

**China-Georgia Relations:
Prospects and Challenges for the Establishment of New Sphere of Influence in the
South Caucasus in the Post Covid-19 Era**

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Abstract:

China's growing economic clout in Georgia through the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) is significantly creating a web of connectivity between Asia and Europe through the land and maritime routes of Georgia. It is significant as it creates a new "Sphere of Influence" for China beyond its immediate neighbourhood. However, maintaining such a sphere of influence for a long term strategic advantage appears to be very challenging in recent times. Primarily because its emergence as a powerful force has disturbed the strategic balance in the South Caucasus and foster severe competition in the region in recent years. Georgia has become a battleground due to its strategic location in the South Caucasus. The challenges have abruptly gone worse in recent months as COVID-19 has severely impacted the state's capacity to maintain its strategic influence outside its borders. This paper examines how China's growing role in the region has elevated its stature and analyzes the challenges of maintaining its strategic position in the region.

Key Words: China, Georgia, BRI, Sphere of Influence, South Caucasus, EU

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is a century of integration and connectivity. One of the main features of this century is the rise of China as an international economic power. China has emerged as an exceptional power having economic reach in almost every region of the world (Walton, 2007). Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) lends it tremendous weight at regional and global levels (Aoyama, 2017). The most important aspect of BRI is that it includes those smaller regions and states into its web of connectivity which were largely ignored in the past (Boon & Ardy, 2017). Thus, lending them their true geostrategic importance and creating a new sphere of influence. Georgia in the South Caucasus region is one such geostrategically important state.

China's political and economic relations with the countries of South Caucasus in general and with Georgia, in particular, have been positive since their independence in 1991. Their relations have made tremendous progress during the last decade especially after the announcement of BRI. Although, Georgia was not part of the BRI scheme initially, and its peculiar geography, location between Caspian and the Black Sea makes it a not easy to access region. But the recent improvement in the construction of railroad, like Baku, Tbilisi Kara railway road link and infrastructure improvement on ports with the Chinese investment has further improved Georgia's status as a transit state and China's economic ties as well as political clout in the region (Avdaliani, 2019).

Thus, Georgia emerges as one of the most important strategic routes for China's BRI. Their bilateral relationship is economic in nature but it has granted tremendous geostrategic importance to China in the South Caucasus region, not only disturbing the existing balance of

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power in the region between Russia and the European Union (EU) but also created a new “Sphere of Influence” for China. However, the occurrence of COVID-19 has created severe challenges for China’s position as well as for BRI. The study revolves around the following queries. First, it examines the factors that led China and Georgia to establish such a strong partnership and examines the increasing economic clout of China in Georgia as a balancing act in Caucasian politics. How BRI is contributing to the redefining the sphere of influence theory (SIT)? And, how COVID-19 situation is going to affect China’s sphere of influence in the region.

For the purpose this study is divided into three parts; First will discuss, with the help of economic data of the factors that led the two nations to come closer and the establishment of China’s sphere of influence (as a theoretical framework) in the South Caucasus region. This will use the statistical data of China-Georgia’s trade relations in recent years to analyze the strengthening of bilateral ties. Additionally, it will also use the detail of BRI related projects to comprehend the idea. Moreover, the theoretical contextualization of the sphere of influence will be used to understand China’s growing role in the region. The second part will analyze the geostrategic competition in the region with a special focus on Georgia. This will present a comparative analysis of China’s growing regional influence in the presence of two regional powers Russia and the EU. The third part will briefly look at the challenge of COVID-19 on the China Georgia relationship. Recent trade statistics will be used to analyze the current scenario and draw upon the expected outcome on their relations. SIT provides a comprehensive theoretical understanding of China’s growing influence in the region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An act which results in balancing or outbalancing any other power, either ruin someone’s influence or establish a new sphere of influence. The theory “Sphere of influence,” by Sussana Hast presents a good explanation for this phenomenon. According to Hast, the concept of sphere of influence has been used in Europe historically for explaining Russian policies in Soviet states during the cold war era. She observes that “a Sphere cannot be overlapped” (Hast, 2014). This assumption might need to be revisited. As influence is a relational term whereby one power expands its influence at the expense of others. Hast’s theory of sphere of influence has traditionally been used to describe the Soviet Union’s behaviour in its sphere of influence (the current post-Soviet States) during the cold war era (Ferguson & Hast, 2018). However, its diluting influence in the post-Soviet space and the simultaneous emergence of new powers especially extra-regional powers like China necessitates a reappraisal of SIT. When Chinese President Xi called the BRI “the Plan of the century during the first Belt & Road Forum in 2017, and experts termed it a Chinese Marshal Plan, it became evident that how much influence it is creating all over the world (“China’s Xi hails,” 2017).

