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China's Engagement with Afghan Security

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The key priorities of China's investments in Afghanistan concern the political and economic spheres, and over the years, Beijing has emphasized more on a stable Afghanistan that poses no threat to China's internal security.² Moreover, the South and Central Asian regions-both of which Afghanistan straddles-are vital for China's diplomatic and geo-economic advancement and, therefore, ensuring stability and security in this region, particularly in Afghanistan, is a priority for Beijing. Additionally, a stable and secure Afghanistan is necessary for China to ensure its own internal security, especially in its restive Xinjiang province.

This essay discusses Beijing's security concerns with regard to Afghanistan, examines the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with regard to Afghanistan's security, and analyses China's influence on Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan.

China's Primary Security Concerns Pertaining to Afghanistan

Terrorism and insecurity in the region, especially in Afghanistan, is one of Beijing's main security concerns, because China requires a stable, secure neighbourhood to advance its economic plans, particularly its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Specifically, China is concerned about the security of its western Xinjiang province,³ which shares a short border with Afghanistan's

1. Gulsom Mirzada is a GIS Research Assistant at the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

2. Ali, Samran. "China Factor in Afghan Peace." *The Nation*. April 16, 2018. <https://nation.com.pk/16-Apr-2018/china-factor-in-afghan-peace>

3. Maizland, Lindsay. "China's Crackdown on Uighurs in Xinjiang." *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 11, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-crackdown-ughurs-xinjiang>

northeastern Badakshan province as well as longer borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Several of Beijing's connectivity projects and BRI energy and other infrastructure straddle these regions, rendering stability and security in these areas as one of China's top priorities. In this regard, one of China's concerns is to ensure that violent Uyghur armed groups and other radical militant groups active in the region do not pose a security threat to its mega projects.

In an interview for this essay, Dr. Nishank Motwani, a Senior Research and Communication Manager at the Kabul-based Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), argued that "China is quite predictably investing in a place (Pakistan), where it can shape and influence outcomes, where it can use its money to buy influence and use that influence to promote economic and security interest."⁴ It can be inferred that the U.S.'s influence over policies in Afghanistan is a concern for China in its neighbourhood. Meanwhile, in another interview for this essay, Dr. Davood Moradian, the Director General of the Kabul-based Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), noted that "the new Silk Road initiative is Beijing's quest to expand its economic influence westward toward Europe by increasing trade and development in Central Asia. Afghanistan could play an important part in China's plan."⁵ This encapsulates the reasons why China has an economic interest in Afghanistan and why Afghanistan's security has become an important matter for Beijing.

Fearing insecurity in the Wakhan Corridor area along the Afghanistan-China frontier, Beijing undertook actions in 2018 which were interpreted by many as its building of a military training camp on Afghan soil. Chinese officials refuted this claim and stated that Beijing was helping Afghanistan set up a mountain brigade, and that this was part of the counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries.⁶

For the most part, China has remained cautious and has avoided getting

4. Motwani, Nishank, Senior Research and Communication Manager at Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Interview by Author. Kabul, Afghanistan. February 10, 2019.

5. Wong, Edward, and Jolly, David. "China considers larger role in Afghanistan peace process." *The New York Times*, January 24, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/25/world/asia/china-considers-larger-role-in-afghanistan-peace-process.html>

6. Chan, Minnie. "China is helping Afghanistan set up mountain brigade to fight terrorism." *South China Morning Post*. August 28, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161745/china-building-training-camp-afghanistan-fight>

directly involved in Afghanistan militarily, and does not wish to be forced into a direct war against terrorism. So, one of the critical questions here pertains to whether China can be an adequate replacement for the U.S. in terms of security and political support for Afghanistan. In an interview for this study, AISS Researcher, Dr. Omar Sadr, argued that Afghanistan needs to be financially supported in order to ensure that the government can administer its affairs well by itself. He added that given how Afghanistan is reliant on extensive financial aid from the U.S. for running its military, in an event of a departure of the U.S., China and the other countries do not have the political commitment and economical capability to support Afghanistan's military forces financially.⁷ This would mean the security situation in Afghanistan would become more unstable, and maintaining the Afghan armed forces would become unviable. Dr. Sadr argued that as a result, China and other countries in the region do not have a capacity to fulfil the security and political vacuum in Afghanistan post U.S. withdrawal.⁸ Dr. Motwani's observations too reflected this line of thought, and he emphasized that, "neither China nor other countries can fill the political and security vacuum in Afghanistan after U.S. troop withdrawal. They would compete with each other, support different factions-but not fill up the gaps."⁹ This suggests that a U.S. withdrawal and an absence of a viable replacement could result in political instability and heightened insecurity in Afghanistan.

