

The Security Concerns of China in Afghanistan: Implications for Bilateral Relations

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Introduction

Since the withdrawal of United States from Afghanistan in August 2021, China has stepped in to fill the void. Due to its proximity with such a geo-strategically important country, China has a very significant role to play. The need for recognition and humanitarian assistance in these times of crisis has drawn the Taliban closer to it. China is the first country to recognise Afghanistan's ambassador to China which serves as a huge diplomatic achievement for the country. Moreover, China has invested billions of dollars in the development of infrastructure and provision of economic assistance to the Afghan people. The trade volume between the two states is amplifying and it is expected that China will overtake Pakistan to be Afghanistan's leading trading partner.¹The increasing engagement of China with Afghanistan is not without a cause. China wants to ensure its security and boost its economy.² In 2013 it began the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to establish regional connectivity from Asia to Europe through an extensive physical infrastructure of roads and railways. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which links China to Gwadar port located in Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan and forms a component of the BRI, has alone cost \$62 billion.³ While Afghanistan has shown interest in joining the BRI,⁴ the security of China and BRI is now at stake due to terrorism. This paper analyses the growing security concerns of China within Afghanistan due to the presence of terrorist groups. It also explores the possible implications the situation might have for the bilateral ties between the two countries.

Afghanistan under Taliban 2.0 – A Hub of Terrorism

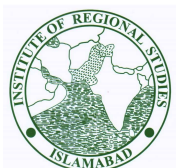
According to a United Nations Security

Council report, there are thousands of terrorists currently present in Afghanistan.⁵ Taliban also released hundreds of extremists, detained by the former governments, soon after taking power. There are mainly two categories of terrorists in Afghanistan: one aligned with the Taliban and the others opposing it. The first category includes groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda, Central Asian jihadis, East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), etc. The main group in opposition to the Taliban is the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). The return of the Taliban was accompanied by the resurfacing of many such terrorist groups.⁶ For instance, terror attacks in Pakistan alone increased by 73 per cent in the first two years of Taliban's return according to Islamabad-based think tank Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies.⁷ Taliban have also been reportedly providing monthly aid packages and weaponry to the terrorists. Nevertheless, in an attempt to avoid accountability, the Taliban have denied the presence of jihadist groups launching terror attacks in the region.

China's Security Concerns

China's security concerns in Afghanistan stem from four main entities: TTP, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), ETIM, and the ISKP. The TTP is an umbrella organisation of various Pakistan-based jihadist groups. It was formed in 2007 with the objective of establishing Sharia in Pakistan. For the past several years the group has been a source of immense insecurity for Chinese nationals. On 22 April 2021, an attack was conducted by TTP in the car parking area of the Serena hotel in Quetta, the capital city of Balochistan, where then Chinese ambassador to Pakistan Nong Rong was staying. Fortunately, he remained unharmed in the attack. The group has attacked Chinese engineers and workers as well. In July 2021, a bus carrying Chinese

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workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the north-western province of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, was attacked leading to the death of nine Chinese who were aboard. The bus was headed to the Dasu hydropower project being built by China's government as part of CPEC.⁸ According to Pakistan's then Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, the attack was conducted by the TTP,⁹ even though the group denied its involvement. Another attack, following the same pattern, was executed in March 2024, where five Chinese workers were killed in a suicide attack conducted on a convoy transporting them to the Dasu dam project. In this case as well, the TTP denied any responsibility when evidence suggested otherwise.¹⁰ In a video circulating on social media, a TTP commander of Gandapur faction could be seen threatening the government and saying that the group will continue to launch attacks against CPEC unless they are paid tax by the government.¹¹ The Pakistani officials have considerable amount of evidence in support of the claim that the Afghan Taliban are directly involved in aiding the TTP,¹² which not only negatively effects Pak-Afghan relations but will also have huge implications for China-Afghan relations.

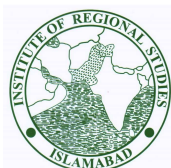
An important dynamic to note here is that the TTP is not executing these attacks alone. There are reports related to the possible nexus between TTP and Baloch militants (specifically Baloch Liberation Army or BLA)¹³ who have been active against China's development projects in Balochistan. These separatist elements believe that both the governments of Pakistan and China are looting the province's natural resources and developing Gwadar port for their own gains without sharing them with the people of the province who are the rightful owners. Therefore, BLA has been targeting Chinese infrastructure and their nationals within Pakistan to discourage foreign investment.¹⁴ For instance, in April 2022, a female suicide bomber associated with the group launched a suicide attack in Karachi which resulted in the death of three Chinese citizens two of whom were teachers.¹⁵ In March 2024, a series of attacks were executed by the BLA targeting Chinese infrastructure in the peripheral areas of Pakistan.

