# INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA, AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN'S (CAP) TRILATERAL RELATIONSHIP IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE US WITHDRAWAL: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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## Abstract

The objective of this study is to assess the international public perceptions of China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (CAP)'s trilateral relationship following the unilateral US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. It also attempts to examine China's prospects and challenges after the withdrawal, as well as opportunities for stability and prosperity in the South Asian region based on the CAP's trilateral relationship. A survey of the Chinese, American, and Pakistani communities in South Korea ($N$=321) was conducted for this purpose. Data were analyzed using descriptive, correlation, ANOVA, and multiple regression modeling techniques. The results show that participants' views on trilateral relationships differed based on their country of origin. According to Pearson correlation analysis, CAP's trilateral relationship was negatively associated with China's growing role following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan but positively associated with South Asia's political, economic, and geostrategic importance, as well as future prospects for bringing stability and prosperity to the region. The findings of the ANOVA revealed that three groups of individuals had different scores. However, only predictor CAP's trilateral relationship has a significant influence on China's growing role following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, according to a stepwise multiple regression model. This research has implications for scholars, students, and policymakers who are interested in international politics in general, and South Asian politics in particular.

## 1. Introduction

Regional cooperation refers to the interconnectedness of neighboring countries based on a variety of factors such as the political, economic, or geostrategic importance of one or more countries. This becomes increasingly important in the wake of the trilateral relationship of three neighboring countries namely China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (CAP). Despite having different political systems, these countries share common interests including security, stability, and prosperity in the region. Although the bilateral relations between Pakistan and China have been smooth in the past and continue to be on smooth lines. On the contrary, the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been confronted mainly due to the dispute over the borderline (Durand line) and political issues such as Pakhtunistan which are beyond the scope of this study. However, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan provides a unique opportunity to these neighboring countries to rethink and redefine their roles in the region, particularly China. The political stability, economic prosperity, and security largely depend on strengthening the CAP's trilateral relationship. In this context, the political and geostrategic importance of Afghanistan and Pakistan on one side and the growing role of China in the region on the other side could lead toward new areas of political and economic cooperation. Thus, the growing significance of this trilateral relationship entails investigating the international public perceptions to understand the growing role of China in the region in the wake of US

withdrawal from Afghanistan. For this, a quantitative study is conducted using a Survey questionnaire (see Section 3, Research Method for details). The key research questions of this study are:

1. Did the US's abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan create prospects or challenges for China?

2. Will the CAP trilateral relationship in the wake of US withdrawal from Afghanistan provide opportunities for stability and prosperity in the South Asian region?

In order to find answers to these questions, it is critical to get an overview of the available literature at first. This would be useful in understanding the nexus of US withdrawal from Afghanistan and China's prospects or challenges, as well as the opportunity for regional prosperity in conjunction with CAP's trilateral relationship. Thus, the following section provides a brief literature review as discussed.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral relationship

Neighboring countries and strategic partners China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan aim to safeguard common interests, people-to-people exchanges, mutual benefits, and cultural connectivity. Sino-Afghan enjoys strategic and cooperative partnerships. Afghanistan has continued its engagements with the one-China policy and also supports China on issues regarding Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Beijing supports a peaceful reconstruction in Afghanistan and also provides

assistance (MOFA of the People's Republic of China, n.d). Sino-Pak friendship is time-tested as seventy years of bilateral relations show China's support to Pakistan's stance on the Kashmir issue particularly on the global stage. On the other hand, Pakistan supports China's stance on issues relating to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Afghanistan-Pakistan has shared borders and cultural connectivity but has not had good friendly ties for the years blaming each other for having terrorist attacks. Though, Pakistan hosts some three million Afghan refugees who have been involved in violent actions in their country. Afghan-Pak relations have seen downs and ups such as border clashes and harsh talks amid Cold War but they have intentions to establish good relations and needed the help of a friend to settle hard relations through mediation. During the Cold War, China has been willing to bring together Afghanistan and Pakistan playing a mediator's role. In 2012, Afghanistan proposed a tripartite meeting among CAP. Then in 2017, China put forward the idea for trilateral foreign minister dialogue amid Pak-Afghan tense ties. After the first China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Minister Dialogue (CAP-FMD), two key facts emerged regarding the trilateral relationship; China expressed its willingness to play a constructive role in settling Afghan-Pak relations and to extend CPEC to Afghanistan for mutual interests and win-win results (Kalil, 2018). Trying to bring related factors to the current situation, China and Pakistan could be key actors in the Afghan peace process after the

US and NATO troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan.

