

Tracing China's contemporary interest in post-9/11 Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article aims at examining China's contemporary interests in post-9/11 Afghanistan. China's diplomatic engagement started in post-Taliban Afghanistan, yet it did not take any part in the US military campaign. Since the US-Taliban engagement for peace talks, Beijing has been playing an active role and hosted a number of Taliban delegations for the peace process. The article argues the security threat from Afghanistan, vast natural resources in Afghanistan; concern of narcotic flow from Afghanistan; the market for Chinese goods, and most importantly, China's Belt and Road initiative needs a stable and peaceful Afghanistan are the main factors Beijing is active vis-à-vis contemporary Afghanistan. China's active socio-economic, political, and diplomatic rendezvous in Afghanistan will not only bring peace and stability to Afghanistan but will also augment China's political thump at the global level and provide it with a peaceful neighbourhood, the market for its goods and a corridor for its Belt and Road Initiative.

Key Words: China, Afghanistan, Contemporary Interests, Stability, Peace Process, Security.

Introduction

China-Afghan relationship is centuries old. Afghanistan had once the focus of Buddhism, and Chinese Priests used to use Sil Road to Bamiyan, Afghanistan, for Buddha statues located over there (Khan, n.d.). However, in modern history, China-Afghanistan diplomatic engagement between the two neighbors started in 1955. Zhu Enlai, the Chinese Premier in 1957, visited Afghanistan. Reciprocally, Afghan premier Sardar Daoud made a state visit to Peking. The mutual visits were instrumental in bringing both countries close to each other. Thus, both the states inked an agreement, 'Friendship and Non-Aggression' in August 1960. Besides, the two countries signed a joint Boundary Agreement in 1963 in order to resolve the border issue in Wakhan (Rahimi, 2008).

Throughout the diplomatic history of China and Afghanistan, their relations have been cordial except the ten years period between 1979-89 during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan where China had reservations over the invasion and did not render recognition to the Soviet installed government (Akhter & Liu, 2019). The Soviet Union in 1979 did a military intervention in Afghanistan and installed the Babrak

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Karmal government there. China, being considering it an intervention in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, did not accept Babrak Karmal's government under the guise of Moscow ([Weitz, 2010](#)). China supported the Mujahideen and became one of the main suppliers of weapons in the guerrilla war against the Soviets ([Iqbal, n.d.](#)). When the civil war erupted among different Afghan factions after the Soviet withdrawal, China remained on the sideline and withdrew its embassy staff from Kabul in 1993 following the fall of Najibullah's government ([Weitz, 2010](#)).

Under the Taliban rule, China almost remained absent from the Afghan political scene and never recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan. However, China maintained channels of communication with the Taliban through its close ally Pakistan in order to monitor developments in Afghanistan because China had concerns regarding the militant groups, especially 'East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and 'Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan' (IMU) ([Iqbal, n.d.](#)). In the late 1990s, China sent a diplomatic mission to Mullah Omar to get assurances that Afghan soil would not be used against China for terrorist activities. He responded positively ([The Rise of China-Afghanistan Security Relations – The Diplomat, n.d.](#)).

China and Post-9/11 Afghanistan

China's five foreign policy principles: peaceful co-existence, non-intervention; respect for sovereignty; mutual non-aggression, and lastly, the quality and mutual benefit, provide a base to its Afghanistan policy ([Bukhari, 2012](#)). Likewise, China policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan is based on its belief in non-intervention. China always wants friendly relations with its neighbors. When the US moved a resolution in Security Council, following the 9/11 attacks, to invade Afghanistan, China voted in its favor, which allowed the US to intervene in Afghanistan. Besides, China officially expressed its support for the operation against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and cooperated in War on Terror with the international community. China approach towards the Taliban is very cautious; they don't condemn the Taliban by name and use terrorists instead. This modest diplomatic approach shows their non-involvement in the internal affairs of another country as well as not to become hostile to the Taliban. Nonetheless, in the current scenario, the economy is on the top priority of every country, including China, for which Afghanistan is so much important for China as it is a market as well as it has vast natural resources which could be exploited by China. China is supporting international moves vis-à-vis Afghanistan as without international support; it cannot secure its economic, political, and strategic and security interests in Afghanistan ([Weitz, 2010](#)).

