

DYNAMICS OF SINO-AFGHAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-WITHDRAWAL OF COMBAT TROOPS

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Abstract

China shares shortest but significant border with Afghanistan to the south-western flank of the Chinese autonomous province of Xinjiang. This border has been creating high-security risks for China owing to the Uyghur separatist activities. To secure this edgy border China has to rely on Afghanistan and Pakistan

After the withdrawal of combat troops, Afghanistan became liable for its own security. In order to make Afghanistan secure and stable the Afghan government called the non-state actors to initiate peace talks. For the first time China was involved along with the US and Pakistan in the peace process. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) became dysfunctional within a year but China did not avert efforts for peace in Afghanistan. It setup a Trilateral Coordination Group (TCG) as Beijing was determined to continue mediation efforts between the Afghan state and non-state actors by taking Pakistan on board. After initiating huge economic projects i.e CPEC and OBOR, China's concerns looms high due to militancy which can cause main hurdle in achieving economic and development goals in the region. Since reducing role in Afghanistan the United States also needs to take China on board owing to its acceptability among various segments of Afghan society. China has an image of benign power that pursue towards constructive collaboration rather than competition.

The article deals with the following questions:

- *Why do militancy and anti-state activities in Afghanistan affect China?*

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- *How did China emerge as a neutral and acceptable power in Afghanistan?*
- *How would militancy distract China's mega projects i.e. CPEC and OBOR?*
- *Can China be successful in bringing sustainable peace in Afghanistan and in the region at large?*

To answer these questions analytical, qualitative and deductive research methodologies would be adopted. Furthermore, the paper also suggests recommendations for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Key words: Uyghur, combat troops, non-state actors, peace talks

An Overview of Sino-Afghan Relation 1949-2001

On October 1, 1949 at Tiananmen Square in Beijing Mao Zedong the chairman of the Central People's Government proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China. On the eve of the founding of the PRC, the Chinese "People's Political Consultative Conference" passed the mutual program and defined the core principles of the PRC. Mao was not eager to establish diplomatic relations with foreign countries in haste. He believed in cleaning house before inviting any guest. China had been a home of world oldest civilization. In the beginning years China pursued modernity and strength on both domestic and international fronts.

The PRC's initial diplomatic partners were mainly the Soviet bloc countries and the neighbouring states of China. Soviet Union was the first that recognized PRC after two days of its formation and by 1955, 22 countries had established diplomatic relations with China. Mao Zedong's foreign policy goals were focusing on defending China's security and creating a peaceful international environment for domestic economic advancement.¹

The Sino-Soviet co-operation was the main feature of Beijing's foreign policy till the decade of 1950. The series of Soviet Union "extra ordinary demands" in the end of 1950s, deepened Chinese concern that eventually led to a great transformation of China's internal and foreign policy. The situation eventually gave rise to the economic strategy of self-reliance and an anti-Soviet foreign policy.²

¹Liu, Guoli., 2017, "China Rising: Chinese Foreign Policy in a Changing World", London: Macmillan Education Palgrave, p. 9.

² The China Review, (Fall 2001), Vol. 1, No.1, p.9.

Afghanistan turned toward the Soviet Union in 1954 and the latter's military aid program extended to Kabul in 1955. In the same year Beijing opened an embassy at Kabul. With the signs of Sino-Soviet rift in the late 1950s, the Soviet Union embarked an expanded economic activity to friendly countries including Afghanistan which turned China relations with Afghanistan with the tide of events in the region.³ China perceived Afghanistan as a potential threat for her security if the latter turned towards the Soviet Union. Sino-Afghan border dispute was settled in 1963 when a 47 miles border agreement was signed known as Wakhan Corridor.⁴ Afghanistan did not become a specific trading partner of China till 1979.

The Soviet occupation raised apprehension in China due to Soviets strategic predicament. China condemned Soviet military interference in the internal matters of Afghanistan. China considered the Afghan-Soviet war a great threat for peace and security of the region and the world at large. It did not recognize the Soviet backed Babrak Karmal regime in Kabul and joined the US to support Afghan resistant groups called Mujahideen. The Soviet presence in Afghanistan posed a threat to the security of China, it cut off relations with Kabul and the same policy was continued after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan as the latter fell into factional fighting and civil war.

