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China–Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan: assessing key interests and implementing strategies

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ABSTRACT

This article studies China's and Pakistan's key interests in Afghanistan, and their mutual cooperation to pursue them. It identifies security, energy, connectivity and geopolitics as China's main interests. Get recognition of the Durand Line as an international border with Afghanistan, prevention of 'hostile elements' from using Afghan territory and access to the CARs as those of Pakistan's motives. Both sides cooperated with each other on Afghanistan under the umbrella of their strategic partnership. Islamabad helped in establishing initial Taliban-China contacts and persuaded the Taliban for negotiations with the USA and Kabul authorities. Beijing supported Islamabad's Afghan policy and mediated between Islamabad–Kabul and Taliban–Kabul negotiations. China and Pakistan backed their diplomacy with economic assistance and extended CPEC and BRI to Afghanistan. Amidst various challenges, thus far Sino-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan has benefited to their mutual interests and contributed to the peace process. Afghanistan has emerged as a new chapter of their relationship. How Sino-Pakistan cooperation advances in this troubled country in future is yet to be seen.

KEYWORDS China–Pakistan; Afghanistan; Taliban; Afghan government; Afghan peace process

Introduction

While the world was busy in dealing with ravaging COVID-19, the United States and the Afghan Taliban signed the 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' in Doha on 29 February 2020. Under the terms of the agreement, the USA and its allies will withdraw all military forces within 14 months of its implementation (DoS, 2020). The USA has also committed to facilitate intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan

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authorities (which finally started on 12 September) and to get a ratification from the United Nations for the agreement. In return, the Taliban have guaranteed that Afghan soil will not be used against the USA and its allies. The UN, NATO, EU, China, Russia and many other capitals have welcomed the agreement.

The peace agreement brings with it both fear and hope. Given the decades-long war, a weak Afghan state, saddled with deep divisions on different lines, conflicting interests of external players and a host of other complicated issues, make critics skeptic about the prospects of stability in Afghanistan. They worry that the war-torn country might descend into chaos that was created by an abrupt withdrawal after the end of the Soviet-occupation in 1989. The vacuum left by the USA was filled by the Taliban, elements of Al-Qaeda, and other transnational extremist groups in the following decades. On the other hand, cautious optimists argue that the agreement itself showed a change in the rigid stands of various parties involved: Taliban softened their hardline approach and realized they could not impose their ideology upon others through violence; the USA, after a 19-year long war that cost it over US\$2 trillion and over 3500 casualties of troops, concluded that the use of force was ineffective; Pakistan, with a record of involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs, realized its limitations in shaping the future of its neighbor; the US and the Kabul-authorities acknowledged Taliban hailing from Afghanistan's largest Pashtun ethnic group as a political reality (Mashal, 2020). The implementation of the peace agreement will facilitate an ultimate withdrawal of US troops. On 8 October 2020, US President Donald Trump announced to bring all US forces deployed in Afghanistan back home before the Christmas. Although there are some concerns by NATO allies over a quick withdrawal, if the Trump Administration implements its decision the number of US troops will reduce to zero thus ending 19 years long War on Terror (WoT) (Graham-Harrison & Borger, 2020). Finally, given Afghans' disdain for invaders, the exit of foreign occupying forces will remove one of the hurdles and might lead feuding parties to find a peaceful settlement to a seemingly endless war.

Although China and Pakistan were not a party to the peace deal, they played an important role in finalizing it. Arguably, the deal could not materialize without their role – at least at this stage. Their diplomatic efforts helped in addressing some of the major challenges in the peace process. For example, Pakistan used its clout to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table while China helped to break the stalemates in Islamabad-Kabul and Kabul-Taliban ties.

Obviously, Beijing and Islamabad cooperated on the matter in a bid to safeguard and promote their own interests. The precarious security situation in Afghanistan affect them more than any other country. Peace in

Afghanistan is crucial to the stability of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (hereafter Xinjiang), and to the smooth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its 'flagship' project, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In addition to security matters, China eyes on Afghanistan's huge natural resources, and by virtue of being a rising power, intends to play a greater role in shaping the future of its troubled neighbor to maximize its own gains. To achieve these objectives, China changed its centuries-old Afghan policy from one that was marked by indifference to one that features active engagement. For Pakistan, the recognition of the Durand Line as an international border with Afghanistan, the curtailment of Indian influence as well as anti-Pakistan elements in that country, and access to Central Asian Republics (CAR) are key interests.

Even though the Sino-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan began to take a tangible shape in recent years, it has emerged as a geographic expansion and a new chapter of their ties. This cooperation operates under the umbrella of their comprehensive, trust-based strategic partnership. Both the countries have supported each other's common interests and reconciled their policies in the areas of differences. China and Pakistan are also working with other states and take part in different initiatives dealing with Afghan peace process, their bilateral collaboration proves more beneficial to their mutual interests and to Afghan peace process than other mechanisms. In spite of its significance, very little work has been done in this area. The existing literature has looked at the roles played by Pakistan and by China separately. Except for a few pieces (Boni, 2020, Ch. 6; Wolf, 2020, Ch. 8) there is scarcity of literature that discusses Sino-Pakistan joint efforts on Afghanistan. This article is an attempt to fill the void.

