

## China-Afghanistan Relations: Implications for China in the Post-US Military Exit from Afghanistan

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### Abstract

*The post-US military exit from Afghanistan has produced a new opening for Chinese engagement in Afghanistan. Two aspects, security concerns and economic opportunities to this effect, are significant and will determine the contours of paradigm that will guide China's new engagement in Afghanistan. Two things will determine the stability in the region: China's assessment of the implications and policy response to fill in the vacuum, and, secondly, how China balances its security apprehensions with economic openings. Otherwise, chaos might spell not only in its western border but the region in its backyard might slide to chaos and will enhance Chinese security concerns. The purpose of the research is to evaluate the nature of security concerns and their impact on Beijing's economic interests. 'Great Cohesive Power' framework has been employed to explain China's New Neighborhood Diplomacy that is aimed by Beijing to balance between security concerns and economic interests.*

**Keywords:** China-Afghanistan relations, Xinjiang, Security Concerns, New Neighborhood Policy

### Introduction

The dramatic and ignominious military withdrawal of America from Afghanistan and the consequent swift assumption of power by the resurgent Taliban have left a vacuum and there seems no regional country except China capable of filling in the void. It implies that Beijing is going to play a bigger not only in the stabilization of Afghanistan but also peace in the region. (Zhang, 2022) Notwithstanding the complete sway of the Taliban, stability still eludes

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Afghanistan due to complex ground realities: foreign occupations and a long spell of civil war have shattered the infrastructure on the one hand, and, on the other hand, gravely ruined the economy and Afghanistan is undergoing a serious humanitarian crisis. These conditions have deprived the country of peace and stability but also fraught with negative implications for Afghanistan's neighbors. From Chinese perspective, the volatile scenario may produce spillover effect of extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan and destabilize the security and stability in the adjoining Chinese Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Murtazashvili, 2022).

### **Engagement with Taliban-a Fait Accompli**

For China, engagement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is a matter of fiat accompli as much as Chinese rise as a global power is largely dependent upon the environment and trajectory of its relations with the countries in its backyard, especially Afghanistan which shares border with volatile periphery region of China, Xinjiang. At present, China's Afghan policy is premised on the following objectives: it has granted political, not diplomatic, acceptance to the Taliban inasmuch as who controls Kabul controls Afghanistan; secondly, engage the Taliban in order to ensure that ultra-religious elements do not find safe havens again in Afghanistan; thirdly, encourage all stakeholders in Afghanistan for 'inclusive politics' and extend assistance to Afghanistan in order to address the grave humanitarian crisis engulfing Afghanistan, and, finally, highlighting the failure of the US and the West in fulfilling their responsibility in Afghanistan (Zhang, 2022).

### **Theoretical framework-great cohesive power**

A great power may be defined a sovereign state that has, first, worldwide interests and influence and, secondly, it has not only potential but possess all paraphernalia to protect its interests so that it may exercise its influence on a global plane. According to Kenneth Waltz, there are six factors that calibrate the great power position, and they are: populace and geographical area, existence of natural resources, military prowess, economic potential, political balance and adroitness. (Waltz, 1993) But Waltz's criteria are more an intrinsic characterization; there is an extrinsic amplification of the great power which furnishes springboard to the rising great powers to realize their worldwide interests. Their rise points that, inter alia, that they map out two stage strategies; the first phase relates to achieving the status of 'Great Cohesive Power' that entails peaceful and stable periphery and geographically abutted countries and regions; only then could an aspiring great power become real great power. Once

they manage to consolidate their sway there, they use it to achieve further development and greater strength at the global level.

### **The Monroe doctrine**

The Great Cohesive Power framework implies that the Great Power needs to have either total influence or coercive engagement with countries on its periphery or in its backyard so that it may have relatively calm environment. Only then does the Great power manage to play its true role in the international arena. The Monroe Doctrine propounded by U.S, President James Monroe can be cited as how the United States managed to achieve Great Cohesive Power status by barring the Western colonialists from further colonization in the Americas. The doctrine proclaims that “the American continents ...are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers. The United States would consider any foreign challenge to the sovereignty of existing American nations as unfriendly act.” (Alan Brinkley, 1992). As a matter of fact, the United States managed to get necessary concern free environment in its backyard and consequently focused more on its future global role. It will be pertinent to mention that the Doctrine supplemented by 1904 Roosevelt Corollary provided justification for future US interventionist and expansionist designs.

