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GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCES ON THE AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT

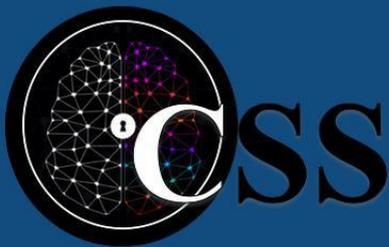
CSS DIALOGUE REPORT

THE CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

Geopolitical Influences on the Afghanistan Conflict

The conflict in Afghanistan has transcended its national borders with the involvement of major international players such as the USA and China in both discreet and overt manners. The Taliban and the central government in Kabul have struggled to retain power for decades through complex webs of intergroup relationships that have been woven with the delicate strands of history. However, this nuanced relationship has been dissected and leveraged for self-interest by the international community. Their objectives of waging a War on Terror, extracting Afghanistan's plentiful natural resources, and building a commercial network through the Heartland have superseded the needs of the peace process in Afghanistan. Thousands of lives have been treated as collateral damage, and an even greater number have been left to their own devices by power-hungry governments and militia. This report aims to analyze the intricate roots of the Afghanistan conflict through the lenses of significant international stakeholders, aiming to uncover the methods by which a successful peace process may be possible.

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Table of Contents

Enduring Freedom: Global War on Terror	3
<i>The United States in Afghanistan</i>	
Sahej Veer Singh	
Expanding Sphere of Influence	8
<i>China's interests in Afghanistan</i>	
B.S. Ashish	
Strategic Hedging in the Neighborhood	14
<i>India's tactical placement in Afghanistan</i>	
Nehal Dadhich	
Concerns of the Islamic Republic	21
<i>Iran in Afghanistan</i>	
Pradeek Krishna	

Enduring Freedom: Global War on Terror

The United States in Afghanistan

Sahej Veer Singh¹

Introduction

Allama Muhammad Iqbal, one of the greatest Urdu poets of the twentieth century once said, "If there will be peace in Afghanistan, there will be peace in Asia. If there will be fasad in Afghanistan, there will be fasad in Asia."¹ Even though Mohammad Iqbal passed away in 1938, the quote possesses tremendous depth and accuracy when one looks into what occurred in Afghanistan in the following years. Afghanistan, famously acknowledged by the world as the "graveyard of empires", has been a witness to centuries of war, incredible political instability, economic struggles, and disastrous amounts of terrorist influence. The United States of America has been the most crucial agent in the events that occurred, and the strategy used concerning Afghanistan globally. This paper will focus on the geopolitical influences of the Afghanistan conflict with respect to the United States of America. Along with geopolitics, this paper will briefly discuss the economic, political, and social impacts that both countries have on each other. The 9/11 attacks drastically changed the US approach towards Afghanistan, therefore, this paper has been divided into two main parts, before and after 2001.

Pre-2001

Past U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

In 1904, Halford Mackinder re-established the weight of geopolitics in international relations via his thesis- "The Geographical Pivot of History", where he introduced the heartland theory. The theory essentially established that the one who rules the Heartland shall command the world Island (Eurasia), and the one who rules the World-Island shall command the world.² During the 1830s, imperialist augmentation all over the world was at its very peak. Mackinder focused on what he called 'The great game'. The Soviet Union wished to expand its territory and gain access to warm access to the Arabian Sea, which was an influential trade route, because of which, authority over Afghanistan and the neighbouring territory became a critical element. At the same time, the British Empire was flexing its imperial muscles and wished to gain control in the same region. Between 1838 to 1878, four wars were fought between the Soviet Union and Britain, at the end of which, Afghanistan became a British protectorate. The

¹ *Sahej Veer Singh is a Research Intern at the Centre for Security Studies and a student at the Jindal School of International Affairs.*

¹ "Afghanistan's Constitution and the Changing Times.," The Free Library, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Afghanistan%27s+constitution+and+the+changing+times.-a0595707207>.

² Halford John Mackinder and Stephen V. Mladineo, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: a Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996).

second phase of this 'Great Game' is still going on today, where, until the recent past, China and Russia wanted access to the Afghan region, and the United States, owing to its military presence and financial influence, was blatantly denying it.

Amidst the Cold War, the U.S. embraced containment of powers like Russia and China as its driving foreign policy. Geopolitics was a framework for this path, but with a slight twist on Mackinder. The Soviets already commanded East Europe and had charge of the Heartland. Besides the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the resulting ambivalence, the meaning of geopolitics on U.S. foreign policy became more assertive, and there was a return to Mackinder's stress on the power over Eurasia. In 1992, the Pentagon stated clearly what the new U.S. foreign policy goal in Eurasia would be. "Our first objective is to prevent the reemergence of a rival that poses a threat on the territory of the former Soviet Union...Our strategy must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor." Moreover, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Richard Boucher stated in September 2007, "One of our goals is to stabilize Afghanistan, so it can become a conduit and a hub between South and Central Asia so that energy can flow to the south...and so that the countries of Central Asia are no longer bottled up between two enormous powers of China and Russia."

The one that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically prolific regions.³ Afghanistan holds the world's sixth-largest possession of rare earth metals.⁴ With its economy booming, China enjoys immense economic weight to throw around, and Afghanistan has been on the country's radar for a lengthy time now. Uncle Sam's idea behind Afghanistan was simple in the past- by the USA restricting this alternative option of Afghanistan as a source of these metals for a long time, it would strengthen the USA's geopolitical position and simultaneously decrease Chinese dependence and power. The USA had also adopted an approach of a balance of power around Chinese borders by reinstating Cold War alliances, in which Afghanistan plays a part.⁵ However, these geopolitical dynamics are certainly going to change after the U.S. military withdrawal by September.

The Soviet-Afghan war and the rise of Al Qaeda

During the 1979 Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, The United States and Pakistan formed an alliance and worked together to conduct proxy wars in the region. Pakistan became part of a US-led alliance and countered the Soviet Union together, at the end of which the Soviet Union gave up Afghanistan in 1989. However, the critical factor here is to understand what that war cost the United States of America. According to 100 pages of classified U.S. documents, after

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives Updated with a New Epilogue"

⁴ Simpson, Sarah. "Afghanistan Holds Enormous Bounty of Rare Earths, Minerals." *Scientific American*. Scientific American, September 29, 2011. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/afghanistan-holds-enormous-bounty-of-rare-earths/>.

⁵ Mon et al., "U.S. Geopolitics: Afghanistan and the Containment of China," *U.S. Geopolitics: Afghanistan and the Containment of China* | *Small Wars Journal*, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/us-geopolitics-afghanistan-and-the-containment-of-china>.

the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter provided over a hundred million US dollars to Afghan-mujahidin lead anti-Soviet resistance, which increased to 700 million US dollars a year under the Regan administration.⁶

Apart from the financial effects, the long-term implication of the Soviet-Afghan war was disastrous for the United States of America and is something that still haunts the country. Soon after the war, the Afghan Mujahidin came into power. However, due to internal fighting and complications, it could not last for long. In this context, a Mullah Mohammed Omar-led Taliban was born, which, in 1996, established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Furthermore, during the Afghan Mujahidin was fighting the Soviet Union with the support of the USA and Pakistan, is when in 1988, Al Qaeda was born. Al Qaeda was initially supported by both the Afghan Mujahidin and the Taliban. The point is, monetary support during the war did not result in any significant troubles for the United States, but the active support to Al Qaeda in the initial stage disastrously backfired in the form of the 9/11 attacks.