The surge of Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid of 1990s, raised security concerns in the Xinjiang autonomous region which had border with Afghanistan. The Uyghur militants in Xinjiang were reportedly trained by, and fought alongside Afghan Mujahideen during their war against the Soviets. Chinese officials alleged that the arms and explosives used against the Chinese in Xinjiang were originated from Afghanistan.

Although China largely ignored the civil war in Afghanistan and the Taliban took over in September 1996, however, from 1998 Beijing began to show signs of accommodation with the Taliban. On December 10, 1998 China signed a military accord for the training of Afghan pilots. The Taliban also sent a delegation to China to open economic and security relations. In February 1999, China and the Taliban signed an agreement on economic cooperation and for training of military forces in Afghanistan. The Chinese diplomats sought assurance that the Taliban would not train Xinjiang

³ Khalid, Zulfiqar, 1987, "Pakistan in the pamir knot: geostrategic imperatives", Vanguard: p.79.

⁴ Meher, Jagmohan, 2008, "Afghanistan Dynamics of survival", Gyan Publishing House, p. 19.

Uyghurs, whereas the Afghan leaders wanted China to block United Nations sanctions against Afghanistan.

China condemned the September 11, 2001 incident in the US but it urged the US to discuss anti-terrorist proposals at the United Nations Security Council. China also insisted that any action against the act of terrorism should be based on international law and the UN Charter. China further emphasised on concrete evidences before any military strike against suspected terrorist groups. However, China attempted to develop good ties with the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan installed in December 2001. Though China did not send troops in Afghanistan to be a part of International Security Assistant Force (ISAF) but took an early action in pledging aid for eventual Afghan reconstruction efforts and focused on developing economic ties with Afghanistan. In 2007 President Hamid Karzai opened Afghanistan's energy, mineral and raw materials sectors for foreign investors. China's Metallurgical Construction Corporation (MCC), a multinational enterprise under direct control of the central government, won the right to develop the world's second largest copper deposit in Afghanistan. MCC agreed to invest \$3.5 billion to develop Afghanistan's Aynak copper field in Logar Province, located in the south of Kabul. The agreement included a construction of a coal-fired electrical power plant and a freight railway. The MCC also agreed to construct schools, clinics, markets, and mosques in exchange for a deal in the project.⁵

In December 2011 China and Afghanistan signed a 25 year deal that allowed China's state owned National Petroleum Corporation to become the first foreign company to develop oil and natural gas reserves in this war torn country.

Xinjiang, Uyghurs and Afghanistan

In the north western border of China there is Xinjiang province. It is the largest province in China having full name "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Urumqi is the capital city of the XUAR . The Sino-Afghan 76 kilometres border⁶ located at the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor⁷ and stretches from the tri-junction of the two countries with Pakistan-

⁵ Begum, Imrana, 2011, Chinese Growing Diplomatic, strategic and economic interest in Afghanistan," Pakistan Perspectives journal, Vols. 16, Nos. 2, July-December 2011, p: 142

⁶ Lawrence R. Sullivan and Robert L. Paarlberg, Historical Dictionary of Chinese Foreign Affairs, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham: 2018, p.10.

⁷ Michael F. Clarke, Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central , New York: 2011, Routledge, p.76.

controlled Gilgit-Baltistan at one end to the tri-junction on the other with Tajikistan. The joint counter-terrorism operations take place near this border.

Xinjiang is culturally a part of Central Asia. The Uyghurs, are the largest single ethnic group who are Turkic speaking Muslims strongly connected with the Muslim communities of Central Asia mainly the Uzbeks.⁸ Xinjiang covers about one-sixth of China's land. The province covers territory of over 1,600,000 square kilometres. It borders Tibet Autonomous Region and India's Leh District to the South, and Qinghai and Gansu provinces to the southeast. The region shares a 5000 km land border with eight countries including Mongolia to the northeast, Russia to the north, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to the west.⁹

Since the founding of PRC, Xinjiang turned into a hotbed of open military conflict with India in 1962 and with the Soviet Union in 1969. Xinjiang again turned into a base for Chinese operations against the USSR throughout the Afghan-Soviet war in 1980s. That involvement became the onset of radical Islamic fundamentalism into the Xinjiang region. Xinjiang had the potential to become a locus for armed conflict.¹⁰ Until mid-1980s, most of the Chinese training centres of Afghan resistance groups were located in Peshawar along its border with Pakistan. China trained several thousand Mujahideen in camps near Kashgar and Khotan inside Xinjiang,

The international community had no political strategy for Afghanistan from 1992-1994. At that time, Taliban were at the stage of emergence. China broke off diplomatic relations with Afghanistan in 1993 as latter fell into factional fighting and civil war. China adopted diplomacy of engagement with the Taliban in order to ensure the safety of its borders and engaged in low-level economic and technical cooperation. Taliban surge in Afghanistan effected the internal security of Xinjiang . Uyghur militant in Xinjiang had been trained by, and fought alongside Afghan Mujahideen.

