

The United States and Sino-Pak Strategic Imperatives in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan is geo-politically significant; despite two decade long imbroglion and foreign occupation it has been a ground for major powers to establish their influences and to counter their rivals. It is a hub having proximity to the South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Inside Afghanistan the interests of the United States, China and Pakistan converges and diverges on multiple grounds but for all the interests the peace and stability inside Afghanistan is crucial. The research piece investigates strategic interests of Pakistan, China and the United States in Afghanistan and also finds out grounds where these three countries cooperate for the peace and stability of Afghanistan and the region. This research is conducted through mixed method design by using both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to investigate strategic interests of Pakistan, China and the United States inside Afghanistan. These three countries have some diverging interests but rational approach made them cooperate. Accordingly, the grounds of convergence are counter-terrorism, curbing violent extremism and cooperation for economic connectivity and regional relations which are rational choices for players in order to secure win-win situation. Peaceful and stable Afghanistan is the only way for access and utilization of natural resources and for the feasibility of significant economic projects like CASA-1000, China Pakistan Economic Cooperation and Belt Road Initiative .

Keywords: strategic interests, extremism, economic cooperation, China Pakistan economic cooperation, convergence, game theory.

The pivot of international politics is in shift towards rising Asia from the US and Europe. Great powers are striving for access to the Asian huge consumer market and natural resources. The US is expected as dominant military power till 2030 whereby the other aspiring powers are emerging threats for the US due to which it cannot rely on soft power only. For America the “energy independence” is important because her fiscal policies are dependent on oil and gas in the whole world (Fishelson, 2007). For the diplomatic outreach to the whole world these fiscal objectives are the base. The US after the collapse of USSR is in pursuit of consistent control over the CARs natural resources (Rousseau, 2011). For Nicholas Spikeman, control of Eurasian resources guarantee hegemony over the world. Zbigniew Brzezinski explained in his book “The Grand Chessboard” (1998) that control over Central Asia is vital for Eurasian ascendancy and the regulation of natural resources of Eurasia is way leading towards the global hegemony (Khan, 2011). Taking this theory in policy making the US invaded Afghanistan for having control to the natural resources of the CARs. In the very start the regional countries aligned with the US in war against Taliban but the interests of these countries were diverged in the later years and they afterwards switched over their policy options. Because the underlying policy contours of the US became evident later as to counter the regional aspiring powers, access to the natural resources of CARs, spoil the development of energy pipelines in order to damage Russia, China and Iran

(Abbas, 2012). Resultantly, the western powers have not accomplished their goals in Afghanistan while regional countries established regional structure for their mutual interests and for improving regional relations. Hence, for the economic and military interests of these countries regional groups and alliances got more importance.

As mentioned already that Afghanistan is geo-strategically important because it works as connecting regions of north and south of Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East. The three countries Pakistan, China and the US are in struggle to ensure peace and stability inside Afghanistan. Pakistan provides easy access for the landlocked Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea in order to trade with the world market. Natural resources of CARs and Afghanistan are alluring to both China and the US. Contextually, the Afghanistan became focus of foreign policies of the three countries Pakistan, China and the US.

In Afghanistan perspectives as the foreign troops have been withdrawn and the US completely left hence the three players as Pakistan, China and the United States are recently having no other alternative than to converge on bringing peace and stability inside Afghanistan.

Method

For conducting this research Mixed method design is used which is composed of qualitative and quantitative methods. This design is useful for investigation of research questions and ultimately achieve research goals. This design validate research through triangulation techniques.

The quantitative method is used in order to achieve goal of strategic imperatives of Pakistan, the United States and China inside Afghanistan. And qualitative methods give required details of the interests of these three countries in the stability and peace of Afghanistan. This research will be conducted through mixed method design consisted of three phases as initial data gathering, a questionnaire survey and qualitative data gathering.

The Initial Data Gathering Stage

This step is to get all possible recent information and data on the theme of strategic imperatives of Pakistan, China and the United States inside Afghanistan.

The Survey and Qualitative Data Gathering

This stage is to collect primary data in order to impart validity to the research questions and objectives.