Post-2001

U.S. Objectives in Afghanistan

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, removing Al Qaeda from existence and expelling the Taliban from power were the primary objectives for the United States. Afghanistan also contributes to around 90% of the world's non-pharmaceutical-grade opium and is the largest producer of Hashish.⁷ Owing to the fact that profits from hashish, opium, and other drug sales are an essential factor for terrorist funding in Afghanistan, a large part of the mission has been the eradication of these drugs. Afghanistan possesses oil, copper, gold, cobalt, lithium, and other mineral deposits estimated to have a combined worth of over a trillion dollars. The most prominent of them are Rare Earth Metals, which are extremely important for modern-day and future technology. China currently possesses 97% of the world's Rare Earth Metals supply, and Afghanistan is estimated to have the world's sixth-largest possession of these metals.⁸ Because of this, the geopolitical aims enunciated by the Pentagon were still majorly about control of the natural resources of Afghanistan to deter the emergence of world powers like Russia and China.

U.S. Military Withdrawal

In the nineteen year-long intervention, the United States has suffered over 22,000 military casualties and around 2,400 fatalities in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Congress has diverted over \$144 billion solely for security forces and reconstruction.⁹ Even though the United States had an initial goal in mind while entering Afghanistan, it was never clear on its desired end state. After decades of war, conflict and the complications that came with it, the United States has

⁶“Afghanistan,” Afghanistan, accessed July 15, 2021, <https://afghanistaninfo.blogspot.com/2019/01/history-to-trump-cia-was-aiding-afghan.html>.

⁷ “World Drug Report 2010 - UNODC,” accessed July 15, 2021, https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/Front_matters.pdf.

⁸ James Risén, “US Discovers Vast Riches of Minerals in Afghanistan,” CNBC (CNBC, October 13, 2016), <https://www.cnbc.com/id/37678403>.

⁹ “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief,” accessed July 15, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

finally realized that there is no option of victory in Afghanistan. The United States has been able to keep China out of Afghanistan until now. However, with the United States deciding to remove its military presence in the country by September, future U.S. strategy towards Afghanistan will play a key role in how the geopolitical dynamics turn out.

How much influence will the United States have over Afghanistan following its withdrawal? The answer seems clear for now- drastically low. However, if the United States can maintain dominance over Afghanistan by monetary influence and keeps China out of the map, it will be the triumph of United States foreign policy at work and will be nothing less than a marvel. Nevertheless, with the growing dominance of the Taliban in Afghanistan and a highly expected Taliban take-over, such a situation is unlikely.

The United States can keep a vital financial influence over Afghanistan, leading to the Afghan government being highly dependent on the USA for survival, just like in the past. On April 14, 2021, when Joe Biden declared the removal of the military from Afghanistan by September, he also mentioned that- "While we will not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily, our diplomatic and humanitarian work will continue. We'll continue to support the government of Afghanistan. We will keep providing assistance to the Afghan National Defenses and Security Forces."¹⁰ Such a situation, however, will only become a reality if the Afghan government retains power over the Taliban, the chances of which are not far from zero.

The Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces

The effectiveness of the ANDSF is considered key to the security of Afghanistan. The United States' support has been nothing less than a determinant for ANDSF's survival. In the same context, President Ghani previously stated, "We will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. financial support." Since 2014, the USA has funded approximately 75% of the \$5 billion to \$6 billion a year necessary to fund the ANDSF. However, for the Financial Year 2021, Congress allocated just above \$3 billion for ANDSF, making it the least since Financial Year 2008.¹¹

Looking at the long run, a U.S. military withdrawal will have second and third-order impacts on the stumbling Afghan state. After recalling the 1990s' civil war, a few Afghans have implied that their communities, which many times include their related militias, may determine an autonomous course of action if the government does not provide them security.¹²

The Islamic State-Khorasan Province

After the Taliban, many U.S. counter-terrorism operations are aimed at ISKP, the local Islamic State affiliate. The ISKP almost collapsed in 2019 after operations by the United States, Afghan

¹⁰ Greenfield, Daniel. "Biden Will Leave 650 Troops in Afghanistan as Taliban Double Their Territory Since His Withdrawal Announcement." Frontpagemag, June 25, 2021. <https://www.frontpagemag.com/point/2021/06/biden-will-leave-650-troops-afghanistan-taliban-daniel-greenfield/>

¹¹ "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief," accessed July 15, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

¹² "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief," accessed July 15, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

security forces and Taliban. Before the 2019 offensives, ISKP's strength ranged approximately from 2000 to 4000 fighters. Many advisors suggest that a political settlement or Taliban's involvement in peace talks could motivate newly unemployed fighters to join the ISKP.¹³

Economy

Since Financial Year 2002, Congress has allocated around US\$144 billion in aid to Afghanistan. This includes around 61% dedicated to security, 25% for governance, and 14% for humanitarian aid and active civilian operations. In July 2020, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that 90% of Afghans still live under the government-defined poverty level, which is two dollars a day. A military withdrawal will undoubtedly affect the amount of assistance the United States gives to Afghanistan, which, consequentially, will expose the Afghan economy to high levels of risks. Making the situation even worse, the country is already suffering due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has reportedly infected tens of thousands of Afghans.¹⁴

Conclusion

Before the 2001 attacks, the United States foreign policy primarily focused on containment and balance of power to counter potential superpowers like Russia and China. However, the 9/11 attacks changed the dynamics completely. From a strategic point of view of containment and control over resources, the approach shifted towards the complete eradication of terrorism from Afghanistan and neighboring regions. Both, a rising force like China and increased terrorist activity pose a direct threat to the United States of America. However, America in the recent past has given more emphasis on containing terrorist activities in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's unexplored natural resources and unique geographical location can potentially improve its economy and consequentially, its political dynamics. China has no plans of stopping its economic and political endeavours, and the Afghan game will play a key role in it, especially after the U.S. withdrawal. This becomes increasingly important when one considers the fact that China has actively been working on reconstructing the silk route. Afghanistan shares a considerable amount of land with China, the prospects of which China has been exploring and will continue to work on promptly. That said, Afghanistan's overall placement remains in jeopardy in the light of dwindling U.S. assistance and military presence

¹³ "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief," accessed July 15, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

¹⁴ "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief," accessed July 15, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

Expanding Sphere of Influence

China in Afghanistan

B.S. Ashishⁱⁱ

Introduction

China and Afghanistan share a 76 km border, from the Gilgit-Baltistan region till the trisection at the Tajikistan border along the Wakhan corridor. The then kingdom of Afghanistan was one of the first states to recognize Mao's People's Republic of China in 1950; and by 1955, Kabul had established diplomatic relations with Beijing. Although China served as a covert intermediary for the United States-bloc in their quest against fending the Soviets from Afghanistan in the 1980s, after the 2001 formal re-establishment of diplomatic ties between Kabul and Beijing, China started to accommodate the goals of both the Taliban and the Afghan government. China resented military intervention by NATO in the region. It predicted that neither the coalition forces nor the insurgency forces were going to get the upper hand in the conflict, therefore, it shrewdly refrained from militarily involving itself in the region. China was also able to secure the trust of the Taliban and could retain the friendship with Pakistan by not interfering in the issue militarily¹. Hence, China's non-interference principle paid dividend vis-à-vis the 2001 War on Terror against Afghanistan.

