

THE US WITHDRAWAL AND CHINA'S GROWING ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

China's interest in Afghanistan has grown substantially over the past few decades. This is evident from the fact that Logar Aynak, the copper extraction project of China, is the largest foreign investment in Afghanistan. In this paper, China's growing engagement in Afghanistan is studied, especially China's role in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is examined at length. The main problems and obstacles China faces in Afghanistan are explored, and challenges and opportunities arise as a result are discussed as well. Considering China's policy of careful engagement in the region, the nature of China's growing involvement in Afghanistan is studied.

Keywords: Sino-US Rivalry, CPEC, OBOR, Taliban Government, China-Afghanistan Relations

Introduction

Unlike the United Kingdom, United States of America, and Russia who have a history of intervening in Afghanistan affairs and fighting proxy wars against each other, China has no such history. For the last few decades, China's interests in Afghanistan were limited to controlling the spill over of the jihadi trend in Afghanistan among the Uyghur separatists of Xinjiang.¹ China shares a 47-mile border with Afghanistan along the North-Eastern Afghan province of Badakhshan with China's Muslim-dominated region of Xinjiang.

Despite being an immediate neighbour, China has never been directly part of the great game in Afghanistan because traditionally Afghanistan had been a low diplomatic priority for China and strategically speaking China did not consider itself ready for the great game.²

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¹ Dirk Van Der Kley, "China's Foreign Policy in Afghanistan," (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy: 3) <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>

² Zhao Hong, "China's Afghan Policy: The Forming of the 'March West Strategy?'" *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2013,1-29 ; Zhao Huasheng,

Nonetheless China has kept increasing its trade and investment in Afghanistan for last few decades. Between 2002 and 2010, China's exports in Afghanistan increased from \$19.91 million to \$704 million.³ Moreover, since 2007, China has invested \$4.4 billion in Afghanistan through its two state-owned companies, Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCCL), at the location of Mes Aynak, which holds 240 million tonnes of 2.3 percent grade untapped copper ore, making it one of the world's largest copper mines.⁴ The Logar Aynak, the copper extraction project of China, is the largest foreign investment in Afghanistan thus far.

China's policy of keeping itself away from the great game in Afghanistan helped them get strategic gains at others' expense. From 2002-2021 the USA and Europe were carrying the burden of the security and state-building project in Afghanistan during Karzai and Ghani regimes, while China kept improving its stakes in trade and investment. Despite signing the large-scale financial agreements with the Afghan government, China did not take any sides between the Taliban and the Ashraf Ghani led Afghan government. In hindsight it can be argued that was a wise policy because it helped China maintain a working relationship with the Taliban leadership which proved very useful in the post-US withdrawal scenario.

Moreover, since 2017-18 as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan became imminent, China started increasing its military stakes in region around Afghanistan.⁵ China denies it but reports are at least two Chinese funded military bases are constructed one in Murghab region and the other in Gorno-Badakhshan province of Tajikistan bordering Afghanistan to provide the security cover to Tajikistan and to protect the Sinkiang province of China, from any spill over effect of extremist religious militancy emanating from the volatile Afghanistan region.⁶ This makes a strategic sense because the Central Asian countries including Tajikistan are an integral part of the One Belt-One Road (OBOR) initiative, therefore,

"Afghanistan and China's New Neighbourhood Diplomacy," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944)*, vol. 92, no. 4, (2016) :891-908.

³ Raja Mohammad Khan, "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan," *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, Special Issue, vol.1, no.1. (Summer 2015): 3.

⁴ Erica Downs, "China Buys into Afghanistan," *SAIS Review*, Vol. XXXII, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 2012): 66.

⁵ Stephen Blank, "China's Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does it Mean?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 18, 2019.

⁶ Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "China To Build Military Bases In Tajikistan," *Silk Road Briefing*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2021/11/02/>

China has the genuine concerns over maintaining the security in the region.⁷

Experts say China had kept a low profile in Afghanistan, but started having plans of larger engagement in the region in the post-2011 scenario when Obama had announced the plan for the gradual withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan.⁸ China can ill-afford any political instability and long-drawn civil war in Afghanistan. The political stability in Afghanistan is important for China, as it is an important route for reaching Eurasia. Afghanistan is wedged between two major routes for China's trade between Central Asia and Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Hence, the security of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also depends upon the stability and peace in Afghanistan.

