



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

## Wrap - Up 4

# Analysing Dimensions of China's Engagement with Afghanistan



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## Overview

China's engagement in Afghanistan had started to gain momentum after President Trump's firm announcement on the US exit. China sees its deep strategic alliance with Pakistan as a major facilitator for expanding its engagement in Afghanistan. It wishes to leverage the fact that it doesn't have a history of invasion/ war against Afghanistan unlike other major actors, like the US and Russia. Even though Chinese ambitions include containing US influence in the region, the reality is that China did benefit from US' prolonged presence in Afghanistan. Beijing's engagement significantly widened from being an indifferent economic player to extending cooperation in counter-terrorism, dealing with the challenges of the coronavirus and aiming to connect the neighbouring states of Afghanistan through the BRI.

China has been one of the first nations along with Pakistan to legitimise the Taliban after the group took over Kabul on August 15, 2021. Beijing kept its embassy open, was quick to establish diplomatic contact with the Taliban, resumed air corridor, extended humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, and most importantly, has been actively campaigning for the recognition of the Taliban regime at the international front. China is driven primarily by its security interests which entail ensuring no support is extended to the Uyghurs from the Afghan soil. China sees Afghanistan as a regional connector to fulfil its ambitious plans of expanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region. However, the evolving security and political situation in Afghanistan poses different set of questions and uncertainties for Beijing's future engagement in Afghanistan. New Delhi needs to carefully evaluate these developments in Kabul to assess its future steps. India remains committed to extend humanitarian assistance to Afghan people and seeks peace and stability in Afghanistan. India and five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan have decided to form a joint working group on Afghanistan. CAPS Wrap-Up is an attempt to study varied dimensions of China's engagement in Afghanistan for a deeper assessment of evolving scenario in Afghanistan.

Dr Shalini Chawla

*Editor*

# Evolving China-Taliban Bonhomie: Strategic Interests, Hope and Realities

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The Taliban's takeover of Kabul on August 15th, 2021, did not evoke any surprised reaction from China. Beijing, along with Pakistan and Russia, demonstrated calm and decided to keep their embassies in Afghanistan open, whereas the US, India, and other European countries were quick to shut down the consulate and evacuate their diplomatic staff. Within ten days of the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, China established diplomatic contact with the Taliban. After the talks between the deputy head of the Taliban's political office, Abdul Salam Hanafi, and Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan, Wang Yu, in Kabul, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin, said that, "China and the Afghan Taliban have smooth and effective communication and consultation." Even though China has made insincere statements for the international community that it would welcome the 'inclusive government' in Afghanistan, it was not hesitant to exclude the democratic leadership from its engagement and so-called 'peace talks' with the Taliban before August 2021. For China, an 'inclusive government' in Afghanistan is not essentially a democratically elected government but a regime that assures peace and stability and accommodates Chinese strategic interests and security concerns.

Pakistan supported the Taliban since its origin in the 1990s, ensured its resurgence post 9/11, consistently strengthened the group's position during the US (and NATO allies) military operations in Afghanistan and provided it with the necessary support to victoriously sail through the hastened US exit. China played a crucial role in Afghanistan by maintaining a cautious and cordial relationship with the democratically elected regime, and at the same time, providing the Taliban with much needed legitimacy and confidence that a major economic and military power is ready to back it, irrespective of the Taliban's blatant disregard for a much desired inclusive government (by the Afghans), human rights, and women's liberation.

Looking into China's ambitious profile, its prime interests and stakes in Afghanistan include: 1) Guard its borders, ensure no support from Afghan soil is extended to Xinjiang militancy and control spill over of extremism in its territory; 2) Minerals in Afghanistan are attractive for Beijing; 3) Secure the smooth expansion and functioning of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative (BRI) in the region and expand BRI to Afghanistan; 4) China sees Afghanistan's geographical location as a significant facilitator towards the expansion of its regional influence; and, 5) Occupy the strategic space available post US exit from the region.

Chinese engagement in Afghanistan had started to gain momentum after President Trump's firm announcement on the US exit. China sees its deep strategic alliance with Pakistan as a major facilitator for expanding its engagement in Afghanistan. Pakistan, (at the moment) sees the Taliban takeover as its strategic victory and believes this would adversely impact India's engagement in Afghanistan. Beijing wishes to leverage the fact that it doesn't have a history of invasion/ war against Afghanistan, unlike other major actors like the US and Russia. Even though the Chinese ambitions include containing US influence in the region, the reality

is that China did benefit from the US' prolonged presence in Afghanistan. Beijing's engagement significantly widened, from being an indifferent economic player to extending cooperation in counter-terrorism, dealing with the challenges of the coronavirus and aiming to connect the neighbouring states of Afghanistan through BRI.

Post August 2021, Beijing has been prompt in its support and has resumed direct air-trade links with Afghanistan. The restoration of the commercial corridor between China and Afghanistan was marked by a large cargo plane carrying 45 tons of pine nuts from Kabul to China. Beijing also announced over \$30 million worth of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. In return, China expects the Taliban to clamp down on the Uyghurs. China has been worried about the rising Uyghur secessionism in the western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) bordering Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and Afghanistan and is apprehensive about the proliferation of rising extremism from the Afghan-Pakistan border into the restive Xinjiang. Continued instability in Afghanistan would have direct implications for China's BRI in the region and also impact China's economic initiatives in Kabul. Many reports suggest that Uyghur separatists of the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) have deep links with Al Qaeda and receive training in the Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and also receive weapons (and training) from Pakistan. China would want to seek insurance from the Taliban that the East Turkistan separatists do not get any support from Afghanistan and the Taliban associates. Ahmed Yusuf, a leader of the Uyghurs currently near the Badakshan border, said, "One of the China's conditions for recognising the Taliban is to cut their relationship with us the Uyghurs and get them out of Afghanistan".<sup>1</sup> The Chinese expect commitments from the Taliban to expel the Uyghurs from the Afghan territory or hand them over to Beijing. There are reports suggesting a conflict on this issue amongst the Taliban. There is a pragmatic group within the Taliban that supports the Chinese position, and on the other hand, there is an ideological hardcore faction that is opposed to this.<sup>2</sup> Another critical threat to China is the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISKAP), which has been emboldened after the Taliban takeover, has escalated attacks in Afghanistan, and is keen on welcoming the Uyghur fighters (expelled by the Taliban).<sup>3</sup> Chinese are also deeply concerned about the drugs coming from Afghanistan, as the Golden Crescent (meaning Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan) is the main gateway for smuggling drugs into China.

