

CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH TALIBAN AFTER AMERICAN WITHDRAWAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

United States' sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan created a huge power vacuum in the region and induced serious repercussions for all regional states. Especially, China is facing a new situation in its backyard that has the potential to disrupt its Belt and Road Initiative. Afghanistan's location makes it important place connecting eastern and western parts of BRI. This study by delving into primary and secondary sources concurs that China is thinking about a serious engagement with new regime in Afghanistan. Using the analytic of engagement and conceptual framework of geo-economics it brings out the potential avenues of cooperation between both countries and what it means for Pakistan. From the Chinese perspective this paper informs about Chinese intentions to engage with Taliban regime in economic and security related spheres. It aims to understand the potential avenues of cooperation that exist between both countries, of which one has no international recognition. Lastly, paper also included discussion on China-Taliban's engagement and its implication for Pakistan and argues that Pakistan's national security is heavily dependent on both China and Afghanistan.

Keywords: China, Taliban, Afghanistan, United States of America, Geo-economics, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

At the global scale, it seems, both U.S. and China are competing for domination over the world. The situation is forcing both countries to make alliances to achieve their national goals and protect their national goals in the macro region of Global Indian Ocean (Hass R., 2021). The US's interests in Afghanistan were predicated upon a strict national security paradigm legitimized by normative ideas underpinning liberal political order spearheaded by United State since the end of the 2nd world war. Notable objective of this intervention was to bring political stability, end protracted civil war and destroy the safe havens of groups working against American interests. However, the sudden American withdrawal from Afghanistan is creating a domestic power vacuum and anxieties for regional. Both factors offered opportunity and space for diplomatic maneuvering to China (Hass, 2021). It is now seriously considering to investing in its economic ties with Afghanistan to achieve same ends, its own national security.

It is argued that a stable Afghanistan is more crucial for its newly envisioned long-term objective to make China the largest economy of the world (Glazbrook, 2021). China has its eagerness in a similar case shown in Iran and agreed to invest \$400 billion in the Persian Gulf State, over the period of 25 years (Fassihi & Myers, 2021). In fact, In Pakistan, under the vision of the flagship Silk Road Project, China had already invested more than \$73 billion in 'China's Pakistan Economic Corridor' (Hillman & Sacks, 2021). Not only this investment will be saved and get more premium if Afghanistan will also join the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative).

The unique and attractive geo-geographical location of Afghanistan has created interest of China. On the other hand, The United States and its NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) presence in the backyard of China, has created 'security dilemma' for her. China sees U.S and its military presence in its backyard is direct threat to China's national security. The most pertinent objective of China in the

Afghanistan is to secure its long-term interest in the region and beyond through peaceful means. Thus, China wants the United State execution from the region, and only when the withdrawal is responsible and not left a chaotic and uncertain prevailing situation in the region. (Sun, 2020).

Similarly, there are legitimate concerns in China and Pakistan fearing that if some semblance of stability will not get restored in Afghanistan. It will not only aggravate the stability inside Pakistan but also put Chinese's investment in the region at the stake and future geo-economic plans of integrating the regional economies of Asia. After the blitz like Taliban takeover of Kabul, the United States' two-decade long efforts ended in a withdrawal and a new strategy of engagement with twin countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan or (Af-Pak). Amidst this sudden chaotic withdrawal and to total annihilation of Ashraf Ghani led Afghan regime all eyes remained focus on Taliban and United States. There is a little or no discussion on Chinese intentions, options, and opportunities to fill in the gap left behind by American withdrawal. This is what that provided inspiration to us to try to understand the existing Sino-Taliban/Afghan relations and how American withdrawal can affect it (Kaur, 2021).

Afghanistan is although a landlocked country, yet it did not remain aloof from the rest of world since the time of Alexander. However, with arrival modern era the country had turned into a classic case of a prisoner of geography (it describes the impact of geography can have international affairs) There is a plurality of narratives that define and describe the position of the country in regional and global history. To celebrate the resilience and steadfastness of the people of Afghanistan against the foreign invasions it has been eulogized 'graveyard of empires.' From the times of Kipling to of Khaled Hosseini the literature world sees it as a land of brute force where jaggedness and wilderness are not features of physical geography but also of its people (Benjamin, 2020).

