

GROWING CHINESE AND PAKISTANI INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The minerals of Afghanistan are of economic interest to the major powers. This paper analyses China's growing involvement in Afghanistan and its prospects. It also discusses the trilateral alliance between Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan and its implications for regional and global stakeholders. China can profit from raw material extraction in Afghanistan and the provision of transit routes. Making use of the geographical proximity between the three, there is room for cooperation and dialogue on countering terrorism and resource development. For Pakistan, cordial relations with Afghanistan can be fruitful in energy supply, security provision, connectivity, and ensuring its overall strategic interests.

Keywords: South Asia, Afghanistan, raw minerals, Taliban takeover, US withdrawal

Introduction and Geostrategic Importance

Afghanistan is a landlocked country with a multi-ethnic population. It is located to the north and west of Pakistan and east of Iran and also shares a short 91 kilometres long border with China. Other neighbours include Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

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Resultantly, it is at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, providing an important trade route to Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and ultimately to Europe. Afghanistan has a history of being highly sought after by invaders but the terrain of the country—mostly arid, dry, and mountainous—has always proven to be a difficult barrier for invaders, as has the rigorous courage and independent nature of the local tribes, who have shown history their sheer resilience against foreign rule. In the struggle and persistence to do so, Afghanistan has historically shifted many alliances and is still divided into ethnic factions with red lines that have been repeatedly triggered and exploited.

Population and Ethnic Groups

According to the World Population Review, Afghanistan is a country of 40 million people (as of 23 May 2022), with Kabul being the biggest city, with a population of 3 million people. Over half of the total population is older than 18.¹ According to the CIA World Factbook, it ranks 37th in the world in terms of population and 43rd in terms of land area.² Of this population, 42 per cent are Pashtuns, a tribal society, said to be the largest in the world.³ 27 per cent are Tajiks, 9 per cent are Hazaras, 9 per cent are Uzbeks, 3 per cent are Turkmen, and 2 per cent are Baloch. The country is also multilingual, with Pashto and Dari being the official languages. Muslims make up 99 per cent of the population of Afghanistan, with Sunni Muslims being the majority and Shias the minority. No public churches have been allowed in Afghanistan lately.⁴ It is also important to note that most of the population lives in a rural setting and literacy levels are low among men and even lower among women.

The ethnic rivalries in Afghanistan have been long at the centre of the power struggle in the state. One of the biggest problems of Afghanistan is a failure to produce harmony among the various ethnic groups, which has time and again produced discord and

conflict and has jeopardized peace and reconciliatory efforts in the war-torn country.

The Pashtuns have a bigger population in neighbouring Pakistan, which has produced long-lasting and continuing vulnerabilities in the relations between the two countries. Whereas their shared history as a nation produces a sense of unity among them, they also feel familial ties with ethnic groups in other countries, such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The ethnic struggles we mostly see today were a result of the amalgamation of Pashtun majority regions into British India, under the Durand Line agreement of 1893. Later, the term Pashtunistan, used for an imagined autonomous Pashtun majority state, comprising regions of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, became a major foreign policy objective of Afghanistan. This has been a point of dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with Afghanistan becoming the first state to refuse to acknowledge Pakistan's independence, a decision that has harmed the relations of the two brotherly Muslim-majority neighbouring states. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have recently backed the Pashtun community by supporting the Taliban. Iran, on the other side, has attempted to elevate Afghanistan's Shia Hazara minority. This is particularly visible in the sectarian rift and proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, who have deployed proxies against one another on several occasions.

The Great Game

The modern boundaries of Afghanistan are a result of the agreement between the imperial British and Tsarist Russia. Not new to Afghanistan's history, it once again became a point of contention between ideologies and commercial gains, in what came to be known as the Great Game. Both wanted to extend their political, economic, and diplomatic power over Afghanistan and Central Asia. Britain wanted to secure its maritime access routes and secure its 'crown jewel', British India, while Russia was extending its empire in Asia. The Anglo-Afghan and Anglo-Sikh wars were the precursors to Russia

proposing Afghanistan as a buffer state between the two. Afghanistan has once again become a chessboard for powerful countries, each attempting to project its dominance on a country that may provide trade links and economic assets in the twenty-first century.