For establishing a Sphere of Influence, the influencing states must exercise soft means rather than intimidation or coercion (Etzioni, 2015). Looking at the contemporary sphere of influence politics in the Caucasus region. Both approaches are at play. Russian policies largely pertain to a hard approach especially in the case of Georgia. While China’s soft means to articulate its sphere of influence indicates that how it is utilizing the geostrategic strength of Georgia’s land and maritime routes for establishing its sphere of influence in the whole region and beyond (Papava, 2017).

Though, Georgia was not included in the immediate neighbourhood of China. But there is historical evidence present where the Soviet Union formed such a sphere of influence in Cuba for its

geostrategic objective during the Cold War era (Tsokhas, 1980). The means of establishing a sphere of influence has transformed a lot in the 21st century. The initiations of BRI by China has, therefore, given a new dimension to the SIT which used to be discussed in the backdrop of Soviet policies during and after the cold war era.

The post-cold war realities are quite different from the cold war era. The fundamental changes have occurred in world politics from bipolarity to unipolarity and now emerging multi-polar world. It magnifies the differences in the approach of multiple powers for the establishment of their sphere of influence. Russia and China vary in their approaches towards creating a sphere of influence in the South Caucasus in general and Georgia in particular. Georgia presents a unique example of their diverging interests. This divergence might affect their bilateral ties. In Hast's view, a sphere of influence cannot be overlapped. However, the post-cold war realities are presenting quite opposite picture. The situation in most parts of the post-Soviet space makes it difficult to assume it due to the emergence of new powers. Russia's post-cold war policies in Georgia have greatly altered its influence in the post-Soviet space coinciding with the emergence of new powers especially China proves that spheres of influence do overlap with the changing geostrategic realities (Cooley, 2017).

WHY GEORGIA MATTERS?

Interestingly, China's relations with Georgia has been an understudied area at the turn of the new century. However, due to its undeniable geostrategic importance, it has become an important area of study for scholars and policymakers ("Georgia: China's Way," 2016). Georgia retains its importance from many geographic, political, and economic factors. Located between the two enclosed bodies of water the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, it is a land bridge between Asia and Europe (Poghosyan, 2018). This geographical peculiarity attracts China's attention for connecting a potential consumer market and as a transit route to Europe through land and maritime routes (Celata & Coletti, 2015).

Georgia's territorial proximity to Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East and its strategically important Black Sea ports make it an extremely important state and a hub for China's Eurasia

Figure 1: Map shows land and maritime route to Europe via South Caucasus



Source: ("Peculiarities of Georgia's transit," Caucasus Business Week, 2016).

connection (Linn & Tiomkin, 2006). It also provides a land route for the North-South connections between Russia and the Middle East. Politically, Georgia has espoused a pro-western approach since its independence which has made it a strong contender for EU membership. Russia does not conform to this approach and maintains an anti-Georgian stance. On the other hand, despite its pro-western leanings, Georgia has failed to get the desired support from the EU during Russia Georgia war in 2008. Moreover, the delay in its EU membership has caused resentment and disappointment.