China has been discussing Afghanistan's incorporation into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and options including connecting CPEC via railway to Kandahar and the Kabul-Peshawar motorway have been discussed. Chinese companies have been circumspectly watching the natural resources in Afghanistan, which are estimated at \$1 trillion. In 2007, a deal worth \$3.4 billion (30-year lease) was signed between Afghanistan and two Chinese state-owned companies – the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) and the Jiangxi Copper Company Limited (JLC) - to mine copper in the eastern region of Afghanistan at Aynak Copper Mine, the world's second-largest copper deposit. In 2011, China National Petroleum Corp. was awarded three Amu Darya basin exploratory blocks in Afghanistan. Even after a decade, there has been no progress on these projects owing to security, political and procedural obstacles. There are reports of Chinese companies and contractors exploring opportunities for mineral wealth extraction in Afghanistan. According to the *Global Times*, Chinese business representatives in Afghanistan are due to hold a defense expo aiming to provide a platform to the producers and traders to explore markets for their goods.

Although there is a keenness in China to explore the economic opportunity in Afghanistan, its economic initiatives in Afghanistan will depend on the evolving security dynamics, which are marked by pessimism and uncertainty. China might have been quick in providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and verbal

legitimation to the Taliban, but the fact remains that the country would require much broader and sustained economic assistance for survival. The critical question is: Can China shoulder the burden of sustaining and rebuilding Afghanistan? Highly unlikely; Beijing will not fund the country beyond a point, but it will continue to use its global position and influence as a P-5 member of the United Nations Security Council to fetch international legitimacy and economic assistance for Afghanistan.

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is seen by China as a strategic opportunity to expand its influence in the region and the Islamic world. China feels that by extending much needed humanitarian assistance to the Taliban, it can seek commitments from the group to control Uyghurs. However, the evolving situation in Afghanistan reveals a complex set of realities: increasing instability, factionalism within the Taliban, the rise of the Islamic State, and the challenges of funding Afghanistan's survival as a state. Given these realities, China is likely to be cautious in its engagement with Afghanistan. While it will keep up the projection of support to the Taliban regime, a campaign to legitimize the Taliban and seek economic assistance from the international community for Kabul, it will cautiously 'wait and watch' and be pragmatic in dealing with the Taliban.

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Saikiran Kannan, Taliban's growing proximity with China is an opportunity ISKP trying to leverage, *India Today*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/taliban-china-relation-afghanistan-india-pakistan-threat-to-uyghur-muslims-1875479-2021-11-11>. Accessed on January 1, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See, Tom O'Connor, "ISIS Puts China On Notice by Recruiting Minorities for Attacks in Afghanistan", *Newsweek*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-put-china-notice-ethnic-minority-attacks-afghanistan-1640973>. Accessed on December 10, 2021.

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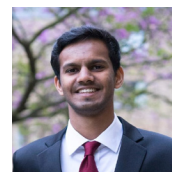
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## *Afghanistan as a Key Link in China's BRI?*

**Mr Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury**

*Research Associate*



Announced in Kazakhstan in September 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a convergence of China's domestic and foreign policy that aims to strengthen its global connectivity through a network of overland and sea routes, oil and gas pipelines, and power grids, all while providing developing countries with a new alternative path to development. With China's impressive rise over the past decades, it seeks to provide beneficial development to countries, drawing from China's experience and avoiding mistakes made by the West.<sup>1</sup> For China, this outreach through the BRI also benefits Beijing's interests and regional ambitions.

An important section of the BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that links western China with the Gwadar Port in the Indian Ocean. Other routes from western China that include roads, rails, and pipelines also aim to traverse Central and West Asia.

It is in this light that the fall of the United States-backed Afghan government to the Taliban and China's engagement with the group has garnered interest. Although Beijing is yet to formally recognize the Taliban, it emerged as one of the first to develop diplomatic channels and offer foreign aid. There is no doubt they feel the vacuum left by the U.S. could be strategically exploited and are exploring options to extend the CPEC into Afghanistan. According to a retired PLA official, "Beijing has few qualms about fostering a closer relationship with the Taliban and is ready to assert itself as the most influential outside player in an Afghanistan now all but abandoned by the United States."<sup>2</sup> The Taliban regime too is eager to engage with China – viewing them as Afghanistan's primary source of economic aid for the foreseeable future. Even before taking over Kabul, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen stated that the group welcomed Chinese investments in reconstruction and would ensure their safety.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it would be useful to examine whether Afghanistan can play an important role as a part of the BRI.

Although Beijing intends on increasing its influence in Afghanistan and is formulating a way to integrate the country into the BRI, China will not rush into the country. First and foremost, Beijing will ensure that its own interests and security concerns are addressed. Subsequently, China will be able to successfully extend the BRI only if Afghanistan is stable. The past two decades have shown that Afghanistan has remained "at best, tangential to China's economic and infrastructure efforts" under the BRI.<sup>4</sup>

### **China's Economic Interests in Afghanistan**

China's interests with regard to the BRI are primarily twofold. First, Afghanistan's geographic location at the crossroads of Asia allows opportunities for China to have greater access to West Asia. By extending the CPEC to Afghanistan through the Peshawar-Kabul motorway, which is already being discussed, would create a shorter land route for China to access the West Asian markets. Subsequently, it would also enable easier access to Iran

with whom China is bolstering bilateral ties, and could reportedly be investing \$400 billion over 25 years.<sup>5</sup>

Second, beneath the surface, Afghanistan is rich in mineral resources. According to a 2019 report by the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, it is estimated that the country holds “more than 2.2 billion metric tons (MTs) of iron ore, 1.3 billion MTs of marble, almost 30 million MTs of copper, 1.4 MTs of rare-earth minerals, and 2,700kg of gold.”<sup>6</sup> Although the mining sector remains underdeveloped, Beijing could explore long-term opportunities under the BRI to tap these reserves. China would be especially interested in one of the world’s largest rare-earth deposits, as they are used in a range of high-technology products and have been referred to by Chinese President Xi Jinping as a strategically important resource.<sup>7</sup> Apart from these, Afghanistan also offers the BRI numerous opportunities in infrastructure and industry development.