The Economic Potential of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been at the heart of social, political, and economic conflicts, which have been worsened by 40-year civil unrest and external interventions and control. Between 2001 and 2021, Afghanistan has had some advancements in the medical and educational fields, as well as improved human liberties and social justice for the population, thanks to a government based on democratic principles of sorts. However, Afghanistan's poor socioeconomic prospects have resulted in widespread impoverishment, unemployment, and external migration of Afghans to other states. Pakistan and Iran are the states that have taken in the most Afghan refugees, both legitimately and unlawfully. There were 2.2 million Afghan refugees already in the neighbouring countries and the UN estimated that a further half a million Afghans might relocate after the recent Taliban takeover.⁵ Despite the current economic conditions, things can start to look better as Afghanistan harbours massive mineral resources, an important location, and serves as a gateway to crucial regions of the world, such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, which have huge populations, with South Asia alone making up almost 25 per cent of the world population.⁶

Copper and Iron Reserves

Afghanistan has rich reserves of oil, gas, coal, marble, gold, copper, iron, and lithium but failure to explore and excavate the resources has resulted in mineral resources only accounting for 1.56 per cent of the country's GDP. A study suggests that Afghanistan has worth \$3 trillion worth of mineral deposits.⁷ The iron and copper reserves in the country alone can push the economy and make it one

of the leading world producers. Some studies suggest that the Hajigak iron reserves in the Bamyān province of Afghanistan will reach a trade of \$900 million by 2030.⁸ Foreign investment, however, remains low due to the ongoing insecurity and instability in the country. China and India have explored options for investments.

The top economic investor in Afghanistan is China. Two state-owned companies signed a deal worth billions of dollars to take the reserves on lease. China's investment in Afghanistan's copper mines is rooted in its growing economy and need for more resources. Lithium is primarily used for batteries in electronic devices and even vehicles, and the world of fast-growing technologies is looking for more ready availability of lithium from which Afghanistan can benefit. Major world producers like China can be highly interested in such an investment, also given the close geographical proximity of the two.

It is estimated that Afghanistan has the second-largest lithium reserves in the world after Bolivia,⁹ but again, due to security issues, no steps have been taken to invest in the field. Furthermore, Afghanistan's potential for being used as a transit trade route, as well as a supply route for energy such as gas and electricity, between Central and South Asia, makes it an important state. Central Asian states and even Turkey are hopeful for stability in the region, for the prosperity and continuation of projects that will mutually benefit all. After the political events of 15 August 2021, aid to the country, which accounted for 45 per cent of its GDP, was halted, resulting in a further collapse of the economy, enhancing the trade deficit and balance of payment issues. Moreover, the Central Bank has lost access to overseas assets and international payments due to money laundering and financing of terrorism.¹⁰ Drug trafficking and smuggling are also rampant, with the country becoming the world's largest producer of opium and a major distributor to Europe, Russia, and North America.¹¹

Taliban Takeover and US Withdrawal

Until a little after the mid-twentieth century, Afghanistan was ruled by an absolute monarchy. The monarchy was overthrown in a military coup in 1973 and the republic of Afghanistan was established. In 1978, as a result of another coup, the democratic republic of Afghanistan was installed, which was also overthrown a year later by a massive invasion of the soviet troops, establishing a socialist government in Afghanistan. After a civil war against the 'Godless' communist regime which was widely unacceptable to the vastly rural and Muslim population of Afghanistan, a coalition of mujahideen took over the country and was recognized by the UN.¹² A few years later, the Taliban took over the country and renamed Afghanistan the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, upholding, and promoting Islamic Shariah rule. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on US soil in 2001, the Taliban were defeated with US assistance. Even with the installation of a new administration sponsored by the United States, the government struggled to exert influence and expand its power at the grassroots levels. Tribal leaders continued to meddle with the state administration, and the state did not attempt to sway these vigilante groups. Many of these unofficial power entities served as local justice institutions and carried out Jirgas, usually following the tribal code of conduct of the Pashtuns, called the *Pashtunwali*.

