**Regional connectivity challenges**

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In pursuit of their geo-economic and geo-strategic security interests, the two global superpowers, namely the US and China, seem to have locked horns on the domination of the global commons i.e. land, sea and air lines of communications, outer space and cyberspaces. The phenomenon of guarding respective spheres of influence by the big three, including Russia, involves most of the other countries wittingly or unwittingly on the global chessboard. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), labelled as the world’s largest infrastructure programme, has so far directed investments mainly to energy and transportation networks in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. BRI investment projects are estimated to add over USD 1 trillion of outward funding for foreign infrastructure over the 10-year period from 2017. According to official data, China invested USD 139.8 billion by 2020 in BRI projects, including USD 22.5 billion last year alone. This includes the BRI’s flagship project, the USD 60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), in which Beijing has so far invested over USD 25 billion. Since its launch in 2013, the BRI has been well received across the globe due to its easy loan parameters. However, unsustainable loans and cases of debt traps in countries like Sri Lanka and Malaysia as well as the use of sovereign land for building China’s military installations have made the BRI a cause for concern.

[Somali military kills 28 al-Shabaab terrorists in 48 hours](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2022/somali-military-kills-28-al-shabaab-terrorists-in-48-hours)

In response to the Chinese BRI and the String of Pearls, the US strategic response came with the Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Policy, giving birth to The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also known as the QUAD), which is a strategic security dialogue between the United States, India, Japan and Australia. Quad is to checkmate China’s growing profile as a nation, giving humanitarian aid to nations across Asia and the Pacific, and it wants to challenge China’s soft power bid in the region. Moreover, little is known about the new quadrilateral framework announced in July 2021 between the United States, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, except that it is aimed at enhancing regional connectivity. A July 16 statement from the US State Department said the four countries aimed to “expand trade, build transit links, and strengthen business-to-business ties” with an eye on “the historic opportunity to open flourishing interregional trade routes”. But analysts remain divided over whether the new grouping is aimed at countering China’s growing influence in the region, especially its Belt and Road Initiative as some saw it as a US attempt to keep military supply lines into Afghanistan open then and after exit, remain relevant in Afghanistan and the region by ultimately seeking basing facilities for its military drones and intelligence operators.

[Western Balkans see highest COVID deaths per 100,000 globally](https://nation.com.pk/29-Jan-2022/western-balkans-see-highest-covid-deaths-per-100-000-globally)

In addition to the bad impact of super powers’ rivalries, almost all South Asian countries have their regional borders and other political disputes, which prohibit fully capitalising on the regional connectivity as a part of above-mentioned mega initiatives by China as well as the US. Indian-Occupied Kashmir remains the number one nuclear flashpoint between Pakistan and India despite fighting four wars in addition to misuse of Indus Water Treaty by India, Sir Creek and Siachen issues. Consequently, the Indian quest to reach out to the big Pakistani market, Central Asia and beyond by land routes remains an unrealised dream. Pakistan also fails to benefit from close export to India’s big market; people-to-people contact and bilateral tourism potential remains a hostage to the above stated unresolved issues due the want of visionary political leadership and a far-right extremist state of mind reflected in the Indian state’s policies.

The World Bank has characterised South Asia as one of the least integrated regions in the world because of the low level of trade. It is painful to see that instead of taking advantage of the ongoing mega connectivity projects, the South Asian countries continue to drift apart due foreign influence, camp politics and narrow-minded self-interests.

[4.5 magnitude earthquake jolts parts of Swat](https://nation.com.pk/28-Jan-2022/4-5-magnitude-earthquake-jolts-parts-of-swat)

Pakistan is also a part of two older projects hindered by funding difficulties: the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia-1000 project, which intends to bring hydropower from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. On January 15, Pakistan’s energy minister announced that negotiations are underway with Russia to build a gas pipeline from Kazakhstan to Pakistan. The envisioned new pipeline marks Islamabad’s latest effort to strengthen connectivity with Kabul and Central Asia—but not the rest of South Asia.

If South Asia is to meaningfully benefit from the regional connectivity, the biggest challenges of staying away from becoming a pawn in the Great Powers’ Politics and overcoming bilateral or multilateral disputes through peaceful resolution by exploring the middle grounds is the only way forward: A utopian dream, the realisation of which is prone to remain elusive without great leadership and providence.