

China's Growing Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

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Abstract

China is giving a push to the reconciliation process among the Taliban and the Afghan government. As well as working on trilateral relations of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. China is looking for CPEC expansion to Afghanistan through Pakistan, for which China seeks to explore the ways of reconciliation in Afghanistan among the Taliban and the Afghan government. US wants his long stay in Afghanistan to check the regional power of China and Russia, while China is taking interest in the Afghan peace process to smooth the way for US complete withdrawal. China along with other regional powers in Afghanistan supporting the Taliban demand of the US comprehensive drawdown timeline. The paper will bring into light China's role in Afghan peace and reconciliation, especially with the Taliban. It will also analyze China's role in Afghanistan's infrastructure and development.

Key Words: China, Afghanistan, Strategic interests, reconstruction and reconciliation, Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

Historically and politically Afghanistan and China never hostile towards each other, and when China got independence in 1949, Afghanistan wholeheartedly supported the reorganization of newly created People's Democratic Republic of China. The monarchy of Afghanistan recognized the first communist government of Mao Zedong in China during the 1950s and after five years established diplomatic relations among the two states. However, very insignificant progress can see in both states until 2001. China never wants to indulge in Afghan politics after 9/11 US attacks. Nor China provided any kind of support to the Taliban militants. But during all such scenarios, China was completely neutral. It was after 2001 when the interim setup under Karzai was formed and similarly, China fully supported the Karzai government after the 2004 Presidential elections (Pandey, 2017). China and Afghanistan shared a slight border of about 76 kilometers along the water divide along the Aghsu river trajectory with the Amu Darya in the West, and the Kara chukar river in the East belongs to the Yarkand River. It started in a tripoint from the Gilgit-Baltistan side and ended with Tajikistan. On China's side, the border is in the Chalachigu Valley. While from the Afghanistan side it ends with the Wakhan corridor and crossed by Wakhjir pass. There are natural reserves on both sides of the border. In the late 19 century British in the Indian Sub-continent were reluctant from the Russian encroachment policy in Central Asia, Sinkiang and Tibet. The British obtained a buffer zone among Russian and India by the extension of Afghan sovereignty over the narrow Wakhan corridor. This east-west corridor efficiently aided to mark Russian and British imperialist strategies. The Wakhan corridor was eventually demarcated with an eastern limit of Afghan sovereignty. But in maps, it was not clear with China. In 20th

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century claims on the Pamir region, including Afghan corridors and adjacent Russian Tajikistan. The communist regime of China in the 1960s decided the demarcation of its boundaries with the neighboring states that are Nepal, Burma, Magnolia and Pakistan. With Afghanistan, it was the fifth China and Afghanistan boundary agreement, signed on November 22, 1963, settled by Afghanistan and China independently (International Boundary Study, 1969).

China's Role in Afghanistan Peace and Reconciliation

China's contribution to Afghanistan has largely been in the domain of pledging an increasing amount of developmental aid, nowadays China in Afghanistan setting-up large-scale investment projects. Especially, its role in the Afghan harmony and settlement process with the Taliban is astonishing. The US special representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad also acknowledges China's role in Afghan peacebuilding (Pandey, 2017). China seeks to play a positive function in Afghan peace and firmness for regional peace and to counter-terrorism from the entire region. China took participation in many forums to construct friendly relations among the two adjacent neighbors Pakistan and Afghanistan to reveal the mistrust among these two states. After the 9/11 accident, China supported UN sanctions against the Taliban, but indirectly have a soft corner for the Taliban to reconcile the mistrust. According to the US think tank from 2001 to 2012, diplomatically China took a very minimal role in Afghanistan. It precipitated in meetings related to Afghanistan, just to listen to the statements and was completely sideline during such a period (Kley, 2014). China remained neutral during the US intervention in Afghanistan. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown was of the view that it was possible may China send their troops to Afghanistan during US presence in Afghanistan and joined ISAF forces. But China clearly opposed to sending troops in Afghanistan. China never backed anti-terrorist activities in Afghanistan but provided training to Afghan security and police forces for an Afghan peace initiative.

