

China's Growing Influence in Afghanistan and its Impacts on Pakistan in the Post-2014 Era

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Abstract *This research paper examines China's growing influence in Afghanistan (post-2014) in the context of the Chinese government's overall approach to Afghan peace and stability. China growing influence in Afghanistan can be seen in three dynamics which are security, economic, and geostrategic, and its impacts on Pakistan have also been explored. This study is based on a mixed research approach means Qualitative cum Quantitative. In the economic field, it has been observed that the Chinese invested in Afghanistan more in the post-2014 as compared to pre-2014. In the security field, the China diplomatic efforts can be seen in the form of treaties and agreements with Afghanistan under Ashraf Ghani's Afghan Unity Government AUG. These efforts are to eradicate terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan as China herself is facing the same issue in its western region. The China vision in the Geostrategic field and its strategy and policy towards Afghanistan are analyzed. These three-tier policies of China in Afghanistan have certain impacts on Pakistan, and these impacts are explored under BRI particular part, which is CPEC Post 2014.*

Key Words: Afghan Peace, Geo-strategic, Diplomacy, Terrorism, Extremism

Introduction

The Newly elected head of state Dr. Ashraf Ghani, began his maiden official Four days' visit to Beijing after being sworn as the head of the state in 2014. A new direction of Afghanistan's peace and stability led by China through a common political and economic strategy helpful for the future of the entire region ([Mohan, 2014](#)). China has also activated a more evolving and dynamic neighborhood policy to create an atmosphere that would be favorable for the advanced economic development of the region. Chinese neighborhood diplomacy is to serve the national transformation in Afghanistan and the region because the region is in jeopardy of terrorism for many years. Expansions of social, political, and economic prerequisites among neighbors were almost obstructed due to insecurity and instability in Afghanistan after the cold-war. While Afghanistan being the heart of Asia, could play an important role in this regard.

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China has a geostrategic and geo-economic interest in the region that changed its previous policy of neutrality by the adoption of a pro-activist builder of Afghanistan's future (Small, 2015). A change in China's policy concerning Pakistan and Afghanistan was started before president Xing, but during Xing's Communist Party government, the process of reassessing its foreign policy increased dynamically for Afghanistan and Pakistan in the very interest of security and economic challenges in the region (Wang Xu, 2013). Chinese economic interests are to require a change in foreign policy in Afghanistan in diplomacy and security policies. Such enduring partnership of China in Afghanistan is beneficial to 2014 Afghanistan that experienced a shift from military to economic development since 2014.

China, as an emerging global power, can't afford instability in its immediate neighborhood after 2014. Second, it is traditionally an ally of Pakistan and a partner in peaceful economic and strategic goals since the end of the United States military mission in Afghanistan the region since the announcement of the end of US war-on-terror mission in Afghanistan and third with new (Afghan Unity Government AUG) in Kabul after Afghanistan's historical election, China's interests have been heightened in Afghanistan as well as in Central Asian. China's overall objective to boost its comprehensive national trade and energy power and economic position in Asia is the involvement in Afghanistan that could see an opportunity to China's access to mineral, energy resources, and routs linkages in Afghanistan, which could also provide an important link for investment, trade and infrastructure development in Central and South Asia. China's interests in Afghanistan and the region have grown into different dimensions, and the geopolitical significance of the region increased Chinese calculation for realizing its grand strategy (Dream of New Silk Route), and the region has become increasingly important in China's strategic calculation.

