

THE PAKISTAN FACTOR IN CHINA'S AFGHANISTAN POLICY: EMERGING REGIONAL FAULTLINES AMID US WITHDRAWAL

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Cover photo: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosts the 4th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Guiyang, southwest China's Guizhou Province, June 3, 2021. Photo by Yang Wenbin/Xinhua via Getty Images.



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Photo above: Representatives from China and Pakistan sign cooperation documents during the ninth Joint Cooperation Committee meeting of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Islamabad, Pakistan, Nov. 5, 2019. Photo by Ahmad Kamal/Xinhua via Getty Images.



To date, China has largely relied on Pakistan to conduct its Afghan policy.



Introduction

At 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 Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi discussed various challenges to Afghan peace in the wake of the announcement of the unilateral U.S. military withdrawal. While the challenges from the exit of U.S. troops were identified as the potential for strife and civil war, the opportunities highlighted included the prospects for the Afghan people to decide their own political destiny. Expressing China's willingness "to work with all stakeholders of Afghanistan, including Pakistan, to make more efforts to promote peace talks and mediation," Wang offered to play the role of mediator by hosting "an intra-Afghan dialogue at an appropriate time."¹ All three countries also agreed to work together to push the U.S. to ensure an "orderly withdrawal" of

“Beijing’s primary concern in a post-U.S. Afghanistan ... is that Uyghur separatists and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement might find a safe haven in the country.”

its troops as well as “the fulfillment of its due obligations” so that the security situation in Afghanistan does not deteriorate further. The statement went on to add that, “China hopes that Pakistan will continue to make good use of its own advantages and make new and constructive efforts. China also hopes that the Afghan side will take a positive view of Pakistan’s sincerity and contributions.” This suggests that China recognizes the importance of bridging the differences between Afghanistan and Pakistan and sees itself playing a mediator role to this end.

To date, China has largely relied on Pakistan to conduct its Afghan policy. Not much bothered about the future political role of the Taliban, China fears the prospect of instability in Afghanistan after the U.S. exit. Beijing’s primary concern in a post-U.S. Afghanistan, which is likely to be run by a regime dominated by the Taliban, is that Uyghur separatists and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) might find a safe haven in the country. Although all regional countries support the idea of an inclusive political resolution to the Afghan conflict, neither China nor any other country has any appetite to lead a regional intervention to stabilize it. China has therefore responded to the announcement of the American exit from Afghanistan with a sense of disquiet. While it has considered the U.S. presence in Afghanistan to be largely disruptive, the abrupt exit is likely to create more challenges than opportunities for China. Wang had expressed similar concerns at the Third Session of the 13th National People’s Congress in May 2020 when he remarked that American “troop withdrawal must proceed in a responsible way without undermining the interests of Afghanistan or other countries in the region.”²

All external interventions in Afghanistan, whether by Britain, the Soviet Union, or the United States, have been a disaster. In particular, the last four decades since the 1979 Soviet invasion have witnessed a series of traumatic changes in the ways in which Afghans have been governed as they have struggled to cope with the repercussions of the economic, social, and political crises that have engulfed them. As the

U.S. leaves Afghanistan after 20 years, the failure to find a political accommodation between warring factions may yet result in another slide into chaos. Building a multi-ethnic state on liberal-democratic lines has been constrained by the inability of the Afghan ruling elite to harmonize the Islamic faith, the country’s mix of ethnicities, nationalism, and modernity. Though many positive changes have taken place in Afghanistan since 2001, such as regular elections; improvements in infrastructure, education, and health care; women’s empowerment; and the creation of a trained national military force, these are not irreversible. The bitter reality is that Afghanistan remains a war-torn country facing an uncertain future, rife with unrestrained terrorist violence, political instability, government corruption, large-scale narcotics production, and an ongoing Taliban insurgency. The security situation is so desperate that the Afghan government has begun to raise local militias.

Afghanistan is neither an entrenched democracy nor a state that has control of its international borders. Moreover, about half of the Afghan countryside remains contested or controlled by the Afghan Taliban and other terror groups such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Afghan-based branch of ISIS. Notwithstanding decades of military operations and international economic and security assistance, Afghanistan remains a source of instability for the region. The inability of the Afghan government to find a political solution with the Taliban is a long-term source of conflict with serious spillover effects. Consequently, the two-decade-long U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan has progressively evolved into a bloody regional geopolitical contest, giving birth to a “New Great Game.” As withdrawing American troops leave a vacuum to be filled by various terror outfits, Afghanistan may become a regional battleground for the global balance of power.

There seems to be, as could be expected, a convergence of opinion that the hasty withdrawal will have serious repercussions on the process of reconciliation underway. Furthermore, in the midst of the U.S.-China strategic

confrontation, the U.S. exit from Afghanistan could have severe consequences for the countries of South and Central Asia in particular. What Marvin Weinbaum remarked 15 years ago still holds true that “many of Afghanistan’s challenges, often thought of as domestic, are also regional in character, necessarily addressed with regional strategies and cooperation.”³ So far, however, the responses to the U.S. withdrawal have not resulted in what can be deemed a truly “regional” political strategy. Against this backdrop, China is refining its policy toolbox to calibrate its response. If the past is any guide, China is likely to rely on Pakistan, at least in the short term, for framing its response to the unfolding Afghan scenario. Though Pakistan has set in motion the process of resetting its relations with the Biden administration, at this stage it will mostly likely throw its weight behind China if Washington and Beijing fail to reconcile their differences on Afghan affairs.

Although it would be simplistic to assume that China’s and Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan have become completely identical, one cannot rule out a growing convergence that may lead to deeper engagement between Beijing and Islamabad after the American drawdown. This paper seeks to address the Pakistan factor in China’s Afghanistan policy and is divided into the following five sections:

1. It begins with a critical evaluation of China’s interests and actions in Afghanistan. Beijing’s economic interests are broadly in sync with Pakistan’s stated ambitions to become a regional trade hub. As far as the political dimension is concerned, China seems convinced that Pakistan has a key role to play in the stabilization of Afghanistan following the pullout of American troops.
2. Next it analyses Pakistan’s evolving interests in Afghanistan. China is not oblivious to the fact that Pakistan is playing competing sides of the Afghan conflict to advance its own interests, but also feels that Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan cannot be ignored, and its interests need to be accommodated.
3. Then it deals with how Pakistan shapes the contours of China’s Afghan policy, including discussion of common threats from India and Pakistan’s facilitation role.
4. The next section on China’s challenges discusses potential American flexibility after freeing itself from its Afghanistan commitment, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan’s (TTP) alliance with Baluch separatists, the fragmented Afghan peace process, and seemingly

intractable Pakistan-Afghanistan discord.