Relations under Hamid Karzai Era

China fully supports the interim setup in Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai. In 2002 he paid his first visit to China, closely after the formation of the Afghan interim government. When the new government established in Afghanistan after the 2004 Presidential elections China recognized Hamid Karzai's regime. When he won the Presidential elections of 2004, he again paid a trip to China in 2006 and for the second time in 2010. All through the 2006 visit of Karzai both the states signed a treaty of Good Neighbor Friendship and Cooperation in bilateral relations. And During this era, Chinese officials paid no visit to Afghanistan. Security and economic cooperation, fighting against terrorism, stress on the exploration of natural resources, generating electricity, infrastructure and development, improvement in the agriculture sector, drug trafficking and organized crimes was top of the agenda during both states leadership meetings. China fully participated in and supported the international efforts of Afghanistan peace. China supported the Afghanistan format which was created in 1999 by the UN with the effort to promote peace and political reconciliation in Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation organization SCO supports the 6 plus 2 formats, in which 6 referred to Afghanistan 6 adjacent neighboring states; that are *China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Pakistan*. While the 2 represent the Unites States and Russia. But this was ineffective after the US intervention in Afghanistan. After all, China participated in all gatherings related to Afghanistan that are; the London forum on Afghanistan in 2006, the Paris conference in 2008, the Hague conference in 2009, Istanbul as well as Kabul conference in 2010. Similarly, Afghanistan was not a member of SCO, but China discusses the Afghan issue on such a forum (Huasheng, 2012).

National Unity Government and China-Afghanistan Bilateral Relations

China started a new era of bilateral relations with the new setup in Afghanistan, the National Unity Government (NUG). The security and diplomatic relations were restored in October 2014, when Ashraf

Ghani visited China. Ghani was personally received by his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. Throughout this trip, China announces \$329 million of grants for Afghan peace and reconstruction. In return, the Afghan authority handed over 15 Uyghurs to Chinese authority as a token of appreciation and a step towards collaboration against the menace of militants (Khalil, 2016). On November 2014, high-level Chinese diplomats visited Kabul under the headship of Chinese Public security minister Guo Shengkun, a meeting was held with Ashraf Ghani. The meeting focused on the elimination of terrorist elements of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. Similarly, on May 17, 2015, Afghan interior minister Noor-ul-Haq Ullomo went on a three days trip to China. In the same way, in May 2016, Afghan chief executive Abdullah visited China on the request of the Chinese Prime Minister. So, several bilateral visits took place among the two states, in result emphasis was made on bilateral cooperation in many developmental works.

On 31st December 2014, NATO handed over finally Afghan authority and national responsibility to Afghan National Security Forces. It was a great concern for the Chinese diplomats and policymakers that, if China deeply indulges in Afghanistan while to start huge investment can harm its strategies. Because it will come under international attention and terrorist groups and target their projects. While on the other side, China desires everlasting peace and stability in Afghanistan that the country may not become a heaven for the Uyghur radicals to spread militancy in the entire region. Thus, for the smooth implementation and protection of its investment, China's foremost requirement is peace and stability in Afghanistan (Kley, 2014). However, from 2012 China's started diplomatic relations and the then security chief Zhou Yongkang visited Kabul, while China also appointed an exceptional representative to Afghanistan in 2014. Ashraf Ghani greatly appreciated china's positive role in Afghanistan, that's why setting the Afghan foreign policy plan based on the premises of the five concentric circles to keep China in the first circle in 2014. Ghani gives immense importance to china while given them first position among the five states (Pandey, 2017).

In October 2014 the fourth ministerial conference was held in Beijing. Istanbul process on Afghanistan stress on Afghan peace and reconciliation with different stakeholders in Afghanistan. Which is crucial for regional security and prosperity. On this platform, Premier Li Keqiang raised some proposals on the Afghan issue, "that Afghanistan should be governed by their own people" to seek out the best suitable state governance model. Second political reconciliation must move forward. He stressed on the world community for economic reconstruction in Afghanistan and assists in their external relations on mutual respect (Embassy of China, 2014 October 3). To reconcile the mistrust in bilateral relations China in 2015 took several multilateral efforts to try to find a political settlement with the Taliban.