After 2014 Afghanistan has emerged as a source of concern for many states, especially for China, where US-led International Security Armed Forces ISAF ended their combat mission. However, the political, economic, and security challenges of Afghanistan and regional stability will remain precocious. This is no longer true now. The complete removal of international troops would leave deep consequences and influence on the country's economic and security management as experienced in USSR's withdrawal and American ignorance in post-1989 after the end of the cold war. That had created huge space for the ideology of Talibanization in the country and the region as well. The same experience has been detected in the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the sudden withdrawal of forces from Iraq after the death of Saddam Hussain. That has produced a vicious militant group of Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria which is paradoxically the brainchild of Saudi-led Wahhabism (Shakdam, 2015). Both circumstances of Taliban and ISIL were produced with co-existence of the poor mechanism of withdrawals of US forces from the war-torn region. Looking into the above case studies of Afghanistan and Iraq, some experts on security studies are agreed that China has diverted their policy toward Afghanistan after the announcement of American withdrawal from Afghanistan due to their security and economic interests. As Elizabeth Wishnick in his research article in *Central Asian Affairs* 2014 said that "With the announcement of the planned drawdown of US and international forces in 2014, Chinese diplomacy has become more active to forestall developments that would be detrimental to China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region XUAR or Chinese interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan. On June 8, 2012, China and Afghanistan upgraded their relationship to a strategic and cooperative partnership (Wishnick, 2015).

Politically, Afghanistan also has been placed at the cheeseboard of geopolitical interests of the regional and superpowers from the British Empire to the cold war. During the ideological cold war of the USSR and United States, Afghanistan was overcome as a battlefield for proxies. The instability and terrorism are the consequences of those approaches of external interference of cold war, civil war, and war-on-terror and sectarian violence in Afghanistan for decades which is now became an international issue. The problem of Afghanistan always was/is proxy wars imposed on Afghan people and being sponsored by external players to gain their own political and ideological interests. Such poor design external and domestic policies and foreign interference have always placed Afghanistan's future uncertain, reluctant and vulnerable not only for Afghanistan itself but for whole the region at all. After a long war on terrorism, launched for one and half

decades from 2001 to 2014, the regional states are recalibrating their policies to protect their national interests in post-2014.

Afghanistan, for instance, China which is the most important actor of the regional state, is re-shaping its longstanding neutral policies for Afghanistan. China's objectives in the current scenario are to rebuild Afghanistan after US withdrawal. The collections of raw minerals and natural resources, commercial investment, and preventing Uighur militants from establishing safe havens in the Pak-Afghan porous border have increased China's interest in involvement in Afghanistan's issue (Ross, Trombly, and Barr, 2015).

The Objective of the Study

- To analyze the facts to bring possible stability in Afghanistan, which is essential for the development progress of Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- To find out that how China, due to its own economic and strategic interests, has initiated a constructive role in Afghanistan and started efforts for peace talks with the Taliban to promote economic and commercial investments in the Pak-Afghan region since 2014.
- To examine how the opportunity of economic interconnectivity in the region is the best alternative for long-lasting peace and development in Afghanistan and the region post-2014.

Research Questions

- 1) Despite Afghanistan being a war-torn country, why China has reoriented its policy towards Afghanistan?
- 2) What are the nature of Chinese economic, security, and geostrategic interests in Afghanistan and its impacts on Pakistan?

Research Methodology

To address the above research questions, the researcher has been adopted a qualitative cum quantitative research method of data collection. For primary data collection, the researcher has done interviews of various security policy analysts in Islamabad institutions like SDPI, IPRI, etc. the researcher has also visited the Afghanistan Embassy to find out the answer to the questions raised through a randomly interviewing method. The Secondary sources for data collection are books, magazines, newspapers, and journal articles.

Literature Review

Justyna, in her research on Sino-Afghan relations, has explained China's upcoming role in Afghanistan after international troops withdrawal. China-Afghanistan being neighbors in their Wakhan border, it has now a concern for Chinese policy-maker to safe Afghanistan from international terrorism because Afghanistan is one of the notable sources of possible instability and uncertainty of the future goals and security of Afghanistan is a top priority for Chinese (Tatar, 2014). The presence of NATO forces in Afghanistan is significant for Beijing's interests in the framework of Talibanization ending in the neighborhood albeit not for the long-term stay of US military forces in its neighborhood. However, post-2014 pro-active approaches are to be supposed through "Chinese characteristics" slogan of political attempts not likely military.

