



# The New Great Game: A Pakistani Perspective

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## Report Authors

“The New Great Game – A Pakistani Perspective” was researched, compiled and written by **Lt. General Tariq Khan**, an erudite general from Pakistan’s Armored Corps and a decorated War Veteran, is an expert on critical issues related to Terrorism & Insurgencies. General Tariq Khan during the Battle of Bajaur, transformed and re-shaped Frontier Corps into a relentless fighting force and raised FC’s own special forces popularly known as SOG. Commanded and led major operations in FATA from the frontline, his model on counter-insurgency is still applied to this day. Lt. General Tariq Khan (Retired) leads CommandEleven’s Board of Advisors as our Patron-in-Chief.

## About CommandEleven

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CommandEleven seeks to inform and guide public policy and decision makers in government, business and military through a rigorous program of publications, conferences, digital medias, policy briefings and recommendations.

Visit <http://commandeleven.com> for more information or contact [info@commandeleven.com](mailto:info@commandeleven.com).

*(We are not in Afghanistan for the sake of the Education Policy in a broken 13<sup>th</sup> century country. We are there so the people of Britain and our Global Interests are not threatened.) Liam Fox*

## The History

The term 'Great Game'<sup>1</sup>, now a common cliché, was born of the infamous competition for regional control played out in the Indian sub-continent during the 19<sup>th</sup> century between the British and Russian Empires.

The Russian search for warm water ports extended their interests towards the Indian Ocean, bringing them into direct conflict with British interests. Subsequently, the British found themselves involved in three Anglo-Afghan Wars<sup>2</sup>, primarily undertaken to contain Russian expansion towards the east, ultimately resulting in Afghanistan accepted as a buffer state between the two belligerents.

In 1979, a century later, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan with an eye on the mineral resources<sup>3</sup> and access to the Indian Ocean through Iran or Pakistan. However, not only did they fail, but instead unravelled the Soviet Union in 1991<sup>4</sup>. The resulting years of wars, chaos and anarchy transformed Afghanistan<sup>5</sup> a haven for terrorist organizations resulting in the al-Qaeda's September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on the World Trade Center.

Yet, after a 20-year experiment, overseen by a coalition of the US and a NATO lead International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)<sup>6</sup>, in nation building, constitutional structural development and setting up of a security apparatus and the ultimate withdrawal of US forces securing the failure in Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>, set the stage for the New Great Game in South Asia.

In simple terms, the US again failed to export its version of democracy and nation building, creating numerous opportunities for both state and non-state actors to benefit.

Afghanistan's geostrategic location makes its stability crucial to China, the Central Asian Republics, Iran, and Pakistan. It is a fulcrum in the region, whose political and administrative status can, and has, impact on the region as a whole<sup>8</sup> for decades. In the same region, where two nuclear armed states stand at the ready to declare war.

With China assertion to global leadership in the economic domain, the US set up a strategic alliance with India<sup>9</sup>, including them in the Quad security paradigm. This further strained the transactional US-Pakistan relationship, pushing it closer to China.

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<sup>1</sup> Great Britain's Great Game: An Introduction, Taylor and Francis 160-171

<sup>2</sup> Afghan War, History & facts, Encyclopedia Britannica

<sup>3</sup> Mapping Afghanistan's untapped natural resources, Al Jazeera, Mohammed Hussain 24<sup>th</sup> Sept 2021

<sup>4</sup> A peek into the Collapse of USSR, Dr Naazir Mahmood, Political Economy.

<sup>5</sup> Background-Al Qaeda, Inside the Terror Network. Frontline, PBS

<sup>6</sup> ISAF's mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014), NATO, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_69366.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm)

<sup>7</sup> The Secret History of the US Diplomatic Failure In Afghanistan, The New Yorker, Annals of war, December 2021

<sup>8</sup> Why Afghanistan will be a New Geopolitical Pivot, Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, 16 September 2021

<sup>9</sup> The United States and India: Deepening our Strategic Partnership, fact sheet, office of the spokesperson, July 27, 2021

The Indo-US partnership forced a Pak-China collaboration as natural counter-balance in the affairs of a regional strategic paradigm.

A New Great Game has begun, where the games are more diverse, the methods more covert and the players more versatile, but the objectives have not changed, in a region that has already survived the original Great Game.

The Indian sub-continent has experienced the trials and tribulations of establishing democratic functioning systems against influences, both internal and external, to derail those systems, and created alliances based on the animosities that threaten peace. But in the eleven nation Indian sub-continent, it is the conflicts and trials that India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan face that take center stage, regionally and internationally.

## **The Background**

Understanding the impact of the evolving geostrategic world in the shadow of the Russo-Ukraine Conflict<sup>10</sup> and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>, on south Asia in general, and particularly the Indian subcontinent, one must be aware of all the influences working in the region.