In April 2021, US president Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. In August of the same year, the Afghan government was removed by the Taliban and then President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. Currently, the state is being run by the Taliban, with an unelected cabinet, coming from the high-ranking members of the Taliban itself. Haibatullah Akhundzada, the leader of the Taliban was also named the supreme leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.¹³ Russia, China, and Pakistan have accused the US of mishandling the situation in Afghanistan while signalling the normalization of ties with the Taliban.¹⁴

Relationship with China and the Growing Chinese Influence

China's Take on Xinjiang and ETIM

China was wary of the US military engagement in the region owing to the prospects of it bringing the US closer to the growing world power and providing it with better means of keeping a check on China. Later on, however, it was critical of the hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan as well. China is seen as pursuing a careful policy towards the Taliban regime and trying to dismantle the US hold and foreign policy in the country, something it may have been preparing for a while, outsmarting the US along the way. This is because China understands that Afghanistan is a land of eminent interest for great power rivalry, dating back in time from the British and Russian hustle to the recent involvement of the US. China is optimistic about having good ties with the Taliban regime as long as they are not detrimental to vital Chinese interests. China is concerned about its far-west province of Xinjiang, which is facing separatist and extremist movements, with China making it clear that it does not want Afghanistan to host any Uyghur separatist groups on its territory. This was the reason that the authorities in Beijing met Mullah Omar in the year 2000, and with the recent meetings between the Taliban representatives and the Chinese Foreign Minister, this issue has been taken up again.¹⁵ In July 2021, the Chinese foreign minister conveyed to the visiting Taliban delegation their hope that the Afghan Taliban would sever ties with all terrorist organizations including the ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) and enable opportunities for peace, stability, and cooperation in the region. Instead of tangling itself in the political and military rivalries in the heart of the Eurasian continent, which China calls 'the graveyard of empires', China wants to contribute to post-war reconstruction and economic investments in the country.¹⁶

In 2014, China hosted the Istanbul process, where regional countries were invited to discuss the future course of relations with Afghanistan with the US and ISAF troops leaving. This made sure China's Afghanistan policy was dynamic and proactive. In 2015, the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral strategic dialogue was held in Kabul. Being close to almost all of Afghanistan's neighbours and harbouring strong economic ties with all, China is well-suited to offer mediation and coordination between the states; be it Pakistan, Iran, India or the Central Asian states. These states being on the same page regarding their policies and positions on Afghanistan can ensure regional cooperation and stability. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is serving as an important body in regulating policies among all these states regarding Afghanistan.¹⁷

Transit Routes

The importance of Afghanistan at the crossroads of different regions is also evident in China's growing attention towards it. In 2020, Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister proposed the idea of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. It called on Afghanistan and Nepal to follow the model of Sino-Pakistan friendship and cooperation.¹⁸ The bigger plan is to incorporate Afghanistan into China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) project, the results of which will be regional realignment by giving Afghanistan economic incentives. China, as discussed before, has already offered to help smoothen the political and social discords in the state and has offered support. This can be worrisome for India and the US, as this realignment will strengthen trilateral ties between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; something India will never want as a rising regional hegemon and an important ally of the US in the region trying to counter-balance China. China's trade and infrastructure aspirations in South Asia and Central Asia greatly undermine and threaten the geopolitical interests of India and the US. Resultantly, China's move in Afghanistan has been to support a government that is not friendly to

either India or the US, while also putting efforts with them to prevent the spread of terrorism to the western Xinjiang province.