For a political approach, the author has analyzed Chinese diplomatic actions in Afghanistan in the framework of cooperation by involving every country from the region, in different multilateral and bi-lateral forum and mechanisms like CICA and the SCO, the Istanbul Process or Heart of Asia, trilateral dialogues, Murree Peace talks, and QGC.

A prominent Chinese dream of the "New Silk Road" concept is one of her clear confirmation that Beijing is interested to see Free-Taliban Afghanistan in the future for long-term interests. In this regard,

neighboring states of Afghanistan, especially China, can play significant roles to safeguard their long-term interests of political economy. In his article, Gartenstein highlights Chinese economic and security interests in Afghanistan post-2014, where international troops have ended prolong strategic combat mission against Islamic militancy of Al-Qaeda. In the whole War on Terror," China remained a neutral state regardless of its prolonged goals in the region and beyond, but after some political and military transformation in Afghanistan, China has changed its position. In this article, he says that China being exploiter of raw material and other natural resources and concern for their own. Similarly, after 9/11, if Pakistan had joined the war on terror formally, but Pakistan army led by President Pervez Musharraf continued the support of the Taliban and Haqqanis network to wage war against American and NATO forces in Afghanistan and provided safe sanctuaries in Federally Administrative Tribal Areas (FATA) after toppling Taliban in Afghanistan. After the killing of Al-Qaeda lead Osama bin Laden, the terrorists and their sympathizers still consider Afghanistan as a Launchpad of terrorist attacks anywhere in the world, which one of the foremost concerns for all. That is why I (Peter Thomson) wrote this book. My (Peter Thomson) motive sprang from concerns for our national interests and the desire of Afghans, Americans, and the broad international community to break the cycle of tragic wars in Afghanistan.

Peter Thomson gives a detailed view of the Afghan war from Cold-war to Civil war and War-on-Terrorism in his book "The Wars of Afghanistan, published in 2011. He also highlights the internal and external conflict in Afghanistan explicitly and the causes of insurgency, interference, and failures of external to understand Afghans, and in his remark about the book, he says that America and its allies are mired in Afghanistan's endless war. It is still possible to achieve an acceptable outcome, but only if our policies respect Afghan history and culture and we heed the lessons of past foreign interventions (Thomson, 2011).

The involvement of Afghan people in the mainstream politics in their country is a need of the hour in the current issue of terrorism because during the cold-war that strategy was successful largely due to the involving more than 20 million Afghanistan to expel Soviet Army in the 1980s. Unfortunately, after the Soviet withdrawal, the United States and its allies steadily moved their responsiveness away from Afghanistan and left it the non-states actor proxies of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which ultimately transformed Afghanistan into a terrorist Islamic state. United States did not grasp those actions of neighbors in Afghanistan, which led to saw the catastrophic tragedy of 9/11.

Theoretical Framework

Adding the central question of the study, this research is based on two theoretical contexts to understand the above phenomenon of Afghanistan in an organized manner. First, to understand the region by applying Berry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) in the view of security and to discuss regional connections and states' behaviors in an anarchic global structure.

Regional Security Complex Theory

A new approach incorporates traditional and non-traditional features of security developed through the Copenhagen School. However, the work of Barry Buzan, Weaver, and De Wilde work on security has moved the focus of the International Relations discipline from purely state security to human security ([Haftendorn, 1991](#)). Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) was defined by a prominent American scholar of international politics Barry Buzan first in 1983 and later redefined it with the joint study of Ole Weaver comprehensively in their book "Region and Politics in 2003 ([Buzan and Weaver, 2003](#)). The RSC was first represented and investigated by Barry Buzan in the People, State, and Fear book but re-examined and operationalized the collective work of Ole Weaver in security and another context. They distinguished region from global to units in different levels of analysis. Before going to the regional theorization of the RSC, it is significant to define the region in his expressing that region "must be composed of geographically clustered sets of such units, and these clusters must be embedded in a larger system, which has a structure

of its own. Regions have analytical, and even ontological, standing, but they do not have actor quality ([Buzan and Weaver, 2003](#)). "On the other side, they also explained the international system to be understood as interactions of units within an organized structure in different groups but interdepend on each other in terms of political and military concerns.

