SPOTLIGHT
ON REGIONAL AFFAIRS

Vol xxxv No. 5 May 2016

NEW TRENDS IN CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY AND THE EVOLVING SINO-AFGHAN TIES

HUMERA IQBAL

INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES ISLAMABAD

NEW TRENDS IN CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY AND THE EVOLVING SINO-AFGHAN TIES

HUMERA IQBAL*

"Now we're all talking about Syria. [By the] second half of next year, the most important topic will be Afghanistan."[1]

Wang Yi, Chinese Foreign Minister, 2013.

Fifth of August 2015 marked the 60th Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic and friendly relations between China and Afghanistan. The event was jointly celebrated by the Dunya University and Afghanistan-China Friendship Association to further elevate decades-old friendship by strengthening traditional and mutually beneficial cooperation through joint efforts.[2] With the drawdown of US combat troops, Afghanistan looms large in the minds of Chinese policymakers. The struggle faced by the Afghan security forces in fighting the radical extremist groups for the past few years has raised fears in Beijing. As the Western forces pack their bags from Afghanistan, questions are being asked about the future security of China due to its neighbouring contiguity. Afghanistan has been a constant worrisome neighbour for China as it remains a grim source of instability since the 1980s. To add further to the pressures on Beijing, both the US and Afghan governments expect it to play a significant role in shaping the future of Afghanistan after 2014. A thorough yet conscious strategic study persuaded

* Ms. Humera Iqbal is Research Analyst at Institute of Regional Studies.

Beijing to embrace a proactive diplomatic tone for engaging with Afghanistan for the future peace and security of China. Moreover, a realization about the regional scenario pushed China to shape a policy of engaging Afghanistan progressively within the region as well.

This paper looks into the changing foreign policy archetypes of China as it has achieved regional status and acquired additional responsibilities under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. A 60-year chronology of China-Afghanistan relations until the present day with an overview of Afghanistan in China's foreign policy is also discussed. The paper also highlights Afghanistan in China's future discourse. The study aims to analyze the driving factors and strategy of Beijing in Afghanistan along with the risk levels Afghanistan holds for China. Before looking into the evolving Sino-Afghan relations, the paper first discusses the foreign policy of China for a clear understanding.

Marching West to the Chinese Dream: Neighbourhood diplomacy under Xi Jinping

For decades, China has based its foreign policy decisions on the 'five principles of peaceful co-existence'. The five principles as laid out in the Panchsheel Treaty, signed on 29 April 1954 are: 'mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity', 'mutual non-aggression', 'non-interference in each other's internal affairs', 'equality and mutual benefit', and 'peaceful co-existence'.[3] These five principles are still valuable. Xi Jinping envisions these principles as, 'peaceful development', 'building a harmonious world', 'multi-polarity', 'acting as a spokesman for developing countries', and a 'policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries'.[4]

At the World Peace Forum in June 2013, Foreign Minister Wang Yi spelled out the principles of China's foreign policy under the new leadership. The new foreign policy revolves around building a new model of major country

relationships and major country diplomacy. The novel role China aspires in the world is directly linked to President Xi Jinping's vision of the 'Chinese Dream' which aims at achieving equal footing with the world powers like the US in the international arena. The vision aims to modify China's growth and development model. Essentially, under the Chinese Dream, China's objective is to present itself as a more proactive and responsible state internationally, i.e., to be an international stakeholder, and a state observing international norms and standards. China, under the new foreign policy dream, intends to offer Chinese solution to deal with the burning international and regional issues. Foreign Minister Wang characterized China's 'major country diplomacy' by 'no conflict', 'no confrontation', 'mutual respect', and 'win-win cooperation'.[5]

Beijing is offering a substitute to the American notion of new world order under the new strategy which stresses equality and unchallengeable sovereignty for all kinds of states with different choices of internal political systems notwithstanding whether they comply with the Western ideals and interests or not. The Chinese term for such system is 'multi-polarity'. Beijing emphasizes that it 'never seeks hegemony'. China conveys to its smaller neighbours that its economic development and growing military power is not for regional oppression, in contrast to the Americans who enforce their will on other countries in the name of trade and human rights.[6]

In this regard, under the regional policy order, China's decade-long significant geo-political strategy aims to turn westward with the 'March West' policy. The Third Plenum of the Communist Party of China (CPC) largely emphasized on market reforms and intensified national security mechanism, mainly aiming at 'opening to those that border China inland'. Wang Jisi, a notable Chinese political analyst and former director of the leading China Academy of Social Sciences, urged Chinese leaders to 'march westwards' in an October 2012 policy paper. Wang pushed the Chinese policymakers to focus on China's

economic and diplomatic ties with its Central Asian allies to deepen its influence in the Asian continent and shrug off American influence there.[7] Hence, Beijing intends to stabilize its regional neighbourhood as a 'priority in its diplomacy'. China endeavours to establish dialogue among national groups to create a cohesive and stable environment as a policy option for resolving disputes within the conflict-affected neighbours.[8]

President Xi proposed the 'One Belt, One Road' concept—consisting of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR)—as a vital foreign policy approach. While respecting regional diversity, President Xi stressed on avoiding any kind of dominance in regional affairs, rejecting 'one-size-fits-all' development model, and endorsing management of disputes via 'equal-based dialogue and friendly consultation'. China notably rejects the notion of becoming a development model for other states. The initiative is to create 'a new pattern of regional economic integration' and 'innovation-driven open growth model' of development marked by 'mutually beneficial reciprocity'.[9] With this, Beijing aims to engage actively for creating a conducive neighbourhood environment for development to serve the cause of national rejuvenation for which it seeks to have neighbours sociable in politics and closely tied in economy. China also aspires to deepen security cooperation and people-to-people bonds with its neighbours.

In contrast to Deng Xiaoping's cautious approach in taking up a global leadership role, President Xi seems ready to take calculated political policy shots. China, under Xi Jinping, has emerged more confident and self-assured as it prepares to take risks in pursuance of its interests abroad and within the region. At the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit, Xi Jinping outlined his vision for a future Asian security order with an emphasis on the five principles of peaceful co-existence as founding rules for governing state-to-state relations. Therefore, President Xi Jinping painted his

Asian security vision as made by Asians for Asians by declaring, “China’s peaceful development begins here in Asia, finds its support in Asia, and delivers tangible benefits to Asia.” With this, Xi offered a compelling model of regional leadership with an Asian flavour for the resolution of burning issues in its neighbourhood.[10]

Xi Jinping gave a fresh signal of assertive diplomacy with the new foreign and regional policy approach. Analytically speaking however the new approach does not mark a substantial change in the regional position China had in the past. The only new element introduced by President Xi is the vision and strategy to have ‘connectivity’ with neighbours and a linkage of Chinese Dream with its foreign affairs to have win-win relationships, but with a firm persistence on not compromising Chinese core interests and assertive continuation of its principles of sovereignty. Hence, the question is where does Afghanistan fit in the regional policy of neighbourhood diplomacy and Chinese Dream of establishing a more viably peaceful, One Belt One Road connectivity? As an overly cautious new player, China still lacks a coherent foreign and regional policy with respect to Afghanistan. Moreover, the political options and the direction of China’s future discourse are still being debated. Perhaps an understanding of China-Afghanistan relations since the beginning would help in evaluating future course of bilateral relations and options for China as a regional player with a progressive new vision.

Afghanistan in China’s foreign policy

Afghanistan has never been an important player in diplomacy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). During the earlier decades, Afghanistan largely remained peripheral to China’s interests. At times China did adopt a utilitarian approach towards it though. China’s diplomacy with regard to Afghanistan follows a constant pattern of engagement comprised of cautiousness and watchfulness. Officially Beijing has managed to maintain proper relations

with all the political forces in Afghanistan while opting for a low profile strategy. The US usually deals with both Pakistan and Afghanistan under one strategy, but Chinese policymakers looks at both countries separately, and make clear priority distinctions between them.

