

Quest for Peace in Afghanistan: Analysis of China's Regional Policy after US Withdrawal

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Peace and stability are critical for Afghanistan's and regional countries' security and socioeconomic interests. It is also necessary for landmark project of China, the Belt and Road Initiative, in the region. Therefore, China is consistently making concrete efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of United States without restoration of peace and stability has created a situation where there is likelihood of civil war in the country. An unstable Afghanistan would prove fatal for the interests and security of China as well as other neighbouring countries. On one hand, it has created security threats to Chinese interests and investment in Afghanistan and on the other hand militant organizations like Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) regrouped their militants that posed direct threat to security and stability of China. The current study attempts to analyse the Chinese quest and pursuit for peace and stability in Afghanistan and whether China possible role along with the regional countries to establish a regional bloc of countries, like Pakistan, Russia Iran and Turkey could be workable for restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan or not after the US and NATO forces withdrawal ?

Keywords: China, Regional Bloc, Afghanistan, Taliban,Peace and stability.

The decade's long war and brutalities have crippled the state and society of Afghanistan, which, has been altered the country a cockpit of regional and extra regional states and non-state proxies for the last 4 decades. It is a fact that like other regional countries, insecurity and terrorism are serious threats to China's national security and interests in the region, so it can be argued that China is affected by the Afghan imbroglio and as such, she is searching for peace in the country. In 2001 China supported the US invasion of Afghanistan in the hope of restoration of peace and stability. After the collapse of the Taliban regime (1996-2001) and formation of Karzai government in Afghanistan, China reopened its embassy in Kabul in 2002, which was closed in 1993. China's Afghan policy and role can be judged from various aspects. First, it helped in developmental projects, provided notable economic aid, technical assistance and made sizable contribution to Kabul's foreign direct investment. Second, China

provided training to Afghan officials. Third, it facilitated the peace process. It shows that in post-2001 era China-Afghanistan relations entered into a new phase. Overall, China has been playing a positive and constructive role since US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Most importantly, Kabul has no unpleasant memory about Beijing because the latter has not ever interfered in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. It has made Chinese role in the post-withdrawal era acceptable to most of the groups including Taliban and helped establish its soft image in the country in particular and in regional affairs in general.

Bringing about peace and stability in Afghanistan is, no doubt, an uphill task. There are proxies and socio-economic causes of the decade's long insurgencies and insecurity in the country. At the moment war economy has surrounded the state and the people of this devastated land. Not only China but other notable regional countries including Russia, Pakistan and Iran having stakes, are also considering the post-US withdrawal scenario as a thorny problem for themselves. At present China and Russia have more influence in the region as compared to the US. For instance, Islamabad has formulated its Afghan policy after the Taliban takeover in consultation with China and Russia. It shows that the neighbouring countries are fully aware of the fact that activation of a regional mechanism for restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan is the need of the hour.

In the past two decades, several studies have been conducted over the peace process in Afghanistan; rarely any academic paper has addressed the Chinese potential of peace within a broad paradigm of regional stakeholders in Afghanistan. To ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan, therefore, require a regional approach relevant and acceptable to all concerned stakeholders to bring an end to the Afghan quagmire. This study ensures regional contextual knowledge but also strives to acquire knowledge relevant to the broader scholarly community in the understanding of regional dynamics in the peace process in Afghanistan. This study has systematically focused on the Chinese regional approach to peace building in Afghanistan and its key policy tool, i.e., 'economic development'. This study has explored China's efforts in the peace process, intra-Afghan dialogue, economic aid and support and its cooperation and working together with Pakistan, Russia and Iran to restore peace and stability in this war-torn country. Last but not least, the paper also places options for a newly established Taliban government, politicians and decision-makers to carefully craft national/foreign security policy.

Theoretical Framework

In the contemporary world politics, the study of regions has received a significant attention. The increased interconnectedness in security and economic aspects bring the regional states closer to each other. The Regional Security Complex Theory advanced by Buzan and Ole Waever (2003) endeavours to convince the mainstream of International Relations to pay attention to the regional level of analysis. Regional Security Complex Theory is a relatively new theoretical approach in the IR, first introduced by Barry Buzan in 1983 in 'People, states, and fear', and later presented as a major theory in Buzan and Ole Waever's 2003 work: *Regions and Powers the structure of international security* (Buzan, 1983; Buzan et al., 2003). As defined by Buzan and Waever a Regional Security Complex is "a set of units whose major process of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from each other" (Buzan et al., 2003: 44). The regional states are closely knitted in a way that matters related to domestic peace and security of one state have a vital and paramount impact on the other (Sunawar, 2018). Security of one actor is directly related to security of another actor. The regional security complex theory explains the security is predominantly a regional issue, as threat do not travel long distances, instead the immediate neighbours are more vulnerable to (in)security issues of geographically adjoining states (Buzan et

al., 2003; Sarwar and Siraj, 2021). As the authors explain that geographical proximity produces a pattern of regionally based clusters, where security and economic interdependence is markedly deeper between the states inside the complexes than those outside of complexes (Buzan et al., 2003; Godehardt, 2014: 41).