However, while China and the U.S. endorse two diverse strategic approaches to bring security to Afghanistan, both countries do seek a secure Afghanistan. In this regard, China's strategy stems more from its own domestic security concerns rather than international security issues per se. As Dr. Zhao Hong noted in his analysis in 2013, China's approach is more on economic development, providing job opportunities, and infrastructure development.¹⁰ In his analysis, Dr Zhao added that while Chinese leaders do not oppose Afghanistan developing its own type of regime according to their internal

7. Sadr, Omar, Researcher at the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies. Interview by Author. Kabul, Afghanistan. December 28, 2018.

8. Ibid.

9. Motwani, Nishank, Senior Research and Communication Manager at Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Interview by Author. Kabul, Afghanistan. February 10, 2019.

10. Hong, Zhao. "China's AFGHAN Policy: Toward a "march west" Strategy?" Institute for National Security Strategy. August 15, 2013. <http://www.eai.nus.edu.sg/publications/files/BB842.pdf>

conditions, the U.S.'s approach concentrates more on establishing a Western style of democracy in Afghanistan.¹¹

Facilitating Security and Stability in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is one of China's priority areas for economic and security reasons.¹² While China is a major economic power in the region, it professes a policy of non-interference in the political and security spheres of other states, thus obviating the scenario that it will be a major actor in providing security in the region. This view was also shared by Dr. Motwani, who noted that China does have some political and security interests in Afghanistan but that it is not interested in engaging directly to provide security.¹³ He argued that instead, Beijing is more of a "free rider of U.S. efforts" towards security and peace. It means China has tended to piggyback on the security efforts of the U.S. and NATO to further its economic objectives with regard to Afghanistan. This begs the question as to whether and how Beijing can contribute to security in Afghanistan. There exist several possibilities in this regard.

China has been providing security related support to Afghanistan by providing training for Afghan security forces.¹⁴ China would contribute towards the strengthening of Afghanistan's military forces in a more effective way by providing such facilities rather than by intervening militarily in Afghanistan. However, China seems reluctant to play a bigger role that in the military and security sector in Afghanistan. In his 2018 analysis, Dirk van der Kley argues that multiple factors influence China's reluctance.¹⁵ He argues that Chinese policymakers fear a backlash from rebel groups, including Uyghur armed groups, as a potential side effect of militarily intervening in Afghanistan. Indeed, a military intervention in Afghanistan by China would be interpreted by the armed groups as a war against Muslims in Afghanistan. While noting

11. Ibid.

12. Ruttig, Thomas. "Climbing on China's Priority List: Views on Afghanistan from Beijing." Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 10, 2018. <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/climbing-on-chinas-priority-list-views-on-afghanistan-from-beijing/>

13. Motwani, Nishank, Senior Research and Communication Manager at Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. Interview by Author. Kabul, Afghanistan. February 10, 2019.

14. Chan, Minnie. "China is Helping Afghanistan Set up mountain bridge to fight terrorism." South China Morning Post, August 28, 2018. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161745/china-building-training-camp-afghanistan-fight>

15. Dirk van der Kley. "China's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan." Lowy Institute for International Policy. October, 2014. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/185021/chinas-foreign-policy-in-afghanistan_0.pdf

that China would be unwilling to deploy its military in Afghanistan, van der Kley adds that it is a matter of China's military capability and asks whether it would be able to handle Afghanistan's situation with its military prowess.¹⁶

Furthermore, China can harness its influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan to facilitate bilateral cooperation in security sector and to help promote a regional consensus with regard to security in Afghanistan. China enjoys immense influence over Pakistan due to its military, economic and diplomatic support for the latter.¹⁷ This influence can present an effective leverage for China to bring Pakistan on board on the issue of security cooperation in Afghanistan, but this would require effective diplomacy and initiatives from Afghanistan to convince China to do so.

To that end, the declaration of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in Afghanistan, issued in Kabul on February 28, 2018, provides the necessary platform and framework for security cooperation.¹⁸ Since China was a participant and has signed the declaration, Afghanistan could harness it to encourage Beijing to use its influence over Pakistan to secure the latter's cooperation in security in Afghanistan. Kabul can also harness the SCO platform in which Afghanistan is an observer member. Another framework that could be utilised is the trilateral understanding signed between Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in December 2018 to enhance counterterrorism and security cooperation.¹⁹

China can also play a constructive role in the Afghan peace process as a prelude to security in Afghanistan. Beijing occupies a position that enables it to play a key role in the Quadrilateral Cooperation Group (QCG) framework (comprising Pakistan, China, Afghanistan and U.S.) which was established to negotiate with the Taliban. This platform was a significant opportunity for China to utilise its influence. In a 2018 essay, Dr. Vinay Kaura highlighted that in the backdrop of weak internal peace overture in Afghanistan, the QCG