China has adopted a four-point approach towards Afghanistan:

1. Safeguarding security and stability;
2. Developing the economy;
3. Improving governance while respecting the rights of Afghans to choose the model of government suited for Afghanistan (lately China has replaced 'improving governance' with 'political reconciliation'); and
4. Enhancing international cooperation.[11]

Therefore, China centres its approach on the principle of 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' for upholding Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the progressive path as decided by the Afghan people themselves. Although Beijing has implemented stern policies for countering terrorism in its own Xinjiang province, it argues for a non-military solution for Afghanistan.

Two core interests determine China's foreign policy in Afghanistan: security and economy. Hence, the arrival of the ominous date of 2014, and the ensuing unforeseen state of affairs, pushed China to take some responsibility, as indicated by the new foreign policy shift.

Sino-Afghan relations through historical lens

A detailed account of the Sino-Afghan relations would give a better picture of the 60 years of evolving relations.

An unnatural border

China's shortest border (76 km) among all its fourteen neighbours is with Afghanistan.[12] On the Chinese side, the two share a tiny sliver of a border known as Wakhjir Pass that has been closed since the founding of the PRC. On the Afghan side, the border area is called Wakhan Corridor, a sparsely populated narrow mountainous panhandle belt of territory in the north-eastern Afghanistan that forms a part of Badakhshan province.[13]

China and Afghanistan have never been natural neighbours. Wakhan exists only because in 1873 the two regional empires of the 19th century—Great Britain in India and Russia in Central Asia—carved out a political buffer to keep their empires geographically separated. Another agreement between Britain and Afghanistan in 1893 effectively split the historic area of Wakhan by making the Panj and Pamir Rivers the border between Afghanistan and the Russian Empire.[14] The Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission awarded the area to Afghanistan in 1895-96 to create this buffer which was once part of the epic Silk Road.[15]

The pact involved neither China nor the Afghans and their boundary was left undefined. Today, this thin strip of land has become a bequest of the historic Great Game as it separates Tajikistan from Pakistan.[16] This extremely rugged terrain has historically been a crucial ancient trading route of the Silk Road between Badakhshan in north-eastern Afghanistan and Yarkant in China's Xinjiang. The Wakhjir Pass at the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor links it with the Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang, China, which—as mentioned above—was closed down by the Afghan and Chinese authorities in the past.[17]

The relationship between Afghanistan and China can be divided into four phases according to the shifting interests and state of affairs between them, i.e., 1950s-1970s, 1980s-2000, 2000-2013, and 2014 to present.

1950s to 1970s

China and Afghanistan maintained friendly cooperative relations since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Kabul had readily recognized PRC on 12 January 1950, but Beijing only reciprocated once the formal diplomatic ties were established in 1955. China established its bilateral relations on the basis of the five principles of peaceful co-existence and embraced the credentials of Afghanistan as a neutral state. The Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression was signed between the two countries in August 1960.[18] Under the boundary delimitation and rectification programme with its neighbouring states, Beijing and Kabul formally signed a boundary agreement on 22 November 1963.[19]

Initially both the neighbouring countries remained distant. Beijing had a weaker footing in Afghanistan due to the stronger Soviet presence there. In December 1974 Daud Khan sent his brother Mohammad Naim to China as a special envoy of Kabul government in an effort to decrease reliance on Moscow. Beijing, as a goodwill gesture, offered long-term interest-free loan of about $55 million to Afghanistan. Unfortunately, Afghanistan's neutrality was entirely abandoned after a 1978 pro-Soviet coup. The regime of Noor Muhammad Taraki signed a twenty-year friendship treaty with Moscow that contained collective détente provisions, followed by anti-China policies.[20]

1980s to 2000

Irrespective of the friction between the two, China formally condemned the Soviet military invasion of Afghanistan with a demand for withdrawal of Soviet forces. Beijing took it as a violation of Afghanistan's sovereignty, and a security threat to China, Asia, and the whole world. Beijing did not recognize the Babrak Karmal regime held up by the Soviet Union, and supported the Afghan resistance by providing military training and arms to the Afghan Mujahideen.[21]

China viewed the geo-strategic location of Afghanistan as the cause of Soviet Union's action, and its own encirclement. Moreover, US airbase in Badakhshan province left China more anxious about becoming a target in the Cold War.[22]

Beijing welcomed the supply of weapons to the Mujahideen. One of the most vital clandestine operations in Chinese history was that Beijing became the arms supplier in the guerrilla war against the Soviets. According to Barnett R. Rubin, an American expert on Afghanistan at New York University and former special adviser to the United States government and the United Nations, four intelligence services— the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate, and the Ministry of State Security of China—met every week in Islamabad.[23] During that time Beijing independently made connections with the ethnic Tajik military personnel in Afghanistan which later formed the Northern Alliance. After Soviet withdrawal, China, like the US, rapidly wound up its involvement in Afghanistan, but remained diplomatically engaged with the Najibullah government. When the civil war erupted however China officially closed down its embassy in Afghanistan in February 1993.[24]

Under Taliban rule in the 1990s, Chinese remained absent from the big Afghan picture. Beijing never fancied the rise of Taliban and therefore never recognized their government in Afghanistan, but it closely monitored the country's putrefying state of affairs as a concerned neighbour. China supported the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) decision of imposing sanctions on the Taliban in response to providing sanctuary to Al-Qaeda. Beijing had its own concerns regarding the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and other affiliated Central Asian militant groups such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and their bases and training camps in Afghanistan with Taliban's approval.

After the imposition of sanctions and diplomatic isolation by the international community, Taliban were desperately in need of financial assistance

and international legitimacy. The Chinese took their desperation as an opportunity,[25] and established a working relationship with the Taliban regime for economic and reconstructive engagement. In 2000, China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Taliban government in Kabul for economic and technical cooperation. Two Chinese telecommunication firms, Huawei Technologies and ZTE, signed limited phone service contract for Kabul and Kandahar. A business delegation led by the Taliban visited Beijing as well. Chinese engineers also negotiated with the Taliban to renovate a US-built power station.[26] Chinese companies like Dongfeng Agricultural Machinery Company began repairing Afghanistan's power grid and fixing dams in Kandahar, Helmand, and Nangarhar.[27]

The political contacts were also shaped in February 1999, when a five-member group of Chinese diplomats met Taliban officials in Kabul[28] to establish formal opening of trade ties. By the end of the year it allegedly became known that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) agreed to provide low-level military support to the Taliban via Pakistan, in exchange for cutting off training assistance to Uighurs. Yet again, China ensured to proceed with characteristic caution. While visiting Pakistan in 2000, former Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan declined to meet his Taliban counterpart. Whereas the deputy director of the foreign ministry's Asia Department Sun Guoxiang, a much low-profile diplomat accompanying Jiaxuan, met the then Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Sayyed Mohammad Haqqani in Islamabad. The purpose of the meeting was to get assurance from the Taliban that they would not permit anyone to use Afghan territory against China. Later on, the then Chinese ambassador to Pakistan Lu Shulin officially requested his Afghan counterpart Abdul Salam Zaeef for a meeting with top leader Mullah Omar for the same purpose. Zaeef even in his autobiography describes the Chinese ambassador as "the only one to maintain a good relation with the embassy and with [Taliban-run] Afghanistan."[29]

In November 2000, a Chinese delegation from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, an influential think tank run by the Ministry of State Security, visited Kabul and Kandahar.[30] Next month Ambassador Lu Shulin with a three-man team visited Afghanistan and met a group of powerful Taliban leaders in Kabul and later met with the Taliban head Mullah Omar in Kandahar. Lu became the first and only senior non-Muslim country representative that Omar ever met. In exchange for China's requested assurances, Taliban hoped to gain a beneficial relief from the meet up with Chinese ambassador at the international level in the form of warding off of UN sanctions imposed on the group. UN sanctions included ban on travel, arms embargo, flights prohibition from Afghanistan, and mandatory closure of Taliban's overseas offices. Beijing did not veto the resolution but abstained, expressing concern "that the Afghan people would suffer from the measures proposed in the resolution."[31] Taliban's hopes of receiving a status of diplomatic recognition from China received a setback with the destruction of 8th century Buddha statues in Bamiyan.[32]

2001 to 2013

With the 9/11 terrorist attacks, China pledged support to US and offered to share intelligence as the US set out to overthrow the Taliban government. The FBI even set up its office in Beijing. Terrorist financing intelligence was also shared.[33] China welcomed the new interim government of Karzai in Afghanistan and after nine years, on 6 February 2002, formally re-opened its embassy in Kabul.[34] In 2003, when the then Afghan vice president Nimatullah Shahrani visited China, both sides signed the Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation, the Letter of Exchange on Undertaking the Project of Renovation of the Parwan Irrigation Project, and the Letter of Exchange on Donation of $1 million to the Afghan Reconstruction Fund by China.[35] Essentially 9/11 came as a

relief for China, and economically it picked from where it had left prior to the incident.