Beijing improved relations with the Taliban to be ensured that the latter would cut off support for the Uyghur rebels and control drug trafficking. Although China largely ignored the civil war in Afghanistan and the Taliban

⁸Dillon, Michael, 2014, "Xinjiang and the Expansion of Chinese Communist Power: Kashgar in the early twentieth century", London: Routledge, p. xvii.

⁹ Guo. Rongxing; Gui, Hao; Guo, Luc Changlei, 2015, "Multiregional Economic Development in China", New York: Springer Heidelberg, p. 156.

¹⁰ Klimes, Ondrej, 2015, "Struggle by the Pen: The Uyghur Discourse of Nation and National Interest, c. 1900-1949", Leiden: Publisher Brill, p.4.

took over in September 1996, however, from 1998 Beijing began to show signs of accommodation with the Taliban. On 10 December 1998, China adopted diplomacy of engagement with the Taliban regime and engaged in low level economic and technical cooperation. China condemned the 9/11 incident but urged the US to discuss anti-terrorist proposals at the United Nations Security Council. After the Bonn Agreement in December 2001 China attempted to develop good ties with post-Taliban Afghanistan. Beijing promised US \$150 million in aid to President Hamid Karzai's government during his visit to China in January 2002. China also moved promptly to reopen its embassy in Kabul and Chinese foreign minister paid a visit to the Afghan capital in 2002.

Besides economic links, the two countries also expanded cooperation in other areas including the fight against the three evil forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism. After more than ten years when the Taliban regime was toppled by the US-led forces, China gradually emerged as a key player in maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan, particularly in the future when the US troops would be pulled out.

Withdrawal of Combat Troops

After the September 11, 2001 incident the US sent its troops in Afghanistan with three main objectives:

1. To oust Taliban who did not hand over the head of Al-Qaeda to the US;
2. to capture the main culprit given refugee by the Taliban in Afghanistan and
3. to train Afghan army.¹¹

The first objective was achieved within a month, the second was on May 2, 2011. However, when Hamid Karzai was installed as a result of Bonn agreement, the foreign forces began working over the third objective. The completion of the second objective raised demand to give a withdrawal plan to combat troops from Afghanistan the NATO member states also called the same. In May 2012, NATO reached an agreement with Obama administration to phase out the US lead in the Afghan war by the middle of 2013 and completed by the end of 2014.¹² NATO combat operations ended

¹¹ Imrana Begum, *The War on Terrorism and NATO's role in Afghanistan*, in *Journal of European Studies* Vol.24 &25, Nos. 2 & 1, July 2008 & January 2009, Area Study Centre for Europe, University of Karachi, p. 53.

¹² Dave Boyer, May 21, 2012, "NATO finalizes Afghan withdrawal Plans", *The Washington Times* newspaper,

officially in Afghanistan on December 28, 2014.¹³ The Afghan army and police became responsible for the security of their own people. The mission conceived the flag in 2001 was lowered by the military leaders and a new flag was hoisted with changed responsibilities restricted to training, advising, assisting the local army and police. Resolute Support became a new name of NATO mission in Afghanistan.¹⁴

The situation in Afghanistan remained far from stability and it was a question that how Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) would control insurgency after the withdrawal of foreign forces in Afghanistan. Foreign powers have played unusual role to decrease or intensify war in Afghanistan. The US competition with Russia and China as well as Iran, rivalries with Gulf countries and Pakistan's interference, have changed Afghanistan into a dangerous place.¹⁵

Quadrilateral Coordination Group

The thirteen years presence of Western troops did not bring peace and stability in Afghanistan. At the withdrawal of combat troops there was a grave need to involve non state or anti-state personnel in meaningful dialogues in Afghanistan. To initiate such process the role of Pakistan could not be ignored but this time the Afghan government specifically the former president Hamid Karzai initiated efforts to get China involved in matters of the war and peace in Afghanistan. Kabul have long been trying to engage Beijing for resolving the conflict in Afghanistan but the latter avoided her involvement in such process in the presence of the US-led coalition troops fighting against non-state actors. The gradual withdrawal of the Western coalition in 2014, motivated China to bring the opposite poles of Afghan politics close to each other as the US had failed to do so. Thus, China emerged as a new stakeholder in Afghan politics although it was not its arena.¹⁶