In 2017, a trilateral ministerial-level meeting of China's, Pakistan and Afghanistan foreign ministers was held in Beijing. These dialogues are a natural miracle among the three countries. The three states took the discussion on mutual political trust and reconciliation. Cooperation in counterterrorism and security-related issues came under discussion. China's foreign minister 'Wang' added that Pakistan and China are in favor of "reconciliation with the Taliban and the Afghan government. President Ghani and President Xi-Jinping, during a meeting in Astana in June 2017, paid gratitude to each other concern. President Ghani appreciated China's role in the Afghan reconstruction and reconciliation process".

In mid-2017 the upsurge in the Taliban activities provoked the militancy on the Pak-Afghan border. To release the strain among Pakistan and Afghanistan, China sent its foreign minister to defuse the tension among both the states. China has great economic and strategic interests in this region, to safeguard her interest's peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan is indispensable. As any kind of instability on the Pak-Afghan border will deteriorate the strategic and long-term interests of China in this region. In 2017, China organized a meeting of Pakistan and Afghanistan foreign minister on security matters and to release border tension from both the neighboring states. It was the first trilateral meeting in which China arbitrate after signing an agreement on the establishment of the dialogue mechanism among the three states in June 2017 (The Diplomat, 2017 June 15). Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in 2017 took the initiative of the Kabul process, China was part of it. Similarly, China sent its diplomats to Moscow to hold talks with the Afghan representatives and with Taliban members. Several other efforts like Quadrilateral Coordination Group,

Afghanistan contact group of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and more recently the Moscow Format. Since 2017, China cultivated the bridge among the Taliban and Afghan government, while conducted several meetings with the Taliban members without help (Stone, 2017).

Infrastructure and Development

China and Afghanistan are enjoying long-standing friendly economic relations since 2002. Before 2001, Beijing has so to refrain from Afghanistan, unlike Pakistan and other regional states. After two decades now China's economic foot front has expanded. With increasing economic aid and different developmental projects undergoing on in the supervision of Chinese companies. After signing the "Comprehensive Partnership Agreement" the trade volume between the two countries reached from US\$53 million to US\$700 million in 2010. After a clear indication of the US withdraws from Afghanistan, China is looking to makes Afghanistan a higher part of its regional determination. In 2013, Chinese *President Xi Jinping* installed the *Belt and Road initiative (BRI)*. A vast infrastructural project of almost 60 countries. China's strategic position in the Afghan peace initiative is to offer some stability, which might bring some opportunities for greater trade and investment. BRI project has the creativity for China to invest in Afghanistan, as well as will provide the shortest route to "Central Asian and South Asia and between China and the Middle East". "Unlike the US, which wants to reduce its military presence in Afghanistan, China is looking for long-term connectivity." Afghanistan badly needs its infrastructure and China wants to help them. The US is looking towards the growing and steady approach of China in Afghanistan, and news of a yearlong talk among the Afghan Taliban and US cancellation coincided. It was due to China's foreign minister's visit to Pakistan and meetings with Afghan and Pakistani counterparts (Bokhari, 2017).

China's growing strategic interests in Afghanistan are going beyond trade. China is considering the major foreign direct investor in Afghanistan. For Afghanistan rebuilding purposes China provided \$ 150 million aid for different projects during 2002. While China's investment in Afghanistan was \$ 205.3 million during the year 2002-2010. Different Chinese companies are involved in Afghanistan's economic rebuilding. "Such as a state hospital in Kabul, Parvan irrigation project, human resource training", almost 800 Afghan officials took training in China in different fields and the development of Aynak copper mine a huge foreign investment in Afghanistan. Trade cooperating among the two states also enlarged, from 2006 China declared Afghanistan as a tariff-free treatment of 278 products. China's major export to Afghanistan is *machinery, electronic equipment, building materials, light industrial goods, domestic appliances and green tea*. While, on the other side china import from Afghanistan are *sheep leather, carpets and cotton* etc. China is the fifth major export market for Afghanistan and the second principal import partner in the region (Huasheng, 2012).