In this paper China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is studied in the context of Sino-US rivalry and the post-US withdrawal scenario. The focus of this research paper is to explain how starting as a low diplomatic priority, over a last decade or so Afghanistan has gradually become strategically important for China. Moreover, to explore what will be the foreign policy of China in Afghanistan. Whether China will completely take the responsibility of Afghanistan like the USA did or it may adopt a different course.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section the reasons for the US pull out from Afghanistan are explained with the lens of increasing Sino-US rivalry. In the second section, the nature of Taliban rule and political and economic situation in post-US withdrawal Afghanistan is explained. In the third section growing engagement of China in Afghanistan from low diplomatic profile to a country of a strategic importance is studied. In the fourth section obstacles for China in Afghanistan are examined.

Research Questions

The main research questions which this paper explores are to study how Afghanistan has emerged as a region of strategic importance from traditionally a low diplomatic priority for China in last few decades. Moreover this paper explores whether the Chinese engagement in Afghanistan has increased or not after the US withdrawal and what are the chances of China taking over the leadership role in Afghanistan like USA did from 2002 to 2021.

⁷ Irina V Kokushkina, and Maria A. Soloshcheva, "The Role of Central Asia in the 'One Belt—One Road' Initiative," *Iran & the Caucasus*, vol. 23, no. 3, (2019):283–98.

⁸ "Obama Announces Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal Plan," *CNN News*, June 23, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/06/22/>

The US Withdrawal and the Sino-US Rivalry in Afghanistan

The newspapers and reports from the USA suggest that for the last several years leading to the departure of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the US administration and policy makers were increasingly seeing their presence in Afghanistan as more damaging than doing any good to them in their overall competition with rising China. The US administration was increasingly seeing that their presence was benefitting China at their expense. The US administration was apprehensive of the positive image and conciliatory policies of the Hamid Karzai government towards China.⁹ By 2010, they had started accusing China of “free-riding” and getting massive investment deals in Afghanistan at the expense of the United States, which was paying the price not only in monetary terms but also because the US soldiers were losing their lives on the soil of Afghanistan.¹⁰ The USA was apprehensive of the Chinese strategy of bidding for massive investments in Afghanistan while keeping a distance by not taking sides, which meant that the Chinese investments faced no threats from the insurgents, and they positioned themselves to work with whoever controlled Kabul.¹¹

It is quite clear from the discussion above that the United States did not like this equation and wanted to change this in favour of the USA. The USA had wanted China to pay for its investment gains in Afghanistan by cooperating with the USA in its peace efforts in Afghanistan.¹² Like the USA had proposed China several joint projects including constructing schools around the Aynak region, the site for Chinese copper mines.¹³ But China did not take any interest because China was not ready for getting involved in the quagmire of the Afghan imbroglio. The famous China expert, Andrew Small had told the *Reuters* in 2014, “At the end of 2011, the Chinese realized America was leaving and they were getting this dumped on their lap.”¹⁴

Several explanations exist for the abrupt, unwise pull out of the USA from Afghanistan in August 2020. One of the explanations that make a sense to me is the policymakers in the United States believed one way to make China pay for the security of Afghanistan could be to pull-out the US

⁹ Tiffany P, *China's Role in Shaping the Future of Afghanistan* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010) https://carnegieendowment.org/files/china_role_afghanistan.pdf

¹⁰ Robert D. Kaplan, “Beijing’s Afghan Gamble,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2009.

¹¹ Tiffany P. Ng.

¹² Katharine Houreld, Ben Blanchard, “Anxious China Emerges as Diplomatic Player in Afghanistan,” *Reuters News*, April 14, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and NATO forces from Afghanistan and let China handle the Afghanistan mess. In other words dump Afghanistan in China's lap in a hope that Afghanistan will prove to be a graveyard for China as well like it has been the graveyard of empires in past.¹⁵ From Alexander the Great in 327 BC to former Soviet Union and the United States in recent past, history tells us Afghanistan has proved to be a difficult region to control which is why many term it a 'graveyard of the empires.'¹⁶