Results

Through triangulation analysis of the data was done.

Study population and Sampling

The sample area comprised Pakistan Foreign office, Defence Ministry, ISI, Various public sector universities (Behria University Islamabad, COMSATS Islamabad, Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi, National Defence University Islamabad, University of Peshawar, Indian Think Tank, Thailand Senior Journalist, Director of UK Statecraft.

Table 1
Showing the results of different organizations

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	4.3	4.3	
BU	1	4.3	4.3	8.7
COMSATS	1	4.3	4.3	13.0
FJWU	7	30.4	30.4	43.5
India	1	4.3	4.3	47.8
ISI	1	4.3	4.3	52.2
NDU	1	4.3	4.3	56.5
PSU	1	4.3	4.3	60.9
SPU	1	4.3	4.3	65.2
TISF	1	4.3	4.3	69.6
UoP	7	30.4	30.4	100.0
Total	23		100.0	100.0

Table 2
Showing the number of specialized numbers

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
6	26.1	26.1	26.1
14	60.9	60.9	87.0
1	4.3	4.3	91.3
1	4.3	4.3	95.7
1	4.3	4.3	100.0
23	100.0	100.0	

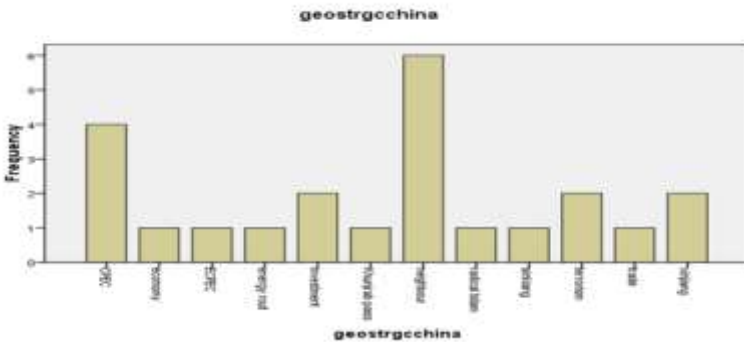
Table 3
Showing respondent male and female gender

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Male	14	11.5	2.5
Female	9	11.5	-2.5
Total	23		

Main grounds for investigation was strategic importance of Afghanistan for Pakistan, China and the US

Geostrategic Significance of Afghanistan for China

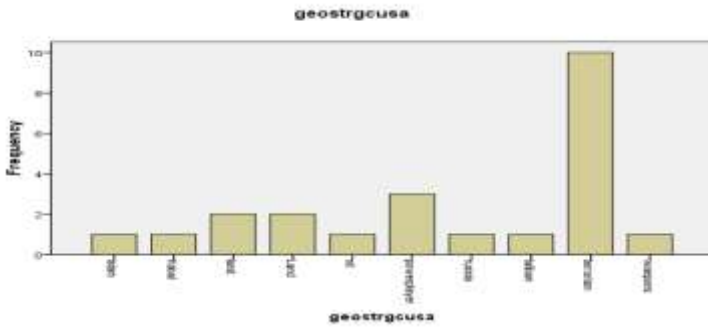
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	CPEC	4	17.4	17.4	17.4
	Economy	1	4.3	4.3	21.7
	ECPEC	1	4.3	4.3	26.1
	energy rout	1	4.3	4.3	30.4
	Investment	2	8.7	8.7	39.1
	Khunjrab pass	1	4.3	4.3	43.5
	Neighbor	6	26.1	26.1	69.6
	radical Islam	1	4.3	4.3	73.9
	Sinkiang	1	4.3	4.3	78.3
	Terrorism	2	8.7	8.7	87.0
	Trade	1	4.3	4.3	91.3
	Xinjiang	2	8.7	8.7	100.0
	Total	23	100.0	100.0	