China’s case is the same: the ascendancy of China as a great power due to string of characteristics ranging from its distinctive geopolitical position, diplomatic traditions to ideology, China require a kind of engagement with its neighbors which is free of any concerns. That’s why, Beijing has invariably given particular import to its relations with its neighbor in its foreign policy considerations.

And China’s history and geography have a salient impact on it because it is unique in the sense that China shares 22000 km long border with fourteen countries, besides having eight maritime neighbors. (Huasheng, 2016).

### **New Neighborhood Diplomacy (NND)**

China’s ‘New Neighborhood Diplomacy’ (NND) is a theoretical paradigm containing strategy for achieving Great Cohesive Power by Beijing. A brainchild of Xi Jinping’s administration, it is, on the one hand, reflection of Chinese leadership’s realization of their country’s rise and adjustment in regional tier of foreign policy; and, on the other hand, practically, comprises a number of new initiatives that cover China’s regional foreign policy. However, the word ‘new’ does not in any way imply that the new initiatives have replaced the original policies; rather, they have been revisited, revised and amended in

the contemporary context without compromising the original foundations. (Huasheng, 2016) One of the features of the NND is the further elevation of relations with the neighboring countries. The paradigm that calibrates China's foreign relations is based upon four principles: ties with great powers are indispensable but relations with countries abutting periphery are paramount; developing countries provide the bedrock whereupon the principal act of multiculturalism is staged.

Beijing's escalated engagement to its neighborhood and neighboring sub-regions is directed towards achieving status of 'Great Cohesive Power' (GCP) and it has two aspects: "It has slowly dawned upon policy makers in China that the logical corollary of its rise as a great power is that it will soon become center of international political gravity." (Xinhuanet, 2015) And the second aspect is that in as much as China's economy, politics, diplomacy and security have been directly affected by its relations with neighbors, therefore, its leadership has come to the conclusion that developing harmonious relations with states abutting its periphery are essential because, first, they will result in security concern free ambiance; secondly, the strategic position of the country will be bolstered, thirdly, diplomatic clout of the country will shore up and, finally, broaden the base of China's sway at the world stage. (Huasheng, 2016) Therefore, stable and concern-free relations with neighbors is a sine qua non to achieving CGP peacefully but if the neighborhood is mired in chaos and uncertainty, it will be hard for the country to ensure sure its national security; besides, China's hands will be bound and its foreign policy and diplomatic push for greater international role will be thwarted. (LI, 2015).

### **Policy of integration-community of common destiny**

Addressing the BRICS Foreign Ministers' meeting, Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China, observed: "Both history and reality tell us that seeking one's own security at the expense of others' will only create new tensions and risks." (BRICS, 2022) In pursuance of XI Jinping words, China has, instead of proclaiming a root-and-branch approach, adopted a more pragmatic and cooperative way and developed to integrate neighbors into "a community which share common destiny and link China to all its neighbors through thick and thin." (Huasheng, 2016) In order to realize the 'Community of Common Destiny', two landmark projects- 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road,' which is part of the strategy, have been launched by China. These two projects are clubbed together and are called 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), are a strategic idea highlighting China's fresh and naturally logical attention to its regional diplomacy. (Clarke, 2016)

## **Research Methodology**

The current study is an analytical exercise in its perspective and is aimed at analyzing Sino-Afghan relationship in the context of China's security concerns emanating from the Taliban Afghanistan and further economic openings available to Beijing. Therefore, qualitative research has been employed to conduct the present research and to analyze the content of scholarly articles and other material available on the topic.

