



## External Dynamics in China's Afghan Policy Behavior

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### Abstract

*As the US leaves Afghanistan, China rushes to fill the void. The transformation in China's foreign policy behavior towards Afghanistan is somewhat an aberration from historical trends. Now, growing bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan are making policy experts surprised to what is behind this recent diplomatic push up of China. The paper analyses three external factors shaping China's Afghanistan approach: (1) withdrawal of the US-led western forces from Afghanistan forcing China to anticipate inimical forces will take the lead in Afghanistan, (2) Indian role and its long-lasting effects on Chinese interests in Afghanistan, (3) how regional countries around Afghanistan view the post-withdrawal situation and its policy implications for China. The research concludes that these external determinants, less or more, have far-reaching implications for China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan.*

**Key Words:** China's Afghan Policy; Indian Influence; Withdrawal of the US-led forces; Regional countries; South Asia

### Introduction

China initially viewed Afghanistan as distinct country far away from the center of power. This historical approach has been manifesting until 2009 came. With the growth of Beijing's financial interests, it has less advantage to repeat the past. Given the security risks emanating from Afghanistan, Beijing holds firm belief that it can no longer avoid the spillover effects of tattered Afghanistan if proper diplomatic attention is not paid to. To compensate emerging issues within Afghanistan for China's national security, Beijing engages Afghanistan with diplomatic, economic initiatives and taking a lead in Afghan peace process.

Policy analysts guess three main external factors can be attributed to Chinese robust Afghan engagement. First, the US planned withdrawal in 2009. The withdrawal plan nurtured a notion in Chinese policy elite if America goes outside Afghanistan, considering it a faraway territory, which country would take

care of Afghanistan. China's new position took cue from the fact that clash of interests might force other countries to challenge the Chinese economic and security interests in Afghanistan. Instead of relying on other powers for the safeguard of Chinese interests in Afghanistan as it has been the practice in the past, Beijing now thinks of taking matters in its own hands.

Second, India is considered a rival power of China in Afghanistan. Historically, geographically, culturally and economically, India is closer to Afghanistan than that of China. This advantage of India adds suspicions in China that India might use this leverage against China's interests. Also, there is no mechanism of interaction for countries in the region. So, China believes that India is opposed to the Chinese interests in Afghanistan.

Third, the stance of the regional countries about the evolving Afghanistan security situation and its implications for China's foreign policy behavior. In the pretext of

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'peaceful rise' later changed to 'peaceful development', China can no longer afford to have adversarial relations with the countries around its periphery. The research concludes that these three external factors have significant impacts on Chinese conduct in Afghanistan.

### **The Withdrawal of the US-led Western Forces from Afghanistan and its Implications for China's Foreign Policy**

Before President Obama assumed the power, American policy in Afghanistan clearly showed no inclination of compromise. President Obama simultaneously decided two options: (1) the withdrawal of the US-led forces from Afghanistan, (2) to consent for additional troops in Afghanistan. This policy brought a marked shift from the earlier one to the extent to force someone to believe that America no longer wants to remain in Afghanistan.

Even American closet allies were not happy with the idea of more military engagement in the region. This idea, indeed, would have severe repercussions for regional and international security. Even the American diplomats like Richard Holbrook had serious objections for the policy also though he was among chief architect of this policy. He said in his diary, "They don't have a deep understanding of the issues themselves, but increasingly, they're deluding themselves into thinking they do" (Rosenberg, 2015).

The resurgence of US military personnel, no doubt, brought apprehensions for the regional countries to the length of suspicion. The change in the US security policy in Afghanistan is especially apparent. In a speech at the United States Military Academy in 2009, President Obama announced a gradual drawdown of US troops starting from 2011. Next, at the international conference held in London on Afghanistan, the international community endorsed these plans of withdrawal. The core of the new policy was to begin the modern 'counter-insurgency' against the Taliban and Al Qaeda with stationing 38000 additional troops.