As part of Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction, the notable assistance Beijing offered was its pledge of $150 million aid in January 2002. Beijing also offered to grant $15 million and $1 million cash for Afghan Reconstruction Fund during Vice President Shahrani's visit to China (as mentioned above). The bilateral relations were further strengthened when in September 2004 Ambassador Sun Yuxi signed the Declaration on Encouraging Closer Trade, Transit, and Investment Cooperation between Governments of Signatories to the Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations on behalf of the Chinese government along with the Afghan government's representatives and five of the other neighbouring countries of Afghanistan.[36] Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai also tried to base his foreign policy approach on exerting autonomy from the US for which he sought to strike a balance among the foreign powers in Afghanistan by ensuring multiple sources of diplomatic and economic support.

Karzai made his first official visit to Beijing in January 2002 as Chairman of the Afghan Interim Government. In the following years, President Karzai met with former Chinese President Hu Jintao several times on the side-lines of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summits in 2004 (Tashkent), 2006 (Shanghai), 2008 (Dushanbe), 2009 (Yekaterinburg), 2010 (Tashkent), 2011 (Astana), 2012 (Beijing), and 2013 (Bishkek). Similarly, other Afghan high-ranking officials like former vice president Karim Khalili met with his Chinese counterparts in the SCO prime ministers meetings, and parliamentary meetings between the two countries etc.[37]

Despite Karzai's tilt towards China, the diplomatic bond between the two countries remained mere routine assurances and verbal pledges from Beijing due to its varying political interests and rising economic insecurity in Afghanistan. Chinese engagement began to change by 2011 with the Chinese officials starting

to take interest in the signed agreements at the international forums. Suddenly China appeared to be leading the summits on Afghanistan, and started taking keen interest in the Afghan situation to change the future course of the country by including regional neighbours. Chinese meetings with Taliban and push for workable peace negotiations between political forces of Afghanistan became more visible. This changed political approach of China in Afghanistan was viewed by some observers as geared towards resource-hunting. However, Chinese analysts uphold that China's only concern in Afghanistan is security. The catalyst for stepping up of Chinese diplomatic activities to build a stable Afghanistan was the anticipation of the gloomy year of 2014, and a realization that the Americans were leaving with a volcanic chaos for the regional neighbours to muddle through. Therefore, in 2012 came the noteworthy visit when the Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang visited Kabul. With this first high-level visit since 1966, the change in traditional diplomatic approach between the two countries became evident.[38]

Redefining diplomatic trends: 2014-present

The year 2014 witnessed new leadership with new vision and new regional stance in both Afghanistan and China. It brought a striking bilateral energetic shift, as China efficiently emerged from being a discreet neighbour to a greater visible one. Chinese activities in Afghanistan both at the bilateral and multilateral levels with high-level exchanges became more frequent. In February 2014, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Kabul to meet with his counterpart to ensure Chinese support for Afghanistan in attaining smooth political, security, and economic transitions. In July 2014, China appointed its first special envoy to Afghanistan Sun Yuxi, a Chinese diplomat with ambassadorial experience in Afghanistan and India. The special envoy was tasked

to save Afghanistan from becoming a refuge for South/Central Asian militants who could destabilize China's western provinces.[39]

Another major thread of China's diplomatic engagement in 2014 under the neighbourhood diplomacy has been to initiate regional and sub-regional security mechanisms via bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral dialogues with regional stakeholders. The 'Heart of Asia', a multilateral forum launched in 2011 in Istanbul, was endorsed by Chinese government which hosted its 4th Ministerial Conference on 31 October 2014.[40] The 'Heart of Asia' Istanbul process aimed at bringing all of Afghanistan's regional neighbours together to take on a greater role for a result-oriented security, political, and economic cooperation. Notably, the trilateral dialogues first established in February 2012 between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China had also spawned numerous consultative mechanisms such as Track-II Afghanistan-Pakistan-China Dialogue, first convened in August 2013, as well as India-China-Russia and China-Russia-Pakistan dialogues on Afghanistan. In March 2014, China and Russia also hosted a 6+1 Dialogue on the Afghan issue in Geneva. Presumably, China's idea behind such dialogue is to reach a consensus among the neighbouring countries on Afghanistan crisis as all of them would have to directly deal with the instability. These dialogues even include curbing transnational crimes like drug trafficking[41] which has funded militant groups' insurgency in Central Asia immensely. The PRC law enforcement organs have even adopted the name of 'Golden Crescent' for poppy-growing Afghanistan as it has become a serious challenge for the authorities to curb its flow.[42]

On the Afghanistan side, President Ashraf Ghani chose China as the destination of his first state visit abroad on 10 July 2015; publicly embracing the diplomatic vibrancy of China. President Xi pledged to beef up security cooperation between the two neighbours as a common interest of both the countries on the occasion. Xi appreciated Ghani for Afghanistan's support to China's Belt and Road initiative and proposed to have an extensive and inclusive

national reconciliation process on an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' basis by mediating between all the parties involved.[43] Hence, the cautionary approach of avoiding deep involvement in the geopolitical affairs of Afghanistan by confining its role to the economic domain in the country continues to play a dominant role.

Following the visit of Ghani, China's Vice President Li Yuanchao visited Afghanistan on 3 November 2015 to oversee the signing of three agreements on security, reconstruction, and education cooperation. The security agreement talked about the physical security of the Afghans, and ensured a security system at the gates of Kabul to check and investigate the traffic entering the city. The reconstruction agreement committed 500 million Yuan (approximately $79 million) to the Afghan Ministry of Urban Development as a first tranche of the total 2 billion Yuan (around $309 million) to support the construction of 10,000 apartments for the families of the Afghan National Security Forces and the police personnel who died in service while the remaining amount would be given to the government officers. With regard to the education agreement, China offered 1,500 scholarships to Afghan students.[44] China's efforts also became more visible in Afghanistan through efforts and interests like training Afghan security and police personnel,[45] 781 according to China's former foreign minister Yang Jiechi. China still refuses to commit troops to tackle insurgency though.[46]

In November 2014, Guo Shengkun, the state councillor in-charge of China's domestic security, visited Afghanistan to discuss combating ETIM. Same year in October, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, visited Afghanistan as a special envoy of the President of China. There had never been as many visits from top Chinese diplomatic, security, and military officials to Afghanistan as were seen in 2014.[47] In the past decade, Beijing had chosen to keep its official visits discreet. Mostly the Afghan side visited China rather than the high-ranking Chinese officials visiting Kabul. Perhaps China's top

leadership or officials wanted to be less visible to avoid becoming extremists' target or being labelled as associated with any one political group of Afghanistan.

Testing points for China in Afghanistan: Pursuit of interests and associated risks

Afghanistan's state of affairs poses a test for China either to pursue its national interests in the country or risk becoming a target of insurgent movement. The pugnacious fighting in Afghanistan has bumped into President Xi's newly formulated policy towards Afghanistan and the region. Taliban, a fractured movement, are still a resilient force, while the National Unity Government (NUG) of President Ghani is clueless on how to deal with the Taliban insurgency and control the potential rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the country. Hence, Ashraf Ghani seeks peace and assistance from regional China whereas Beijing is apprehensive due to the continuing chaos.