In fact, its history reflects that many great powers have been miserably failed to conquer it or keep a direct control on it. It is as a correct for contemporary powers as it was true for the likes of Alexander and Genghis Khan, (Benjamin, 2020). However, this narrative oversimplifies or misses some nuanced details of the affairs between empires and nature of their engagement with Afghan country. Especially with the rising British influence and sovereignty in 19th century the region served as a 'buffer zone' between the Great Britain and the then Soviet Union. And in the process lost its unique position of political eminence, it enjoyed until 18th century, and turned into a weak state dependent on its neighbors for even sorting out domestic challenges. Starting from the British shadow of 'shared sovereignty' has not left Afghanistan. Later on, Soviet Union, US, Pakistan and Iran pulled over their weight onto the domestic politics and even state-formation inside Afghanistan (Laskin, 2021).

The United States' hurried withdrawal is not first of its nature and it could be compared with USSR military drawdown from Afghanistan in 1988. The ill-planned military withdrawal had created a political vacuum in the country with dire consequences for the region is swamped by bogey of cross border (inter-region) terrorism and strong presences of sectarianism and political stability caused by an 'ungovernable' Afghanistan. The manner in which United State of America had set its 'feet of clay' (in the words of Trotsky) and later the way it has changed (or changing) its nature of engagement with Af-Pak region is yet required a satisfactory answer. (Kissinger, 2021).

United State of America and Taliban has no one-dimensional history of engagement nor a stable ideological or transactional relationship. Relations between the United State of America and the Afghan Taliban have not been good in the past. United State of America provided logistical, financial, and moral support to Mujahidin, smiling and Shaking hands with President Reagan at White House. Then it kept in direct relationship with Taliban mediated by Pakistan to achieve certain guarantee for protecting economic interest of its oil Companies (Rashid,2010). The nature of engagement and a closer look on its evolutionary trajectory could help situating the current withdrawal in a relatively longer period of engagement between the two countries adhering to two strictly opposing ideological worldviews.

In February of 1989, the USSR (The Union of Soviet Socialist Republic) pulled out from Afghanistan handing over power to Dr. Najeeb Ullah. He tried his best to end the internecine conflict between the warring factions of Afghan tribal elites. He tried to use the power of state to bring some social modernization to reduce the burden of conservative value-system that was inflaming the conflict. However, despite, the disintegration of USSR and relatively more liberal credentials of Dr Najeeb (Dutta, 2021).

United State continued supplying weapons to the Mujahidin. This civil war continues and in 1992, Taliban won the civil war in Afghanistan.

In 1996, the Taliban established Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They emerged as a major political force in Afghanistan. Their victory in influenced the domestic and regional politics in multiples manners. For example, the enforcement of religiosity through state, imaginary of Khilafat and implementation of Sharia (in practice code of *Pashtun wali*) have transnational and continental consequences i.e., the event of 9/11. Especially religion become the key ideational forces lying down conditions for any political arena. Predominantly Sunni, the interpretation of religion, politics, and the sociality. They were offering was not acceptable to the minority Shiite sect, who was also ethnically different from Pashtun dominated Taliban movement. The authorities and rowdy culture of rural Pashtun pushed Taliban to inscribe the same code of ethics and system of values to a diverse pool of sects, tribes, and ethnicities. It ended up creating moral to political chaos and consolidation of authoritarian impulses into the Emirate-e-Afghanistan (Maizland, 2021).

United State during the whole period was mere a spectator and tries to keep its hand away from making a direct military, diplomatic, or any other kind of intervention. In the due period the Islamic outlook of Taliban regime, its porous control on territory and population and the purposive use of symbol of Pan-Islamism led to the consolidation of forces and organizations that were latter designated as terrorist by the home security department of the US (Emily, 2021).

In reaction to the event of 9/11. On Oct 7, 2001, American forces joined by NATO allies (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) entered Afghanistan with a pretext to overthrow the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which was sheltering wanted terrorist of Al-Qaeda (It is a multinationals militant Islamic group composed of Salafist Jihadists). This new engagement of US with Afghanistan was coded as “Global War on Terrorism” with purpose of bringing “enduring freedom” to extirpate the menace of terrorism from its root. The proclaimed objective of this militaristic intervention was to hunt down the Osama Bin Ladin and to penalize Taliban for giving safe sanctuaries to the Al-Qaeda top notch in leaders in Afghanistan. However, despite continuous pressure and the threat of invasion, the Taliban were not persuaded to breakage their linkage with Al-Qaeda. The Taliban unwillingness to return Bin Ladin forced the United Sates to dismantle the Taliban regime (Zucchini, 2021).