This research is important in many respects. China and Pakistan have maintained decades-old strategic relationship. The scope of this relationship was largely confined to the Indian subcontinent and was based on their shared security concerns towards India. It is only recently that the two countries have expanded their cooperation on Afghanistan. Most notably, this cooperation is not only a recent phenomenon, Afghanistan is a rare area where in the past Sino-Pakistan policies clashed with each other. Pakistan supported militant groups such as the Taliban and the Haqqani Network while China regarded these and other religious extremist groups as a threat to the stability of Xinjiang and the region. Although China and Pakistan have synergized their policies, this does not guarantee that things will be trouble-free in the future. History shows that Afghanistan, also referred to as the Graveyard of Empires, surprised world's strategists and military planners. Great Britain in the nineteenth century, the former Soviet Union during the 1980s and the USA while launching the WoT could not imagine that their adventures in Afghanistan would turn into protracted

and unwinnable wars. Thus, Afghanistan is a tough test case for Sino-Pakistan relations. This article will also add to the debate on the 'rise of China.' Beijing's decision for active engagement in Afghan affairs is a shift in its traditional, centuries-old indifferent policy. This change, along with other recent shifts in China's foreign policy such as the establishment of the first ever overseas military base at Djibouti, an increasing role in UN Peacekeeping, and the establishment of private security forces for the protection of overseas interests are the indication of China's growing ambitions for a great power status. An assessment of China's increasing involvement in Afghanistan will therefore provide food for thought to China observers. Last but not least, the article will add to the debate on the Afghan peace process – a subject of immense importance to international security for decades.

Given the fact that aspects of Sino-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan are not well examined, an exploratory approach seems a relevant method of investigation for this topic. As Kumar (2011, p. 15) maintains that an exploratory approach is a useful tool for neglected fields. As appear from its name, the approach 'explores' various dimensions of a given topic for in-depth study (Rich, Brians, Manheim, & Willnat, 2018, p. 70). Furthermore, an exploratory approach is inductive in nature, it follows bottom-up approach and moves from particular to general. This method is flexible in nature as it does not require a formal structure, attestation of hypothesis or theory.

Like other methodological tools, the exploratory approach has both weaknesses and strengths. Its main critique is that contrary to academic conventions which encourage structure and theoretical framework, exploratory research is open-ended and is devoid of theoretical debate. If taken in a different way, this critique becomes its strength. An exploratory approach frees researchers from structural boundaries to explore various aspects of the subject rigorously by moving beyond initial hypothesis. Davies (2006, pp. 110, 111) shatters misperceptions associated with and underlines the importance of this approach for less studied areas. He argued that exploratory research has suffered from misrepresentations and misunderstandings. It is not a 'feasibility study' or 'pilot study.' It follows the logic of discovery, breaks new grounds and helps in generating and constructing theories (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 79). Therefore, with a view to develop an understanding of Chinese and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan as well as their mutual collaboration to pursue them, an exploratory approach seems an appropriate tool.

This is a qualitative research. It includes primary sources such as agreements, policy statements, and secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, op-eds, and openly available sources from internet published in English language. In China, English language publications representing Chinese perspective is on the rise recently. Newspapers and magazines

such as *China Daily*, *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, *Beijing Review* and Xinhua can be accessed openly. This article has benefitted from these Chinese and Western sources. The article is divided in four parts. The first and the second parts explain China's and Pakistan's key interests in Afghanistan respectively. The part three discusses their collaborative strategies and the part four summarizes key challenges in the peace process. This is followed by a conclusion.

1. China's key interests in Afghanistan

Although, the People's Republic of China (PRC) shares a 76-km-long border with Afghanistan, it attached low diplomatic priority to Afghanistan throughout history (Hong, 2013, pp. 1, 2). After 9/11, the USA established its military presence in Afghanistan and CARs thus becoming China's next-door neighbor. Yet, China continued to steer clear of getting entangled in Afghan affairs and refused to take part in the WoT (Andersen & Jiang, 2018, p. 16). China's engagement with Afghanistan began to develop in around 2010 and deepened in the following years. In 2012, the member of Politburo Standing Committee, Zhou Yongkang, visited Kabul. This was the first visit of a senior Chinese official to Afghanistan since 1966. In October 2014, China organized the Istanbul Process (also known as the Heart of Asia) in Beijing for the reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This was the first time that China hosted any meeting on Afghanistan. As Hirono (2019) argued, 'Since then, the Chinese government has continued its mediatory efforts between the two warring parties through bilateral and multilateral channels.' Following the Istanbul Process, China made first-ever invitation to the Taliban delegation. By the signing of peace agreement in Doha, the Taliban delegates had made several visits to China. The article identifies three key Chinese interests in Afghanistan.

First, religious extremism stemming from Afghanistan affected China's key interests. It could spill over to adjacent Xinjiang and incite separatist tendencies. Although the Xinjiang problem was rooted in history with ethnic dimension, the pan-Islamic moments in the region exacerbated it. The Soviet defeat in Afghanistan during the 1980s, the emergence of CARs on ethno-religious grounds in 1991 and the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan during the 1990s gave rise to separatist activities in Xinjiang. Despite China's crackdowns at home and collaborative measures with regional countries, especially from the platform of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), separatist tendencies and sporadic terror incidents continued to occur (Swanström & Tucker, 2019, p. 157). The July 2009 riots in Xinjiang in which over 190 people were killed proved to be the worst incident in decades. The more worrying trend for Beijing was that terrorist

activities which were largely confined to Xinjiang spread to other cities. In 2013 and 2014, terrorist attacks took place in Beijing, Kunming and Guangzhou. Around this time, the Obama Administration decided to substantially reduce the number of troops which heightened China's concerns regarding the return of violence and militancy to Afghanistan following the US withdrawal (Scobell, 2015, p. 325).

