

## CHINA'S STRATEGY TOWARDS TALIBAN-LED AFGHANISTAN

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### Abstract

*With the withdrawal of the United States and NATO-led forces from Afghanistan, the instant takeover of Kabul by the Taliban forces shocked the World. China was the only country that responded this shift with calm and cautiousness. China's calmness over this major shift on the regional level has raised several questions regarding its policy and approach towards Afghanistan under Taliban rule. As a hard-headed worldwide player as well as a competitor of the United States, China must have some strategies and reasons to deal with the Taliban-led Afghanistan for the achievement of its mega plans. It is conceivable that all present and future plans of China require peaceful and stable South and Central Asia, which is far-fetched without political stability and security in Afghanistan. To understand the way, China deals with the Taliban-led Afghanistan, this paper explores four questions. First, what did China want from Taliban? Is Takeover of Taliban an opportunity for China to fill vacuum or there are other interests? What does China make of this new transition? And, how will China go ahead with Taliban-led Afghanistan? This research finds that China needs to have cordial relations with Taliban ruled Afghanistan for the peace and stability in the region so that it could accomplish its regional and international projects.*

**Keywords:** Taliban–Led Afghanistan, Threat, Security, Reconstruction

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## INTRODUCTION

China-Afghanistan association has been mainly friendly all through history. This friendship was interrupted for the short of time during presence of Soviet Union in Afghanistan. With the evacuation of Soviet forces from Afghan land and relaxation of tension between China and Russia, the Sino-Afghan relations revived to some extent, but China did not recognize the Taliban regime in Afghanistan because of multiple reasons (BIR, 1969). In 2000 when Taliban government was toppled by the United States and allied forces after 9/11 incident, China started struggle to reach to the new government in Afghanistan. 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed an awesome improvement in Sino-Afghan relations. Chinese involvement in political affairs of Afghanistan was limited during the first decade of US presence there, but China became a big trade partner and aid donor to Afghanistan throughout the war time. With time China played shuttle diplomacy role in Afghanistan and it brokered peace in the war ridden country. In this connection, China started involving in the peace process in Afghanistan and recognized Taliban as one of the stakeholders of talks because of their active involvement in Afghan politics. This involvement aimed to maintain peace and stability in the region (Ramachandran, 2018).

It was obvious that Taliban will gain military benefits with the withdrawal of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan and it will have a leverage on the land. China was concerned about eruption of long war in Afghanistan and to avoid any such war it stepped up diplomatic efforts with government and Taliban to back up a political settlement. Accepting the fact that Taliban was occupying widely the territory of Afghanistan, having understanding of the Taliban's role in the process of nonviolent reconstruction and reconciliation on their land, China started negotiations for (Johnson, 2021). Currently, China recognises Taliban as a political group and vital military force and urges its leaders to hold high the banner of peace talks. China is concerned about the spillover impact of Taliban's resurgence in

Afghanistan, therefore, it takes assurance from Taliban not to allow any militant force to use Afghanistan as a base against internal affairs in China. The facts reveal that China's inclination to Taliban is for peaceful Afghanistan. For that sake, China intends to stay engaged with Taliban for the security of borders and investment. Currently, in Taliban is the sole ally of China in Afghanistan, which can resist the anti-China activities of the militant groups on its porous western border.

### **What does China want from Taliban?**

Bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan dated back to 1950s, when first time Afghanistan's kingdom recognised China and imitated diplomatic relations. Beijing and Kabul signed a treaty of friendship and non-aggression in 1960 and Boundary Treaty in 1963. Thereby, both the countries settled their territorial issue over Wakhan border, which was under the control of Afghanistan in Badakhshan province and it has boundary with Xinjiang Ughur Autonomous region in China (Segal, 1952).

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 interrupted Sino-Afghan diplomatic relations because Union of Socialist Soviet Russia (USSR) was trying to introduce anti-China version of communism in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Lüthi, 2010). There was a spilt between China and USSR over communist doctrinal divergences that resulted from their diverse versions and pragmatic approaches of Marxism–Leninism, as prompted by their particular geopolitics during the Cold War (1945–1991) (Lüthi, 2010). China's relations with Afghanistan remained suspended even after the withdrawal of Soviet forces because resistant militant Islamic group (Taliban) seized power in 1996. China had ideological differences with that group that become a reason for their denial to Taliban rule in Afghanistan and it continued keeping its embassy closed in Kabul until the post-Taliban regime in 2002. Despite long time presence on the land of Afghanistan, the United States could not dismantle Taliban group. Taliban kept on growing as a strong political group. After a decade,

United States recognised that peace in Afghanistan was impossible without involving Taliban in the peace talks, therefore, they recognised Taliban as one of the political group of Afghanistan.

