**GEO-POLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF PAKISTAN**

Pakistan is located in South Asia and is bordered by Iran, Afghanistan, China and India. To the north are the Himalayan Mountains, which branch off into the Hindu Kush range. To the southwest is the vast Balochistan Plateau, which is arid and sparsely populated. In the south is the Thar Desert and a 650-mile coast along the Arabian sea. The Indus River begins in the Tibetan Plateau and cuts through the country’s eastern half. The river nourishes the fertile plains of the Punjab, the country’s populous core region and its political and economic heartland. Pakistan’s primary geographic challenge arises from its borders, which do not correspond to natural geographic boundaries. The modern borders of Pakistan were created in 1947, when the nation was carved out of the Muslim-majority northwest and northeast portions of India. The countries have fought three wars since independence, and each claims the territory of Kashmir. Bangladesh, then known as “East Pakistan,” gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 with India’s help. This reinforced the notion within Pakistan that India was an existential threat. Pakistan has long sought to gain influence in Afghanistan, both to secure strategic depth and to prevent Kabul from falling into New Delhi’s orbit. On the west, the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan — called the Durand Line — has remained contentious since the British created it in 1893. Kabul claims that Afghanistan’s true boundary runs deep into Pakistan to absorb the Pashtun tribal belt divided between both countries. The mountainous terrain has made the region difficult to govern, ensuring that the border remains porous.

**Strategic Interests and a Difficult Neighbourhood**

 Ever since its independence, Pakistan has been confronted with territorial claims from Afghanistan on parts of its Northwest Frontier Province; Afghanistan has never accepted the inclusion of this area in Pakistan following a referendum in July 1947. And Afghanistan, with its Pashtun majority, has never accepted as the Pakistani border the Durand Line demarcated by the British, which divides the area inhabited by the Pashtun people. Jammu and Kashmir are the Alsace and Lorraine of South Asia. Ever since Indian and Pakistani independence, the issue of which country these regions belong to has been at the epicentre of political tensions in South Asia. The intensity of the dispute over this region, with its majority Muslim population, stems from the strong symbolic importance it has for both sides: for the Pakistanis it is the identity of their state as the country of Muslims which is at stake, whilst, for the Indians, the region symbolises the secular constitutional nature of the Indian Union. Yet the conflict between Pakistan and India has also always been about power politics. The Pakistani elite has never been willing to accept Indian hegemonic ambitions in South Asia and has thus sought to ally itself with foreign powers – first with the US and later with China. Pakistan is considerably smaller and weaker in economic and political terms, as well as in military terms. Following its disastrous defeat by India in 1971, it began to work on its own nuclear programme. When India exploded a total of 5 nuclear devices on 11 and 13 May 1998 and declared itself to be a nuclear weapon state, Pakistan was hot on its heels. Thus, the Pakistani-Indian conflict had gained a nuclear dimension. Yet the nuclear balance has not really served as a deterrent, since armed conflict between the two states was perpetuated through the use of non-state players. This was the case in the Kargil crisis in 1999, when Pakistani fighters infiltrated the Indian part of Kashmir and were brutally forced out by the Indian army. When the trail of the terrorists responsible for the December 2001 attack on the Parliament in Delhi led to Pakistan, a renewed crisis erupted between Pakistan and India in the summer of 2002, bringing with it the threat of possible nuclear escalation. Recently, though, the relationship between Pakistan and India has improved tangibly. In autumn 2003, both sides agreed on a ceasefire and, in February 2004, they entered into a "composite dialogue". Both sides have given a lot of ground. In April 2005, President Musharraf and the new Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh declared the peace process to be irreversible.

**Traditional Geographical Importance of Pakistan**

Traditionally, Pakistan's geographical importance has been defined in following ways;
**1.** Pakistan's North Western Border can be used as an access to the Central Asian Republics rich in natural resources. It's a narrow strip of Afghan Territory between Tajikistan and Pakistan which if used as a transit route can benefit all the countries in trade.

**2.** Pakistan's South Western Border with Iran is of great significance in a trade with this oil-rich country.
**3.**Eastern Border of Pakistan with India has been quite less utilized than the potential it carries. This can be a free trade route with India if the major conflicts between both the states are resolved.
**4.**Northern Border of Pakistan with China provides another important route for access of Chinese products in Pakistan.