There is an on-going debate within Chinese analytical circles either to do more in Afghanistan or resist regional and international pressures. One segment of the political thinkers like Colonel Dai Xu represents a traditional noninterfering approach of China and prefers Beijing not to take part in the US war on terror because its fire could engulf China. Dai Xu is of the view that China's strategic interests are not much deeply involved, and Beijing should focus on its own interests. By contrast, another segment of analysts like Da Wei argues that 'China could do more' on both Afghanistan and Pakistan without the use of force. Sun Zhe stresses that US war on terror has given China a 'strategic space' which must be carefully considered.[48]

Today's Afghanistan presents the following serious and unavoidable concerns linked to the national priorities of China in Afghanistan:

Security: A national interest with threat pulsations

Containment of Uighurs and ETIM

The top priority and a fundamental concern of China is to maintain stability on its western borders and prevent Uighur separatists from making contact with the terrorists based or being trained in Afghanistan. China fears two-pronged security concerns from Uighur militancy: first, a possible unrest amongst its Uighur population in Xinjiang; and second, a possible terrorist attack carried out by the ETIM elsewhere in China.[49] To China, the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), and the ETIM have strong links with Afghanistan. China accuses these organizations of carrying out terrorist attacks within the country and also of recruiting and training Uighur separatists to fight for an independent Xinjiang. In the past, China followed a narrow approach towards shielding its territories in the north-western province of Xinjiang from the influence of destabilizing elements from Afghanistan.[50]

In October 2009, senior Al-Qaeda operative Abu Yahya al-Libi, who died in a US drone strike in June 2012, had called on Uighurs to launch jihad against 'Chinese infidels' for reclaiming control over their land in Xinjiang by striking back at the intolerant Chinese.[51] Waves of serious terrorist attacks then followed within China beyond Xinjiang. Most notable among those were massive riots in Urumqi in 2009, explosion on Tiananmen Square in 2013 before the third Central Committee Plenum, mass stabbing at Kumming railway station in 2014 before a parliamentary session, and double-suicide bombing at Urumqi railway station on the last visiting day of President Xi Jinping in 2014. Such attacks have raised highest security concerns about TIP and ETIM involvement in China.[52]

Taliban in the past provided ETIM with safe haven in Afghanistan. According to ETIM's propaganda, it was involved in fighting against The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). It is difficult to identify the

specific affiliations of Uighurs militants in Afghanistan as all of them are not associated with ETIM; some have joined IMU as well. Attacks in China have been forcefully dealt with by the authorities. Hundreds of Xinjiang-based separatists have been arrested and charged for extremist propaganda. That's why China pushed Pakistan to ban IMU and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)—and to operate against these militant organizations and other violent non-state actors who propagate anti-Chinese orientations—alongside Pakistan's own fight against armed groups.[53]

From time to time, since the emergence of Taliban, China has tried to seek assurances from Afghanistan-based militant groups against supporting Uighur militants destabilizing Xinjiang. After 9/11 too, China quietly maintained interactive relations with Taliban leaders to seek out guarantees on the concerned subject. China has based its rationale towards Taliban on the principle of acknowledging them as a core political actor in Afghanistan that would pursue its goals centred on Afghanistan only.[54] In 2002, the brother of a top Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani visited Beijing. The pre-9/11 understanding between the two maintained at the time which assured Taliban's commitment to keeping a distance from Uighur militant groups in exchange for Beijing's treatment of Taliban as a legitimate political group rather than a terrorist outfit via careful expression when referred to.[55]

Zhao Huasheng views a stable and peaceful Xinjiang as the starting point for China's Afghanistan policy because of the several threats emanating out of Afghanistan. Threat of enduring relations between the separatists in Xinjiang and Taliban remains a challenge to Xinjiang's security. Other threats include spill-over effects of terrorism, destabilization, religious extremism, and drug trafficking within Xinjiang. The Chinese officials call them 'three evil forces', i.e., separatism, extremism, and terrorism.[56] Beijing fears unchecked spread of radicalization into Central Asia and then Xinjiang. China views Afghanistan as an

opportune station for rival or competing great powers to pursue their broader agendas including encirclement of China. For years China kept its patience with the US presence and combat operations in its neighbourhood in the hope of seeing it defeat terrorism and extremist groups in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a crucial centre for anti-terrorist campaigns because it was the first battleground for the post-9/11 war on terror, and remains a spiritual pillar of terrorism in the region. If it fails to achieve triumph then the terrorist groups would not only expand further, but could stage a comeback as witnessed lately.[57]

Troop deployment question

Attached to the security threats are the regional and international expectations from China to fill in the security gaps left by the international players. Beijing has offered to increase provision of equipment and support to Afghan security forces but its official status quo on no troop deployment remains unchanged. On the other hand, many Chinese policy thinkers are probing into the efficacy of current policy. Having deeper realization of the huge risks involved in committing profoundly in Afghanistan, some scholars believe that Beijing has no choice but to bear the cost of being a major powerful neighbour.[58] Beijing has not contributed to the stabilization and counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. But if Uighur militant groups in Afghanistan establish deeper safe havens, and none of Beijing's local partners are able or willing to extend assistance against them, China might set a new precedent in its counter-terrorism strategy and carry out operations beyond its borders.[59] Until then, China's foreign policy on security and military engagement is clear on maintaining less involvement with no troops on ground policy.

Another likely possibility of Chinese troop deployment in Afghanistan, if ever considered, would be under the auspices of a UN peacekeeping mission. Despite the level of concern attached to security with regard to Afghanistan,

China has committed to providing only military assistance. So far the only assistance has been a mine-clearing training course for around a dozen Afghan officers by the PLA. Beijing has even been apathetic to becoming associated with the US and NATO forces committed in Afghanistan. Moreover, even the possible proposal of opening up a logistical route into Afghanistan from western China to transit nonlethal military supplies by road via Pakistan was never approved by Beijing.[60]

President Ghani used the China-Pakistan friendship card with China in a matter-of-factly manner to seek Chinese support in pressurizing Pakistan on curbing militancy. Chinese government however realizes the limitations of Islamabad with regard to pressurizing the rogue elements unleashed in the region and has hence opted for Islamabad's suggestion of engaging with the Taliban and other violent non-state actors.[61] Rather than committing to broader international security apparatus, Beijing has shown active interest in getting the Afghan government to strike a deal with the Taliban and is also willing to act as a mediator for the purpose. Therefore, security remains the main underlying reason for China to establish and maintain contacts with the Taliban.

Multilateral framework: A security shield

Another aspect of China's security interest vis-à-vis Afghanistan is to preferably work within a multilateral framework. This strategy covers Beijing's fear of being at the frontline in the eyes of insurgents and is compatible with its non-interference doctrine as well. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been an apt choice for China to pursue interests in Afghanistan. Since April 2011, SCO has incorporated Afghanistan's instability as one of the top security concerns. During the November 2012 Kabul-Islamabad-Beijing trilateral dialogue, the parties had agreed on seeking a regional solution to the Afghan war while acknowledging the key role SCO as a regional mechanism could play in

solving the sprouting security, political, and economic challenges.[62] A vital aspect that requires assessment is whether the SCO is capable of replacing ISAF and addressing the security challenges in Afghanistan or not? The possibility of SCO taking such role is least possible as it is not a pact-based defence organization like NATO. It also lacks internal consensus on extending security assistance to Afghanistan. Raffaello Pantucci, Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, defined SCO as a "hugely ineffective organization."[63] While China may highlight SCO as part of its Afghan strategy, it might not work successfully. The Central Asian states are still not capable of providing for their own security and look towards Russia. China itself is not willing to extend military support to Afghanistan, so unanimity is unlikely in case of joining counter-insurgency operations like ISAF.[64]