From this perspective, this study is based on three predictors with an outcome and formulates the following hypotheses:

$H1_a$. CAP's trilateral relationship is significantly related to the growing role of China after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

$H1_b$. The political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia is significantly related to the growing role of China after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

$H1_c$. Future prospects to bring stability and prosperity among CAP are significantly related to the growing role of China after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

## 2.2 The relationship among variables

Based on CAP relations and strategic importance in the region, four China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Minister Dialogue (CAP-FMD) have been held since 2017 to date. In this regard, 1st CAP-FMD was held in Beijing on 26th December 2017, to promote trilateral cooperation and shared integrated interests (MOFA of the People's Republic of China, 2017). The 2nd CAP-FMD was held in Kabul on 15th December 2018, to increase counterterrorism security cooperation, regional connectivity, and economic development (Gul, 2018). The 3rd CAP-FMD convened in Islamabad on 7th September 2019, which reaffirms their commitments to strengthen trilateral cooperation and to continue security cooperation (MOFA, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2019). The 4th CAP-FMD held in Guiyang on 3rd June 2021,

focused on challenges to Afghan peace after the announcement of the US military withdrawal, prospects of civil war, and opportunities for Afghans to decide their political destiny. China expressed its readiness to work with stakeholders in Afghanistan and Pakistan and offers to play its role as a mediator in the future. CAP agreed to work jointly to shove the US for an "orderly withdrawal" of foreign troops and "the fulfillment of its due obligations" to avoid the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan (Kaura, 2021). After two decades of US mission in Afghanistan, several changes are occurring in the wake of the withdrawal of the US military and its European allies. Many observers view this as an opportunity for Afghanistan to boost its influence in South Asia as well as through the significant role of emerging power China and neighboring country Pakistan to bring opportunities, economic development, and stability in the region. Many studies have been conducted on the Sino-Afghan, Sino-Pak, Afghan-Pak relations that focus on political, cultural, and economic ties, however, a little research focuses on CAP trilateral relationship after the sudden withdrawal of US military, prospects or challenges for China, and opportunities for stability and prosperity in the region. The most recent research by (Tahir & Nazir, 2021) analyzes the trilateral relationship between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan with a focus on geopolitical interests and finds that mutual relations are significant for regional peace. Particularly, Chinese constructive engagements with Afghanistan through several measures can herald peace and prosperity for the entire region. (Khan & Shirazi, 2021) highlight that the geostrategic doctrine between Afghanistan and Pakistan could lead to important changes in mutual strategic policies and trade with other bordering countries after the construction of China's Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) if there is peace in Afghanistan. Geostrategic importance can bring economic development and the transmission of gas and oil pipelines between two states could be a positive impact on Afghanistan's pol-economic challenges. (Likewise, Shabbier *et al*., 2021) examine the changing global power structure through the construction of CPEC in the light of opportunities for China and Pakistan and indicate economic and strategic significance as the establishment of Gwadar port provides an alternate sea route to China and also helps to reduce Sino dependency on Malacca Strait for trade purposes. Being a neighbor country of Afghanistan, Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan issue is also crucial to building peace in the region. (Qayum & Tariq, 2020) compare conflict to cooperation shift in Afghan-Pak relations during Ashraf Ghani period and Hamid Karzai era and find engulfed in bilateral relations during Karzai rule, however military Cross Border Militancy is a positive initiative in crisis during former's rule. They conclude that agreement on peace and reconciliation between Taliban and the Afghan government was made due to Pakistan's efforts and would enhance friendly ties between the two nations. Although CAP trilateral relations have significant impacts on the region from a political, economic, and strategic perspective. It becomes

more important particularly due to the recent shift followed by the abrupt withdrawal of the US military from Afghanistan. There is a handful of research on the CAP trilateral relationship in terms of prospects, challenges, the growing role of China in South Asia, and opportunities for stability and prosperity by three sides. This suggested to researchers to conduct research on CAP trilateral relationship in the wake of withdrawal of foreign troops, prospects, challenges, China's growing role, and opportunities in three directions. Considering this, the researchers have formulated the following hypotheses:

H2. CAP has a significant impact on the trilateral relationships after the unilateral US military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

H3.The US's abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan has created prospects or challenges for China.