Secretary Clinton also appreciated India's vital contributions in reconstruction, capacity building and development efforts in Afghanistan. Both sides also pledged to explore the opportunities in civilian assistance

programs. Seen from the geopolitical perspective, this development implies that the US views India as a potential replacement to the other rival powers. Moreover, it is evident from the US global engagement that in Asia US tilt towards India has some meaning for China.

The Americans' apprehensions over China's growing power generate misperceptions and skepticism in the Sino-US relations. In this context, the Indo-US strategic partnership has been forged to create a second line of defense, which seems to be directed against China". Since the US-India talks began, it was taken as the encirclement of China. No explanation can be more elaborative when in the present scenario, the scholars talk about the growing convergence in bilateral relations between the two countries.

China's response to the Af-Pak policy was opposing the demands of the US. China argued that Afghanistan and Pakistan should be visualized separately, not as a single entity. Chinese apprehensions are further cemented by the fact that it would bring more violence and extremism. Consequently, China declared that it is no in favor of such policy which implicitly finds violence as its foundation. The policymakers have solid reasons for diverging Chinese behavior: first, China seems in great fear of being encircled by the US-led western military alliance from Afghanistan. The ultimate consequences for this encirclement would be for its domestic security.

A Muslim majority province Uyghur Autonomous Region since last three decades appears restive for China. A history full of violence, extremism and Jihadi activities makes it very sensitive for Beijing. If China complies to the Af-Pak policy, then there is no reason in thinking the scenario which would be a nightmare for Beijing. In this framework, China views the neighbor's security essential for its domestic security.

The second reason, according to the scholars, is the increasing economic activity of China related to Afghanistan. The economic potential, in the form of natural minerals, a hub of cross-regional transportation, gas and oil reserves are enough proof for increasing Chinese concerns for Afghanistan.

Moreover, Afghanistan is located at the periphery of those countries which oil reserves

are abundant yet untapped, i.e., the Central Asian Republics. No route is more beneficial for the transportation of these resources than that of Afghanistan. Dry ports will also be developed as per the international standards. Mining is a significant contributor to Afghanistan's self-sufficiency.

Afghanistan's dependency over foreign aid can be minimized if this resource comes into full play. Geological research shows that in Afghanistan, there are 1400 types of mineral and ore minerals. Billions of dollars can be fetched from these reserves. The creation of electricity, employment opportunities and business opportunities appear additional benefits which BRI promises to bring. The most striking optimism about BRI in Afghanistan, policymakers predict, will be the restoration of lost confidence of international investors.

Zhang Li, a professor of the South Asian Study Centre at Sichuan University, said that "I don't think that US withdrawal also means a Chinese withdrawal, but especially in security affairs in Afghanistan, China will remain low key and cautious. China wants to play more of a role there, but each option in doing that will be assessed carefully before any steps are taken" (Sanjeev Miglani, 2012).

The fact remains true that China still holds the policy of low-profile and caution. Many other scholars also have the same opinion about the growing Chinese weariness about Afghanistan. Andrew Small says that China has a plan to train, equip and modernize the Afghan army. However, the policy has been quite distinct from the US-led western alliance. Any program or proposal of partnership with the west, according to scholars, appears for China very disturbing and annoying. The same was the case when the proposed contribution in the multilateral fund for Afghan security forces was outrightly reject by China.

Jaspal writes about Indian role in Af-Pak strategy in the following words: "China's strategic interests in Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian States make it a natural strategic competitor to the U.S in Afghanistan. Therefore, the role of India, which the Americans have envisaged in their Af-Pak strategy, is against China's strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan" (Jaspal, 2007).

Jaspal further elaborates China's multiple challenges in Afghanistan, "Beijing certainly endeavors to check both the NATO-led ISAF military presence on the Chinese periphery beyond 2014 and the increasing Indian participation in Kabul's affairs, directly and indirectly, through seconding Pakistan's strategic imperative in the solution of Afghanistan's present imbroglio" (Jaspal, 2007).

Moreover, the scheduled withdrawal plan of the US-led western troops after 2014 also strengthens the perception that Afghanistan's inclusion in the regional framework should be a priority to minimize the risks of potential security fiasco.