In 2020, China signed a 25-year strategic agreement with Iran, which was viewed as a threat to the US given its estrangement from Iran and the multiple sanctions. A move like this is an open challenge to the US. The agreement includes the export of Iranian energy to Pakistan's Gwadar Seaport, which China exerts influence over and leads a trade route to Xinjiang. This move also greatly undermines India's efforts to strengthen ties and improve connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia through Iran's Chabahar port, which India has heavily invested in.¹⁹

Through the BRI plan, China intends to connect with Europe via Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which will cross Afghanistan on the way, and then through Central Asia, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkey to finally Europe. Moreover, China is thinking of developing a route through Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor which is a merging point between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.

Resource Development

China has offered Afghanistan irresistible packages, something that Western corporations have failed to match. These packages include infrastructure and development programmes, including an electric power plant, schools, healthcare, and even rails, estimated to create thousands of jobs. China has provided limited security support, as critics accuse China of free-riding on the US efforts to ensure security and stability in the country. China has invested \$3.5 billion in the Aynak copper mines.²⁰ What is different about Chinese corporations is that they are state-owned and more immune to risks than privately owned companies, and this provides an edge to China over its Western counterparts and opens opportunities for investments. China also enjoys more positive and friendly ties with Afghanistan than the US, with anti-American sentiments running at an all-time high. This makes China less vulnerable to terror attacks and

provides incentives for investments and prosperity that foreign aid and loans alone cannot match. China has also reportedly provided \$200 million in foreign assistance and had become Afghanistan's single largest foreign investor by the year 2007.²¹

According to a Carnegie article "Perhaps more than any of the other powers, China will likely play an increasingly important role in the future of Afghanistan."²²

Foreign Aid

After China reopened its embassy in Afghanistan in 2002, it immediately provided \$5 million worth of humanitarian assistance. In 2014, China gave Afghanistan \$80 million worth of annual aid and aimed to provide further aid of \$240 million over the next three or so years.²³ Recently, after the Taliban takeover, China provided considerable humanitarian aid to Afghanistan worth 200 million Yuan, close to \$31 million. Afghanistan, which was facing economic turmoil and an absolute disaster, readily welcomed the food and medicines sent by China. The Taliban view China as an important state given its economic prowess that Afghanistan is so in need of. Donations of Covid-19 vaccines were also a huge assistance. Even on the diplomatic front, China has tried to gather support for reconciliatory efforts in Afghanistan.²⁴

Relations with and Influence of Pakistan

History

Afghanistan and Pakistan had a rough start to relations ever since Pakistan gained independence. The main bone of contention has been the issue of the Durand Line. Afghanistan has also been dependent on Pakistan for access to warm waters. Pakistan is also a bigger state with a larger population and a stronger military. There is little that Afghanistan could do about its demands for greater Pashtunistan, which had even lesser support among the Pashtuns in Pakistan. Pakistan also pursued an aggressive foreign policy on the

matter and there were frequent border closures. After 1973, Afghanistan started supporting proxies in Balochistan, by funding insurgency, sheltering rebels, and installing training camps on Afghan soil.²⁵ But during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan quickly became a frontline state against communism and in the war for freedom. Pakistan permitted the Mujahideen to organize in the tribal areas while transferring finances and weapons from the United States and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan secretly backed the Mujahideen to avoid openly challenging the Soviet Union while simultaneously exerting influence over the war's result and Afghanistan's destiny. As a result, Pakistan became a target of terrorist strikes. By 1989, the Soviets had been beaten in Afghanistan thanks to Pakistan's large-scale clandestine operations, which were backed by US finances and munitions.²⁶

After the Soviets left, Afghanistan suffered a power vacuum and fell into conflicts between the warlords. Pakistan, Iran and Uzbekistan tried to mediate but with little support from international forums, failed to do so. Pakistan started extending support to the Taliban to bring some stability to eastern Afghanistan. Pakistan saw a high potential in Afghanistan and deemed it an important trade and energy route leading to the Central Asian states after the soviets had been defeated. The Taliban, who originally had no desire to hold power, ultimately took over Kabul in 1996.

