic initiatives with Pakistan and Iran are being taken to overturn the regional balance of power but implicit strategic undertones and expected outcomes are still difficult to ignore China's intentions. Official China's stance about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Iran's 25-year cooperation agreement emphasizes economic development, connectivity, and mutual benefits, but the broader geopolitical implications of these initiatives are still undeniable. China labels CPEC as a "game-changer" for regional development and a flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. China's officials, including Foreign Minister Wang Yi, have continuously emphasized CPEC's potential to strengthen connectivity and boost stability. However, the size and scope of these projects, which range from the Gwadar Port to energy infrastructure, suggest a strategic vision that extends beyond economic cooperation. Pakistan sees CPEC as a way to strengthen its financial and diplomatic ties with China, implicitly countering regional rivals such as India. While China has avoided overtly

framing CPEC in geopolitical terms, its investments establish long-term dependencies and shift trade dynamics in ways that subtly reshape the regional order.

Similarly, the 25-year agreement with Iran is presented publicly as a partnership for mutual growth, energy security, and increased regional trade. However, the agreement itself emphasizes on integrating Iran into China's BRI and ensuring long-term access to discounted oil strongly suggests a strategic motivation. Iran's Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, referred to this partnership as a "cornerstone" of Iran's economic realignment, consistent with the country's overall goal of countering U.S. sanctions and influence. China has never openly articulated these geopolitical goals, but it has not denied that these projects have the potential to reshape regional power dynamics.

While China's official discourse does not explicitly address geopolitical alignment, the structural impact of its economic ties with Pakistan and Iran still supports the hypothesis. These projects implicitly promote regional realignments, securing China's strategic interests while subtly altering the regional balance of power without being explicitly acknowledged.

### **4.3 Diplomatic Mechanisms:**

The diplomatic mechanisms that China uses to engage with Pakistan and Iran and also Afghanistan can be further split down into the following subcategories as follows.

#### **4.3.1 Joint statements:**

Pakistan and China have been actively engaged to address the potential consequences of U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, by highlighting regional peace, counterterrorism, and economic collaboration.

The Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, held on June 3, 2021, which was the significant engagement between three countries where the joint statement mainly focused on the importance of "responsible and orderly withdrawal of foreign troops to prevent potential security vacuums (Wang Yi, 2021)." All country representatives agreed to provide support for Afghan driven peace process for a stability, which is essential for regional security. Similarly, the also discussed to cooperate in counterterrorism to prevent Afghanistan for becoming safe haven for the terrorist

organizations and its potential for economic regional integration by extending CPEC to Afghanistan to achieve regional connectivity and shared prosperity (Wang Yi, 2021).

The Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games 2022 where Afghanistan was also among the main agenda of the meetings with Chinese President and other officials held in Beijing from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 (Express Tribune, 2022). Both sides agreed to work for a peaceful, stable, united, safe, and secure Afghanistan which is fundamental for prosperity and progress in the region. They also emphasized the need of "humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and its people to avert the looming crisis and called upon the international community to provide continued and enhanced assistance and support to Afghanistan and asked to unfreeze the Afghanistan's financial assets." And both countries showed interest for the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan (Joint Statement, 2022).

The Fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue on the 6th of May in Islamabad again reaffirmed the tri-national commitments to collaborate on regional security and economic development where the joint statement of the sitting reaffirmed the CPEC extension to Afghanistan, saying, "The extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan will enhance regional connectivity and bring shared prosperity" by underscoring the importance of current initiatives such as CASA-1000 and TAPI, are important for regional economic integration (MoFA, 2023)".

Iran, being an important stakeholder in changing regional dynamics hosted the third quadrilateral Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Russian Federation on Afghanistan situation, which was held on 27 September 2024 on the sidelines of the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, where the post-U.S. withdrawal Afghan situation was also key agenda (Yousaf, 2024). Ministers agreed on 19 points, including their support for "Afghanistan's national sovereignty, political independence, unity, and territorial integrity," where they stressed that the international community has a shared interest in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan (Joint Statement, 2024). They agreed, "a country that should serve as a platform for international cooperation rather than geopolitical competition." They also emphasized that "terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida, the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Jaish ul-Adl, and other similar groups in the region including Majeed Brigade, as

well as others, based in Afghanistan, are a serious threat to regional and global security (Joint Statement, 2024). The ministers also expressed readiness to expand economic and trade cooperation and regional connectivity with Afghanistan to their integration into regional economic cooperation (Joint Statement, 2024). The Ministers pointed out that NATO members should bear the responsibility for the current unrest in Afghanistan, and they should create opportunities for Afghanistan's economic recovery and future development and prosperity, immediately lift unilateral sanctions against Afghanistan, and return Afghanistan's overseas assets for the benefit of the Afghan people. And they also showed support for the political settlement of the Afghan (Joint Statement, 2024).