H4.The CAP's trilateral relationship in the wake of US withdrawal from Afghanistan has provided opportunities for stability and prosperity in the South Asian region.

To test the most contributory factor in reference to the growing role of China, the researchers have designed a proposed model and three competing models.
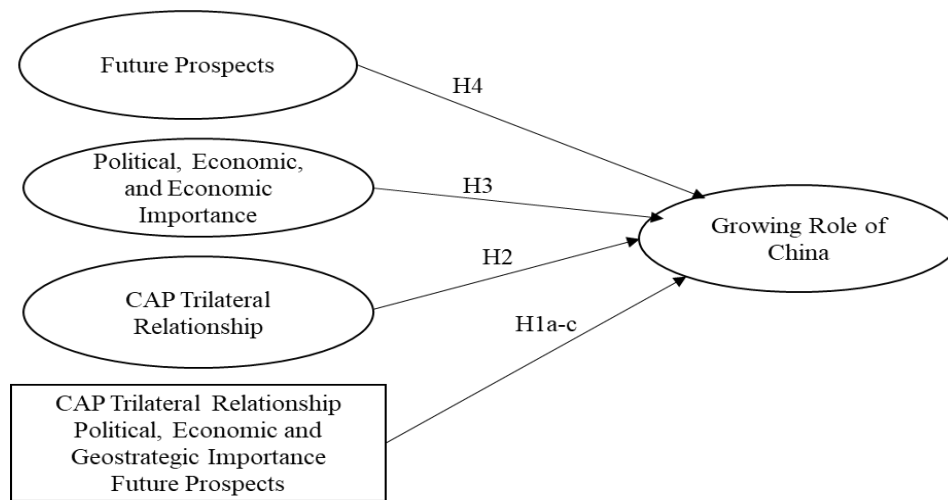
*2.3 The Proposed Model and Competing Models*
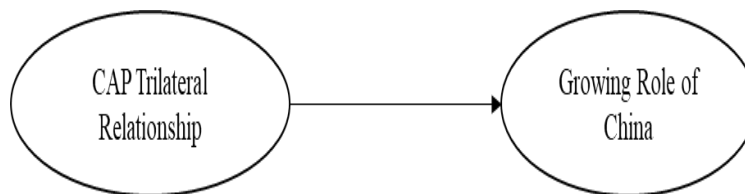


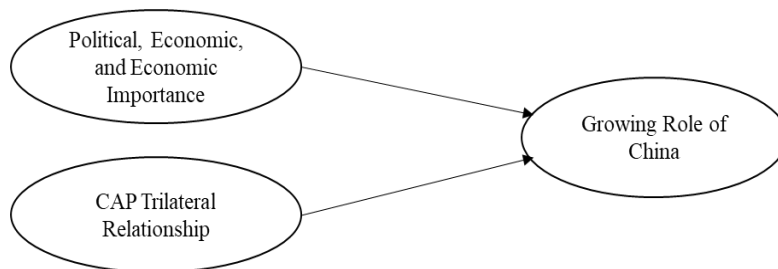**Figure 1:** The Proposed Model



**Figure 2:** Competing Model 1 $M_1$

**Figure 3:** Competing Model 2 $M_2$
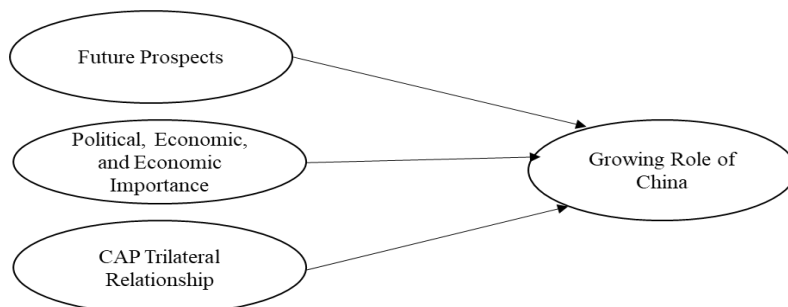


**Figure 4:** Competing Model 3 $M_3$

## 3. Research Method

### 3.1 Study design and participants

A total of 321 participants responded to the survey. The data was collected by face-to-face questionnaire distribution among Chinese ($n=107$), American ($n=107$), and Pakistani ($n=107$) currently living in South Korea. Coffee coupons were given to participants to respond to the survey.