In the beginning of May 2015 Pakistan and China conveyed the non-state actors who had been labelled since 1990s as Taliban that a conducive environment would be necessary for negotiations. And Taliban delegation

¹³ Pamela Constable, NATO flag lowered in Afghanistan as combat mission ends, In The Washington Post, December 28, 2014.

¹⁴ Rasmussen, Sune. Engel, December 28, 2014, "Nato ends combat operations in Afghanistan", The Guardian newspaper.

¹⁵ Efforts. Rivalaries for peace in Afghanistan, in The Kabul Times, October 8, 2018

¹⁶ Bahrami, Abdul. Ahad, February 4, 2016, "China's engagement in Afghanistan's peace efforts", The Daily Outlook Afghanistan newspaper.

had to agree on ceding violence inside Afghanistan. Apart from the engagement with the largest militant group, in the mid of May 2015 Kabul was also busy to finalize a peace deal with the second largest militant insurgent group that remained inactive for years known as Hizb-e-Islami Afghanistan headed by a former warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.¹⁷

There have been informal preliminary contacts between Taliban representatives and Afghan figures from January to July 2015. In due course Pakistan hosted the first official peace talks meeting in a tentative step towards ending more than 13 years of war between the Afghan Taliban and the government in Kabul during July 7-9, 2015 in Murree, a hill station on the border between Punjab and Azakd Kashmir in Pakistan. The meeting was concluded with an agreement to meet again. In these talks the US and China maintained their presence as an observer state. On July 29, one day before the second round of talks, the Afghan government announced the death of Mullah Omar and it was confirmed by the Taliban.¹⁸ The revelation exposed the leadership crisis in Taliban and sabotaged the peace process.¹⁹

It was during an international climate change conference in Paris held on November 30, 2015 when a trilateral meeting headed by the British prime minister David Cameron, Pakistan's PM and the president of Afghanistan took place on the side-lines of the conference. All three agreed to work with those who would enter in a peace process as legitimate political actor.²⁰ In that meeting the PM of Pakistan suggested a quadrilateral meeting for the peace process. After one week on December 8-9, 2015 the fifth Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process held in Islamabad and during the conference a trilateral and quadrilateral meetings were held on the side-lines of HIA-IP. All four parties agreed together to create a conducive atmosphere that encourages Taliban groups to engage in meaningful and sustainable negotiations. China and the US were determined to eliminate mistrust prevailed between Kabul and Islamabad.

The peace talks adopted the term of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) of Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and the US. The QCG first meeting was held in Islamabad on January 11, 2016 to facilitate an Afghan-led and Afghan owned peace and reconciliation process with a view to achieve

¹⁷ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2016-05/16/content_25291456.htm

¹⁸ Europa Regional Survey of the World, South Asia: 2016 (13th Edition), 2015, London: Routledge, p. xvii.

¹⁹ Dawn newspaper 24, 2016.

²⁰ Khan, Tahir, Manan, Abdul, November 30, 2015, "Afghan peace process: Nawaz, Ghani agree to take 'legitimate' stakeholders on board" The Express Tribune, Pakistan newspaper.

lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region at large.²¹ The meeting was not attended by non-state actors or Taliban. They argued that they control more territory in Afghanistan than they did at any time since they were ousted from power in 2001. They were consistent on their demand of the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from their country. The US and NATO have 13,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan, mainly in training capacity. They include 9, 800 US and three thousand and two hundred NATO troops.²² The QCG countries underlined the importance of bringing an end to the conflict in Afghanistan that continues to wreak futile violence on the Afghan people and also breeds insecurity throughout the region. The four participants emphasized the immediate action for direct talks between representatives of the Afghan government and representatives' of anti-state groups in a peace process that aims to preserve Afghanistan's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Within two month the QCG members met four times and there was a hope that the meetings would breed positive results for peace in Afghanistan.