The United State of America's interests and nature of its indirect, mediated and latter direct militaristic engagement with Afghanistan were always predicated upon the strict national security concerns. However, for drawing in the legitimacy for its action it also used Normative-Liberal discourse of Human Rights violation and women freedom to justify its action. However, this veneer was simply lifted. In 2021 by, President Joe Biden by counting that,

“United State of America led NATO force cannot fight a war that the people of Afghan and its military are not willing to fight for themselves. The US has spent our trillions of dollars and well trained and equipped the Afghan army of some 3 million large force.”(House, The White, 2021).

Similarly, after the blitz like swift takeover of Afghanistan on 15 Aug,2021, the United States' two decade long protracted direct engagement were ended in an agreed yet ill-planned withdrawal. Once, the Afghan Taliban was back in action and the Afghan army had shown no spine to stand before a rowing band of the Taliban troops. It received to a humiliating defeat at the hands of Taliban and all the vestiges, institutional as well as ideological, smoked into air with a swish of the hands. All the investment which was done by the United State of America on Afghan army, was fruitless (Acemoglu, 2021). An authoritarian scholar in the field, Dr. Shoaib Pervaiz, explained this setback in following terms,

“This is very big loss for the United State of America itself, it has invested over \$3 trillion in Afghanistan to stop them (Taliban) from taking over. So that project is completely in disarray. Similarly, the win heart and mind strategy of General Petraeus, former Director of Central Intelligence Agency and the next General who took over the command of American forces. It is in shamble because that strategy has really failed.”

In fact, the Afghan Taliban made a strong come back to the helm of power in Afghanistan after the two decades of long war consist of pitched battles of mind, nerves and strategy. After the total annihilation of Ashraf Ghani led government all eyes of the international community are fixed on the Afghan Taliban.

While on the ground the situation for this Taliban regime is facing now one of the worst political, economic, climate, and humanitarian crisis. The Afghan economy is in shamble, and even no money is available in public exchequer to pay salaries of public servants. Taliban lacked in the organizational capacity to manage these monumental challenges in the after math of US withdrawal (Nagesh , 2020).

Given the nature of inconsistent nature of US-Taliban relations. China's role attains much significance not only for Afghanistan but also China. China is an emerging economic power of Asia trying to protect this success into ideological and political domains. China is seriously considering the region and revitalizing its old silk road through the One Belt, and One Road Initiatives. Therefore, stable Afghanistan is very important to ensure its futuristic ambitious of building a chain centric hegemonic model of pragmatic political economy without any agenda for imparting a social change in Afghanistan. However, there is not clarity of both ambitions and conduct and that is question that inquiry would like to probe.

Geo-Economic perspective

Geo-economics lay down the emphasis on promotion of trade and economic cooperation among the states to bring them closer to achieve the national interests. While according to classical geo-politics the national interest and power can be gained and maintained through the physical control of territories. Therefore, the concept of geo-economic is antithesis to the classical geo-political theory as both approaches follow different mechanism to achieve the same goals (Bura, 2012).

According to Mikael Wigell, geo-economics is an approach which can be attributed to the both an analytical approach and a foreign policy strategy. Geo-economics put emphasis on economic cooperation to gain and maximize power, and this concept is a new tool for the scholars to analyze the international relations. In geo-economics one could analyze how economic tools are employed by the states to achieve a specific strategic objective in a particular geographical area as the state using economic means to meet foreign policy goals. And this study heavily borrows on the work of Mikael Wigell (Wigell, 2018).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Afghanistan boasts of a unique geographical location as it connects central Asia, South Asia, and Middle East. Its unique geography creates geo-strategic and geo-political interests for China. Owing to the unique topography of Afghanistan, which mainly consists of mountains terrains and valleys, China or any other powerful state cannot achieve geo-strategic interests through classical approach, which believes in the use of military power and occupation to achieve goals. Therefore, China has wielded geo-economics approach to procure its geo-strategic and geo-political goals. There is myriad of geo-strategic and economic interests that China wants to acquire in Afghanistan to enhance its power.