Since 2014, China started giving indications of recognising the Taliban as a stakeholder in the politics of Afghanistan and it engaged in talks with the group. There are various reasons for this shift in Chinese policy towards Taliban. Strategically, China's interest to be a world power drew its intention to Afghanistan. In contrast to its geopolitical position in 1996, Chinese economy reaches worth USD 14.7 trillion these days, which makes it distinct in the list of global powers (Haiqi & Attanayake, 2021). Additionally, China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) plan, aims to create a Network of Roads and Rails, requires peace and stability in the region, which is inevitable without stable Afghanistan. Moreover, extension of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan also requires peace in this country. Although, China had a partial part in the peace building affairs of Afghanistan more than the earlier two decades, it involved actively in 2015 with the creation of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) in association with the United States, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Khan, 2016). The QCG aimed to resume talks between Afghan government and Taliban to accelerate peace process providing an incentive to Taliban to cease use of violence and move towards political goals.

Since then, several Taliban delegations have met Chinese officials during the trilateral dialogues between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan from 2017-2020. Five main themes of the four round trilateral dialogues meant to build mutual political trust and reconciliation between these countries. They aimed to cooperate with each other for development and security. Also, they pledged to make a framework for counter terrorism. Besides, they aimed reconstruction, reconciliation and economic stability of Afghanistan. The consensus that developed as a result of these dialogues called on all stakeholders for ceasefire and negotiations. They welcomed

Taliban as a mainstream political group in Afghanistan. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was discussed as a factor of connectivity and high level cooperation. Advancement of CPEC to Afghanistan was also agreed by all parties. They agreed to keep continue their opposition to East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). They also agreed to counter terrorism and advance counter terrorism activities by mean of economic advancement and trade routes (CGTN, 2021).

China had anticipated Taliban's return to power especially after Doha agreement (2021). The agreement was signed on February 29, 2021 as a part of peace process between the United States and Taliban. This agreement is recognised as the final stage of the peace dialogues between the two as it pronounced the end of war and withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan as long as Taliban guarantees to stop al-Qaeda from function in districts in the Taliban domination. US also forced Taliban to keep continue talks with Afghan government. The US pledged full withdrawal by May 1, 2021 as long as Taliban keeps continue negotiations for peace. The United States also intended to finish economic sanctions against Taliban by August 27, 2021. The United Nations Security Council endorsed the agreement unanimously. Subsequently, Taliban got the recognition as a political party of Afghanistan and a stakeholder of peace process. The US completed its full evacuation on August 30, 2021, as the Taliban occupied the country forcefully.

Before taking control of the country, Taliban leaders met Chinese leaders. The meeting was held in Tianjin province of China between the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar. China called this meeting to discuss the matter of Uighur groups in Xinjiang province, which were reportedly supported by the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Chew, 2021). China believed that ETIM had ties with Taliban group. During the meeting Wang Yi took assurance from the Taliban leader that they would not allow any anti-China group to use Afghan soil for any such act that is detrimental to China. Wang Yi also expressed his trust in

the significant role of Taliban as political group in Afghanistan, and he anticipated his positive role for reconciliation, peace, and reconstruction process in the country. China desires to see “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” all-inclusive government structure in Afghanistan being represented by all ethnic and political factions.

Baradar, the Taliban leader, showed trust in China’s sincere efforts for secure future of Afghan people and assured to resist all forces to use Afghan territory against China. Besides, he expressed willingness for broad-based and all-inclusive government in Afghanistan in future after the withdrawal of US forces. Taliban group wished China stay involved in Afghanistan in future for fast reconstruction process, economic development and investment.