Economically, its location holds special importance for the US and EU for energy trade and as a transit route, It's location is vital for the energy trade from the Caspian region to Europe and thus severing the Russian monopoly in the regional transit infrastructure (Shaffer, 2009). Russia provokes separatist tendencies in Georgia to counter the Western agenda in the region. In this backdrop, China's emergence as an economic development partner and an integrating force is largely welcomed in Georgia Georgia is equally significant for the neighbouring states. For instance, Azerbaijan, which has well maintained its energy transit route through the Georgian territory and Turkey. Georgia is critically important in this regard as two major pipelines Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan pipeline and the Baku Tbilisi Erzurum pipeline run through its territory (Lynch, 2006). Besides, its land and rail routes enhance its significance for the interregional and trans-regional trade. All these characteristics make this tiny state very attractive for China's land and maritime connectivity projects. In recent years, its Black Sea ports located in Batumi and Anaklia has become a hub of international trade as the shortest routes to Europe ("Changing geopolitics," 2016). This led China to initiate multiple infrastructure projects in Georgia. The modernization of Anaklia port commenced with its investment. This port alone has a capacity of 100 million tonnes of cargo annually (Avdaliani, 2018). Moreover, the Baku Tbilisi Kara railway project is strategically very important. This 826 km long rail route will connect Azerbaijan with Turkey via Georgia. Many Central Asian republics (CARs) are ready to link their country with the project especially Kazakhstan. Ultimately China will be connected to Central Asia through this railway network (Shahbazov, 2017). Thus, It is evident that BRI is not only serving the purpose of economic integration but also expanding Chinese influence.

CHINA'S INCREASING ECONOMIC CLOUT IN GEORGIA

Although, Georgia was not in the BRI countries when it was announced in 2013. Nobody could have imagined that Georgia would emerge as an important country for China's BRI initiative in the coming years. Owing to the geographic juxtaposition of states of commonwealth of independence states (CIS), Turkey, and EU to Georgia, they remain major trading partners of Georgia with a 75 percent share in foreign trade till 2017. Under BRI, economic ties between the two states have seen rapid growth. China has emerged as the 3rd largest trading partner of Georgia in 2017. It has become the biggest buyer of Georgian wine (Avdaliani, 2017). This rapid growth in bilateral trade has further strengthened Beijing's foothold in Tbilisi. Whereas, Russian trade relations are way behind China, despite the regional proximity, adjacent borders, and the traditional Russian sphere of influence.

Georgia signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with China in 2017, the only country in the South Caucasus having an FTA with China. The bilateral ties between the two countries have experienced some remarkable development during the last 10 years. Their bilateral trade was

only US\$70 million in 2006 which has reached US\$847 million in 2017 (ITC, 2018). China is investing in energy, transportation, services, construction, and sustainable development in Georgia. The Hauling Group of China is investing in seven major projects with \$500 million in the country. It includes Kutaisi Free Industrial Zone worth \$43 million, and timber processing units with \$52 million. The Hauling group's investment in the banking sector is around \$70 million and another \$10 million have been invested in the construction sector. The Hauling group is also constructing a new International Free Economic Zone worth \$310 million. An important aspect of the Hauling group's activity in Georgia is that almost 80 percent workforce would be taken from Georgia, enhancing the socio-economic impact of the BRI (Shepard, 2016). The Sinohydro Company of China is working on the construction of the Adjara Bypass project. Recently, the Georgian government has signed with a private Chinese energy firm CFFC China Energy CO, a memorandum of understanding for the establishment of a commercial bank with the initial assets of \$300 million which will soon reach \$1 billion (Nan, 2017).

Challenges to China's Sphere of Influence

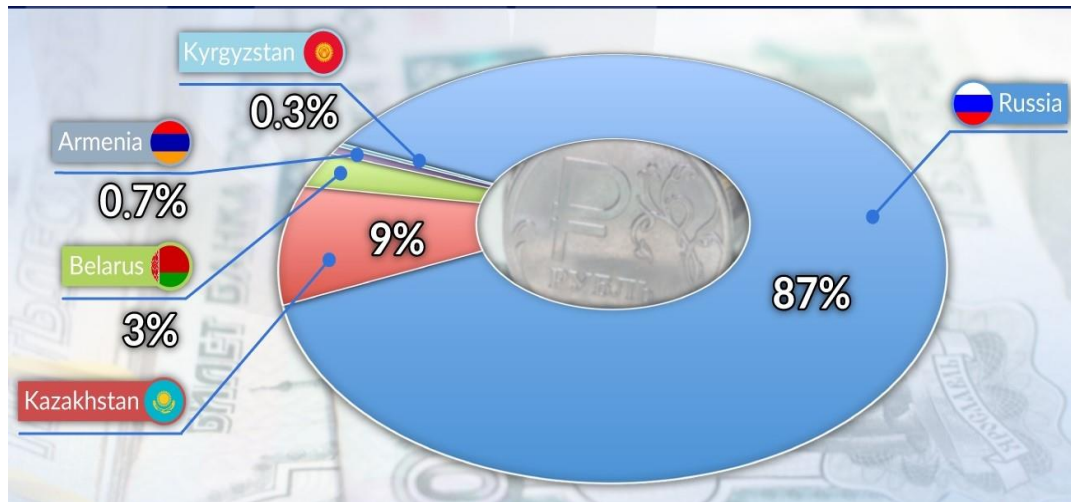
(a)- Russia: Challenges for Regional Powers in Georgia