Furthermore, instability stemming from Afghanistan can affect the development of BRI. Two out of the six corridors being developed under BRI (China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor; and CPEC) are in close proximity to Afghanistan. China has also made considerable investments in Afghanistan's neighboring countries. For example in Iran alone, China has announced a hefty amount of US\$400 billion investment for the next 25 years (Staff, 2020). This reflects China's deepening interests in Iran. Arguably, Iran's huge energy resources, strategic locations, and the role in regional geopolitics make it an important link in China's regional strategy. Beijing played important role in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPA) also known as 'Iran nuclear deal' (The Trump Administration withdrew from it in March 2018). In return, Iran endorsed China's BRI, showed interest in joining the CPEC and supported the Afghan peace process. Against mounting US pressure, Iran is moving closer to the Chinese lap. This is just one example. China's investment in the entire region is increasing. Evidently, the instability emanating from Afghanistan affects the entire region. Umarov (2017, pp. 397, 398) summed up China's security concerns which led to its engagement with Afghanistan:

Beijing worries about the possible ruinous influence of instability in Afghanistan, which is the linchpin of many grandiose OBOR-related projects. The destabilization of Afghanistan, as well as the spread of chaos and violence from its territory to neighboring countries and regions, could jeopardize OBOR and China's existing investments.... Afghanistan, as a neighbor of all these countries, poses a non-insignificant risk to Beijing's plans. In this context, the PRC has no other choice but to increase its foreign policy involvement in Afghanistan.

Chinese analysts concluded that the continued civil war in Afghanistan had sabotaged Xinjiang's stability (Hatef & Luqiu, 2018; Hong, 2013, p. 11) and created hurdles in the implementation of BRI. To address these concerns, China decided an active engagement in Afghan affairs.

Second, Afghanistan's abundant and mostly unexplored natural resources drew China's interests. According to US Geological Survey, Afghanistan possessed mineral resources worth US\$1 trillion. Afghanistan's Minister of Mines, Wahidullah Shahrani, made even a bigger claim of US\$3 trillion worth of natural resources (Najafizada, 2011). China's appetite for these resources could be measured from the fact that it began exploring them even during the period of its low diplomatic engagement. In 2007, Chinese

companies signed a deal worth US\$4.4 billion to develop world's the second largest copper deposits at Mes Aynak in Logar Province (Marty, 2016), and in 2011, signed a 25-year contract for oil exploration at Amu Darya (Shalizi, 2012). Since China had not made any military contributions to the security of Afghanistan, Western critics accused it for making a free-ride on the US-led security arrangements (Hong, 2013, p. 4). To address the criticism, to make better security arrangements for the existing projects and to explore new ones, China decided to increase its role in Afghanistan.

Third, as China ascended to a great power status it wanted to take a bigger role in regional affairs. In 2011, China surpassed Japan to become the second largest economy in the world. At that time as China was under President Hu Jintao who was risk-averse in international affairs, it continued to maintain a low profile in regional politics. This policy changed with Xi Jinping's assumption of power in China in 2013. Xi adopted an assertive foreign policy and strove for China's status at global level at par with its rising status (Ferdinand, 2016; Umarov, 2017). China was no more willing to accept the future of Afghanistan being shaped by its rivals the USA, Russia or India. Furthermore, as Chaziza (2016) argued, the PRC leadership perceived that an increased role in Afghanistan would help it build its image as a responsible rising power that put efforts in maintaining regional peace and stability. These interests shaped China's Afghan policy. Pakistan with its vast experience in Afghan affairs and close strategic partnership with the PRC became an instrument in promoting these Chinese interests as discussed in the latter part of the article. The following part examines Pakistan's interests.

Pakistan's key interests

To understand Pakistan's role and interests in Afghanistan, a background of Pakistan-Afghan relations and the major issues between them is helpful.

Pakistan and Afghanistan share about 2600-km long, contested border. The border dubbed as the Durand Line was marked in 1893 between Sir Mortimer Durand, secretary of the British India and the Afghan ruler Abdur Rahman Khan. Subsequent Afghan authorities claimed that the Durand Line was unfairly drawn, it divided Pashtuns on two sides of the border permanently and was imposed by the British on then a weak Afghan ruler. At the time of the partition of the Indian Subcontinent the British authorities rejected Afghan government's demand for the renegotiation of the Durand Line. Amidst this controversy, as Pakistan emerged on the world map as an independent nation in August 1947, Afghanistan proved the lone opponent to Pakistan's membership in the UN. Since then, the unresolved status of the Durand Line has marred their bilateral relationship while no Afghan government accepted it as an international border. Even Pakistan-friendly

regime of Taliban (1996–2001) refused to acknowledge it (Jamal & Bangash, 2016). The border dispute lay at the center of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations and created a number of complicated issues.