### **Challenges for China’s BRI**

Although Afghanistan presents attractive opportunities and could be developed into a regional link for the BRI, the challenges outweigh the attractive prospects. Despite Afghanistan formally signing on to the BRI and China promising to fund \$100 million worth of projects, no concrete investments have materialised.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, “in practice, the main railways, highways, and energy infrastructure built in Eurasia with Chinese investment have bypassed Afghanistan to traverse more stable routes.”<sup>9</sup>

Two projects that predate the BRI have also not taken off in Afghanistan. In 2008, a Chinese consortium of the China Metallurgical Group Corporation and Jiangxi Copper Ltd. won a 30-year lease to extract copper from the Mes Aynak mine in Logar province. Subsequently, there has been little development and the project was put on hold due to security concerns. After the Taliban takeover, however, there have been reports of reviving this project, although only time will tell whether the project manages to scratch beneath the surface.<sup>10</sup> In the second instance, the China National Petroleum Corporation won a bid in 2011 to develop an oil field in the Amu Darya basin and drill for 25 years. Again, almost no extraction took place and operations were suspended in 2012.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the above, Pakistan’s relationship with Afghanistan also creates challenges for Beijing. The Taliban takeover, while some thought would immediately bolster Pakistan’s influence and be a victory for Islamabad, has soured relations between the two, resulting in a somewhat complicated victory for Pakistan. This has mainly stemmed from disagreements over the fencing of the Durand Line and the presence of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and other anti-Pakistan groups on Afghan territory. Both China and Afghanistan would benefit from the CPEC rather than building fresh infrastructure through the Wakhan Corridor<sup>12</sup>, a route China has kept closed to most commercial traffic due to the fear of terrorism and drug smuggling spilling over. However, the troubled relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan could complicate extending the BRI to Afghanistan. A strained bilateral relationship has also led to Afghanistan seeking alternative routes to access foreign markets in the past. This, however, does have the ability to change in the future. Thus, notwithstanding the influence Beijing has over Islamabad, it remains to be seen to what extent this can be leveraged to further economic interests and the BRI.

Ultimately, Afghanistan’s deteriorating internal security environment is the most significant challenge for China. This “severely inhibits investment opportunities and the viability of connectivity projects” in the country.<sup>13</sup> With the Taliban regime now in control, this aspect has not yet been entirely assuaged and China will not move ahead on the ground unless its security conditions are met. Summed up, “if China is unable to secure its projects

in Pakistan, where the government is supportive of BRI and China enjoys strong influence, then it will have even more difficulty doing so in Afghanistan.”<sup>14</sup>

To conclude, China’s near-term interests in Afghanistan are security-related, and nothing matters more than stability. These, rather than potential economic gains through the BRI, will drive Beijing’s policy towards the country. China has so far remained a relatively minor stakeholder in Afghanistan’s economy. Despite its relationship with the Taliban regime, its role is unlikely to change soon and Afghanistan will not become a key link in China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Zhou Fangye, “The Historic Contribution Of China’s Reform And Opening Up To The World,” in *Routledge Handbook of the Belt and Road*, ed. Cai Fang and Peter Nolan (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), p. 21-25. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Zhou Bo, “In Afghanistan, China Is Ready to Step Into the Void,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/opinion/china-afghanistan-taliban.html>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Chew, “China a ‘welcome friend’ for reconstruction in Afghanistan: Taliban spokesman,” *South China Morning Post*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3140399/china-welcome-friend-reconstruction-afghanistan-taliban>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, “A BRI(dge) too far: The unfulfilled promise and limitations of China’s involvement in Afghanistan.” *Brookings Institution*, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-bridge-too-far-the-unfulfilled-promise-and-limitations-of-chinas-involvement-in-afghanistan/>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Farnaz Fasshi, Steven Lee Myers, “Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> “Mining Sector Roadmap,” *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum*, 2019, <https://momp.gov.af/sites/default/files/2020-07/MoMP%20Roadmap-1-merged.pdf>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Shunsuke Tabeta, “China consolidates 3 rare earth miners into ‘aircraft carrier’,” *Nikkei Asia*, December 24, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Markets/Commodities/China-consolidates-3-rare-earth-miners-into-aircraft-carrier>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Felbab-Brown, n. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Weitz, “Will China save the Afghan economy?,” *Middle East Institute*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/will-china-save-afghan-economy>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “China moves fast to engage Taliban Govt eyeing Aynak copper mines,” *The Economic Times*, September 15, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-moves-fast-to-engage-taliban-govt-eyeing-aynak-copper-mines/articleshow/86240838.cms>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Felbab-Brown, n. 4.

<sup>12</sup> The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of land in Afghanistan, extending east to China’s Xinjiang Province and separating Tajikistan from Pakistan.

<sup>13</sup> Annie Cowan, “Afghanistan Reconnected: Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *East West Institute*, March 2018, <https://www.eastwest.ngo/sites/default/files/arp-challenges-and-opportunities-in-the-context-of-bri.pdf>. Accessed January 10, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> David Sacks, Jennifer Hillman, “Why Major Belt and Road Investments Are Not Coming to Afghanistan,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-major-belt-and-road-investments-are-not-coming-afghanistan>. Accessed January 10, 2022.



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# *China – Taliban Talks: An Assessment*

**Mr Mohit Sharma**  
*Research Associate*



With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan sees a pivotal turn in its history. The current global geopolitical conditions have made regional players so significant that all eyes have fallen on them. Among others, China assumes great importance as it readily projects itself as the honest broker without the US or Russia's reputational challenges. China's dealings with the Taliban goes before the 9/11 attacks on the United States, and after that, remained low-key when China offered its full support to the 'Global War on Terror'. It would be interesting to do a factual assessment of the meetings between China and the Taliban since the establishment of the first Islamic Emirate in 1996.

## **Background**

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the United States and China worked together to finance and arm Afghan mujahideen through their common ally, Pakistan. China trained Uighurs to fight the Russians in Afghanistan, fearing Moscow's takeover of the old silk route. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent fall of the communist government in Afghanistan, China grew wary of extremism spilling into its Xinjiang province. China has been talking to the Taliban ever since, not because of just mercantilist ambitions, but also to maintain the principle of non-interference, which means Taliban would not export extremism into volatile Xinjiang or condemn abuses against the Uighur Muslims in China. For the Taliban, China would not question their human rights abuses. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying, when recently asked about the Taliban's human rights abuses, replied that "China has long adhered to non-interference in internal affairs of Afghanistan and pursues a friendly policy towards entire Afghan people."<sup>1</sup>

## **China's Engagement with the Taliban**

**December 10, 1998** – The People's Republic of China and the Taliban underwent a Military Cooperation in December 1998, said to be brokered by Pakistan. China agreed to repair and maintain equipment that Taliban had captured and assist in training the Taliban's armed forces at Taxila in Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> In return, the Taliban decided not to provide any training to the Chinese Muslims in Xinjiang. China saw military camps in Afghanistan as a grave security threat. One of the camps had been established by Tahir Yuldashev, leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), who had cultivated deeper linkages with the terrorist group 'Turkestan Islamic Party'. China was also wary of the Afghan heroin smuggled across the China-Afghan border.

