



RESEARCH PAPER

**China's Role in the Post US Withdrawal from Afghanistan:
Implications for the Region**

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the analysis of China's growing influence in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the US. The study explore the regional implications of China's growing influence in Afghanistan for the Pakistan and Iran. China's engagement in Afghanistan that argues China's economic, security, Politically and diplomatic interest in Afghanistan are becoming increasingly important as the country emerges as an important node in Belt and road initiative. The withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan has initiated a transformational phase in the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, with profound implications for neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran. The Qualitative method has been employed by the researcher. However, the findings indicate that China's growing influence in Afghanistan poses both challenges and opportunities for regional stability and its impacts on Iran and Pakistan too.

KEYWORDS CPEC, BRI, Economic Interest, Security, Withdrawal, Pakistan, Iran, Growing Influence

Introduction

The longest war fought by the United States came to an end in August 2021 with the departure from Afghanistan. The effects of the retreat, however, have prompted concerns for the future of the nation and the area as a whole. Afghanistan is a key site for regional politics and trade because to its strategic location on the borders of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Due to the power vacuum created by the US army departure from the region, nations like China have increased their presence there. The stability and politics of the area will be significantly impacted by China's rising involvement in Afghanistan. China has indicated interest in supporting Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, but its engagement would irritate other regional countries, especially the US and India. Since the US has played a significant role in the region for the past 20 years, concerns have been raised about the country's potential future involvement in international affairs. India, on the other hand, and China have a protracted rivalry and are both concerned about China's expanding influence in the area (Roychowdhury, 2021).

The research explores China's participation with Afghanistan from a historical, political, economic, and security perspective, providing a sophisticated view of this intricate bilateral relationship. China pursues a separate strategy in Afghanistan that reflects the unique interests, worries, and objectives of China while mostly adhering to

the mainstream of the international community. Although China has several interests in Afghanistan, its domestic worries regarding the security and stability of the predominantly Muslim area of Xinjiang take precedence over all others. China keeps regular and cordial ties with the Afghan government, is involved in the nation's economic recovery, and offers Afghanistan financial help and other support. The research also looks at China's viewpoints on Afghanistan, especially those about security, terrorism, and extremism in the area. It examines China's attempts to combat the extremism and terrorist threats in Afghanistan as well as the repercussions for the country's internal security. Additionally, the author throws light on China's engagement with Afghanistan within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), stressing China's economic interests and investment projects in Afghanistan as well as their relevance for connectivity and regional development (Hausheng, 2012).

China's participation in Afghanistan may affect the region's security situation as well. Since the Taliban have taken control of Afghanistan, there have been worries that terrorist activities could pick up again, which might affect neighboring nations. China is worried that Uighur terrorists from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) may operate in Afghanistan and endanger China's regional security interests. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which intends to improve infrastructural connections between Asia, Europe, and Africa, is the main reason for China's involvement in Afghanistan. Afghanistan serves as a key BRI Centre due to its advantageous location and wealth of natural resources. The natural resources of Afghanistan, such as copper, iron, and lithium, which are necessary for the development of renewable energy technologies, have also piqued China's attention. (Kumar, 2021).

The implications of China's expanding role in Afghanistan are profound, especially for neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran. Both nations share immediate borders with Afghanistan and are intricately woven into the regional fabric. The implications encompass economic opportunities, security challenges, and shifts in regional power dynamics, all of which demand careful analysis and consideration. In Pakistan, the deepening relationship with China presents an opportunity for enhanced economic integration and infrastructure development under the umbrella of CPEC. Simultaneously, Pakistan must navigate a changing regional power dynamic, which could reshape its geopolitical landscape. Iran, with its historical ties and immediate geographical proximity to Afghanistan, finds itself at a unique crossroads. (Kumar, 2021). China's growing presence may open doors for increased regional collaboration, trade, and investment. However, it could also raise concerns about Iran's autonomy in shaping the region's future and potentially necessitate a reassessment of its regional and international alliances.