Geostrategic Significance of Afghanistan for USA

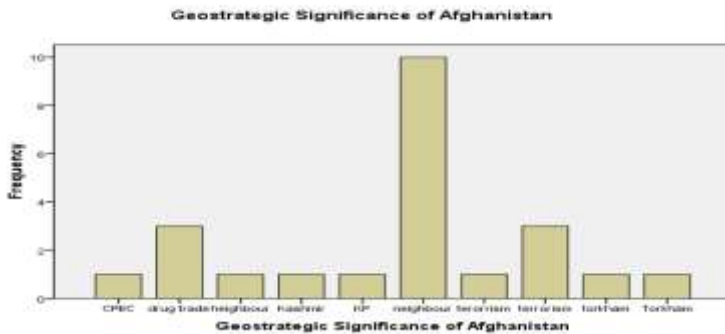
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Islam	1	4.3	4.3	4.3
	Kabal	1	4.3	4.3	8.7
	Land	2	8.7	8.7	17.4
	Land	2	8.7	8.7	26.1
	Nil	1	4.3	4.3	30.4
	Powerplayer	3	13.0	13.0	43.5
	Russia	1	4.3	4.3	47.8
	Taliban	1	4.3	4.3	52.2
	Terrorism	10	43.5	43.5	95.7

Weapons	1	4.3	4.3	100.0
Total	23	100.0	100.0	



Geostrategic Significance of Afghanistan for Pakistan

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	CPEC	1	4.3	4.3	4.3
	drug trade	3	13.0	13.0	17.4
	heighbour	1	4.3	4.3	21.7
	Kashmir	1	4.3	4.3	26.1
	KP	1	4.3	4.3	30.4
	neighbour	10	43.5	43.5	73.9
	terrorism	1	4.3	4.3	78.3
	terrorism	3	13.0	13.0	91.3
	torkham	1	4.3	4.3	95.7
	Torkham	1	4.3	4.3	100.0
	Total	23	100.0	100.0	



Discussion

Strategic Imperatives of the Pakistan, China and the US

To Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Terrorism in Afghanistan has spill over to the Pakistan adjacent areas and to the western part of China as Xinjiang which are directly connected with Afghanistan. The US is also adamant about the very presence of Al-Qaeda, ISKP and other terrorists. So the immediate goal is peace and stability inside Afghanistan and that Afghan soil is not used against any country. Accordingly, the policy priorities of Pakistan, the US and China are to work for curbing terrorism and violent extremism inside Afghanistan.

China is fearful of the fall out of terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang which have been infested from the Wakhan corridor, in northeast of Afghanistan stretched from Tajikistan and China. It channelize Uighur fighters to China which has caused havoc to the law and order situation for China. Looking into history then Taliban have trained militants of ETIM in both Pakistan FATA and Afghanistan whereby these militants were with fissiparous tendencies as manifested in incidents of 1992 and 1997 (Chung, 2002) got strength in 2009. These elements striving for an independent home of their own with no China domination. Resultantly, in order to overcome the threat of Uyghur China is contributing for the anti-terrorism, security and above all to curb the East Turkestan Islamic movement.

China had emphasized for the agreement of Taliban and the United States and later lend her good offices for intra-Afghan dialogues also. As already stated that both Pakistan tribal areas and Xinjiang are with Afghan imbroglio spill over hence China and Pakistan are indispensable in all efforts for counter-terrorism and control over violent religious extremism, separatist tendencies with particular mention of safeguard Xinjiang (Haider, 2005) for which Pakistan too has taken curbing Uighur on exigency after 9/11. Both countries have signed anti-terrorism agreement in 2005 ratified in 2006.

Pakistan had been contemplated as part of problem and solution simultaneously by the US and has taken Pakistan contribution for Afghanistan. For Vali Nasr the US first adopted cooperative policy for Pakistan but then turned towards considering it as hub for militants and that it provides shelter to terrorists. Consequently the gulf between two countries was widened enough and the agony of offenses was again faced by Pakistan (Nasr, 2013). Pakistan has done remarkable military operations in tribal areas as Operation Rah-e Raast, Rah-e-Nijat, Radd Ul Fasad etc where the militant hideouts have been cleared. Pakistan has played huge role against terrorism and extremism and to implement National Action Plan with its true spirit and to keep national security on sound footings.