The last and fifth meeting was held in May 18, 2016 at Islamabad and after three days of the meeting the head of Taliban was targeted by a US drone strike on May 21, 2016 in Baluchistan.²³ The killing of the head who was participating in peace talks gave impression that the US agreed with the demands of the Afghan president, that "irreconcilable" insurgents based in Pakistan should be targeted. His death brought a serious blow to the peace talks from various aspects. For the US as a pentagon official justified the killing of Taliban's head as he was creating obstacles to peace and reconciliation process between the government of Afghanistan and Taliban and prohibiting the latter from participating in such talks with Afghan government.²⁴ On the other hand the then Pakistan's Army Chief General expressed anger on the strike and said that the US did not take Pakistan in confidence before the strike and such unilateral actions would undermine trust of anti-state actors and affect counter terrorism cooperation.²⁵ He

²¹ Javed Hamim Kakar, 4-nation meeting stresses immediate need for direct talks, in Pajhwok Afghan News Reflecting the truth, January 11, 2016. <https://www.pajhwok.com/en/2016/01/11/4-nation-meeting-stresses-immediate-need-direct-talks>

²² Tanzeem, Ayesha, January 16, 2016, "Differences Plague Afghanistan Peace Talks", <https://www.voanews.com/a/talks-on-afghan-peace-process-open-in-pakistan/3139601.html>

²³ Helene Cooper, U.S. Drone Strike Targets Taliban Leader in The New York Times, May 21, 2016.

²⁴ The guardian newspaper, May 22, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/22/death-of-mullah-akhtar-mansoor-likely-to-enrage-pakistan>

²⁵ Dawn, newspaper, May 26, 2016.

further said that “Pakistan’s efforts, successes and sacrifices in the fight against terrorism are unparalleled.”²⁶ The war against terrorism is a common war of the US and Pakistan. The one-sided US action also cause frustration in Pakistan that the US does not acknowledge the sacrifices of Pakistan in the war against terrorism.

Trilateral Coordination Group

The killing of Taliban’s head in Pakistan created tension in relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan and the credibility of the US was ruined in Taliban circles. It also derailed the dialogue process and halted the security and progress of the two countries. At this time of despair Pakistan and Afghanistan looked towards China, being capable to remove suspension between these two neighbours. The gesture indicated high level faith both countries placed in China. Both countries found China ready to play a constructive role for the improvement of relations based totally on equal consultations with the two parties.²⁷ Beijing found an opportunity in the 6th summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) held on June 8-9, 2017. In the side-lines of the summit it was emphasised by China to revive the Afghan peace process and counter-terrorism cooperation which had been terminated since a year.²⁸ For peace & reconciliation in Afghanistan the Chinese Foreign Minister proposed a trilateral mechanism for cooperation including China, Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁹

The trilateral talks were held in China and the participants called on the Taliban to join the process. In such quest the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s reached Kabul on June 24, 2017 with his “shuttle diplomacy” aimed at mediating between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The three parties agreed on China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers’ dialogue mechanism to cooperate on issues of mutual interest. The three parties also believed that the Quadrilateral Coordination Group should be revived and a conducive environment must be created to bring the non-state actors on dialogue table.³⁰ As per official statement, “The trilateral mechanism mainly

²⁶ Gen Raheel’ seriously concerned over violation of sovereignty by US, in Dawn May 25, 2016.

²⁷ Khan, Tahir, June 25, 2017, “China Launches shuttle diplomacy to help Pak-Afghan ties improve”, Daily Times newspaper.

²⁸ Dawn newspaper, June 25, 2017.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ China, Afghanistan, Pakistan agree to maintain regional peace, stability, 26. 6. 2017, Source Xinhua.

http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/26/c_136393932.htm

focuses on three key areas – strategic and security issues, counter-terrorism and security and economic development and connectivity.”³¹

When the trilateral Group was struggling for peace in Afghanistan, in the meantime after the break of 16 months the 6th QCG meeting was organized at Muscat, Oman on October 16, 2017.³² At this time the non-state group denied its presence in the talks which signals the fruitless discussion and there was no issuance of any official statement after the talks.³³ On the other hand the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi’s reconciliation process remained fruitful as it met after six months hard efforts in December 26, 2017. The foreign ministers of the trilateral group met in Beijing to strengthen counter-terrorism coordination and cooperation.³⁴ The Chinese FM said that our dialogue process is not targeted at any other party nor would it be subject to influence from other countries or forces rather complement other existing mechanisms and contribute to peace and stability in Afghanistan and in the region.

