



China's Greater Role in Afghanistan in Post-Withdrawal Environment

Fakhar Alam

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Institute of Regional Studies

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China paid close attention to the changing political and security conditions of Afghanistan during the military exit of the United States from the war-torn country. Amid the fragile peace negotiation and with the collapse of Ashraf Ghani's regime, the country invited a lot of attention from the region as well as from the entire world. China also showed its concerns over the changed scenario and so vowed its pledge to respect and support the political settlement between the Taliban and other political stakeholders in Kabul. China showed utmost support to the peace process among the Afghan stakeholders and now also desires to work for the reconstruction and stability of Afghanistan long with other regional and global contenders. China does not have any historical baggage in Afghanistan and it has never sided with any of the factions or interfered in the internal political matters therein. Therefore, China can confidently partner with any of the future government(s) of Afghanistan. Moreover, Beijing's decentralised diplomatic approach is always acknowledged by stakeholders in Afghanistan. China's role in Afghanistan would also be compatible with the other neighbours of Afghanistan, especially Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs).

Glimpse of Sino-Afghan Relations

Historically, Sino-Afghan relations were formed on warmth, friendliness and civility. Although these relations can be traced back to the 8th century when Silk Road was established as the only trade route between Asia and Europe while Afghanistan was one of the strategic crossings of this route. However, in the 18th century, after the formation of modern Afghanistan, economic and political ties were established between both neighbours. Similar patterns were observed during World War I, when both sides fought shoulder to shoulder against the imperialist Japanese Army. The official diplomatic relations were developed in 1957 when premiers from both sides visited each other.

Even during the initial stages of the Cold War both Kabul and Beijing were in the same block. Unfortunately, these friendly ties deteriorated for a small period with the installation of a pro-Soviet regime at Kabul in the backdrop of Sino-Soviet animosity. While China was on the top of the list of the countries which were very much against the Soviet's invasion. Finally, after the USSR's withdrawal and with the Talibanisation of Afghanistan, China-Taliban relations were established unofficially. Since then, these associations have been strengthened.¹

Following 9/11 and the subsequent fall of Taliban regime, China changed its approach toward Afghanistan. Beijing began establishing relations with the fragile government as well as with the Taliban according to their capacities and capabilities. Since then China is in touch with most of the stakeholders in Kabul.² Now when the US has left Afghanistan without achieving peace,³ China can be the potential regional as well as a global actor with the capacity to play an imperative role in reconciling the political divisions in Afghanistan. China's general convergent and persuasive diplomatic strategy will be a facilitator for this role.

China's Interest and Stakes in Afghanistan

Being a neighbour to the conflict-prone Afghanistan and with the presence of insurgents in form of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) at the Western front, China is highly concerned regarding the negative spillover of the unstable security environment prevailing within Afghanistan. Even in recent times, the building of re-socialisation camps in Xinjiang represents the magnitude of China's apprehension over ETIM.⁴ Also, during the Afghan Taliban's political chief's visit to Beijing on July 28, 2021, China urged the Taliban to break up all linkages with ETIM and to take action against them. Moreover, China is also wary of the presence of other transnational terrorist groups in Afghanistan such as Islamic State (ISIS).

Secondly, Afghanistan is located at the crossroad of the envisioned regional connectivity under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, Beijing has inexorable interests in the stability of the war-ravaged country. And unstable and anarchic security environment within Afghanistan is the main hurdle for the security and expansion of the BRI and its projects, especially, CPEC which is most vulnerable to the deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan. Thus, a sense of true long-lasting and sustainable peace, in Afghanistan, in the post-BRI environment, is critically significant for several actors.

Thirdly, as an emerging global political and economic power, it is in Beijing's interests that an inclusive peace could be achieved in its neighborhood by the consent of all the parties. From USSR to USA's overwhelming withdrawal, China has always remained vigilant to the changing security environment. And the least external influence over Afghanistan is imperative for Beijing's regional influence. China wants a sole sovereign Afghan power controlling the Kabul and it uses the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) forum along with several other regional states for socio-political developments and ensuring intra-state security.⁵

Furthermore, some Western scholars are of the view that Afghanistan is a mineral rich land and their net worth is more than one trillion dollars. Especially, Lithium and Rare Earth Metals are in abundance. And most of these mineral rich areas were under the Taliban's control during the America's presence. Now those immense minerals needed to be mined while Beijing could provide infrastructural and technical support to extract them and even bring them to international market.