Improvement of Regional Relations

The potential of Asia is limited not only to the regional security cooperation but it is remarkable for economic aspects also as regarding energy policies. This economic cooperation has linked the region in economic and security cooperation and has ensured regional economic connectivity. As for instance India and China and India contributed fifty percent to the world energy demand consisted twenty percent natural gas and sixty percent oil (Herberg, 2010). The region has been strewn with more energy demand hence protection of transit and transportation of energy is utmost requirement. Approaching energy resources across China, Middle East and China is enhanced which can sufficiently configure geopolitics of the region.

America in the context of economic interdependence will try for more convergence than conflicts with China as the same is evident in the adverse consequences of Afghanistan. (Steinberg and Hanlon, 2014) For some theorist this economic interdependence is main cause of the US convergence with China (Xinbo, 2012). Chinese has never tarnished security relations with the US for the sake of economic and trade ties with other countries. For cooperation and coordination with the US China has even reduced trade and investment in Iran for the containment of nuclear proliferation (Downs, 2013). However China in the recent world has been working through huge investment in different important regions of the world. China has invested amount of dollar 1.3 trillion in the Europe and specifically in the treasury bonds of the US.

While taking the regional countries like Pakistan and China then both are linked through most significant economic project of CPEC linking China Xinjiang with Pakistan Gwadar port. CPEC has dividends for China because trade through Straits of Malacca has security hurdles for China as well as time taking through it is 45 days while trade through CPEC will take only 10 days. Besides CPEC is integral part of Belt and Road Initiative which connect entire Central Asia with South Asia. China attempting to connect with Northern Mediterranean Sea, South Asia, North Africa and South East Asia through maritime routes with whole world (Ahmad, 2015). It provides access of various landlocked regional countries like Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics for trade through Pakistan Balochistan Gwadar port to the Arabian Sea. Similarly for linking Pakistan Gwadar port with CARs for energy and gas is also urgently needed for Pakistan. It will channelize Pakistan trade with European market through Pakistan-Central Asia bilateral trade. Besides these economic dividends the hallmark project of CPEC will boost regional economic cooperation and will overcome regional disputes.

CPEC ensures regional huge investment which in turn will promote economic development and prosperity not only for Pakistan and China but for the whole region. Economic dividends included development of infrastructure, reduced distance of transportation route resulting in reduced cost of communication, installation of industrial production units, and improved time for delivery of goods and reducing inventory cost. This strategic project foresees multi-billion master plan of 2030 timeline comprised various areas of cooperation like construction of road and rail links, fiber optic cable projects, mutual economic and technical cooperation, development of industrial zones and benefits to regional countries will improve relations.

For all these economic dividends peace and stability inside Afghanistan is crucial hence Pakistan and China has always cooperated for the peace talks and lend their good offices for the sake. Peaceful region guarantee regional economic integration through CPEC. In the region Pakistan is also potential because Pakistan being at crossroad is juncture for China, CARs and Gulf countries. Whereas the oil reserves of Gulf countries are expected to last in coming four decades. Consequently, Central Asian natural resources are required for all countries which has accentuated CPEC importance and has imparted geo-strategic importance to Pakistan. Trade through CARs and Pakistan can increase GDP to 2.3 % of China and Central Asia (Sachdeva, 2007). Afghanistan is also taken as conduit of rails, roads and energy supply to Eurasia from Indian Ocean.

Russia and China have huge economic cooperation as an agreement of three decades worth US dollars 400 billion is signed to trade 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China from Russian gas fields in Siberia. Eastern Siberia socio-economic development is designed by Russia.

Imports of value US dollar 24 billion of China and Russia are signed for three years which will lessen Russia dependence on Foreign exchange reserves in dollars. Furthermore, Silk Road Economic Belt revival is initiated by joint build-up of a China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor which is essential for diverse economic growth and development.