5. It concludes with a final section on India as the China-India-Pakistan triangle is important to understand as a major regional faultline impacting the prospects for stability in Afghanistan.

China’s interests and actions

Although China shares a 76-km-long border with Afghanistan, relations with Kabul were never high on Beijing’s diplomatic radar until the U.S. established a military presence there following the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks. Even after that, China continued to avoid major involvement in Afghan affairs for a long time. However, when the former U.S. President Barack Obama decided to withdraw troops from Afghanistan in 2011, Beijing began to step up its engagement with Kabul. To facilitate reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban, China hosted the Istanbul Process in Beijing in October 2014. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, in his address, talked about “the five propositions of the Chinese side” regarding the resolution of the Afghan conflict, while expressing Beijing’s support for “peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction” and Afghanistan’s integration into “regional cooperation.”⁴ China has since remained diplomatically active on the conflict resolution front, making mediatory efforts to resolve differences between the warring parties. China has hosted a Taliban delegation, while participating in some regional multilateral conferences on the Afghan peace process. China reportedly hosted a Taliban delegation in December 2014, one month after President Ashraf Ghani made his first overseas visit to China, during which he asked it to play a mediating role and put pressure on Pakistan to allow the Taliban leaders living there to meet Afghan officials.

A report in *The Wall Street Journal* portrayed the hosting of the Taliban’s meeting with the Kabul regime in Beijing as “a rare example of China helping to mediate in another country’s internal conflict, and the latest indication of Chinese ambitions to gradually supplant the U.S. as guarantor of security and prosperity in Asia.”⁵ Around the same time, China’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sun Yuxi, underlined China’s willingness to assume greater responsibilities. In an interview with the BBC, he said, “For the past 13 years the U.S. and NATO have been playing a major role in Afghanistan and we made a contribution and

“As one Chinese scholar puts it, ‘Considered negatively, Afghanistan is a like a lock that can cut off Central, South, and West Asia from each other. Considered positively, it is the key that can open the door to collaboration between these areas.’”

gave them support, but now with the U.S. leaving, Afghanistan is facing a critical period. We are ready to do more, we want to play a bigger role.”⁶ The commitment to play a more active regional role was reaffirmed in February 2015 by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang, who said that, “China is ready to play its constructive role and will provide necessary facilitation at any time if it is required by various parties in Afghanistan.”⁷ However, as Beijing has so far failed to make any military commitment toward Afghan security, the criticism that China is free riding on the U.S.-led security presence there is not off the mark.

Before proceeding further, it is relevant to identify China’s major interests in Afghanistan. Its primary interest is to ensure that religious extremism stemming from Afghanistan does not affect China. China’s northwestern province of Xinjiang has been particularly vulnerable to separatist tendencies for some time, and the pan-Islamic sentiments espoused by al-Qaeda have only exacerbated them. The birth of Central Asian republics on ethno-religious grounds following the disintegration of the USSR and the rise of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan during the 1990s provided fertile ground for the emergence of Islamist fundamentalism in Xinjiang, and China’s brutal crackdown on Muslim minorities living there only added fuel to the fire. Sporadic terror incidents took place in the first decade of this century, and the July 2009 ethnic riots in Xinjiang were probably the clearest manifestation of the widespread disaffection among Uyghurs. This incident was perhaps “one of many turning points in the Chinese government’s increasingly draconian rule over the region,” which eventually resulted in mass imprisonment of China’s Muslim minorities in concentration and political re-education camps.⁸ After it became evident that Uyghur militants, trained and sheltered in Afghanistan, were expanding their footprint in mainland China, concerns began to mount within Beijing’s security apparatus about the possible return of terrorist violence in Afghanistan and its repercussions for China. This coincided with the Obama administration’s decision to reduce the number of troops stationed in Afghanistan.

Second, for Beijing the security of its geopolitically ambitious connectivity program — the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — is vital, and it may not be possible to ensure it without Afghan involvement. As one Chinese scholar puts it, “Considered negatively, Afghanistan is a like a lock that can cut off Central, South, and West Asia from each other. Considered positively, it is the key that can open the door to collaboration between these areas.”⁹ China and Afghanistan have often affirmed their commitment to cooperate on BRI projects and integrate Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the BRI’s key arteries. Though the CPEC is expected to bring many socio-economic benefits to Pakistan and geostrategic advantages for China, there are serious challenges to its implementation, ranging from the fragile internal security situation to the mistrust of outside powers.¹⁰ Further instability in and around Afghanistan could seriously affect the BRI’s prospects. China has thus made repeated efforts to gain international legitimacy for its BRI activities in Afghanistan. In Resolution 2274 (2016) on the mandate of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the U.N. Security Council in March 2016 called for strengthening regional trade and transit through regional development initiatives, including the BRI.¹¹ U.N. Security Council Resolution 2344 on Afghanistan, passed in March 2017, again called for consensus on assisting Afghanistan and strengthening regional economic cooperation through many connectivity initiatives, including the BRI.¹²

Protecting Chinese investments in Afghanistan’s neighboring countries also figures prominently in Beijing’s foreign policy calculations vis-à-vis Kabul. China has recently announced a major deal with Iran involving a reported \$400 billion in investment over 25 years, reflecting Beijing’s growing interests in Iran. The country’s huge energy resources and its role in regional geopolitics make it particularly attractive for China. If this Chinese move eases Iran’s international isolation amid the renewed negotiations over the revival of the 2015 nuclear accord,¹³ Tehran could throw its weight behind Beijing’s Afghan



Photo above: A Wakhi man looks out to the mountains in the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. Photo by Tom McShane/Loop Images/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

“It is clear that the continued instability in Afghanistan has the potential to destabilize Xinjiang in ways that could create impediments to the smooth implementation of the BRI.”

“No Afghan government, including the fundamentalist Taliban regime (1996-2001), has accepted the Durand Line as an internationally recognized border.”

policies. Iran has already endorsed the BRI and showed an interest in joining the CPEC.¹⁴ If the American exit brings more instability in Afghanistan, it will affect the entire region, and China would not escape the consequences. In this context, it is important for China to increase its diplomatic involvement in Afghanistan.