In *The Washington Times*, Bill Gertz wrote an article on August 18, 2021, reporting an encounter in China between David Stilwell, former assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs during the Trump administration, and a People's Liberation Army (PLA) officer. During encounters, the Chinese PLA officer criticized the 'imperialist US policies', which, according to him, had turned Afghanistan into an American colony. On this Mr. Stillwell agreed America should depart as soon as possible and was reported telling the author, "I wished him and his PLA buddies luck in the graveyard of empires."¹⁷ In the same news story, Mr. Stillwell showed his happiness over the expected US withdrawal from Afghanistan, "Now they (China) have no choice but to engage. The alternative is to leave all that investment in Afghanistan and give up the One Belt/One Road dream."¹⁸ Hence, the policy makers in the United States were convinced that once they pulled out from Afghanistan, China would take complete charge of Afghanistan and would have to bear all the expenses to maintain peace and security in Afghanistan.

The Sino-US rivalry has been on the rise since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, and it is taking very dangerous turns as competition is becoming fierce, covering a range of issues involving economic competition, the power of alliances and ideological struggle.¹⁹ Mearsheimer, believes that the America-China rivalry is inevitable and that the USA must control the rise of China before it is too late.²⁰ Even there is talk on the possibility of a new Cold War between

¹⁵ Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6 (2001): 17–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20050325>.

¹⁶ Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "Why Is Afghanistan the 'Graveyard of Empires'?" *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/why-is-afghanistan-the-graveyard-of-empires/> and Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, (New York: Norton, 2010)

¹⁷ Bill Gertz, "China Set to Join 'Graveyard Of Empires' in Afghanistan," *The Washington Times*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/aug/18/china-set-join-graveyard-empires-afghanistan/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Huang Tran, "Is the US–China Strategic Competition a Cold War?" *New Atlanticist*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/>

²⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, (November/December 2021) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/>

China and the USA. In his article in the *New York Times*, David E. Sanger compared the worries of the US administration vis-à-vis China with their concerns during the 1950s vis-à-vis the former Soviet Union and asked whether the war between China and the USA had started.²¹ In response, Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis were in agreement with his concerns regarding the Cold War with China and answered whether it had started already or maybe not yet in their article published in *Foreign Affairs* magazine a few days later.²²

In all this conversation of the Sino-US strategic rivalry and the possibility of a new Cold War, being a periphery Afghanistan is surely not at the centre stage but it will remain one of the major venues of the US-China rivalry.²³ For China peace and stability in Afghanistan is important for the success of CPEC and OBOR initiatives. On the other hand, for USA, Afghanistan remains relevant because USA still has its strategic interests in the region. Moreover, the USA would not like smooth sailing for China in Afghanistan, therefore, would like to remain engaged.

The Post-US Withdrawal Situation in Afghanistan

The post-US withdrawal situation in Afghanistan is still evolving, but thus far, under Taliban rule, the future of Afghanistan is uncertain. The Afghan economy is in the doldrums, and poverty is at its peak.²⁴ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports ninety percent (34 million) of the Afghan population lives below the poverty line as the two-thirds of the Afghans are not sure about their next meal.²⁵

On the question of women's rights, the Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid in his first press conference said, "In regard to women, of course, they will be able to work within the frameworks of our Islamic laws for example in education, in health, in prosecution."²⁶ However, the last two years of Taliban rule show no change for Afghan women compared to the first stint of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Afghan women still cannot go outside for work or travel without a male guardian,

²¹ David E. Sanger, "Washington Hears Echoes of the '50s and Worries: Is This a Cold War With China?" *The New York Times*, October 16, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/17/us/politics/>

²² Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-10-19/>

²³ Mohsen Shariatinia, "China-US Rivalry: the Afghanistan Factor," *MENA Affairs*, August 22, 2021, <https://menaaffairs.com/>

²⁴ Haroun Rahimi, "The Taliban in Government: A Grim New Reality is Settling in," *Al-Jazeera News*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/>

²⁵ Kelly Ng, "Afghan Economic Hopes Threatened by Taliban – UN," *BBC News*, April 18, 2023.