Similarly, the Late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited China in February 2023 to engage China on key issues related to the post U.S. withdrawal situation in Afghanistan. Since the new Taliban government imposed restrictions on women from education after 6<sup>th</sup> grade and forced them out from the prominent governmental positions, both the countries called on the Afghan rulers to form an inclusive government in which all ethnic groups and political groups participate, and to revert all discriminatory measures against women, ethnic minorities and other religions and the press release of that engagement held U.S. and its NATO allies responsible for the current situation in Afghanistan (AP news, 2023).

China, Iran, Russia, and Pakistan also had a joint engagement on April 13, 2023, in Samarkand to reaffirm the respect for Afghanistan's territorial integrity and sovereignty (Tehran Times, 2023). The joint statement of this sitting argued in the favor of Afghanistan to independently decide its future in a way that reflects the aspirations of its people. It also underlined the significance of creating an inclusive political system to address the nation's persistent problems and the necessity of ongoing aid to Afghanistan and urged the international community to "increase humanitarian aid to alleviate the plight of the Afghan people." All sides urged Afghanistan's de facto authorities to take concrete steps to disrupt terrorist networks operating within its borders as part of the counterterrorism agenda (Joint Statement, 2023).

#### **4.3.2 China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on Afghanistan:**

The China's-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on the other hand, has consistently been vocal on the evolving situation in Afghanistan, focusing on regional security, counterterrorism, and working for the stability in Afghanistan.

SCO Afghan Contact Group was called in Dushanbe on July 14, 2021, to address the escalating situation in Afghanistan, where the China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that the grave challenge of moving toward war or peace, chaos or stability as a result of hasty withdrawal (Laskar, 2021). While stressing Afghanistan's importance for regional security, he proposed five actions: holding the U.S. accountable, preventing terrorism, advancing reconciliation, strengthening multilateral coordination, and supporting reconstruction (Wang Yi, 2021). Wang underlined that the United States must keep its word and not "walk away, create more problems... and dump the 'burden' on regional countries." He called on the SCO to keep Afghanistan from turning into a "source of terrorism," and he urged the Taliban to keep their promises to cut off their connections with terrorist groups. He called for an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" approach to reconciliation and urged all Afghan factions to set up an inclusive political system (Wang Yi, 2021).

The joint statement of this sitting also stressed Afghanistan's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, urging all parties to resolve conflicts through peaceful means while preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorism, calling for enhanced cooperation to deal with the "three forces" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism and all the SCO members were supportive of an inclusive "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" peace process, advocating for a political settlement that includes all ethnic and political groups and also the importance of International assistance in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development and peace and stability to integrate the country into regional economic setups (SCO, 2021).

Similarly, Afghanistan was also the primary agenda at the SCO Council of Heads of State Summit on September 17, 2021, in Dushanbe. The joint statement expressed relief that the withdrawal and then the power transition in Afghanistan happened with the bloodshed, civil war, and a mass exodus of refugees. Yet, they highlighted the need for a collective effort to stabilize the country. The main concern was shown in the summit the Afghan territory must not be used to train the terrorists or to threaten the security of SCO member states while expressing deep concerns over the resurgence of terrorism (Press Release, 2021).

Furthermore, the statement argued that an inclusive government should be formed in Afghanistan to "ensure representation of all ethnic groups" and affirm fundamental human rights. Leaders emphasized that long-term stability required an inclusive political structure. The joint statement strongly emphasized humanitarian issues, calling on the international

community to "stand by the Afghan people" and assist in averting an impending humanitarian and economic catastrophe. The leaders pushed for Afghanistan's inclusion in regional programs to support sustainable development, acknowledging the country's significance in regional economic frameworks and connectivity. The SCO offered to foster multilateral efforts to support Afghanistan's development, peace, and autonomy (Press Release, 2021).

#### **4.3.3 China's direct diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan:**

China has also engaged Afghanistan directly over last 5 years via diplomatic meetings and state visits from the officials of both countries to discuss the different scenarios related to the evolving post-withdrawal situation.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin on July 28, 2021, to express support for an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" peace process, where Yi expressed deep concern about Afghan territory being used as a base for terrorism, particularly by East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which Beijing labels as a biggest threat to its Xinjiang region (Cheung & Westcott, 2021). He expressed hopes that Afghan Taliban will end ties with all terrorist organizations, including the ETIM. This meeting had a strategic importance because China wants to ensure a stable Afghanistan which can align with its regional economic objectives in the longer term (PRC, 2021).