## **Historical Background of Sino-Afghan Relations**

Notwithstanding the fact that Afghanistan occupies a significant niche in China's regional strategic calculus, a glimpse at the historical background of their relations points that the security concerns of China arose and intensified in Xinjiang with the assumption of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996. But Beijing preferred not to grant diplomatic recognition to this fundamentalist regime because the Taliban government had granted safe havens to a number of diverse radical Islamic denominations like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that was responsible for attacks in Central Asian States; but, from Chinese perspective, it was the presence of Uighur-centered East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in the Taliban ruled Afghanistan was worrisome because the Movement was demanding independent Xinjiang (Zhang, 2022).

Afghanistan was one of the first few states that had granted diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China and established formal diplomatic relations in January 1955. However, Afghanistan remained at the periphery of Chinese diplomacy for most of the early period because Afghanistan was closer to the Soviet Union from the 1950's to the 1980s, and Kabul was principally relying on Moscow for economic, political and security issues; therefore, their political and economic relationship did not evolve and remained insignificant. During the Cold War, the Beijing-Kabul ties were influenced by big powers' competition and in the 1980s, when the Soviet military made incursion into Afghanistan and the country became a battleground of superpowers' rivalry, China was one of the countries that had decided to collaborate with America and its allies in an effort to contain Soviet Union and provided Soviet manufactured arms to Afghan Mujahideen resisting the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan (Garver, 2016).

## **Post-Cold War Phase**

Soon after end of the Cold War and, later, with the break-up of USSR, Afghanistan witnessed tumultuous developments as the forces of diverse Afghan Mujahideen and incumbent President of Afghanistan, Dr. Najibullah, engaged in

an internecine war; the situation forced Beijing to pull out its diplomatic staff and vacate the embassy in 1993. During the decade of 1991 to 2001, China's policy towards Afghanistan was guided by safeguarding Xinjiang from terrorist threats and, secondly, establishing relationship with the Central Asian republics recently seceded from the defunct Soviet Union (Clarke, 2016).

The second phase of China's post-Cold War policy towards Afghanistan began with the incident of 9/11 and lasted till 2021 when the United States, having failed to stabilize Afghanistan, resolved to withdraw its military from Afghanistan. The induction of the US-backed interim government under the President Hamid Karzai ushered a new phase in Sino-Kabul relations. However, the era was characterized by two aspects: China initiated 'pragmatic commercial engagement' with Afghanistan and its commercial interests began to grow but, simultaneously, Beijing opted to exercise 'strategic insulation' and rejected any involvement in the internal politics and security situation of Afghanistan.

Later, Obama administration made clear its intention to organize its military exit from Afghanistan, China did realize the necessity of revisiting its policy of indifference in order to assess the implications of post-US exit Afghan scenario and decided to revisit the contours of its commercial, security and foreign relations with Afghanistan. On the other hand, the National Unity Government (NUG) came to power in 2014 in Afghanistan, led by Dr. Ashraf Ghani, advocated China's escalated involvement not only in promoting regional connectivity but economic growth too. Besides, he re-mapped the contours of Afghanistan's foreign policy premised upon five concentric circles, and realizing the implications of sans America Afghanistan and likely role China would play, he placed China in the first circle of engagement (Pandey S. , 2019)

### **Security Concerns**

Since August 2021, China's policy towards the Taliban is premised on security and concern about the threat of violent extremism. China's overall objective in Afghanistan is to thwart terrorism along with the spread of brutal extremism from Afghanistan to other parts of the region. Above all, China is concerned about the spread of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan to Western China and Xinjiang. It also fears that a weakened Afghanistan will create a breeding ground for the East Turkanistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) or different radical Islamic groups interested in using Afghanistan as a base of operations.