Lack of coordination between Pakistan and Afghanistan over border management allowed militants and criminal groups to take refuge in the border regions on both sides. Over a period of time, elements of transnational terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and IS joined them. Most of the terrorist organizations posing threats to these countries – Uyghur separatists to China, the Taliban and Al Qaeda to Afghanistan and Tahreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to Pakistan – took the advantage of the lawlessness of the border regions. This, coupled with indifferent attitude of successive Pakistani governments towards the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), led to its underdevelopment, social disparities and political grievances. Until its merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, FATA remained out of Pakistan’s legal framework and was ruled by orthodox local administrative system. In the post-9/11 period, US drone strikes and Pakistan’s military operations in the tribal areas created resentment among the locals. These resentments transformed into the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), a political group that also grabbed two seats in national election and is against military operation in the tribal areas. Although the situation in the tribal areas is not very serious, it remains a source of concern for Pakistani authorities.

Finally, and significantly from Pakistan’s security perspective, the Pakistan–Afghanistan tension provided India an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence in Afghanistan, something that enlarged the theater of Indo-Pakistan conflict to Pakistan’s western borders. Except for the 1980s during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and during the short period of Taliban’s rule (1996–2001), India remained influential in Afghanistan. In the post-9/11 Afghanistan, as the US military operations uprooted Taliban, India made its reentry and spent nearly US\$3 billion in economic and military assistance. India signed Agreement on Strategic Partnership (2011), trained Afghan security personnel, provided small arms, attack helicopters and sent paramilitary forces to ‘protect’ Indian citizens and projects (Verma, 2020, p. 2). Islamabad alleged that India used its presence in Afghanistan for creating instability in Baluchistan and supported to the TTP in a bid to encircle it from both sides (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012, pp. 25, 26; Hong, 2013, p. 21). New Delhi rejected those claims and considered its legitimate right to expand relations with Kabul.

This backdrop shaped Pakistan’s Afghan policy which strived for three objectives: get recognition of the Durand Line as an international border with Afghanistan, to prevent ‘anti-Pakistan’ elements from operating on Afghan soil and to connect with the CARs. To achieve these objectives, Pakistani policy makers strived for friendly governments in Kabul (Gregory,

2014, pp. 93, 94). Islamabad's support to the Taliban and the Haqqani Network was a part of this policy (Hussain, 2011). From defense point of view, Pakistan sought 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan in case of a conflict with India.

These policies not only failed but became a source of tension in the region. A combination of factors such as external pressure, tarnishing image, terrorism with its huge impact on economy and society and China's persuasion and pressure pushed Pakistan to change its Afghan policy.¹ Pakistan began to realize that peace in Afghanistan was directly linked to its own stability. This self-reflection in Pakistani security circles started during the 2010s and matured in the form of so-called the 'Bajwa Doctrine' (Warraich, 2018). Announced by Pakistan Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the Doctrine proposed country's strategic realignment to bring peace not only in Pakistan but also in the region. A decisive shift in Pakistan's Afghan policy took place with the assumption of power by Imran Khan as the new Prime Minister in August 2018. Mr. Khan paid high attention to peace in Afghanistan, linking it directly with peace in Pakistan. His government stopped supporting one group over the others, abandoned the idea of strategic depth and backed the international efforts for the 'Afghan-led, Afghan-owned' peace process. As Tehran Times (2018) commented, 'Under Imran Khan, relations between Islamabad and Kabul have shown a marked improvement from the previous government. Khan has reaffirmed his interest in burying the hatchet and opening channels of engagement with the Afghan government'.

The US, Kabul authorities, and other stakeholders acknowledged the change in Pakistan's policies (United States Institute of Peace, 2020). For the first time in years, the USA stopped blaming Islamabad for the dual role of counterterrorism efforts and the support of the Taliban simultaneously. It also stopped pressing for 'do more' and acknowledged Pakistan's contribution on counterterrorism (Jaffery, 2020). President Trump who did a barrage of tweets against Pakistan in the early years of his presidency, in a marked shift in his tone stated, 'We're getting along very well. I would say we've never been closer with Pakistan than we are right now' (Gul, 2020a). US officials acknowledged about the improvement in US–Pakistan relations and the change in Pakistan's Afghan policy on several occasions (Gul, 2020b). The following part explains how China and Pakistan implemented their joint strategies in Afghanistan.

Implementing strategies

Strategic partnership

The first and foremost reason as to why Sino-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan is intensifying and gaining traction is that it is part of a wider

strategic partnership, undergirded by decades of 'trust.' Pakistan has a vast experience in dealing with Afghan affairs. Once China began its interests in the war-torn country, Islamabad shared its knowledge and experience. The strategic contour enabled the two countries to streamline their policies in a relatively short period of time. In sharp contrast, Pakistan has been working with the USA on Afghanistan since the 1980s. The accompanying US economic and military assistance to Pakistan as a reward was very high. For example, Washington provided over US\$33 billion to Islamabad in the post-9/11 period alone (Rizvi, 2020). Despite an extensive period of cooperation and huge assistance, the US–Pakistan cooperation was marred with mistrust, accusation and counter-accusation primarily due to the absence of strategic component. Therefore, in case of China and Pakistan their strategic congruence facilitated to their collaboration in Afghanistan.