The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on March 24, 2022, made a historic official visit to Kabul which has historical significance since it was the first high-level Chinese visit to Afghanistan after the Taliban's return in power in August 2021 (Times, 2022). During this visit, China expressed its willingness to extend the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) in Afghanistan to increase regional connectivity. The Afghan interim leadership welcomed China's overtures, considering them essential to rebuild the war-torn Afghan economy. This visit showcases China's pragmatic approach, focusing on regional stability and economic integration without formally recognizing the new Taliban setup (Press Release, 2022).

China also hosted a trilateral meeting in Tunxi with top officials from Afghanistan and Pakistan on March 30, 2022, where talks centered on security, regional development, and political cooperation (Times, 2022). This meeting was crucial to promote Afghanistan's inclusion in regional frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), facilitating

cross-border trade and infrastructure projects, and China again urged Afghanistan to restore its internal security. Additionally, China reaffirmed its support for Afghanistan's peaceful development, while Pakistan highlighted cooperation under the CPEC. (Press Release, 2022).

In September 2023, China appoints Zhao Sheng as its new ambassador to Afghanistan which was an important diplomatic initiative indicating the China's willingness to expand the diplomatic ties with the Taliban government. Following the Taliban takeover, Zhao Sheng was the first China's ambassador appointed in Kabul. Although China did not official recognized the Taliban administration, it did indicate Beijing's intention to fortify relations and protect its interests, especially in sustaining regional stability and the security of its Belt and Road projects. (Al Jazeera, 2023).

In October 2024, China offered tariff-free access for Afghan exports to integrate Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative's regional trade networks. China aimed to promote goodwill and increase economic interdependence by stabilizing Afghanistan's economy by removing trade barriers. This goodwill gesture was aligned with China's plan to indirectly support the Taliban government while advancing regional stability through economic engagement. Many people believed the tariff-free deal was an attempt to strengthen bilateral relations without formally recognizing the Taliban regime (Yaqubi et al., 2024).

#### **4.3.4 China as a mediator in the regional rivalries:**

China also achieved a significant milestone in March 2023 through its diplomatic strategy when it mediated between Iran and Saudi Arabia to re-establish the diplomatic ties between two middle eastern rivals which were suspended in 2016 on the killing of Shia cleric inside Saudi Arabia (Berg, 2023). This unexpected agreement, which was reached after four days of secret negotiations between Tehran and Riyadh, mediated by Beijing, underscores China as a new power broker in the Middle East. This agreement included reopening embassies within two Middle Eastern nations, resuming prior accords on security and trade, and committing to mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. The negotiations centered around reducing regional tensions, particularly in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and Iran have supported opposing groups in a terrible proxy war. China de-escalated hostilities by facilitating this dialogue, demonstrating a broader

commitment to regional stability (Motamedi, 2023). China's strategic interests in securing energy supplies and extending its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the Middle East would benefit directly from the agreement, which also sought to strengthen bilateral economic and cultural cooperation.

This mediation is particularly significant in the times following the U.S. withdrawal. China strategically tries to fill the power void left by the United States and its declining influence in the Middle East. Beijing challenged Washington's long-standing hegemony by demonstrating its ability to affect regional dynamics by mediating a peace agreement between Tehran and Riyadh. The agreement "reflects a shift towards a multipolar world where power is no longer concentrated in Western capitals," The stability of trade routes essential to China's energy imports and regional economic integration is also guaranteed if the tensions decline (Guyer, 2023).

#### **4.3.5 Testing H3 and H4:**

*H3: China will leverage diplomatic ties with Pakistan and Iran to project a unified front against regional rivals, emphasizing shared strategic objectives.*

The empirical evidence significantly supports H3 by illustrating the strategic use of diplomatic ties by China with Pakistan and Iran, where China's engagement is trilateral and quadrilateral platforms such as the Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in 2021 and the Third Quadrilateral Meeting (September 2024) also indicated China's ability to align these nations under shared goals, particularly regarding Afghanistan. The emphasis on counterterrorism cooperation and "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" governance is an apparent attempt to present a cohesive strategy for regional stability. Furthermore, China's continuous focus on expanding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan also highlights its long-term ambitions of integrating Pakistan and Afghanistan into its regional framework to expand in the countries which were under the U.S. shadow during the times of war in Afghanistan.