China, Taliban, and the idea of national reconciliation

China had welcomed the breakthrough in the Qatar process but was left disappointed when Karzai derailed the process. Support for national reconciliation between Taliban and Kabul has become a fixture in China's diplomatic activity in the post-2014 scenario. Since last year, China has expanded its regular direct contacts with Taliban despite the fact that the movement has branched out into factions. Taliban representatives held meetings with Chinese officials both in Pakistan and in China. To Beijing, as long as the process remains Afghan-led and aims at promoting peace, it is willing to provide a neutral venue for the sake of its own security concerns. In May 2015, China for the first time hosted talks on its own soil, in Urumqi, between the Afghan government and representatives of Taliban factions to plan preliminary consultations about the future negotiations. Taliban and the Afghan government have decided to restart negotiations from scratch which indicates failure of previous efforts.[65] For now, the peace talks are still focusing on establishing a roadmap for future negotiations. China is willing

to put its weight behind promoting these direct talks. The previous round of talks held in 2015 collapsed due to a sudden disclosure of the death of former Taliban chief Mullah Omar.[66]

Quadrilateral Coordination Group

Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the US have initiated a Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) that urges Taliban militants to negotiate to bring an end to Afghanistan crisis. China is using its limited influence to broker peace talks in Kabul.[67] The first round of QCG was held in Islamabad, second in Kabul, third in Islamabad again,[68] while the fourth round was recently held in Kabul on 23 February 2016.[69] The talks mainly focus on a roadmap, a documented process, as a guideline to lay the groundwork for direct dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban. The draft has envisaged a three-stage process, the pre-negotiation period, direct peace talks with Taliban groups, and the implementation phase.[70] Taliban are not part of the QCG talks. Pakistan's Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz provided the list of Taliban representatives willing to participate in the peace process in the first round of the QCG. He put an emphasis on not attaching pre-conditions for talks.[71] The latest round set conditions for the final direct peace talks between Kabul and Taliban though. A joint communiqué issued by the QCG invited 'all Taliban and other groups' to travel to Islamabad to participate in the talks through their authorized representatives.[72] During the meeting, Afghan officials handed over a list of 10 leaders belonging to different Taliban groups and the Haqqani Network to Pakistan. Afghan government asked Pakistan to bring those influential Taliban leaders to the negotiating table.[73] To ensure security measures, a settlement between Afghanistan and Pakistan was reached on using force against Taliban members opposing the peace talks.[74]

All the initiatives aside, the reality on ground hasn't stopped haunting the peace participants. There are many serious challenges that need to be sorted out

first to make the peace process work. One big challenge on the part of China is whether it can achieve peace by using its influence on the Taliban to start negotiating. Would it be enough for China to achieve peace without the use of military pressure, while focusing only on being a mediator and venue facilitator, leaving Afghans to take the lead stance? Analysts are sceptical about China's mediatory role beyond its own borders and whether it can succeed where powerful actors like US, NATO, and regional Afghan neighbours have failed so far.

Taliban: Post-Mullah Omar

Besides concerns over Chinese mediatory role, there is an issue of rising power struggle within the Taliban which has raised doubts about who would represent the group if and when talks with the Afghan government would resume. The confirmation of Mullah Omar's death by both the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan Intelligence brought to surface the confrontations within the group and ambiguity among the participating countries. Taliban, under Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the successor of Mullah Omar, have further become fractious.[75] A splinter group headed by Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund, which rejects Mansour's authority, has dismissed any talks under the mediation of the US, China, or Pakistan.[76] Although Mansour's faction has retained its office in Qatar, he and his field commanders showed no interest in joining the peace talks.[77] The group's fracturing under Mansour has weakened the prospects of the preferred outcome strived for by Beijing, i.e., a negotiated political settlement between the Taliban and President Ghani's government. In addition, to demean the future peace prospects, the splinter groups have escalated extreme violence. Taliban militants have reportedly launched offensives with just 100 or more men in 41 districts in 2014, which rose to 65 in 2015. In 2015 alone, Taliban launched three major coordinated offensives in Kunduz, Faryab, and Helmand; each involved at

least 1,000 men. Capturing of the urban centre of Kunduz by Taliban for two weeks in the post-US invasion period is alarming for the possibility of any future peace negotiations.[78]

Therefore, to expect the militants to join the current round of peace talks being planned by China would be too ambitious. It might be expected that Taliban would obviate from opting for dialogue now when they are strategically in a stronger position on ground once again. For instance, as Imtiaz Gul, Executive Director of the Center for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad, said that there were 'practically no incentives' to offer Taliban field commanders.[79] Furthermore, questions surrounding Taliban motives and fractious organization are uncertain because Mansour's ability to convince others to join peace negotiations is debatable. Questions surround whether China too would remain committed patiently to the peace and mediation policy; if yes, for how long? Another major obstacle is the present NUG in Afghanistan which not only lacks coherent policies on handling Taliban but also ethnic balance.

ISIS/Daesh and Taliban: Coalition vs competition

Another challenge to peace process is the budding affair of allegiance between the splinter groups of Taliban and Daesh militants. The association of elements of banned IMU with ISIS also worries Beijing about the future of peace negotiations and the idea of a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Beijing has got involved in a situation where the risks attached with peace negotiations are too high, because only a segment of Taliban is willing to negotiate while the representatives who have broader support within the movement are still absent.[80] ISIS has been reported to have found a new base in Afghanistan, other than Iraq and Syria. Former Taliban militants joining ISIS are commonly referred to by the US as either 'reflagging' or 'rebranding'. It is estimated that there are about 1,000 to 3,000 fighters who are launching attacks

like the recent bombing of the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad. Perhaps because of the optimism and stern push for peace, Pakistan is confronted by ISIS. According to US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, ISIS is building 'little nests' in Afghanistan's east. The complexity of the current situation is that Taliban are also battling ISIS for influence.[81]

While keeping the worrisome ground realities in mind, Afghans have started having high hopes from China. An adviser to the High Peace Council (HPC) Muhammad Ismail Qasimyar expressed hope that Beijing could help Afghanistan by playing a role in ending the on-going conflict. The HPC considers Chinese efforts in the reconciliation process as both result-oriented and productive.[82] The question in the minds of the political thinkers is whether China can end Afghan conflict? If yes, to what extent? The reconciliation process of Afghanistan is a very complicated affair which is difficult to lever even by China. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society with many stakeholders in its on-going war and peace setup. Besides the multiple internal factions, these stakeholders also include Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the US and the West. The players having diverse interests have employed different approaches that lead the process nowhere in realistic terms. Hence, the peace approach required for credible outcome is to have a continuous and sincere peace support among the stakeholders with a will to gear efforts towards reducing trust deficits.

For China, diplomacy and the peace process of Afghanistan are pursued likewise. China due to its neutral policies in Afghanistan has become a focus of many hopeful eyes. Although Beijing is determined and plans to stick to being a facilitator in the talks—as it is not party to the war—it is for Kabul to bargain efficaciously with the insurgent groups. The Chinese like the idea of acquiring the status of peacemaker in Afghanistan by convincing Taliban to accept a deal that the US failed to persuade them on over the past decade. China will be involved only to provide a neutral venue for the parties to hold talks though. It will sit back

anxiously for a peace plan from President Ghani with military support from Pakistan. Afghanistan is expected to hold parliamentary and district elections in October this year. A breakthrough in negotiations is imperative by this summer; otherwise all the efforts of Pakistan and China will be overshadowed by political instability in Afghanistan. One will have to admit though that a breakthrough with Taliban is certainly too much to anticipate.[83]

Economic/commercial interests

The One Belt One Road initiative of President Xi Jinping mainly targets China's troubled western regions. To counter the Uighur unrest in Xinjiang, the central government in Beijing has initiated a two-pronged strategy: first, as mentioned above, Beijing clamps down hard on militant activities; and second, it focuses on economic development to provide employment opportunities and improve socio-economic conditions of Uighurs in order to drive out discontent among the poor. Beijing views improved socio-economic order as the best remedy for the menace of terrorism and radicalization of society. The Silk Road Economic Belt initiative as part of its 'March West' policy requires a stable, secure, and economically flourishing Afghanistan to complement the development of China's western regions.[84] The idea is to provide Afghans with economic benefits and to teach them to become self-sufficient as well for joining in and benefiting from the region's broader economic development.