The alarming situation resulted by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan alarmed the whole region. The economic implications of the Afghan security and growing influence of non-state actors and its geographic importance/implications for China's connectivity drive and trade necessitate studying the Afghan issue through the lens of regional security complex theory. Since the security vulnerability of Afghanistan profoundly affects the region in general, the adjacent states have also been subject to spill over affect thus creating a regional security complex. Afghanistan's security construct is more pertinent with China due to its national security environment receives greater heat. Moreover, the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), linking to Europe via Central Asia significantly depends on land routes, and therefore, the Afghan instability poses colossal threat not merely to the economic interests of China but also to Central and South Asian countries as well. Thus, the region having overlapped economic and security concerns, presents a regional security complex. An unstable Afghanistan could threaten stability in the Chinese Xinjiang region and its geo-economic project, the BRI, in Pakistan and Central Asia. At the same time, a stable and peaceful Afghanistan may present opportunities for China and other regional states to contribute to the country's post-conflict economic reconstruction and development.

Method

This research study is conducted on the qualitative and descriptive techniques of social sciences to assess the Chinese potential of peace within a broad paradigm of regional stakeholders in Afghanistan. Data, facts and figures to support the analysis have been collected from secondary sources, including books, research articles and official reports. The Content Analysis Technique has been adopted to analyse the existing literature on Chinese policy towards Afghanistan. While using qualitative content analysis method, the significances and insights can be obtained from a text more holistically and evidently. This approach to the study relies on in-depth assessment, inquiry, and detailed study of the Chinese foreign policy towards Afghanistan and Beijing's cooperation with other regional stakeholders, including Pakistan, Russia and Iran. Qualitative content analysis allows learners to understand social phenomenon including its meaning in a subjective but scientific manner. A researcher uses analytical inquiry to develop fresh notions in light of the dynamic evidence. There are several ways to do an analytical investigation of a research problem, and a study conducted using this approach is considerably more trustworthy, consistent, and thorough. In order to analyse Chinese potential of peace in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal and to access its regional acceptability, descriptive and analytical approaches of social sciences are found comparatively more suitable. Resultantly, qualitative assessment of data is preferred over the standardized precision of measurement.

China's Interests in Afghanistan since 2001: A Historical Sketch

Historically speaking, China showed very little interests in Afghanistan (Segal, 1981), but now it has many stakes in the country. First, the rise of militant groups like ETIM and ISKP alarmed Beijing because it also created security threat to China (Weitz, 2010). Second, China has economic interests in Afghanistan because it has about one trillion dollars' natural resources including 1.6 billion barrel crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet gas and 240 million tons Copper (Ross, Trombly and Barr, 2014). Third, though China opposed the US long term presence in Afghanistan, but at the same time it was also not in favour of her quick withdrawal without

restoration of peace fearing it would lead to civil war in Afghanistan (Weitz, 2010). Fourth, China is concerned about the drug production in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, China is taking active part in economic recovery and development of the country by providing assistance and aid in various fields. Kabul looks toward China for help and support in economic development as well as in the security and peace (Khan, 2015). Though still China kept low profile in Afghanistan (Mie`re, Li, and Inkster, 2011), her contributions especially in economic development of the country are noteworthy. More importantly, Hamid Karzai paid five visits to Beijing during his tenure which depicts the importance of China for Afghanistan and increasing recognition of bilateral relations in both countries. In 2002, the two countries signed “Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations”, in 2006, signed the “treaty of bilateral friendship and cooperation” and treaty of “Trade and Economy Cooperation”. In 2010, during Hamid Karzai’s visit to China, many agreements were signed which gave free access to some goods from Afghanistan to China, and proposed larger cooperation in irrigation, mining, agriculture, infrastructure development, power generation and natural resources exploration (Paliwal, 2011).

Since 2012, the two countries upgraded their relations to a cooperative partnership (Yongbiao, 2018). They have also assisted each other in combating terrorism, organized crimes and drug trafficking. They have also established good economic relations, with concentration on exploration of natural reservoirs, electricity generation, construction of roads, rehabilitation of agricultural division and involved in communications developments (Huasheng, 2012). Chinese telecommunication companies, Huawei and ZTE updated 200,000 Afghanistan’s analog telephone lines to digital.