The Iran-Saudi reconciliation mediated by China also demonstrates Beijing's strategic positioning as a mediator or a stabilizing force in the region to reshape the regional order. China promoted itself as a stabilizing force by settling one of the most bitter rivalries in the Middle East, undermining American hegemony and enhancing its position as a regional power broker. The deal demonstrates China's capacity to promote regional

stability through diplomacy, consistent with its broader objectives of acquiring geopolitical and economic gains in the region. This achievement is a prime example of how China's diplomatic influence is increased by its mediating role, which reshapes the region to suit its strategic goals.

However, while the empirics support the hypothesis, there are some limitations that Iran's foreign policy, which may not always be entirely in line with Beijing's goals, affects how much it agrees with China's aims. Similarly, Pakistan's domestic unrest makes it difficult to present a united front. However, China's persistent attempts to coordinate policies with these countries, especially in economic connectivity and counterterrorism, show a significant congruence of strategic aims, supporting the hypothesis.

*H4: China will strategically position itself as a mediator or advocate for regional stability, particularly in ways that enhance its influence and reshape the regional diplomatic order in its Favor.*

Empirical evidence shows mild to strong support for H4, demonstrating China's continuous attempts to mediate and stand for stability in Afghanistan while reshaping the regional order to suit its interests. Events like the Second Informal Meeting on Afghanistan (April 2023) and the SCO Afghan Contact Group (July 2021) indicate China's proactive participation in promoting inclusive government and multilateral cooperation in Afghanistan. Wang Yi's meetings with Taliban commanders in Tianjin and Kabul highlight China's strategic efforts to keep Afghanistan from turning into a terrorist hotspot while also expanding its influence through initiatives for economic integration like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's actions, like fostering Afghanistan's integration in regional connectivity initiatives and providing tariff-free trade access to Afghan exports (October 2024), further underline its capacity to use economic tools to support its mediating role. Its strategy of presenting itself as a stabilizing power is consistent with its rhetoric of support for Afghanistan's development and sovereignty.

However, the evidence also highlights some limitations. China has taken a cautious approach to completely altering the regional order, as evidenced by its denial to formally recognize the Taliban government despite positioning itself as a major player. Furthermore, its support for stability frequently refers to its strategic objectives, like safeguarding its investments in Pakistan and Afghanistan and securing its western borders. According to a neorealist framework, these nuances demonstrate that although the hypothesis is well-

supported, China's actions are motivated more by pragmatic self-interest than altruistic mediation.

#### **4.4 Cross-Mechanism Analysis:**

The cross-mechanism analysis connects both economic and diplomatic mechanisms and then analysis that how these mechanisms together make a ground for China to enhance its influence in the region in the following way.

##### **4.4.1 Synthesizing Economic and Diplomatic Mechanisms:**

The China's strategy in South Asia and the Middle East through its interaction with Pakistan and Iran after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan showcases a direct linkage between China's diplomatic and economic strategies in the region (Mearsheimer, 2001b). These policies are grounded in the China's neorealist pursuit of power and influence, which creates a reinforcing cycle to consolidate Beijing's regional and global standings.

The economic investment, infrastructure development, and financial assistance set a foundation for China's influence to grow where projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and 25-year cooperation agreement with Iran allow China to gain access to strategic assets, secure energy resources, and to integrate these countries into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Rolland, 2017). These initiatives also create economic dependencies, allowing China to leverage substantially over the partner countries. For instance, the sovereign guarantees on CPEC energy projects tie Pakistan's economy closely to China's interests, whereas the infrastructure commitments in Iran strengthen Beijing's feet in the Middle Eastern region.

Similarly, the diplomatic mechanisms amplify the strategic utility of these economic initiatives. The China's bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral engagements with Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan have consistently focused on the regional stability, counterterrorism, and economic integration. Engagements like the Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue (2021) and the Third Quadrilateral Meeting (2024) reinforce China as a mediator in the region and to protect its investments by ensuring political stability in the countries. The direct China's engagements with the Taliban in Tianjin (2021) and Kabul (2022) also demonstrate that the diplomatic overtures are tailored to secure its economic assets by reducing the risks from instability.

A synthesis of these strategies shows a clear pattern: diplomatic engagements are taken to strengthen the viability and sustainability of economic ventures, whereas diplomatic efforts always back China's economic ties. Together, they constitute a feedback loop in which diplomatic efforts offer the strategic framework to preserve and grow influence, while economic initiatives give the solid foundation for it.