Firstly, China wants to jettison the security risks that are posed to China due to instability in Afghanistan. China shares a border with Afghanistan and the latter has been the hub of terrorists since a long time. Those terrorists in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to the sovereignty of China, and China has the aspiration to get rid of these terrorists. Therefore, the Chinese leadership wants economic cooperation with Afghanistan so that a robust government of Afghanistan cooperate with her to achieve her security interest in Afghanistan.

Secondly, China launched BRI in order increase its influence in the region. China is an emerging global power on the map of the world, and the world has recently witnessed the bitter animosity between the USA and China. The USA has evacuated the Afghanistan the last year which provided a relief to China. China cannot afford to have any other global power sitting next to its door which could prove a hurdle in the way of its national interests. Due to this reason China envisages a stable and robust Afghan government so that there would be no room for any foreign power to invade Afghanistan.

Thirdly, China aspires to have an influence in the Middle East, and she has made a huge investment in Iran. Iran is a geo-strategic partner of China; however, both partners have no ground connection. Afghanistan provides a road connection between China and Iran. China has a special interest in the Middle East; therefore, she wants economic cooperation with Afghanistan. Thus, China wants a prosper Afghanistan so that it can help China to exert her influence in the Middle East.

Fourthly, the instability in Afghanistan poses a serious threat to the China's BRI (Belt and Road initiative) project and especially to the CPEC project, the flagship project under the umbrella of BRI. China wants to extirpate all security risks associated with its developmental projects. Therefore, China is investing in Afghanistan so that a stable Afghanistan helps China to achieve her economic and strategic goals in the region. China wants to achieve above mentioned objectives through geo-economics tool.

China wants economic cooperation with Afghanistan to procure its interests by creating a stable and prosper government in Afghanistan that serves her interests. To begin with Afghanistan's unveiled underground natural resources. China has offered economic and technical assistance to Afghanistan to parlay the underground resources to cash. It will prosper the Afghan government which will ultimately serve the interest of China.

Similarly, China wants infrastructural development in Afghanistan which will result in connectivity of the region. China wants to invest in infrastructural development in Afghanistan as it will help China to achieve geo-strategic and geo-political objectives in the region. Moreover, the road connectivity with Iran will help China to exert its influence in the region. Similarly, China wants to dole out economic assistance to Afghanistan so that a powerful Afghan government crush the terrorists who poses threat to the economic interests of China. To cut the story short, China has employed geo-economics theory in Afghanistan to safeguard its geo-political and geo-strategic interests.

Potential Avenues of Co-operation

After the US evacuation, Afghanistan is inundated with a plethora of problems; but, worn-torn Afghanistan also offers numerous opportunities for the neighboring countries, especially for China. The nascent Taliban-led government is desperately looking for friends in the international political arena who could help them to rehabilitate their country, and it is appropriate time for the regional players to extend their hands towards Afghan people before they get exploited by terrorists or extra-regional players for personal gains. To this end, China, emerging global and regional power, has struck the right path by starting diplomatic ties with the Taliban regime, the current rulers of Afghanistan. The current Chinese approach towards Taliban is antithesis to its 1990s approach when they shunned diplomatic ties or relations with Taliban regime. China has altogether changed her approach towards the Taliban regime owing to secure its geo-strategic and geo-economic interests which are contingent upon peace and stability in Afghanistan. There are certain areas of mutual cooperation and benefit for the both countries, China and Afghanistan.

Political and Economic Alignment

Both Chinese and Taliban leadership believe that the United States is responsible for the current chaotic situation in Afghanistan. The leaders of both countries aspire a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Moreover, the Taliban leadership is resolute that they will not interfere in the affairs of other states and also not allow any terrorist to use their land against any other country. When the Chinese spokesperson Yi met the current acting deputy Prime Minister, Abdul Ghani Baradar, promised that

"The Afghan Taliban is committed to refrain from activities that directly or indirectly destabilize another country. And the Taliban would honor its commitment to an open and inclusive Islamic government."

And the Chinese leadership has also ensured that they will not interfere in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan. Non-interference is the potential avenues of co-operation between China and Afghanistan. Mr. Wang Yi, China foreign ministry spoke person stated that *"China has never interfered in the internal affairs of Afghanistan"* (MFAPRC, 2021). Historically, it is also an established fact that China has never interfered in the internal matters of other states. Similarly, the Taliban leadership and their people are tired of prolong war, and they do not want to indulge themselves in any proxy war. One of the religious scholars from Afghanistan explained to me,

China wants one thing from the Afghan that they must not interfere in the domestic affairs of the other countries and we will do the same. In reality this is the objective of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The formation of an Inclusive government is also the potential avenues of Cooperation between China and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. China also asked the Taliban leadership to make an inclusive

government so that Afghanistan should not fall prey to the civil war. The Taliban leadership also assured the international community that they will form an inclusive government (MFAPRC, 2021).