**October 1999** – Mullah Omar (the then emir of Taliban) conveyed annual felicitations via Radio Shariat on the occasion of China's national day.<sup>3</sup> Chinese officials also fled to Kabul to put economic relations back on track and launch flights between Urumqi (capital of Xinjiang province) and Kabul. China's ambassador to Pakistan sought a meeting with Mullah Omar. Analysts from the Chinese think tank, 'China Institute of

Contemporary International Relations' (Ministry of state-run think tank), travelled to Kandahar to prepare for the meeting.

**Meeting between Lu Shulin and Mullah Omar** – Though China denied any clandestine negotiations between them and the Taliban, they did not reject the existence of pragmatic contact channels. After this alleged Kandahar meeting, China abstained on UNSC resolution 1333, which called on all states to prevent any assistance and support for the Taliban. According to Abdul Salam Zaeef, former Taliban envoy to Pakistan, the Chinese ambassador was the only foreign diplomat to maintain good relations with their mission in Islamabad.

During 2000 and 2001, China pushed up its economic activities in Taliban ruled Afghanistan. In 2000, the Chinese firm ZTE agreed to install telephone lines in Kabul after a counter-guarantee provided by Pakistan. By late 2001, China had taken over as the biggest investor in Afghanistan, with authorised investments mostly in power generation and repairing of power grids. In July 2001, the Taliban delegation spent a week in China as guests and met Chinese entrepreneurs. The international reputation of China in its support of the War on Terror got a whip in October 2001, when US intelligence reports claimed that China continued to supply arms (SA-7 Shoulder fire missiles) to al-Qaeda even after 9/11.<sup>4</sup> In August 2001, Osama Bin Laden had also called for closer Taliban-China ties to reduce US influence. In 2001, several reports indicate that Chinese companies were aiding the Taliban. Indian intelligence also came up with the information that Huawei India was in liaison with the Taliban and also supplied them with communication surveillance machines. Due to this, the government of India deported 180 Chinese experts from the Huawei office in Bangalore.

For a decade after 2002, China maintained its state-to-state relationship with the Afghan government. China provided the government in Kabul with reconstruction aid and material support and did not establish much contact with the Taliban till 2014. When it was realised that the Taliban would have to be accommodated as a political player and the US started devising strategies to withdraw completely from Afghanistan, China started to directly talk with the Taliban and assume more traction in post-US Afghanistan.

**November 2014** – Report from the 'Afghan Islamic Press' cited that Taliban representatives travelled to China in 2014 to "share Islamic Emirate's stance with China". The delegation was reportedly led by Qari Din Muhammad, based at the Taliban office in Doha. China wanted to further its own understanding of the newest changes inside the Taliban. China also offered to mediate talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban to increase Beijing's involvement in the Afghan rebuilding process. Kabul's involvement in these talks remained unclear. In the same year, a position of special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan was introduced by the foreign ministry of China and named Sun Yuxi to the post.

**May 2015** – China organised a secret meeting between the Taliban and the Afghan Government in May 2015 in Urumqi (Xinjiang). Sher Mohammad Stanikzai led the Taliban delegation.<sup>5</sup> China indirectly confirmed the meeting by stating that China maintains contact with all parties related to Afghan peace talks.

**November 2015** – China offered to host talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Urumqi for the second time. The Taliban delegation was led by Mullah Jalil (former foreign minister), Mullah

Abdul Razaq (former interior minister), and Mullah Hassan Rahmani (former governor of Kandahar). Taliban, however, issued a statement that these were not official representatives of the Afghan Taliban.<sup>6</sup> For China, if the Urumqi meetings led to full-fledged negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban, it would have been the political outcome that Beijing desired.

**July 2016** – A new initiative that involved the US, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan was launched in January 2016, called the Quadrilateral Coordination Group. A roadmap was laid out where Pakistan would use its influence to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. However, this peace process hit an impasse when Taliban's leader, Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, was killed in an American drone strike, and hence talks with the Taliban broke down. In July 2016, an Afghan delegation visited China to “explore prospects” for Beijing's role in restarting the political dialogue.<sup>7</sup> A four-member delegation led by Sher Abbas Stanakzai visited Beijing on July 18 at the special invitation of the Chinese government. China wished to learn more about the political stance of the new Taliban emir, Haibatullah Akhundzada, to see where he stands on reconciliation talks with the US backed Afghan government. They also discussed “the invasion of Afghanistan and talked about a joint stance against the malicious policies of the invading forces.”<sup>8</sup>

**June 2019** – The Taliban delegation headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar visited Beijing. According to the Chinese ministry, the two sides discussed the Afghan peace process and other security-related issues.<sup>9</sup> This meeting came amid several negotiations between the US and the Taliban, which had been criticised for the lack of Afghan involvement and absence of women's rights issues. Both sides agreed to stay in communication and cooperation for the political settlement of the Afghan issue and counter-terrorism. China's relationship with Taliban offered an alternate platform for actors side-lined by the US. China, however, stated that the “US-Taliban deal is a good framework for peaceful solution of the Afghan issue and they are in support of it.”<sup>10</sup>

China's engagement efforts intensified in June 2019, as peace talks between the US and Taliban proceeded quickly. China invited Baradar again to participate in a two-day intra-Afghan conference held in October 2019.<sup>11</sup> The meeting got postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis and then never took place.

**July 2021** – Chinese Foreign minister Wang Yi met with a nine member Taliban delegation led by Mullah Baradar in Tianjin.<sup>12</sup> The meeting was unprecedented in the way China publicised it. Wang publicly acknowledged the Taliban as a crucial military and political force that was to play an essential role in the peace, reconciliation and reconstruction of the country. Such affirmations from the Chinese gave the Taliban much needed legitimacy on the international stage. Taliban reiterated that it would create an investment-friendly environment in Afghanistan.

At the moment, humanitarian aid and COVID vaccines are the major Chinese assistance to Afghanistan. Diplomatically, China is trying to gather international support for the current Afghan administration by calling to lift sanctions and unfreeze Afghan foreign assets. China has a much larger aim, i.e., to secure its security-related concerns in the Western frontier and for its Belt and Road projects in Central Asia. China wants the Taliban to fight the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to prevent cross border terrorism, along with its much larger concern to protect its economic interests in the region.



## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Mumbai, August 16, 2021, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgmb/eng/fyrth/t1899785.htm>. Accessed on 15 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> J Mohan Malik, "Assessing China's tactical gains and Strategic losses after 11 September," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2002, p. 258.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Jin, "What to make of China's latest meeting with the Taliban", *The Diplomat*, August 5, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/what-to-make-of-chinas-latest-meeting-with-the-taliban/>, Accessed on 16 January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Topychkanov, "Secret Meeting bring Taliban to China", *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, May 28, 2015, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2015/05/28/secret-meeting-brings-taliban-to-china-pub-60241>.

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# *China Afghanistan Relations – The Security Dimension*

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In December 2020, reports emerged about the detention and subsequent deportation of ten Chinese personnel including one woman by the National Directorate of Security (NDS),<sup>1</sup> the intelligence agency of Afghanistan. Although the exact circumstances and motives remain unclear due to a lack of clarity in the official statements given by both countries, the incident demonstrated the growing interests of China and its efforts to increase its influence in Afghanistan.

The current fragile security environment in Afghanistan and the competing interests of various global powers in the region presents unique challenges, and opportunities, to China's ambition of becoming a global hegemon. Since any stress on its periphery is bound to affect its global designs, China will endeavour to mitigate these tensions with skilful employment of all the instruments at its disposal, particularly the use of diplomacy and economic clout, and, if need be, military force. The Chinese reaction to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has therefore been pragmatic and underlines its geostrategic and economic outlook towards the region”

## **Dragging The Dragon**

From a Chinese perspective, their national interests are primarily related to the possibility of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups, like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which could further fuel religious extremism and Uighur separatism in its western province of Xinjiang. China will also be concerned by the strengthening of other terror groups like the Daesh and its local affiliates.

Besides the terror threat, China is also particularly concerned about the narcotics smuggling from the region. Although much of the drugs like heroin and opiate being smuggled into China presently originate in Myanmar, the ratio of drugs reaching from its western borders has significantly increased in recent years.<sup>2</sup> This unchecked proliferation of narcotics and related organised crimes, especially in its closely controlled western provinces, presents significant challenges to the Chinese authorities.

Apart from the above- mentioned security concerns, the Chinese design of attaining global supremacy through its grand geostrategic BRI project, is also likely to face a roadblock due to continued instability in war- torn Afghanistan. China will therefore need to focus on creating favourable conditions for the successful operationalisation of its flagship BRI projects, including the much needed connectivity of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with the Central Asian Region.<sup>3</sup>

## **A Slow and Steady Engagement**

Although China is seen to have adopted a somewhat reticent approach towards involving itself in Afghanistan, it has in fact, kept itself steadily, and silently, invested in the region.

China was involved in providing covert assistance for arming the Afghan Mujahideen in their jihad

against the Soviets.<sup>4</sup> As reported, China not only provided approximately \$400 million in aid, but also a significant quantum of arms and ammunition to the Mujahideen.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, China has been developing strong ties with whosoever is at the helm of affairs in Kabul. These engagements have been on a discernible rise in recent years. In October 2015, an MOU on defence cooperation was signed between the two defence ministries. Although the exact details remain confidential, it is believed that the agreement was intended to build the counter- terrorism capabilities of the Afghan National Army. Similar MOU with the intent to train, arm and equip the Afghan Police was also signed, and four security scanners were delivered during Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao's visit in November 2015.<sup>6</sup>

General Fang Fenghui, a member of China's Central Military Commission (CMC) and chief of the CMC's General Staff, visited Kabul in February 2016 and announced an aid of approximately 480 million yen (\$73 million). Subsequently, in July 2016, Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) received their first consignment of military equipment from China, which included military uniforms, logistics items, spares for military vehicles, and some undisclosed weapons and ammunition. As per some estimates, China provided approximately \$70 million worth of military aid to Afghan defence forces from 2016 to 2018.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese desire to militarily engage with Afghanistan was also evident in the unconfirmed reports about the setting up of a Chinese military base in the Wakhan Corridor of the Badakhshan Province. As per some inputs, China intended to either station at least one battalion of its troops in the area or assist the ANDSF with raising, equipping and sustaining a brigade in the mountainous boundary region.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the non-implementation of this proposal for a limited presence and proactive role in the strategically important Wakhan corridor, China has continued to maintain close bilateral security cooperation with Afghanistan by focusing its attention on intelligence sharing, equipment and training.

Simultaneously, China also kept its channels of communication open with the Taliban, resulting in high-profile visits and exchanges. It even facilitated secret talks between Kabul and the Taliban at Urumchi. Now, with the Taliban in power, China can effectively leverage its cordial relations and economic clout to intensify military and security cooperation. As the Taliban government settles down and attempts to establish its grip over the country, it will require generous assistance, which China is likely to provide in exchange for security guarantee.

### **The Pakistan Factor**

Both China and Pakistan have a strong geo-economic stake in extending the flagship BRI project, the CPEC to Afghanistan and beyond. The rise in targeting of Chinese personal working on various projects in Pakistan has cast a shadow on the CPEC. Pakistan has always blamed the terror sanctuaries in Afghanistan for these attacks. The security situation in volatile Afghanistan will therefore have a significant impact on not only the current economic projects but also their planned extensions, if any, into Afghanistan.

Since China is not prepared to involve itself in Afghanistan beyond a certain threshold, at least at this stage, it will continue to exploit Pakistan's knowledge and expertise to influence events in Afghanistan.

The growing strategic leverage of China over Pakistan will therefore also be a crucial factor in shaping ties between China and Afghanistan. Despite Pakistan's ideological, operational, and material support to the Taliban, there are uneasy contours in their bilateral relationship. In the case of continued disagreements

between the two on issues such as border fencing, China certainly has the potential, perhaps not the inclination, to be the trusted security guarantor between the two neighbours.

### **A Careful Recalibration**

China certainly has the potential to play a constructive role in the rehabilitation and return to normalcy in Afghanistan. However, it is not yet ready to occupy the security and governance vacuum left by the US forces. China has traditionally refrained from unilaterally deploying its troops in an active combat role on foreign soil. The capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in being able to operate in a hostile counter-insurgency environment are yet unproven. Moreover, given the reputation of Afghanistan as the "Graveyard of Empires", China is unlikely to involve itself in an enhanced security role.

It is, however, most certainly on its way to enhancing diplomatic and economic engagements. This careful recalibration is essential for China and will also result in some additional involvement in the fields of military security, especially in regards to the provision of aid, threat mitigation to its investments and cooperation in counterterrorism.