China also trained Afghan officials in different fields and did security cooperation to counter the three forces of evil-terrorism, extremism and separatism. She also gave human resource training to more than 800 different officials of Afghanistan and also technical training to local people in different fields (Norling, 2008). In 2012, Chinese President Hu Jintao and his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai reached an agreement to upgrade bilateral relations to the level of a strategic partnership. President Hu Jintao urged the two sides to enhance security cooperation and jointly combat the “three forces” of terrorism, separatism and extremism as well as trans-boundary crimes, including drug trafficking (Xinhua, 2012). It has strengthened their bilateral relations which positively contributing to bring peace and development in the country. Afghan government has always acknowledged China for its support and assistance in the reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. In 2017, People’s Republic of China had also incorporated Afghanistan in Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

China is one of the leading investors in Afghanistan. The country has a good number of unexplored reserves of copper, coal, iron, gas, cobalt, mercury, gold, lithium and thorium. After the opening of these sites for international investors, China also showed its interests in Foreign Direct Investment. She has invested in different types of projects important for the development of this war-torn country. Twelve Chinese enterprises have currently invested in Afghanistan. China invested 425 million dollars in the country, and the cumulative contract value of its signed projects is 1.221 billion dollars (Yongbiao, 2018).

China’s Policy Towards Taliban Regime

Primarily the security and economic interests of China have defined her policy towards Afghanistan in the post- US withdrawal era. Beijing has a chance to play a significant role in Afghanistan because of the country’s extreme isolation in the international community since the

Taliban took over Kabul. Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021, China has established active diplomatic contacts with the new regime. Like other neighbours of Afghanistan, Beijing is cautiously interacting with the Taliban government without formally recognizing it. She has announced several investment initiatives, continued trade and allowed Taliban to reopen Afghanistan's embassy in Beijing. China has joined the global community's efforts in pushing the Taliban to enact reforms, including the creation of an inclusive government, and insurance of women's rights, especially regarding employment and education (Rehman, 2022). Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, some nations have maintained their embassies open, including China. Insecurity, bases of ISKP and ETIM, power politics of big powers and political instability are the main concerns of China in Afghanistan. China wants to address these concerns through constructive engagement with Taliban. Since China has maintained pleasant ties with all prominent stakeholders of Afghanistan, therefore, her position in Afghan affairs is distinct following the United States and NATO withdrawal. She is working on bilateral as well as multilateral levels to address the above-mentioned concerns. At multilateral level, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the potential platform where China can work with other Afghanistan's neighbours (Khan and Sultana, 2019). In the post-withdrawal period, China has adopted a rational approach to establishing ties with the new regime and is ready to work with it which is in the best position to address its legitimate concerns and safeguard national and regional interests. Kabul will attract Chinese foreign direct investment, export resources, and improve transportation services if Chinese worries about security are appropriately addressed. The expanded transportation connections and natural resources Afghanistan provides are advantageous to Beijing. Therefore, both parties are eager to benefit from the opportunities they have for each other.

Post-withdrawal China's Interests in Afghanistan

After 20 years long war, US and NATO withdrew their forces in haste leaving Kabul in a state of chaos and uncertainty, without finding any durable solution to the Afghan issue. By signing Doha agreement with Taliban, the coalition only wanted a face saving for their defeat and safe passage for their consequent withdrawal. Washington spent billions of dollars of which major portion was incurred for military purposes to inflict death and destruction on the Afghan people. Reconstruction and rehabilitation attracted little attention of the human rights champions. Besides spending billions of dollars, Washington had to bear the loss of 2300 US soldiers whereas 20,660 more were injured (BBC, 2021) without achieving any tangible goals. The US led coalition had given a little attention to institutions building. Therefore, before the formal completion of withdrawal the US established system was collapsed and Taliban takeover Kabul in mid-August 2021. The main reason was that the US and her allies did not give enough attention to institutions building and formation of strong government army. It seems as if the US and her allies had invaded Afghanistan to avenge the 9/11 attack on its world trade centre and stayed here to look for some geostrategic interests in the region included the containment of China. Hence, this adventure was in no way sincerely and firmly aimed at bringing peace and stability in the country. The present US-led international system is polarised and biased that cannot adapt to rising China (Kaufman, 2010).

China being a rising economic power and leading international trade bearer would never like to ignore any potential security threat in her neighbourhood constraining its economic initiatives. Currently, the quantum of China's trade is 4 trillion dollars, its GDP is 17 trillion dollars, and it has foreign reserves worth 4 trillion dollars (Ahmar, 2021). In the post-withdrawal Afghanistan China has geopolitical, economic and security interests.

Geopolitical Interests

It is obvious that China cannot afford political instability, insecurity and power politics in its neighbourhood. At the same time China is in a better position to play an effective role in restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan because Beijing and Kabul share no history of rivalry. The US and her allies withdrawal from Afghanistan has compelled Chinese policy makers to formulate a more proactive and comprehensive policy towards Afghanistan. Beijing welcomed and hosted a Taliban delegation in July 2021 followed by China's official statement that she respects Afghan's rights to decide their future. This indicates Beijing's stance which implies that the Taliban's victory reflects the people's will. China started strengthening her diplomatic ties with Taliban even before they took control of Kabul.