Leverages vis-à-vis the situation in Afghanistan

China and Pakistan have certain leverages which they availed while dealing with Afghan crises. China has three main leverages. It enjoyed the repute of a benign neighbor by virtue of its non-interference policy in Afghanistan's internal affairs throughout history. Even when China decided to increase its role in Afghan affairs about a decade ago, it carefully adopted an inclusive approach and developed relations with all stakeholders including the Taliban. The credibility of China's neutrality could be measured from the fact that Maulana Sami ul Haq, a Pakistani cleric also known as the father of the Taliban, requested China not to leave the region to the USA and play a larger role to end the long conflict. Second, China is the second largest economy. In this capacity, it can make a financial contribution to the future reconstruction of Afghanistan. According to a World Bank (2019) report, Afghanistan collected US\$2.5 billion revenue against US\$11 billion expenditures. The country faced with chronic budget deficit. In the post-9/11 period, this deficit was covered by foreign assistance mainly from the USA. The situation is now changing. Washington is likely to cut down its contribution following the withdrawal. To sustain itself, Afghanistan requires external assistance until it is able to generate its own resources. In this context, Afghan stakeholders are aware of China's economic clout and therefore give due weightage to its future role (Hong, 2013, pp. 19, 20; Saif, 2019). Third, what was US's weakness in Afghanistan, the trust deficit with Pakistan, is China's key strength.

Pakistan too has certain levers vis-à-vis Afghanistan that it can pull. It is an important neighbor with 30–35 million ethnic Pashtun population and maintains old religious-cultural ties (Siddique, 2012, p. 6). Second, Afghanistan is a landlocked country and is largely dependent on Pakistan for its imports and exports (to conceptualize Afghanistan–Pakistan relations

in the framework of a landlocked state's ties with its coastal neighbour see, Bhatnagar, Shahab, & Ahmed, 2020). If Afghanistan finally joins CPEC, this will connect its economy to Pakistan, China, and the rest of the world via the Gwadar Port. This can potentially provide a big boost to Afghanistan's economy.

Mutual support

Akin to the practice of mutual support as was maintained in the Indian sub-continent theatre, was repeated in Afghanistan. As China decided to involve itself in Afghanistan, it found that no country was more relevant and willing to promote its key interests than Pakistan was. Islamabad has been looking after Beijing's interests for decades. During the period of China's limited engagement, it greatly relied on Islamabad for Afghan affairs. During the 1980s, China was involved in Afghanistan for a short period in reaction to the Soviet invasion, Beijing supplied its assistance to anti-Soviet forces via Pakistan. China was reportedly behind Pakistan's decision in joining the WoT. Pakistan's participation in WoT helped Beijing in safeguarding its interests in Afghanistan at the time of heavy US military presence in the region. At the same time Pakistan concluded that China's presence in Afghanistan was beneficial to it more than the footprint of any other power.

Reconciliation of differences

Yet another salient feature of Sino-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan was a reconciliation between their divergent objectives. Pakistan overtly backed the Taliban during the 1990s and covertly in the post-9/11. Contrary to this, China diametrically opposed to religious extremism in all its forms terming it a threat to its internal and regional stability. Yet, they did not allow these differences to affect their bilateral ties. China never questioned Pakistan's rationality of the support to the Taliban while Pakistan ensured that the fallout of its Taliban policy did not harm China's interests. Out of this mutuality of understanding, Islamabad used its clout to establish Beijing's direct contacts with the Taliban during the 1990s. In 2000, Pakistan arranged a meeting between the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, and the head of Taliban, *Mullah* Omar in Kandahar. Former Taliban's Ambassador to Islamabad, Abdul Salam Zaef, wrote in his memoirs that 'The ambassador of China was the only one to maintain a good relationship with the embassy [of Afghanistan in Islamabad] and with Afghanistan.' According to Zaef, in his meeting with Omar, Lu Shulin discussed China's concerns about the 'rumours' that Taliban were allegedly assisting the Uyghur in Xinxiang. Zaef (2010, p. 135) wrote:

Mullah Mohammad Omar assured him that Afghanistan never had any interest or wish to interfere in China's domestic issues and affairs, nor would Afghanistan allow any group to use its territory to conduct any such operations or support one to that end. The ambassador seemed to be satisfied following his visit. He was the first foreign non-Islamic ambassador ever to see *Mullah* Mohammad Omar *Saheb*.

This first-hand account contends to media reports which claimed that Uyghurs separatists had enjoyed sanctuaries in Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. Kalinovsky (2013, p. 18) also maintained that the Taliban did not provide sanctuaries to Uyghurs. Arguably, convincing the Taliban from denying safe heavens to Uyghurs was not possible without Pakistan's role. Pakistan's facilitation between China and the Taliban continued throughout years. Islamabad was behind Taliban's visits to China in 2018 and 2019 (Bokhari, 2018). As a result of these parleys, China–Taliban equation developed to an extent that Taliban negotiator *Mullah* Abdul Ghani Baradar included China's name among the four countries he expressed his gratitude for their support (Panag, 2020). It can be stated on the basis of these developments that if the Taliban gained power or became part of it, Chinese interests would remain unaffected. A senior Indian analyst commented, 'It is interesting to note that China has never blamed Pakistan for propping up the Taliban and Al Qaeda, whose activity in the region remains a major reason for the presence of NATO and US forces' (Singh, 2010). Although China has developed fairly good contacts with the Taliban, Pakistan remains relevant due to its deep-rooted links with the group.