China will also have to remain cognizant of the geopolitical and social realities of Afghanistan, especially about their aversion to foreign presence, and will therefore play by its trusted rule book of increasing influence through "connectivity and commerce". The reluctance of the western world to provide liberal monetary aid to Kabul post-Taliban takeover also makes China a central player in the region, if it wants to be.

As of now, it is doing a fine balancing act and will step up as soon as it finds conditions favourable. It is, however, very unlikely that China will go for a "Boots on ground" approach to Afghanistan, instead of relying on its economic might and diplomatic manoeuvres to exercise strategic influence over Kabul.

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# *Uyghur militancy, Chinese Concerns and Expectations from the Taliban*

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Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic Muslim group native to China's western province of Xinjiang, officially called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), are the largest ethnic minority in China, constituting around 12 million Uyghur population. Uyghurs are ethnically and culturally related and inclined to the Central Asian nations and speak their own Turkic language, which makes them different from China's ethnic majority, the Han Chinese. Uyghur resistance can be dated back to the mid-18th century when the empire ruled by the Qing dynasty conquered the region. Since then, Uyghur resistance has been continuing and even had limited periods of independence when local states were declared the East Turkistan Republic during the periods of 1931-34 and 1944-49. Later, the region became an integral part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and a national autonomous region was established in 1955.<sup>1</sup>

The prime factor which led to the continued resistance from the Uyghur ethnic minority is the policy neglect of the PRC's Communist Party of China (CPC) for the peaceful integration of Uyghurs with the ethnic Han Chinese. Due to the continuous suppression of their religious and ethnic freedom, there was a mass exodus of Uyghurs into neighbouring states and around the world, including Afghanistan. This led to the formation of several groups and organizations fighting for the independence of the East Turkistan state. Among several groups and organizations that have formed over the decades, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) have gained prominence and are the most influential. The WUC was established in Germany in 2004, and has an official goal to fight for the human rights of Uyghurs and promote democracy in XUAR through peaceful and non-violent means, and not to achieve independence of XUAR or the formation of East Turkistan (which is not accepted and disregarded by the PRC). Another prominent organization is the ETIM, which has resorted to violence and pledged for the independence of East Turkistan.<sup>2</sup>

## **Origins and Genesis of ETIM**

The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is an Uyghur terrorist organization established with the sole intention of creating an East Turkistan state carving the China's western province of XUAR. Though the origins of ETIM are contested, it is noted that the organization was formed in 1940 by three individuals: Abdul Hameed, Abdul Hakeem Makhdoom, and Abdul Azeez Makhdoom. The organization came to the limelight around the 1980's when it took radicalization and violence as a means to achieve its goal. The organization was officially identified as ETIM only in 1997, under the leadership of Hakeem, and since then, it has orchestrated and is responsible for several terrorist attacks in China.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, the group has evolved more strategically and has a presence in Central and West Asia,



Southeast Asia, and the Afghan-Pak region and is affiliated with many global and regional terrorist and extremist groups like Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, ISIS (ISIL) and the Haqqani network. However, due to its affiliations and activity in different regions under different organizations, ETIM is also referred to as 'East Turkistan Liberation Organization' (ELTO), 'East Turkistan Islamic Party' (ETIP), 'Turkistan Islamic Party' (TIP) and; 'Islamic Party of Turkistan' (IPT). However, due to poor organizational structure and translation errors, all these groups are considered a part of ETIM, and the United Nations Security Council Al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee lists ETIM and all affiliated/sub-groups as one entity under ETIM and has listed it as a terrorist organization since 2002.<sup>4</sup>

### **China and Afghanistan: The Case of ETIM**

As a war-torn state for decades, Afghanistan has given birth and shelter to numerous terrorist and extremist organizations. China borders Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor, which opens to the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan, which is considered a hotbed for Uyghur militancy and terrorism for decades. China was always very particular and wary about this region due to the influence of ETIM in this region and the chances of its spillover to XUAR.<sup>5</sup> According to certain sources, ETIM moved its headquarters to Kabul in 1998 under the leadership of Hasan Mahsum, after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996. After moving to Afghanistan, ETIM is said to have evolved exponentially with the Taliban's and Al-Qaeda's logistic and financial support and training to its militants.<sup>6</sup> China accuses ETIM of more than 200 terrorist attacks from 1990 to 2001 in XUAR, which allegedly killed more than 200 people.

After the Taliban was overthrown in 2001, ETIM also lost its influence but survived all along by relocating across Afghanistan with the help of local Taliban commanders and taking shelter in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Even during this period, i.e., in the last two decades, ETIM has tried to keep its presence and orchestrated several attacks killing hundreds of people in China.<sup>7</sup>

The recent geopolitical shift after the Taliban took over Afghanistan last year has made nations across the world, including China, concerned about the security situation in Afghanistan and the possibility of Afghanistan becoming a terror hotbed again to attack other nations with a clear reference to ETIM.<sup>8</sup>

### **Chinese Concerns and Taliban's Assurances**

Soon after the Taliban took over Afghanistan on 15th August 2021, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying stated that "China stands ready to continue to develop good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan and play a constructive role in Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction".<sup>9</sup> After the U.S. withdrawal, Biden's administration froze nearly \$9.1 billion of Afghan government reserves in U.S. bank accounts, and soon its allies followed by suspending all international aid and assistance.<sup>10</sup> Soon, China utilized the opportunity and took a stand-alone decision and asserted the international community to provide aid and assistance to Afghanistan without any conditions and unfreeze the assets.<sup>11</sup> China took a step forward along with Pakistan and was among the first nations to offer aid and assistance and pledged \$31 million worth of food supplies, vaccines, winter supplies and medicines.<sup>12</sup>

Though China didn't officially recognize the Taliban regime, it has extended its legitimacy to the Taliban's leadership, which seems friendly yet cautious and prudent. China's approach towards the Taliban seems to be more of a calculative approach where Beijing thinks that economic and diplomatic incentives

might persuade the Taliban to be more inclined towards Chinese interests.<sup>13</sup> It seems like China's concern is more about managing the threats emanating out of Afghanistan and targeting Chinese territory rather than grabbing the opportunities.<sup>14</sup> Beijing sees ETIM as a major threat to its internal security and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China considers its XUAR region crucial for the success of its BRI project as vital trade routes run through this region.<sup>15</sup>