Another important nexus of the TTP is with ETIM. In fact, the 2021 attack on the bus carrying Chinese nationals was conducted by the TTP in collaboration with the ETIM.¹⁶ The group consists of Uighurs, an ethnic minority of Sunni Muslims, located in the Xinjiang province of China. Its objective is to establish a larger Turkestan consisting of Xinjiang and other parts of Asia as well as to liberate the Uighurs who have been allegedly targeted by China's government for decades. The separatist tendencies of the group have been a cause of concern for China.¹⁷ Even though the Taliban are silent over the Uighur issue due to diplomatic reasons, other terrorist groups aligned with them have expressed their opposition by attacking the BRI and Chinese citizens.

The most lethal threat faced by China is ISKP. It propagates the idea that due to China's treatment of Uighur Muslims, it is the responsibility of every Muslim to raise arms against it. Their media outlet, *Voice of Khorasan*, has also issued threats against the development of the BRI, expressing their ambition of putting the project in jeopardy.¹⁸ In December 2022, one day after the meeting of China's ambassador with Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, two explosive devices went off inside Longan hotel in Kabul, targeting Chinese nationals who were staying there. Fortunately, no foreigners were harmed. Later, the ISKP accepted responsibility.¹⁹ Even though the group has been anti-China since its emergence, its propaganda as well as attacks against the Chinese have increased since the Taliban takeover.

Implications for Bilateral Ties of China and Afghanistan

In order to avoid putting the Afghan Taliban's friendship with China in jeopardy, the TTP has avoided claiming attacks on Chinese nationals in Afghanistan. The Afghan Taliban's reluctance to curb TTP violence has already strained their relationship with Islamabad. TTP does not want Beijing-Kabul relations to meet the same fate. The TTP also formed a new jihadist front, Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP), to avoid taking the responsibility for attacks which might raise



questions on the Afghan Taliban's actions against terrorist forces residing in their territory.²⁰

Since the origination of the Uighur threat, the Chinese government has sought regional cooperation to control any external assistance the militants might be receiving from the region. In a position paper published in April 2023, China emphasised the importance and need for the IEA to launch a crackdown against ETIM and other militant organisations. During the first regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan, China invested billions of dollars to help the country build its infrastructure in exchange for a guarantee that Afghanistan would not be used to launch terror attacks in China. Contrary to China's expectations from the Taliban, Uighur militants were not contained. As far as ISKP is concerned, it is trying its best to neutralise any efforts by the Taliban which might assist them in gaining international recognition. For this purpose, it has been targeting foreign nationals including Russians, Pakistanis, Indians, and Chinese. Such attempts are intended to harm the prospects of foreign investment in Afghanistan.²¹

China has used its ties with Pakistan to ensure the Uighur population residing there does not launch terrorist activity in their country. It is doing the same in Afghanistan to guarantee the safety of BRI and its population. Even though the Taliban ensured the Chinese government that they would not allow Uighur militants to continue their extremist activities in China from Afghanistan, they released at least thirty Uighur terrorists soon after their takeover.²² Later, however, in an effort to appease China, Taliban relocated Uighur bases from China's adjoining border province, Badakshan, to other areas.²³ Other than ETIM members, terrorists belonging to other groups were also released which resulted in the increase in terrorist activities in the region. Moreover, the *Pashtunwali* (the tribal code of

Pashtuns), a *jihadist* history and inter marriages between the families of different terrorist organisations would influence the Taliban's ability to take substantive action against these groups.²⁴

It is widely believed that if extremist groups are pressured too much by Afghan Taliban, they might join ISKP.²⁵ The group has already attracted disgruntled Taliban, TTP, ETIM and other extremist members. It was one of the reasons that Taliban did not pressure TTP to surrender completely even after being asked by Pakistani state on multiple occasions. Even though China has invited Afghanistan to join CPEC, it may have to proceed cautiously with them in case the Taliban remain reluctant to produce any substantive results against terrorists. It is important, however, for the sake of the Afghan people that the international community engages with IEA without endorsing the Taliban's actions.

Conclusion

Since the Taliban takeover, the number of terrorist attacks in the region have increased which is a cause of concern for Afghanistan's neighbours. The growing extremism threat increases chances of straining China-Afghan relations in the future, which might negatively affect the Afghan economy by driving away investment. China's objective to achieve economic betterment for its country cannot be accomplished without effectively addressing the security concerns emanating from Afghanistan. For this purpose, cooperation from Taliban's side is necessary. At the same time, the current economic and humanitarian crisis prevailing in Afghanistan is a challenge that not only increases the plight of Afghan people but also nurtures terrorist elements residing there. Therefore, it is important that China as well as the international community engages with the Taliban regime to address not only terrorism but also the humanitarian crisis.

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