16. Ibid.

17. Sareen, Sushant. "For Pakistan, China is the new America." Observer Research Foundation. February 20, 2019. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/pakistan-china-new-america-48305/>

18. "The Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration." U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan. March 01, 2018. <https://af.usembassy.gov/kabul-process-peace-security-cooperation-afghanistan-declaration/>

19. Ayaz Gul. "Afghanistan, China and Pakistan Ink Deal to Enhance Counterterror Cooperation". South & Central Asia. 15. December 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghanistan-china-and-pakistan-ink-deal-to-enhance-counterterror-cooperation-4702178.html>

was designed to discuss prospects for peace talks between Afghan government and the Taliban, and should be activated to play a more significant role.²⁰ Furthermore, another way in which China can become more involved in securing Afghanistan would be through support for economic and military development in Afghanistan. In an interview, Dr. Sadr noted that every kind of support for peace and security in Afghanistan, including one by China, should respect democratic structures and be aligned with sustainable development priorities and growth in military and political sectors.²¹

China and Regional Consensus Towards Security in Afghanistan

China can play multiple roles in bringing about a regional consensus with Pakistan, Russia and the Central Asian states on security issues in Afghanistan. Firstly, as explained above, China can use its influence over Pakistan to bring the latter on board with regard to security cooperation in Afghanistan. Additionally, given China's stewardship of the SCO, Beijing can harness the platform to convince SCO members to cooperate towards ensuring security in Afghanistan based on the SCO mandate, which includes ensuring peace and security in the region.²² The term "region" here encompasses all eight SCO member states and four observer states.

Afghanistan is an observer member in the SCO, and major players in the region that can play constructive (or obstructive) roles in Afghanistan's security are also part of the platform: Pakistan, India, China, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are full members, while Iran is an observer member. With such an assorted membership, the SCO possesses a unique potential for shaping a regional consensus and ensuring regional cooperation with regard to security in Afghanistan. China as a lead member, of course, can play a significant role in making this happen. Furthermore, all SCO members have some form of an interest in Afghanistan, with some of those interests being shared and some others, conflicting. With regard to Afghanistan, an SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group has existed since 2005, and recently, China proposed another similar

20. Kaura, Vinay. "China, US differ on road to peace in Afghanistan." Middle East Institute. January 9, 2018. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-us-differ-road-peace-afghanistan>

21. Sadr, Omar, Researcher at the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies. Interview by Author. Kabul, Afghanistan. December 28, 2018.

22. "About Shanghai Cooperation Organization." January 09, 2017. http://eng.sectsco.org/about_sco/

one focused on the Afghan peace process.²³

At present, prevailing trends indicate that China's political role in Afghanistan could become more active than it has been so far. In this backdrop, China can harness its influence among SCO members to mobilize them to play an active role in fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and the peace process in the country. However, it would be imperative that China and the other actors involve the Afghan government in any peace talks and negotiations with the Taliban, if any.

China can also play the role of a mediator between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Taliban as it has done previously through the QCG mechanism. The China-Pakistan relationship has been steadily becoming stronger over the years, particularly so in the recent times given how Pakistan is gradually becoming more dependent on China's military, economic, political, and diplomatic support. The U.S. and other actors believe that China is in a better position to exercise its influence over Pakistan to secure Islamabad's cooperation in the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. As Dr. Sadr also stated, the biggest factor in this framework is Pakistan's economic dependence on China and Beijing is becoming one of the biggest investors in Pakistan, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

That said, there are some limitations to the extent of China's influence over Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. In this regard, Dr. Motwani noted that China cannot exert too much pressure over Pakistan because there are tremendous strategic and political interests, such as countering the U.S.'s presence in Afghanistan, between these two countries.

Conclusion

Evidently, there exist several initiatives aimed at achieving peace and ensuring security in Afghanistan. In this regard, China has a key role to play both directly as well as in bringing about regional consensus to that effect. China can use its influence over Pakistan to bring the latter on board for security cooperation and peace talks in Afghanistan. Also, as a founding and lead member of the SCO, China can play a significant role in mobilizing SCO members towards security cooperation for Afghanistan under the SCO mandate.

23. "SCO-Afghanistan: Meeting of the Contact Group Held in Moscow." InfoSCO, October 10, 2017. <http://infoshos.ru/en/?idn=17289>

Policy Recommendations

- The government of Afghanistan should be directly involved in any peace talks with the Taliban, because a third party will be unable to represent the Afghan government and people in a manner that the Afghan government can.
- If China genuinely desires to bring peace and security in Afghanistan, Beijing should also play an active, constructive role in the security and political spheres, and avoid basing its calculations and engagement primarily on economic benefits its actions could deliver to China.
- China should cooperate with the Afghan government directly and robustly with regard to Afghanistan related matters rather than relying more on Pakistan's government.