China, for a long time, has only been eyeing the vast untapped natural resources in Afghanistan and wanted to expand its economic activities in the region owing to its geographical advantage. China and Afghanistan inked agreements such as "Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations" in December 2002; but extended military support neither to the United States nor to the Afghan government to avoid criticism about Beijing's mistreatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang as a reactionary measure from Islamic countries.¹ China's self-interested actions in the region not only halted the growth of Sino-Afghan relations, but also earned widespread criticism; therefore, China was called out for exploiting the US-led political stabilization programme in Afghanistan just to advance its own economic objectives.

China's foreign policy over Afghanistan shifted significantly, in the last decade, due to two reasons. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed his interests to revive the transcontinental trade framework that was prevalent in the medieval world – the Silk Road – that connected Europe to Asia via land and water. Xi's proposal, the Belt Road Initiative (BRI)

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¹ Baisali Mohanty, "China in Afghanistan: Security, Regional Standing, and Status," *ORF Occasional Paper*, pg. 18&19, October 2017.

was an ambitious plan to connect Chinese markets to European and African markets through South, Central and West Asia, via land and water, similar to its predecessor. While the initial plan for BRI was to omit the Afghan territory by passing through Pakistan and then to Central Asia due to frequent wars and instability in the region, the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding between Beijing and Kabul promised Afghanistan a place in the contemporary silk-road initiative. Along with the commitment of including Kabul in the BRI initiative, the National Unity Government (NUG) led by President Ashraf Ghani that was formed in 2014 renewed China's interests in the region. The installation of the elected Ashraf Ghani's government meant the mission of NATO alliance was completed. China was very keen on encasing the power vacuum left by the retreat of the United States-led military alliance. President Ashraf Ghani's visit to Beijing in October 2014 and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Kabul the same year sealed relations between the states. President Ghani advocated for more Chinese involvement in the region and placed China in tier-1 priority in the 2014 Afghan Foreign Policy. Sino-Afghan relations, which came to a standstill under President Karzai's government, improved tremendously under President Ghani. President Karzai had to rely on the western powers due to China's military inactivity in the region. In fact, in November 2010, Afghanistan, under President Karzai, signed a declaration on an enduring partnership with NATO in the Lisbon summit. But the course of events changed under President Ghani; China became an active regional player while the wary western alliance became passive in the region.²

China's Security Interest in Afghanistan

Another key factor that boosted China's involvement in Afghanistan is to safeguard its national security and territorial integrity. China is threatened by the terrorist-activities taking place in the Xinjiang province and suspects the influence of extremist groups operating in the Wakhan region on the Uighurs in Xinjiang. Afghanistan hosts numerous extremist and separatist organizations such as the Uighur fighters-affiliated Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) along with the strong presence of the Taliban and the ISIS. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) fears that these organizations might inspire the Uighurs in Xinjiang to organize riots and freedom movements against the People's Republic, due to the geographical proximity between the Wakhan Corridor and Xinjiang Province. The violent riots that took place in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang in July 2009, against the Communist Party worries the party as it considers the riot as the influence of exiled Uighur fighters operating from the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan. Many more exiled Uighur fighters had assembled themselves in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Beijing believes that the main aim of these organizations is to fight the Communist Party-led China to reclaim the historic territories of Turkestan such as Xinjiang, to form a sovereign Muslim state. Therefore, China has identified terrorists as those who were involved in the "East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM)"

² Shubhangi Pandey, "Understanding China's Afghanistan Policy : From Calculated Indifference to Strategic Engagement", *ORF Issue Brief*, Issue no. 305, August 2019.

or those who fight for the independence and creation of a separate “East Turkestan”.³

However, the Xinjiang Province is a very important geo-strategic region for China. The Belt Road Initiative (BRI) that connects China to Pakistan and Central Asia passes through Xinjiang. Railway projects such as the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project, the Five-Nation Railway Project between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connect Xinjiang to various other regions. Therefore, China has involved itself in various counterterrorist activities with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan to counter the spill over of ideological extremism beyond the Wakhan Corridor into Xinjiang, as well as to counter the smuggling of drugs, such as opiates, into China from Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor.⁴

If one analyses China’s stance vis-à-vis terrorism, China was disinterested in helping the Western Powers in their war against terror on Afghanistan in 2001. But China’s foreign policy stresses on the importance of military surveillance in the Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan to counterattack the exiled Uighur fighters, who are terrorists according to the CCP. However, it is to be noted that some of these fighters have pledged their alliance with the Taliban. This is precisely why China has gone easy on the Taliban and has been accommodating their goals and requirements since 2001. China can now comfortably leverage its accommodation of the Taliban in order to urge them to eliminate the Uighur safe-haven in the Taliban territory. This proves that China’s counterterrorism policies are very delicate and complicated, and cannot be compared with the western stance on Terrorism. United States’ rivalry against the Taliban and ISIS played to the advantage of Beijing as, in 2020, the ISIS leader announced China to be “the greatest enemy of their (ISIS’) greatest enemy (USA).” The fact that the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) was already blacklisted by the UN in 2002. This, coupled with the lack of criticism from the Islamic states and entities about the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang due to China’s concessions to the Taliban and relevant Islamic stakeholders in Afghanistan, places China in a very favourable position in this region. This is one of the reasons why China has been actively involved in Afghanistan post 2014.⁵

The Afghan Ambassador to China, in September 2018, revealed that China had volunteered to train Afghan soldiers in China in the interest to counter the influence of exiled Uighur fighters and other extremists through the Afghan North-Eastern border of the Wakhan Corridor. Many reports claim the existence of Chinese military bases in the Wakhan corridor. The reports further claimed that China had built the base for stationing troops and military equipment to

³ Chien-peng Chung, “China’s “War on Terror”: September 11 and Uighur Separatism”, *Council of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 4, pg. 8, August 2002.

⁴ Baisali Mohanty, “China in Afghanistan: Security, Regional Standing, and Status,” *ORF Occasional Paper*, pg. 18&19, October 2017.

⁵ Kabir Taneja, “Reading China’s Approach to Counterterrorism.” *ORF*, March 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/reading-china-approach-counterterrorism/>

fend-off Afghan-operated Uighur fighters from the Chinese border.⁶ China is also believed to have used its economic aid to neighbouring countries such as Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan as leverage for soliciting greater military cooperation in the Wakhan corridor, for China's own self-interest. This explains why China is still hesitant to completely open the Wakhan corridor for trade with Afghanistan, despite Ashraf Ghani's constant request.