China has stepped up cooperation with the Afghan government on border security. However, institutionalized cooperation with Afghan security agencies has not prevented Beijing from working clandestinely. It was reported in Indian media that 10 Chinese nationals were detained on Dec. 10, 2020 in Kabul on charges of spying.¹⁵ Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) began a crackdown on the spying, but the Afghan government agreed to suppress the news at China's request. President Ghani did not want the incident to be exploited by the Americans to embarrass the Chinese. In early January 2021, Afghanistan was reported to have released the 10 Chinese spies, who are said to belong to China's Ministry of State Security (MSS). They were reportedly collecting information about al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Uyghurs in Kunar and Badakhshan provinces, and also working to entrap ETIM fighters in Afghanistan.¹⁶ This incident only highlights China's desperation to crack down on Uyghur separatists, as well as the limits of formal China-Afghan intelligence cooperation and the deep penetration of terror organizations in Afghanistan.

It is clear that the continued instability in Afghanistan has the potential to destabilize Xinjiang in ways that could create impediments to the smooth implementation of the BRI. Afghanistan's abundant and mostly untapped natural resources also work as a magnet for resource-hungry China. China's need for Afghan natural resources could be gauged from the fact that Beijing got involved in their exploration even when it had very limited diplomatic engagement with Kabul. For instance, Chinese companies entered into a deal worth \$4.4 billion to develop copper deposits at Mes Aynak in Logar Province. It is another matter that even after making

huge investments in the mining sector, Beijing has not been able to operate fully, primarily because of continuing conflict and insecurity in Afghanistan.¹⁷ However, China's efforts should be seen as part of its multifaceted diplomatic approach as well as an indication of promising prospects for its long-term strategic effectiveness in Afghanistan. Pakistan's vast experience in Afghan affairs and its close strategic partnership with China have been an important factor in Beijing's Afghan policy.

Pakistan's evolving interests in Afghanistan

In order to understand Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan, one must first understand the background of their bilateral relations. Pakistan and Afghanistan share an about 2,600-km-long border, known as the Durand Line. This controversial boundary was marked in 1893 as part of an agreement between Sir Mortimer Durand, secretary of British India, and Abdur Rahman Khan, the Afghan ruler. However, it was later claimed by nationalist Afghans that the boundary was drawn arbitrarily as it divided Pashtuns on both sides of the border. It was coercively imposed by the British as Khan was politically weak. When the British departed from the Indian subcontinent in 1947, partitioning it into the two independent countries of India and Pakistan, Britain rejected the Afghan government's demand to redraw the Durand Line. An incensed Afghanistan was the only country to have opposed Pakistan's entry into the United Nations. As a result of this opposition, Pakistan became acutely conscious of the irredentist threat posed by Afghanistan's support for an independent Pashtunistan. The dispute over the Durand Line has since defined the bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁸

No Afghan government, including the fundamentalist Taliban regime (1996-2001), has accepted the Durand Line as an internationally recognized border. As recently as September

2020, Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh tweeted that, “No Afghan politician of national stature can overlook the issue of Durand Line. It will condemn him or her in life & after life. It is an issue which needs discussions & resolution. Expecting us to gift it for free is unrealistic.”¹⁹ Clearly, the resolution of the Durand Line dispute will not prove easy without a spirit of compromise and concession on both sides.

As ruefully observed by a former military officer of Pakistan, while Pashtuns derive their ethnic identity from the Pashto language, which is spoken on both sides of the disputed border, when they are asked to define their nationality, they always declare themselves to be Afghan.²⁰ Pashtun nationalism in Pakistan has been a very sensitive issue for Pakistani policymakers because of its negative effects on internal stability, similar to the Bengali nationalistic rebellion that led to the creation of Bangladesh. Many in Pakistan’s civilian and military circles have long argued that the American presence in Afghanistan gives Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line a good reason to unite, strengthening Pashtun nationalism in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.²¹

There is a huge lack of coordination between the two countries on effective border management, due to the porous nature of the disputed boundary, mutual suspicions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the legacy of Pakistan’s use of its border areas to shelter Afghan mujahedeen during the “Afghan jihad,” and complicated geopolitics. This has allowed terrorists and criminals to take refuge in the border regions on both sides. Over time, al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),²² and ISIS have joined them. Most of the terrorist organizations posing threats — Uyghur separatists to China, the Taliban and al-Qaeda to Afghanistan, and the TTP to Pakistan — have taken advantage of the lawlessness of the border areas. Pakistan’s policies toward its border regions have also created many problems. For instance, until its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas remained outside of Pakistan’s legal framework. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), a socio-political movement opposing the Pakistan army for conducting military operations in the tribal areas, is also a challenge.

Finally, from Pakistan’s perspective, Afghanistan provides it with “strategic depth” against India. Pakistan has tried to expand its sphere of influence so that it can control Kabul’s

relations with New Delhi. In the years since the U.S. ousted the Taliban, India has made considerable diplomatic and economic investments in the country, providing around \$3 billion in economic and military assistance.²³ Pakistan wants the Western world to believe that India has been using its development presence in Afghanistan to stir up trouble in Baluchistan, a claim that has not been substantiated. Recently, Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi, in an interview with an Afghan television channel, again accused India of using Afghan soil against Pakistan. He even indirectly questioned Afghan sovereignty in deciding the nature and scope of its bilateral ties with India. Pakistan’s prominent Pashtun activist Afrasiab Khattak sarcastically countered him by saying that the Taliban wouldn’t need a foreign minister “when they already have one” in Qureshi.²⁴ Both Afghanistan and India reject Pakistan’s claims and consider it their legitimate right to deepen their strategic partnership.