With an exit-America-enter-China perception in Afghanistan, both the countries have started to view each other as substantial partners. Energy-hungry Chinese economy seeks energy security from the neighbourhood as well. With abundant natural resources in the form of oil, natural gas, copper, iron ore, and other rare earth metals, Afghanistan provides China with an opportunity to diversify its energy and mineral sources. Kabul is hoping to go through a process of revitalization of its economy via resources to ensure reduction in dependency

on foreign aid. President Ghani plans to make energy the bulwark of Afghan economy. He stresses on reviving the significance of Afghanistan as a 'hub of regional trade, transit, and peace' via China's ambitious Silk Road trade route. But profits for Afghanistan via the Silk Road are plausible only if China draws a new access route from Iran's Chabahar port via Afghanistan alongside Pakistan's Gwadar port to access West Asian countries, and Africa.[85]

So far, in comparison to other economic contributors, China's aid to Afghanistan has been too little. In 2013, Sino-Afghan bilateral trade was estimated to be $338 million, a tiny percentage of a much larger Chinese international trade.[86] From 2002 to 2010, China's aid to the country totalled 1.3 billion Yuan (about $205 million) only. In 2011, China provided an additional 150 million Yuan (around $24 million) of free assistance. China assisted Afghanistan in the construction of infrastructure projects such as the State Hospital in Kabul and Parwan irrigation project, human resource training for more than 800 Afghan officials and technical staff in China, and exemption of export tariffs in 2010 whereby 95 per cent of the taxes on commodities imported from Afghanistan were gradually abolished.[87] The biggest foreign investment contract in Afghanistan's history of $3.4 billion has been won by Chinese companies. It was for the development of a copper mine at Mes Aynak, 40 km south of Kabul in Logar province, where in 2007 Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCC) won a competitive tender for a 30-year lease. It is estimated to contain world's second-largest copper deposits worth about $100 billion, which could generate revenue for the Afghan government in the form of about 20 per cent royalty and a bonus payment of about $808 million for granting exploit rights. The World Bank estimated that Aynak could create 4,500 direct, 7,600 indirect and 62,500 induced jobs. Unfortunately, due to insecurity and a later discovery of a 1,400 years old Buddhist monastery on the site has thrown back the mine development. In late 2014, MCC tried to negotiate a postponement

until 2019 with President Ghani while Afghan officials tried to convince the company over on-site security guarantees.[88]

In 2011, China's largest state-owned oil firm, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its Afghan partner Watan Oil and Gas bid successfully for a $400 million exploration license to develop three oil blocks in Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan. CNPC agreed to pay generously through construction of a refinery, 15 per cent royalties on oil, 20 per cent revenue tax, and 50 per cent or more tax on profits that could approximately generate annual tax revenues of more than $300 million. Regrettably, this project also came under similar threats by insurgents, and its engineers were harassed on site by men loyal to Vice President General Dostum which led to a halt in construction.[89]

Another project that China won in the country involved exploiting oil and natural gas in the western provinces of Sari Pul and Faryab, the first contract allowed by the Afghan government for any foreign companies to exploit these resources. Under the deal, signed in December 2011, the Afghan government will receive 70 per cent from sale profits. Chinese companies have thus established a footing in Afghanistan to benefit from future regional economic growth. The ground realities however made Chinese firms and government rethink their future investment as they responded to violence with freezing of activities. For future economic expansion, China looks for stability in Afghanistan. On bilateral trade, the Chinese government offered Afghanistan tariff-free deal on about 278 commodities starting from 2006.[90]

Three main factors would shape Chinese economic engagement with Afghanistan: First, and most recognizable is the security situation in Afghanistan, since the protection of Chinese economic projects and personnel depends on it.[91] So far both have been in danger. The largest Chinese investment of Mes Aynak in Afghanistan had been attacked almost 19 times and many of the Chinese engineers came under direct threats of abduction that made the staff depart due to

the insecure environment. For years, China had followed discreet diplomacy in dealing with the protection of its nationals on Afghan soil but President Xi Jinping has taken a firmer stance. In 2013, a joint statement signed with President Karzai mentioned Afghan willingness for undertaking tangible measures for improving the security of Chinese institutions and people in Afghanistan. Similarly, during his visit to Beijing in October 2014, President Ghani was praised by President Xi for effective measures by Afghanistan for ensuring the safety of Chinese institutions and personnel in the country.[92] Therefore, if the security situation remains feasible, China would focus on investing in Afghanistan with more economic aid flowing, otherwise an already restrained Beijing would withdraw its investments. Additionally, it would persist to focus on other options of collaboration like in the education and agriculture sectors where Chinese physical presence may not be required. Beijing cannot risk its reputation and economic status because of the instability in Afghanistan.[93]

Second, the attitude of Chinese companies is towards resource investment projects in Afghanistan. The concern is that China's contemporary resource projects in Afghanistan are facing setbacks due to Taliban attacks, and future of resource investment looks challengeable. Chinese government does not necessarily have influence on all the decisions regarding resource extraction. If the ground situation remains viable, not only would Chinese economic aid expand, the firms would also take risks of aiding projects in Afghanistan. Chinese firms have technical and local knowledge for competitive bidding for resource projects. Investment in unexplored mineral deposits has significant potential for Afghanistan's economy through tax revenue and creation of job opportunities for the locals.[94] Chinese companies have also invested in small information technology projects like telecommunications which are likely to continue. Third, for China's economic engagement in Afghanistan, a suggestive attitude of Afghan government will significantly help. China prefers to deliver economic aid

according to the need of and requests from the Afghan government as it has been a consistent pattern with other countries as well. In fact, with the Afghan government's suggestion of projects, it will have some influence over them as well.[95]

The point whether these limited investments will achieve Chinese aim of economic engagement in Afghanistan is debatable. So far, China's involvement in Afghanistan's economic development has not contributed much to improving both the country's security and socio-economic conditions. On the contrary, Chinese projects have come under direct attacks despite Chinese companies' efforts and risk-taking in fragile security situation. Nevertheless, Chinese analysts support their country's current approach of engaging with Afghanistan economically even under grave threats. Western critics however point towards China's limited and supposedly self-interested investment strategy which focuses mainly on utilizing Afghanistan's natural resources via free-riding because of the security assistance provided by the US and NATO allies.

Can China achieve what the US and West could not?

China's influential and more active role in Afghanistan's future peace and socio-economic development will surely make a difference as Beijing's foreign policy is very different from that of Washington. In its dealings with Afghanistan, China has shown its usual diplomatic policy of directly working with the Afghan government while maintaining a balance between and distance from other political actors like the Taliban. Eventually, everything depends on how much China is willing to give in support of Afghanistan even for its own security and economic interests. So far China has remained an observer and has not actually contributed in the country with regard to conflict resolution and planning stability. China is yet to be tried if it is willing to take the test. Afghanistan is seen both as an opportunity and a challenge. Clearly peace and stability in Afghanistan will

become an opportunity for Beijing to pursue its interests, otherwise the country will be put on the hold option. If the peace process derails once again and the uncontrollable chaos spreads, without even a second thought, China would side-line Afghanistan from all of its economic ventures like the One Belt One Road initiative. It will carry on with its broader development plans with the rest of the regional neighbours though. The decision would be due to the lesson Chinese learnt from their past economic experiences in Afghanistan where they realized that no matter how much dance they had with the Afghan political ducks, their projects and workers still faced serious security vulnerability even in less violent parts of the country. At one point, China had halted its economic activity due to such threats and it can do so again without hesitation. Hence cautious baby steps are on equal footing with the expansion of economic ventures. Beijing-Kabul engagement is driven more by Beijing's own genuine national interests and future gains than concerns for Afghanistan's situation. China in no circumstance can take a risk on compromising its rising regional status in exchange for winning the title of a responsible state.