### 3.2. Measures an d reliability

This study is comprised of constructs namely the growing role of China after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan; political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia, and future prospects to bring stability and prosperity among China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in terms of CAP' trilateral relationship. All the items were analyzed on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The internal consistency computed

an alpha for the variable growing role of China after US withdrawal from Afghanistan ($a=.838$); for the variable political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia ($a=.851$), and ($a=.879$) for future prospects to bring stability and prosperity among China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Cronbach's alpha values of these variables ranged from .838 to .879. Such high scores of reliability indicate above the prescribed .7 and prove the reliability of the instruments. The development of the survey questionnaire is carried out using journal articles, reports, and books.

### 3.3 Statistical analysis

ANOVA was used to compare differences between the participants' groups based on their country of origin. Pearson correlation was employed to examine the relationship between variables namely: the growing role of China after US withdrawal from Afghanistan, participants'

country of origin, political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia, and future prospects to bring stability and prosperity among CAP. Variables that indicated statistical significance were selected for stepwise multiple regression analysis. SPSS version 26 was used to conduct the analysis.

## 4. Results

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of the sample (*N*=321)

| Variables | Category | Frequency | n(%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 248 | 77.3 |
| | Female | 73 | 22.7 |
| Age (in years) | Less than 20 | 15 | 4.7 |
| | 21-30 | 113 | 35.2 |
| | 31-40 | 151 | 47 |
| | 41-50 | 42 | 13.1 |
| Highest Level of Education | Higher School | 39 | 12.1 |
| | Undergraduate | 34 | 10.6 |
| | Master | 163 | 50.8 |
| | Graduate | 66 | 20.6 |
| | Postgraduate | 19 | 5.9 |
| Marital Status | Married | 80 | 24.9 |
| | Unmarried | 241 | 75.1 |
| Occupation | Employed Full-Time | 162 | 50.5 |
| | Employed Part-Time | 9 | 2.8 |
| | Self-employed | 72 | 22.4 |
| | Seeking Opportunities | 6 | 1.9 |
| | Student | 72 | 22.4 |
| Interested in Politics | Yes | 298 | 92.8 |
| | No | 23 | 7.2 |
| Origin of Country | China | 107 | 33.3 |
| | United States | 107 | 33.3 |
| | Pakistan | 107 | 33.3 |

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the sample (*N*=321) that include gender, age, highest educational level, marital status, occupation, interest in politics, and origin of country. The majority of male participants (*n*=248; 77.3%) responded than female (*n*=73; 22.7%). In respect to age (*n*=113; 35.2%) fell under the age group 21-30 years old, following age group was 31-40 years old (*n*=151;47%), 41-50 years old group (*n*=42; 13.1%), and smallest age group less than 20 years old(*n*=15; .4.7%). In terms of educational level, almost half respondents had master (*n*=163; 50.8%), while others included graduate (*n*=66; 20.6%), higher school (*n*=39; 12.1%), postgraduate (*n*=19; 5.9%), and undergraduate (*n*=34; 10.6%). A large number of respondents were unmarried (*n*=241; 75.1%) than married (*n*=80; 24.9%). A vast majority of respondents (*n*=298; 92.8%) had interest in politics than others (*n*=23; 7.2%). Regarding the respondents' origin of country, there

were Chinese (*n=107; 33.3%*), American (*n=107; 33.3%*), and Pakistani (*n=107; 33.3%*) who are currently living in Korea.