While history is replete with the names and conquests of empires, should we view Francis Fukuyama's *The American Century* or Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* as ideas of what a world should be or warning of what the world was to become?

Today, should we read Robert Kaplan's *Coming Anarchy* or *Democracy – Just a Moment* as the manual of our future as a civilization?

We have learned narratives. It is the world we live in today, whether we chose to accept or deny it. Narratives created from peoples' subjective notions, where accepted values are debated, argued, and fought over. Narratives where the strongest/loudest voices win the day, with truth buried beneath diplomatic and political debris.

So, we have learnt to live in a world of narratives, where people are subjected to notions and where values are debated upon, argued, and fought over. The strongest voice always wins the day, while the truth remains buried under the debris of diplomacy and political propriety. And here, when the world was being called a village, where integration meant New World Orders such as the United Nations, economic regulation such as the WTO, political alliances such as the EU and the OIC etc. where communication and travel meant reduced distances to hours rather than days, it would be natural to expect the world to shrink to a village. But it did not and the world stands as divided as never before. These divisions have a natural fallout which will have a definitive impact on South Asia as the pulls and pushes of the powers that influence the region, play out their agendas, in search of their respective objectives.

The days of a unipolar globe, led by a powerful US are fast coming to a close as we find the US authority in every dimension waning, i.e., military clout, economic

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<sup>10</sup> Brothers Disunited: Russia's use of military power in Ukraine, The return of the Cold war, The west and Russia, London, pp 99-129

<sup>11</sup> Resolute Support Mission, Key Facts and figures, NATO int, February 2021

strength, moral standing and ethical conduct all of which are being challenged and questioned. China, the fastest growing economy<sup>12</sup> is taking on a super power status just as Russia is flexing its military muscle<sup>13</sup>. With a global population peaking at 8.5 billion by 2030<sup>14</sup>, the world is looking at food and water security in a very different light. Reduced resources will lead to global conflict to acquire more, protect what one has and to preserve what is available. Carbon emissions and zero tolerance for nitrogen emission etc. will lead to other restrictive regulations and regimes as we gradually move in to a world of 'selective' sanctions, prohibitions, and endorsements. One could be in the right camp for now and hold the world at arm's length, while occupying a territory, that was never theirs but justified, by as intangible a context, as a biblical one<sup>15</sup>; yet one could also be in the wrong camp, and be accused of terrorism while fighting occupation forces in one's own country<sup>16</sup>. So, the world has evolved where being morally and politically correct is not the winning argument but being an economic or military power is. So, as we see the United States a fading power, we see it challenged by China in the economic field and by Russia in the military field while the US tries desperately to sustain itself. The rest of the globe is driven by these ambitions or simply crushed between them. The world therefore shall live in conflict governed by the adage let the 'best man win' – almost akin to the laws of the jungle – might is right.

### The Region

The Indian Sub-Continent has a history that goes back in time but essentially evolves around access to trade through sea. From the times of Alexander's famous march and the discovery of the Silk Route, right up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Great Game, the game was played. The region is essentially an island blocked by high mountains in the North and surrounded by ocean everywhere else. It is a natural conduit to all Central Asia and the eastern continents of China. It gives access to all year-round ports to Russia on account of the warm waters, if, Russia can ever establish itself here. With 25% of the world's population<sup>17</sup> it is a lucrative market and a huge consumer of food and energy. So, it is no wonder that all three super powers, the US, China, and Russia along with the EU either already have stakes in the subcontinent or are in search of them for the future. This has led to competing interests. Take China for instance: its trade is basically through the Malacca Straits now commonly addressed as the Malacca Dilemma<sup>18</sup>. It amounts to 16 billion barrels of oil<sup>19</sup> passing through daily and 100,000 ships carrying cargo annually<sup>19</sup>. Control for the Malacca Straits is now being contested. The US is asserting itself and has aligned other countries against China<sup>20</sup> and its trade interests. China has had to seek an alternative to the Malacca Straits and has found it in the BRI of which the CPEC is the flag ship<sup>21</sup>. So why does CPEC become so important? The distance from the Western China to the sea is less than the distance it takes to transport goods within

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<sup>12</sup> World Economic Outlook Database 2019 and International Monetary Fund, 17 June 2019

<sup>13</sup> Russia's Armed Forces: more capable by far, but for how long? Military balance Blog, IISS, 9th October, 2020

<sup>14</sup> Press release, World Population. <https://www.un.org>

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Havelock, River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p 210

<sup>16</sup> Kashmir and Palestine: The story of two Occupations. Goldie Osuri, Al Jazeera