One crucial strategy that might work for China—unlike the US and others—is the convergence of interests between Beijing and Islamabad. Pakistan army could secure political primacy across the Durand Line with China's assistance. Moreover, Chinese diplomacy is based on patience and cautiousness. China does not wish to condition the terms of peace process nor does it dictate its own ideas for future peace dealings between the Afghan parties to the conflict. US for the past decade had been looking for a winning trophy in Afghanistan while China has been interested only in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan in its neighbourhood. China aims to make sure that it gets the support of all regional states in its peace efforts and wants them to look upon China's role in a friendly manner. For this, China has even begun to muster regional support through a number of group meetings, such as trilateral talks between Afghanistan, China,

and Pakistan as well as the US. China has also hosted talks between regional countries called 6+1 involving Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and US.[96] Thus, China wants to ensure regional multilateralism instead of unilateralism. As a matter of fact, China is perceived as a great power with increasing influence in the region and with a potential to contribute towards regional stabilization. Despite the deep-seated insecurities and vulnerabilities sensed by China in its western region, where it feels threatened by internal anxieties, Beijing has tactfully stimulated confidence among regional neighbours, especially Afghanistan, by opting for a successful 'Empty Fortress' strategy.[97]

Conclusion

The crux of the recent evolution of Sino-Afghan bilateral relations is the convergence of interests and needs. Afghanistan needs Chinese financial and economic aid and technical support whereas it also seems to complement China's regional diplomacy, and its future geostrategic and geopolitical scheme. Both China and Afghanistan have been victims of imperial geopolitical games by outside powers. While China has strongly emerged as a power from the past imperial influences, Afghanistan is still deeply engrossed in fighting with the enemies within and outside of the country to bring about peace and stability. Therefore, the changing bilateral ties between Afghanistan and China would be beneficial for Afghanistan, but they are also crucial for China. The evolving Chinese interests in Afghanistan were not solely due to the draw-down of NATO in 2014 but also because of the demands of the emerging Chinese Dream and regional power status. It is in China's national interest to assist Afghanistan so that an unstable and distressed neighbour—infiltrated with homegrown as well as regional terrorists and a proxy battleground for regional contention—does not become an obstruction to China's rise as a peaceful and responsible power.

China's principle of 'non-interference' in the internal affairs of other countries in the absence of a direct threat is at the core of internal resistance to greater Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, particularly in the security sector. While mutual agreement on non-interference is in place, there are constant debates going on about whether it is in China's interest to expand its involvement in Afghanistan or not. This very principle of non-interference has until now kept China in a beneficial position in terms of direct or indirect interaction with various political forces of Afghanistan and for providing a negotiating platform for national reconciliation. For the past few years, diplomatic dealings have become direct but without giving up the essence of the principle. Jiang Zemin magnified Deng Xiaoping's statement by stressing that China should "bide its time, hide its brightness, not seek leadership, but do some things."[98] Hence, the scholars opted for reconstruction support in Afghanistan instead of committing to security support in the country.[99] Beijing opted for endorsing national reconciliation process than taking part in the US-backed combat operations. China is well-trained in the practice of strategic patience and this approach will most likely be adopted by China in Afghanistan.[100]

China, with an advantage of diplomatic influence both internationally and regionally, in addition to a rising economic capital, cannot afford to remain indifferent to the Afghan situation threatening China's national interests and future development goals. However, being a new player in bringing solutions to regional issues like Afghanistan, China lacks experience in resolving internal conflicts in conflict-affected states as it has always regarded such issues as the internal matters of each country. Sceptics are worried about the scope of Chinese regional policy with regard to handling complex and volatile internal issues of Afghanistan. It is quite evident that Chinese diplomacy and notions of dialogue-based dispute-resolution is not applicable in case of Afghanistan and also not enough to bring peace. Presumably, China itself is still not ready to take on full

responsibility in Afghanistan to pursue its decades-long Chinese Dream. In coming years too, China will focus on securing its own borders while avoiding to take sides or unnecessarily provoking any leading Afghan party. It cannot afford to see its dream getting burnt in Afghan quagmire.

Notes and References

[1] Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), p.117.

[2] Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, <http://af.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxw/t1287619.htm>.

[3] "The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence," Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Houston, 28 June 2004, <http://houston.china-consulate.org/eng/nv/t140964.htm>.

[4] Thomas Heberer, "China in 2013: The Chinese Dream's Domestic and Foreign Policy Shifts," *Asian Survey*, The University of California Press, Vol.24, No.1, January-February 2014, p.119.

[5] Ibid., pp.119-121.

[6] "Principles of China's Foreign Policy," *Asia for Educators*, 2009, <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1950_forpol_principles.htm>.

[7] Emily Feng, "Marching West: Regional Integration in Central Asia", *The Huffington Post*, 15 March 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/china-hands/marching-west-regional-integration_b_4581020.html>.

[8] Heberer, op.cit., pp.119-121.

[9] Michael D. Swaine, "Xi Jinping on Chinese Foreign Relations: The Governance of China and Chinese Commentary," <http://www.hoover.org/ sites/default/files/ research/docs/clm48ms.pdf>.

[10] Ankit Panda, "Reflecting on China's Five Principles, 60 years later," *The Diplomat*, 26 June 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/reflecting-on-chinas-five-principles-60-years-later/>.

[11] Zhao Huasheng, "China and Afghanistan: China's interests, stances and perspectives," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, March 2012, <http://csis.org/files/ publication/120322_Zhao_ChinaAfghan_web.pdf>.

[12] "Afghanistan-China Boundary," *International Boundary Study*, The Geographer Office of Strategic and Functional Research Bureau of Intelligence Research, 1 May 1969, No.89.

[13] Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis*…, op.cit., p.121.

[14] Afghanistan-USSR Boundary, International Boundary Study, No. 26 Revised, 15 September 1983, <http://archive.law.fsu.edu/library/collection/ LimitsinSeas/IBS026. pdf>.

[15] Fact Box-Key Facts about the Wakhan Corridor", *Reuters*, 12 June 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/06/12/idUSSP389507>.

[16] Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis*…, op.cit., p.122.

[17] <http://ramana-studypoint.blogspot.com/2011/08/wakhan-corridor-wakhjir-pass. html>.

[18] Musa Khan Jalalzai, "Communist China and Afghanistan," in *The Foreign Policy of Afghanistan*, (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003), p.385.

[19] "Afghanistan-China Boundary," op.cit.

[20] Jalalzai, "Communist China and Afghanistan," op.cit., pp.385-386.

[21] Ibid., p.386.

[22] Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis.*.., op.cit., p.123.

[23] Ibid., 123-124.

[24] Ibid., pp.125-126.

[25] Ibid., p.127.

[26] Ibid., p.129.

[27] Ibid., p.128.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Jalalzai, "Communist China and Afghanistan," op.cit., pp.386-387.

[30] Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis.*.., op.cit., pp.128-129.

[31] Ibid., p.129.

[32] Ibid., p.130.

[33] Ibid.

[34] "China to reopen its embassy in Kabul after 8 years," *People's Daily Online*, 21 December 2001, <http://en.people.cn/200112/21/eng20011221_87217. shtml>.

[35] "China's Relations with Countries having Diplomatic Relation with China," in *China's Foreign Affairs*, Department of Policy Planning Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, (Beijing: World Affairs Press, Ed. 2004), 76-77.

[36] Ibid., p.77.

[37] Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner and Michael Beckley, "China's Strategy towards South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress," *RAND Corporation*, Research Report, 2014, 55.

[38] Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar, "China's Evolving Stance on Afghanistan: Towards More Robust Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," *The Polish Institute of Strategic Studies*, Strategic File No.2258, October 2014.

[39] Ankit Panda, "China Announces Special Envoy for Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, 19 July 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/china-announces-special-envoy-for-afghanistan/>.