**Table 2:** Growing role of China after withdrawal of US military

| Sr.No | Items | Strongly Disagree , n% | Disagree , n % | Neutral, n % | Agree, n % | Strongly Agree, n% | Mean Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Certain geopolitical developments have influenced the South Asian region during the years. | 27.1 | 1.2 | 12.8 | 55.8 | 3.1 | 3.06 |
| 2. | The rise of China has a great impact on South Asian region. | 6.2 | 11.2 | 31.2 | 47.7 | 3.7 | 3.31 |
| 3. | Political and economic development of South Asian region can have implications for the political and economic prosperity of the region. | 10.3 | 3.7 | 20.2 | 58.6 | 7.2 | 3.48 |
| 4. | Political and economic development of South Asian region can have implications at the international level. | 15.6 | 2.5 | 16.8 | 61.7 | 3.4 | 3.34 |
| 5. | Afghanistan has geostrategic importance in the region. | 22.7 | .6 | 17.1 | 55.1 | 4.4 | 3.17 |
| 6. | The US intervention in Afghanistan has been disastrous. | 21.2 | 1.6 | 16.8 | 56.1 | 4.4 | 3.21 |
| 7. | The abrupt withdrawal of US from Afghanistan has created problems for South Asian countries. | 26.8 | 3.1 | 16.2 | 49.5 | 4.4 | 3.02 |
| 8. | The regional balance of power could be disturbed due to imbalance of power within Afghanistan. | 15 | 8.4 | 27.7 | 44.9 | 4 | 3.14 |
| 9. | China's intervention in South Asian politics serves China's own interests in the region. | 19.9 | 3.4 | 19 | 54.2 | 3.4 | 3.18 |

Table 2 shows that nine questions addressed the growing role of China after withdrawal of US military and measured a level of mean average from 3.02-3.48.

**Table 3:** Political, economic and geostrategic importance of South Asia

| Sr.No | Items | Strongly Disagree, *n* % | Disagree, *n* % | Neutral, *n* % | Agree, *n* % | Strongly Agree, *n*% | Mean Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | China's growing role in South Asia is beneficial for the economic prosperity of the region. | 9 | 3.4 | 18.7 | 50.2 | 18.7 | 3.66 |
| 2. | China's growing role in South Asia is not important for the political stability in the region. | 4.4 | 7.2 | 19 | 45.8 | 23.7 | 3.77 |
| 3. | China, Afghanistan and Pakistan's trilateral relationship can have implications for the economic prosperity of the region. | 6.2 | 10.9 | 29.9 | 39.6 | 13.4 | 3.43 |
| 4. | The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has given an opportunity to China to increase its role in South Asian region. | 7.2 | 4.4 | 34.6 | 44.9 | 9 | 3.44 |
| 5. | China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has created prospects of regional connectivity. | 7.5 | 6.5 | 29.9 | 45.2 | 10.9 | 3.45 |
| 6. | Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a fine example of regional cooperation. | 4.4 | 5.3 | 33.3 | 44.9 | 12.1 | 3.55 |
| 7. | India's stance on China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) can have implications for the South Asian region. | 7.2 | 1.9 | 21.5 | 57.9 | 11.5 | 3.65 |

Table 3 shows seven questions addressed political, economic and geostrategic importance of South Asia and measured a level of mean average from 3.43-3.77

**Table 4:** Future prospects to bring stability and prosperity in the region

| Sr.no | Items | Strongly Disagree, *n* % | Disagree, *n* % | Neutral, *n* % | Agree, *n* % | Strongly Agree, *n* % | Mean Average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | The political factor is the most important aspect of China's relations with Afghanistan. | 5.9 | 11.8 | 31.8 | 48.6 | 1.9 | 3.28 |

| No. | Statement | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2. | The economic factor is the most important aspect of China's relations with Afghanistan. | 10.3 | 3.7 | 19.9 | 61.7 | 4.4 | 3.46 |
| 3. | The geostrategic location of Afghanistan is the most important aspect of China's relations with Afghanistan. | 15.9 | 2.2 | 16.5 | 62.9 | 2.5 | 3.34 |
| 4. | The political factor is the most important aspect of China's relations with Pakistan. | 24 | .6 | 16.2 | 57 | 2.2 | 3.13 |
| 5. | The economic factor is the most important aspect of China's relations with Pakistan. | 22.1 | 1.6 | 16.8 | 57 | 2.5 | 3.16 |
| 6. | The geostrategic location of Pakistan is the most important aspect of China's relations with Pakistan. | 27.1 | 1.9 | 15 | 53 | 2.5 | 3.01 |
| 7. | CAP's trilateral relationship is significant for the region. | 14.6 | 8.4 | 26.8 | 48.3 | 1.9 | 3.14 |
| 8. | China can play a positive role to bring Afghanistan and Pakistan close together. | 20.6 | 2.2 | 18.1 | 57.3 | 1.9 | 3.18 |
| 9. | CAP's trilateral relationship has future prospects. | 9.3 | .6 | 14 | 51.4 | 24.6 | 3.81 |

Table 4 shows nine questions addressed future prospects to bring stability and prosperity in the region and measured a level of mean average from 3.01-3.81.