**Modern Geographical Importance of Pakistan**

Though the geography of the country is same, the interpretations of interests linked with it have improved a bit with the changing regional and international dynamics. This can be evaluated under the following new heads:

**China-Pakistan Economic Corridor**
The $46 billion 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' scheme, which is being demonstrated as a 'Game-Changer' is more than a network of roads to link Chinese city of Kashgar with the Gulf States via Gwadar of Pakistan. CPEC is a complete package of energy projects and trade opportunities for Pakistan. It is the most cherished fruit of Pakistan's geographical importance the country ever had. However, some credit also goes to the foreign policy makers of Pakistan who always kept into considerations the Sino-Pak mutual interests.

In the wake of CPEC, China is going to have the shortest route-access ever available to the Middle Eastern, African, and European markets. For Pakistan, it might be a new gain but to China, this access is a link to it long term strategic plan to take over US control in the said regions.

 **Gwadar port is the nearest warm-water port to energy-rich Central Asian Countries**
Bought from Oman in 1958, Gwadar has been developed into a warm-water seaport which now operated by a Chinese company named 'China Overseas Port Holding Company' under a 43 years agreed lease. The port is the soul of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Being the nearest deep-sea port to the landlocked Central Asian Republics, Gwadar is another manifestation of Pakistan's geographical importance.

**The Persian Gulf and Pars Gas Field**
Pakistan's Gwadar Port provides access to the 'Gulf of Oman' which extends via 'Strait of Hormuz' to form the 'Persian Gulf'. This gulf is surrounded by Iran, UAE, Saudi Araba, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq. Access to the Persian Gulf via Gwadar port means access to all these countries most of which are rich in energy resources. The Persian Gulf also has the world's largest natural gas reservoir 'Pars Gas Field' shared by Iran and Qatar. Pakistan's geographic importance increases due to its proximity to such mega-fields of natural resources when the country has been suffering from energy starvation for long periods of time.

**Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI)**
The Asian Development Bank's funded project of TAPI is the name of a gas pipeline which aims to supply natural gas from the Caspian Sea to the four countries mentioned above. Pakistan due to its geographical nearness to this Central Asian Republic is seeking benefit from the project. It also reflects the dependence of India on Pakistan for having access to the natural resources of Central Asian Republics. The construction of the project commenced in December 2015, and it will be functional by 2019.

**Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline**
Also known as the 'Peace Pipeline' the project is another fruit of Pakistan's geographic importance. The pipeline project was formally inaugurated in 2013, but it's far from being operational due to several controversies. Particularly the anti-Iran stance of the USA influenced Pakistan to abandon the project. Things, however, have changed after the US-Iran Nuclear Deal and Iran is no more under enormous sanctions. Pakistan at the same time never utterly gave up the project. Good omens are apparent for the future of this project.

**Pakistan shares Marine Border with Oman**
Pakistan and Oman settled their maritime under an agreement in 2000; adhering to the International Law of Sea. This sharing of a maritime boundary with the brotherly country of Oman can interpret Pakistan's geographical importance in the sense of access to Oman's undersea energy resources. The sea route can also be used to have access to the Persian Gulf and its littoral states.

India’s effort to make a two-fold strategic partnership with the US and China has further increased Pakistan’s “already remarkable” geopolitical importance, says a new study by a US think-tank. The wave of terrorist attacks which struck London on July 7 and 21 further increased Pakistan’s position as a key Western ally in the war against terror, says Federico Bordonaro, a University of Rome professor who authored the power and interest news report, titled “Pakistan: a Geopolitical Crux.”

Prof Bordonaro, a security analyst with the Chicago-based PINR, told Dawnthat Pakistan’s location at the confluence of South and Central Asian regions contribute to its geopolitical importance.

“Several foreign powers are interested in Pakistan as an outlet for energy resources in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan,” said Mr Bordonaro, who is currently studying the security problems of South Asia, particularly in reference to India’s effort to emerge as a major naval power in the Indian Ocean.
Prof Bordonaro believes that South and Central Asian regions would soon witness a major tug-of-war between the US and China with both wanting to further increase their influence in Pakistan.

“It will be very interesting to watch how influential people in the Pakistan Army and the ISI reorient their focus in this competition,” he said, recalling that when the US decided to sell F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan in March this year there were people in the Bush administration who argued that it would increase the army’s attachment to the US.

“If China gets stronger than it already is, it will be a problem for the US,” said Prof Bordonaro, adding that the Chinese could use Gwadar to counter India’s efforts to dominate the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.”

The Indo-US nuclear deal, signed on July 18, could also harm US efforts to maintain a nuclear balance between India and Pakistan, he argues. Prof Bordonaro believes that although the US could not prevent India and Pakistan from testing their nuclear devices in 1998, the Americans later decided not to create an imbalance of power in South Asia.

“But the US also has chosen India in order to balance China’s growing influence in the region and if you do so, it is very difficult not to cause an imbalance between Pakistan and India. This is the tragedy of power politics.”