To assess what may be offered, the Taliban need only consider Beijing's economic responsibilities in the region and the diplomatic protection Beijing offers Pakistan. China may offer these incentives to a government that is probably facing challenges on the diplomatic and economic fronts (Muzaffar, et. al., 2019). Beijing may also rely on its ties with Pakistan. It is blatantly incorrect to follow the conventional wisdom that claims that since China can influence Pakistan to do anything it wants and Pakistan can influence the Taliban to do whatever it wants, China can also influence the Taliban to do whatever it wants. Beijing has become more cognizant of both its own and Pakistan's limitations as a result of the experience it has gained over the last ten years, especially with the Afghan peace negotiations. However, Beijing will undoubtedly demand that its friends in Pakistan go above and beyond during this time to make sure that the Islamist militant movement, which they supported and hosted and about which

China has always expressed strong reservations, does not negatively impact Chinese interests now that it is in power. (Glaser, 2021).

Literature Review

A Study was conducted by Zhang (2022), The US's 20-year military presence in Afghanistan will end in August 2021, and the geopolitical environment in the region will have undergone a considerable change. China is anticipated to have a significant influence in determining how Afghanistan will develop after the US leaves. In this study of the literature, we will look at the research that has already been done on China's involvement in Afghanistan after the US left and give a summary of what is known at this time. After a humiliating 20-year engagement, the United States' humiliating exit from Afghanistan in August 2021 left China as the dominant power in the area, with the potential to play a key role in Afghan politics in the future, which might be governed by a resurgent Taliban (Zhang, 2022).

After the US withdrawal China has five engagement strategy for Afghanistan, which includes (i) preventing the country from reemerging as a haven for terrorists, (ii) pragmatically and cautiously accepting the Taliban's dominance in Afghan affairs, (iii) fostering inclusive politics in the country, (iv) demonstrating a higher level of humanitarian concern, and (v) holding the US and the West accountable for failing to fulfil their obligations. Undoubtedly, China's strategy has developed into one that is more proactive and advantageous, but it continues to be constrained by significant barriers, not the least of which are its concerns about the Taliban and its intensifying competition with the United States (Zhang, 2022).

China is currently the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan after winning the bid for oil exploration in the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan, acquiring the US\$4.4 billion extraction contract to develop the Mes Aynak copper field located in the province of Logar, and building extensive railway infrastructure in the nation. The China-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project and the Five Nations Railway Project, which connect China with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, respectively, have also been established by China (Stratfor, 2018).

The literature's main takeaway is that China's involvement in Afghanistan is largely motivated by economic factors. China, a country with an energy-hungry population, has been interested in the abundant natural resources of Afghanistan, such as copper, iron, gold, and lithium. Afghanistan is thought to have undeveloped mineral resources worth \$1 trillion, according to a US Geological Survey report, making it one of the wealthiest mining locations in the world (Katzman, 2012).

A crucial position for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vast infrastructural development project aiming at connecting China with Europe and Africa, as well as natural riches are offered by Afghanistan. China's access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf is made possible by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a vital link in the BRI. A crucial node in the CPEC, China has made significant investments in the construction of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan and has been looking into methods to expand the corridor to Afghanistan (Bhatia, 2021).

China's Diplomatic Initiatives for Afghan Peace

During the Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue held in Guiyang, China on June 3, 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi,

Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar and Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi on many issues concerning peace in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the statement of the unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. military. The threats arising from the departure of U. S. troops were considered as possible conflict and civil war while the opportunities were seen as the ability of the Afghan people to determine their own political future. Saying that China is ready “to step up efforts with all parties of Afghanistan including Pakistan for peace talks and mediation, Wang offered to act as a mediator at an appropriate time and host an intra-Afghan dialogue.”

Afghanistan since the Taliban Takeover

After a twenty-year war, the Taliban, a fundamentalist Islamic organisation with a large Pashtun population, return to power in Afghanistan in 2021. It was not long, less than 10 years after the first rule was conquered by an invasion led by the United States of America in 2001, the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan across the border and began to regain lost ground. The Taliban retook control in August 2021. In a 2020 peace agreement with the organisation, the US pulled its final enduring forces out of Afghanistan at the same time as its rapid advance (Muzaffar, et. al., 2021). While the Taliban has promised to respect the rights of women and the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, they have upheld a strict interpretation of sharia law. Meanwhile, the Taliban has been unable to provide Afghans with sufficient food and economic hope as the group has transitioned from a militant group to a governing body. Taliban still threatens Afghans’ civil and political rights enshrined in the constitution formed by the government supported by the United States. Since taking over the country, the Taliban have engaged in activities that were characteristic of their regime in the late 1990s (Bajoria, 2021).