The unique geographical location of Afghanistan has created special interest of China in Afghanistan. The Chinese leadership envisions the idea of connecting the region. Afghanistan is the gateway to the central Asia from south Asia, and it connects Central Asia with Middle East.

Security analyst in the field, Retired Lieutenant General Javid, stated,

“Though, China’s financial engagement has been less in past. However, now according to the president Xi Jinping vision i.e., under the One Belt and One Road Initiative, cross boarder economic activities will provide greater opportunity for China to remain in the region and to promote interest of the China”.

China has envisaged a plan to connect the world through roads, railway networks and sea, and to this end, she began BRI (Belt and Road initiative) few years back in 2013. This project of China is highly laudable as it will overcome the trade barriers and will bring prosperity in the world; however, there are certain hurdles in the way of BRI completion. China has poured billions of dollars in the BRI project, and she cannot afford to risk her investment. One of the largest threats posed to the BRI project is the regional instability. Afghanistan has remained the ground for terrorist outfits and in the current decade several new terrorist organizations are rearing their heads in Afghanistan like ISIS, IS Khurasan etc. These terrorist organizations pose serious threat to the BRI. But also create an opportunity for China and Afghanistan to work together to uproot these terrorist organizations which pose serious threat to the BRI project. Current Afghan regime is also willing to cooperate with China in this regard as this project will help Afghanistan to build new infrastructure and stable its economy. The official spokesperson of the Islamic Emirate, Zabiullah Mujahid also welcomed the BRI in these words.

“China is our main partner and represents a fundamental and astonishing opportunity for us because it is ready to invest and rebuild our country” (RFERL, 2021).

The Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China, Wang Yi said *“The BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), warmly welcomed and actively participated by Afghanistan, has brought benefits to both Afghanistan and China and the region beyond”* (Embassy C.-A. , 2020).

Moreover, Afghanistan is also enriched with untapped natural resources and rare earth minerals like copper, chromite etc. Unfortunately, Afghanistan does not have financial resources and modern machinery to extract underground minerals. And, it creates another opportunity for both the countries to work mutually. Afghan leadership is looking for China’s assistance to parlay its underground resources into cash. However, China has little investment in the ‘Anyak Copper Mine’ and ‘Amu Daraya Basin Oil’ projects, the religious scholar from Afghanistan, explained to me, *‘the Anyak copper mine, has been slowdown for many years due to U.S. presence in Afghanistan; however, we will expedite it now’*. The cooperation between China and Afghan leadership will robust the Afghan economy. An official spokesperson of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Zabiullah Mujahid, stated

“Afghanistan has rich copper mines and untapped natural resources, which, thanks to the Chinese, will be modernized. Finally, China represents our ticket to the market around the world.”

The Taliban leadership wants to cooperate with China so that it can heal the wounds of its people, which are inflicted by two-decade protracted war, by making them financially stable. Similarly, China also wants to help its neighbor as the prosperity in its neighbor serves her interest.

Additionally, Afghanistan produces surplus fruits especially dry fruits which is one of her major exports. On the other hand, China has highest population in the world, and to fulfill the food needs she imports food items from other countries. Thus, it creates another opportunity for the both countries to work together. The Taliban leadership is looking towards China as the largest export market, and it will also help China to overcome food shortages problem.

One of clerics of Afghanistan Shura (consultation committee of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) has expressed his thoughts during interview with me as,

“Afghanistan is also an agrarian country and a great number of our people are linked with the occupation of agriculture. We produce surplus fruit especially dry fruit but we have no market to export our goods.”

Moreover, China can also help Afghanistan to improve the quality and production of agricultural items by sharing new and sophisticated technology as she already employed in her country. In a nut shell both

countries have multiple avenues of economic cooperation. If both countries cash these opportunities, this region will become prosper in letter and spirit.