The principal cause for China to seek more involvement in Afghanistan is its concern about the border between Afghanistan and China's Muslim-dominated province of Xinjiang. Peking considers Xinjiang to be a nursery for "The Three

Evils” (Small, 2010) (terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism). Beijing’s security concerns are further heightened by the risk of fundamentalists coming from abroad and using Xinjiang as a stepping stone to develop ties with the already marginalized Uighur regions of China. Besides, there is concern that the ideology of pan-Islamist groups operating in Pakistan’s and Afghanistan’s tribal belts could spread to China, further exacerbating Xinjiang separatism. (Sales, 2018)

The Chinese authorities’ growing concern is compounded by reports that many of these fighters have taken refuge in in Pakistan’s erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), as well as in the south and east provinces of Afghanistan. (Pandey S. , 2019). There is a widespread view that some of these fighters have joined other international groups, including the IMU, which has split into two factions: one loyal to the al-Qaeda-affiliated Taliban, and another loyal to the ISKP-affiliated Al-Qaida-linked Al-Qaida. However, many of these fighters are still focused on planning attacks against China specifically, such as TIP (Turkistan Islamic Party) or EIM (Etturistan Islamic Movement), which seeks to create an Islamic state in Xinjiang known as “East Turkestan.” (Press, 2019).

### **Security Objectives**

China has four main security objectives driving its involvement in Afghanistan:

- The first is to ensure the presence of a functioning government in Afghanistan. Without such a government, the Taliban cannot project their power across the country and exercise monopoly on violence and they will not be able to carry out their security assurances to China and other neighbors. (Evansky, 2022)
- The second is China's reliance on Russia and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Russia has a military base on the southern part of its border with Tajikistan, which it established in 1992-1997 to support President Emomali Rahmon’s fledgling government during the 1992-1997 civil war. It has maintained the base since. Russia has declared that its military is ready not only to counter Afghanistan-originated likely threats and provocations but also detect and countervail radical terrorist groups seeking to infiltrate into the borders of Tajikistan (TASS, 2022).
- Third, China wants to make sure that the Taliban are ready to destroy Uyghur groups based in Afghanistan. In July 2021, just before the Kabul government collapsed, the Taliban promised to Beijing that they would

not allow foreign elements to use Afghanistan as a springboard for attacks on China (Ren, 2021).

- Finally, Beijing has signaled that it is ready to make hefty investments in Afghanistan and scant details are available to this effect, but it wants assurances with respect to two things: guarantees regarding protection of present investments, and, secondly, physical safety of its citizens currently engaged in different projects in Afghanistan.

### **Military Aspect**

A history of sporadic and high-profile attacks by militants has raised China's worries regarding uncertainty in the region which in turn could fuel religious radicalization in Xinjiang and bolster Uighur separatist activities and threaten China's territorial integrity. (Azizi, 2018) For example, the riots that erupted in Xinjiang Province's capital of Urumqi in July 2009 killed about 200 people. (Ghiasy, 2017) So, while China's alleged military presence in Afghanistan may appear ominous to some regional states, it is natural and legitimate, from Chinese perspective, challenges to its security.

The underlying objective of Chinese escalated engagement in Afghanistan is premised upon that it seeks to: countervail militant activities of ETIM-affiliated Uighur fighters operating out of Afghanistan; set up a mechanism of controls along its Western border; and strengthen the Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism with Tajikistan (QCCM), Afghanistan and Pakistan to prevent cross-border infiltration of militants. China has adopted a new approach that pertains to interplay between its economic sway in Afghanistan and its strategic influence. And this approach can be used to explain China's increased military presence and engagement with Afghanistan along the Wakhan Corridor ( McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023).

Some regional analysts and pundits are of the view that inasmuch as China's Afghanistan policy was originally premised upon containing domestic extremism, it had passed the burden of political settlement and military engagement to the American and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force). (Hong, 2013) While this may explain, at least in part, the absence of Chinese involvement in security operations inside Afghanistan, China, later on, decided to revise its carefully calibrated policy of strategic restraint and exhibited its intent to participate in security area, albeit discreetly.