### **Is Takeover of Taliban an opportunity for China to fill the vacuum or there are other interests?**

Following the withdrawal process of US and NATO led forces from Afghanistan and pursuing open talks between China and Taliban only a month before evacuation of forces, many observers assessed the growing involvement of China in Afghan affairs. They assessed that in the wake of the evacuation of US forces from Afghanistan, a vacuum will occur there, and China will have a great opportunity to enhance its influence in Afghanistan as well as in the region. However, Chinese analysts Attanayake and Haiqi (2021) remark that China inclines to see Afghanistan through the prism of managing threats rather than perceiving it in the form of opportunities. It is a fact that Chinese political and economic interests in Afghanistan have expanded considerably, but China is more concerned about any spillover and inspirational effect of religion based transition in Afghanistan to neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan. So far as China’s economic engagement in Afghanistan is concerned, it is not wide ranging. Minimum Chinese investment in Afghanistan includes Amu Darya energy projects and Aynak copper mine, which have been in stillness for many years because of instable situation. The most debatable matter about involvement of Afghanistan in the

BRI as well as CPEC is also in stasis.

Beijing views that peace, permissive security and political stability in Afghanistan is the first condition to embark on important investment role. China is more concerned about secure borders in Afghanistan for sustainable regional security. China is worried that violence and Islamism in Afghanistan could inspire Islamist groups in those countries. Also, the regain of power by Taliban could help the ETIM to regroup there and speed up attacks in the Xinjiang province, which could be possibly influenced by the separatist activists of Uyghur community (Chew, 2021). Another threat to China in South Asia region is Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is active in anti-Chinese attacks. On July 14, 2021 nine Chinese engineers were killed in the vicinity of Kohista-Dasu hydropower project, ETIM claimed responsibility of attacks with the help of TTP (Jackson, 2022). In this situation, China will have to make more efforts to keep its nationals protected in these two regions.

Despite all these ground realities, China is applying a more pragmatic approach for keeping engaged Afghan Taliban in talks rather than to severe relations with the group. China intends to create a consensus based framework by keeping this group under international security and force to extend its role in Afghanistan for embarking on mega projects (Calabrese, 2021).

### **What does China want to make of this new transition?**

Despite this fact that China has limited economic engagement in the Afghanistan, it is a fact that Kabul is a vital variable for the economic interests of China in the Asian region. Afghanistan's participation in Belt and Road Initiative of China is highly required for the peaceful projection of all projects in Pakistan. Enhancing economic engagement with China through investment and financial assistance is highly essential for reconstruction and nation building in Afghanistan. Understanding significance of bilateral engagement between Afghanistan and China, governments of both the countries

inked memorandum of understanding pledging collaboration under BRI. Ghani government in Afghanistan made it a priority to involve in BRI and Chinese government also repeatedly showed interest to expand CPEC to Afghanistan. Despite all this interest on both sides to make the BRI and CPEC a priority of this bilateral relations China could not make new investments in Afghanistan because of insecure political environment. China had undertaken various joint railway and road network projects with Afghanistan, but none of those could be completed so far (Jhoson, 2021).

Takeover of Taliban, brought new economic strikes from international community against Afghanistan. Biden administration froze Afghan government reserves in the US banks. The European Union, and Britain barred their aid programmes in Afghanistan. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) impeded the emergency funds supply and World Bank blocked funding for various projects. Inversely, China, and Pakistan offered sufficient aid US\$31 million worth of winter supplies, medicines, COVID vaccines and grain. However, barely a month later, the United Nations appealed the US and other donor countries for emergency funds pledging over US\$1 billion to address the dire humanitarian situation in the country. The donor countries responded the appeal after deliberation and debate, however, Beijing was quick to respond the call independently. In view of worsening economy condition of Afghanistan, China has reiterated calls for the international community, especially to the US government, to revoke sanctions and bans against the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. Additionally, it urged other countries to donate unconditional assistance to war torn Afghan people. China also called the international community to remove all financial bans which are creating obstacles to the reconstruction process in Afghanistan (Calabrese, 2021).

Although, China has less economic engagement in Afghanistan even so it believes that Afghanistan can play a vital role in the materialisation of Belt and Road Initiative as long as there is peace



and stability. China believes that Afghanistan's services are required to protect all BRI projects in Pakistan, and for the protection of overland routes of Beijing to the Indian Ocean. In consideration of these ground realities, China is actively engaged with the present Taliban group in power. After long term comprehensive negotiations, Taliban has realised that how much Chinese assistance and investment is significant for Afghanistan. Taliban leadership welcomes all Chinese investment for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. China takes it as an opportunity to invest on Afghan land through state-owned as well as private enterprises.