Strategic calculus of security

China is located in the far northeast of Afghanistan. China is an emerging global economic power while Afghanistan is at war since the last four decades. Afghanistan remained a hub of terrorist outfits for many years. China views instability in Afghanistan a threat to its geo-strategic interests in the region. The Taliban leadership, who mainly represents Pashtun community, has not yet included Tajik and Uzbek in their interim government. There is a fear that if Taliban leadership does not incorporate Tajik and Uzbek communities in the government, they might join ETIM East Turkistan Islamic Movement. It is also said that the ETIM has tentacles in China; however, it is mainly based in Badakhshan, Afghanistan. ETIM is a separatist and terrorist organization which poses a serious threat to the sovereignty of China and this organization is also against the Taliban regime. The threats posed by ETIM creates another potential avenue of cooperation. To this means, presence of any security threats may pose a strategic threat to the long term strategic and economic interests of China and Afghanistan. Therefore, they are ready to address the issue of security threat in in order to safeguard its long-term interests in the region (Amy, 2021).

Additionally, China and Iran, which is located in the west of Afghanistan, have recently signed a 25-year comprehensive strategic agreement on 27 March 2021. This agreement will provide a relief to the torpid Iran's economy which is in doldrums owing to the US sanctions. This deal will weak the US hegemony in the region and it will also help China to exert its influence in the Middle East. Both geostrategic partners, Iran and China, do not have any land boundary with each other. Afghanistan provides a land connection between China and Iran; therefore, it creates another opportunity for the Afghan and Chinese leaders to work together. Retired Lieutenant General Javid state that,

"Afghanistan boasts of a mountain's terrain and fertile valleys. Each valley is separated by mountains, and rivers and have its own different culture and norms. There is no land connection between these valleys as there is no infrastructural development. These mountains make it difficult for any foreign power to conquer the whole Afghanistan".

This mountains terrain does not only provide natural defense against foreign invaders but also hinder national cohesion. Historically, it is an established fact that no local ruler of Afghanistan has ruled all over Afghanistan due to diverse ethnicities living in their valleys, which are separated from each other by mountains. The Taliban leadership is also cognizant of this fact that infrastructural development is imperative for national cohesion. It creates another potential avenue of cooperation between China and Afghanistan. The roads and infrastructural development under the Belt and Road Initiative will provide national cohesion in Afghanistan, and it would also make it easy for China to access its geostrategic partner, Iran, through road link.

China-Taliban relations: Implications for Pakistan

Afghanistan has remained the hub of great game and proxies since the last four decades. Pakistan has claimed on multiple occasions in the past that Afghanistan provides the safe heaven to those who want to destabilize Pakistan. Pakistan has also tried convincing the USA during the latter's presence in Afghanistan that Afghan land is used by its adversaries. However, the USA always rebuffed this claim advertently or inadvertently. After the takeover of Kabul by Taliban. This fact was endorsed by Senator Dr Jahanzeb Jamal Dini affiliated with Baluchistan National party (Mengal), stated,

"It seems the situation has been turned in favor of Pakistan as the Taliban leadership has assured the international community that they would not allow its soil to be used for terrorist activities against any other country".

Therefore, Pakistan has also welcomed the growing ties between China and Afghan leadership. The cooperation between Afghanistan and China will ultimately help Pakistan as Pakistan enjoys cordial relations with China. Moreover, the growing cooperation between the China and Afghanistan will eliminate the security risk to the CPEC. The growing ties between the Taliban and Chinese leadership are endorsed

by the Pakistani political elite because China and Pakistan have mutual geo-strategic and geo-economic goals.

Additionally, the peace in Afghanistan will provide a chance for regional cooperation, regional connectivity and regional prosperity. Afghanistan is located at the heart of Asia. It connects central Asia, South Asia and Middle East with each other. It is the crossroad to many countries. This truth was properly reflected by Dr Shoaib, an independent scholar in the field, stated,

“Peaceful Afghanistan will guarantee the completion of China’s dream of connecting the whole region. The regional connectivity will open the doors for regional cooperation and trade, if China involves itself in Afghanistan, China gives a lot of economic opportunities to the regional connectivity”.

The continent of Asia has the largest population which makes it the largest trade market of the world and a house of the biggest manpower. Therefore, the trade and cooperation in the region can potentially make it the 21st century an Asian century. However, peace, prosperity, connectivity and cooperation of the region depends upon the stability in Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan welcomes the Chinese special interest in Afghanistan. China is also cognizant of the fact that peace and prosperity of the region is linked with peaceful Afghanistan.