China took another move in her efforts to bring peace in Afghanistan. Beijing was not hesitant to dialogue with Delhi over Afghanistan’s peace and continued covert diplomacy with Taliban too. Despite of the trilateral group efforts, in April 27-28, 2018, there was a two days informal summit between China and India held in Chinese city Wuhan. Indian PM and Chinese President agreed to carry out a joint India-China economic project in war-torn Afghanistan. It would be the first such project in the war-ravaged country by India and China.³⁵ Another move was a joint India-China project for peace in Afghanistan that would enable India to play a larger part in Afghanistan ultimately reduces Beijing’s reliance on Pakistan.³⁶

As per Chinese diplomacy, the second trilateral meeting was held on May 28 in Beijing³⁷ followed by the 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

³¹ Tahir Khan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China gold strategic dialogue in Beijing, in Dailu Times, May 29, 2018.

³² Dagia, Niha, October 16, 2017, “Quadrilateral meeting begins in Oman with hope for peace in Afghanistan”, The Express Tribune newspaper,

³³ Dawn newspaper, October 17, 2017.

³⁴ December 16, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1592949/1-pak-china-afghan-trilateral-meeting-stresses-talks-taliban/>

³⁵ The News, April 29, 2018.

³⁶ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-stays-out-of-move-to-support-chinas-bri-at-sco-meet/articleshow/64533390.cms>

³⁷ Times of Islamabad, May 29, 2018.

<https://timesofislamabad.com/29-May-2018/pakistan-china-and-afghanistan-hold-trilateral-strategic-dialogues-in-beijing>

Summit held on June 9 to 10, 2018 in Qingdao, a coastal city in east China's Shandong Province. It was the first SCO summit since its expansion, India and Pakistan attended the summit as full members.³⁸ The Afghanistan's president Mr. Ashraf Ghani also attended the summit as an observer state. The Chinese president Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's will in "seeking peaceful coexistence, common prosperity, shared aspiration, and win-win cooperation."³⁹

China an Acceptable Power for All Parties in Afghanistan

China formed a comprehensive strategy for Afghanistan six months before the withdrawal of foreign troops from there. In July 2014, China appointed a former ambassador of China in Afghanistan and India Mr. Sun Yuxi, as a special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴⁰ In his youth, Sun in 1981 had provided Chinese arms to the Afghan Mujahideens. Sun Yuri said that China had established multiple forums for negotiations and discussions in order to bring in the neighbouring countries and others to facilitate the reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Mr. Sun stated that "We support a peace process because we are also a victim of terrorism." But such process must be Afghan state owned China established their own contacts with Taliban.⁴¹ China provided a neutral venue to all stakeholders in Afghanistan.

Beijing was waiting for a peace plan from Kabul and Islamabad as both greatly suffered in the war against terrorism. When a QCG was formed China became its focal member. Although it never played a role of mediator beyond its borders but gained initial success where Afghanistan's neighbour Pakistan, NATO and the US had failed. Among all four China enjoys a unique status having close and trust worthy relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as the Taliban. When a deadlock occurred in QCG after May 2016 incident and the US lost credibility, it was China which resumed the process of peace talks by reducing the acceptable member for the Afghan state and non-state actors in June 2017. In the TCG China has been continuously engaged in dialogues. China supports all Afghan parties in persevering to realise a political reconciliation process as early as possible and to continue playing a constructive function.⁴²

³⁸ China focus: What to expect from SCO summit in Qingdao, Xinhua, 11. 6. 2018.

³⁹ China Daily, June 11, 2018.

⁴⁰ Dawn newspaper, July 19, 2014.

⁴¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30273431>

⁴² China courted Afghan Taliban in secret meetings, Financial Times, August 6, 2018.

An unprecedented event took place in Afghanistan in the first week of June 2018 when the Afghan president announced eight days unilateral ceasefire with the Taliban to celebrate Eid ul-Fitr after the holiest month of Ramadan. That was a trust-building gesture to encourage militants to negotiate with the state.⁴³ The non-state actors replied in a same manner and announced three-days ceasefire with the Afghan government. It was first time in the past 17 years war history that the militants declared a cessation of violence, even though a limited one, since they were ousted by US in 2001.⁴⁴ The ceasefire was a result of China and Pakistan's quiet diplomacy. Both countries played a decisive role in persuading both to lay down arms against each other.⁴⁵

However, the Taliban declined the same request of Afghanistan government in August 2018, and ignored the efforts of the US for three months ceasefire on Eid-ul Azha as they believed that such ceasefire would only assist the US troops, who the Taliban are trying to drive out of the country.⁴⁶ The Wakhan corridor which is at the north-eastern edge of Afghanistan, barely populated, the Chinese were found distributing blankets and food stuff among the people. Such gestures are sufficient to win the hearts of people.