In the meantime, Taliban are fond of having negotiations with the rest of the international community. The community should take this will of Taliban seriously for the sake of development and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Giving a thought to this call of Taliban for the interest of Afghanistan, Beijing hosted talks between Afghanistan and its neighbouring country Iran. The meeting was attended by Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, however, Russia and China participated through video link. Taliban are willing to create coexistence with regional countries, it is Taliban's most significant diplomatic priority (Meyers, 2021).

### **How will be China's Road ahead with Taliban-led Afghanistan?**

China is calm over Taliban's takeover and it has expressed friendly remarks, yet it is cautious with regard to the recognition of Taliban led Afghanistan. Beijing has neither officially recognized legitimacy of Taliban as a sole leadership of Afghan government nor it has recognized Taliban ruled Afghanistan. China does not want to lead this recognition process of Taliban government, as it intends to do so with the consensus of important regional countries including Pakistan, Iran and Russia, which have a vital role in Afghanistan. The purpose is to avoid any sort of misunderstanding with the regional powers for the peace and stability of the region. However, Beijing is optimistic that Taliban will adopt relatively different policy than the previous rule. China believes that economic incentives and the

positive diplomatic attitude of the current Taliban might bring a fair alignment between the two countries (Oertel & Small, 2021).

Current association of Beijing towards Taliban shows that Beijing's recognition of Taliban government is inevitable. Once, it will recognize, its affiliation will be twofold. First, it will be mercantilism based. China will pursue to resuscitate business schemes in Afghanistan, which will be backed by Taliban as they need foreign investment for earning revenues to run the government. Besides, as the Western foreign donors have cut off aid, therefore, Taliban do not want to lose China as an investment partner. Therefore, they will welcome all sort of economic investment from China. Second, the nature of bond between the two countries depends on no interference in each other's affairs. China has already taken assurance from Taliban not to support any sort of extremism in the restive Xinjiang province, which has territorial proximity with the Badakhshan province in Afghanistan. Besides, China wants Taliban not to condemn any sort of Chinese behaviour with the Uyghur Muslims in that region. In retaliation, Taliban expect from China no question regarding human rights issues unless the victim is Chinese citizen (Johnson, 2021).

China's road ahead with Taliban-led Afghanistan will not be easy. China will have to stay cautious of the emergence of terrorism in the Taliban led Afghanistan. Afghanistan can prove a big test for Beijing if it is failed to check properly all maneuvers of political transition in Kabul and related issues such as the new wave of refugees and narcotic trafficking, supply of weapons. China should extend its diplomatic model driven by loans, commodities and infrastructure, but it should not try to increase its investment there nor should it try to fill the gap left by the evacuated big forces.

## CONCLUSION

Taliban are interested to win trust of China to sustain diplomatic relations with this giant country. Taliban assume relations with China as a big opportunity to get economic support focusing on investment for rehabilitation of the war-ridden Afghanistan. China's tilt towards Afghanistan is driven both by security and economic concerns. On the economic ground, China intends to build roads and railway network through Afghanistan to Pakistan. However, on security fronts, China is concerned about the security of its Northern Province Xinjiang because of the emergence of IS-K in unstable Afghanistan and its extended support to the Uyghur community. To achieve its interests, China is attempting hard to win the confidence of Taliban forces in exchange of their interests in China. Taliban has already assured China not to use their land against this country keeping with their previous attitude. Taliban has never damaged Chinese infrastructure, or projects nor they have ever supported publicly Uyghur Community in China. Moreover, long lasting Peace in Afghanistan is highly desired by China for its ongoing and future investment projects. The aim of engagement with Taliban aims to ensure

The future of Chinese investment projects in the region will depend on lasting peace in Afghanistan. China's policy of engaging the Taliban is meant to confirm assurance for its security and investment. As long as Taliban keep with the moderate policies that enable engagement with other countries and attain political stability, it will grab attention of the World as a suitable place for investment. These confidence building measures present enough reasons for the leadership of China and Taliban to bring up a good ally.

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