Regional Stability and Peaceful Dispensation in Afghanistan

For looking the role of three countries of Pakistan, China and the US then it stretched back towards the axis of these three countries for containment of the USSR in Afghanistan and backing Mujahideen. The Chinese made weapons (Shichor, 2004) were used and the US also provides dollars for the sake. Post 9/11 the role of Pakistan in war on terror has played a pivotal role for China and the US regarding Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and China have invested in recent peace talks between US and Taliban where ultimately the agreement had been signed by both Zalmi Khalilzad (the US special envoy for the task) and Taliban leader. The landmark agreement stipulated a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces, the US would reduce its forces down to 8,600 from 12,000 in the next three to four months while the remaining US forces would withdraw in 14 months' time.

It also mandated both sides to release prisoners held in their custody. The Kabul government was bound for the Taliban five thousands prisoners release and one thousand Taliban security forces in next 2 weeks. The Taliban have pledged not to allow Afghan soil to be used by any militant group including Al Qaeda or Daesh. The US has agreed to take off Taliban leaders' names from the blacklist of the UN and US. The blacklist barred leaders from travel and movement beyond Afghanistan. Permanent ceasefire was asked through agreement in order to have feasible environment for dialogues so that intra-Afghan talks which had been failed. Consequently Taliban have taken control of the Kabul government.

However, the condition of prisoners release took months and clashes and then intra-Afghan dialogues started. Intra-Afghan dialogues did not yield in any meaningful way and as soon as the US withdrew completed then Taliban got the command of Afghanistan without any meaningful resistance. The Afghan army withered away in couple of weeks. Currently the Taliban have launched an interim government which is still awaiting international recognition and is embroiled in economic crisis.

The US will have to play hard ball in smooth working of the Taliban based government which is mostly having hardliners in cabinet by excluding other factions. Freezing of worth \$ 7 billion foreign assets in Afghan central bank is its manifestation. The transition government is to handle any splinter group or Daesh iron handedly. The US has strategic imperatives and wants an eye on Afghanistan for overcoming China influence in CARs and Afghanistan.

China would wait and see. It will pin its hopes on peace taking hold in the country and refrain from taking any partisan role. Because it believes time is on its side and the related economic endeavor of China in Afghanistan and CARs are alarming to the US.

Pakistan wants more economic and strategic cooperation with China keeping Indian factor in calculations. Pakistan will have to accept the reality of a free Afghanistan that may initiate long term policies of enduring friendship with its neighbors and regional countries including India. While Islamabad must however demand and insist that Afghan soil would not be allowed to be used covertly or overtly by any country against Pakistan's interests.

Pakistan role can be pivotal in Afghanistan for smoothening trade to and from Afghanistan and successful bilateral trade. It can provide technical support for establishing private and public departments and various infrastructure projects.

For Pakistan the most important is to establish working relations required for Pakistan stability. Strategic imperatives of Pakistan would be fulfilled if Pakistan adopt realistic approach and then set goals according to possibilities. Accordingly Pakistan and India will also have improved bilateral relations by calling on the EU, US and others to support in same. Pakistan can retain its leverage through soft power, mutual cooperation and an approach leading towards more convergence of interests. Border management issues need mutually agreed mechanism.

A peaceful Afghanistan would be a springboard for accessing the Central Asian countries. It will play a crucial role in the iconic Chinese initiative of Belt and Road. It will benefit from exploitation of its proven mineral reserves of more than \$ 1.5 trillion.

These three countries interests have simultaneous converging as well as diverging nature but for maximum gains and minimum loss these players tries to overcome complexities in relations and to reach an equilibrium of maximum strength for all the involved countries

Hence these states came to non-zero sum game. As taking the investigation conducted in this research piece it is evident that all the three players as Pakistan, China and the US are with multiple interests in Afghanistan in order to serve their national interests. Although the dimensions of their goals diverge also to the great interests but the rational choices ultimately yield in maximum benefits for all the three players. The rational choices came into notice are to fight terrorism and violent extremism, improvement of regional security and economic interests, to ensure regional economic integration. Their interests converge because of maximum benefits than costs. Which in turn yield in win-win situation for the three players. The regional economic projects like CPEC, TAPI and CASA-1000 can be feasible only through stable region.

The US as manifested after the withdrawal from Afghanistan is mainly focused on containment of China because the assertive military and economy of China is alarming for the US. But the economic interdependence compels the US for convergence with China. Hence according to game theory the rational choices of serving security and economic interests result in cooperation.