After 9/11, the US, along with its allied forces, attacked Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime there. China recognized Afghan's Interim Government under the leadership of Hamid Karzai and reopened its Kabul embassy in February 2002 after a suspension of nearly nine years ([Chinese Embassy in Kabul Reopened, n.d.](#)). Hamid Karzai, president of Afghanistan, made several visits to China, and he also met regularly with his Chinese counterpart on the sidelines of SCO. Though China supported United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution against the Taliban and also provided financial assistance to the Afghan's government, it did not become part of US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. Since 2011, China has been intensified its engagement with Ashraf Ghani's administration in 2014. This paper will analyze China main interests in Afghanistan and then will proceed to describe Beijing's role in post-US Afghanistan, particularly its role in the Afghan peace process and subsequent China's clout in Afghanistan and the region.

China's Economic Interests in Afghanistan

A natural economic partnership exists between Afghanistan and China. Afghanistan has plentiful natural resources like oil, natural gas, cobalt, copper, gold, iron, lithium and others. According to a US report in 2010, Afghanistan possesses untapped natural resources worth \$1 trillion. Besides, the US Geological

Survey contends: Afghanistan has 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 500 billion barrels of liquified natural gas ([Mehrad et al., 2020](#)).

Afghanistan possesses huge reserves of copper, natural gas, oil, gold, copper and other raw materials that are needed for China's economic industry. Ince Afghanistan is stable and peaceful, it can be used by China for transportation as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor works as the shortest way for access to the Arabian Sea. The sea routes which go through the Strait of Malacca is not only lengthy but also unsafe due to the presence of pirates. In addition, Afghanistan has one of the most underdeveloped infrastructures in the world. On the other hand, China has well trained and competent companies for infrastructure. Besides, China has also well-developed industries, and for smooth economic development, it needs massive natural resources as it has insufficient domestic recourses to meet China's raw material needs ([Bukhari, 2012](#)).

Afghanistan being a war-torn country for the last four decades, is an extremely poor and underdeveloped state. Nearly 90 percent of the Afghan budget is dependent on foreign aid. In the post-9/11 era, when Karzai became the interim president of Afghanistan, China pledged \$150 million for reconstruction in the country ([Huasheng, 2016](#)). Besides, China gave \$10 million for a hospital in Kabul and an irrigation project at Parwan. Furthermore, in 2003, China gave \$15 million as a grant for the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.](#)). China interests in Afghanistan with every passing year increased. It provided Afghanistan with the aid of \$75 million in 2009 ([Paliwal, n.d.](#)). The Chinese aid after 2012 increased hugely. Furthermore, China's aid to Afghanistan is mounting. The Chinese government in 2014 announced an aid of RMB 2 billion to Afghanistan ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, n.d.](#)). While it provided a total of \$240 million in aid to Afghanistan from 2001-2013, in 2014, it has provided \$80 million aid to the country and pledges to provide another \$240 million from 2015-2018 ([Huasheng, 2016](#)). In May 2014, both the governments signed a technical cooperation agreement and on non-emergency humanitarian aid. In 2017, China extended aid of \$90 million for developmental projects in Badakhshan province alone.

All these engagements indicate China's interests in Afghanistan. It is the biggest investor in Afghanistan. China's interests are mostly in infrastructure building and natural resources extractions. In Northern Afghanistan, China has started extracting oil from the Basin of Amu Darya River ([Ramachandran, n.d.](#)). This tenders to the Chinese company, National Petroleum Corporation, got in December 2011 to drill three oilfields in the Au Darya for the next 25 years ([Bukhari, 2012](#)). The terms of the agreement say China will have to pay 15% royalty, 70% of revenue on income, besides 20% tax on income that comes from the project. Reciprocally, Afghanistan will take \$7 billion in the next 25 years. Moreover, China had given a telecom system to Afghanistan in 2007, which they upgraded in 2017 to fibre optics.

Bilateral trade is also on the rise. In 2006, the "Sino-Afghan Economic Committee" was set up to expand mutual trade. It gave duty-free access to about 278 items, and then in 2010, they signed the "Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership Agreement" to increase trade relations. In 2012, China pledged to provide about \$23.8 million to increase bilateral trade and investment ([Bukhari, 2012](#)).

China's economic engagement with Afghanistan will not only bring economic development as well as political stability there, but it will be also beneficial for China. In 2007, China owned a \$3.5 billion copper mining contract in the Lugar province of Afghanistan. It includes the construction of a coal-fired electrical power plant (400-megawatt), and a freight railway, a copper smelter. These statistics make China the biggest investor in Afghanistan so far. To extract oil from the Amu Darya basin in Northern Afghanistan, China signed a 25-year contract to extract in 2011. In addition, the Chinese companies ZTE Corporation and Hawaii are building up their presence in the telecommunication sector in Afghanistan ([Weitz, 2010](#)). Though there is huge potential for China in terms of investments, trade, natural resources extraction, and expanding its links with the Central Asian states and beyond, however, all these things are dependent on the security situation over there. Without a peaceful environment in Afghanistan, China's economic interests cannot be materialized. The active Chinese role in the Afghan peace process shows us China has this issue

on a priority basis to be solved. Although China is quite interested in investing in Afghanistan, its calculation is due to the security threat on the one hand and the US presence on the other hand.