Moreover, due to high demand of electricity and energy, Pakistan has made deals with central Asian states to import energy. The CASA-1000 (Central Asia- South Asia power project) is an under-construction project that will allow for the export of surplus electricity from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan. Similarly, the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline will allow Pakistan and Afghanistan to import gas from central Asian states to meet their energy demands. One of the greatest threats posed to the completion of this project is the security risk in Afghanistan. An independent expert in the field, Dr Waqar, stated,

“The Taliban comeback will prove beneficial for both sides. It will bring both sides closer and well helping to bridge the gulf and enhancing trust between the two countries”.

There is also a positive sign for the completion of these projects as the Afghan leadership has assured all the stakeholders of this project that they will provide security to these projects. The completion of these projects will help Pakistan and Afghanistan to meet their energy demands which will ultimately robust their economies. It is an established fact that trade between two countries helps to resolve other conflicts as well and economic dependency on each other will enhance cooperation between the states.

On the Eastern border Pakistan has a bitter rivalry with India due to border disputes especially in Kashmir. Pakistan also blames India for proxy war in Afghanistan to destabilize CPEC through proxies in Afghanistan. An independent scholar in the field, Dr Shoaib, stated,

“Pakistan and China cannot do tangible progress without Afghan help. If Afghanistan is in shamble. Pakistan will be in shamble. If Pakistan go astray the whole China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Belt and Road initiative will be out of window.”

It creates another area of strategic cooperation where the Taliban leadership and China can work together to extirpate India’s presence in Afghanistan in order to secure their geo-strategic and geo-economic interests. The Afghan leadership has reiterated it multiple times that they would uproot the proxies from Afghanistan altogether so it will help Pakistan in eradicating any security to destabilize CPEC.

Pakistan is located to the south and East of Afghanistan, and both countries are separated by Durand line, the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan was drawn during British rule over India in 1893, however the tribes near the border on each side have same ancestral roots and also have identical ethnicity. The state of Pakistan and Afghanistan has a long border dispute over border demarcation. It creates an opportunity for China to play the role of mediator between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, an authoritative expert in the field, Dr Waqar, stated,

“China has always sided with Pakistan in many of its dealings, so Pakistan and China will solve a realistic and substantial plan to solve the problems, which will ultimately serve its geo-economic and geo-strategic interests.”

Pakistan is a geo-strategic and geo-economic partner of China. The CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) project is the flagship project of China’s OBOR (one belt one road initiative), and it provides access to China to the Arabian Sea.

On the other hand, if Taliban leadership fail to form an inclusive government, it will have severe implications for Pakistan and the region. There is a fear that if Taliban do not form an inclusive government, there are chances of breakout of a civil war that will harshly impact the whole region. Firstly, there will be the mass exodus of refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Pakistan's economic conditions does not allow it to host immigrants. In case of civil war, the emigrants will add burden to the already struggling economy of Pakistan and concomitant problems will make the state vulnerable. Another independent expert in the field, Shakeel Ramay, stated,

"Pakistan cannot afford uncertainty in Afghanistan. As Anarchy and civil war in Afghanistan will result in mass departure from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Afghanistan will again become the center of proxies and terrorism. It poses a serious threat to the national security of Pakistan."

Pakistan has already sacrificed a lot during war on terror in terms of financial and human losses. Thirdly, the smuggling of narcotics and weapons to Pakistan will engender more issues and further aggravate the problems for Pakistan. Pakistan is already trying to come out of the predicaments that are caused due to instability in Pakistan. The Pakistani leadership knows peace in Pakistan is directly linked with the peace in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

The sudden U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a vacuum in the region. This time, China has become quite assertive in the region, the new scenario in the region will be completely different from the earlier one, and China will bridge this gap through massive economic development. China is increasing its economic rapprochement and ties with Afghanistan aimed at to bring the region into BRI and counter American threat in the region. However, Pakistan's security being dependent on the stability of Afghanistan has a massive concern over the instability. If Afghanistan remains unstable for long, Pakistan and China will also not be exempted from the consequences. Thus, if Afghanistan and China continue to work on its landmark project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Pakistan would be benefited to further its increase economic ties with Afghanistan. It will be beneficial for both Pakistan and Afghanistan

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