Historically, many regional powers like Iran, Russia, and Turkey have been wrangling for influence in Georgia. After coming out of the sway of communism, its post-independent history is a story of constant struggle under difficult geopolitical circumstances (Dryzek & Holmes, 2002). The geopolitical and geo-economic significance of Georgian territory makes it significant for Russia. Georgia still represents a buffer zone between North Caucasus, Middle East, and Russia. Its inclusion in the extended European eastern neighbourhood makes it a security concern for the Russian government. Moreover, Georgia's pro-western orientations, especially after the Rose Revolution of 2003, have added more complexity in its relations with the Russian Federation. Georgia does not pose a security risk for Russian territory (Japaridze, 2014). Even Georgia's important geopolitical location as a trading hub does not undermine Russia's geopolitical importance. Then what compelled Georgia for seeking the assistance of extra-regional powers and what options Georgia has implied so far? Perhaps it is the divergence of Russian and Western interests in Georgia which not only makes Georgia look for a reliable partner. But it also makes it difficult for Russia to maintain its sphere of influence in Georgia (Bugajski, 2016). Russia has employed both soft and hard instruments in its policy towards smaller states of the South Caucasus. The use of more hard power in Georgia's case has caused more alienation towards its former masters. Furthermore, the use of hard power is tantamount to causing more disintegration in the region.

Unfortunately, Russia's soft approach for regional integration has not produced the desired results. Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is not successful so far in achieving its ideal for regional integration as it postulates. Rather, it seems more focused on preserving "its sphere of influence" instead of consolidating or broadening it, which was the main objective of its policy in the post-communist era. There has been a lot of skepticism about the success of EAEU since its inception. Kazakhstan and Belarus along with Russia were its founding members. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined it later. To create economic integration and a single market within the post-Soviet block. However, it has not succeeded yet to comprehend the idea since it was composed of only Russia's like-minded states. Russia is the overwhelmingly dominated economy in this Union

with apparent economic objectives. Therefore, it seems a more politically oriented scheme due to Russian dominance. In demographic terms, with a total population of 184.3 million only Russia consists of 146.7 million people while Armenia just over 3 million (EAEU, 2020). Hence, it looks more focused on preserving “its sphere of influence,” which was the main objective of its policy in the post-communist era. Conversely, it has strengthened the influence of other regional and extra-regional players in the region (Bugajski, 2016). The following graph shows the stark differences between the size of Economies in the EAEU.

Figure: Difference in the economic share of EAEU member states.



Source: ("The Russia-China agreement," Financial Observers, 2018)

(b)- The European Union: Challenges for Regional Powers in Georgia

The European Union (EU) is another regional power, which represents as a regional balancer for Russia. Unfortunately, the EU despite a glaring integration policy, the Eastern Partnership Program (EPP) has been unsuccessful in many contexts. Georgia is a test case for EU policy (Gstöhl, 2017). Although Georgia has been vying for NATO membership for more than a decade. It has participated in many peace operations with NATO and has done some valuable services as an aspirant of NATO membership. For instance, it contributed more than 900 troops in Afghanistan, supported the US strikes against Iraq, and has been hand in hand with the EU on many other occasions. Despite that, its membership dream could not realize. The EU has failed to save one of its allies from the Russian wrath. It has created a trust deficit in the region. Moreover, it has caused a regional leadership vacuum in the South Caucasus.