In recent years people to people contacts and cultural exchange programs expanded between the two states. *Chinese Minister of Public Security, Guo Shengkun*, visit Kabul in 2014 to strengthen bilateral cooperation, enhance trade, peace, and security with Afghanistan. China's benefit to Afghanistan's security is to enhance *one belt one road initiative*. In which Afghanistan reaffirmed a key role and has great potential for *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*. China is making Afghanistan a member of the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)* which is an integral part of the BRI project. The joining of CPEC will strengthen the Pak-Afghan and China relations. As it is in the best interests of all adjacent states to protect its economic benefits (Zia, 2017). The Afghan side is committed to line up itself by way of the "Belt and Road" initiative and active participation in areas such as shipping and road connectivity. In 2016 both the states signed an MoU, in which China's pledge to invest \$ 100 million. In September 2016, another progress in relations was the opening of a shortest goods train to commence China reached to the Afghan border of Hairatan (Stone, 2017). In June 2017, China's *President Xi-Jinping* meets with Ashraf Ghani in Astana (*Kazakhstan*). Both state leaders make stronger cooperation on all levels, exchange of bilateral visits at all levels; steadily push forward China-Afghanistan connectivity projects and constructive improvement in the combined structure of the "Belt and Road."

Another China's contribution to Afghanistan is the connection of the "Digital Silk Road fiber optic cable network". In this project along with china, the US and other partners are also included, which has already connected at least 25 provinces in Afghanistan. With the aim to extend it to China and South Asia, Central Asia and Europe. Some other Chinese projects are Five Nations Railway and Lapis Lazuli Corridor along with Asian Development Bank cooperation. China is keen to develop and rebuilt the Afghanistan war-torn economy, which destroyed a decade of war. "China is acute to advance in a peaceful Afghanistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Bokhari, 2017)."

China's Relationship with the Afghan Taliban

From 2015 China started the reconnection process among the Ashraf Ghani and the Taliban members. However, such a process derailed due to the Kabul attacks. This also destabilized Afghanistan and Pakistan relations on the plea that terrorist's accident occurs inside from Pakistan. Pakistan rejected that terrorist's safe heaven is inside in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan should stop blame-game and allegations. China was of the view that diplomatically, we can't achieve progress until peace not restored in Pak-Afghan bilateral relations. That's why China engaged in shuttle diplomacy among the two states many times. In 2017, China hosted trilateral talks of *Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China*, in which China invited the Taliban members to join the process of negotiations (Ramachandran, 2017).

China's hatred towards the Taliban was because of their support towards 'East-Turkistan' organization an Uyghur split up a group working in Xinjiang a Sunni-Muslim dominated province of China. But China is vigilant with political bargaining tackle amid the Taliban to sidestep direct conflict (Huasheng, 2012). During the 1990s China's had anxious relations with the Taliban, due to the Taliban support towards the Anti-Chinese terrorist elements, and fully supported UN sanctions against the Taliban. But later, in the 1990s China realized that the best way of settlement with the Taliban is the dialogue process. China was of the view that diplomacy with the Taliban can also pave the way for trade potential with Afghanistan. In 1999, for the first time the Chinese officials destitute the ice and visited Kabul. It was a start of economic relations also, and air flights started among the Urumqi province of China and Kabul (Stone, 2017). During 1999 Chinese ambassador in Pakistan held a meeting with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar. The Chinese ambassador was the only foreign diplomat who established a working relationship with the Taliban (Zaeef, 2010). In 2000 again the Chinese ambassador met with Mullah Omar and conveys the message that China wants that the Taliban stopped the support towards the Uyghur militants allegedly operating in Afghanistan with East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The Taliban leader in response was hopeful from China to recognize its government and in future avoid further UN sanctions against the Taliban. Due to such meetings, the two leaders sidestep further hitches against each other (Stone, 2017). In 2017 several bilateral meetings were held among the Afghan Taliban leaders and Chinese officials. Beijing keeps confidential such meetings, but in 2017 publicly exposed that a Taliban delegation visited China to meet with high officials under the supervision of the Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. In 2017, the Afghan ambassador to Beijing stated that China wants to train the Afghan soldiers on China's soil to combat the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda militants to protect its border. As well as to keep a vigilant eye on militants' activities in Xinjiang, which came through the northern part of Afghanistan, the rocky Wakhan corridor. China is also intensely optimistic about the construction of a military training base near to Wakhan and to station one battalion in a camp with necessary weapons for security purposes (Pandey, 2017).