Asked if the Indo-US nuclear deal could cause Pakistan to move away from the US, Mr Bordonaro said: “This is a possibility that is growing. It depends on how Indo-US relations develop in the near future and on the situation in Waziristan.”

Prof Bordonaro says that officials in Islamabad realize it’s not in their interest to move away from the US but they may try to balance growing Indo-US relations with a more pro-Chinese position. “If this happens, it will begin a very interesting and dangerous process in South Asia.”

A lot will also depend on how long this present administrative setup in Pakistan continues, said Prof Bordonaro, adding that the Americans still back the present setup. “They are not yet thinking about the post-Musharraf era, even though they lost some of confidence in him.”

Prof Bordonaro says Uzbekistan’s decision to ask the US to remove its military base has only added to Pakistan’s geopolitical position. Commenting on Uzbekistan’s move, he said both Russia and China were trying to counter US influence in Central Asia. “In Kyrgyzstan, which has allowed US military presence, we see an increase in US influence while in Uzbekistan we see its influence waning.”

**''Pakistan: a Geopolitical Crux''**

Two recent events have increased Pakistan's already remarkable geopolitical importance. The first was an ambitious and complex geo-strategic move by India -- Pakistan's main geopolitical rival -- consisting in a two-fold strategic partnership with China and the United States. Such an initiative by New Delhi, aimed at enhancing India's role as the Indian Ocean's central power, amplifies Islamabad's security concerns regarding its adversary's strategy. The second event was the wave of terrorist attacks which struck London on July 7 and July 21: Scotland Yard rapidly identified some of the perpetrators as British Muslims of Pakistani descent.

**Islamabad's Perilous Game in the Post-9/11 International Context**

Pakistan's policy is nowadays perceived in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, its regime is considered by diplomats and scholars to be among the most pro-American due to President Pervez Musharraf's official commitment to tackling al-Qaeda and assisting U.S. operations in Afghanistan. On the other hand, its society is regarded as one of the greatest hotbeds of Islamic radicalism, spreading terrorist ideology around the Muslim world. Islamabad is still the only Muslim power to possess a nuclear weapon, which, together with its flourishing demography and Islamic schools' activities, gives it the status of a regional great power.

At a time of China's rise as a global power, the somewhat fragile balance in Islamabad's political and military milieus is to be monitored carefully. Analysts know that both Pakistan's army and its intelligence agency, the I.S.I., are less than monolithic in their support of the current administration. A strategic partnership with Beijing, consisting in defense technology sharing, is allegedly the preferred option for some influential Pakistani decision-makers.

Musharraf's position is similar to that of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak: a pragmatic statesman who aligns with the U.S. notwithstanding the presence of a permanent radical opposition, of a fundamentalist character, deeply rooted in society. Cracking down on religious institutions and political movements that solidly backed al-Qaeda had been Musharraf's card for staying in power with U.S. support after September 11, 2001. It is clear that the terrorist attacks against Britain have put once again an enormous pressure on the Pakistani government.

Reacting to allegations about the possible involvement of some Pakistani citizens in the July 22 Sharm el-Sheikh bombing, Musharraf declared on July 25 that al-Qaeda has been eradicated from the country following Islamabad's anti-terror policy. However, both the U.S. and the E.U. member-states are showing growing concern about Pakistan's inability to tackle terror cells' activities effectively. One of the most worrisome aspects of the problem, Western intelligence agencies say, is that some European citizens of Pakistani descent apparently maintain very close relations with their ancestral home country's radical elements, being said to flock back to their country of origin to receive extremist indoctrination and, possibly, terrorist training. Moreover, some of the most radical imams in Europe are also suspected of furthering al-Qaedaist interests using the local mosque as a training facility.

Although the United States seems to be willing to continue promoting a balance of power in the South Asian region by enhancing cooperation in security and defense policies with both India and Pakistan, the Bush administration is increasingly worried about Islamist activities in Pakistan's north-western tribal region of Waziristan, and also worried about growing Sino-Pakistani military cooperation -- leading to Chinese use of the Gwadar naval base in the Arabian Sea.

On June 15, Pakistani military sources said that U.S. forces killed 24 pro-Taliban militants on Pakistani territory. This seems to show that Washington is determined not to leave the task of fighting Islamist militants to Pakistani forces alone. However, it entails a clear violation of Pakistan's national sovereignty, despite the good relations between Washington and Islamabad. This fact, coupled with the U.S. perception of India as the more important military regional partner -- given the U.S.-China rivalry -- could complicate, if not jeopardize, the future of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.