For the sympathetic restoration of Afghanistan, China's emerging status has been reported a viable option away from the western hegemonic order (The China Daily, 2012). The same plan was pronounced by then China 's president Hu Jintao, "the Chinese government will continue to encourage capable Chinese companies to invest in Afghanistan. China will continue actively participating in international and regional cooperation concerning Afghanistan" (The China Daily, 2012). Since the relations reestablished again in 2002, China's aim has been in the focus of promotion of regional stability through these cultural, economic and security activities.

### **The Stance of the Regional Countries towards Afghanistan: How Does It Shape Chinese Response?**

American power in Afghanistan has been, to a certain extent, remains successful in containing the Taliban. After some initial successes and setbacks, it was decided by the then US administration that pulling out troops is the best possible option for growing US difficulties. The initial response of neighboring countries, however, was mixed. The next question that disturbed the neighboring countries was the vacuum created by US-led western forces withdrawal.

So, this fear inculcated the perception of a collective response to anticipated evils, emerging out of coming anarchy. In response, a general trend of policy shifts has remained a core fashion of the neighboring countries. Every neighboring country assuming the new

responsibilities thought of in those terms which are clearly against its interests. China was no exception to these changes. In other words, the withdrawal plan was an awakening call for needed changes in the Chinese policy towards Afghanistan.

The neighboring countries like Russia and China planned to solely focus on the regional initiative with the primary aim to bring lasting peace in Afghanistan. In 2014, China and Russia started 6+1 dialogue on Afghanistan in Geneva. The notable representatives of Iran, USA, Pakistan, India, Russia, Afghanistan and China were present for discussing the lasting peace in Afghanistan.

China has found that Pakistan is not effectively stopping those people. This has affected China's attitude to Pakistan, which is no longer considers a reliable partner. This is one of the reasons why Chinese-Indian relations have started to warm, and that China is seeking cooperation with the US in Afghanistan" (Dalrymple, 2014). It appears a late realization by China that multilateral approach with India and US in Afghanistan may be a more secure deal for furthering their relations in Afghanistan. China's diplomacy towards Afghanistan has been complemented by a new concept which is to change the whole course of events between China and Afghanistan.

With strong opposition to the traditional alienation of the Taliban from the mainstream, it appears China's emphasize of incorporation of the Taliban into diplomatic activity. China has been forced to make this decision on the following basis: (1) Taliban no more exists as the periphery group. Now, China rightly thinks that without the incorporation of the Taliban into the political process is unlikely to achieve peace in Afghanistan (2) China's decision about Afghanistan's stability compels others to think about Afghanistan seriously.

Andrew Small, an expert of Chinese foreign policy, holds the opinion that for durable peace in Afghanistan beyond 2014 has become the cornerstone of China's foreign policy towards the region. China continuous effort to bring Taliban in the peace process appears in the same notion of peace beyond 2014 (Small, 2013). China's transformative foreign policy towards Afghanistan holds this idea very well.

So, this concept was behind the new initiatives which China launched after 2012. China's sudden emphasize on security cooperation with Afghanistan was an anomaly which was to unfurl later. China established strategic relations with Afghanistan.

Moreover, China's has never been aligned with any country in Afghanistan. China's presence in bilateral and multilateral forums concerning Afghanistan was less. After this period, some modification was even observed in this policy. China decided to have cooperation with American in an initiative to train and educate the Afghan diplomats, engineers, health workers and agricultural professionals (Small, 2013).

### How does India Influence the Chinese Foreign Policy towards Afghanistan?

According to the political analysts, India's paramount interests from Afghanistan emanate from three compelling grounds: (1) Afghan security is very cogent reason for India's regional ambitions (2) due to the geographical location of Afghanistan in the heart of Asia, it is the primary necessity for India to have a cordial relation with Afghanistan for more secure business environment (3) to keep its energy security intact in the face of any hostile Afghan government.