China launched, In June 2021, a trilateral meeting between China's Foreign Minister and his counterparts from Afghanistan and Pakistan to address fresh



worries about the withdrawal of US and ISAF troops from Afghanistan at a critical moment in the peace process in the country. (Krishnan, 2021) The three foreign ministers stressed the need for a peaceful solution to the conflict and urged the US to leave Afghanistan “in a responsible manner.” (News, 2021), During the meeting, China affirmed its strong support for the peace-building process in Afghanistan. China also expressed its readiness to strengthen economic and commercial ties with Kabul and to help increase self-development potential. (News, 2021).

### **Economic Opportunities**

China’s growing involvement in Afghanistan goes beyond national security concerns. Afghanistan’s strategic placing is another driving factor: Afghanistan is situated at the intersection of Central and South Asia, and this geographical position furnishes it with leverage over other countries in terms of trade and transit routes. Consequently, it has a great potential to bridge the regions of West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and China for commercial purposes. Afghanistan is home to a huge inventory of natural resources that include scarce elements, copper, iron ore and gold, and lithium. (Azizi, 2018) Afghanistan’s mineral resources have the potential to make huge addition to country’s financial resources and lessen Kabul’s reliance on donor countries provided they are managed well. However, the same abundance of natural resources and strategic setting can drive the country into turmoil, increase corruption, fuel insurgency through illegal mining and delay economic development. Therefore, ‘geographic location’ alone may not determine the fate of Afghanistan. (Pandey S. , 2019)

However, Afghanistan-China economic and trade relations have improved significantly over the past 20 years and are on an upward trajectory. Since the war began in 2001, Afghanistan has counted China as one of its top trading partners. According to the China Ministry of Commerce, Afghanistan-China bilateral trade volume in 2017 reached USD 554 million. (Zia, 2019) A number of developments in recent years suggest that both countries are willing to step up their economic cooperation. These include the creation of the Afghanistan-China Sino-Economic Committee in 2006; the signature of the Comprehensive Cooperation Partnership Agreement (CCPA) in 2010; and the signing of a Customs Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2017. Afghanistan is expected to import 23,000 tons of pine nuts and saffron, as well as various gemstones, into China every year, to meet the high demand for these commodities in the Chinese markets. (Zia, 2019)

### **Amu Darya Oil Extraction Contract**

The Taliban govt. and Xinjiang's Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC), a Chinese company, signed in January 2023, a 25-year period oil extraction deal from the Amu Draya basin. (Peter Hoskins, 2023) It is the first large-scale energy extraction contract with a foreign company since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in January 2021. The deal underlines China's economic engagement in the area. The Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan, Wang Yu, while attending a news conference in Kabul, hailed the signing of the deal and termed it a very significant economic venture between Beijing and Kabul. (AlJazeera, 2023)

China is the biggest foreign investor in Afghanistan, winning bids to explore for oil in its Amu Darya basin north of the country and to build large-scale railway infrastructure. The country's biggest copper mine is also under negotiation, with a state-owned Chinese company. The mine, located about 40 kilometers southwest of Kabul in the Logar Province, is the country's largest copper deposit. China won an extraction contract for the mine in 2008, amounting to \$4,400,000, to develop the mine. (Satandar Trade Portal, 2019) The insatiable quest of Chinese corporations for critical metals including copper, necessary for the automotive, power generation and consumer electronic industries has led to exponential growth of their overseas mining holdings. (Marty, 2018) . China launched the Sino-Afghan special railway transportation project and the Five Nations railway project, which links China with the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikia, the Republic of Zanzibar, the Republic of Khartoum, the Republic of Iran, and the Republic of Afghanistan. (Stratfor, 2018) However, China's preference not to participate in military means aimed at resolving the conflict had been criticized for profiting from the US-led effort to stabilize Afghanistan while simultaneously increasing its resource-exporting operations in the country. (Hong, 2013)

Initially, the Chinese giant project – Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) included Pakistan and Central Asia and Afghanistan was not part of the project; however, the 2016 MoU between China and Afghanistan expressed a commitment to work together in the framework of the BRI and marked an important step towards Afghanistan's eventual integration into the multi-continental infrastructure in accordance with Afghanistan's aspirations. (Safi & Alizada, 2018) The Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Project (SASRP) and the Five Nations Railway Project (FNRP) provide spatial connection to China with the northern Afghanistan; however, China aims to develop links with south Afghanistan by coopting Afghanistan in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in a reciprocal profitable agreement. China and Afghanistan have also

established a fiber optic link through the Wakhan corridor in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. (Pandey S. , 2019)