#### **4.4.2 How Economic and Diplomatic Mechanisms Interlink to Reinforce China's Influence?**

China's diplomatic and economic mechanisms are profoundly interconnected and backed by each other, reinforcing the other to maximize Beijing's influence in South Asia and the Middle East. This interconnection reflects a strategic coherence in which the economic investments do not stand alone but are an integral component of broader geopolitical design.

##### **4.4.2.1 Economic Mechanisms as Foundations for Diplomatic Engagements:**

China's significant economic projects, such as CPEC and its investment plans in Iran, serve as the basis for deeper diplomatic ties (Fallon, 2015). China's heavy investments in critical infrastructure like ports, energy corridors, and trade networks create tangible stakes that require diplomatic cooperation. For example, the expansion of CPEC into Afghanistan, which has been discussed in several trilateral and multilateral forums, showcases how economic investments influence China's diplomatic agenda (Wolf, 2020). Hence, China gains leverage in diplomatic negotiations by showcasing itself as a critical development partner via these projects.

##### **4.4.2.2 Diplomacy to Safeguard Economic Interests:**

Diplomatic mechanisms are utilized to secure China's economic assets and mitigate risks. China's involvement with the Taliban in Afghanistan, including bilateral meetings and the SCO Afghan Contact Group (2021), demonstrates its concern about terrorism and instability endangering its investments (Huasheng, 2016b). These engagements guarantee that China's economic ventures, such as the potential extension of CPEC to Afghanistan, are safeguarded from regional security challenges. Additionally, China establishes a buffer zone to protect its economic projects by siding with Iran and Pakistan on mutual safety concerns.

#### **4.4.2.3 Multilateral Platforms as Dual-Use Tools:**

Organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), led by China, also illustrate the dual utility of economic and diplomatic mechanisms (Aksu, 2016b). From a financial perspective, platforms like the SCO advocate for regional connectivity projects that align with China's BRI. From a diplomatic standpoint, they allow China to influence regional narratives and establish itself as the leader in handling shared issues such as humanitarian crises and terrorism. This dual role was exemplified at the SCO Council of Heads of State Summit 2021, which focused on counterterrorism cooperation while encouraging Afghanistan's integration into regional economic frameworks (SCO, 2021).

#### **4.4.2.4 Economic Leverage Enhances Diplomatic Clout:**

Economic dependence set up through investments and loans, such as Pakistan's reliance on China's financing under CPEC, amplifies China's diplomatic influence. Beijing's ability to align Pakistan and Iran with its strategic goals in Afghanistan is an example of how these dependencies enable it to influence bilateral and multilateral discussions in its favor (Ali, 2022). Beijing aims to play a crucial role in Middle Eastern geopolitics due to the 25-year agreement with Iran, which links China's interests to Iran's energy and infrastructure sectors.

#### **4.4.2.5 Diplomatic Rhetoric Strengthens Economic Objectives:**

China's diplomatic interactions often promote mutual respect, regional stability, and inclusive governance, indirectly bolstering its economic goals. For example, China's demand for a peace process that is "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" is consistent with its desire for Afghanistan to remain stable and support its regional economic initiatives. China's economic influence has also increased through diplomatic initiatives encouraging Afghanistan's inclusion in regional trade networks.

### **4.5 Broader Implications for Regional Balance of Power in South Asia and the Middle East:**

The discussion above about China's diplomatic and economic strategies in South Asia and the Middle East reshaped the regional balance of power while challenging the status quo dominated by the U.S.-led Western powers, most specifically after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. All the engagements made with Pakistan and Iran are creating new alignments, fostering a new multipolar regional (if not international) order, and enhancing China's influence by diminishing the traditional dominance of Western powers.

#### **4.5.1 Shifting Influence in South Asia:**

Deep China's engagements with Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan fundamentally altered South Asia's power dynamics (Small, 2015). Historically, Pakistan's close alliance with the U.S., especially during the Cold War and the War on Terror, was meant to position the U.S. as a dominant player in that region. Still, the massive China's investments under CPEC, backed by diplomatic rhetoric, have pivoted Pakistan closer to Beijing's sphere of influence (Hillman, 2020).

These changing dynamics are weakening the U.S.'s footholds in South Asia, more specifically after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. China's ability to pivot itself as a mediating force in Afghanistan via direct engagements with the Afghan Taliban reinforced China as a regional power broker (Huasheng, 2016c). This increasing influence continuously challenging India's strategic position since New Delhi's alignment with the U.S. and counter-China's coalitions like the Quad are continuously being counterbalanced by China by their entrenched presence in Pakistan and now in Afghanistan, where India has very minimum influence in the Afghan peace process, U.S. withdrawal, and the aftermath (Meijer, 2020).