The Russia Georgia war in 2008 caused apprehensions in Georgia. Especially, when the EU failed to stand out with a small state against the aggression of one of its members, mighty in size and strength. Most of the Western European states preferred Russia because of their energy and trade relations with it and set aside the reservation of small nations (Nodia, 2012). The same year, the EU halted the process of Georgia’s membership in NATO. This became even more difficult for Georgia in the aftermath of the Georgia-Russia war. The selection of Montenegro as a NATO member also caused disenchantment in Georgia who has been striving for it for a long and sees it as a concrete solution for its security and survival in a hostile neighbourhood (Dempsey, 2015). The outcomes of the EU’s policy towards post-communist states are not much different.

The failure of regional powers in bringing peace and stability in the region paved the way for extra-regional powers to make strong footprints in the region (German, 2007). The US policy in the region is not a far cry from the EU, it supports the rhetoric of its European ally in the regional affairs, which is based more on the anti-Russian agenda and has failed in producing any meaningful results. Whether it is the Nagorno Karabakh issue, failure of the Minsk group, Ukrainian issue in the neighborhood, or Russian invasion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Averre, 2016). Such a situation raised many challenges for the EU's policy of integrating the Caucasus and Russian plans like the EAEU.

This scenario represents favorable circumstances for China to strengthen its position in Georgia and explore its land and maritime routes for its connectivity scheme. Though it faces a challenge too. A major challenge is that China does not enjoy much strategic depth in the region like regional players Russia and the EU due to geographic proximity. However, this emerges as its biggest advantage too. It is free from any power bloc association and in a position to freely concentrate on the economic and business activity. And this has been the focus of China for the last few years (Yan, 2017). For Georgia, growing Chinese presence represents a dual opportunity for strengthening its economic and strategic position vis a vis existential security threats. During the last five years, Chinese investment has increased manifold making it possible to generate much-needed economic activity and financial stability in the country. Secondly, China's interests in projects like the construction of a new city near Kutaisi, and the free industrial zone near the Black Sea port of Poti indicates the strategic importance of East-west connections for China's trade activity (Avdaliani, 2017). China's growing presence in Georgia has increasingly become a balancing act. It is gradually changing the game and converting Georgia's vulnerabilities into opportunities. Russia needs to rethink its further movement southwards near the east-west highway, a strategically important route for China. With increased economic activity along this route, Russia would have to restrict its military movement along the breakaway region of South Ossetia near demarcation lines. Otherwise, it would endanger China's heavy investment and jeopardize its relations with it. Russia is currently not in a position to face more isolation. Even though China has not shown any interest in its military presence in the region, its economic activity has already given it incredible importance in regional affairs. Its role as an integrating force and economic development partner has given it strategic leverage in Georgia.

BRI has sparked interests in the small and weak states in the region for two reasons. First, huge foreign direct investment (FDI) would bring domestic economic stability; secondly, a sense of security would prevail due to the growing Chinese presence and its economic stakes. One of the key features of this development would be the weakening of the core and strengthening of the peripheries in this region. The security dilemma of small and weak states often makes them rely more on external reliable power for their security. They find a strategic solace and hope for strength with economic development and partnership with a strong country like China.

The developments in China-Georgia relations and the announcement of BRI brought new opportunities for Georgia but it also exacerbated the challenges of Russian foreign policy (Avdaliani, 2018). It has left Russia with little options concerning its policy about Georgia and the troubled southern region. Russia needs to devise a careful strategy as further instability in Georgia due to Russian policies might endanger the huge Chinese economic investment and

cause problems in its developing relationship with China, which Russia cannot afford to deteriorate at the moment. Losing China as a strategic partner would cause further isolation for Russia in the global political arena (Pallin & Westerlund, 2009).

(c)- COVID 19: Challenges for Regional Powers in Georgia

Maintaining this sphere of influence is not an easy task. The latest challenge in this regard has emerged with the occurrence of COVID-19 which has severe economic implications for the world. Many experts believe that pandemics will alter the whole structure of international relations.

There is a historical relationship between diseases and the state's power. Historical evidence proves that epidemics have played an important role in changing the power relations among states, and sometimes eliminating the whole civilizations. Antonian Plague of 165-180 AD brought Pax Romana to an end. Similarly, the Byzantine empire was devastated by the Bubonic plague from 527 to 565 AD (Jarus, 2020). Despite a remarkable modernization of the health system in the twenty-first century, states are still not completely immune to the effects of diseases. COVID-19 is the latest example. China's emerging power at global and regional levels is facing this challenge. Therefore, it is not surprising that COVID-19 has actuated a severe controversy regarding the global order and states relations.