Since the Taliban has taken over Afghanistan, China has asked the Taliban to take concrete steps to cut-off its ties with other terrorist organizations, particularly ETIM. Wang Yi, Chinese foreign minister "has sought assurances from the Taliban that it will make a clean break with the ETIM, a group Beijing alleges is inciting separatism in neighbouring Xinjiang, warning Kabul that the group not only threatens China's security but also Afghanistan's long-term stability."<sup>16</sup>

Initially, the Taliban had dodged questions about Chinese treatment of Uyghur Muslim ethnic minorities in XUAR but mellowed its voice and assured China that it would act against any other terrorist organizations using Afghanistan as a base to operate and attack any other nation.<sup>17</sup> Still, China is very circumspect about the Taliban's assurances as a recent report from the United Nations suggests that there are about 500 militants in northern Afghanistan's Badakhshan province who have recently joined the Taliban; it consists of several Tajik, Chechen, Uyghur, and Uzbek fighters.<sup>18</sup> They have a longstanding relationship with ETIM militants and other Taliban commanders in the region. However, if Taliban leadership tries to launch an offensive against ETIM, there might be long term repercussions as the Taliban tries to bring all ethnic groups of Afghanistan under its fold.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, if China wants to utilise the economic resources of Afghanistan, first, it needs to address the security issues emanating from Afghanistan, particularly ETIM. Despite repeated pressure from China asking the Taliban to cut off its terror links, particularly with ETIM and Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban's continued assurance to China that Uyghur militants have left Afghanistan, the situation seems to wary as both China and the Taliban are trying to strategically hedge against each other to gain more political and economic autonomy.

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# *Chinese Expansion as a Facilitator in Iran-Afghan Relations*

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The rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the seizure of power by the Taliban in Kabul sent shock waves around the world in August 2021. The Afghan government crumbled like a house of cards after the pull out of the American forces from there. Various nations like China and Pakistan have grabbed the centre-stage to engage with Taliban for their various alleged motives. In fact, after Taliban's siege of Kabul, China emerged as the first nation to pledge humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Furthermore, China's bonhomie with Iran has been growing quite considerably owing to its BRI plans in the West Asian region in which Iran plays a significant role. In similar circumstances, Iran's desire to engage with Taliban without formally recognizing it as the legitimate ruling power in Afghanistan has somewhat pushed it a bit closer to China where discussions related to Afghanistan are concerned.

In all of this, Indian efforts to utilize Chabahar port for supplying humanitarian aid to Afghanistan has been hailed as a good diplomatic move by New Delhi. Chabahar is being developed by India to facilitate trade and connectivity with Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. Iran has also offered to facilitate Indian efforts to send wheat and COVID-19 medicines to Afghanistan via Tehran.<sup>1</sup> In this context, this paper attempts to evaluate whether China can act as a facilitator in the emerging Iran-Afghanistan relations. Further it discusses the precarious diplomatic balance of Iran in its dealing with Afghanistan and whether it will affect India's ventures vis-à-vis Chabahar port.

## **China and Iran are Together in Afghanistan?**

China has been trying hard to make Afghanistan a mutual issue with its (Afghanistan) neighbour Iran, in order to stabilize its growing role in Afghanistan. This is despite the fact that China has been reiterating that it will only recognize Taliban as legitimate government in Afghanistan if it forms an open and inclusive government along with dissociating itself from all terrorist groups. One of the reasons cited by analysts is that Beijing's stress for an inclusive Islamic government is related to Taliban adhering to and promoting peace and stability, which are significant for facilitating Chinese interests and conditions. While it is also being indicated that the Chinese, Russian, Iranian and Pakistani efforts to collaborate on current Afghan crisis could be another chapter in the 'great game' prevalent in Afghanistan. However, there are chances that Moscow, Beijing, Tehran and Islamabad—all are trying to diplomatically promote their own interests in this new geopolitical order which emerged after Taliban's capture of Kabul.

However, in the game of diplomacy and international politics, China has refrained from recognizing the Taliban government in Afghanistan. There are chances that China might make a concerted effort to recognize Taliban by pursuing regional countries like Iran and other Islamic

nations of West Asia and Russia. This is based on the assumption that Taliban might curb the spread of terrorism and militancy, in order to refrain Afghanistan to slide back into chaos which will be detrimental to Chinese BRI plans in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> So far, China has been safely endorsing the Taliban government to garner humanitarian aid and support for Afghanistan. Moreover, Taliban is seeking Chinese assistance in order to get its government fully recognized by the international community. This is because of the \$9 billion of frozen Afghani assets abroad.<sup>3</sup>

### **Iran and Taliban: Enmity to Pragmatism?**

Even though the Iranian government had welcomed the departure of the US from its eastern neighbours. According to Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, “America’s military defeat and its withdrawal must become an opportunity to restore life, security and durable peace in Afghanistan.”<sup>4</sup> However, it is still apprehensive about the spill over of Sunni terrorism or refugee crisis across its almost 900 kms (560 miles) long border it shares with Afghanistan. With the Taliban’s capturing the reins of power in Kabul led various Gulf and foreign nations have been scrambling to find ways to engage with the Taliban—avoiding formally recognizing the Taliban government—for various reasons which included security of their assets and preventing the meltdown of Afghan security and economic situation.

Even though it is difficult to assess the trajectory of Iran-Taliban relations in the next few years, it cannot be ruled out that in the current scenario, Iran visualizes the Taliban “both as an opportunity and a threat.” Iran is now banking on its quiet engagement with the Taliban in the past few years to prevent the destabilizing exodus (if it happens) across its frontiers adjoining Afghan territory. Further, it seeks to protect its growing trade with Afghanistan to support its ailing economy already struggling due to American sanctions. The prospects for Iran’s economic development will be lowered considering the political and economic outlook in Afghanistan remains uncertain. The level of engagement between Tehran and Taliban in the contemporary times also depends on the new Afghan regime’s treatment of Shi’a minorities. In fact, Tehran has time and again extended its support for the formation of an inclusive government in Afghanistan that has the representation of all ethnic groups and factions. At the same time, Iran—like the rest of the world—did not expect Kabul’s fall at this rapid pace. Rather it anticipated a power vacuum following the departure of the US troops with Ashraf Ghani government still holding power reigns. In the first few days of the year 2022, the first meeting between Iranian and Taliban’s leaders happened, however, there was no breakthrough. This collapse of the Afghan government came at a time when the Iranian domestic political system was transitioning with a new hardline candidate coming to power. Thus, most of Iran’s domestic focus has been focused on cabinet selection and the confirmation process for ministers. This is further complicated by the surging COVID-19 waves in Iran in a way overshadowing the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

Iran’s relations with the Taliban had remained complex in the past. The Taliban’s emergence in the 1990s was based on a Sunni extremist ideology and an anti-Shi’ite and anti-Iranian orientation. The two sides were on the brink of war in 1998 when the Taliban killed 11 Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan’s fourth-largest city, Mazar-e-Sharif. The Sunni Taliban has fostered anti-Shi’a sentiments and committed atrocities against the Hazara minority in Afghanistan. So, in order to counter this threat, Iran had armed the Northern Alliance to fight against the Taliban in the 1990s, which rankled the Taliban for a long period. Since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Iran has been cozying up to the group, with a significantly different orientation. This shift should come

as no surprise.