Furthermore, China undermines India's aspirations for regional leadership by expanding CPEC into Afghanistan and incorporating Central Asian economies into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). New Delhi is further excluded in regional geopolitics as infrastructure that connects South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East avoids traditional Indian trade routes.

#### **4.5.2 A Rebalanced Middle East:**

The U.S. hegemony in the Middle East has directly challenged by China's growing cooperation with Iran under the 25-year cooperation agreement and its role in facilitating the historic Iran-Saudi reconciliation (Scita, 2019). In the face of Western sanctions, the 25-years cooperation agreement, which involves energy trade and infrastructure development, gives Iran an economic lifeline and reduces its dependence on established Gulf players. At the same time, regional dynamics have significantly changed due to China's role in mediating the March 2023 agreement to restore diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. China has extended its influence in the Middle East by establishing itself as a reliable mediator, stabilizing force, and mediating the restoration of relations between these two rivals (Xinchun and Shaoxian, 2023). This dual strategy strengthens

China's influence in the region by reshaping the alliances. China's objective of ensuring stability along its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) corridors is in line with the Iran-Saudi agreement, which also minimizes the possibilities of regional proxy wars like the one in Yemen. In addition, it strengthens Beijing's strategic influence over Tehran and Riyadh while giving Iran a strong ally to balance out Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations that are aligned with the United States over the historic period of time.

The exemplification of tariff-free Afghan exports to China, deepening trade relations with Iran, and successful mediation signals its intent to replace the U.S. as a central player in Middle Eastern economic and political affairs. This realignment tests traditional Western allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel as they now have to negotiate a more multipolar regional order influenced by Beijing's expanding power and assertive diplomatic manner.

#### **4.5.3 Undermining U.S. Hegemony:**

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan left a power vacuum that China aims to fill by its geopolitical and geoeconomic engagements. China seeks to undermine American dominance in South Asia and the Middle East through diplomatic engagements such as the SCO Afghan Contact Group (2021) and economic gestures such as integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative. China positions itself as a mediator and provider of development-oriented solutions, in stark contrast to the United States, which has traditionally been viewed as an interventionist power.

The broader implications are that U.S. influence is diminishing as regional powers such as Pakistan and Iran align more closely with China's vision for economic development and stability. This strategic shift transforms local power dynamics and indicates a decline in the West's capacity to set the terms in these regions, leading to a multipolar future (Christensen, 2015).

#### **4.5.4 Enhanced Regional Connectivity:**

China's emphasis on regional connectivity, as evidenced by CPEC and proposed extensions into Afghanistan, fosters economic interdependence, pivoting the balance of power in its favor. By connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East via infrastructure and trade, Beijing establishes a regional order in which its economic dominance translates into political power. Initiatives such as the Tunxi Trilateral Meeting (2022), which aimed to

align Afghan stability with broader regional connectivity goals, demonstrate how China applies economic tools to fulfill geopolitical aims (Ali et al., 2021). This interconnectedness undermines traditional power centers like India and the Gulf states, which have historically relied on Western-led frameworks; instead, China's integration of these regions into the BRI sets up dependency that reinforces its power while lowering the political autonomy of other regional actors.

#### **4.5.5 Prospects for a Multipolar World Order:**

China's South Asia and the Middle East strategy reflects its broader vision of a multipolar world. By leveraging its alliances with Pakistan and Iran, Beijing positions itself as a counterweight to Western influence and an alternative power center in the regional order. This approach changes regional dynamics and contributes to a global shift in which traditional hierarchies are being challenged by rising powers such as China (Ikenberry, 2011).

Therefore, China is redefining the balance of power in South Asia and the Middle East through economic investments, diplomatic engagements, and multilateral cooperation, resulting in a regional environment which is consistently aligns with long-term strategic China's goals. This rebalancing has far-reaching consequences for the regions in question and the broader trajectory of global geopolitics and geo-economics.

#### **4.6 Addressing the Neorealist Perspective on China's Actions and Strategic Objectives:**

The above discussion on the basis of empirics reveals that China's geopolitical and geoeconomic strategy in South Asia and Middle East is closely aligned with the neorealist principles. Since neorealism is based on the principles the belief that a state operates in an anarchic system where she prioritizes power, security, relative gain to survive or dominate, aligns closely with the China's ambitions of acquiring power, demonstrating it realistic approach to geopolitics and geoeconomics.