**Table 5:** Pearson Correlation

| Constructs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Growing role of China after withdrawal of US military | 1 | | | |
| CAP's trilateral relationship | -.532** | 1 | | |
| Political, economic and geostrategic importance of South Asia | .170** | -.232** | 1 | |
| Future prospects to bring stability and prosperity in the region | .146* | -.126** | .231** | 1 |

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5 shows Pearson correlation between the growing role of China after withdrawal of US military and CAP's relationship was found to be negatively significant ($r$= -.532**, p=.001); however, it indicated positive significant correlation between the growing role of China after withdrawal of US military and political, economic and geostrategic importance of South Asia ($r$= .170**, p=.002); and also significant correlation between the growing role of China after withdrawal of US military and Future prospects to bring stability and prosperity in the region($r$= .146**, p=.009). Thus, H1$_{a-c}$, were supported.

**Table 6:** One-Way ANOVA Results on CAP's trilateral relationship

| Participants Group | Mean | Std. Deviation | Test of Homogeneity of Variance Levene Statistic | Sig. | ANOVA F | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese | 28.467 | 4.562 | 2.375 | .001 | 63.296 | .001 |
| American | 21.775 | 4.415 | | | | |
| Pakistani | 24.635 | 4.105 | | | | |
| Political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia | | | | | | |
| Chinese | 32.691 | 5.276 | 9.303 | .001 | 33.910 | .001 |
| American | 28.682 | 7.244 | | | | |
| Pakistani | 25.448 | 6.656 | | | | |

Group Differences
CAP's trilateral relationship

| Participants Groups | Mean Difference | Sig | 95% Confidence Interval | LL | UL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chinese-American | 6.691 | .001 | | 5.214 | 8.168 |
| Chinese-Pakistani | 3.831 | .001 | | 2.403 | 5.259 |
| American-Chinese | -6.691 | .001 | | -8.168 | -5.214 |
| American-Pakistani | -2.859 | .001 | | -4.262 | -1.457 |
| Political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia | | | | | |
| Chinese-American | 4.009 | .001 | 1.923 | | 6.095 |
| American-Chinese | -4.009 | .001 | -6.095 | | -1.923 |
| American-Pakistani | 3.233 | .002 | .945 | | 5.522 |

Table 6 shows ANOVA results that indicated the scores of three groups differ significantly across impact on trilateral relationship after the unilateral US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, $F(2, 318) = 63.296$, p <.001; also for political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia, $F(2, 318) = 33.910$, p <.001; and also for future prospects to bring stability and prosperity among CAP, $F(2, 318) = 9.261$, p <.001. As the Levene Statistic is significant and equal variance was not found, except future prospects to bring stability and prosperity among CAP, so individual differences between participants groups were tested using Dunnett's T3. The mean scores on the impact on trilateral relationship after the unilateral US military withdrawal from Afghanistan for Chinese ($M=28.467$, $SD=4.562$) were significantly different from American ($M=21.775$, $SD=4.415$), and also significantly different from Pakistani ($M=24.635$, $SD=4.105$). The mean score on political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia for Chinese ($M=32.691$, $SD=5.276$) was found significantly different from American ($M=28.682$, $SD=7.244$), and also significantly different from Pakistani ($M=25.448$, $SD=6.656$). The mean difference was found significant *p* <.001.

### 4.1 Stepwise Multiple Regression model building

**Table 7:** Model Summary

| Model | $R^2$ | Adjusted $R^2$ | $\Delta r^2$ | Standard error of the estimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| $M_1$ | .290 | .283 | .290 | 4.35564 |
| $M_2$ | .000 | .000 | -.290 | 5.14553 |
| $M_3$ | .283 | .281 | .283 | 4.36461 |

Table 7 shows that the value of $R^2$ is .290 ($M_1$), with 29% changes in outcome variable which indicated that predictive power CAP's trilateral relationship is a major contributing factor. The value of $R^2$ is .000 ($M_2$), with -.29% changes in outcome variable are occurred due to changes of controlled variables political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia, and future prospects to bring stability and prosperity among CAP. The value of $R^2$ is .283 ($M_3$), with 28.3%

changes in outcome variable is occurred due to changes of controlled variables political, economic, and geostrategic importance of South Asia, and controlled variable CAP' trilateral relationship. As per comparison among three models, $M_1$ is a better model that fits the data than $M_2$ and $M_3$, as results indicated the highest value of $R^2$ and adjusted $R^2$ ($M_1$=.290, $M_2$=-.290, $M_3$=.283)