China's Political and Strategic Interests

China's political engagement with Afghanistan has been intensified since 2011. In the last about forty years, the first highest-level visit was taken place when China's head of internal security visited Afghanistan in 2012. During his meeting with President Hamid Karzai, he signed various agreements on intelligence sharing and training for Afghan police officers in China ([Huasheng, 2016](#)). In July 2014, China appointed Sun Yuxi as a special envoy to Afghanistan a former ambassador to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated Sun was appointed "to step up the communication with Afghanistan and all parties concerned and safeguard lasting peace, stability and development of Afghanistan and the region" ([Huasheng, 2016](#)).

China hosted the fourth "the heart of Asia Conference in October 2014. This mechanism was initiated in 2011, and it is also known as the Istanbul Process, which included fourteen regional states and 17 supporting countries all over the world. The process was aimed at providing a forum to discuss regional matters, predominantly Afghanistan. During the conference, the Chinese prime minister put forward a proposal for the solution of the Afghan conundrum by reconciliation among the different factions, economic uplift, strengthening external support and advocated for their self-rule ([Huasheng, 2016](#)).

Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, after taking oath as a president of Afghanistan in his first term, made his first official a four-day visit to China, where he was warmly welcomed at the airport by premier Xi Jinping. The welcome of the Premier himself was an indication of how weightage China gives to its neighbor. They inked four cooperation agreements to enhance bilateral relations between the two countries. China also pledged \$327 million in aid to Afghanistan from 2014 to 2017. Besides, China has been providing scholarships to Afghan students and train many with various skills and fields.

Moreover, China has put its premium to help settle the Afghan issue. For the said reason, China put pressure on Pakistan to play an active in the Afghan peace process. A trilateral dialogue took place among Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in February 2012. China, in addition, has also founded trilateral dialogues vis-à-vis Afghanistan, one between Russia, China and India and India, China, and Russia, and similarly between Pakistan, China, and Russia. In addition, China and Russia also hosted a 6+1 dialogue on the Afghan issue in Geneva in March 2014.

Afghanistan has great importance in China's strategic calculus (Khan, n.d.). Afghanistan possesses a central position in the Chinese 'Silk Road Economic Belt strategy. This initiative will connect South Asia with the Middle East and Central Asia through a rail link. Afghanistan is a gateway for these three regions, and in case of any vulnerability and instability in Afghanistan, the strategy may not succeed ([What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?](#) - *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, n.d.). Chinese One Belt, One Road (OBOR) is China's initiative which is aimed at expanding Chinese politico-economic clout. Afghanistan's stability is essential. OBOR is one hand, will provide an opportunity for Chinese economic expansion; on the other hand, it will provide opportunities to the regional countries and Afghanistan as well. Afghanistan being a landlocked country, if it becomes a part of OBOR, will have a great opportunity to get economic stability and connect to the rest of the world through rail links and roads. Moreover, China, with the passage of time, has expanded its clout in the Central Asian Republics, which has in turn provided for enough political leverage. Any stability/instability factor will have a huge role in the strategic balance of power in Central Asia.

China's Security Interests

Afghanistan's security is one of the prime interests of China. When the US and its allies attacked Afghanistan in 2001, China endorsed United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions against Afghanistan, and

even the FBI set up its office in China ([Iqbal, n.d.](#)). China, however, avoided military involvement there for a number of different reasons. First, China perceives solution of Afghanistan conflict through military means is not possible as a Central Asia's expert in Fudan University argues against any military adventure by saying, "The Taliban has existed in Afghanistan for some time and to eliminate it through military force is impossible." Second, China fears any military involvement would make the Taliban en-bloc to China. Third, China's army has inadequate know-how in the deployment of combat forces overseas, and a situation like Afghanistan seems to be difficult for her to handle properly. Fourth, China is likely to avoid military action in its foreign policy principle — non-interference. Despite these concerns, China has remained in contact with Afghanistan in diplomatic and economic terms.