This backdrop has shaped Pakistan’s Afghan policy, which aims to convince the government in Kabul to recognize the Durand Line, to gain “strategic depth” in Afghanistan and prevent India from operating on Afghan soil with the help of violent proxies, and to connect with Central Asia. Pakistan’s support to the Taliban and the Haqqani Network should be seen in this context. However, these policies have been a source of constant tension in the region. As India’s scholar-diplomat, Shivshankar Menon, has rightly said in his latest book, “Pakistan is more fundamentally a victim of its own flawed strategic vision and the actions of its own intelligence agencies than of the terrorists who were their chosen instruments.”²⁵ He further argues that Pakistan’s main aims in Afghanistan have not been achieved, nor do they seem attainable, creating an unstable area “overshadowed by a multipronged power sharing among tribes, extremist and terrorist groups, and the Pakistan army. If anything, the situation is worse than the ambiguous but relatively stable frontier constructed by the [British] Raj.” The U.S. has often blamed Pakistan for playing a dual role, aiding counterterrorism efforts while also supporting the Taliban insurgency. Former President Donald Trump, in the early years of his presidency, vehemently criticized Pakistan for its destabilizing role in Afghanistan. Changing Pakistan’s behavior and forcing it to cut links with the Taliban was a key objective of Trump’s Afghanistan’s strategy. Washington persuaded President Ghani to reach out to Beijing in the hope

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that it would help achieve this objective, but Ghani felt let down.²⁶ Later Trump too changed both his policy and tone with Pakistan, looking to Islamabad to mediate between the U.S. and the Taliban for an exit deal. Pakistan is now making efforts to reach out to the Biden administration. Since American dependence on Pakistan will disappear soon after the U.S. military withdrawal, Pakistan faces a major challenge in protecting its interests in Afghanistan. During his phone calls with U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken in May 2021, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Qureshi said that ties between Pakistan and the U.S. should be based on “close economic cooperation, enhanced regional connectivity, and common vision for a peaceful South Asia.”²⁷ However, Qureshi’s stress on a “responsible withdrawal” of American and foreign forces only betrays a sense of Pyrrhic victory.

Afghanistan’s key challenge over the past four decades has been its fragmented domestic political landscape in combination with regional power rivalries that have further intensified these conflicts. A peaceful Afghanistan would thus represent a significant source of stability for most of the neighboring countries, including China. In comparison to other states in the region, China has certain advantages in dealing with the Afghan crises. It has enjoyed a reputation of being a neutral neighbor due to its long-held policy of non-interference in Afghanistan’s internal political dynamics. Even when Beijing indicated an incremental shift in its historic position about a decade ago, it was careful to adopt an inclusive approach, forging ties with all key Afghan stakeholders, including the Taliban. China’s growing economic strength makes it imperative for Kabul to strengthen its relationship with Beijing. In the context of the American withdrawal, the Afghan government will continue to rely on international financial support. Though the nature of the assistance will certainly change,²⁸ China could be one potential source. China’s strong level of trust with Pakistan, however, is Beijing’s core strength. Since Afghanistan is a

landlocked country that is mostly dependent on Pakistan for its trade, its participation in the CPEC would be advantageous for both Pakistan and China.

China’s need for Pakistan

The most important reason why it is advantageous for China to coordinate its Afghan policies with Pakistan is the strong strategic ties between the two countries. Since Pakistan has precious experience in dealing with Afghan affairs, China views this as a huge advantage. Once China began to focus its attention on Afghanistan, Pakistan came forward to share its knowledge, which led to trust between the two. This is in sharp contrast to Pakistan’s tense relations with the U.S. regarding Afghanistan. Though Islamabad has reaped rich military and economic rewards from its partnership with Washington, U.S.-Pakistan cooperation has been marred by mistrust and suspicion of each other’s reliability and motives. By contrast, the greater strategic congruence between China and Pakistan has facilitated their collaboration in Afghanistan.

Since Joe Biden’s entry into the White House, Pakistan has begun to make concerted efforts to reset its relationship with the U.S. A day after Qureshi’s call with Blinken, an editorial in *Dawn* summarized Pakistan’s strategic dilemma: “Pakistan has in recent years invested heavily in its relationship with China especially through CPEC. At the same time, Pakistan has also paid special attention to consolidating its ties with Russia. ... This, however, makes for some tightrope walking for Pakistan as the U.S. is now locked in a difficult relationship with both China and Russia.”²⁹ The editorial further emphasized the need for Islamabad to “strike the right balance” in Pakistan’s relationships with the U.S. and China and avoid strengthening “one relationship at the expense of another.” In other words, it would not be easy for Islamabad to keep ties with the Biden administration on an even keel without partnering with Washington to ensure a smooth transition of power in Kabul.

Nevertheless, there is a good chance that if America's and China's interests do not converge in Afghanistan, Islamabad's interests will be closer to Beijing's than to those of Washington. Even China may not like Pakistan to support American efforts in its Afghan-related activities in the post-withdrawal era. When reports emerged that the U.S. was trying to set up military bases outside Afghanistan, Lan Jianxue, a Chinese scholar, criticized the U.S. while mentioning that "Pakistan is a country that firmly defends its sovereignty and rejects foreign interference, therefore Pakistan will certainly not allow the U.S. to operate a military base on its territory. If it gives the U.S. access to its bases, this will cause nothing but harm to Pakistan."³⁰

Mutual rivalry with India

While China and Russia are showing renewed interest in strategic collaboration on many issues, of which Afghanistan is one, China still finds Pakistan to be a more reliable ally due to their mutual rivalry with neighboring India. For Beijing, no country is as relevant and willing to promote its interests in the region as Pakistan. This is an ongoing dimension of India-Pakistan relations and is linked to Pakistan's perennial desire to "undo" Jammu and Kashmir's incorporation into India. Until Pakistan's 1971 defeat against India and the subsequent birth of Bangladesh, Pakistan's ruling establishment had fairly limited ideas about how to deal with India. But under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan's response to its 1971 defeat was to set out on the nuclear path and strengthen ties with China. Since then, influential groups within the Pakistan Army leadership have believed that covert use of force against India could be an effective tool to bring India to its knees. And China has been a net beneficiary of Pakistan's strategic approach vis-à-vis India.

Pakistan has served China's interests for many decades. During the 1980s, China was involved, along with Pakistan and the U.S., in Afghanistan as a supporter of anti-Soviet fighters. However, Islamabad's ties with Beijing after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan underwent some change as China seemed to show somewhat declining interest in Pakistan. China's principal adversary, the Soviet Union, had disintegrated and thus no longer represented the same threat. Moreover, after the end of the Cold War, China's

strategic focus turned to East and Southeast Asia as well as the emerging Central Asian republics, an entirely new political region on China's doorstep with strategic implications for its western borders.³¹

But Beijing continued to remain invested in Pakistan for many reasons, including to keep Pakistan out of the American camp and to encourage the Pakistani military to support China in its campaign against extremist forces focused on Xinjiang operating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Another important factor was China's attempt to repair its ties with India, and a series of confidence-building measures between the two countries to maintain "peace and tranquility" along the disputed border. Thus, China kept its stance on the Kashmir issue balanced with an emphasis on the need to arrive at a bilateral solution. That is why during the 1999 Kargil crisis,³² China refused to bail Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif out of the military mess, and insisted that the Line of Control (LoC) between the areas of Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistani and Indian control should be respected. But despite these constraints, it was not possible for China to ignore Pakistan on account of its size, strategic location, and eagerness to be a loyal Chinese ally.³³ The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 in the U.S. changed many calculations and worldviews, however.