China’s role in Afghanistan: The Post US period

The other nations are United Kingdom, United States of America, and Russia and these three nations have at some point in time overruled in Afghanistan affairs and even fought proxy wars against each other, and however, China has not had such experience. Unlike before the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, China had vested interests in Afghanistan for the last few decades only in managing the explosion of the jihadi trend in Afghanistan among the Uyghur separatists of Xinjiang. China is also a neighbour of Afghanistan and the two countries share a border of approximately 75 Kilometers with the North Eastern Afghan province of Badakhshan in Central Asia bordering Xinjiang. Technically China has never been a direct player in the great game in Afghanistan, primarily because Afghanistan until recently has never been particularly high on China’s diplomatic radar and from a strategic standpoint, China was never quite prepared to get into the great game. (Muzaffar, et. al, 2021a; Zhao, 2013).

China's involvement and influence under the current Taliban government

The Chinese government had been having diplomatic relations with the successive Afghan governments since 2001 but it has never severed ties with the Taliban. However, this communication only intensified after the Obama administration announced a date of withdrawal of US army from the country in 2014 (Bibi, & Muzaffar, 2023). In that very year China assigned its first ever special envoy for Afghanistan and the country spearheaded in negotiating the political affairs between the Taliban and the Afghan government. China was a member of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group with the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and has been involved in the Moscow

Dialogue, formed in 2016 and 2017, respectively. Moreover, between 2014 and 2019, China itself allowed the Taliban to use its territory for the organization of several meetings. (Li, 2021).

The intended aim of these efforts was to help create 'a large scale, national, and Afghan-led and -owned reconciliation process among the many political groups comprising the nation'. China's participation and sponsorship also guaranteed that China would be able to talk to the leaders of the Taliban and whoever else showed up as the government. Although one month before the Taliban's takeover, the Chinese delegation invited nine Taliban leaders to a conference in Tianjin in July 2021, the head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission represented the group. During the meeting, China's foreign minister Wang Yi referred to the Taliban as "a crucial military and political power in the country and a major player in the Afghanistan peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction process." In August, shortly before the Afghan republic collapsed, a spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was asked what Beijing would mean in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan: 'We stand for further advancement of good-neighborly and friendly relations with Afghanistan.' As some opined it was this desire to extend its sphere of influence in the region, it was probably a manifestation of the Chinese government whose interests in Afghanistan are positive, if not friendly. (Rakisits, 2021).

Material and Methods

The research is based on qualitative method. This research would be an analytical and exploratory type to explain the importance of China's role in the post US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Secondary and primary sources such as books, journalist, articles and reports have been used for study. Certainly conducting qualitative research on the topic China's role in the post US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its Implications for Region involves a systematic approach to-gather analyze and interpret data in a comprehensive manner.

Theoretical Framework

Neo-Realism provides a lens through which we can understand China's actions in post-US Afghanistan as driven by its pursuit of power, security, and regional dominance in the context of an anarchic international system. China's strategic moves in Afghanistan should be analyzed within the framework of these Neo-Realist principles to gain insights into its motivations and objectives.

Neo-realism, as expounded by scholars like Kenneth Waltz, focuses on states as rational actors driven by self-interest and the pursuit of power. Neo-Realism emphasizes the importance of states seeking to maintain or shift the balance of power in their favor. With the US withdrawing from Afghanistan, a power vacuum has emerged in the region. China may perceive this as an opportunity to expand its influence and solidify its position as a regional power (Waltz, 1979).

State Behavior and Security Concerns (Waltz, 1978):Neorealism is concerned with the actions of states in the international system characterized by anarchy and where the primary concern is security. Applying neorealism to China's involvement in Afghanistan, it means that China's actions are mainly motivated by security factors. Due to the threats of having the instabilities in Afghanistan affecting the other Central Asian states and China's Xinjiang province Beijing values stability in Afghanistan to avoid terrorism and separatism. Thus, economic investments and diplomatic activities of

China are to strengthen its borders and to prevent the penetration of extraneous forces that can provoke the destabilization of the situation.