²⁶ "Transcript of Taliban's First News Conference in Kabul," *Aljazeera*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/>

and girls above 12 are not allowed to attend their schools. Many others have lost jobs in the labour force, media, and entertainment industries. There was not a single woman in the cabinet of the Taliban government, and the government's Ministry of Women Affairs was replaced by a Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.²⁷

During the Karzai and Ghani governments, Afghan economy relied heavily on foreign aid from the United States and its NATO allies. As all of that has suddenly stopped, the Taliban government is denied access to US\$10 billion assets held overseas in the Afghan central bank. According to the United Nations' World Food Programme (WFP), Afghanistan is going to be the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The WFP has reported that Afghanistan's needs for basic human necessities have surpassed those of other worst-hit countries, such as South Sudan, Syria, Ethiopia and even Yemen.²⁸ According to the WFP website, 22.8 million Afghans, which is more than half of the total population, are facing acute food shortages, and 8.7 million are facing emergency levels of food insecurity among the 41.7 million total population of Afghanistan.²⁹

The situation in Afghanistan is currently in a flux, as none of the countries, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE, that had previously recognized the Taliban government in the 1990s have officially recognized the current Taliban government. Pakistan has declared that it will make a "regional decision" on this. The spokesperson of the Pakistan Foreign Office, Mr. Asim Iftikhar in a news briefing told the media, "We thought that it would be the best to do it through a regional, consensual approach."³⁰ Which means this time even the Pakistan government would not recognise the Taliban government unilaterally.

The question of the legitimacy of the new Taliban regime has made the situation worse. The United States, Germany, IMF, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and World Bank had frozen Afghanistan's financial resources worth 3.5 billion US dollars, leading to a collapse of the Afghani (the currency of Afghanistan) and the complete downfall of the banking system in Afghanistan. Initially the absence of financial channels made it difficult for international donors to send relief money to Afghanistan. In August 2022, when the first anniversary of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan was being celebrated, the US administration announced that frozen Afghan funds could not be transferred because the Afghan government was not trustworthy, as it had given refuge to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the topmost al-

²⁷ Bart Edes, "Afghan Women under Taliban Rule," *Observer Research Foundation*, December 27, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/>

²⁸ Available at <https://www.wfp.org/stories/wfp-glance> (Accessed October 27, 2022)

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan Rules Out Solo Flight on Taliban Recognition," *The Express Tribune*, July 23, 2022.

Qa'ida leader.³¹ Later, in September 2022, the creation of a new "Afghan Fund" was announced, which was given the task of distributing frozen money directly to the people of Afghanistan independent of the Taliban government and Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), the central bank of Afghanistan.³² After more than six months of that announcement, those funds are still languishing in a Swiss bank, The Bank of International Settlements (BIS) based in Basel, Switzerland.³³

To avert Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis and economic collapse, a special session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers was held in Islamabad, Pakistan, on December 19, 2021. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan demanded immediate actions. Still, at the end of the session, merely a pledge was made that the OIC would set up the Humanitarian Trust Fund (HTF) and Food Security Programme expected to start its operations by March 2022 and would be managed by the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB).³⁴ Finally, on May 12, 2023, official launch was organised by the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia where agreements were signed to carry out different Humanitarian projects in Afghanistan.³⁵

China's Growing Engagement in Afghanistan

At the time of the first Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1996, China had closed its embassy in Afghanistan and suspended its diplomatic relations with Afghanistan.³⁶ But once Taliban were removed from the power, the diplomatic relations were revived by the end of 2001.³⁷ Hamid Karzai visited China immediately after taking the charge of the transitional government in 2002 and later paid official state visits in 2006 and 2010 as

³¹ "Frozen Afghan Funds," *The Nation*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.nation.com.pk/>

³² Kylie Atwood, "US Sets Up Fund to Distribute Frozen Billions to Afghanistan," *CNN*, September 14, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/14/politics/>

³³ Line Golestani, "Afghanistan: the U.S. Has Frozen the Assets of its Central Bank, the Population Foots the Bill," *Orient XXINews*, April 18, 2023. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/>

³⁴ Baqir Sajjad Sayed, "OIC Pledges Money, Food Aid for Afghanistan Amid Fears of Chaos," *Dawn*, December 20, 2021.