Strategic Interests

Pakistan immediately recognized the Taliban government. The fundamentalist Islamic government in Afghanistan meant that it would not allow India on its soil, something extremely favourable to Pakistan. General Pervez Musharraf also admitted to supporting the Taliban calling it a national security interest of Pakistan.²⁷ Later, after the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan was once again a frontline state against terrorism in Afghanistan and had to withdraw support due to increased pressure from the US and the international community.

The NATO forces moved to Kabul and had strong ties with India, a strategic threat to Pakistan and a complete failure in planting a friendly Taliban government. By 2006, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan had sharply worsened and then Afghan President Hamid Karzai had blamed Pakistan for supporting the Taliban insurgency. Terrorism by then had also started across the border, in Pakistan. We can say that after the withdrawal of US forces in 2021 and the takeover by the Taliban, Pakistan is once again hopeful that it can exercise some influence in Afghanistan. A friendly and Islamic government keeps India out of Afghanistan and Pakistan has to assign a lesser number of troops on that border, which would have otherwise presented a double-edged sword from either side of Pakistan. The location of Pakistan also makes sure that there isn't any direct commute and access between Afghanistan and India, and all land routes must go through Pakistan, which Pakistan has not yet allowed. It also gives Pakistan a shorter trade route to Central Asia.

Afghanistan's cordial ties with China and Pakistan also makes it a strategic trilateral alliance in the region, based mostly on security and economic ties. This can lead to regional development and cooperation, something that will not be acceptable to Washington and New Delhi. Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan are also part of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism that was planned to cooperate with Tajikistan in counter-terrorism and cross-border movement regulation of militants.

Energy Supply

In addition to trade routes, Afghanistan's location also makes it important in different projects such as the TAPI gas pipeline project from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and finally India. It is almost 1,800 km long. The construction started in 2015 but due to instability and security issues in Afghanistan, it has still not been completed. Other issues include a large requirement of capital, that the struggling economies have not been able to meet and the

disputes in relations between India and Pakistan. However, the construction of the Afghanistan-Pakistan section began in 2018 and the project is expected to supply 33 billion cubic meters of gas every year.²⁸

Another project is the CASA-1000, short for central Asia, South Asia 1000 megawatt. It is nearly a 1-billion-dollar investment that will bring electricity generated through hydropower in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are rich in hydropower, to Afghanistan and then Pakistan.²⁹ Afghanistan and Pakistan suffer from electricity shortages and are increasingly seeing higher demand. Pakistan needs to meet the demands of its citizens, especially in the long hot summers. Power outages are resulting in a slack in industrial output. As a result of CASA-100, there will be faster and more efficient access to electricity, resulting in improved trade will improve and there will be better cross-border water and energy management. All of this is not possible for Pakistan without a stable and secure Afghanistan and a government that maintains cordial relations and is conducive to regional prosperity and development.

Implications for Global and Regional Players

The United States

The US is also likely to caution Central Asian states against their relationship with the Taliban regime and China. It can also be judged that the growing China and Pakistan alignment is in response to the US-India strategic alliance. The US is also losing its influence over Pakistan, and Pakistan is no longer an ally of the US as it had been in the past during the cold war, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the war on terror. The US—which has spent years in a protracted war in Afghanistan and spent billions and billions of dollars—is now witnessing China free-riding on its efforts in Afghanistan and taking the more prominent share of investments in the country.

To some extent, Pakistan's and mainly China's involvement in Afghanistan demands a policy change from the US. The US should try to manage competition instead of trying to eliminate it. The United States can offer the direction and foresight needed to ensure that international aid helps the Afghan people by simplifying its humanitarian efforts and cooperating with international bodies. As part of this assistance, Afghanistan will be assisted in improving the openness of its governmental and development contracts. In particular, Washington can give training and assistance to help Afghanistan develop its capacity for public information dissemination. By widening its comparatively small initiatives, supplying technical and administrative education for businesses, enhancing credit facilities by authorizing microloans, and establishing directives that would generate a more favourable and legitimate institutional environment for businesses, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) could make economic progress outside of the mining industry a prime focus. The US should educate Afghan authorities on how to attract international aid and capital.