Pakistan's subsequent participation in the U.S.-led "War on Terror" helped to ease China's initial apprehensions. And the American military presence in Afghanistan since 2001 has allowed China to protect its varied interests in the country. Pakistan's support of the Taliban insurgency has undeniably weakened two of China's main rivals: India and the U.S. As some analysts have observed, "In China's quest for regional dominance, Afghanistan's relationship with India presents many challenges to China's grand plan. As a result, there is increased interest on the part of China in Afghanistan to overpower India's regional dominance."³⁴ As the U.S. prepares to leave Afghanistan, Pakistan will obviously prefer China's presence to that of any other regional player. And despite public rhetoric about regional cooperation, China will enhance its coordination with Pakistan and make concerted attempts to sideline India. As China's relations with India have deteriorated since the Galwan crisis in June 2020,³⁵ the possibility of China and Pakistan working

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in tandem to counter India’s influence in Afghanistan has increased further.

Pakistan’s facilitation role

Pakistan backed the Taliban openly during the 1990s and more clandestinely post-9/11. Contrary to this, China claimed to oppose religious extremism, terming it a threat to its own internal security. But these differences did not affect their bilateral ties as China refused to question Pakistan’s rational for supporting the Taliban. Pakistan also ensured that the negative fallout of its Taliban policy did not run counter to China’s interests. During the period of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, Pakistan facilitated China’s direct contact with the group, with the aim of ensuring Uyghur separatists did not find sanctuary in Afghanistan.

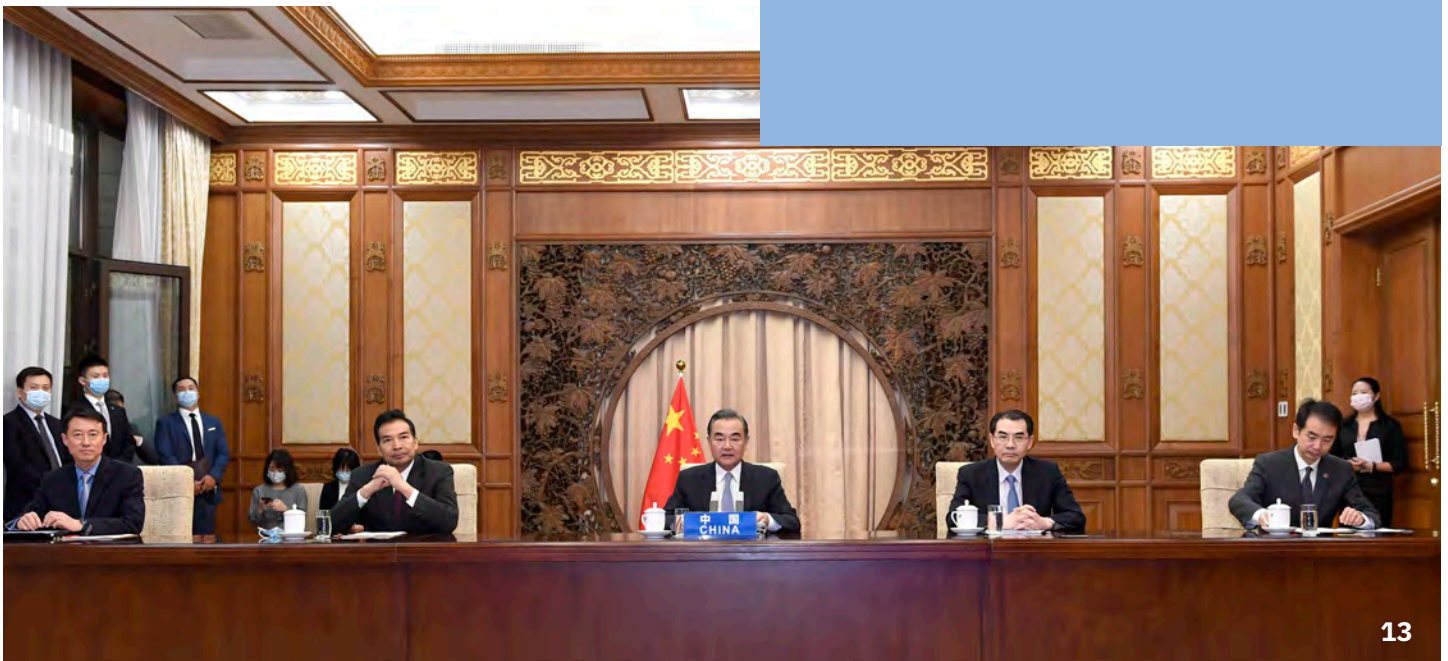
Pakistan continued to play the role of facilitator between China and the Taliban. Later, when regional diplomacy gained momentum to reconcile differences between the Taliban and the Kabul regime, China began to develop direct relations with the Taliban. It can be surmised that if the Taliban come to power again, they will ensure that Chinese interests remain

unaffected. And although China has developed good contacts with the Taliban, Pakistan remains the most important factor bringing them closer together.