Since the fall of Kabul, Tehran has adopted a more pragmatic stance towards the Taliban regime for various reasons. *Firstly*, the Iranian leadership, in the same way as China and Russia, welcomed the departure of American forces from their geopolitical backyard. Further, this withdrawal also came as a blow to American credibility and influence in the region which can also impact other American allies in the West Asian region. *Secondly*, as mentioned earlier through a proactive and more engaging stance towards the Taliban, Iran aims to prevent another refugee influx. This is also to prevent the additional test for its already strained healthcare system due to pandemic; as well as could also lead to public resentment due to the socio-economic crisis faced by Iranians. *Thirdly*, the drug trade- which is a key source of income for the Taliban. As Iran has been both a key transit route and a market itself, it has been witnessing devastating consequences for its society owing to the drugs. Afghanistan descending into a potential civil war poses additional threats for Iran. *Fourthly*, Taliban 2.0 had started rebranding itself as a nationalistic inclusive organization in an attempt to obtain international recognition along with strengthening its domestic legitimacy.

### **The Delicate Balancing**

The public sentiment towards the Taliban is negative around the world, including Iran, which requires the latter to tread carefully while maintaining balance with the Taliban. This has to be done by Iranian leadership by continuing its cautious rhetoric towards the Taliban. In case, there appears compliance between Taliban and Tehran hardline leadership, the foremost issues to tackle will still remain the treatment of Shi'a Hazara Muslims and curbing drug trade. So, in other words, if both Taliban and Tehran want to establish a bilateral relation it will only be shaped by a transactional policy based on these conditionalities, further depending on the way the Taliban government acts. The prevalence of the more radical elements might result in serious confrontation with Iran based on ideological grounds. If the Taliban fails to control skirmishes against Shi'a Hazara Muslims, its relations with Iran could deteriorate, which in turn could lead Iran to activate its Fatemiyoun<sup>6</sup> units in Afghanistan. Due to the Taliban's antagonistic relationship with Iran, it considers the Fatemiyoun as an Iranian proxy. This could result in making the situation between Tehran and the Taliban more tense shaking this delicate balance.

In case of India, the present circumstances in Afghanistan have become one of the most relevant parts of discussion with Iran. This was indicated by the Iranian foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian while discussing with Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar Iranian support to Indian humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in the form of wheat, medicines and COVID-19 vaccine. Further, both foreign ministers "stressed the need to form an inclusive government" in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> In these discussions, the usage of Chabahar port figures prominently. Even though, China is still an indirect player in Chabahar port project. However, it cannot be ignored that Chinese support to Iranian economy including the 25-year cooperation program is related to gain access to cheaper oil and gas as well as aid its BRI projects.

Both India and China have been competing to invest in Chabahar to reach Afghanistan and there are chances that Iran is trying to play the two rivals off each other to promote its own interests. Chabahar is important for Indian interests regarding its vital geostrategic location as well as counterweight to Gwadar port in Pakistan—being developed by China. Even though the situation seems not that critical for Indian ventures in Chabahar, still it can take an undesired turn by ever-changing circumstances.

Iran is a nation that has been struggling due to economic isolation and sanctions resulting in a stiff socio-political scenario with rising public dissent. In this context, the Taliban ascendancy serves to deepen Iranian economic isolation if it chooses to support and recognize the Taliban as a legitimate Afghan government. Until now, there has been no substantive move towards recognition of the Taliban regime by the international community. Tehran is preparing itself to play a crucial role and maintain a favourable balance of power in post-American Afghanistan. In its these aspirations, Chinese increasing engagements with Taliban can act as a facilitator for Tehran. Despite their ephemeral mutual interests, it remains debatable whether Tehran will covertly or overtly support the Taliban; and whether it will enhance Iranian influence in Afghanistan in the long run. So, it can be said that the Tehran-Taliban alliance can easily be termed as a “marriage of convenience” but whether this will become Iran’s gain is seeming unclear.

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Rezaul H. Laskar, “Will Help India Ship Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan: Iran”, The Hindustan Times, January 09, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/will-help-india-ship-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-iran-101641750263925.html>. Accessed on January 24, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Yew Lun Tain, “China will not be the First to Recognize Taliban Government, Schola Says,” Reuters, October 30, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-will-not-be-first-recognise-taliban-government-scholar-says-2021-10-27/>. Accessed on January 24, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> “Taliban ask China for help in Getting International Recognition”, Bloomberg (Times of India), January 18, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/taliban-should-respect-human-rights-for-the-sake-of-international-recognition-un-chief/articleshow/89062549.cms>. Accessed on January 24, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> “Iran says U.S. “failure” in Afghanistan a chance for durable peace”, Reuters, August 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-says-us-failure-afghanistan-chance-durable-peace-2021-08-16/>. Accessed on January 14, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Ray Takeyh, “Where Iran Stands on the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan”, CFR, August 30, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/where-iran-stands-taliban-takeover-afghanistan>. Accessed on January 14, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> The Fatemiyoun Brigade are the Iranian backed Shi’a Afghan refugees. It also has members of the Hazara Shi’a minority. Hazaras currently constitute approximately 9 percent total Afghanistan. They are considered infidels by the Sunni Taliban and are targeted through deadly attacks by Taliban since the 1990s. Presently, considerable numbers of Hazaras have fled to Iran, where the Iranian government has recruited them to the militia. These Fatemiyouns are men in their 20s or 30s suffering from economic deprivation and vulnerabilities due to their migrant status. Lila Hassan, “What Is the Fatemiyoun Brigade and Why Does It Make the Taliban Nervous?”, The Frontline, July 20, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/what-is-the-fatemiyoun-brigade-and-why-does-it-make-the-taliban-nervous/#:~:text=Who%20are%20the%20Fatemiyoun%3F,total%20population%20of%2038%20million..> Accessed on January 15, 2022.

<sup>7</sup>N. 1.



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