The CPEC is an essential part of the BRI, and it is estimated that China has poured in over \$60 billion in infrastructure projects in Pakistan under the BRI. In recent years, Pakistan and the Taliban-led government in Kabul have discussed the possibility of expanding the membership of the CPEC to include Afghanistan. (Greenfield, 2021) This would provide Beijing with several advantages, including a connection to Central Asia through Afghanistan. Pakistan and China seem working unanimously on this aspect.

### **Taliban's View of China**

The Taliban government too wants close cooperation with China for the purpose of economic benefits. At present, Afghanistan is in dire economic straits, and Beijing's financial help and investment appear one of the limited openings that Afghanistan could count on in the near future because financial assistance from America and Europe has already stopped. According to the report issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) in April 2022 24 million Afghans, an increase of 18.4 percent from 2021, were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. (Sopko, 2022).

There are three reasons for this economic hardship: first, the previous government received 80% of its budget support from foreign aid, which made up 40% of its gross domestic product (GDP). The bulk of that support came from the US. When the Afghanistan Republic collapsed, foreign aid dried up and millions of workers went unpaid, resulting in massive economic hardship and the total collapse of the economy. Secondly, in the immediate aftermath of the collapse, the United States and global partners froze Afghanistan's central bank reserves, as well as economic sanctions against the Taliban government, which blocked the Taliban from accessing Afghanistan's \$9 billion worth of foreign exchange reserves. Thirdly, the region is suffering from a devastating drought, which has affected local crop yields and contributed to an increase in food insecurity.

The Government of the Taliban is aware of how powerful China is economically. China did not play a major role during the previous Taliban regime in the 90s but its power has increased significantly since then. China and the Taliban ruled Afghanistan have both affirmed that Afghanistan would participate in BRI ventures but hitherto no formal announcements about any kind of investment have been made. As previously noted, increasing security concerns in Afghanistan make such announcements likely soon. China is eager to entice the

Taliban with promises of economic growth, but it wants to have upper hand in this relationship. The Chinese government has announced its intent to include Afghanistan in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and thus wants Afghanistan a model of another CPEC success and promotes regional connectivity. Another aspect which the Chinese officials have stressed that China wants to collaborate with Afghanistan so that the latter's resource advantage may be transformed into development advantage. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Notwithstanding the fact that China is pushing for more economic aid to the Taliban, it recognizes that investment in Afghanistan carries its own risks. While China promises substantial economic engagement with the Taliban over the long term, it is also facing the reality that it's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in neighboring Pakistan has cost the country a lot of money. It has been reported that "China and Chinese commercial banks held about 30% of Pakistan's total external debt of about \$100 billion. Much of that debt has come under CPEC." (Khaliq, 2023).

Even though China is offering economic support to the Taliban, it is doing so in exchange for security assurances, while also ensuring alleviation of development problems in Afghanistan because Beijing has apprehensions that instability in Afghanistan may result due to poverty. If Afghanistan is able to demonstrate that it can deliver on its security promises, then more cooperation may follow. However, some analysts believe that developing extensive cooperation with a foreign power like China and allowing it to have extensive control over the domestic affairs of Afghanistan and influencing for relations with fellow Muslims (like ETIM) could produce backlash from inside the Taliban allies. While there are no major disagreements among Taliban leaders about their relationship with China now, there may be in the future if this relationship grows closer. Groups such as the Haqqani tribe, which has taken a more hardline stance on religious issues voiced strong opposition regarding return of girls to schools, could take a similar stance against China if it pushes the Taliban too hard to crack down on the Uyghurs. The Taliban had rejected American demands regarding the return of girls to schools because they did not want to be seen as caving in to American pressure; experts observe that Beijing may experience the same situation if it decides to exert beyond a limit pressure on the Taliban to act against Uyghur or other Muslim communities (Murtazashvili, 2022).