China's Economic Interest in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a key geostrategic area to China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) as it connects the markets of South, Central, and West Asia with China. With the right utilisation of its geostrategic location, Afghanistan can be converted into a hub of trade and transit in Asia. Not only that, but Afghanistan also has rich and untapped natural resources that might be worth up-to three-trillion US dollars, according to an Afghan defence liaison in Washington, in 2017.⁷ Many metals such as copper, gold, iron ore, and lithium are found in abundance in Afghanistan's rocky mountainous terrain. Right from the provisional government under President Karzai in 2001, China has been eyeing on these resources. As a result, China emerged as the number 1 trading partner of Afghanistan, with trade worth up-to 554 billion US Dollars according to Chinese Foreign Ministry in 2017. China also made it a point to build as many roads and railroads possible to connect Afghanistan with China. North-Afghanistan is connected with China through the Sino-Afghanistan railway project and the five-nation railway project; while China is keen on integrating Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in order to get connected with the Southern parts of Afghanistan. China came to this decision after Afghanistan showed interest to join the economic corridor in the 13th Economic Cooperation Organization's summit in 2017. There is already a fibre-optic link between Afghanistan and China through the Wakhan Corridor.⁸

Apart from connecting all parts of Afghanistan with China, China has advanced its objectives through a lot of agreements and paperwork. It formed the Sino-Afghan Economic Committee in 2006 to increase bilateral trade. Through this setup, around 278 goods were given duty-free access for trade between the countries. China In 2007, the contract for Afghanistan's Aynak copper mine, claimed as the world's largest unexploited copper mine, was handed over to China's state-backed Metallurgical Group. This contract almost accounted for up-to 40% of government revenue, making it the largest-ever foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region. In 2010, Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership Agreement was signed by China and Afghanistan to bolster trade. This agreement promised larger economic and technological

⁶ Reuters Staff, "China says it is helping Afghanistan with defense, counterterrorism", *Reuters*, September 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-afghanistan/china-says-it-is-helping-afghanistan-with-defense-counterterrorism-idUSKCN1LF13H>

⁷ Ahmad Shah Katawazai, "Will Afghanistan's Minerals Shape Trump's Policy Toward the Region?", *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/will-afghanistans-minerals-shape-trumps-policy-toward-the-region/>

⁸ Shubhangi Pandey, "Understanding China's Afghanistan Policy : From Calculated Indifference to Strategic Engagement", *ORF Issue Brief*, Issue no. 305, August 2019.

cooperation, giving a favourable tariff to many products of Afghanistan. And in 2017, China and Afghanistan signed the customs free trade agreement which fuelled a significant increase in trade. China and Afghanistan also pushed for the China-Afghanistan Air Corridor to trade perishable, on-demand and high-value goods.⁹

Afghanistan lacked significantly in infrastructure and development to be able to handle the enormous trade activities as a part of CPEC and BRI. China felt that developing Afghanistan in order to integrate the state into these economic corridors will definitely yield great results in the long-term. China also considered development and post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan as a potential antidote for the political and security dilemma in the country. After all, BRI can be successful only if all stakeholders are politically stable and have enough infrastructure to support the massive trade patterns. This is the real reason why China has been heavily investing in Afghanistan to improve its infrastructure.¹⁰

China's Geopolitical Strategy for the Process in Afghanistan

China wishes for a peaceful settlement of the Afghan war and supports for an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process'. With the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from the region, many non-state actors such as the Taliban, Haqqani Network that is affiliated with the Taliban, and the ISIS are gearing up to take advantage of the power vacuum that is going to be induced after the retreat of the foreign military alliance. For China's sustained economic activities in the region, it has to step up and mediate the peace process. Pakistan has been one of the most important stakeholders of Afghan conflict as Pakistan hosts more than 1.4 million Afghan refugees due to war. Not only that, Pakistan has also established direct contact with the Taliban and hosts insurgents with very similar political ideologies, at the same time. China is, perhaps, the most appropriate country to facilitate the peace process because it holds a strategic leverage on Pakistan by virtue of the excessive development aid that was provided through initiatives such as CPEC. Iran is another key stakeholder of the Afghan war. China is the number 1 energy partner of Iran, in light of the record 17.8 million tonnes of crude oil purchase by China from Iran recently. Therefore, China has the potential to wield its influence over Iran as well.¹¹ China plans to retain Pakistan as their all-weather ally while strategically integrating Kabul into CPEC and BRI. Not only Pakistan and China, but about ten Asian countries that were a part of the 13th Economic Cooperation Organization's (ECO) Summit in 2017 would benefit from Kabul's inclusion into the CPEC, owing to its geostrategic location. Therefore, both Pakistan and China share identical interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan, and advocate for smooth and sustainable peace process 'led and owned' by Afghanistan. China possesses an additional

⁹ Tahiri, Noor Rahman, "Afghanistan and China Trade Relationship", *Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA)*, Paper no. 82098, 22 October 2017.

¹⁰ Baisali Mohanty, "China in Afghanistan: Security, Regional Standing, and Status," *ORF Occasional Paper*, pg. 18&19, October 2017.

¹¹ Eleanor Albert, "China is buying record amounts of Iranian oil", *The Diplomat*, March 2021.
<https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/china-is-buying-record-amounts-of-iranian-oil/>

advantage as Maulana Samiul Haq, considered as the Father of the Taliban, stressed on China's involvement in the peace-process and requested China not to leave such matters of great importance solely to the United States. China is the only country to maintain amicable relations with almost all stakeholders in the region; therefore, it is China's responsibility to facilitate a sustainable peace-process in the region. If China is able to successfully resolve the Afghanistan dispute, no entity can stop it from becoming the regional superpower, causing severe damage to the credibility of the wary United States and NATO alliance. Resolving the Afghan dispute will also serve as means for China to achieve strategic depth in Central and West Asia.

Predicting China's Future Discourse in Afghanistan

In order to achieve this, so far, China has been mobilizing support for an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process' in regional groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Quadrilateral Grouping Cooperation. In fact, China helped Afghanistan to secure a permanent observer status in SCO. China has been appealing to all stakeholders, including Pakistan, that the power vacuum that is to be caused during the complete retreat of foreign military in Afghanistan should not be exploited for their selfish needs, instead urged the stakeholders to participate in the peace-process. China is utilising its amicable relations with the Taliban as well as urging Pakistan to exert its influence over the Taliban to cooperate in the peace process.¹²

Professor Du Youkang, the director of the Pakistan Study Centre at Fudan University, Shanghai, emphasized on the importance of all stakeholders to truly respect the "Afghan-led Afghan-owned" facet of the peace-process and urged China to prevent other stakeholders from jeopardizing the efforts. With Biden-administered United States informing September 11 as the deadline for complete retreat of NATO forces, China should urge the alliance to retreat systematically and in a responsible and orderly manner to prevent the sudden induction of a power vacuum and chaos. China should also encourage the Afghanistan government to form a political framework where every ethnic group in the region can participate and share power on an equal basis through peace negotiations so that it can be broadly representative and inclusive. China should also continue to consider development as a potential antidote to the security dilemma in the region. If every stakeholder of the conflict is equally benefitted from the economic activities and development, there is a high chance for the skirmish over power and governance to end. Last but not the least, China should continue rallying for support in regional groups and should involve itself in groupings with stakeholders such as the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan grouping, the China-Pakistan-Iran-Russia grouping, and the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan-United States grouping. With all these policies in place, China can possibly resolve the dispute and result in the development and stability of Afghanistan and eventually help its other neighbours as well.