Balance of Power and Regional Influence(Rolland,2017):Neorealism focuses on the distribution of power and how states align themselves in relation to other significant powers. In the context of Afghanistan, China's actions can be described as part of its policy to contain other regional powers – Russia and the United States, in particular. In this context, through the economic projects such as BRI and infrastructure investments to connect the region, China aims at strengthening its position in Afghanistan and other countries and consolidating its role as the key actor in the region.

Implications for the Region(Ahmad & Khan, 2022):Pakistan stands to benefit from China's growing influence. As a close ally, Pakistan's collaboration with China is likely to deepen, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This partnership could strengthen Pakistan's strategic position, aligning it closely with China's broader regional objectives.

Iran: Iran views China as a valuable partner, particularly as both countries are wary of US influence. Iran might coordinate more closely with China and Pakistan to counterbalance other regional players like Saudi Arabia and India (Kashgarian, 2021).. This alignment could foster greater regional cooperation but might also fuel rivalries with nations outside this alliance.

Findings

Strategic Engagement and Economic Initiatives

Strategic interaction and economic operations include collective actions of sovereign states to improve cooperation in the spheres of security and economy. While strategic partnership concentrates on the diplomatic and military cooperation to solve the common threats towards the regional stability and political dialogue. On the other hand, economic policies seek to promote economic activities within the economy through export and import, investment and development of infrastructure among others. The relationship between the two is important to understand as economic stability is usually followed by political stability, which results in dependencies which foster cooperation. For instance, China's belt and road strategy is a clear example of how economic interdependence can define diplomacy and affect the geopolitics of the world. In the aggregate, it is crucial to utilize economic initiatives to accomplish more extensive strategic goals.

Diplomatic and Political Influence

The diplomatic and political impact power means the ability of a nation or an organization to control or to influence the decisions, policy and actions of other nations. This influence can be in form of bilateral treaties and agreements, international relations, and international organizations and through soft power diplomacy through cultural exchanges, and provision of foreign aids. He added that countries use their diplomacy to advance and protect their agendas, as well as to maintain order, and resolve worldwide issues, including climate change or security risks. This influence, therefore, depends with the economic muscles, military might and diplomatic skills of a nation in determining the balance of power in the system thereby defining international politics.

Security Concerns and Counterterrorism

Security and counter-terrorism are the processes and measures that states adopt to deal with threats from the violent non-state actors and to safeguard the country and the region. Such concerns stem from the fact that terrorism is still likely to happen in the future and this can have an effect of derailing societies and peace. As a result, countries establish counter terrorism policies, which consist of techniques such as intelligence, military and social policies to prevent radicalization. There is need for cooperation since most of the time terrorists have international linkages and hence there is need for concerted effort. In this context, addressing political instability and socio-economic inequalities, for instance, helps nations to reduce the threats to security and enhance the security of nations in the world.

Impact on Regional Dynamics

Pakistan: Views China's role as beneficial for its strategic interests, enhancing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and countering Indian influence.

Iran: Sees China's involvement with cautious optimism, recognizing both competition and potential for collaboration.

Conclusion

Since the Taliban seized an Afghanistan devoid of its foreign peoples, anticipations have been rife that China would have a new opportunity to seize the geopolitical, security, and economic opportunities left by the West. China can be seen to have direct stakes in a peaceful, ent synonymous with development and good governance, Afghanistan that can help avoid the cross border troubles creeping into the Xinjiang province or acts of terror against Chinese citizens and properties in other parts of the Central South Asian regions. To date, there has been no signal that China would be willing to commit any human and material resources to address the entire spectrum of security, economical and development issues that Afghanistan confronts - much less two billion dollars. 3trillions which the USA expended in two decades of operation in the country. Given its non-interference policy and learning from both Soviet and US failure in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that China would risk becoming militarily mired in the country. Although the defense of human rights in international relations can be partly explained by the five reasons mentioned above, two more factors could also have contributed to the noninterference policy. First, despite the increasingly important role of China as an actor in the economic and security spheres of Central Asia, Afghanistan still holds a relatively marginal place in its foreign policy priorities, which remain focused on the region of East Asia and the competition with the USA. Second, the Chinese government still feels relatively secure about the possibility of the ETIM/TIP or any other militant groups more generally to pose a direct threat to China and its facilities in Xinjiang and the region at large for at least two reasons: First, the Chinese government can rely on the support and cooperation of other regional players such as Pakistan or Tajikistan to counteract this perceived threat, and Second, the militants can, for various reasons.(Li, 2021).