Pakistan is the only country that can facilitate other Chinese objectives as well, such as the implementation of the BRI and consequent resource extraction from Afghanistan. As the Sino-Afghan border is inhospitable due to rugged terrain, the easier alternative route for China is via Pakistan. Connectivity through Pakistan offers several advantages,

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such as the relatively shorter distance, easy availability of Pakistan's infrastructure, and the very strong strategic partnership between the two countries.³⁶ The fact that China has helped Pakistan develop the Gwadar Port also enhances Beijing's Afghanistan outreach. Over the past two decades, all Pakistani governments encouraged China's involvement in the development of Gwadar, while China sees the port as a strategic access point to the Indian Ocean.³⁷ The possibilities of using it for Afghanistan have already been explored. Increased connectivity under CPEC is likely to surmount many of the existing hurdles. Further improvement in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations will have the best outcome for the BRI as it will facilitate China's connectivity to Iran and Turkey.³⁸

China has equally reciprocated Pakistan's efforts with diplomatic and economic support. China has shielded it from being pressured by the U.S. and other international bodies for its tolerance toward extremist outfits. When Pakistan came under increasing pressure from the Trump administration for sheltering terrorists, China hailed Pakistan's role in the fight against terror. In August 2017, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi came to Pakistan's rescue when speaking with then U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Defending Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, he remarked, "We should attach importance to Pakistan's important role in Afghanistan and respect Pakistan's sovereignty and legitimate security concerns."³⁹

Pakistan believes that India's foothold in Afghanistan is detrimental to its interests. Although China has not publicly stated anything adverse on the issue, it is reasonable to believe that it shares Pakistan concerns and attitude. The manner in which the Taliban has received regional recognition in the wake of the Doha peace deal has put India in an awkward position, forcing it to make a shift in its policy toward the Taliban. While Pakistan continues to hope to benefit from China's presence in Afghanistan so as to counter India's influence, China sees the advantages of making use of Pakistan to challenge India.

Geopolitics of the Wakhan Corridor

China's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan is accompanied by economic assistance and investment in infrastructure development. Special attention has also been paid to China's focus on Badakhshan Province,⁴⁰

including the promise of Chinese support for the creation of a special Afghan mountain brigade in Badakhshan as well as plans to expand its military presence by stationing Chinese troops there. Despite China's official denial, former Afghan officials claim that Beijing sought to build a military base there for a People's Liberation Army brigade, and to send military trainers for Afghan security forces, but when the Ghani regime requested Russian helicopters, Beijing pushed Chinese helicopters and drones. As China insisted on deploying Chinese navigation systems, there was fear in Afghan government circles that the Chinese internet and navigation systems could be used to spy on Afghanistan, leading to a freeze on further talks about the base, trainers, and equipment.⁴¹ This may have prompted China to instead station its troops in Tajikistan across the border.

To increase its trade volume with Afghanistan, China has taken a number of measures, including launching a train service from Nantong City, in eastern China's Jiangsu Province, to the Afghanistan city of Hairatan,⁴² establishing an air corridor, and granting duty-free treatment to range of Afghan commodities.⁴³ In order to boost trade through the new railway service, China has even persuaded Uzbekistan to minimize the transit fee for the railway, which should help Afghan traders.⁴⁴ China is going to benefit from a rail link between Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan, which recently signed a framework agreement on a 573-km railway track aimed at connecting Tashkent via Kabul with Pakistan's northern city of Peshawar.⁴⁵ China is also reported to be building a direct road with Afghanistan via the Wakhan Corridor, not too far from the Karakorum Highway. If road infrastructure through this mountainous corridor allows China to increase trade with Central Asia and to move in troops easily, the increased commerce through the Wakhan Corridor to the port of Gwadar would certainly be beneficial for Pakistan.⁴⁶ This could also be used by Afghanistan as an alternative export route, thereby reducing its dependence on Pakistan. However, opium production and transnational criminal networks are big Chinese worries if the Wakhan Corridor is opened up to greater trade flows. In 2009 China chose to refuse an American request to open the Wakhjir Pass (at the end of the Wakhan Corridor) as an alternative supply route for NATO troops operating in Afghanistan, indicating that opening of the Wakhjir border will depend on the positive future trajectory of China-Afghanistan relations.⁴⁷ China's policy in the Wakhan Corridor seems

“From a Chinese perspective, another complicating factor in an already fraught situation is the downturn in relations between Islamabad and Kabul.”

to be motivated primarily by the threat of radicalization, although the strategic role that this region can play in the BRI in Central Asia is another important factor as well.

Challenges for China

American flexibility

One may of course make the fairly obvious point that China’s reaction to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is complex. China is worried that without American military support, Afghanistan could descend into chaos. This is broadly true, for no other country can match American power and influence. In case of civil war, China-focused Islamist extremists will take advantage of Afghan territory for training and shelter. However, China is equally apprehensive of America’s long-term intentions in the region. It probably believes that since the U.S. has substantially given up its military commitment in Afghanistan, it would not hesitate to use Afghanistan to undercut Beijing’s regional strategic calculations. Some of the recent statements made by Biden administration officials are seen as confirming China’s fears that America’s “strategic retrenchment” from Afghanistan will free up its capability to compete more vigorously with China.⁴⁸

TTP’s alliance with Baluch separatists

TTP, also known as the Pakistani Taliban, which was seen as a largely spent force, has recently reemerged and unleashed a series of terror attacks across Pakistan’s tribal belt. This is a troubling development from the Chinese perspective. The TTP has mostly targeted Pakistan’s security personnel, and has gradually moved away from a global jihadist narrative to more local causes. But the TTP’s attack on the Serena Hotel in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan’s Balochistan Province, indicates a tactical convergence with Baluch separatists.⁴⁹ Balochistan borders Afghanistan and Iran and many sectarian, separatist, and foreign terror groups have a

presence there. The province is also home to Gwadar Port, in which the Chinese have invested through CPEC to link Xinjiang with the Arabian Sea. The CPEC has been sold to the Pakistani people as a way to ensure local job creation and economic development. However, in reality there has been no boost to local employment and skilled job creation. Balochistan remains Pakistan’s poorest province and the development of the area has only resulted in the alienation of local people.⁵⁰ Ethnic Baluch separatists have frequently targeted Chinese construction in Balochistan, accusing the Pakistani state of exploiting their resources. In November 2018, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) launched an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi.⁵¹ It is believed that the TTP has begun collaborating with some Baluch groups.⁵² Since Baluchs also live in parts of Afghanistan and some leaders of the BLA spent years in exile there, Chinese investments in Afghanistan may also be vulnerable to attacks from Baluch separatists, as has occurred in Pakistan.