¹² Shannon Tiezzi, "Du Youkang on China's Stake in Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, May 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/du-youkang-on-chinas-stake-in-afghanistan/>

Strategic Hedging in the Neighborhood

India in Afghanistan

Nehal Dadhich⁴

Introduction

India and Afghanistan share deep civilisational and cultural links dating back to the era of the Indus Valley Civilisation. Since the signing of the Friendship Treaty in 1950, both states have engaged over matters of political, economic, and social importance. Due to turmoil in Afghanistan's regional setting, although the relations between the two have not always been friendly, Indian support to the Afghan government and towards its rebuilding and restructuring efforts have been constant over the years. Afghanistan is of great geopolitical and economic interest to India and maintenance of stability in that region is imperative for India's security. The rise of the Taliban since the 1990s and their colluded efforts with Pakistan to perpetuate cross-border terrorism has hurt Indian assets, nationals, and border security. To counter Pakistan's influence, India has committed itself to the Afghan government's efforts to contain terrorism through the usage of its soft power. India has over the years attempted to expand Afghanistan's trade and economic opportunities to reduce the latter's reliance on Pakistan. Moreover, it has played a key role in amalgamating Afghanistan into the global economic chain. Post the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan signed between the U.S. and the Taliban and a new order which is yet to be set in Afghanistan, India needs to reposition its priorities vis-à-vis Afghanistan. With a new power structure between the Taliban and the Afghan government predicted to come in place, India will have to reassess its past attitude whilst dealing with Afghanistan and consequently formulate a renewed framework of policies. This paper aims to give a historical background to Indo-Afghan relations as well as highlight India's role in Afghanistan's regional conflict. Furthermore, it will elaborate upon the challenges that lie ahead of India with respect to recent developments of the conflict and analyse India's interests for the same.

Historical Background

India and Afghanistan have long been linked culturally and socially. The diplomatic relationship between the two can broadly be divided into three phases. The first phase began in 1947 with India's independence and formation of amicable ties with Afghanistan with the signing of the Friendship Treaty in 1950. India signed various agreements and protocols with pro-Soviet regimes in Afghanistan to promote cooperation and to enhance Indian influence¹.

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¹ Fahmida Ashraf, "India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11," *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

After the overthrow of the last king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, in 1973, Khan's People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan established firmer ties with USSR and implemented a wave of policies to modernise a largely communist Afghan state. During this period India increased its investments in various developmental activities corresponding to sectors of industry, irrigation, and hydroelectricity. India was the sole South Asian country that supported the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan during the 1980s, distancing itself from conservative Afghans whose movement, Muhajideen, was supported by the U.S. and Pakistan. This adversely affected India's image among the Afghans and the West which continued to overshadow the India-U.S.-Afghanistan relationship for years to come. The 1990s was a time of great turbulence for Indo-Afghan relations. Starting with 1991 when Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan and Muhajideen established its authority. These were the events that led to the first instance of diplomatic isolation and lessening of Indian influence in Afghanistan, as India had cordial relations with the ousted pro-Soviet government of Najibullah². Marked by civil war, Islamic extremism and jihadist terrorism, India struggled to maintain amicable ties. However, later in 1992 when Burhanuddin Rabbani established a pre-dominantly non-Pashtun government, India again became active in Afghanistan and provided humanitarian and technical assistance to the Afghan government³. A big shift in relations was marked in 1996 with the rise of the Taliban and the removal of the Rabbani government. This was the period when Islamabad's relations to Afghanistan overshadowed that of New Delhi's. Pakistan adopted a deep strategic policy towards Afghanistan which included cooperation over militaristic activities between both the states which posed a direct threat to Indian security, especially at its Kashmiri borders. As underlined by Ayesha Jalal:

“The tactic of pushing battle-hardened militants from Afghanistan across LOC to wage a low-intensity war against Indian security forces in Kashmir was designed to keep the subcontinent's most contentious dispute in the international gaze.”⁴

To counter Pakistan's growing influence, India established links with the Northern Alliances that consisted of non-Pashtun groups comprising of mainly Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras which were against the Taliban's rule. India strengthened the defence of the Northern Alliance by providing high-altitude warfare equipment worth \$10 million through its Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Indian defence advisers provided technical advice to the Northern Alliance⁵. Russia and Iran were also in on these efforts along with India to marginalise the influence of the Taliban. In 1999, Indian Airlines flight 814 was hijacked and landed in

² Fahmida Ashraf, “India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11,” *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

³ Fahmida Ashraf, “India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11,” *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

⁴ Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 298.

⁵ Fahmida Ashraf, “India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11,” *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

Kandahar, Afghanistan which Taliban and Pakistan's ISI were suspected to have orchestrated.

The second phase of relations began post 9/11 attacks which altered U.S.'s foreign policy towards the Middle East. The wave for the U.S. campaign of War Against Terrorism and the subsequent "Operation Enduring Freedom" in Afghanistan was a blessing in disguise for India that doubled its efforts to combat the Taliban. India cooperated entirely with the U.S. by providing air facilities and intelligence for it to carry out its operation. This served New Delhi its purpose to isolate Pakistan from the rest of the international community and contain its influence in the region. The Indian Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Satinder Lambah, visited Kabul in November 2001, and opened a liaison office in Kabul; Later reopening the Indian Embassy in Kabul. After the toppling of the Taliban government, a new interim government with Mr Hamid Karzai as interim president was established after the Bonn Conference of 2001. Karzai was also manned with representatives of the Northern Alliance to support the setup of the new system during which period India announced \$100 million construction aid to Afghanistan. Since then, India has been involved in many of the training programmes and humanitarian, health, rural, and infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan⁶. The Karzai government was not well received by Pakistan who saw the regime as anti-Pakistan and pro-India. Nonetheless, Pakistan continued to shelter and train the Taliban as strategists in Rawalpindi believed that Pakistan would need to defend itself against any possible Indo-Afghan nexus once US forces decided to exit from Afghanistan⁷. Indian nationals stationed in Afghanistan continued to experience attacks and kidnappings. In 2008, a suicide car bombing outside of the Indian embassy in Kabul which left around 58 killed was suspected to have been carried out by the Taliban in cooperation with intelligence provided by Pakistan's ISI. Again in 2010 a combined suicide bombing and shooting attack on Hamid Guest House and Park Residence directed against Indian presence left 18 killed and as many as 36 injured. Later intelligence reports pointed towards Pakistan led militants' involvement in the attack along with the Taliban. In the same year during London Conference, India dismissed the idea of there being a "good" and "bad" Taliban and re-iterated its viewpoint of Taliban being an instrument of Pakistan's ISI used to conduct proxy wars against India, and thus there could be no "good Taliban".

The final phase of relations began in 2014 with the election of Ashraf Ghani as Afghanistan's President. Although in his initial years in office, President Ghani proved to be lenient towards Pakistan in an attempt to gather its support to terminate the Taliban. But over time he was faced with the harsh reality of Pakistan being an active player in sustaining the Taliban, and thus reoriented his approach towards India. Indo-Afghan relations evolved drastically under Modi-Ghani leadership. For example, India began to shed its earlier hesitation on only giving non-lethal assistance like transport vehicles and training to Afghanistan. Moreover, the Ghani

⁶ Fahmida Ashraf, "India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11," *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

⁷ Vinay Kaura, "India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

administration was strong in its opposition to Pakistan for aiding and harbouring the Taliban, dismissing Pakistani economic support as long as it assisted the Taliban.