Both ethnic violence and terrorism in Xinjiang are the main concerns that have always been worried the Chinese authorities for since long. In 2009, ethnic violence escalated in the provincial capital Urumqi resulting in the death of two hundred people ([BBC NEWS | Asia-Pacific | Many "missing" after China Riots, n.d.](#)). However, terrorist incidents have been increased for the last couple of years. In May 2014, attackers drove two cars loaded with explosives into a busy market in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang and threw explosives before crashing, killing 31 and wounded more than 90 ([Urumqi, 2014](#)). Moreover, a violent incident in June 2014 resulted in the death of hundred people, in addition to 59 terrorists shot dead by the security officials in Xinjiang. An imam who was reportedly a supporter of the Communist Party was stabbed to death in August the same year in Kashgar ([Islamist Militants Armed with Knives, Axes Kill Imam of China's Biggest Mosque, Chinese Authorities Say - ABC News, n.d.](#)). Some terrorist attacks also took place beyond Xinjiang. In October 2013, a car was set ablaze and driven into Tiananmen, Beijing's central square, killing three people inside the car and two bystanders ([China Detains Five Over Tiananmen Crash, Calls It "Terrorist Attack" - WSJ, n.d.](#)). Besides, in March 2014, ten men armed with long knives attacked at Kunming train station in China's south killed 29 and wounded more than a hundred people ([Knife-Wielding Attackers Kill 29 at China Train Station - CNN, n.d.](#)). Xinjiang covers one-sixth of the landmass of China and borders eight independent countries. It also has vast natural resources like gas, coal and oil and important trade route as China conducts about 80 percent of trade with Central Asia through it ([China's Role in Central Asia, n.d.](#)).

Following the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan in 2014, China has increased its engagement regarding security and defense affairs. They have signed four MOUs regarding security and defense cooperation, and security and defence officials from both sides have also been frequently visited each other countries ([The Rise of China-Afghanistan Security Relations – The Diplomat, n.d.](#)). In March 2016, the Chinese military delegation visited Afghanistan, the first visit of such a kind in the last two decades. This mission was headed by China's Chief of Staff of the army Fang Fenghua. During his meeting with Ashraf Ghani, he promised to attribute about \$73million to the Afghan military and also proposed an anti-terrorism plan which requires the joint efforts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Tajikistan against terrorism ([The Expanding Kabul-Beijing Military Ties – CSRS En, n.d.](#)). In May 2016, Abdullah Abdullah, Afghan Chief Executive Officer, during his visit to China, also sought Chinese assistance for strengthening the Afghan army.

Although China has controlled the Xinjiang insurgency, still Chinese interest in post-US withdrawal Afghanistan is to thwart the spillover of terrorism and extremism into Xinjiang and make sure Afghanistan does not provide a safe haven to the Uyghur insurgency ([China's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan, n.d.](#)). China perceives that continuous instability in Afghanistan will create security problems in Xinjiang and beyond.

Narcotics flow from Afghanistan to China is another source of concern for the latter. In the past, narcotics were used to flow to China from Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, yet that flow has significantly been reduced. However, Afghanistan at the moment has become one of the largest sources of narcotics for China, and the flow of narcotics has increased from the Golden Crescent, a heroin producing area that includes Pakistan, Iran and a part of Afghanistan ([Weitz, 2010](#)). Chinese authorities are aware of the link between illegal drugs and militants financing. Reportedly, Taliban commanders use revenue getting from

the opium trade for purchasing weapons, fund training and buy support. In addition, drug trafficking is a source of financing for militant organizations operating in Central Asia ([Weitz, 2010](#)).

China's Role in the Afghan Peace Process

China has been taking a keen interest in the Afghan peace process and has been actively participating in all the international conferences on Afghanistan since 9/11. Now it has been actively engaged in the Afghan reconciliation process since the US drawdown. China has several advantages over the other stakeholders in the Afghanistan conflict solution. History does not find any conflict between China and Afghanistan, and the relationship has remained balanced between the two countries. Besides, China has not supported any ethnic or militant group in Afghanistan. Andrew Small, an expert on China, observe, "China is the only actor who can foot the level of investment needed in Afghanistan to make it succeed and stick it out" ([China Has Its Eyes on Afghanistan's Minerals | Wadsam, n.d.](#)). This is not the first time China is playing its role as a mediator, but it was also a part of the 6+2 group in the 1990s ([Iqbal, n.d.](#)).