Some observers are of the view that China tend to perceive the vacuum not only to avail the opportunities but to manage the threats as well. Beijing's main goal of obtaining economic gains is by utilizing Afghanistan's role as a regional connection in the Belt and Road Initiative or the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Furthermore, China has been looking for a way to extract Afghanistan's immense mineral resources since 2007, which necessitates security and transportation infrastructure. Because none of this is conceivable without a stable Afghanistan, China is currently examining the political environment in the country and what it may benefit from peace (Sakhi, 2022).

Economic Interests and Engagement

Before withdrawal Afghanistan's fragile economy was highly dependent on US aid and Western donors'. China becomes a crucial supporter of Taliban-led Afghanistan provided the latter does not support extremism and militancy. While China seeks to revive business schemes in Afghanistan, Taliban support Chinese investment as it will provide the much-needed revenues at this critical juncture. After the US withdrawal millions of dollars foreign aid that was supporting the former administration has been stopped, billions dollars of state assets are blocked, and financial sanctions have brought Afghanistan's economy near to collapse. So, Taliban government is actively pursuing Chinese economic support, trade relations and investment in this scenario. A Counsel on Foreign Relations expert, Ian Johnson has very rightly remarked that Taliban will welcome any sort of investment, especially if it is not accompanied by lectures on human rights. According to him, China's goal is likely to be at least as much political as economic (Johnson, 2021).

After the collapse of Ashraf Ghani government, Taliban spokesman Sohail Shaheen in his press conferences repeatedly called upon China for investment. As one of the leading trade partners of Afghanistan since 2006, China has given duty free access to export 278 items (Bashardost, 2019). It has increased the bilateral trade significantly. In 2021, bilateral trade volume increased and recorded 523.45 million dollars. China export to Afghanistan was 474 million dollars and her imports from Afghanistan were 49.53 million dollars (China Briefing, 2023). Beijing is devoted to improving the two nations' cooperation in several areas, including economy and trade. To overcome the obstacles, she has established an air corridor to increase the import of agricultural goods like pine nuts. In 2022, she has also given duty-free access to 98% of Afghan goods import to China (China Embassy in Afghanistan, 2022, November 3). This is an obvious attempt to strengthen bilateral commercial relations in this critical time as the Taliban regime strives to rebuild the nation's sanctions-hit economy. Moreover, China's exports to Afghanistan are cheap (Reeves, 2010), therefore, comparatively more affordable for the poor people of the country. Beijing has continuously encouraged collaboration on significant projects with Kabul, assisting it to generate money, boost job opportunities at the local level, and strengthen its potential for economic growth. In the current situation, the socio-economic

development of Afghanistan is critically important for peace and stability in the country and the region. Therefore, economic development, creation of jobs and business opportunities are very crucial to end terrorism and militancy in the country. It will protect the youth from becoming member of terrorist organizations.

One of the main interests of China in Afghanistan is the exploration of mineral resources. The MesAynak copper mine and the oil extraction agreements in Faryab and Sar-e-Pol provinces are the main economic interests of China in the country. The country has a huge amount of unexplored natural resources including copper, Iron, Silver, Lithium, Chromite, Gemstones, and oil etc. To stabilise the economy of Afghanistan, some of the very significant investments of China are; the 30 years of Aynak copper mines project worth 3.5 billion dollars whose copper deposits are estimated to be worth of 3 trillion dollars (Khan, 2015) expected to generate 4,000 direct jobs, 7,600 indirect and 62,500 induced jobs (Iqbal, 2016) and after the full operationalization expected to generate revenue equal to 45% of Afghanistan's total budget (Bukhari, 2012), and the 25 years project of exploration of gas and oil in Amu Darya River Basin oil fields. It is pertinent to mention here that this was the first contract in the history of Afghanistan to permit any foreign country to discover gas and oil in the country. China National Petroleum Corporation signed this agreement of oil exploration in 2011. A survey estimated that these oil fields containing reservoirs of about 87 million barrels oil. According to the agreement, China will invest 400 million dollars in this project and will pay the Afghan government 20% tax on revenue, 15% royalty, and 70% of revenue on income. It is estimated that annually 304.35 million dollars will provide this project to Afghanistan, a total of 7 billion dollars in the 25 years contract period and expected to generate 7,000 jobs (Tahiri, 2017).