Russia

Russia has long criticized the US invasion of Afghanistan and has recently taken up a stern foreign policy against terrorism and has worked for its elimination. In Syria, Russia argues it supports authoritarian regimes because they keep the rise of radicalism in check. In Afghanistan, Russia seems ready to engage with the Taliban if they ensure the safety of their diplomats and do not threaten the neighbouring Central Asian states that are important Russian allies. Normalizing ties with Russia can be a win for the Taliban after the West withdraws. On the other hand, Russia has also held military drills with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China, to demonstrate their readiness and capability to tackle terrorism in the region. Russia also held talks in Moscow in late 2021 to call on UN donors to help evade a humanitarian crisis in the country and emphasize that the main

burden should be upon the invaders who were in Afghanistan for the past 20 years. While the US and most Western countries have closed their embassies in Kabul, Russia opened diplomatic posts in March 2022.

India and Iran

India which had high hopes in Afghanistan and several investments is now left out in the cold after the Taliban takeover. A fundamentalist Taliban regime will be hostile to India. Previously, during the Karzai government, India had some involvement in Afghanistan and close ties with the US and the Northern Alliance, but all hopes of any near future involvement are meagre. Strategically, India wanted a toehold in Afghanistan to weaken Pakistan's influence and have a presence on either side of Pakistan's borders. India also hoped to gain access to Afghanistan's rich and vast mineral reserves, as well as to Central Asia, which would have provided the shortest land route. But Pakistan's refusal to allow it and now the Taliban takeover have made matters worse for India. As discussed earlier, China's strategic deal with Iran and Pakistan also greatly undermines India's investments in the Chabahar port. Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan's strategic realignment can also be a threat to India's rising regional power and there is little that India can do against China. And with China backing Pakistan, there is little that India will be willing to do in Pakistan as well. Proxy use remains the only viable option.

Iran is aware of the vulnerabilities that its eastern neighbour poses to the state. It has supported the minority Shia Hazaras community in the country. Iran was able to pit the Northern Alliance against the Pashtun groups, which were backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. However, after 2001, Iran adopted some changes in its foreign policy and started engaging with the Taliban. Iran-Pakistan relations haven't always been the best either. After the Taliban takeover, Pakistan has seen increased insurgency in its Balochistan province. Unlike in FATA, insurgents have not been able to hold territory and

return to Iran and Afghanistan.³⁰ On the brighter side, Iran and Pakistan are engaging and working together for security cooperation and infrastructure as well as cross-border smuggling and violence.

Conclusion

China is interested in Afghanistan's mineral resources because of their proximity, magnitude, and relevance to regional infrastructural development. Foreign Minister Wang Yi's statement about political backing being available to Chinese companies wanting to invest in Afghanistan during his visit to Kabul sent a clear message to any Chinese companies interested in investing in Afghanistan. Chinese concerns are heavily influenced by economic factors. China is already a market frontrunner when it comes to rare-earth minerals. China treads carefully on a level that subjects it to lesser danger. China, as the world's second-largest economy with a natural frontier with both nations, is unlikely to be able to do so without assisting in the resolution of regional issues. For a longer reach, Beijing wants to guarantee that Afghanistan does not destabilize the region or creates issues for itself. Pakistan has always been suspicious of India's involvement in Afghanistan, fearful of being encircled by its arch-enemy. China has its underlying issues with India, which derive from its unresolved borderline. China and Pakistan reviewed the consequences of the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, including extremism, terrorism, and narcotics trafficking and smuggling risks, as well as the imperative for emergency assistance. In short, the US, being long engaged in Afghanistan, has lost popular support from its people to keep engagement in Afghanistan but China and Pakistan, being geographically closer and having high strategic stakes, have a renewed motivation to exercise influence over Afghanistan over various lines.

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