[40] "The Fourth 'Heart of Asia' – Istanbul Process Ministerial Conference," 31 October 2014, <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/ uploads/2014/04/Fourth-HoA-Ministerial-Conference.pdf>.

[41] Dirk van der Kley, "China's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan," *Lowy Institute*, October 2014, <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/chinas-foreign-policy-in-afghanistan_0.pdf>.

[42] Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, "China's Strategy towards South …," op.cit., p.54.

[43] "Xi pledges closer China-Afghanistan security cooperation," *Xinhuanet*, 10 July 2015, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/10/c_134401664. htm>.

[44] Ankit Panda, "Chinese Vice President visits Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, 4 November 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/chinese-vice-president-visits-afghanistan/>.

[45] Szczudlik-Tatar, "China's Evolving Stance on Afghanistan …," op.cit.

[46] Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, "China's 'Af-Pak' hinterland," Adelphi Series, 54:451, 2014, p.74.

[47] Zhao Huasheng, "What is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 8 March 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/08/what-is-behind-china-s-growing-attention-to-afghanistan>.

[48] Elizabeth Wishnick, "Post-2014 Afghanistan policy and the limitations of China's global role," *Central Asian Affairs*, Brill Nijhoff, 2014, No.1, p.142.

[49] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Daniel Trombly and Nathaniel Barr, "China's Post-2014 Role in Afghanistan," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 2014, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/publications/China_ Report.pdf>, p.13.

[50] Szczudlik-Tatar, "China's Evolving Stance on Afghanistan …," op.cit.

[51] Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel, "*China's 'Af-Pak' hinterland*," op.cit., pp.82-83.

[52] Szczudlik-Tatar, "China's Evolving Stance on Afghanistan …," op.cit.

[53] Gartenstein-Ross, Trombly and Barr, "China's Post-2014 Role…," op.cit., pp.12-14.

[54] Michael Clarke, "In Afghanistan, China is Put to the Test," *The National Interest*, 18 August 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/afghanistan-china-put-the-test-13605>.

[55] Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis.*.., op.cit., pp.134-135.

[56] Wishnick, op.cit., (ref.48), p.141.

[57] Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, "Post-2014 Afghanistan policy…," op.cit., p.54.

[58] Clarke, "In Afghanistan, China is Put to the Test," op.cit.

[59] Gartenstein-Ross, Trombly and Barr, "China's Post-2014 Role…," op.cit.

[60] Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, "China's Strategy towards South …," op.cit., pp.58-60.

[61] Gartenstein-Ross, Trombly and Barr, "China's Post-2014 Role…," op.cit., pp.14-15.

[62] "Trilateral Meeting: China backs Pak-Afghan appeal for peace talks," *The Express Tribune*, 30 November 2012, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/473087/ trilateral-meeting-china-backs-pak-afghan-appeal-for-peace-talks/>.

[63] Gartenstein-Ross, Trombly and Barr, "China's Post-2014 Role…," op.cit., p.18.

[64] Ibid., pp.17-18.

[65] Petr Topychkanov, "Secret meeting brings Taliban to China," *Russia & India Report*, 28 May 2015, <https://in.rbth.com/blogs/2015/05/28/secret_ meeting_brings_taliban_ to_china_43383.html>.

[66] Kathy Gannon, "Afghanistan meeting ends with call for talks with Taliban," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 06 February 2016, <http://www.csmonitor. com/World/ Middle-East/2016/0206/Afghanistan-meeting-ends-with-call-for-talks-with-Taliban>.

[67] Zhen Liu, "Afghan foreign minister's China trip is a chance for peace talks," *South China Morning Post*, 26 January 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/ china/diplomacy-defence/article/1905275/afghan-foreign-ministers-china-trip-chance-peace-talks>.

[68] Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Roadmap for Afghan peace talks likely today," *Dawn News*, 6 February 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1237772/roadmap-for-afghan-peace-talks-likely-today>.

[69] Mateen Haider, "Pakistan to host peace talks between Afghan govt and Taliban," *Dawn News*, 23 February 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/ 1241416/pakistan-to-host-peace-talks-between-afghan-govt-and-taliban>.

[70] Syed, "Roadmap for Afghan peace talks…," op.cit.

[71] Pablo Novarro, "First meeting of Quadrilateral Coordination Group held in Islamabad," *Equilibrio Informativo*, 12 January 2016, <http://equilibrioinformativo.com/2016/01/first-meeting-of-quadrilateral-coordination-group-held-in/>.

[72] Haider, "Pakistan to host peace talks…," op.cit.

[73] Tahir Khan, "Afghan peace process: Kabul wants 10 'influential' Taliban on the table," *The Express Tribune*, 28 February 2016, <http://tribune.com.pk/ story/1055758/afghan-peace-process-kabul-wants-10-influential-taliban-on-the-table/>.

[74] "Afghanistan peace talks held in Pakistan," *Al-Jazeera*, 11 January 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/afghan-peace-talks-resume-pakistan-160111045824649.html>.

[75] Hashim Safi, "Taliban say Omar death covered up to wait out Nato drawdown," *Yahoo News*, 31 August 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/afghan-taliban-admit-covering-mullah-omars-death-074745751.html>.

[76] "Afghanistan peace talks held in Pakistan," op.cit.

[77] Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Straight Talk on Afghan Peace Talks," *Foreign Policy*, 05 February 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/05/straight-talk-on-afghan-peace-talks/>.

[78] Zack Beauchamp, "The dam is about to break: Why 2016 could be a very bad year for Afghanistan," *Vox World*, 25 January 2016, <http://www.vox.com/ 2016/1/25/ 10816330/afghanistan-2016-lyall>.

[79] Gannon, "Afghanistan meeting ends…," op.cit.

[80] Clarke, "In Afghanistan, China is Put to the Test," op.cit.

[81] Jennifer Williams, "ISIS is getting stronger in Afghanistan: How it happened and why it matters," *Vox World*, 26 January 2016, <http://www.vox.com/ 2016/1/26/ 10816576/isis-in-afghanistan>.

[82] M. Nadeem Alizai, "China can play role in peace, but Afghans must lead process to end," *Global Times*, 26 January 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/ content/ 904039.shtml>.

[83] Jennifer Williams, "They are riding a tiger that they cannot control: Pakistan and the future of Afghanistan," *Vox World*, 27 January 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/ 1/27/10834882/vanda-felbab-brown-interview>.

[84] Shannon Tiezzi, "China's Prescription for Troubled Xinjiang: The New Silk Road," *The Diplomat*, 19 November 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/ 11/chinas-prescription-for-troubled-xinjiang-the-new-silk-road/>.

[85] Rajeshwari Krishnamurthy, "China in Afghanistan: Is the engagement really a Win-Win?," *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 20 November 2014, <http://www.ipcs.org/article/china/china-in-afghanistan-is-the-engagement-really-a-win-win-4751.html>.

[86] Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel, "China's 'Af-Pak' hinterland," op.cit., p.72.

[87] Huasheng, "China and Afghanistan," op.cit.

[88] Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel, "China's 'Af-Pak' hinterland," op.cit., pp.69-70.

[89] Ibid., 70-71.

[90] Huasheng, "China and Afghanistan," op.cit.

[91] Kley, "China's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan," op.cit.

[92] Parello-Plesner and Duchâtel, "China's 'Af-Pak' hinterland," op.cit., pp.69-73.

[93] Kley, "China's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan," op.cit.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ahmad Rashid, "Can China replace the US in Stabilizing Afghanistan?," *Diplomaatia*, April 2015, <http://www.diplomaatia.ee/en/article/can-china-replace-the-us-in-stabilising-afghanistan/>.

[97] Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, "China's Strategy towards South…," op.cit., p.79.

[98] Wishnick, "Post-2014 Afghanistan policy…," op.cit.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Christian Le Mière, Gary Li and Nigel Inkster, "China," in *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond*, ed. Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman, *The International Institute of Strategic Studies*, London:Routledge, 2011), p.230.