A Taliban delegation under the supervision of "Abbas Stanekzai, head of the Taliban's political office in Qatar", visited China on the invitation of the Chinese government. Abbas said on this occasion that "the Taliban have good terms with different countries of the world and China is one among them". He is also conversant with the Chinese government about the killings and viciousness of invading forces against the Afghan peoples. And demanded from the Chinese authority to raise this issue on world forums and get free Afghanistan from foreign forces (Daily Dawn, 2016 July 31). It is also of the view that China is enjoying leverage position over the Taliban, due to China's natural position during decades of wars in Afghanistan as

well as during US intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 (The Diplomat, 2017 June 15). China is perusing a greater role in Afghanistan to effortlessness its influence on the Taliban and as well as on its own Uighur-Muslim dominated province of Xinjiang. Afghanistan is the home of the Taliban and other transnational groups, which is a direct threat to Uighur-inhabited areas of China. The Chinese authorities claimed the Xinjiang region as a breeding ground for “three evils” that is terrorism, separatism and religious extremism afflicting their country (Panday, 2017).

Conclusion

To sum up, it is said that for regional prosperity China has a key role to keep Pakistan and Afghanistan on track and push the peace process forward among the Taliban and the Afghan government. This is not only beneficial for the region in general but also for China specifically. Consequently, China's participation in the trilateral meeting of Pakistan and Afghanistan is to bolster the trust deficit is a positive sign in the trilateral relations of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China (Zia, 2017). Such interests show his economic and strategic interests in the region. Especially to protect China's one belt one road initiative. Only security and peace in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan can provide protection to China's economic and developmental projects. Beijing's anxiety that an unstable Afghanistan could provide safe heavens to the Uyghurs militants including those who are currently fighting in Syria, can destabilize China's economic projects in this region. Peace in Afghanistan will not only reduce terrorism but also will pay the way for economic development. Not only for China but all the regional states are keen to see towards investment in Afghanistan. Through economic stability, Afghans peoples will get the opportunity to produce in a productive manner determinedly for lasting peace. However, economic prosperity can change the lifestyle of Afghans and will create job opportunities. Because jobless minds and backwardness lead Afghan peoples towards terrorism and unfair means of production. Afghanistan's rich natural resources, if utilized properly have the potential for a better substitute for foreign aid and will reduce Afghanistan's dependence on foreign aid. On the other hand, if not properly exploit can push the county into deeper chaos, enlarging corruption and falling insurgency by illegal mining. Political and economic instability and law and order situation paves the way for foreign intervention. To fill the power vacuum which left by incapable Afghan leadership. Through beginning a substantial existence within the state, China will turn out to be far better prepared as a negotiator of peace deal among the different worrying factions of Afghan militants. Overtaking, India as the prime candidate in the peacebuilding process. China however, seems to be striving for a diplomatic balance. It cites the chronic instability of Afghanistan as an opportunity to make considerable strategic headway, while want to play a diplomatic card intending to create a truce between combatant groups of the region. For China, Pakistan is an “all-weather ally”, while at the same time integrating Kabul is also contained within China's strategic interest (Pandey, 2017).

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