**An evolving environment**

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The strategic environment in the South-Central Asian Region (SCAR) is undergoing a massive paradigm shift. China has already made an unequivocal ingress into the SCAR with the CPEC emerging as the BRI’s flagship project. It has signed a twenty-five-year agreement worth USD 400 billion with Iran. A stable Afghanistan will eventually gravitate to become an integral part of the CPEC. This will facilitate the BRI’s further expansion into the GMER, Africa, the Mediterranean region and Europe. The BRI is poised to integrate all South Asian states (less India) too. Russia is engaging the region meaningfully; has excellent ties with Iran and has improved relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan. The CARs are very favourably inclined to join the BRI, too. The US might be egressing from Afghanistan however, it has remained seriously engaged with it and the region. During the recent Central and South Asia Conference (C&SAC) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan it pointedly engaged the C5+1 and created a regional QUAD of sorts with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Despite its desperate efforts, India remains peripheral and irrelevant to both the Afghan endgame and the post-US Afghanistan.

[Oil marketing companies announce hike in price of LPG](https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2021/oil-marketing-companies-announced-hike-in-price-of-lpg)

The BRI thus portends to generate significant regional interconnectivity and mutually beneficial economic interdependence in the entire SCAR.

However, the US’ deeper strategic objective in the SCAR apparently is to delay, disrupt and/or even destroy the BRI-CPEC which it views as the Chinese vanguard to threaten its singular position at the global apex. To this end, the US-India Combine is likely to maintain Afghanistan in an unmanaged, chaotic and destabilised state through their spoilers—the RAW-NDS Team, other hostile intelligence agencies, Terrorism Central, anti-Taliban Afghan groups etc. This strategy of indirect approach serves two purposes here; one, the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region (APR) and the BRI-CPEC will be destabilised too, thus stunting the latter’s further expansion and progression, and two, it will deny a direct land-link between South and Central Asia. The strategic environment of the SCAR will therefore remain increasingly uncertain and indeterminate. The SCAR’s economic integration, an objective of the BRI, will hence remain largely unsatiated and hostage to Afghanistan’s instability.

[Global warming will claim 83M lives without emissions changes: Study](https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2021/global-warming-will-claim-83m-lives-without-emissions-changes-study)

The contrast between what the peoples of the region desire and what the self-serving spoilers (and their masters) threaten could not be starker. The severe clash of interests between the US and China could not be more conspicuous.

The Taliban, in the meanwhile, continue to tighten their hold on Afghanistan. In a deep strategic manoeuvre, they have established control on all major trade and border crossings with Afghanistan’s neighbours—Tajikistan in the north, Turkmenistan in the West, Iran in the West-South West and Pakistan in the East-South East thus effectively isolating Afghanistan within the region. This move forecloses all chances of any regional interference in Afghanistan as well as all escape routes for their antagonists. They dominate the countryside. In a classic strategy of yore, they are now laying siege to major population centres; Kabul cannot be too far off. They will attempt to break the will of the National Unity Government (NUG)/people to resist through intrigue, conspiracy and by curtailing/cutting off all supplies—food, water, electricity, fuel to major cities etc. They will force the

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NUG to capitulate or negotiate from an extremely weak position. The only way of delaying the inevitable Taliban victory is to keep the APR destabilised and in unending turmoil. The ANDSF is incapable of blunting the Taliban’s irresistible juggernaut. That task will now perhaps be assigned to the various anti-Taliban Afghan groups and Terrorism Central which has thus far been safely ensconced, managed, maintained and sustained in Afghanistan’s wildernesses. The RAW-NDS team remains primed and eager to implement this macabre strategy throughout the APR. Will elements of Terrorism Central be willingly pitched against the Taliban? These terrorist groups are already in operation against the CPEC inside Pakistan. They are utilising their numerous sleeper cells created for such times, purposes and eventualities, (Tried to drive a wedge between Pakistan and China through the terrorist attack on Dasu Dam workers). Pakistan has gone to extreme lengths to fence and secure its western borders with Afghanistan and Iran and now is in a very strong position to counter all cross Pak-Afghan/Iran border movements by these terrorist groups. These groups will now have to depend more on their sleeper cells which are already under pressure through Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad. So, in the ensuing weeks and months Afghan Taliban and the CPEC from GB to the Arabian Sea are likely to come under relentless terrorist attacks.

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This will further vitiate the already volatile strategic environment, especially in the APR. It essentially negates the spirit of the C&SAC which sought mutually supporting regional interconnectivity and economic activities. Afghanistan was clearly identified as the land bridge to connect South and Central Asia. It thus becomes imperative that Afghanistan be pacified, stabilised and incorporated as an inescapable and vital part of the region’s economic future. It must have an all-Afghan Government which exercises genuine writ all over the country. An internationally recognised government in Kabul will favourably impact international efforts towards reconstruction, rehabilitation, economic revival and development, emergence of communication and other infrastructure to create trade corridors etc and make Afghanistan a part of the region’s drive towards mutual progress and prosperity. The potential to create economic integration through trade corridors comprising rail-road networks, oil and gas pipelines (TAPI, IPGPL), special economic zones, industrial zones, trans-region power transmission lines, (CASA) etc is unlimited and can knit the entire SCAR into a formidable economic union and powerhouse.

[Ethiopian Selemon Barega wins gold in Olympics men's 10,000m](https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2021/ethiopian-selemon-barega-wins-gold-in-olympics-men-s-10-000m)

The threat to the region’s prosperous future however, emanates from the spoilers, and their masters, who for their self-centred interests would rather contest, hinder and hamper this regional integration, interconnectivity and economic interdependence. Their nefarious designs must be blunted emphatically. If need be, the peoples of the region must unite, realise where their interests lie, identify the spoilers for who they are and put up a joint front to engage and neutralise them.

The time for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to rise to the challenge and acquire a practical political, economic and even military dimension is nigh.