Pakistan can also facilitate to other Chinese objectives such as the resource extraction and the implementation of the BRI. Since the Sino-Afghan border is inaccessible due to a rugged terrain, China's alternative routes are via Central Asia and Pakistan. Connectivity via Pakistan has various advantages compared to other options. It involves relatively shorter distance; infrastructure in Pakistan is fairly good and is being further developed under CPEC; the route involves only one country (other routes involve two or more states); China's relations with Pakistan are stronger than those with CARs; finally, and most importantly, Pakistan can provide an outlet to the sea via its Gwadar Port. Pakistan and China have successfully conducted trials of China–Gwadar and Gwadar–Afghanistan routes. In November 2016, a convoy of Chinese trucks traversed the entire length of CPEC and reached Gwadar Port where goods were loaded onto Chinese ships for their destination to Asia and Europe (*The Newspapers' Correspondent*, 2016). In January 2020, the first ever Afghan cargo ship arrived at Gwadar. The consignment was transported to Afghanistan on trucks via Chaman border. This also marked the first operational use of the Gwadar port for Afghanistan (Aamir, 2020).² These routes are equally beneficial to the transportation of Afghan-origin raw material to China or to the

outside world. In the past, in addition to precarious security situation the poor logistics and the supply chain management were other hurdles in the optimal development of the Mes Ayank mines. An enhanced connectivity under CPEC (both inside Pakistan and its extension to Afghanistan) will overcome these bottlenecks. These routes can further expand China's connectivity to Iran, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Caspian Sea for trade and energy purposes. The improvement in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations will pave the way for the implementation of the BRI, China's key strategic goal.

China reciprocated Pakistan with diplomatic, political and economic support. Beijing backed Islamabad's policies in the midst of mounting US pressure. For example, the international community criticized Pakistan for turning a blind eye to the presence of Osama Bin Laden in the country for several years. Bin Laden was hiding in Abbottabad Pakistan and was killed by the US forces in May 2011. Although China hailed his execution, it defended Pakistan's role as a frontline state in WoT and expressed its continued, staunch support (Buckley, 2011). An Editorial (2011) in the *Global Times* highlighted Pakistan's contributions and 'huge losses' which were 'beyond the imagination of the West'. Likewise, in August 2017, as the Trump Administration pressured Pakistan for doing little in WoT and harboring terrorists, China reaffirmed its 'continuing and firm' support for Pakistan's efforts to achieve peace and stability in neighboring Afghanistan (Latif, 2017). China's top diplomat Yang Jiechi in a telephonic conversation with the US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, stated to value Pakistan's role and to respect its legitimate security concerns in Afghanistan (Reuters, 2017).

As mentioned before, a key security challenge for Pakistan is India's foothold in Afghanistan. Although China has not taken a stand on it, in the larger context of China–India–Pakistan triangular rivalry, Beijing does share Islamabad's concerns. This is obvious from competing Chinese and Indian interests at different levels in Afghanistan. In 2011, Indian companies beat their Chinese counterparts to get a contract of four blocks of Hajigak Mine, the largest oxide deposit in Afghanistan (Branco, 2020, p. 505). New Delhi opposed Beijing's involvement in the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) natural gas project on strategic and political grounds (Ahmar, 2017; Lanteigne, 2013, p. 125). Against this backdrop, an increased Pakistani or Chinese influence in Afghanistan correspondingly decreases that of India. For example, in 2014 Ashraf Ghani won Afghan presidential election. India for months moved cautiously due to Ghani's overtures towards China and Pakistan. This was despite the fact that three years earlier, Kabul and New Delhi had signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (Krishnamurthy, 2019, p. 5). Taliban's gaining recognition as a 'political reality' in the wake of the peace agreement

has put India on the back foot once again. As Ayesha noted, 'Pakistan hopes to benefit by Chinese presence in Afghanistan as counter-balance to Indian interest and influence there.' She added, 'China also considered that Pakistan could be 'softly' used to challenge India, in the same manner as Delhi has tried to counter-balance China by building ties with Vietnam' (Siddiqi, 2012, p. 5). A recent Pentagon report endorsed the claim that one of China's objectives in Afghanistan was to counterweight India (Department of Defense, 2019). Therefore, even though India does not appear to be an overt common concern in Sino-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan, it is a covert shared concern.

Addressing key impediments

Furthermore, China and Pakistan tried to address some of the hurdles in Afghan peace process through collaborative efforts. Pakistan used its clout to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. It was a difficult task as differences among the Taliban, the US and Afghan authorities were seemingly irreconcilable. Talks were suspended several times. On those occasions, Beijing and Islamabad stepped in for mediation. Pakistan not only persuaded the Taliban, but also the USA. In October 2018, it released from the prison a senior group leader, *Mullah* Abdul Ghani Baradar, on US' demand. Baradar was known for his pro-peace stand and signed the final deal. In September 2019, President Trump cancelled the peace process in retaliation to the killing of a US soldier. Prime Minister Imran Khan in his address to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and later in his meeting with Trump stressed the resumption of talks (Gul, 2019).