³⁵ "IsDB/AHTF and World Food Programme Sign Agreement to Provide Life-Saving Food Assistance in Afghanistan," "The IsDB Official Website, May 12, 2023, <https://www.isdb.org/news/>

³⁶ Chulanee Attanayake & Zheng Haiqi, "Understanding China in Taliban-led Afghanistan," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, (Air University Press : August 25, 2021), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2746135/>

³⁷ Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012), 2.

the President of Afghanistan.³⁸ But still China kept low-profile engagement in Afghanistan limiting its involvement to the relief work and trade and investment only. China refused to commit the military involvement by not joining International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) despite the US willingness and left the security matters in Afghanistan to the United States and its Western allies. Prof. Zhao Huasheng, explains the reasons for China's low-profile involvement,

A series of conditions influenced China's low-profile policy. With the outbreak of the war in Afghanistan, the United States and its European allies entered into Afghanistan in a massive way and took the role of political supervisor and military guarantor in Afghanistan. They enjoy the overall dominant influence in Afghan issues, ranging from regime formation and military buildup, to economic reconstruction. Actually, China currently has no big role to play, and has no interest in playing a subordinate partner under the dominance of the West.³⁹

However, China started thinking about more proactive engagement, once President Barak Obama announced the withdrawal of 33,000 US troops from Afghanistan by the end of September 2012 in his address from the White House on June 22, 2011.⁴⁰ The visit of the politburo member Zhou Yongkang in 2012 and the signing of agreements to help "train, fund and equip Afghan police" was the first clear sign of Chinese increasing interest in building a strategic partnership with Afghanistan.⁴¹ From 2012 onwards there were several developments which suggested China wanted to engage more proactively in Afghanistan.

In year 2014 security and intelligence cooperation between Afghanistan and China took new heights when Mr. Guo Shengkun, the Minister of Public Security and State and Mr. Qi Jianguo, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Deputy Chief of Staff visited Afghanistan.⁴² As a result of this visit the People's Armed Police troops of China started patrolling side by side with their Afghan counterparts along the border of Badakhshan province in the North East and offered a mountain brigade for the Afghan National Security Forces to strengthen the Afghan national

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁰ "Afghanistan: Obama Orders Withdrawal of 33,000 Troops," BBC News, June 23, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/>

⁴¹ Rob Taylor, "Top China Official Visits Afghanistan, Signs Security Deal," *Reuters*, September 23, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-china/>

⁴² Miwa Hirono, "China's Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference: The Case of Post-2014 Afghanistan," *The China Quarterly*, vol. 239, 2019: 614–634.

army.⁴³ Moreover, from 2014 China became part of several multilateral forums where Afghanistan was discussed and for the first time a multilateral 'Heart of Asia' conference on Afghanistan was held in Beijing, China on October 31, 2014 attended by thirty countries including the United States of America.⁴⁴

In May 2015 China with the help of Pakistan tried to broker a peace deal between Taliban and the Ghani government by organising a meeting of the representatives of Afghan High Peace Council with Taliban representatives in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang province of China.⁴⁵ But this peace effort was scuttled by the sudden news leak that Mullah Omar, the chief of Taliban had already died back in 2013. Despite the failure of that peace effort China kept its contacts with Taliban intact and continuously engaged with the Ghani government as well.

In May 2017 a trilateral China-Afghanistan-Pakistan practical cooperation dialogue process was launched in Beijing which has continued and strengthened during the Taliban rule.⁴⁶ Pakistan is the lynchpin of China's Afghanistan policy because without Sino-Pakistan cooperation China could not have made any inroads into Kabul. The Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Dialogue at the Foreign Ministers' level was held through a video link in June 2021 just a few months before the US withdrawal. In this round the three countries had agreed to deepen their economic cooperation under CPEC, BRI, Heart of Asia Conference and Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECCA).⁴⁷ Moreover, they agreed to start three new streams of this dialogue process at the level of trilateral Vice-Ministerial Consultation on Counter-Terrorism and Security, the trilateral Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue, and the trilateral Director-General Level Practical Cooperation Dialogue.⁴⁸

Therefore, when the US and NATO forces pulled out from Afghanistan, it was logical for China to increase its involvement in Afghanistan because there was no other great power in a position who could have come forward and helped fill the vacuum created by the pull out of the US forces. China was the only great power which shared positive vibes and pleasantries with the new Taliban regime as soon as it recaptured Kabul in August 2021. Welcoming the capture of Kabul by the

⁴³ Feng Zhang, "China's New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal," *LSE Public Policy Review*, vol.2, no.3, (2022), 10.