**Table 8:** Coefficients

| Model | Coefficients | Standard error | Beta | *t*-value | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| $M_1$ | | | | | |
| Constant | 25.973 | 1.412 | | 18.39 | .001** |
| CAP's trilateral relationship | -3.238 | .307 | -.515 | -10.54 | .001** |
| Political, economic and geostrategic importance | .025 | .036 | .034 | .68 | .495 |
| Future prospects | .051 | .034 | .074 | 1.50 | .133 |
| $M_2$ | | | | | |
| Constant | 24.960 | .287 | | 86.90 | .001** |
| $M_3$ | | | | | |
| Constant | 28.305 | .385 | | 73.48 | .001** |
| CAP's trilateral relationship | -3.346 | .298 | -.532 | -11.21 | .001** |

Table 8 shows that stepwise multiple regression modeling was used to obtain a better model fit. $M_1$ standardized coefficients for predictive power CAP's trilateral relationship ($\beta$=-.515, $p$ <.001) are highly negatively significant, ($\beta$=.034, $p$ <.495) insignificant for political, economic, and geostrategic importance, and also insignificant

($\beta$=.074, $p$ <.133) for future prospects. $M_2$ did not show the standardized coefficients for any predictor. However, $M_3$ shows the standardized coefficients for predictor CAP's trilateral relationship ($\beta$=-.532, $p$ <.001) negatively significant. This concludes that $M_1$ is a better model that fits the data as compared to $M_2$ and $M_3$.
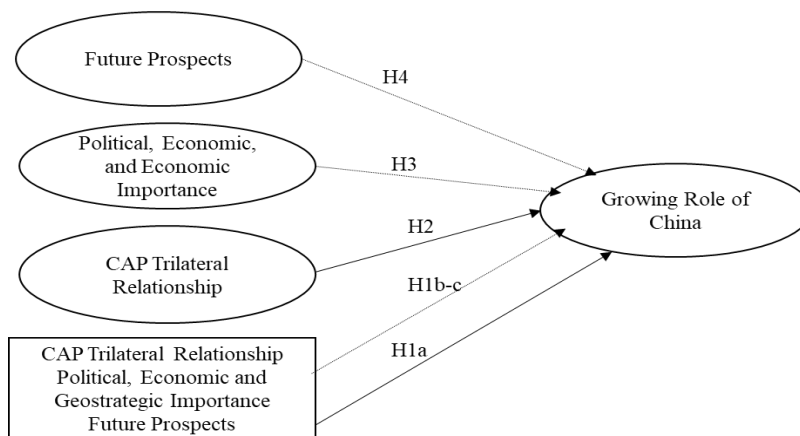
**Figure 5:** The Final Structural Model

## 5. Discussion & Implications

This study shows the relationship between CAP's trilateral relationship, political, economic, and strategic importance of South Asia, and future prospects to bring stability and prosperity in the region in reference to the growing role of China after the withdrawal of the US military. The researchers find a handful of research on this subject particularly in the wake of US military withdrawal from the international public's perceptions. Therefore, the researchers investigate the relationship between CAP's trilateral relationship, political, economic, and strategic importance of South Asia, and future prospects in that population in reference to the growing role of China in the region after the withdrawal of the US military. In support of $H1_a$, CAP's trilateral relationship on the growing role of China in the region, results show negative statistically significant relationship between them. The results for $H1_{b-c}$ show a positive significant relationship regarding the political, economic, and strategic importance of South Asia, and also for the future prospects to bring and prosperity among CAP. The results for H2 show that CAP's trilateral relationship has a significant positive effect on the growing role of China in the region. The findings show different perceptions on other predictors, H3 results show the political, economic, and strategic importance of South Asia has a positive insignificant effect on the growing role of China. Additionally, H4 results also show future prospects to bring stability and prosperity in the region have insignificant effect in terms of the growing role of China.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

Findings of this study indicate several implications. CAP's trilateral relationship matters from the political, economic, and strategic importance of the South Asian region. This study focused on the international public (Chinese, American, Pakistani) living in Korea on how they perceive CAP's trilateral relationship and the growing role of China in the wake of the withdrawal of the US military. In respect to our findings, international public perceptions showed impacts of CAP' trilateral relationship, and political, economic, and strategic importance of