More recently, a contract to drill for oil from the Amu Darya basin and establish an oil field in Sar-e Pul province was signed by the Taliban regime with China on January 5, 2022. Approximately 150 million dollars will be invested yearly by China and in the coming three years, the investment amount will increase to 540 million dollars (China Briefing, 2023). Since the Taliban took control in 2021, this agreement is the first substantial energy exploitation agreement with a foreign corporation. The Taliban regime and a state-owned company of China are now in talks over mining operations in the MesAynak copper mine. It would be in accordance with a 3.5 billion dollars, 30-years deal inked in 2008 under the former government of Afghanistan (China Briefing, 2023). All these plans and initiatives would play a significant role in the economic development of the war-torn Afghanistan. The enormous amount of natural resources in Afghanistan continues to be appealing to Chinese investors despite security challenges. China is therefore a preferable partner to engage with as the Taliban eagerly seeks external aid and investment to support the country's fragile economy. Now after the capturing of Kabul by Taliban, investment in the country remains a question mark, but if a stable government is founded then local and foreign investments will resume.

China contributed 250 million Yuan in 2021 to Afghanistan in the form of food, medication, winter clothing, and other aid to help the Afghan people endure the severe winter season (China Embassy in Afghanistan, 2022, November 3). She also has offered 8 million dollars in humanitarian relief to the Afghan families impacted by the recent earthquake. China is also interested and ready to invest in infrastructure development and regional connectivity projects. During the conference on Afghanistan held in Tashkent on July 26, 2022, Yue Xiaoyong, China's special representative for Afghanistan stated that China will finance the construction of a transnational railway passing through Afghanistan. It is supposed to link Uzbekistan to Pakistani seaports (Rehman, 2022). China views Afghanistan as a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia.

Beijing is concerned about the risks of unnecessary entanglement in Afghanistan, which is seen as a 'strategic trap' and 'graveyard of empires'. Afghanistan's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative including connections to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is particularly important. However, stability has to precede new economic commitments. China would certainly take on a significant investment role provided there is a conducive security and political environment in the country. In other words, Beijing will watch the Afghan situation more cautiously before getting fully involved. China will gradually and carefully fill the vacuum and accommodate Taliban's needs and requirements while ensuring that its own concerns are addressed.

Security Interests

China has four security concerns in post-withdrawal Afghanistan; first, Kabul must have a functional government; second, ensure the security of its border; third, the Taliban should eliminate Uyghur militant groups based in Afghanistan; fourth, protect its current investment (Murtazashvili, 2022). There is many anti-China militant organization based in Afghanistan which have posed direct threats to its national security and unification. Primarily China has security threats from ETIM and ISKP. The expansion of the ISKP also known as ISK in Afghanistan particularly after the withdrawal of the United States of America and the Taliban take over has shadowed the security prospects of other regional states, one such being China- a state at the doorstep of Afghanistan (Kapur, 2022). Analysing the predicaments for China, the ground facts provide a vivid picture of the possible threats to China as a state and its interests in the near abroad. Significant progress in this context is the merger of the ETIM with ISKP. ETIM is a terrorist organization identified by the United Nation and is based in Northeast China's Xinjiang province (Mehra & Wentworth, 2021). This Muslim group's merger with ISKP shall not only provide it sanctuary in Afghanistan to cause security implications for China but may add China to ISKP's target list considering the events unfolding in China regarding the Uighur Muslims. Important to mention here that during their first regime from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban permitted Uyghur organizations to operate on Afghan soil and still it has considerable safe heavens in Afghanistan

An important fact that backs this argument is the attack on Kunduz; the attack was carried out by an ethnic Uighur in 2021 and ISKP claimed its responsibility (Soliev, 2021). In September 2022, ISKP's most scathing comment on China came, criticizing the Belt and Road Initiative in the following words: "red atheists whose hands are soaked with the blood of innocent Uyghur Muslims" (Weber, 2022). This provocative message indicates its plans against China and that ISKP's followers must take up arms against China. ISKP is sceptical of Beijing and Kabul relations and refers to China as "Imperialist" in Voice of Khorasan Magazine of September 2022 (Ma, 2022). Another implication for China is the ISKP's threats to its interests outside China, including Chinese investments. For instance, China's investment in Afghanistan's Amu Darya Oil Project, MesAynak and many others are all subject to Afghanistan's security situation which is being constantly challenged by ISKP (Weber, 2022).

China is more concerned about the potential for strikes planned by terrorist organizations like the ETIM than it is about playing a role in a post-withdrawal scenario. This group is continuously attacking Chinese citizens and interests both inside and outside the country. China is undoubtedly aware that the Taliban won't be persuaded to kick out Uyghur militants from Afghanistan. Several international Jahidi groups are functioning in different parts of the country; the Taliban refuses to extradite them but instead takes covert actions to curtail or stop their extraterritorial activity. According to some evidence, the Afghan Taliban have

relocated Uyghur terrorists from Badakhshan province, a province that shares a border with China, in order to allay China's security concerns (Rehman, 2022). ETIM is also attempting to strike a balance between its animosity towards China and Taliban hosts.