⁴⁴ "Beijing Declaration' of the 'Heart of Asia' Conference," October 31, 2014, <https://www.hoa.gov.af/images/declarations/>

⁴⁵ Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, "China Is Doomed to Play a Significant Role in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/31/>

⁴⁶ See the official press release in this regard, <https://mofa.gov.pk/>

⁴⁷ See the Joint Statement of the Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Taliban, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said they respected the Afghan people's right "to independently determine their own destiny"; therefore, China was ready to work with the new Taliban government in Afghanistan and wanted to develop "friendly and cooperative relations" with the new Taliban regime.⁴⁹

China, like Pakistan and other allies, did not officially recognize the Taliban regime, but after their capture of Kabul considered them the most powerful military and political force in Afghanistan. In an initial reaction, while assuring their support in the rehabilitation of the Afghan people, China urged the Taliban government to negotiate with their political opponents and try to establish an "open and inclusive Islamic government" in Afghanistan that was acceptable to all stakeholders⁵⁰. On the other hand, the Taliban government spokesman, Suhail Shaheen in an interview to the CGTN, the Chinese television welcomed Chinese support and said that China was one of the most powerful countries in the world and could play an important role in the rebuilding, rehabilitation, and reconstruction process.⁵¹

By July 2022 China delivered 250 million Yuan (US\$37.4 million) worth of emergency aid to Afghanistan which was pledged in September 2021 and thus became "the largest, most substantial and fastest assistance (provider) to Afghanistan in disaster relief," claimed by Zhao Lijian, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson.⁵² The emergency aid included grain, winter supplies, medicines and three million COVID-19 vaccine doses. Moreover, when on June 22, 2022 the South-Eastern Afghanistan was struck with an earthquake killing 1000 and injuring 2000 people, China was the first country coming for the help of Afghanistan pledging 50 million (7.5 million dollars) more in emergency aid.⁵³

The way the USA has abandoned Afghanistan after the withdrawal of its forces, China is the only hope for Afghanistan. Well-known US expert on China, Andrew Small, had already declared back in 2013 that it was only China apart from the USA who could provide the level of investment required to uplift the Afghan economy and make it work.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ "China Says Ready for 'Friendly Relations' with Taliban after Rout," *The Express Tribune*, August 16, 2021.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Taliban Want China to Play 'Huge Role' in Rebuilding Afghanistan," *The Express Tribune*, August 20, 2021.

⁵² Kata Zhang, "China delivers US\$37 Million in Aid to Afghanistan, Fulfilling Promise to Taliban," *South China Morning Post*, July 6, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3184316/>

⁵³ "China's Aid Helps Afghans in Difficult Time," *Xinhua News*, August 30, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220>

⁵⁴ "China Could Prove Ultimate Winner in Afghanistan," *USA Today*, January 26, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/01/26/china-winner-afghanistan/1866571/>

Interestingly, not only the Chinese government but also the Chinese companies have started investing heavily in Afghanistan. On January 6, 2023, the Taliban government signed a 25 year long multi-million dollar contract with Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC) to extract oil from Amu Darya Basin and develop an oil reserve in Sar-e-Pul province in the North of Afghanistan.⁵⁵ The Chinese company has promised to invest 540 million dollars in first three years of the twenty-five year contract creating more than 3000 jobs for the local Afghans.⁵⁶

Moreover, under Taliban rule the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral cooperation has achieved further boost as the Taliban regime is more forthcoming towards Pakistan as compared to the Karzai and Ghani regimes because of its massive reliance on Pakistan and China. On May 8, 2023, in the joint statement of the fifth trilateral China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Foreign Ministers dialogue held in Islamabad it was declared that the BRI and CPEC would be extended to Afghanistan and ongoing projects of CASA-1000, TAPI, and Trans-Afghan Railways would be used to enhance the regional connectivity and economic cooperation in the region.⁵⁷ China is also interested in building a railway link between Iran and China via Afghanistan and Pakistan and construct 573 kilometres long Trans-Afghan railroad to connect Mazar-i-Sharif in Uzbekistan to Kabul in Afghanistan and Peshawar in Pakistan because according to Yue Xiaoyong, the China's special envoy to Afghanistan "Beijing sees Afghanistan as a bridge linking Central and South Asia."⁵⁸

The Main Obstacles for China in Afghanistan

China has clearly indicated that it is willing to work with the Taliban regime and wants to play its due role in the rehabilitation process and peace building. However, the biggest problem for China is the legitimacy of the Taliban regime. If the Taliban regime is not recognized by the international community and international institutions, then business and support for the Taliban regime maybe taken as China is taking sides in the Afghan conflict and putting her all eggs in the basket of the Taliban.