South Asia on the growing role of China, after the withdrawal of the US military. Additionally, international public perceptions are consistent with CAP's trilateral relationship. Therefore, enhancing this trilateral relationship in the future, it is necessary to consider political interests, people-to-people contacts, strengthen neighborly ties, and mutual cooperation, in the wake of foreign troops' rollout. Within this framework, the continuity of tripartite meetings like CAP-FMD would have a positive impact. Secondly, in terms of the political, economic, and strategic importance of South Asia, and future prospects; this study identifies the positive relationship on the growing role of China in the region from international public perception. Few past research has also shown that China as an emerging power could play a crucial role to the development in South Asia as well as to improve relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, strengthening Belt and Road cooperation, enhancing economic and trade relations, and strengthening counterterrorism efforts through CAP's trilateral relationship.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

This study finds that CAP's trilateral relationship plays a crucial role in the growing role of China in South Asia. In essence, international public perception indicates that this trilateral relationship is a significant contributor after the withdrawal of the US military from Afghanistan. This reflects building trust through sound cooperation by three sides and also efforts in the process of peace in Afghanistan. Thus, it is necessary to boost mutual cooperation among CAP, and also China's

willingness to accelerate projects through BRI would be a positive indication in the region as safety and stability bring in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops. Chinese, Americans, and Pakistani living in Korea perceive the growing role of China in the region, however, Afghanistan can take the advantage of Chinese willingness to help it in the process of peace building in the war-torn state. In the case of Taliban control, the assurance of national security in Afghanistan could have a positive image across the globe. The recognition of the Taliban's political legitimacy by China provides a diplomatic favor to Afghanistan due to the growing role of China across the globe. Lastly, this study also shows international public perception on future prospects to bring stability and prosperity to the region. The US policy toward Afghanistan marks failure after foreign troops rollout from Afghanistan. The role of China is significant in reference to CAP trilateral relationship as mutual relations show Afghan-Pak trust in China. CPEC is reflecting the growing role of China in the region and would affect Pakistan's economic development and help to alleviate poverty. However, by considering it from Pakistan's perspective in Afghan-Pak relations, it seems that it is not possible for it to separate itself from what occurring in Afghanistan. US observers and many others blame Pakistan for playing a double game in respect to impacts of US policy failure and hasty foreign troops' withdrawal. Nevertheless, Pakistan's efforts toward stability in Afghanistan would be a positive effect putting pressure on the Taliban to prevent violence and

resolve the issues through table talks. Moreover, the Sino-Pak role through trilateral relationship is significant to support the transition of power in a proper and peaceful manner and also contribute to the postwar reconstruction and development. To put this issue to bed, it is the right time for CAP to continue and move forward for common interests through trilateral relations in the wake of the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

## 6. Limitation of the Study

This study has some limitations. With respect to data collection, it was collected from Chinese, American, and Pakistani nationals who are currently living in South Korea. So, the generalization to all three populations should be formed with wariness, and study on this subject should be made using large sample sizes to determine respondents' perceptions. Likewise, this study identifies Chinese, American, and Pakistani perception administering survey in South Korea, the survey should also be conducted in Pakistan on Chinese, Afghani, and Pakistani communities, staying in Pakistan. Thus, there might be some differences in regard to the actual perceptions of the participants.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, after assessing the public perceptions of the Chinese, American, and Pakistani communities living in South Korea, it becomes clear that the CAP's trilateral relationship has a huge potential as far as the stability, security, and prosperity of the region is concerned. The prospects and challenges are also manifold such as by enhancing CAP's relationship, it is important to

see common interests, people-people interaction, enhance mutual linkages and cooperation. As far as the limitation of this study is concerned, it has mainly relied on the perception of the American, Chinese and Pakistani communities living in South Korea. A more integrated approach can be adopted in the future by involving the perspectives of Afghan people. Still, the findings confirm that the significance of the CAP's trilateral relationship cannot be overlooked in the wake of US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Thus, based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the CAP's trilateral relationship could serve a two-fold purpose. On one side, the CAP's mutual cooperation could bring peace and prosperity to the region. On the other side, China's initiatives such as BRI and CPEC could have implications far beyond the region.

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