China is worried about how the instability and insecurity in the country following the United States and her allies exit may damage China's economic interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asian Republics. Therefore, China accused the US of its rapid withdrawal without restoration of stability in the country and reacted angrily to the humanitarian and economic catastrophe in Afghanistan made worse the security situation. China and Afghanistan had a good collaboration until the fall of the Ghani-led regime, and Afghan security agencies were monitoring and pursuing Uyghur insurgent organizations at Beijing's request. However, since the Taliban took control, China has started to communicate with them because she does not want terrorism to spread into China from Afghanistan or harm its economic and political interests in the area. In return for addressing Beijing's security concerns, notably in preventing any Uyghur terrorist organizations from attacking Chinese nationals its interests, especially BRI projects, Beijing has promised the Taliban to give economic assistance.

China Role vis-à-vis Pakistan, Iran and Russia

Following the US withdrawal, the security vulnerability of Afghanistan deeply affects the whole of region. Needless to say, that all regional countries like China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran want peace and stability. It has been proved by the recent increase insecurity in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan and attacks on Chinese in different parts of the country. Taliban's tangible victory and sweeping takeover of Kabul has emboldened Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan sharing same ideology with the former. Pakistan suffered alarming repercussions due to massive influx of Afghan refugees and sudden rise in the scale of terrorist attacks against security forces, civilian population and military installations. It had to divert its armed forces and national resources towards its western border risking its national economy as well as its security position on the eastern border with India-an arch enemy of Pakistan. The Afghan war has seriously affected Pakistan (Khalil and Parveen, 2015). It has also created mistrust between the two countries (Qazi, Qazi and Ahmad, 2016).

According to Economic Survey of Pakistan 2001-2018, the country sustained an estimated loss of 126.79 billion dollars during 2001-2015. Pakistan also lost around 80,000 of its soldiers as well officers and innocent civilians, not to speak of the thousands of women, widows and children who suffered lifelong disabilities. Therefore, an instable or continuation of terror and disturbance in Afghanistan is in no way in the interest of anyone, especially it has direct impact on regional countries. Therefore, the regional countries should extend full support to the Taliban Government and people of the war-ravaged country in the interest of peace and stability in the region.

Pakistan has vast experience in dealing with Afghanistan affairs. Once China decides to initiate mega projects in Afghanistan, it can benefit from Islamabad's knowledge and experience gained over a long period of its engagement as a front-line state during the Soviet invasion and the US attack and occupation of Afghanistan. Beijing and Islamabad's joint strategy based on the principles of peaceful coexistence, economic cooperation and extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and central Asia will produce tangible and promising outcomes. Such arrangements are crucial for creating positive impacts on Afghan economy through boosting economic activities and employment opportunities. Following the hasty withdrawal of the US forces, Beijing and Islamabad can play a key role by ensuring Kabul's participation and partnership in CPEC with workable connectivity. Though these initiatives may face many challenges, but this is very

potential scheme that can help Afghanistan's return to the mainstream of the global community as sovereign state. Both China and Pakistan are interested to include Afghanistan in CPEC, and Ashraf Ghani government has also showed formal interest to join it. Afghanistan is a landlocked country and is mostly reliant on Islamic Republic of Pakistan for her foreign trade. If she joins this Corridor, it will link its economy to China, Pakistan and the rest of the world. It can possibly offer a massive boost to economy of the war-torn Afghanistan.

For decades, Pakistan has been an essential partner of China, for a variety of factors. One, China's wolf warrior diplomacy has enraged many countries, ranging from its Indo-Pacific neighbours to Europe. This emphasises the significance of Pakistan as a genuine partner. In addition, New Delhi closeness with Washington and its allies, including Canberra and Tokyo, India has established a network of security and strategic partnerships, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (known as the Quad) with the United States, Australia, and Japan, as well as a variety of trilateral strategic partnerships such as India-US-Japan and Japan-India-Australia. All of these new agreements are clearly aimed at countering China which certainly makes China more reliant on Pakistan to resist India (Rajagopalan, 2021). Though US tried to engage India as a regional ally to manipulate regional affairs, but this 'marriage of convenience' did not work as it was primarily an ill-designed alliance against Pakistan and China. After fighting war against Taliban for long 20 years, US was obliged to accept humiliation and sign peace agreement with Taliban. She could not achieve its core objectives of restoration of peace (Parveen, Shah and Khalil, 2020). It is also a bitter reality that US in the disguise of war on terror formulated an alliance against regional countries especially against its old rival Russia and rising China. The US seems to be in pursuit of a more aggressive and confrontational attitude toward China, particularly bitterness had reached its peak in Trump administration. The Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, released in March, asserts that China "is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system" (Jisi, 2021).