China: Beyond an Economic Aider in Afghanistan/ A Greater Role

Most of the stakeholders within Afghanistan are aware of the fact that Beijing enjoys the capability to be a more influential regional and global power. And China has healthy ties with all the actors at the same time according to their capacities. While the Taliban has deposed the government in Kabul by making fast advances through armed offensive but the consolidation of governance and public acceptance will remain a challenge. For running the country's governance and economy, people's acceptance, as well as the support of all stakeholders, will be required. Therefore there is still a big room for China and other regional countries.

Even after the formation of an interim government by the Taliban, inclusiveness is still lacking as the different ethnic groups have not been taken into the account. Eventually, the threat of instability is looming over Kabul. China has repeatedly stated that it will play its role in reconciling the different actors for inclusive peace in Afghanistan. Hence, Beijing along with other regional peace seekers can be very supportive to develop a convergence among Taliban and other parties by bringing them to the table so such a deteriorating situation in future could be avoided. Similarly, economy is the very backbone of a state. While Afghanistan's economic health is on incubator since Taliban took over Kabul in August. USA has frozen the Afghan foreign assets. And most of the Banks in Kabul are almost

out of cash. Afghanistan needs monetary support and the development for the functional commerce and financial infrastructure. In this chaotic situation China can prove to be a saviour.

The institutional arrangements have deteriorated in Kabul. Along with the political and economic backing, diplomatic support for the institutional and bureaucratic, structure development could be provided by the Chinese too. Additionally, along with the regional prosperity, the internal, fragile Afghan infrastructure could be brought to right path.

Moreover, for strengthening Chinese interests, it is essential that Afghan community which is comprised of different ethnicities must endorse and accept Beijing's role. Aimed that, cultural relations and people-centric approach will be fruitful. Furthermore, for this societal re-development, the long historic relations between Kabul and Beijing and an ethnic overlap with China's brotherly and Afghanistan's neighbouring nation, Pakistan, can be very supportive. Along with exchange programs, a relaxed visa policy and more people-to-people interaction will be helpful in achieving better cultural arrangements. And eventually it will pave a way at materialising Beijing's geopolitical and socioeconomic interests.

Why Only China?

The American forces were present in Afghanistan for 20 years but all these years were in vain as the USA's approach proved to be counterproductive. Afghanistan's security dynamics are quite similar to what they were in 1996.⁶ Furthermore, foreign troops have been called-off and Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan again, the imminent anarchy within Afghanistan could produce daunting repercussions for the regional as well as global peace and security.

The academicians and security experts are of the view that the negotiations and reconciliation process spurting within from Afghan fraction would be more productive. While Beijing is not only of similar views, also pursuing the very same strategy through SCO forum. Whereas, some academicians argue that Russia too can play similar part in reconciliation and re-development. A noteworthy point is that Russia does not possess as many neutral relations with all parties, especially with the Taliban as China does.

Simultaneously, it is evident that Beijing has never been dictated in its bilateral ties. The Chinese approach is more diplomatic and persuasive based on the equal status. This factor can be observed in Pakistan-China relations, where despite giving huge economic

possessions to Pakistan under CPEC, the Chinese never restricted or dictated Pakistan from having cordial relations with the US.⁷ This soft Chinese approach is what makes it exceptional and more successful in its dealings.

However, with the appointment of Beijing's special envoy to Kabul,⁸ scholars are forecasting strategic shifts in the South-Asia. It could prove to be an exceptional approach, where a country will be capable to have political, economic, social and diplomatic influence over other nation without having an imperative intervention. Also, the Chinese Embassy in Kabul is operating normally under severe situation. Therefore, China is capable to play a greater role in Afghanistan too which would be not only limited to ongoing peace arrangements and economic assistance.

Moreover, everything is not as simple as it seems to be. The deteriorated US-China relations along with several other elements is main irritants for a comprehensive China's diplomatic role in Afghanistan. Whereas, a persuasive, convergent and a lenient attitude could halt all these odds.

Conclusion

Amid the process of the US exit from Afghanistan and the Taliban's hasty advances, the regional countries look towards China for a greater role. As of now over the Taliban's dramatic takeover of Kabul, the more prudent way is to engage with the Afghan stakeholders for an inclusive power structure. So far China has stated that it will respect the changed political transition in Afghanistan. Since Taliban are now in the dominant position for forming a government, China will remain engaged with them. China's engagement with the new government in Afghanistan will not only help in reconstruction of the war torn country but it will pave a way for eradicating transnational terrorism from the SCO region and also connecting Afghanistan with BRI project for its economic development.

Notes and References

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