India's Role

India's role in the conflict has been limited to the exertion of its soft power. It has over the years become a major contributor of humanitarian aid and has helped Afghanistan immensely in its rebuilding efforts. Thus, India has contributed on economic, political, and diplomatic fronts to subdue the conflict in Afghanistan. India stands firm on its stance in favour of an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled" process for enduring peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan. As a regional ally, it is imperative for India to contain the conflict in Afghanistan as it would directly affect the region's stability, thus impacting its security. Moreover, Pakistan's close links to the Taliban and their colluded attacks on India have forced it to play a pro-active role in Afghanistan's conflict. But instead of being militarily involved, India has assumed the position of aid provider in the region and adopted a parallel anti-terrorism stance to the Afghan government. It has done so to distinguish itself as a state standing in solidarity with the Afghan government in its fight against terrorism, unlike Pakistan. Following are the sectors where India has contributed heavily towards Afghanistan's stability:

Economic

New Delhi's commitments have crossed US\$3 billion since 2001 in Afghanistan's restructuring efforts. Since Afghanistan is a landlocked country, the absence of land or maritime connectivity became a challenge for India in transporting basic supplies, and/or equipment and manpower for reconstruction projects. Afghanistan had been long dependent on Pakistan's Karachi port for access to the sea and land routes via the vast borders they share. In May 2016, India signed a historic three-nation deal with Iran and Afghanistan to develop the Chabahar port and built a transport-and-trade corridor through Afghanistan that could substantially reduce the time and cost of (Afghanistan) doing business with Europe⁸. Furthermore, it funded the construction work of a 135-mile road connecting Afghanistan's Nimroz province with the Iranian port of Chabahar. The highway created North-South transport corridors linking the Indian sub-continent and landlocked Central Asia and enabled Afghanistan to access the Arabian Sea through Iran, raising its potential to stimulate more investment from trade with outside powers like India⁹. This project ended Pakistan's monopoly on seaborne transit trade to Afghanistan and opened various trade opportunities for the latter. Additionally, India has helped in the construction of the Salma Dam power project in the Herat region which brings electricity supplies from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan.

⁸ Vinay Kaura, "India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

⁹ Vinay Kaura, "India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

India's assistance to Afghanistan also extends to the rebuilding of air links, power plants, and investing in health and education sectors¹⁰. India has provided three aircraft to Afghanistan's airline, Ariana; 300 military vehicles to the Afghan Army; more than 400 buses for public transport; and training to policemen and Afghan diplomats¹¹. It has established Indian Medical Missions; constructed cold-storage warehouses in Kandahar; opened/rehabilitated schools; and granted scholarships to Afghan students¹². India has also allowed Afghan government telecommunication through Indian satellites¹³. Additionally, unlike projects executed by Western NGOs, Indian projects are highly appreciated by the Afghan people as they are carried out in full consultation with the concerned Afghan ministries and provincial/district administration and are based on the specified requirements of the Afghan people¹⁴.

Diplomatic

India was the first country Afghanistan signed its Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with. India played an active role during the Bonn Conference (2001) to establish an interim government in Afghanistan. Moreover, India's role was instrumental in pushing for Afghanistan's membership of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). As a demonstration of India's motivations, at the 2012 Kabul 'Heart of Asia' conference, India offered to lead two confidence-building measures, intended to support Afghanistan, and integrate them into the regional economy. This included linking chambers of commerce and recognising that trade and investment were about private entrepreneurs taking the initiative¹⁵. Lastly, due to India's good diplomatic relations with the U.S., Europe, Iran, and Russia, it could engage with these countries and play a crucial role in Afghanistan's peace negotiations. India should leverage this advantage and become a stakeholder in the peace process for its smooth execution.

Political and Security

On the political front, India has been one of the oldest and strongest proponents of democratic governance in Kabul¹⁶. From the 2001 Bonn conference – which facilitated the formation of

¹⁰ Vinay Kaura, "India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

¹¹ Fahmida Ashraf, "India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11," *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

¹² Fahmida Ashraf, "India-Afghanistan Relations: Post 9/11," *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 2 (2007): pp. 90-102, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45242397>.

¹³ Vinay Kaura, "India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

¹⁴ Vishal Chandra, "The Afghan Maze and India's Options," *The Afghan Maze and India's Options* (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2009), https://idsa.in/event/TheAfghanMazeandIndiasOptions_vchandra_04092009.

¹⁵ Vinay Kaura, "India-Afghanistan Relations in the Modi-Ghani Era," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1/2 (2017): pp. 29-46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26465815>.

¹⁶ Shubhangi Pandey and Harsh V. Pant, "How India Came Around to Talking to the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*, September 2011, https://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=62423, *Geopolitical Influences on the Afghanistan Conflict* Centre for Security Studies 18

an interim government to take over from the Taliban – to the present day, India has maintained a broad approach in engaging with successive Afghan governments¹⁷. India has provided the Afghan security forces with critical operational training, limited military equipment, and capacity-building courses—assistance that was ramped up after the signing of the India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement in October 2011¹⁸.

Challenges

The recent agreement signed between the U.S. and Taliban - Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan - is hardly desirable for India. Pakistan played a crucial role in the process by bringing Taliban leaders like Baradar to the negotiating table, thus establishing itself as a pivotal player in the Afghan peace process. Pakistan's active support towards Afghan peace negotiations and prevailing ties with the Taliban, which is expected to come into some form of power-sharing structure in Kabul, will pose a risk to Indian interests. India has held a strong stance towards an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled” process to reconciliation but the Afghan government was completely sidelined during the talks between the U.S. and Taliban. This creates uncertainty not only for the Afghan population but also for India. The new governance system is likely to benefit both the Taliban, who will vie for more power and Pakistan, who helped in the process of getting that power.

The militant arm of the Taliban—the Haqqani network—maintains close ties with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and continues to carry out operations targeting Indian nationals in the region. India has been able to invest in Afghanistan's future partially because of the presence of U.S.-led troops and the relative stability it brought. But with the withdrawal of troops and the Haqqani network's staunchly anti-India attitude, Indian assets and investments will be at risk, threatening future economic cooperation between the two countries. Indian missions in Afghanistan, which have in the past also been made Taliban's target, are expected to be impacted. Another challenge for India will be to counter an influx of foreign fighters and an upsurge in violence in Jammu & Kashmir. Any collaboration between the Taliban and Pakistan could relieve Pakistani forces deployed along the Af-Pak border, enhancing Pakistan's conventional military readiness and availability across the Indian border¹⁹. An emboldened Taliban, post-U.S. troop withdrawal, will pose a risk to regional stability where the threat of terrorism and extremism will be a major challenge for all regional players.

25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/25/how-india-came-around-to-talking-to-the-taliban/>.

¹⁷ Shubhangi Pandey and Harsh V. Pant, “How India Came Around to Talking to the Taliban,” *Foreign Policy*, September 25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/25/how-india-came-around-to-talking-to-the-taliban/>.

¹⁸ Shubhangi Pandey and Harsh V. Pant, “How India Came Around to Talking to the Taliban,” *Foreign Policy*, September 25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/25/how-india-came-around-to-talking-to-the-taliban/>.

¹⁹ Rajeev Agarwal, “Post Afghanistan 2014: Options for India and Iran,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2014, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep09145>.