Looking at this situation in a theoretical perspective, the emergence of new great powers at global level with trepidation because it expects rising states' ambitions to grow in tandem with their capabilities, as well as the anxiety that this expectation provokes in their neighbours and potential adversaries (Kirshner, 2012). Following withdrawal, it seems that the US will use the soil of Afghanistan against China as well as against Russia, Pakistan, and Iran. To avoid such developments, peace and stability in Afghanistan are necessary. If there is no peace it will be easy to manipulate Afghanistan against the regional foes. While altering the regional dimensions and alliances, a good chance occurs in the form of Moscow and Islamabad also. In this phenomenon, India is US main regional ally working closely with her to fulfil its objectives of primarily countering China and Pakistan. India's foothold in Afghanistan was a grave concern for both Pakistan and China. Therefore, Pak-China cooperation and coordinated working are necessary for protection of their interests and defusing impacts of India-US alliance. Beijing and Islamabad's strategic partnership in Afghanistan proved workable. The primary rationale behind the success of Beijing and Islamabad partnership in Afghanistan is that it functions under the umbrella of their decades-old friendly strategic relationship.

Likewise, both Russia and Pakistan are concerned about the repercussions of the US and NATO withdrawal without restoration of peace left the country on brink of civil war and untold hardships due to internal and external displacement. Seeing the growing US and India relationship, Islamabad started expanding its relationship with Moscow after experiencing itself being alienated by the US and the close collaboration between the US and India against Pakistan. Islamabad and Moscow due to regional and global pattern of alliance realised to develop a multi-

dimensional relationship in close association besides improving their defence collaboration. It is manifested by the deal of MI-35 helicopters, DRUZHBA joint military exercises, and partaking of the navy of Russia in the Aman-2021 maritime exercise, in Pakistan.

At a recent meeting in Moscow, a Taliban leader reiterated the desire for a peaceful settlement of all local and national issues (Lodhi, 2021). The regional countries, while using their influence and capability should play their role to persuade Taliban and other ethnic and political groups to seek a negotiated solution to the prolonged Afghan issue. Moreover, the regional countries and other powers ought to desist from arming the non-state fighting groups in Afghanistan. Formation of an inclusive government representing all ethnic communities and sects is prerequisite for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue and undoing the possibility of a civil war in the country.

China is also enjoying good workable relation with Tehran that can play crucial role in bringing peace and development to Afghanistan. Taliban government did not enjoy good relationship with Tehran in 1990's. However, China, and Iran supported the Taliban in many ways against the US-led coalition in Afghanistan. Iran can still play her part because it has a long border and sizable trade with Afghanistan. It is estimated that \$5 million hard currency flows to Iran from Afghanistan each day as Afghan buyers are the fifth largest consumers of Iranian exports (Batmanghelidi, 2021). Taliban also cannot ignore peaceful relations with their first door neighbour due to mutual trade interests between the two countries. Therefore, Iran can play an important role in the formation of an inclusive government and subsequent developments in Afghanistan. However, at the moment Iranian policy makers see the situation differently. When the US and its allies finally left Kabul, Iran's Foreign Ministry stressed that Tehran would not rush to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

In case the Taliban agree to the distribution of power and formation of an inclusive government engaging all ethnic groups, especially Hazara Shias in government, Iran would like to have normal relations with Taliban regime. But if the Taliban seeks a monopoly of power, given that the group's ideology is different from that of Iran and closer to Saudi Arabia, then it seems that the relations between Iran and the Taliban or the government formed by the Taliban will not be much amicable. It is Tehran's considered opinion that the Taliban's statement about formation of inclusive government is just an attempt to influence the international opinion in their favour; and that Taliban would never agree to compromise their religious and ideological posture. Iranian leadership firmly believe that in the long run, the ideological aspect of the Taliban will prevail over their political one. Therefore, one cannot expect that the Taliban will not be the same Taliban of 20 years ago. Hence, they cannot be termed as "Friends of Iran" (Choksy and Choksy, 2021). It is no secret that Iranian media and some experts term the formation of Taliban's interim government as "a government of terrorists and criminals" (Choksy and Choksy, 2021). Iran's semi-official Mehr News Agency has reported that given the Taliban's current approach to governance, experts in Tehran have warned that Iran's relations with Taliban government will not be amicable (Choksy and Choksy, 2021).

However, China alone may not properly handle the Afghan situation without well integrated coordination, association and cooperation with its regional partners. Same are the stakes of Russia, Pakistan and Iran and therefore they also cannot bear instability in their neighbourhood because it will directly affect their security and geostrategic interests. China requires taking the initiative in consultation and close association with Russia, Pakistan and Iran as these countries have equally important stakes in Afghanistan. Having said that Afghanistan still needs massive investments to develop its infrastructure and economy. At present, an expert

team on the economy is the utmost requirement to deal with international financial institutions. Moreover, regional and extra-regional players have their own geo-strategic and political interests in the country. These are the potential areas where China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran need to work together and use their resources and influences to resolve the Afghan issues. Though the issues are very complicated, joint efforts of these regional powers can help better in this regard. China and Pakistan are already close allies of regional and international arenas, but the US withdrawal provided an opportunity for realignment of Pakistan with Russia and Iran. A well-considered and well-planned policy with effective implementation by these regional powers will lead to political stability in the country. Otherwise, the absence of such policy and spirit will lead to the intensification of domestic strife and power struggle in Afghanistan.