"International system refers to a group of interdependence units' states without system-level above them, the international system is a group of units in an international distinguished from the system by nature or interactions with or interdependence on each other, units are composed of groups and organizations, and at higher level states, sub-states are groups of individuals within units and individual are the basic level of analysis ([Buzan and Weaver, 2003](#))."

They discuss these levels of analysis with a basic historical perspective:

1. Modern Era (1500-1945)
2. The Cold War Era (Decolonization Era)
3. Post-Cold War Era (the 1990s)

He analyses RSCs in the context of the Post-Cold War era in three levels of analysis.

- 1) National Level
- 2) Regional level
- 3) Global Level

To Contend with the phenomenon of security that every region is placed in a security complex here, Buzan defines it as "A security complex is defined as a set of states whose major security perception and concern are so interlinked that their national security problem can't reasonably be analyzed or solved apart from one another". So the phenomenon of security directly or indirectly is affecting each other characteristically ([Buzan and Weaver, 2003](#)).

Afghanistan is situated among Central Asia, South Asian, and Middle Eastern regional security Complexes. By connecting its neighboring states in its northern, eastern, and western fronts and keeping them apart but pulling on all fronts, but keeping them apart much more than pulling them composed in their complexes, Afghanistan always remained an insulator state or mini security complex even after the war on terror of American led western powers. During the communist-led civil war in the 1970s at state level or internal level complex that led to soviet intervention, Afghanistan sustained as key boundary among other Asian complexes. External interventions in Afghanistan were all due to that internal unrest or rivalries in the country, which has created a mini-complex that reflects political division at the sub-state level.

According to Barry Buzan, the basic factor of the Afghan Mini-complex during civil and Taliban regime are:

A Sunni sect of Islam, including all the Pashtuns, organized Jihadist forces by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and after civil war Taliban created by external patronage of Pakistan and Wahhabi Saudi Arabia against pro-Afghan. Hezbe Tehrer, a Shia-Hazara force supported by Iran, a warlord Rashid Dostam led Militia supported by Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan supported group led by Ahmad Shah Masood ([Buzan and Weaver, 2003](#)).

Taliban is one the most important factor in Afghanistan's civil govt. To the war on terror, which not only polarized the Afghan war internally in ethnic-religious bases but also regionally and externally with sheltering other Islamic organizations (Al-Qaeda, Islamic Movement of East Turkmenistan, Lashkar e Jhangvi, etc.). Taliban has created a huge space for other extremist groups to join against their rival groups and countries for attacks which effectively putting the issue of Afghanistan in a complex for all regional states and major powers. In this issue of Talibanization, Pakistan remained an important player who has sponsored, trained and sheltered them for his political and strategic goals with the financial supports of Saudi Arabia. This turbulence and instability in Taliban's Afghanistan were spill-over to outside territories of neighbors via Islamic extremism, drug trafficking, refugee crisis, and human rights violation effectively. This

transitional character of the Afghan war from 1993 to 2001 delineated the boundary of Gulf rivalry between Shia Islam of Iran and Sunni Islam of Saudi Arabia and also between scholar and fundamentalist.

However, Buzan also has explained other four key assumptions about the functional insulator character Afghanistan in given RSCs that "First, the resistance power in Afghanistan against Soviet invasion worryingly blocked the outsider state to directly established hegemony or kept interests over Taliban's tyrannical regime in Afghanistan and Second, at that time many regional states were directing concerns by their directions eventually. Third, the existing paralyzed statecraft or no central government at that time could not establish diplomatic links with neighbors via any goals except terrorism. Fourth, with the toppling of Taliban from the regime, it departed from fear of Islamic terrorists" safe sanctuary and being functionalized now state reassessing its policy on balance based national interests with other states."