Fragmented peace process and Pakistani-Afghan discord

The Afghan peace process faces a number of hurdles, as is clear from the fact that the intra-Afghan dialogue remains in limbo. There is a significant surge in violence across Afghanistan as the Biden administration moves forward with its plans to withdraw all American troops. From a Chinese perspective, another complicating factor in an already fraught situation is the downturn in relations between Islamabad and Kabul. Despite a recent goodwill trip to Kabul by Pakistan’s army chief, Gen. General Qamar Javed Bajwa, accompanied by the chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt.-Gen. Faiz Hameed, to assure the Afghan leadership of Pakistan’s support for an “inclusive power-sharing arrangement,” President Ghani accused Pakistan of running “an organized system of support” for the Taliban. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Ghani asserted that “names of the various decision-making bodies of the Taliban are Quetta Shura, Miramshah



Photo above: Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (R) meets Dr. Abdullah Abdullah (L), Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation of Afghanistan, at Hyderabad House, New Delhi, on October 09, 2020. [Photo by Indian Government/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.](#)

Shura, and Peshawar Shura — named after the Pakistani cities where they are located. There is a deep relationship with the state.”⁵³ Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib’s recent provocative comments about Pakistan, comparing it to a “brothel house,” led to the cancellation of a phone conversation planned between Prime Minister Imran Khan and President Ghani.⁵⁴ Pakistan is reported to have severed links with Mohib. And when Pakistan’s foreign minister made adverse remarks about the Indian presence in Afghanistan, Mohib condemned it strongly, tweeting that “Qureshi is either uninformed, ignorant or an accomplice” of the Taliban.⁵⁵

In an atmosphere where Pakistan’s efforts to persuade the Taliban to reduce violence and resume peace talks have met with little success, it will not be easy for China to help reverse the downturn in relations between Islamabad and Kabul. There is not much Beijing can do now but wait for possibly better times when the mutual bitterness and

frustration between the two sides begins to soften or some other dynamic sets off change.

Within the Afghan government, there is a lack of mutual trust between key political authorities. Afghan society remains as divided as ever on ethnic lines, with powerful officials and politicians representing competing interests. The fragmented state of the Afghan government reduces its bargaining power in the peace talks with the Taliban. The reintegration of the Taliban in governing structures, power-sharing formula, the composition of a future Afghan state, and the role of women and minorities are contentious issues whose resolution is a pre-requisite for lasting peace in Afghanistan. There are also concerns about terrorist violence and the return of al-Qaeda following the U.S. withdrawal. Afghan security forces and law enforcement agencies do not seem prepared to manage transnational terrorist organizations on their own. As the Taliban is set

“China’s latest offer to host intra-Afghan talks in Beijing should be seen as a reflection of China’s desperation to complete the Afghan peace process.”

to capture more Afghan territory, the security situation is likely to become more unstable with non-Pashtun ethnic groups attempting to put up resistance against the Taliban’s advance. Further instability caused by Taliban’s radical interpretation of Islam, coupled with the possible transition of Afghanistan from a republic to an emirate, will test Pakistan’s commitment to China on the safety of the CPEC. The impact of these challenges on Sino-Pakistan collaboration in Afghanistan remains to be seen.

In order to speed up the process of Afghan reconciliation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could be a handy institutional tool for China, as hinted at by Foreign Minister Wang during his call with his Pakistani counterpart.⁵⁶ Though the Chinese government surely benefits from the strong partnership with Pakistan, it can be a burden at times. That is why China has also been pressing Pakistan to convince the Taliban leadership to be more flexible, as manifested by Wang’s suggestion that “China and Pakistan should continue to strengthen strategic coordination in order to exert a more positive influence on the peace process in Afghanistan.”⁵⁷ Alternatively, if all regional frameworks fail to achieve Afghan peace, Beijing will not hesitate in asking for a potential U.N. intervention, according to Wang. China’s latest offer to host intra-Afghan talks in Beijing⁵⁸ should be seen as a reflection of China’s desperation to complete the Afghan peace process.

Another related factor is China’s sensitivity to the international attention focused on its continuing repression of Xinjiang Muslims. The U.S. has been at the forefront of this, accusing Beijing of genocide against the Uyghur community. In March 2021, the U.S., European Union, Britain, and Canada imposed sanctions on four Chinese individuals and one entity due to human rights violations in Xinjiang.⁵⁹ On May 19, the European Parliament adopted a resolution freezing “any consideration of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), as well as any discussion on ratification.”⁶⁰ At this point, China does not want the situation in Xinjiang to get any worse due to the spillover impact from Afghanistan.

India’s options

India’s primary objective in Afghanistan is to reduce Pakistan’s strategic influence so that Afghan soil is not used as a safe haven for anti-India terrorist groups. But New Delhi’s policy toolbox for responding to the unfolding Afghan crisis remains limited because India’s Afghanistan policy has generally suffered from the tension between idealistic thinking and the constraints imposed by regional and global power politics. This may have also created the impression of inconsistency of purpose and a lack of clear direction. India’s official pronouncements regarding Afghan developments usually do not reflect a well-crafted policy grounded in power realities. Most importantly, India’s refusal to engage with the Taliban has been a constraining factor.

Sensing the futility of its earlier stance, India has now opened a channel of communication with the Taliban. This diplomatic outreach is said to be limited to the Taliban factions that are considered “nationalist” in their worldview and not under the influence of Pakistan’s security establishment.⁶¹ The first official confirmation of India’s direct talks with the Taliban in Doha⁶² has come from Mutlaq bin Majed al-Qahtani, the special envoy of the Qatari foreign minister for counterterrorism and mediation of conflict resolution.⁶³ Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar paid brief stopover visits to Doha on June 9 and June 15 during his travels to Kuwait and Kenya. He met with Qatar’s foreign minister and national security advisor, as well as U.S. Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, who was also there, and discussed Afghan developments.⁶⁴

India-Taliban direct engagement marks a major policy shift, but India made this course correction only after realizing the consequences of Pakistan’s greater involvement in Afghanistan. As pointed out by a former Indian diplomat, “Indian diplomacy was truly flat-footed on openly holding talks with the Taliban, even when the group was gaining

global legitimacy. It is also known that it [Taliban] was signaling its interest in contact with India but at that stage, Delhi was rigidly glued to President Ashraf Ghani. A cruel price has always to be paid for diplomatic obduracy.”⁶⁵ In other words, India has lagged behind other regional players such as Russia, China, and Iran in establishing contacts with the Taliban. What India needs is a long-term strategic approach toward Afghanistan that weaves the political, economic, military, and diplomatic dimensions together into a coherent whole within the framework of a grand strategy. India’s Afghan policy must be based on a clear-cut understanding of its strategic goals in the region, as well as the regional and global strategic environment.