Quest for peace and stability in the post US withdrawal

The recognition of Taliban regime by other countries is dependent upon their internal performance, mood of governance, respect of human and minorities rights, rule of law, overthrowing fundamentalism, and adoption of moderate policies and democratic norms. If such a situation like their previous regime (1996-2001) emerges, then Afghanistan will pose serious security, economic and political threats to China, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. In this regard, these four regional countries must try hard to persuade Taliban and other groups over which they have influence to establish an inclusive government composed of all groups and communities. They should use their collective good offices to do national reconciliation in Afghanistan, besides convincing Taliban to broad-based national government, respect human rights, avoid fundamentalism, extremism, respect women's rights, permit individual freedom and promote democratic norms. This is key for the restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan and putting the country on the path of progress and development.

In Afghanistan, the economy has been badly damaged due to decade's long war. It is said, "who has a gun has bread". The US and NATO withdrew their forces without restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan. They signed Doha agreement in 2020 only to get safe way for themselves, left protracted Afghan imbroglio unresolved. It brought the county to the brink of civil war among the different sects, ethnic groups and other stakeholders. The US president Joe Biden said in his remarks about the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan that "We did not go to Afghanistan for nation-building. And it's the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country". This frivolity and irresponsibility not expected from the US because Afghanistan at present is more destabilized than before 9/11. This place a question mark on US foreign policy approach because, if the US considers that nation building was not its responsibility, then how peace could be restored in a war-torn country? Nation building is key for restoration of peace and stability but unfortunately, very less attention has been given to it in the 20 years stay of US and NATO in Afghanistan.

During the fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan, China presented a five-point proposal. First, Afghanistan should be governed by the Afghan people. Second, political reconciliation must be moved forward. Third, economic reconstruction should be expedited. Fourth, a development path should be explored. Fifth, external support should be fortified (Yongbiao, 2018). Additionally, China is pursuing friendly policy toward all the Afghan people instead of any specific group. It has been affirmed by Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his meeting with Taliban political head Mullah Ghani Baradar in Tianjin during the latter's visit to China on July 28, 2021 (CGTN News, 2021).

All things considered, the lack of indigenous cohesion and central authority acceptable to all sects of Afghanistan are part and parcel of the leading problems (Ali, 2021) in ending the war, restoration of peace and stability and establishment of an inclusive national government in the country. The question is whether international community in general and regional countries in particular can exert pressure and facilitate Taliban to establish a broad-based national government or not. A regime acceptable to majority of groups will help to bring peace in the country (Perveen et al., 2016). For Taliban, it is important to realize this fact that an inclusive and representative government will not only help them in gaining internal stability but will also pave the way for their recognition at the international level. More so, the post US withdrawal ISKP's attacks is alarming for the peace and stability of Afghanistan and the whole region.

Another important issue, which needs immediate attention, is the brain drain from the country. It was seen at Kabul airport that hundreds of educated and professional young people left Afghanistan after the collapse of Ashraf Ghani government in mid-August. Afghan educated youth who can offer and utilize their abilities and capabilities and play an active and effective role in rebuilding their ruined motherland. Moreover, removal of all types of proxies, eradication of socio-economic causes of terrorism, reconciliation, promotion of education and health facilities, human rights, institutions building including strong national military and good governance are prerequisite for sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan. Close cooperation and coordination of regional countries can better help in the above mentioned sectors.

Conclusion

China and other regional powers like Russia, Pakistan, and Iran cannot afford insecurity and instability in Afghanistan as it is fatal. The signing of peace agreement with Taliban by the US without restoring peace and stability has shown the decline of the US's influence and power in the region. The Taliban regime, local people, and many regional countries are looking towards China for a larger role in reconciliation, reconstruction and rebuilding of Afghanistan and regional integration. The current Chinese role in Afghanistan reflects her as a responsible rising power facilitating international peace and stability.

China has taken steps at both individual level and multilateral level as working with regional and international stakeholder to ensure an inclusive political settlement in the country. The regional countries need to integrate their efforts and cooperation in Afghanistan. Under the prevailing hazardous situation, a preferred option is that all these four countries form a formal alliance as a common platform for coordination and integration of their efforts to resolve the Afghan issue. It is high time that China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran work together for durable solution of the Afghan issue and help formation of an inclusive government in Kabul that is acceptable to all concerned. Pakistan and China have already fully synchronized their Afghan policies whereas Russia and Iran currently seem to be at the 'wait and see' axis to decide their formal policies and future course of action. Currently, they have no conflict of interests, they just need to further synchronize their policies. They should make well concerted collective efforts because individual efforts in such critical situation have limited scope and chances to give any fruitful result.

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The authors declared no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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