

China's strategic calculus in Afghanistan

Introduction-

As Afghanistan emerges as a strategic focal point in the regional ambit, various global players are thronging to secure an eminent position on the establishment of stability and peace in the country since the Taliban takeover and subsequent complete withdrawal by the Western forces had created a political and security vacuum. After two decades of military involvement and trillions of dollars invested, coupled with the Taliban's failure to honour its promises and repeated violations of the Doha agreement, it remains very unlikely that any western governments including the European union will be willing to politically invest in Afghanistan that will go beyond just humanitarian assistance. This leaves the door open to other players to broker security deals with the Taliban. One of those could be China, as a stable and secured Afghanistan could be the next valuable addition to its Belt and Road initiative which would increase its dominance in Central Asia. For the Taliban, China could bring financial assistance and political legitimisation.

China has been eying Afghanistan's natural resources for the past 15 - 20 years to sustain its growing economy. Another reason to build relations with the Taliban rests on the expectation that the group will contain terrorist groups, which represent a national security threat for Beijing. Afghanistan's position at a crossroad between Eastern Asia, Middle east and Europe explains its geostrategic significance. Hence, the Chinese interest in the region for a long term economic, strategic and political interest. While China is yet to recognise the Taliban administration as a legitimate Afghan Government it stated that it respects the right of the Afghan people to determine its destiny and retained its embassy in Kabul. This aligns with China's 5 Principles of peaceful co-existence policy which talks about non interference in each other's internal matters and mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Why is China interested in Afghanistan-

For years China showed no interest in Afghanistan as it has always regarded Afghanistan as a neighbour wielding little diplomatic significance. China had always detached itself from the military efforts, political reconciliation and economic reconstruction in Afghanistan as it showed no inclination in joining US led war efforts with its European allies. But now, Beijing's interest in the region is expanding at a very fast rate by being Afghanistan's biggest foreign investor. China has invested in copper extraction, oil and gas sector and road and rail infrastructure. Moreover, the China National Petroleum Corporation aims to build a new natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Xinjiang cutting across Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan. This route is envisioned as an alternative to the Central Asia- China pipeline that transits through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of land in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province which connects to China's Xinjiang province. This route is also a part of the historical silk route connecting Afghanistan and China with Tajikistan to its north and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit Baltistan to its south. This corridor is about 350-km-long and 20- to 60-km-wide in different parts,

covering an approximate area of 10,300 square km. Given the strategic location, the Wakhan corridor will enhance direct trade between Afghanistan and China, bypassing the costly route through Central Asia. This route will also shorten the pipeline distances and bolster energy security by providing China with a robust trade and energy routes into Central Asia, Iran, West Asia and beyond.

A stable Afghanistan is also key for China's Road and Belt initiative as it will be a link for China to connect to the Middle East and Europe. For Afghanistan as well this initiative is a very important step toward improving regional cooperation and interregional connectivity which complements Kabul's long standing policy of promoting regional integration and providing economic cooperation. Furthermore, in addition to the economic benefits, China's BRI is expected to enhance the security and stability of Afghanistan as Afghans had also been looking forward to China to assume a greater peacekeeping role in the country. In January, 2015, President Ashraf Ghani stated " We hope that China will play a proactive role in bringing peace to Afghanistan, because whatever the Chinese do, they do it according to a plan with focus." Afghanistan's willingness to participate in BRI is also very significant as in 2016 the Chinese ambassador in Kabul confirmed China's desire to cooperate with Afghanistan on construction of the Silk Road economic belt.

The Pakistan factor in China- Afghan relations.

Pakistan is a vital factor in China -Afghanistan relations serving both as a critical security partner and a strategic intermediary. The China- Pakistan partnership which is often known as an all weather strategic cooperative partnership has significantly shaped Beijing's engagement with Afghanistan, particularly following the withdrawal of U.S forces and the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

However, China's long term vision is not just limited to security concerns but driven by other economic integration plans under the Road and Belt initiative. The flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) places Pakistan in a central role by providing China with direct access to the Arabian sea through the port of Gwadar. CPEC is also Pakistan's largest and first investment by a regional or extra regional country on such a scale. In this context, a stable Afghanistan could potentially be connected to this network through road, rail, and energy networks which will transform the country from being a conflict zone to a transit hub linking China, Pakistan, Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. Such integration would facilitate smooth trading, attract investment and improve access to global markets for the landlocked Afghan economy. China also aims to economically develop the region to promote long

term stability by generating employment, improving infrastructure and reducing the conditions that foster extremism and insurgency. Pakistan's geographic location, the already existing transport corridors and close strategic partnership with China make it the most viable route for these ambitions.

The Pakistan factor in China's Afghanistan policy is also shaped by factors like regional balance of power, particularly the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan. India is long viewed having a strong presence in Afghanistan which for Pakistan is a security concern, fearing the strategic encirclement through India's political, economic and developmental engagement with Kabul. China also shares some of these concerns, although its primary concern remains its own security and economic interests. Beijing perceives increased Indian influence in Afghanistan as a potential threat to its Belt and Road initiative and its broader regional strategic objectives.