##### **4.6.1 Power Maximization through Regional Influence:**

The increased China's engagement with Pakistan and Iran defines its desire to maximize its power in the region which has historically been under U.S. influence (Small, 2015). The consolidated control over the critical assets under the umbrella of CPEC and then signing

25-years cooperation agreement with Iran are the strategic tools to ensure long-term geostrategic dominance via economic ventures (Scita, 2019).

China's negotiation of the Iran-Saudi rapprochement (2023) clearly outlines its vision as a regional power broker. By facilitating this agreement, China has clearly solidified its position in the Middle East against the decreasing U.S. influence (Mashwani et al., 2024). This move supports neorealism's claim that states seek to counterbalance rivals by seizing opportunities to expand their influence in power vacuums.

#### **4.6.2 Security and Stability as Strategic Objectives:**

China's one in one engagement with Taliban in Tianjin (2021) and Kabul (2022) happened with the intentions to address the terror threat, notably by the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which China considers as a direct threat to internal security. Similarly, the China's contribution in mediating between Iran and Saudi showcases its neorealist intentions to reduce regional security, which could jeopardize the BRI initiative.

Similarly, the focus on counter-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Asia reflects broader security concerns and the joint statements at forums such as the Fourth Trilateral Dialogue (2021) and the Third Quadrilateral Meeting (2024) highlight China's commitments to make sure that regional instability does not threaten its economic and geopolitical objectives.

#### **4.6.3 Relative Gains over Competitors:**

Neorealism also highlights the importance of relative gains in state behavior. China's strategic alliances with Pakistan and Iran reinforce its position against competitors such as the United States and India. The expansion of CPEC into Afghanistan does not only strengthen China's economic outline but also undermine the Indian hopes for regional leadership (Hillman, 2020). Similarly, the 25-year agreement with Iran brings Tehran's economic and security policies closer to Beijing, reducing the United States' influence in the Middle East.

China's ability to act as a mediator in the Iran-Saudi deal demonstrates its ability to outmaneuver its competitors. China gained significant diplomatic capital by positioning itself as a mediator in a traditionally U.S.-dominated region, increasing its relative power and credibility as a global leader.

#### **4.6.4 Balancing Against U.S. Hegemony:**

The neorealist framework which argues balancing as a key strategy for states confronting hegemonic powers (Waltz, 1979). China's actions after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan are a classic example of this principle. China has actively sought to reshape the regional order by filling the power vacuum. Initiatives such as the SCO Afghan Contact Group (2021), and direct diplomatic engagements demonstrate its intent to minimize U.S. influence while asserting leadership.

The Iran-Saudi reconciliation demonstrates China's balancing strategy. By fostering dialogue between two rivals long shaped by Western alliances, China demonstrated its ability to transform alliances and reduce U.S. dominance in the Middle East.

#### **4.6.5 Long-Term Geostrategic Objectives:**

Neorealism also emphasizes long-term planning to protect state interests. China's economic initiatives, such as BRI projects, are intended to create dependencies that strengthen its strategic position. Investments in Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan ensure access to resources and trade routes and help integrate these countries into a China-centric regional structure (Ali et al., 2021). The mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia maintains stability in a region critical to China's energy security and trade goals.

Furthermore, China's multilateral engagements, such as those with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), institutionalize its influence, ensuring that its leadership is ingrained in regional norms and structures. These actions are consistent with neorealism's emphasis on structural power and the establishment of favorable international conditions.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion:

This study has explored the Post Afghan U.S. withdrawal changing geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies in South Asia and the Middle East. This research examined whether the U.S. withdrawal created a geopolitical power vacuum, and it focused on Pakistan and Iran as case studies to examine how China is utilizing its economic and diplomatic engagements to fill the power vacuum in the broader region of South Asia and Middle East created by the U.S. withdrawal. The study anchors the neorealist framework to shed light on how China's actions define its pursuit of power maximization, regional dominance, and strategic realignment the geopolitically critical region. Adopting neorealism as a theoretical framework, the study analysed China's actions as a rational state seeking power maximization and regional dominance within an anarchic international system. By employing a small-N Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) and theory-testing process tracing, the cases of Pakistan and Iran were examined in depth to explore China's strategies for reshaping regional dynamics.