Conclusion

India's relations with Afghanistan will require a new outlook post the agreement between the U.S. and Taliban are executed. India will have to stop forming its foreign policy towards Afghanistan through the prism of Pakistan. Rather Afghanistan will require its independent foreign policy centred around reformed relations with the Taliban, expanded economic and military assistance, and increased diplomatic efforts. It is imperative that India becomes a serious stakeholder in the Afghan peace process and get itself involved in multilateral efforts to facilitate the negotiated political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban²⁰. Additionally, India will have to soften its stance on the Taliban, as the latter will be centric to Afghanistan's new power structure. Establishing diplomatic contacts with a politically empowered Taliban will be crucial to safeguarding New Delhi's existing and future economic interests in the country, including those linked with Central Asian energy markets and broader connectivity projects²¹. Indian investments and developmental programs are vastly popular amongst the Afghan population. Thus, India should continue to provide aid in sectors of women empowerment, infrastructure development, health, and education, etc. Finally, India should take the lead in cooperating with regional powers such as Iran and Russia to formulate a tripartite platform to maintain diplomatic ties and work out a security cooperation arrangement for Afghanistan which could entail training the military and providing equipment. To sum up, India should closely monitor the developments with respect to the U.S. troop withdrawal and be present to provide support whenever required and consequently create a framework for future bilateral engagements with Afghanistan with a renewed vigour.

²⁰ Rudra Chaudhuri and Shreyas Shende, "Dealing With the Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal," Carnegie India, 2020, <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/06/02/dealing-with-taliban-india-s-strategy-in-afghanistan-after-u.s.-withdrawal-pub-81951>.

²¹ Rudra Chaudhuri and Shreyas Shende, "Dealing With the Taliban: India's Strategy in Afghanistan After U.S. Withdrawal," Carnegie India, 2020, <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/06/02/dealing-with-taliban-india-s-strategy-in-afghanistan-after-u.s.-withdrawal-pub-81951>.

Concerns of the Islamic Republic

Iran in Afghanistan

Pradeek Krishna⁵

Introduction

Iran is a fascinating country to study in the context of Afghanistan. Iran and Afghanistan share strong religious and cultural ties and also share a long border. Despite this, Iran and Afghanistan share a complicated relationship. The birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran coincided with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Iran has attempted to contain the spread of Taliban in the country; however, in recent decades, Iran has shifted its focus to opposing the US in Afghanistan. The recent US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan could see a shift in dynamics between Iran and the US in Afghanistan. Arguably the United States would struggle to implement a peace deal without cooperation from Iran effectively. Both share similar interests in the region; both wish to see a withdrawal of NATO forces, both want to see an end to the heroin trade, both wish to stop the rise of terrorist groups such as the Al-Qaida and the Islamic State, and both want to see an inclusive government in Kabul, which the Taliban do not monopolize.¹ Iran has been involved in productive dialogues with the Taliban for years and could potentially play a constructive role in the Afghan peace process.

History of the Afghanistan-Iran Relationship

Iran has historically looked at Afghanistan as an important region for its national security even before 1979. Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, funded several Afghan parties to help stop the spread of communism. The Islamic Republic, which succeeded the monarch were also insecure about the spread of communism in the region. Iran's revolutionary Islamic leader Ayatollah Khomeini was apprehensive of the Soviet domination in Afghanistan and attempted to export the Islamic Revolution to the country. However, Iran had to shift its focus and resources towards the war with Iraq following the 1980 invasion by the dictatorial Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

This resulted in the Afghan Mujahideen, dominated by Sunni groups, increasingly receiving backing from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Iran countered by organizing the Afghan Shia Mujahideen forces.²

¹ Esfandiari, Golnaz. "U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats, May 11, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-afghanistan-withdrawal-iran-opportunities-threats/31215905.html>.

² Tarock, Adam. "The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict." *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1999): 801-19. Accessed June 27, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993589>.

Since 1979, Iran has predominantly interfered in Afghanistan through proxy forces. Afghanistan's population consists of 85 per cent Sunni and 10 per cent Shias. However, the sectarian divide in Afghanistan has not always been a source of tension for Iran as it has allied with Sunni Tajiks and Pashtuns.³

Since the 1990s, Iran has looked at Afghanistan as an asylum for Sunni extremists. Tehran has been sympathetic to the Hazaras in Afghanistan, a Shia minority and the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the Taliban government, which seized power from Afghan warlords, repressed the Hazara population. They were excluded politically, economically isolated, and more than 1000 Hazaras were killed during the civil war which erupted following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Tensions between Iran and the Taliban reached an apotheosis in 1998 when the Taliban executed nine Irani diplomats working at a consulate in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Following the United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 after the 9/11 attacks in New York, Iran worked closely with the US and regional powers to oust the Taliban and establish a new Afghan government. However, the US's cooperation with Iran was not long-lived.

Iran's History of Political Engagement in Afghanistan

The 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan provided Iran with an opportunity to expand its influence on Afghanistan. Iran was part of the Northern Alliance, which expelled the Taliban government, together with the US forces. The Northern Alliance assumed power in Kabul, but problems were caused due to the ethnic make-up of Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance was dominated by Tajiks, while 40 per cent of Afghans were Pashtuns. Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, emerged as the leading candidate to lead the country. Although, the Northern Alliance, keen to promote its ethnic interests, balked at the prospect of a Pashtun leader. Iran was instrumental in persuading the Northern Alliance to support Hamid Karzai.⁴

Iran's support for the US was astonishing as both countries were never on good terms following the Islamic Revolution in Iran. However, the overthrow of the Taliban benefitted both countries. Iran's foreign policy at that time also touted increased cooperation with the USA. Iranian President at the time, Mohammad Khatami, had adopted a policy of engagement with the West. Khatami pursued decreased tensions with regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and also with European countries and the United States. Iran's policy shifted from aiming to export Islamic Revolution to building better cooperative relations with neighbouring countries and global powers. Iran's building cooperation with the US was also a pragmatic approach as both countries desired a stable rule in Kabul and a solution to Iran's security concerns in Afghanistan,

³ Nader, Alireza., Author. Iran's influence in Afghanistan: implications for the U.S. drawdown. 2014. Web.. <https://lccn.loc.gov/2014469216>.

⁴ Taneja, Kabir. "From War to Peace: The Regional Stakes in Afghanistan's Future." ORF, April 5, 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/from-war-to-peace-the-regional-stakes-in-afghanistans-future/>.

which included narcotics production and the refugee crisis.⁵

However, Iran's policies failed to flourish. The George W. Bush administration declared Iran as a member of the Axis of Evil (alongside Iraq and North Korea). The invasion of Iraq which ensued this declaration further deteriorated ties between the countries.

Iran's clandestine nuclear activities, followed by the 2005 election of hardline leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President and Irani support for Iraqi Shia militants fighting US forces in Iraq, brought Iran-US relationships to an all-time low. Increasingly hostile relations between both countries translated into contention in Afghanistan.⁶ Nevertheless, Iran has played a positive role in the development of Afghanistan. It has supported a strong central government in Kabul. A stable and secure government in Afghanistan is vital for Iran. It can help in preventing a Taliban takeover of the country and maintain security along Iranian borders. Furthermore, Iran also wishes to exercise influence beyond the western regions of Afghanistan.

Iran's Security Concerns in Afghanistan

Stability in Afghanistan is in Iran's best security interests. Both countries share a porous border, and the consequences of conflicts in Afghanistan often get into Iranian territory. Iran's primary security concerns in Afghanistan are narcotics trafficking, the refugee crisis, water disputes, and the rise of radical Sunni terrorism.