India has historical links with Afghanistan since known history. Since the establishment of modern Afghanistan, India has been a very active player maintaining relations with all Afghan governments except the more hostile regime of Taliban from 1996 to 2001.

After the exclusion of 5 years from Afghanistan, India found an appropriate moment at the time of American invasion in 2001. An Indian friendly government established in Kabul which paved the way for India to have the relations with Afghanistan on multiple threads. India took the full advantage of the situation and became the one of the most important actors in the Afghan reconstruction (Basu, 2007). Indian established the full embassy elevating from the lowest Liaison office.

International powers, after the Afghan invasion, organized a conference and invited all regional and international players for the

sole purpose of 'Afghan Reconstruction' named as 'Bonn Conference'. India actively participated in the conference and promised to pledge the significant amount for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Moreover, India donated in welfare projects solely aimed at the welfare of common Afghans. India's performance in Afghanistan is more than impressive covering humanitarian, cultural exchange programmes and sponsoring all successive governments brining political stability.

China is also the neighbor of Afghanistan and has been a very active player in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. China's stated purpose is to secure: (1) volatile Xinjiang Autonomous region (2) Afghanistan as a conduit for Chinese business interests (3) energy security. China's relations with Afghanistan have been very oscillating between low and high. China established relations with Afghanistan in 1955. Again, it became lukewarm in the reign of Soviet installed Afghan regime from 1979 to 1989. Taliban regime could also not bring any positive change in Chinese passivism in Afghanistan. After the invasion in 2002, China reestablished relations with the new Afghan government. China's engagement with Afghanistan has grown significantly from very low to active engagement (Scobell, 2015).

To understand the regional dynamics of South Asian, the relations of two regional powers in Afghanistan like India and China would help us to analyze Chinese recent active Afghan engagement. China showed her interest in linking Afghanistan with BRI and invested \$ 400 million in gas and oil sector of Afghanistan (Eltaf, 2011).

China planned to hook Afghanistan with 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) which has far reaching consequences for the trade, common welfare and information technology. BRI will likely make Afghanistan another hub of connectivity in Asia (Jennifer, 2017). Indian also constructed roads, buildings and public welfare projects (Jennifer, 2017). India also invested heavily in Afghanistan agriculture, livestock and logistics. India is the earlier player in Afghanistan reconstruction and China took it as a threat for its status in Afghanistan.

Indian also rejected the idea of CPEC concerning the territorial sovereignty rights over Jammu and Kashmir, a cause of concern for China (The Print, 2019). China also inks suspicions and doubts over the construction of Delaram-Zerang road that will attach Afghanistan with the Iran's southern Chabahar port. China traditionally views these Indian investments with suspicion and doubts (Energy Infrared Post, 2019).

The analysis of China and India's relations with Afghanistan indicate that both have adopted the people-oriented approach and less focused on Afghan security matters. This approach tells us the fact that both consider that poverty in Afghanistan is the major cause in the destabilization and anarchy. So, consensus on development strategy is the common ground between India and China. Another reason which may be a common ground for India and China is the common security threat. An imbalance in the Afghan security, being the neighbor of Afghanistan, can have calamitous consequence for the peace and prosperity for both countries. Despite many common interests, both powers have miserably failed to materialize the common agenda for the stability of Afghanistan.

An ex-Indian diplomat, Nirupam Sen stated that to stop terrorists from working within Afghanistan without any impunity must be the foremost agenda to be addressed with collective efforts and sincerity (Nirupem Sen, 2019). The fear which is found in Indian policy makers about the use of Afghanistan against Indian interests can be decreased by a mechanism which must be binding for all regional stakeholders. Indian fears that Pakistan holds command on all militant organizations to unleash attacks on Indian has proven to a large extent wrong. Some Indian newspapers and journalists are producing this fake news about Pakistan might use these terrorists to attack India (Live Mint, 2019).