Key challenges to China- Afghanistan policy-

China remains extremely cautious about fully trusting the Taliban regime despite maintaining diplomatic engagement since its return to power in August 2021. Here, China is not dealing with a coherently functional and administratively capable entity but rather an armed umbrella organisation in which different militant actors express various interests. This has a high chance of affecting policy coherence and the delivery of support. As a result, China is concerned about the Uighur militants because they have historically maintained good ties with Al- Qaeda which is a direct threat to the internal instability of Xinjiang. Although the Taliban has repeatedly assured China that Afghan territory will not be used against its interests, Beijing doubts the group's ability to control all militant organizations operating within Afghanistan, including the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Following the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, the central Asian republics like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan looked to China to assume a greater role in maintaining regional stability. Given China's growing economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative many expect Beijing to complement its investments with better security commitments as these countries are concerned that instability in Afghanistan could lead to terrorism, cross border militancy, refugee movements and disruptions to trade and infrastructure. However, China has remained cautious, preferring very limited military involvement or being the region's primary security provider. This has created a gap between Central Asian expectations for stronger Chinese leadership as they are a part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which is supposed to address regional security concerns with China acting as the economic anchor.

Afghanistan's geographical location links South Asia, and the Middle East making it a very important region for connection even though it is not a major BRI hub. The insecurity in Afghanistan poses risks to the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor which is the flagship projects of the Belt and Roads Initiatives by increasing the possibility of cross border militant activity and

various other factors like persistent instability, terrorism and political uncertainty that threaten China's long term plans for trade corridors, energy pipelines, road and rail network.

Donald Trump's demand that the Taliban allow the Pentagon to reestablish the control over the Bagram Air base near Kabul has reawakened the Chinese concerns about U.S military encirclement encompassing China's western borders. During Trump's visit to the United Kingdom Trump mentioned to the media that "one of the reasons we want the base is, as you know, it's an hour away from where China makes its nuclear weapons." Though the actual flight time between the base and [China's nuclear facilities in Xinjiang](#) is considerably longer, Trump's remarks reflect a strategic discomfort. However, Afghanistan has rejected the threats by Trump over taking back Bagram and said that "Afghanistan's independence and territorial integrity are of the utmost importance" and called on the US to uphold prior agreements that it would not resort to force.

Emerging Opportunities-

The Taliban administration of Afghanistan has been in talks with China to reopen the historical silk road trade routes, particularly the Wakhan Corridor which connects China and Afghanistan via a 98km wide strip of land. They also announced about its preparation and have asked the counterparts of China to cooperate which will later help facilitate trade between both the countries making it a reliable route for trading purposes.

In addition, China, Afghanistan and Pakistan have also agreed to officially extend the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan integrating Kabul into the Belt and Road initiative Framework. Beijing has actively engaged in conversations to negotiate with the Taliban administration as it views Afghanistan as a vital partner which connects China through Central Asia - West East Asia Economic corridor to Gwadar Port. Such connectivity would provide China with an overland route that could reduce its dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints and strengthen its strategic access to Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond.

The trading of pine- nuts between China and Afghanistan is another reason because of which Beijing has continued its interest in the area along its western border. Opened in 2018, " pine nut air transport corridor" is an air freight route established between the two nations to help Afghanistan's pine nut business which brought a revenue of US\$15 million for the locals within the first four months of its operation.

China also aims to offer Afghanistan with better socio- economic opportunities through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. At the same time, Beijing also urges Afghanistan's interim Taliban regime to honor its security commitments and ensure the safety of the Afghan as well as Chinese citizens. Stability in Afghanistan is crucial for China's long term economic and strategic interests, particularly in the context of the Road and Belt initiative as it will facilitate increased

trade, connectivity and various other investment opportunities which aligns with China's broader regional aspirations.

Conclusion-

To promote stability in Afghanistan it is very important for regional countries to play a role through the regional cooperation mechanism. This all has to be done along with respecting the territorial veracity and sovereignty of Afghanistan and its neighbours. The impressive Chinese investments in the country indicates a desire to enhance its economic relations with Afghanistan. By the means of regional Cooperation by China, The Afghan imbroglio, uncertain security situation, fragile economy can be brought back to normalcy, thereby enabling Afghanistan to be a partner for better trade facilitator. If China designs its post 2014 policy for the stabilisation of Afghanistan through its economic investment and reconstruction it will be able to contribute in aspects like communication network, educational and health services and impart training to the Afghan National Army.

Ultimately, the future of China- Afghanistan relations will depend on whether Beijing can successfully balance its economic ambitions with the complex security realities of Afghanistan. Here, China possesses the financial capacity, expertise in infrastructure and the diplomatic leverage to become a major stakeholder. And at the same time, a stable Afghanistan has the potential to transform from a theatre of conflict into a bridge connecting South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. However, without addressing a few major concerns like terrorism, political fragmentation, economic vulnerability China's economic ambitions might not be able to succeed. Therefore, China's engagement with Afghanistan should be viewed not merely as an economic project, but as a strategic test of its ability to contribute to regional peace, connectivity, and sustainable development.

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