During Ashraf Ghani visit to China in 2014, the latter proposed a "peace and reconciliation forum" including representatives from Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Taliban. The Taliban representatives frequently visit China vis-à-vis the Afghan peace process since 2014. China has been involved with Afghanistan neighbors to resolve the Afghan conflict through peaceful means. China, since 2015 was a part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), a group including Afghanistan, the US, Pakistan and China that was working for reconciliation in Afghanistan. Various rounds of talks were held by QCG in Islamabad and Kabul. QCG was the only collaboration between Beijing and Washington vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

The peace process initiated by QCG hit a setback when the US targeted Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in Baluchistan near the Pak-Afghan border on May 21, 2016. In early July 2016, a Taliban delegation headed by Sher Abbas Stanakzai, the then head of the Taliban's political office in Qatar, visited China in order to explore prospects for the latter's role in resuming the stalled talks. It was not the first visit of the Taliban to China; they have been going there since November 2014. Two factors attracted the Taliban to China: one, China's neutral policy towards Afghanistan. Two, China and the Taliban both want a stable Afghanistan without foreign interference. Furthermore, China was also a part of the Moscow summits of January-February 2019 ([Russia Plays Power Broker as U.S.-Taliban Talks Gather Steam, n.d.](#)). China's ambassador to Afghanistan stated this January:

China firmly supports the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process. The Afghans must take control of their own destiny. No external force is to impose itself on Afghanistan or use Afghanistan for its own selfish gains. Both China and Afghanistan have suffered enormously from colonialism, imperialism and bullying. China shares the Afghan People's desire for peaceful development. All along, the Chinese side has firmly supported all stakeholders to the Afghan question to achieve peace by political means. It has actively participated in and promoted the Afghan peace and reconciliation process in bilateral and multilateral arenas and pushed the international community to foster common understandings ([China Plays an Active and Constructive Role in Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Process, n.d.](#)).

Furthermore, China, although backed the US-Taliban Doha talks, however, China is sceptical about the future of Afghanistan in the light of the US-Taliban Doha deal. China sees the intra-Afghan talks as more difficult than that of the US-Taliban talks ([China's Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan - War on the Rocks, n.d.](#)). Later on, the agreement between the two parties and extended its support to the intra-Afghan talks.

China and SCO Role in Afghanistan

Originally, 'Shanghai Five' was founded by China along with Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in 1996 to solve its border disputes with its member states. In 1998, however, it widened its scope to look

at more general issues of regional security. It was renamed SCO after joining Uzbekistan as a member state in 2001. The SCO has a poor record of cooperation in Afghanistan and each member pursues its own policy towards Afghanistan ([Between Cooperation and Insulation, 2014](#)). However, China views SCO as the appropriate platform to contribute to the stabilization of Afghanistan, and it has supported various initiatives to expand the role of SCO regarding Afghanistan. One of these initiatives was the creation of the SCO-Afghan Working Group ([Economic Investment Key to Afghanistan Success - by Richard Weitz, n.d.](#)). During the SCO conference on Afghanistan in Moscow in March 2009, China pledged to extend \$75 million in military and economic aid to Afghanistan for the next five years ([Weitz, 2010](#)).

SCO considers Afghanistan stability and security as a major concern that has a deep impact on the region. Observer status has been given to Afghanistan in the 2012 summit of SCO in China. Chinese President Hu Jintao pointed in his SCO speech, "We will continue to follow the concept that regional affairs should be managed by countries in the region...that we should guard against shocks from turbulence outside the region, and should play a bigger role in Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction" ([President Hu Jintao Attends APEC CEO Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech, n.d.](#))

Conclusion

Though China has attained a central position in post-US Afghanistan, its military involvement is still unclear. China maintains its neutral posture and supports the Afghan peace process. China, which is located in the neighbourhood, can play a vital role in bringing stability to the war-torn country. All the previous attempts in the last ten years to bring peace in Afghanistan failed due to one reason or another. However, the US-Taliban Doha deal has provided foe with a hope that could provide for peace in Afghanistan following the success of the intra-Afghan talks. The most important reason has been the trust deficit among the stakeholders: the Afghan government and the Taliban. China should play its role to keep the intra-Afghan talks alive between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Earlier, QCG had provided an opportunity to both China and the USA to join their efforts for resolving the Afghan issue in a coordinated and organized way. The SCO role cannot be ignored in this situation as many political analysts are now looking towards it for its role in Afghanistan. The Taliban and the Afghan government should also show sincerity and make compromises for a better future in Afghanistan. The current situation in Afghanistan has brought both challenges and opportunities for China. Afghanistan needs all kinds of support, ranging from economic to technical one, for which China can be a good source. Besides, Afghanistan can also offer China the shortest passage route for exploration of natural resources within Afghanistan and in its neighbourhood: Central Asia. On the contrary, China is an emerging power and has diplomatic influence both regionally and internationally to play its positive role in Afghanistan. All hopes China is keeping in mind are linked with peace and stability in Afghanistan. Whether its China's political, economic, security, or strategic interests, all are connected with peace, China's positive role in Afghanistan will not only provided opportunities to Afghanistan but will benefit China in multiple ways.

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