### **Securing Predominance in the Evolving Geostrategic Reality**

China recognizes that persistent volatile situation in Afghanistan will result in two things: first, it will endanger the safety of its western provinces; and,

secondly, impede its economic development inasmuch as the completion of the BRI and the related ventures depend upon stable periphery. Foreign withdrawal from Afghanistan, particularly if there is no lasting political settlement among the various stakeholders in the country, will only worsen the country's instability. While China, like many neighboring countries, has traditionally been reticent in addressing issues related to the security of Afghanistan, it has become increasingly invested in the results of the conflict for the reasons mentioned above. Therefore, it is not surprising that China has been vehemently supporting an Afghanistan-led and Afghanistan owned peace process. (RFE/RL, 2019).

Still there is another aspect as to why China is escalating its engagement in Afghanistan, and it relates to its ambition to change the perception of the world of China: it wants to be perceived as a strong regional and possibly even a global actor that can solve the problem of South Asia's longest-running insurgency. (Pandey S. , 2019) China is certainly a country which is among best-placed states to steer peace in Afghanistan and in the region. This is due to the fact that China enjoys immense strategic influence over Pakistan—a country that frequently hosts and provides financial and ideological support for the Taliban. Secondly, China's position is further bolstered in relation to its influence on Pakistan by the fact it has also provided Islamabad with vital economic aid, most recently through the \$62 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that is expected to stabilize a stagnant economy, alleviate poverty, and help Pakistan's overall economic development. (Basit, 2019).

However, there is a point to mention here that China's leverage on Pakistan for securing positive impact is conditioned with Beijing strategy regarding exerting it in the time to come. At present, China appears to be seeking a sort of diplomatic balance between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and this is premised upon by keeping its all-weather friend, Pakistan, on its side and pacifying Islamabad uneasiness on escalating Kabul-Beijing friendship and, at the same time, coopting Afghanistan in its regional strategic calculus. (Pandey S. , 2019)

## **Conclusion**

Peaceful and stable Afghanistan is a sine qua non to China's desire to rise, first, a Great Cohesive Power, and, later, a World Power to further and realize its worldwide interests. Given China's New Neighborhood Diplomacy aimed at integrating its neighbors to develop a 'Community of Common Destiny', Beijing is likely to continue to expand its relationship with Afghanistan because it shares China's goal of regional integration, which is to promote economic growth in all partner countries.

China's primary goal in Afghanistan is to maintain its own security and stability, both in the unrest-plagued province of Xinjiang and in the wide area along its western border with Central and South Asia. Fighting Uighur terrorism and other related kinds of extremism, separatism, and terrorism must and probably will continue to be a top priority for its Afghan strategy. The pace and content of Chinese policy will be largely determined by the gravity of these threats and the degree to which the Taliban administration is able to contain them. China's economic interest in Afghanistan is significant but auxiliary to security, and it is most likely not one that will drive it into the conflict-ridden nation.

Notwithstanding the above factors, China's engagement in Afghanistan depends upon, to a significant extent, the success of its policy of integration of its neighbors into a Community of Common Destiny; and, secondly, how far the Taliban government in Kabul will be able to strengthen and exert its control over Afghanistan and rein in extremist and radical Islamic denominations to address Beijing's concerns. The fundamental issue with Afghanistan is that it has been mired in continuous wars and conflicts for the last more than four decades. The irony is that that peace in Afghanistan depends upon the will and cooperation of the great powers. Afghanistan requires complementary peace i.e., peace achieved through consensus of domestic stakeholders and external powers. Only then will Afghanistan be able to be accommodated in the regional economic debate, and will China make most of its investments in Afghanistan. Since the US military pull out of Afghanistan, the continuation of strategic vacuum and consequent deterioration of security situation in Afghanistan could provide the fertile ground to extremist and radical Islamic denominations who could frustrate China's geo-strategic goals and pose a grave challenge to the neighbors of Afghanistan.

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