<sup>17</sup> Population of South Asia, Worldometer

<sup>18</sup> China and the 'Malacca Dilemma', Warsaw Institute

<sup>19</sup> High Traffic, High Risk in the Strait of Malacca. The Atlantic

<sup>20</sup> America's Security Role in the South China Sea, Testimony before House of Foreign affairs sub Committee, Michael D Swaine, July 23, 2015

<sup>21</sup> Overview Belt and Road Initiative Forum, 2019



China to the Chinese ports; currently the distance travelled is 16000 kms, taking 2 to 3 months, which would reduce to 5000 kms or to 1 month at the most<sup>22</sup>. The ports at Gwadar can accommodate 200,000-ton tankers; oil pipelines, fibre optics. The CPEC has caused China to begin industrialisation of its South Western regions. On the other hand, the Gwadar port itself has the potential of being one of the world's largest ports<sup>23</sup>. It out-does the Long Beach Port at Miami and has greater capacity than all the Indian Ports put together<sup>24</sup>. This makes it a potential transshipment port where even today the Saudi Government is contemplating in investing in one of the world's largest refineries.<sup>25</sup>

The future of such a Port if managed correctly allows for huge development and international connectivity. The trade corridor establishes Pakistan's relevance in the region as well as the world as a trade corridor, connecting the east to the west; a key component in global trade as well a supplier of oil and gas. If manufacturing industries develop within these corridors the potential for economic growth is huge. This however, does not commensurate with the US sentiment of containing China and as such a new strategic partnership is developing between India and the US.

### **External Influences**

The United States has lost the War in Afghanistan and is now a stranger in the region. Pakistan, once a trusted ally finds itself a scapegoat in all or every US reverse in the region<sup>26</sup>. The US's attempts to contain China through a proxy India does not hold a realistic proposition and in fact only puts Pakistan on the firing line by default enroute to getting to China. India's quest to global glory and regional domination is challenged by Pakistan's resistance to acquiesce to Indian hegemony; this has a potential for conflict within the region. With Kashmir boiling over and with both India and Pakistan nuclear capable, the conflict has a potential to have a global ramification<sup>27</sup>. Afghanistan, still in search of its identity, remains locked in conflict with no real end in sight. Thus, we see a region with a huge potential but mired in conflict, competing interests and chaos, so much so, that this potential may not be realised in the near or even in the distant future. With a United States searching for relevance in the region, a growing Chinese economic influence, an ambitious India, a fractured Afghanistan, a suspect Pakistan, and with Iranian influence competing with growing Saudi influence, the region is doomed to remain submerged in conflict.

This then becomes the New Great Game and as it plays itself out, regional and global powers jostle for influence, control, and leadership roles. It is important to determine the defining parameters of this Great Game and as to what is the possible outcome into the future. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has greatly diminished the US capacity to influence the region but it shall, instead, endeavour doing so, using India as a proxy. So as to unsettle China, the CPEC and BRI will come under more and more pressure by the United States as it tries to contain China and maintain a

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<sup>22</sup> Geostrategic Imperatives of Gwadar Port for china, The Korean Journal of International Studies 18-2 (august 2020)

<sup>23</sup> The Potential and Prospects of Gwadar Port, Mir Sherbaz Khetrn. <https://www.issi.org.pk>

<sup>24</sup> Gwadar Port Pakistan, Gwadar info.com.website 20 January 2018

<sup>25</sup> Saudi Arabia to set up \$10 Billion oil refinery in Pakistan. Business news, January 13,2019

<sup>26</sup> Pak Terrorism: India and the US ask Pakistan to take immediate, sustained and irreversible steps to contain terrorism. <https://www.economic times.indiatimes.com>

<sup>27</sup> How an India-Pakistan nuclear war could start – and have global consequences. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 2019, Vol 75, no 6, 273-279

regional presence<sup>28</sup>. India will be assert itself creating instability in Pakistan so that CPEC is scuttled, affecting China in line with the US strategic thought. Pakistan will be under pressure by default and demands will be made for Pakistan to find ways and means to help the US reassert itself in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

With the Russo–Ukraine conflict grinding itself to an open–ended conclusion, China may come out as the winner while Russia may successfully sustain the pressures of international sanctions<sup>30</sup>. The Global Community will suffer from a self–inflicted wound through its sanctions imposed on Russia causing a collapse in global supply chains, the diminishing Dollar Reserves Regime, food shortages, high price for energy and transportation and corporate businesses that will suffer<sup>31</sup>. The world will now find itself divided into the Indo–US–Israeli Camp and a Russo–China–Turkey–Iran and Pakistan Camp i.e., the West versus the East, with India a pretender to being part of the Western Alliance<sup>32</sup>. This conflict is more than likely to discover a well–defined line running through South Asia.<sup>33</sup> Its objectives would remain essentially economic and to acquire a leadership role in international financial synergy with multi–national cooperation in the fields of development, opportunity building, food security and wealth. However, its practical manifestation would be through low intensity conflict, political instability, regime change and military application<sup>34</sup>.