The Western powers, USA and India are unhappy with the revival of the title "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," which was used by the Taliban government in the 1990s as well. The international community

⁵⁵ "Afghanistan Signs Oil Extraction Deal with Chinese Company," *Al-Jazeera News*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/6/>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See The Joint Statement of the Fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, *MOFA*, <https://mofa.gov.pk/> (Accessed on July 30, 2023).

⁵⁸ Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "China Ready To Assist In Afghanistan Belt And Road Railway Infrastructure," *Silk Road Briefing*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/07/28/>

have genuine concerns over mistreatment with women, political opponents, religious and ethnic minorities, and the Taliban's unwillingness to agree on a truly broad-based government in Kabul. Hence, internal legitimacy and external recognition of the Taliban regime will be one of the biggest hurdles for peace in Afghanistan.

Regarding the recognition of the Taliban regime, an agreement was reached during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit held in September 2021 in Dushanbe. In Dushanbe, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Iran and Tajikistan agreed for recognition the Taliban government must establish an inclusive government by sharing powers with their political opponents, respect the human rights in Afghanistan and assure the international community that Afghan soil would not be used against any other country. These broad criteria were agreed upon, but in the final analysis, every nation-state is expected to follow its own policy and would decide based on its own national interests.

For recognition of the Taliban regime, Pakistan wants a 'regional decision', as already mentioned. Pakistan has not clarified exactly but probably it means Pakistan would recognize the Taliban regime provided China, Russia, Turkey, Tajikistan, Iran and other regional allies also recognize. If China wanted it and like USA used its power, this could have been done within months of the Taliban takeover. However, even after two years, no recognition means that China is not satisfied with the 'regional decision' and wants a more inclusive decision preferably involving the USA and India as well. The 'regional decision' on Afghanistan would mean one bloc—China, Russia, Pakistan, Turkey and allies supporting the Taliban regime—while the other bloc—USA, India and their Western allies support the opponents of the Taliban. China knows that will not bring back the sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

The track record of the Taliban is that they are unreliable international players because they do not even listen to their allies and benefactors regarding the critical decisions they make. Mostly their decisions are not based on pragmatic, rational choice; rather, they claim to always act on their own version of 'Islamic laws', which are based on a very regressive and out-dated version of Islam. Like on women's rights and 'inclusive government' they have not budged much despite all the international pressures and saner advice from their own allies

The political opposition of the Taliban regime is subdued and quite now because it has no military strength or popular support base to challenge the Taliban regime. The only political challenge of any worth Taliban are facing is from Ahmad Massoud, the son of legendary Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was famous as 'the lion of Panjshir' during Afghan jihad in the 1980s. Ahmad Shah Massoud was one of the strongest opponents of the Taliban during the 1990s. Now his son Ahmad Massoud is leading the most important armed group called National Resistance Front (NRF) against the new Taliban regime from the

Panjshir valley. Apart from Ahmad Massoud, Sami Sadat and Yasin Zia are other two former Afghan war generals who are currently fighting against Taliban.⁵⁹

Apart from the political challenge Taliban are facing from the former war lords, an even bigger challenge comes from the regional chapter of Islamic State in Afghanistan — known as Islamic State Khorasan or ISIS-K. Since the capture of Kabul, ISIS-K has stepped up its terrorist attacks in the Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan, killing hundreds and wounding thousands of people thus far.⁶⁰ Moreover, they have started guerrilla warfare in provinces bordering Pakistan, escalating the conflict and threatening both the Taliban regime and Pakistan. The Sky News Data and Forensic Unit reported that in just two months between August 26 and October 28, 2021, 408 people were killed by ISIS-K in Afghanistan, which included 346 civilians.⁶¹

Some of experts believe ISIS-K will not directly threaten the Chinese assets in Afghanistan but may target “Chinese assets in Pakistan to fuel tension between the allies”.⁶² Such a tension was already created in July 2021 when a bus carrying Chinese workers was attacked near the site of the Dasu hydropower project, killing 12, including nine Chinese citizens. The Pakistan Foreign Office initially termed it “mechanical failure,” while a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson referred to it as an “attack”.⁶³ This kind of attacks may increase on Chinese assets and citizens in Afghanistan and Pakistan if China openly supports the Taliban regime. Therefore, maintaining overall security in Afghanistan will remain one of the biggest challenges for China in Afghanistan.