Another hurdle in the peace process was a mistrust between Islamabad and Kabul. Beijing addressed it at different occasions. China's mediating diplomacy succeeded due to its cordial ties with both sides. According to media reports, Afghan authorities began to use the 'China card' – to convey their concerns to Islamabad – as early as 1990s. President Hamid Karzai in his talk at China Foreign Affairs University in 2012, requested Beijing to bring Afghanistan and Pakistan closer to each other (Khalil, 2019). This was the starting point of China's mediation which increased in the following years. China arranged Pakistan–China–Afghanistan trilateral talks at different levels. In 2017, as Pakistan and Afghanistan were at loggerheads once again, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi shuttled between the two capitals. China proposed the establishment of crisis management cell which turned into a structured mechanism in the form of Afghanistan–China–Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Minister's dialogues (Johnson, 2017). The third trilateral Foreign Ministers' dialogue took place in September 2019, and the third deputy foreign ministers' talks took place in July 2020. China reiterated its

desire for the harmonious growth of Afghanistan–Pakistan relation and showed its commitment to play its role to this end (Sarwar, 2020).

Diplomacy backed with economic, political and military assistance

Finally, China and Pakistan backed their diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan with increased economic assistance, investment in infrastructure development and by bringing Afghanistan in the BRI, the CPEC and other China-led financial and political institutions.

In October 2014, Beijing offered US\$327 million assistance which was more than it had offered from 2001 to 2013 combined to Afghanistan (Morgus, 2019). During the 2015 earthquake, the PRC sent humanitarian relief supplies worth US\$1.56 million and US\$1 million cash (Andersen & Jiang, 2018). China also provided US\$70 million military aid, US\$90 million development assistance for Badakhshan province, offered 150 scholarships and 1000 training programs annually; built the Jumhoriye Hospital, the National Centre for Science and Technology Education, the Chinese Language Department Teaching Building, and the Guest House at the Kabul University.

To increase trade with Afghanistan, China took a number of measures including a train service to Hairatan, via CARs, opened air corridor, offered duty-free treatment to 278 Afghan commodities and invited Afghan delegates to attend trade exhibitions. As a result, Sino-Afghan trade increased to US\$27.1 million in 2003, US\$469.3 in 2012, US\$544 million in 2017 (Zia, 2019) and US\$1.1 billion in 2019 (Jinsong, 2019). Media reported that China was building a direct road with Afghanistan via the Wakhjir Pass in the Wakhan Corridor. This reported construction was close to the trilateral junction of China–Afghanistan–Pakistan border and not too far from the Karakorum Highway. Once the road is completed, it will enhance connectivity among three countries at a strategic point (Foster, 2019). The PRC also took measures to bring Afghanistan under its political and economic folds. Afghanistan joined the SCO as an observer member in 2005, the BRI in 2016, and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2017. In 2017, China and Pakistan extended the CPEC to Afghanistan. Keeping in view Beijing's increasing interests, some observers speculated about the possibility of China's taking a limited security role in Afghanistan should the need arises especially following the US withdrawal (Kelemen, 2020).

Pakistan too increased its overall assistance to Afghanistan. In 2019, Pakistan established the Integrated Transit Trade Management System at the Torkham Border to keep Pakistan–Afghanistan border open for the trade round the clock. In December 2019, the Pakistani cabinet approved the import of cotton from Central Asia via Afghanistan. In January 2020, the

first Afghan-bound cargo ship anchored at Gwadar Port from where goods were transported to Afghanistan via the Chaman border. In recent months, Pakistan opened new border crossing points with Afghanistan, eased visa restrictions and established 18 markets – 12 on the border with Afghanistan and 8 on the border with Iran – to enhance trade opportunities for the people living around borders. In post-9/11, Pakistan's economic assistance to Afghanistan in infrastructure, education, health, agriculture and capacity building crossed US\$1 billion. In addition, Islamabad offered 6000 scholarships to Afghan students, set up healthcare facilities including three hospitals and provided training in medical, agriculture, banking, railways, military and diplomatic fields (APP, 2018).

To enhance connectivity with Afghanistan, Pakistan has decided to modernize the existing roads and built new ones. The most important land connection between the two countries is the 281-km long Peshawar-Kabul road that has been used by ISAF in WoT. China, Pakistan and Afghanistan have decided to modernize it, making it a key link among them (Abrar, 2019). The second important connection is the Quetta-Kandahar road which provides Afghanistan a short access to the Gwadar Port. There are few other roads which traverse the Durand Line at different points. Most importantly, the Western route of the CPEC runs parallel to the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. It will not be difficult to open new cross-border connections, should the need arise. Pakistan and Afghanistan also intend to establish three main railway tracks that will link Landi-Kotal with Jalalabad; Peshawar with Central Asia via Afghanistan; and Chaman Baluchistan with Spin Boldak. Both neighbors are also developing a 1500-MW hydropower project in Kundar funded by China to supply electricity to Pakistan (Manish, 2019; Siddique, 2015). The CARs are also building connectivity and energy related projects with Pakistan and Afghanistan under bilateral and multilateral arrangements. These cross-border projects will improve Pakistan's connectivity with Afghanistan and CARs and might attenuate the disputed status of the Durand Line, putting it on the backburner.

Major hurdles

Along with positive developments, the Afghan peace process faces many challenges. This can be measured from the fact that the intra-Afghan dialogue which were supposed to start in March 2020 started after a protracted impasse on 12 September, that too without a reduction in violence. On the other hand, as mentioned before, the Trump Administration plans to withdraw all US troops before the Christmas. Pakistan and China (Sun,

2020) have already expressed their concerns on the hasty withdrawal. The following part summarizes key challenges.