After the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan, China has been a part of every peace process. It earned the trust of all parties as they agreed on Sino role as a mediator. From 2015 to the recent Russian effort to organize a Moscow meeting on September 4, 2018 (although it postponed at eleventh hour),⁴⁷ China remained a part of all efforts which could bring peace, prosperity and tranquillity in Afghanistan.

CPEC and OBOR: Connecting China with South Asia

China entered in 2014 with comprehensive strategic, economic and diplomatic approaches. As it was a year of withdrawal of foreign combat troops after 13 years of engagement in Afghanistan. China heralded game changer mega programs i.e. CPEC and OBOR. Militancy in Afghanistan would be a setback in these projects. Both projects would help China to extend its influence to fight for regional poverty and developing the basic

⁴³ Mashal, Mujib, June 7, 2018, "Afghan Leader Declares Brief, Unilateral Cease-Fire in Taliban Fight", The New York Times newspaper.

⁴⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/09/taliban-ceasefire-eid-afghanistan>

⁴⁵ Kamran Yousaf, Afghan Eid truce 'backed by Pakistan, China', The Express Tribune, June 11, 2018.

⁴⁶ Taliban reject Afghan ceasefire offer, The Nation, August 21, 2018.

⁴⁷ Russia, Afghanistan to agree on new date for Moscow meeting-----foreign ministry, Augusta 27, 2018, Tass Russian News Agency.

infrastructure. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been a \$ 47 billion Chinese investment in Pakistan and OBOR is an estimated \$4 trillion project through which China could establish itself as a world-leading economy and to spread its power, specifically in the South Asia region.⁴⁸ China has initiated transport and energy projects, power plants, roads, railways, bridges, gas pipelines and ports. The projects would benefit Afghanistan in building infrastructure, creating employment, maintaining social stability that would ultimately lead to peace and prosperity. An unstable Afghanistan can derail the economic ambitions of China. It also played a key role in forming and escalating regional platforms i.e. “the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), setting up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS Development Bank.”

Beijing have been discussing the issue of Muslim Uyghurs with the Taliban fleeing China’s Xinjiang province and planning resistance to Beijing’s rule from Afghan territory. China has intensified a series of clampdowns on the Uighurs who have agitated for independence.⁴⁹

China’s direct talks to the Taliban rather than simply helping mediate Afghan-led talks indicates that the country has been increasingly involved in south and central Asia but not establishing military bases.⁵⁰ Chinese Defence Ministry denied reports about deploying troops to Afghanistan and rumours for its military base in Afghanistan. However, According to the ambassador of Afghanistan to China, Beijing is helping Afghanistan set up a mountain bridge to bolster counterterrorism operations,⁵¹ China believes that instability in Afghanistan would be a main obstacle in its economic plans for the 21st century.

Conclusion

After the withdrawal of foreign troops, China reorganized her role in Afghanistan as it remained a challenge for regional and global powers to bring peace, stability and harmony among various Afghan groups. All stakeholders in Afghanistan have realized that without negotiations and dialogues with non-state actors peace would not prevail over there. In peace talks whether it was through QCG or TCG China possessed a significant position. China declared her policy regarding Afghanistan firmly that such process must be “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led.” China provides a neutral

⁴⁸http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017beltandroad/2017-06/02/content_29598716.htm

⁴⁹ China courted Afghan Taliban in secret meetings, Financial Times, August 6, 2018.

⁵⁰ China courted Afghan Taliban in secret meeting, in Financial Times, August 6, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/66b0906a-993d-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d>

⁵¹ Christopher Bodeen, China says no plans to deploy troops to Afghanistan, In Military Times, August 30, 2018.

venue to all groups to negotiate with each other and understand the significance of peace for their people who have been in turmoil since past thirty seven years. It is further important that the government of Afghanistan and Taliban both trust China and the recent ceasefire between them is an example of such reliance. After the failure of Western powers China is a ray of hope regarding peace, stability and prosperity in Afghanistan.

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