### **Pakistani Perspective**

For Pakistan, the New Great Game would imply a polarized society divided by sectarianism, separatism, provincial animosity, nepotism, corruption, terrorism, political instability, serious financial problems and even a limited or all out military conflict. This environment will be developed, organized, and resourced by external hostile elements as Pakistan’s own dissident groups fall prey to exploitation and manipulation and are ready to cooperate with such outside interference. Pakistan will be asked to tone down CPEC, down–grade its cooperation with China, soften its stance on Kashmir, accommodate India’s quest for regional leadership, cap or give up its nuclear assets and allow international access to fight terrorism within Pakistan or Afghanistan from Pakistan’s territory or air space. This would be the price for a stable Pakistan that the West would be willing to engage with. For Pakistan to survive this moment and to come out of this New Great Game intact, it must begin to form a plan of action whereby it remains as autonomous as possible, as sovereign as practical and as independent as feasible. Some actions that need to be considered are as follows:

- a. Try and bring about a rapprochement between the US and China and if possible, Russia. This could mean a shared influence by these powers in South Asia with defined zones and roles with a view to ensuring conflict avoidance in South Asia. Failing which, using its best diplomatic skills, to keeping the conflict away from Pakistan and contained to the South China Sea.

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<sup>28</sup> Pakistan fears US is targeting its China links as it seeks to settle scores, This week in Asia/politica, 2 October, 2021

<sup>29</sup> Navigating Pakistan’s Afghanistan Conundrum, South AsiaSource, Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, February 3 2022

<sup>30</sup> Could China Benefit from the Ukraine Crisis? TRT World, Murat Sofuoglu, 11 March 2022

<sup>31</sup> What will be the Impact of western Sanctions on Russia? Energy Monitor, Special Focus, Ukraine Crisis, 9 March 2022

<sup>32</sup> Russia’s invasion crystallizes divide between west and the rest of the world. www.theguardian.com. The Observer, Julian Borger, 26 march 2022

<sup>33</sup> Ukraine Crisis: can Pakistan truly follow ‘No Camp Politics’? South Asian Voices, Fizza Batool, 14 March 2022

<sup>34</sup> The Pakistan Quagmire Shivam Shekhawat 3 march 2022

- b. The possibility of arranging for, under the auspices of the Afghan Government, a multi-national force to provide regional connectivity, national stability, development, opportunity building with prejudice to none.
- c. To encourage the United States to develop a CPEC style operation parallel to the Chinese initiative, using Afghanistan as a conduit and Central Asian States as a destination.
- d. Pursuing Kashmir as the longest outstanding UN issue that needs resolution and having got to that resolution working out a permanent conflict resolution regime with India with intent to contain possibility of military conflict. To engage India in disarmament talks based on mutually respected principles.
- e. Pakistan to take up the initiative to set up a regional anti-terrorism regime and center to include all regional countries. The Center to share information, intelligence and supervise action to dismantle terrorist organizations.
- f. Developing new regional trade alliances and developing a policy to attract DFIs, making it easy to do business. Thereby focusing on global stakeholder interests in Pakistan.
- g. Encouraging the export of trained and skilled manpower to Europe and the US by setting up internationally recognized poly-technique Institutes that are affiliated to international traders'/craftsmen's guilds and subject to external evaluation and certification.
- h. To develop its own administrative and governance reforms to provide unity and cohesion with the country by the following:
  - a. Creating more provinces.
  - b. Considering a Presidential system of Governance.
  - c. Depoliticizing the Police.
  - d. Judicial reforms for timely and equal justice to all based on a home-grown system.
  - e. Containing Religious elements from interfering with foreign policy and administrative functioning. Separating State from Religion.
  - f. Educational standards based on international values, norms, and levels.

## Conclusion

South Asia appears to be the next battle ground where world powers will compete to seize the moment in a bid to lead the world; the New Great Game. The environment was created by the growing Chinese influence challenging the US position it had enjoyed, it was further aggravated by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its diminishing role in the region and got even worse by the Russo-Ukraine conflict where the US may find itself on the receiving end even in Europe. As United States' finds its global ascendancy challenged all over, South Asia lends itself to the final showdown – and this must not come to pass. Physical conflicts devastate whole regions, their people and generations to come. Pakistan is central to this conflict and must assert itself sensibly to bring about resolution rather than conflict. Global Powers will compete and must compete but it is not always a must that the practical manifestation is war and military conflict. Influence can also be extended through goodwill and economic cohesion and mutual benefits. China has shown the way – the World must learn these ways as well.



## About the Author

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