A newspaper reported that China assisted Afghan army for a mountain brigade to possibly to train the Afghan army in counterterrorism (Live Mint, 2019). China has been providing small arms, ammunitions, logistics and military equipment's (Martina, 2018). A Military newspaper reported that Chinese troops are conducting exercises in



Afghanistan with the Afghan forces (Shawn Snow, 2017).

Despite similarities, here a question arises: why have India and China hold different opinion about Afghanistan? Chinese scholars point out major differences in the following words: China's Afghan policy is not in common line with India's. China supported Taliban in the Afghan peace process while India was against the inclusion of Taliban in the peace process. China views Taliban as the most important and powerful group which has the capacity and capability to bring peace in Afghanistan. China is not against the Taliban but is opposed to terrorism, separatism and extremism (Huasheng, 2014).

Indian dilemma stems from historical phenomenon that Pakistan has been using Indian opposite groups in damaging the vital interests of India. If Afghanistan gains the neutral status, it will be more appropriate for the pace and security of the whole region. It is also the fact that both sides supported the Bonn polity for the welfare of Afghanistan. However, China is no more ready to embrace the India ideology over Taliban. Also, this issue is creating so much havoc that it can't be a middle ground.

Right from the beginning, both India and China have been donating for the welfare of Afghanistan colossally. No other power matches with the spending as China and India have invested on common Afghan people. With growing business interests, both countries seek a role in Afghanistan which may consolidate and further their interests in Asian and beyond.

In the global perspective, both stand on the opposite side. Their opposite stand on regional and global issues has huge impacts in their decision making about Afghanistan. Like European Union (EU), they are unable to have a common agenda at least on trade and business.

Engaging on multiple fronts with Afghanistan, China seeks to maximize its influence commensurate with her national interests. Also, China's demands are based on genuine grounds. While on the other hand, Indian interests are contested in Afghanistan with factors which are not under the direct control of China namely: (1) Pakistan's presence and its influence on Taliban (2) Taliban

ideology and interests are directly repugnant to the core values of Indian policy in Afghanistan. However, China is a factor with which Indian can evade the negative repercussions in Afghanistan.

Traditional geopolitical thinking between India and China is the hallmark which at least can be minimized only for the sake of regional peace if the two powers agree upon. China's foreign policy dictum 'peaceful coexistence', which both India and China shares and agree on, must be their foreign policy agenda in Afghanistan.

China and India's cooperation in Afghanistan have been less than impressive since the establishment of modern Afghanistan. However, both now found a common path in the Wuhan summit in 2018. It was agreed by them to work jointly on the reconstruction of Afghanistan. After the capture of Kabul by Taliban, there are less opportunities which can bind them again as was in the Wuhan Summit.

Geopolitical approach is so embedded in the region despite the fact that global situation requires them to bind the region with business opportunities, joint economic ventures and common security threats. Common approach is only possible if the interests of both countries are safe and secure.

## Conclusion

China has always been very reluctant partner of Afghanistan since 2001. Initially, China's interaction with Afghanistan was oriented towards remaining a silent spectator. China believed that by little engagement with Afghanistan can be an effectual policy less costly with more advantages. However, Afghanistan's evolving security situation required her to be an active participant for getting benefits and manage security risks which would not be available to a free rider state.

In 2009, President Obama announced the gradual withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Immediately after the announcement, China thought of Afghanistan without the American security umbrella with fear that might be opposite countries would fill the void. Moreover, the militant organizations

would also use Afghanistan as a safe heaven to launch attacks against China.

Under these fears and apprehensions, China made the plan to engage with all Afghan parties and brought all of them on table to discuss the prospects of future Afghan peace. In order to create peace and soft power, China massively enhanced development and humanitarian aid for Afghanistan. Also, China directly participated in the public welfare projects for the welfare of common people of Afghanistan.

The paper takes three external factors behind China's diplomatic push up with Afghanistan: (1) the withdrawal of US-led western coalition forces, (2) the regional stance of the countries around Afghanistan, (3) Indian influence and its implications for China in Afghanistan. The research also concludes that under these changing requirements, China thought of being the active participant in Afghanistan instead of a free rider state.

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