The findings highlight the significant geopolitical shifts in the region initiated by the U.S. withdrawal, which disturbed the power equilibrium in Afghanistan and in the broader region created a vacuum for emerging actors to rebalance the balance of power. This study finds that China used this opportunity through economic and diplomatic mechanisms to fulfil the void created by the withdrawal in the region. The economic mechanisms including Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a flagship subsidiary project if BRI in Pakistan and the 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Iran. China's focus on securing critical resources, building regional connectivity, and creating long-term economic dependencies via these initiatives and the Gwadar Port in Pakistan and infrastructure projects in Iran and integrating these regional economies into its connectivity framework, showcase China's deliberate effort to control key assets that can further enhance its regional influence. China's diplomatic engagements always support its economic efforts, positioning it as a stabilizing force and mediator in the regional conflicts. The direct engagement with Taliban leadership by diplomatic visits to Afghanistan and inviting them in China, Trilateral dialogues with Pakistan and Afghanistan, mediation in the Iran-Saudi rapprochement, and leveraging multilateral

platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) underscore China's calculated efforts to build alliances, address security concerns, and reinforce its regional leadership. These diplomatic efforts, aligned with economic investments, highlight a coherent strategy to maximize influence and counterbalance regional and global competitors.

China's actions closely align with the neorealist emphasis on power and relative gains. The study argues how China's initiatives challenge the traditional dominance of the U.S., shifting the regional order in the favor of Beijing's interests. The study also broadens the scope of neorealism by emphasizing the significance of economic and diplomatic mechanisms as tools for power projection, extending the framework beyond traditional military and political strategies. By fostering economic interdependence, addressing non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and economic instability in the countries and also positioning itself as a mediator in regional conflicts, China consolidates its influence without direct military engagement. This analysis also highlights that these strategies serve as China's long-term objectives of dominance, rather than short term goals of regional development or stability.

This study also acknowledges several limitations despite providing insightful understanding of China's actions in the region. The small-N, case-study approach restricts the generalizability of findings to other regions by only focusing on Pakistan and Iran allowed for detailed insights, the unique historical and geopolitical factors of these cases may not apply universally. The focus on the immediate aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal also limits the analysis to developments that have occurred specifically within a relatively short period after 2021 and the long-term implications of China's strategies remain uncertain, as the post-withdrawal scenarios are still on the process of unfolding. Furthermore, the reliance on neorealism as the only theoretical framework also excludes alternative frameworks, such as constructivism or neoliberalism, which can also offer opposite explanations of China's actions. Additionally, Data accessibility also posed certain challenges, particularly regarding the availability of the details of agreements like the Iran-China 25-year cooperation, limiting the depth of contractual analysis. This study rely on the qualitative data sources, including official governmental websites, media reports, and think tank analyses, which introduces potential biases and gaps in data reliability. The lack of access to comprehensive details of agreements, such as the 25-year cooperation pact

between China and Iran, restricts the ability to fully evaluate the scope and implications of these initiatives.

Additionally, future research could explore areas which are not addressed in this study, such as security mechanisms, which remain a critical dimension of China's strategies in ensuring the stability of its investments and also an important element of neorealist lens. Investigating the Indian perspective on China's initiatives, including CPEC and BRI, would provide valuable insights into regional rivalries. Similarly, exploring U.S. countermeasures to China's expanding influence in South Asia and the Middle East would help in depth contextualization the strategic competition between these global powers. Broader topics, such as China's interactions with smaller states, its mediation in other regional conflicts, or its role in reshaping international institutions, can also be a worth studying in future and using the alternative frameworks such as constructivism or neoliberalism can also offer the unseen aspects of Chinese actions in future.

This study also offers practical implications for policymakers, regional actors, and international organizations. Countries like Pakistan and Iran must balance the economic benefits of Chinese investments with the risks of long-term dependency. Policymakers should negotiate terms that safeguard economic sovereignty and ensure equitable benefits from initiatives like CPEC and the 25-year strategic agreement. Regional actors should engage more proactively in multilateral platforms, such as the SCO, to align their interests with broader regional stability goals while preventing excessive Chinese dominance. For the U.S. and Western powers, the findings underscore the requirement of lucrative initiatives and strategies focusing on economic partnerships and multilateral diplomacy to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region under research.

So, this study untaps China's geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies in South Asia and the Middle East, emphasizing its deliberate yet calculated measures to fill the power vacuum left by the U.S. withdrawal. By integrating economic and diplomatic mechanisms, China effectively consolidates its influence, reshapes regional dynamics, and challenges the traditional dominance of U.S. led Western powers. Constructed on neorealist principles, this study provides a solid framework for understanding China's role in a multipolar world and also offers a foundation for further research. As China continues to assert itself on the global stage, understanding its integrated approach to geopolitics and geoeconomics remains essential for navigating the changing political world order.

## Chapter 6

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