Narcotics trafficking is a significant problem on the Iran-Afghanistan border. Afghanistan produces around 90 per cent of the world's illegal opium, which is trafficked through Iran to the rest of the world. Iran claims to have lost nearly 4000 security forces fighting drug traffickers between 1979 and 2009. Narcotics are increasingly becoming a domestic problem for Iran. Tehran has blamed Kabul for failing to curb opium production and prevent cross-border drug smuggling. Further, the status of Afghan refugees in Iran has been a point of contention between both countries. Iran hosts around 3 million refugees, second only to Pakistan. These refugees are not eligible for citizenship and are denied basic services. Education in government schools was refused to many refugee children until 2015. Afghans only find low-paying jobs in hostile conditions in the construction or agriculture sector. Iran has deployed thousands of these refugees to fight in Syria.

However, these refugees send remittances of around 500 million dollars annually to Afghanistan, providing support for their families in Afghanistan. Afghanistan government fears the destabilization of the country's economy if these refugees are deported.

⁵ Esfandiari, Golnaz. "U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats, May 11, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-afghanistan-withdrawal-iran-opportunities-threats/31215905.html>.

⁶ Stone, Rupert. "What Do US-Iran Talks Mean for Afghanistan?" The Diplomat. The Diplomat, July 31, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/what-do-us-iran-talks-mean-for-afghanistan/>.

The problem of water is also a contentious issue between both countries. The Helmand River, which flows into the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan, is a contested topic. Afghanistan holds the water flowing into Iran as leverage and has announced several projects that may disturb Iran's water flow.

Further, Iran fears hardcore elements of the Taliban, backed by Saudi and Pakistan and aims to keep them far from power. The hardline elements of Sunni Taliban have not been cordial to Shiite Iran. Iran has traditionally focused on the empowerment of Persian speakers in the country, who have been subject to persecution in recent years by Sunni militants, including factions of the Islamic State.

Iran's Friendship with the Taliban

Iran's relationship with the Taliban has seen a shift as the US and NATO forces stayed in Afghanistan. Tehran saw the Taliban as instrumental in countering US influence in the region. Further, Iran's fear of the Islamic State also fired its growing friendship with the Taliban.

The shift in dynamics of the Saudi-Taliban relationship also facilitated better cooperation between Iran and the Taliban. Following the 9/11 attacks, it was difficult for Saudi to favour the Taliban, put together Saudi's harsh stance against Qatar, where the Taliban maintains a political office, resulted in a worsening relationship between Saudi and the Taliban, favouring Iran.⁷ The Taliban have also reciprocated Iranian support by assuring that they would no longer persecute the Hazara population. The Taliban has even appointed an ethnic Hazara as their northern district governor. This is perhaps the first time the Taliban has accommodated a Shia leader in the group.

Managing Instability in Afghanistan

Iran's relationship with the Taliban, increasing US influence in Afghanistan and Iran's security concerns in the region has resulted in Iran working towards creating a state of managed instability in Afghanistan. Iran's support for the Taliban is an effective way of countering the United States in the region and complicating US military objectives in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, Iran refrains from backing the organization's unbridled expansion.

This allows Iran to retaliate against the United States for its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal while allowing Iran to cling to a façade of plausible deniability.⁸

⁷ Aman, Fatehman. "Iran-Taliban Growing Ties: What's Different This Time?" Atlantic Council, February 16, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-taliban-growing-ties-whats-different-this-time/>.

⁸ Aman, Fatehman. "Iran-Taliban Growing Ties: What's Different This Time?" Atlantic Council, February 16, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-taliban-growing-ties-whats-different-this-time/>.

Iran's Economic Influence in Afghanistan

Since 2001, Iran has demonstrated a desire for stability in the region. Iran has pledged more than US\$500 million in economic assistance to Afghanistan ever since. Most of these funds have been spent on roads, energy infrastructure and schools. Iran is also one of Afghanistan's largest trading partners. Trade between both countries was valued at around US\$5 billion in 2013. This demonstrates an enduring economic relationship between both nations. Iran has also assisted other regional powers to develop Afghanistan. Iran's partnership with India in developing the Chabahar Port to facilitate Indian trade with Afghanistan is an example of this.⁹

Tehran's Growing Soft Power in Kabul

Iran has invested significantly in building soft power in Afghanistan. Most of these activities are focused on the western and northern regions of the country and are predominantly aimed at Tajiks and Hazaras. Iran also aims to empower the Shia sect in Afghanistan. Iran has built schools throughout the country and has distributed books to these schools. Iran has also built one of the biggest madrassas in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Furthermore, Iran has spent resources in developing its influence over the Afghan media. Iran has close ties to several television and print media outlets in Afghanistan. Iran's influence could be evident by the use of Persian words in the Pashto language media.

Withdrawal of US Troops

Iran and the US have had similar objectives in Afghanistan, however, not all of Iran's actions have been in line with US interests. Iran has grown resistant to the US's increasing military in Afghanistan. Iran fears that US troops in its neighbourhood could be used against its nuclear facilities. Therefore, Iran has always opposed long term US military deployment in Afghanistan.¹¹

The announcement of withdrawal of US forces from the region would grant Iran one of its biggest wishes. The pullout of foreign forces from Afghanistan could potentially lead to Iran getting more freedom and room to manoeuvre in Afghanistan. However, the resulting power vacuum ensuing from the pullout may result in chaos which could translate into problems for Iran as it could result in a massive influx of refugees and even a hostile Taliban government. Iran must ensure it prevents undesired elements from taking advantage of this vacuum and should ensure stability in the country with the regional powers.¹²

⁹ Tarock, Adam. "The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict." *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1999): 801-19. Accessed June 27, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993589>.

¹⁰ Nader, Alireza., Author. Iran's influence in Afghanistan: implications for the U.S. drawdown. 2014. Web.. <https://lccn.loc.gov/2014469216>.

¹¹ Stone, Rupert. "What Do US-Iran Talks Mean for Afghanistan?" *The Diplomat*. The Diplomat, July 31, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/what-do-us-iran-talks-mean-for-afghanistan/>.

¹² Esfandiari, Golnaz. "U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats."

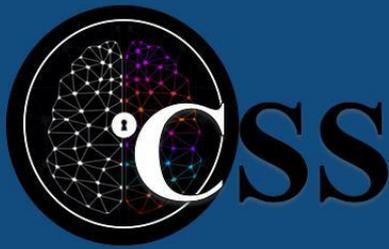
Conclusion

Iran's approach to Afghanistan has been two-sided, one side is regional, and the other side is in the context of its relationship with the United States. With the US announcing the withdrawal of its troops from the region, it is crucial that the country cooperates with Iran to effectively enforce the peace deal due to the considerable amount of cultural and political influence Iran holds over the parties in Afghanistan.¹³

Donald Trump's handling of the relationship with Iran deteriorated US-Iranian cooperation in the region; however, the election of Joe Biden could open new doors for the two countries. The Biden administration has brought Iran into the fold of discussions on Afghanistan, a clear departure from the previous administration's policies. While Iran may not play a massive role in the US-Afghanistan-Iran triangle, it could partner with other regional players to work towards peace in Afghanistan and find an end to the decades-long conflict.

RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats, May 11, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-afghanistan-withdrawal-iran-opportunities-threats/31215905.html>.

¹³ Esfandiari, Golnaz. "U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Could Bring Iran Opportunities, Threats, May 11, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-afghanistan-withdrawal-iran-opportunities-threats/31215905.html>.



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