Findings

Security Dynamic

Before 2014 we can only see visible US security role in Afghanistan during Karzai's period. After 2014 Chinese influence grows in the security domain after the announcement of the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan. In (Post-2014), China is solving the existing extremist terrorist group in Afghanistan, which are not the only problem for Afghanistan but as well as for Chinese geostrategic position in the region, and it cannot be solved by military interventions but the strong economic connectivity through trade routes for long term relations. Chinese contributions (post-2014) regarding security are as following:

- i. The Chinese government signed Bilateral Security Agreements BSA to the Status of Forces Agreement SOFA in July 2014 (Pajhwok news, 2016).
- ii. In 2018 China, Pakistan, Afghanistan signed MoU on Anti-terrorism cooperation to Conduct Joint military exercises (Asian News, 2018).
- iii. In 2015 launched the (Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism QCCM) with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan (TRT World, 2019).
- iv. In 2017, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi started shuttle diplomacy among Pakistan and Afghanistan ([Ramachandran, 2017](#)).
- v. December 2017, China created a 'Mountain Brigade'. In September 2018, Afghanistan's Ambassador to China, Janan Mosazai, announced that China would train Afghan soldiers in China (Ariana News, 2017).
- vi. China is building a base for the Afghan Armed Forces in Badakhshan in northern Afghanistan ([Kucera, 2020](#)).

Geo-Strategic Dynamics

Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the One Road, One Belt Initiative in October 2013. It promotes connectivity between China and Eurasia by integrating the region into a cohesive economic area through new infrastructure, increased cultural exchange, and broadened trade.

- In the 2016 memorandum of understanding (MOU), both countries signed to promote cooperation under the BRI. Afghanistan and China have started a few projects, such as the Digital Silk Road, the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project, the Five Nations Railway Project within Afghanistan, and a Kabul–Urumqi air corridor (REC Annual Review, 2017).
- One of primary examples of Sino-Afghan Cooperation is the Fiber Optic Agreement (signed in April 2017).
- The fiber optic line will help in the realization of the Digital Silk Road Project.
- CASA-1000 power transmission line from Kyrgyzstan to Tajikistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan

signed among four countries (Tolo News, 2015).

- In October 2017, Trade and Transit Corridor Agreement signed between Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, and Turkmenistan at the sidelines of the 7th Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA-VII).
- The Afghan government has made involvement with the BRI a priority, representing it as a regional cooperation framework (MoFA, 2016).
- Afghanistan became a permanent member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in October 2017, which will help facilitate cooperation on infrastructure development between China and Afghanistan under the BRI and RECCA.
- China boosted up her efforts to transform Afghanistan into a regional trade and transit hub by expanding current trade and transport agreements both northward and southward to connect with the rapidly growing BRI corridors.

Economic Dynamics

Chinese assistance and economic development are significantly increased in the post-2014 era. China made huge investments in various developmental projects of Afghanistan to boost up the economy of Afghanistan. Bilateral trade is enhanced on both sides. Trade volume is increased according to world banks and IMF reports. The basic reason behind Chinese assistance to Afghanistan is BRI and its different projects to promote the concept of globalization.

Post-2014 Chinese economic developments in Afghanistan are following:

- 2002-2013 Chinese Economic assistance was \$197 million ranked 23rd donor to Afghanistan published by Kabul in 2009 in 2014 alone; it was \$80 million ([Ramachandran, 2017](#)).
- The Chinese government has trained more than 2,300 Afghan professionals in different fields.
- In 2015 China-Afghan trade was made duty-free to rapidly increase the trade among the two countries ([Stanzel, 2018](#)).
- In May 2016, the countries signed an agreement on technical cooperation worth \$76million (MoFA Report)
- In 2016 Two countries signed a bilateral trade agreement worth \$1 billion (UNDP, 2009).
- China is now Afghanistan's third-largest trading partner, surpassing the EU. Kabul signed a memorandum of understanding on BRI cooperation in 2016 ([Stanzel, 2018](#)).
- Direct flights between Kabul and Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, resumed in July 2016, while the first cargo train journey from China's Nantong to Afghanistan's Hairatan took place in September 2016 ([Stanzel, 2018](#)).
- In January 2020, ANSO announced 500 fully-funded Masters to PhD level scholarships for Afghan students in the University of Chinese Academy of Science (Afghanistan24, 2020).
- As of June 2018, China also increased its financial investments in Afghanistan, chiefly the Mes Aynak copper mines, southeast of Kabul, and the Amu Darya oil fields in northern Afghanistan ([Ramachandran, 2018](#)).
- China announced in December 2017 that it would be willing to extend CPEC to Afghanistan.
- Future development projects include resources, joint Sino-Indian schools and hospitals in Afghanistan, and a multitude of smaller bilateral relations.

Impacts on Pakistan (CPEC)

- The Afghan team is visiting Pakistan as a goodwill gesture, and the visit is meant to boost up ties between the two countries and bring stability to the region. (Afghan team delegation). Afghan

improved security situation is securing western borders of Pakistan and both Afghanistan and Pakistan military training conducted in 2018 under the agreement of collaborations is the good sign of security situation.

- In mid of 2018, the 1,223 MW Balloki Power Plant and the 1,180 MW Bhakki power plants have been completed.
- Neelum-Jhelum and Tarbela hydropower plant project completed in February 2018.
- Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan established a special task force, "TF-88", to ensure maritime security for trade in December 2016.
- Phase I completed, and Phase II under construction.
- China growing influence in Afghanistan reflects its influence on Pakistan. In June 2018, the Chinese foreign minister visited Afghanistan and then Pakistan to press for higher cooperation. China, along with Afghanistan and Pakistan, is entered in "Economic hall" of almost \$ 60 billion under improvements as a part of Belt and Road Initiative. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor includes huge investments in roads, railways, ports, and infrastructure.
- CPEC links China's restive south-west to energy-rich West Asia and further to Europe through the Gwadar port. As in the case of BRI corridors, communication, and energy-related infrastructure development to the tune of \$49 billion.
- Transit Trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan is also stable now. In October 2019, the Ministry of Commerce in Pakistan officially declared Gwadar port ready to handle bulk cargo to and from Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The current Beijing's policy towards Kabul is complemented by high economic and security reasons. The Chinese internal situation and her neighborhood security are directly connected with the Afghan peace and stability that will serve the economic interests of China in the region. The current US policy of staying in Afghanistan for a long period is a matter of concern for China. Apart from all these concerns, the Chinese government and other Afghan neighbors desire a peaceful solution to the Afghan issue of peace and stability. China and other neighboring countries want a permanent solution to the Afghan problem through peaceful diplomacy. The peace process in Afghanistan is majorly associated with the willingness of the Taliban. Washington could also influence the peace process in Afghanistan by devising its exit from Afghanistan that will encourage the neighbors to play their respective roles in Afghanistan's peace. Under the bilateral security agreement between the US and Afghanistan, Washington's under Trump's administration, has a plan to keep forces on Afghan soil till 2024 that shows US ambitions in the region. On the contrary, the Taliban's capacity to fighting and opposing US forces in Afghanistan can be shown from the recent attacks on Kabul and capturing the Kunduz capital in 2015. The Taliban are demanding as a pre-condition for peace negotiation the exit of US forces from Afghanistan. Thus a political solution for the Afghan issue will be the best possible option that will ease the situation in Afghanistan for implementation of Chinese policy that will equally benefit Pakistan if skilfully exploited. Thus China will be able to overcome the wide mistrust between the two countries that will support her interests in the region. It further expected that the Chinese involvement in Afghanistan shall not only make a friendly environment for the ongoing project of CPEC but will be highly beneficial for the strained relationship between Pakistan-Afghanistan.

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