It is indeed the most important challenge that China is about to face in the outh Caucasus region. It has greatly halted China's trade and ambitious BRI plans to connect Europe using Georgia and its Black Sea ports. As the first COVID-19 case was identified in November 2019, Since then it surged to more than 80 million worldwide at the end of 2020 reducing the economic growth to around -4.5 to 6.0 % globally (CRS Report, 2021). China's industrial production and trade across the world experienced a 3.7 percent decline in the first three months of the year (World Bank, 2020). China's GDP growth is expected to hit an all-time low of 1.8 percent in 2020 (Statista, 2020). Against this backdrop, traumatic effects are expected for BRI projects, especially in small states, as well. As a result, Chinese companies have to divert their resources in meeting domestic constraints caused by the pandemic.

Its effects on the Georgian economy are also stark. IMF has predicted a 30-40 percent downturn in Global FDI while Georgia might experience a 19 percent fall in its FDI in 2020. It has to impose a strict travel ban affecting local tourism, and across the border economic activity. Consequently, halting trade activity with all regional and international traders. The biggest blow came from China which has emerged as one of the biggest trading partners of Georgia in 2019 after Turkey and Russia. To mitigate the severe blow to the economies of developing states, China has already announced a suspension of debt repayments (Pitlo, 2020). Despite this gloomy picture, China's early recovery from the pandemic increased the chances for China in preserving its sphere of influence in the region.

Chinese export experience a good come back of 3.5 percent in April 2020 after the initial recovery from COVID-19 at a time when all European powers and the US are still in the midst of crisis. Although exporters still face a demand shortage issue ("Coronavirus effect," 2020). Correspondingly, the diversion of capital from BRI projects to the domestic crisis temporarily halted the development of infrastructure in Anaklia port and other projects. Despite a gloomy

outlook being presented by international financial institutions regarding the global economy, the Chinese leadership has demonstrated its resolve and full commitment to BRI in the future. They are not only considering to share their valuable experience in combating the pandemic crisis in the participating states of BRI but are also planning to develop the health sector of developing partner states. Additionally, their resolve to strengthen the soft infrastructure along with hard infrastructure is going to strengthen their efforts to preserve its economic foothold in the region. China is the first country to recover from the pandemic just like the first one to experience the outbreak. COVID-19 has presented China with some opportunities to improvise the social sector in the BRI states. Similarly, the response of Russia and other regional forces matters significantly. The post-pandemic world would experience a different structure of international relations. COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges for maintaining a sphere of influence for all regional power contenders. While developing economies are the hardest hit by the pandemic, their future relationship with the major powers primarily depends on how much assistance powerful states extends to the small and developing nations.

CONCLUSION

The recent developments in China-Georgia relations and China's increasing economic clout have raised many challenges for it in recent years ranging from competing with regional contenders of powers to facing implications of the pandemic on all of its investment. After all, China is an extra-regional power. The decades-old rivalry between the EU and Russia created a sense of bewilderment in Georgia. China's emergence presents a unique opportunity for Georgia to seek the assistance of a strong economic power through its geostrategic location. Although Georgia does not pose any risk for Russia or the EU. However, their mutual differences have become a great security concern for Georgia's existence. BRI and China's huge economic assistance seem to be a better option for Georgia to secure its territory and develop economically and play a role in Eurasian integration. Russia with its imperial mindset and the EU with full contradictions between its policies and objective have failed in their pursuit. While China as an extra-regional power seems to be making inroads in the region with a strategically oriented policy. It's growing economic role in Georgia has increased its stakes in Georgia's political stability and external security. Nevertheless, Russia despite its concerns, is not in a position to spread hazards and become a security risk for China's economic objectives. This would eventually lead Russia to cooperate in China's BRI of which Russia itself is a part. Moreover, the challenge of pandemic and postponement of economic and development activities have caused a severe economic setback for Georgia and all small regional states. At the moment, the response of the major regional powers is crucial in determining the states' relations and their influence in the region in the post-pandemic era. In this whole scenario, all regional powers including China, the EU, and Russia need to adopt a pragmatic approach not only to meet the challenges but also to maintain peace and stability in the region.

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