China has not been actively partisan over the Taliban but, at present, its strategies in Afghanistan involve stabilizing post-war relations. China has so to some extent accepted the sovereignty of its regime, has supported the lodging of Afghan money and has offered only some non-lethal aid. To my mind, what is most important is that it has not ruled out the possibility of future huge investments in the country's

economy – an opportunity which the Taliban authorities welcome. In return for these commitments, the Taliban has at least offered some level of assurances on security issues that are important to Chinese internal security. In practical terms China has not been very active in Afghanistan and even in the future it appears unlikely that it will engage in direct intervention to protect its interests. However, its actual influence has been relatively modest in comparison to its security provided. The possibilities of making deals and bringing the radical shift of investment such as in the mineral resources of Afghanistan remain a hum and are not likely to come into existence for quite some time in future when certainty and security can be provided to the international investors. This looks rather improbable, especially when Afghanistan's government keeps on being politically ostracized and financially buffered. Last but not the least, Chinese development and humanitarian help remains and is likely to remain grossly inadequate and that too minimal in scale compared to what the USA has continued to give after its withdrawal. China is more involved in the region's dynamics as the country has actively engaged and initiated various forms of multilateral processes, some among which have yielded positive outcomes in the area of humanitarian aid. In this respect, Afghanistan may also present China a further opportunity for growing its leadership and by collaborating with other neighbors in order to have a positive impact for a longer-lasting, more regional approach to peace, security and development. For all the newcomers' unprecedented concessions, it is only right to remember that it has been only one year of the Taliban rule; and while China still performs a balancing and pragmatic policy – the future drastic transformations are yet to come. Ground or international events that have emerged new indications may prompt modification to this approach in as yet undiscovered ways.

Recommendations

Strengthening Regional Cooperation

China should work towards promoting the regional integration format, which involves Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and other neighboring nations. This can be done through such avenues as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO, whose primary aim is to foster security and economic dialogues as well as cooperation on issues of terrorism among others.

Economic Investments and Infrastructure Development

As for Afghanistan, China must assert sustainable and inclusive economic interests and prefer investments in infrastructure with a positive impact on the Afghan population and able to foster their connection with the rest of the Central Asian region. It is vital that projects under the BRI must be implemented diligently and maintain transparency, promote environmental awareness, and act responsibly.

Diplomatic Engagement and Mediation

China should use its diplomatic power to diplomatically intervene in Afghanistan and arbitrate between several groups in the country. Promoting political culture that engulfs all the ethnic and religious groups in the country and ensure their political rights this can go a long way into solving the problem.

Humanitarian Assistance and Development

China should bring more focus on the humanitarian assistance and development cooperation with Afghanistan to address the emergency requirements that include food security, health and schooling. The 100 billion per diem fund development objective should be in line with the long-term development programs that enhance the country's fiscal capacity to address structural weaknesses among the society.

Balancing Relations with Regional Powers

The Chinese leadership should be sensitive to regional realities vis-à-vis Pakistan and Iran, and where their strategic necessities and apprehensions lie. This means that devolving is an important step in preventing tensions that may culminate in war and ensuring that conflict resolution is achieved through regional dialogue.

Monitoring and Adapting to Changing Dynamics

It is necessary for China to pay close attention to the changes in Afghanistan and the overall situations within the region with intent on re-strategizing on the go. Thus, volatility, variation, adaptability, and sensitivity to changes will be the key factors in the effective risk management and in the identification of opportunities.

Engaging with International Organizations

China must join with other nations or international organization such as UN, World Bank and IMF in order to foster and plan for the Afghan future. Cohesiveness with these institutions can help augment outcomes of developments and stabilizations. Thus, for China to be aligned to these recommendations, the country will be in a position to be a positive force in the post-U. S. Afghanistan, to ensure long-term stability and cohesiveness of the South Central Asia states and the prosperity of their nations. To both Pakistan and Iran, China can present potential for the growth of mutually beneficial economic relations and security cooperation, if the countries can tread carefully and assess risks and opportunities optimistically. In the coming years this region will flourish if only the governments of the countries in the region will respect one another, embrace each other, and fight for the *causa pacis et prosperitatem*, the cause of peace and prosperity.

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