China surely cannot afford chaos in Afghanistan, as it will have serious consequences for the region and the BRI project. Peace in Afghanistan is also important for the projects and investments China has already made in Afghanistan. Above all, if ISIS-K or any other extremist elements get strength in Afghanistan, they can not only target the Chinese

⁵⁹ David Loyn, “The Scattered Forces Opposing the Taliban Need Support Now,” Chatham House, July 28, 2023 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-08/>

⁶⁰ Victor J. Blue, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Christina Goldbaum, “ISIS Poses a Growing Threat to New Taliban Government in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, November 03, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/03/world/asia/>

⁶¹ The Sky News Data and Forensic Unit, “Afghanistan: Flurry of Islamic State Khorasan Attacks Could Be Sign of Group's Growing Strength,” October 29, 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/>.

⁶² Tom Hussain, “Isis-K Escalates Terror Attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan in Show of Resistance Against Taliban,” December 8, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3158929/>

⁶³ “Pakistan Bus ‘Blast’ Kills at least 12, Including Nine Chinese,” *Aljazeera*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/14/>

assets in Afghanistan but also enter Uighur through Badakhshan province and may have spill over effects on that sensitive region of China.

China is in a better position to bring peace in Afghanistan compared to the USA. Compared to the USA, which had troubled relations with important regional players, such as Pakistan, Iran and Russia, China has very good relations with all three and the Central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan as well. In my opinion, China should go for the regional solution of the Afghan imbroglio and should go for making all of them part of the peace building effort directly. If they all have a direct stake in the peace process, only that process can bring durable peace in Afghanistan.

For sustainable peace in Afghanistan, a genuine inclusive government is the only way out. If an inclusive government is established in Afghanistan, it would surely help the Afghanistan government get recognized by the international community and international institutions. However, the most difficult question is whether the Taliban would be willing to allow a genuinely inclusive government. There is no clear-cut answer, but China, with the support of Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Iran, can work for this. These are all neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and currently have cordial relations among them. If Pakistan and China together can convince the Taliban regime, Russia and Tajikistan may convince the Tajik leader, Ahmad Massoud and Iran can bring Ismail Khan to the negotiation table, and thus a genuinely inclusive government acceptable to all major stakeholders can be established with an accommodative spirit.

Conclusion

The study of the growing engagement of China in Afghanistan since 2012 makes it evident that though China was not ready to play as a junior partner of USA in Afghanistan, still China was very clear in its approach. China maintained cordial working relations with the Taliban and the Afghan government both during President Karzai and Ghani regimes because China knew Taliban are a key player in Afghan politics and in case USA abandons Afghanistan then China would have to step in and do something because instability in the region did not suit Chinese strategic interests.

However, this does not mean China is ready to play a leadership role in Afghanistan like the USA did from 2002 to 2022. The history of the foreign policy of China reveals that unlike other great powers China avoids interfering in the internal affairs of any state and avoids using coercive tactics to achieve its foreign policy goals. China has always tried to conduct its foreign relations in very sober and measured manner.

The last two years since the US withdrawal indicate, this assessment that China would follow suit immediately and would get bogged down in Afghanistan like the US did is a misplaced assessment. China knows that if it jumps in wholeheartedly and provides everything to

the Taliban regime, then Taliban would solely rely on them and the USA and the international community will also pull back their hands forever and would like China to handle the Afghan mess singlehandedly and get bogged down.

China has always followed a very cautious approach and a policy of calculated engagement in Afghanistan. Therefore, in my assessment there is every possibility that China will continue the same cautious approach in Afghanistan. China will keep increasing its financial and strategic stakes in Afghanistan but it will never associate itself too much with the Taliban regime. China will always like to keep its door open to be able to work with any kind of future government in Afghanistan.