Currently, there are two wars in Afghanistan: one inside Afghanistan against foreign intervention that has gone for the last four decades, and another against the Afghan government from Pakistani soil, causing parallel internal unrest. Since Pakistan’s key policy objective has been to establish its hegemony in Afghanistan, it views an independent Afghanistan that has a vibrant relationship with India as the chief hurdle in the achievement of its hegemonic ambitions. These factors are major obstacles in the way of good relations between the two countries. If Pakistan grants India overland access to Afghanistan, it will transform the entire region. If Pakistan gives priority to geo-economics rather than geopolitics, as army chief Bajwa recently claimed,⁶⁶ it must recognize India’s security and economic interests in Afghanistan. But since there are no signs that Pakistan will give up its strategic ambitions in Afghanistan and allow fresh thinking on India’s role in Afghanistan in the foreseeable future, it is the balance of power between India and Pakistan that is most likely going to determine the ultimate outcome in Afghanistan. Pakistan can be expected to employ every instrument of policy, overtly and covertly, to undermine independent political voices in Afghanistan and to achieve the settlement of the Durand Line on its own terms.

Pakistan is situated at the crossroads of a strategic region bordering China, Afghanistan, and Iran. At present, most of the al-Qaeda operatives and almost all of the top Taliban leaders have their camps in Pakistan. For all of the above reasons, Pakistan is more important to U.S. national security than Afghanistan. As the U.S. withdraws its troops from Afghanistan, Pakistan is very keen to rebuild its relationship with the U.S. and delink it from America’s stake in Kabul. In

the aftermath of the American withdrawal, Prime Minister Khan has high expectations from the Biden administration: He wants the same “civilized” and “even-handed” ties with America that it has with India and Britain.⁶⁷ As India’s leading strategic affairs analyst, C Raja Mohan, has argued, “How Pakistan copes with the new dynamic between the U.S. and China as well as manages the deepening crisis in Afghanistan would be of great interest to Delhi.”⁶⁸ India should therefore formulate its long-term Afghan policy keeping in view factors such as America’s tactical cooperation with Pakistan, China-Pakistan strategic coordination in Afghanistan, and the expansion of China’s power and influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Though India cannot make any military commitment to Afghanistan, it will need to work closely with the U.S., which still has substantial sway in Afghanistan’s political and economic circles.

Pakistan’s importance for the American establishment stems from its geographic location, surrounded as it is by countries that have influenced and will continue to influence U.S. foreign policy — Iran, China, and Russia — as well as by Afghanistan and India. As the Biden administration perceives China as America’s chief global competitor, what the U.S. does in Afghanistan will be to a large extent determined with China in mind. Moreover, in their long and checkered history, there have been several occasions during which the U.S. has rebooted and reset its relationship with Pakistan, and this would not be the first time that Washington and Islamabad have explored a new political compact post-9/11.

It is difficult to decipher the terms and conditions of future cooperation between the United States and Pakistan, but what remains certain is that they will be tied to the outcome in Afghanistan. Though New Delhi cannot hope to influence the Biden administration’s approach toward Pakistan, efforts should nonetheless be made to impress upon Washington that the U.S.-Pakistan relationship should be redefined to ensure that any tactical accommodation comes with some strings attached. In other words, there should be conditionalities so that the Pakistani state can steer productive forces in the interest of broadly shared goals, in contrast to what has happened previously. However, it is also clear that India is recalibrating its China policy due to increased Chinese hostility along the disputed border in the Himalayas, leaving few chances for the two countries to cooperate on Afghanistan.⁶⁹ But despite this limiting factor, India should not shy away from maintaining regular

“Afghanistan’s enduring instability remains at the heart of many non-traditional transnational security challenges, creating significant difficulties for China’s security policy.”

contact with China, if not to coordinate its policies, then at least to be informed about the Afghan situation with a conviction that there could be such a thing as collaboration between adversaries, along with a willingness to believe that geopolitical differences might not be the final determinants of relations between two sovereign countries.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is at a crossroads as the U.S. finally departs after a two-decade-long failed mission. As Afghanistan is likely to remain an unstable country, China is extremely worried about potential security hazards. Beijing’s response will be driven by the goal of maintaining stability in and around Afghanistan, and this means that its main course of action will be to continue to enhance coordination with Pakistan and the Taliban as well as to co-opt the Afghan security services.

Afghanistan’s strategic location at the juncture of Central and South Asia as well as its abundant natural resources are factors that drive China’s active engagement with Afghan affairs, and Pakistan is the most relevant and willing partner to promote Chinese interests in the country. Pakistan’s geographic proximity, ethnic linkages in terms of the sizeable Pashtun population, and the need to keep India out make Islamabad an indispensable ally of China. Moreover, supporting China’s role in Afghanistan complements Pakistan’s own interests. China has been able to develop a working relationship with the Taliban to the extent that China’s interests should remain secure when the Taliban is finally integrated into Afghanistan’s governing structures. Pakistan has achieved a rare feat of reconciling the divergent policies of supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan and helping the Chinese in their anti-terror campaign against extremist groups. China has reciprocated by defending Pakistan’s Afghan policies against frequent American pressure, while also helping to break the diplomatic deadlock between Islamabad and Kabul.

Afghanistan’s enduring instability remains at the heart of many non-traditional transnational security challenges, creating significant difficulties for China’s security policy. Achieving China’s economic and diplomatic goals will require successfully implementing BRI projects that not only allow its own economic transformation but also assist Afghanistan in an equitable fashion. With increased connectivity and trade, Afghanistan should see benefits in terms of environmental, developmental, security, and human rights issues. In other words, legitimacy in Afghan eyes is crucial if Beijing seeks to become a problem-solver and peace-maker in Afghanistan.

If there is no fundamental shift in its Afghan policies, Pakistan should have limited expectations of a potential rapprochement with the U.S. since the latter will invariably view Pakistan through an Afghan prism. The China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral mechanism is designed to minimize the differences between Afghanistan and Pakistan and persuade both sides to focus on enhancing regional security. Since China enjoys good relations with both countries, it is believed to be in a unique position to help address the seemingly intractable Afghan issue, but the structural constraints of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are significant and will not be easily overcome. Thus, China is likely to continue its traditional policy but with a refashioned mechanism, such as a focus on diplomatic efforts, economic assistance, and a more active mediatory role.

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