First, since the contested Afghan election of 2019 which led to an odd power sharing formula between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, the Kabul authorities are sitting on a shaky ground. The government is lack of capacity and the writ in most parts of the country on the one hand and is marred by corruption on the other. The Afghan society is divided on different lines in which powerful officials, warlords, and politicians represent contrasting interests. With this shaky scaffold in place, the Kabul authorities can hardly make a united front against the Taliban for better bargain in the intra-Afghan dialogue. Second, the Taliban-Kabul talks face crucial challenges such as the composition of a future Afghan state, reintegration of the Taliban in Afghanistan, power-sharing formula, disarmament, and the role of women and civil society. Third, under the peace agreement the USA would work for the removal of international sanctions on the Taliban if the latter upholds the agreement. However, there is no clarity how the USA will make its assessment on the Taliban's compliance. On the other hand, a Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team (2020) on Afghanistan stated that the Taliban continued to maintain contacts with the al-Qaeda (Center for Preventive Action, 2020). Fourth, there are apprehension of the continuity of violence and the return of the transnational extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to Afghanistan following the US withdrawal (Apfel, 2020). Afghan security forces and law enforcement agencies are ill-trained and incapable to handle these transnational terrorist organizations at their own. Fifth, regional and global powers have their own competing interests (CPA, C. f. P. A, 2020). Sixth, Afghanistan requires huge investments for infrastructure development and economic growth. From where that hefty investment will come remains a question mark. Finally, the outbreak of the pandemic has created new difficulties. These challenges can potentially slow down or even halt the peace process and will be equally negative for the Sino-Pakistan collaboration.

While these are not minor challenges to be overcome quickly, the peace agreement and the resultant intra-Afghan dialogue in which the Taliban and the Kabul authorities are sitting across the table for the first time since the 9/11, and the prospects of complete withdrawal of foreign occupying forces thus ending the 19-year-old WoT are promising developments. Finally, all stakeholders, internal and external, have reached to the conclusion that the negotiation is the only way to find a peaceful settlement of Afghan crisis.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is on the cusp once again. The USA is packing after two-decades of war, while China seems ready to enter this quagmire. China's

cautious yet well-considered move is driven by its economic and geopolitical interests. The extremism emanating from Afghanistan affects Xinjiang as well as the development of the BRI. In addition, Afghanistan's strategic location at the juncture of Central and South Asia, the Gulf and its abundant natural resources get China's attention. As China decided to replace its historic hands-off approach with active engagement in Afghan affairs about a decade ago, it found Pakistan the most relevant and willing ally to promote its interests. Pakistan's geographic proximity to Afghanistan, ethno-religious bonds, a large size of Pashtun population and high stakes in the final settlement together make it an indispensable player. Pakistan is fully conscious of the fact that supporting China's role in Afghanistan complements to its own interests more than the footprint of any other power. The main reason behind the success of China–Pakistan collaboration on Afghanistan is that it operated under the umbrella of their decades-old strategic partnership. Therefore, both the countries supported to each other's interests. Pakistan facilitated China's contacts with the Taliban and addressed Beijing's concerns regarding the activities of Uyghur separatists and other militant groups. With Pakistan's support, China was able to develop a rapport with the Taliban to an extent that in the future, if the Taliban were to gain power or become part of the political dispensation, China's interests would remain intact. China's direct contacts with the Taliban did not side line Pakistan given latter's deep-rooted links with the group. The reconciliation of their divergent policies – Pakistan's support to Taliban and China's disdain for extremist groups – was a hallmark of their mutual understanding. In reciprocity, China defended Pakistan's Afghan policies especially against US pressures and used its good offices to break diplomatic stalemate between Islamabad and Kabul authorities. Apparently, China is silent on India's role in Afghanistan which is Pakistan's chief security concern. But looking from a larger Sino-Indo-Pakistan rivalry standpoint, their perceptions are not much different from each other. The June 2020 deadly brawls between China and India at Ladakh and their subsequent measures against each other reminds their deep-rooted animosity. Therefore, the curtailment of Indian influence in Afghanistan remains a covert goal of Sino-Pakistan collaboration. For better results, China and Pakistan backed their diplomacy with economic assistance, investments in infrastructure development and extended the CPEC and the BRI to Afghanistan. These measures are likely to create a positive impact on Afghan economy and help in creating employment opportunities which are essential to divert people's attention away from violence. Along with these developments Islamabad assumes that an increased economic interdependence with Afghanistan and the launch of the projects cutting across the border might blur the disputed status of the Durand Line. To sum up,

Afghanistan has emerged as a new chapter of Sino-Pakistan relationship where both have found each as the most important partner of other. Amidst challenges, both have thus far navigated their collaboration smoothly. How this cooperation progresses in future is yet to be seen.

Notes

1. For example, during the 2017 BRICS meeting held in Xian, China for the first time allowed member countries to include Pakistan-based groups as terrorist organization in the final declaration. In 2019, China lifted its technical hold in the UNSC to let pass a resolution which labelled Pakistan-based Masood Azhar as a designated terrorist. For about a decade, China had blocked the resolution on technical grounds.
2. According to media reports, China lobbied Afghan government to use this route. Gwadar Port is under China's administrative control for 40 years with its hands-on 91 percent of profit coming from the Port. The port remained under-utilized since its completion. This and future Afghan trade via Gwadar will provide Chinese companies a moderate revenue, will bring Afghanistan in CPEC and BRI framework by diverting its trade from the rival route via Iran and the Indian-built Chabahar Port.

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