The US was involved in an unnecessary conflict and President Joe Biden decided to withdraw in an honorable way and remain as super power not defeated by Taliban. Besides, the US cannot endure China to rise high economically and take political stable region advantages when there was no any investment from China.

Pakistan is dependent on Afghanistan for channeling its access to not only the Central Asian Republics but cordial strategic and economic relations with China are also possible through stable Afghanistan only. Pakistan's economic interests in Afghanistan are bilateral transit trade as APTTA, TAPI but Pakistan economic interests are not fully realized due to Afghan's Turmoil and presence of Anti-Pakistan lobby. Defence interests can be secured by having Pakistan defence industry and military training but this sort of relations are also not fruitful as military Operations in FATA are mainly the outcome of infiltration from Afghanistan.

Pakistan certainly would like to help Afghanistan in addressing the challenges faced by Taliban transition government. It has stakes in peace and stability inside Afghanistan. But then Islamabad also wants to restrict the role of India in Afghanistan---something that causes huge

resentment in Afghanistan. Many Afghans continue to harbor a feeling of animosity towards Islamabad because they presume Pakistan wants to have a role in Afghanistan's internal politics and policies.

China's interests in Afghanistan have security and economic dimensions. China major interests are to contribute for Afghanistan peace and stability because the fall out of Afghanistan directly affect the Xinjiang. Besides, China wants an access to the rich natural resources of Afghanistan and CARs hence investing for infrastructure development and exploitation of resources exploitation. China because of its stable economy and assertive military is in position to play promising role in stability of the Afghanistan and the region. China has larger strategic imperatives regarding Pakistan and Afghanistan. Energy supply security is important oil and gas importing states. Central Asian natural resources are energy consuming markets of Asia and Europe. CARs are crucial for China after the collapse of Soviet and to maintain its political, economic and strategic leverage there. For China hydrocarbon resources of CARs are significant and to safeguard Xinjiang of fissiparous elements. For this cause China has hugely invested in building gas and oil fields and oil pipeline projects construct. China needs peaceful and stable Afghanistan having working environment for operation of its economic projects

Afghanistan is economic importance for China as the former has natural gas and oil deposits, copper and iron reserves, in its north. As particularly iron ores are in areas between Panjsher and Herat, northern provinces has gold reserves, In Badakhsha lies gold reserves, copper fields in Takhar, Ghazni Aynak and Jawkhar Darband which are utmost required for China in its struggle for iron ore and copper. Natural gas is also required for China at present and in coming times.

China has an abiding interest in peace in the region. Its 'Belt and road initiative' is going to reshape the regional economic and political configuration.

Beijing is of this view that sooner or later its hegemony as the most powerful economically and militarily would be accepted by countries in the region. But the supremacy will be based on cultural and economic cooperation and not in the context of neo-imperialism which will keep countries in its sphere of influence through coercive ways.

Conclusion

The three countries Pakistan, China and the US have interests in Afghanistan and their policies are focused for securing peace and stability in Afghanistan. For serving their interests they have cooperated in fighting violent extremism and terrorism. Besides security aspects they have cooperated for regional economic cooperation and connectivity. Regional configuration also demands the cooperation than conflicts because the Afghanistan crucial location is in proximity of Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East. Hence all the economic projects as CPEC, BRI, TAPI and CASA-1000 are in need of peaceful Afghanistan. Although aspiring power as China is an alarm for the US hegemony hence the US has completely withdrawn from Afghanistan and is targeting the containment of China in the South East Asia with the assistance of her allies and through various economic pressures. However, the economic interdependence causes the US to converge with China in economic market and to diminish conflicts. Similarly, China also for the sake of the US put at risk its ties with Iran and other countries. The game theory covers the research through illustration of rational choices of the three states to maximize their benefits. In the recent context both Pakistan and China can play role to ask Taliban government for inclusive political dispensation and observance of human rights so to get earliest international recognition of their government in order to overcome financial crisis. This will impart stability to Afghanistan transition government.

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