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Pakistan's perspective on Chinese engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan

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Pakistan's perspective on Chinese engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan

Over the past couple of decades, bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan have evolved from being minimalistic to becoming considerably deepened. This has happened primarily due to China's growing economic as well as linked security interests in Afghanistan and the wider region. China-Afghanistan ties have mainly played out in the domains of trade and development, humanitarian aid, and security cooperation. Following the U.S. withdrawal, China-Afghanistan ties are generally expected to expedite further. Practically, since August 2021, when the Taliban took power in Kabul, China has been displaying greater concern for socio-political and economic stability in Afghanistan.

China's increasing footprints in Afghanistan may also translate into a changing regional geopolitical environment with significance for Pakistan. While Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a chequered history of bilateral ties, the impact of the emerging political scenario remains to be seen. So far, Pakistan and China seem to have developed a great degree of convergence of interests viz a viz Afghanistan. Since the August 2021, China and Pakistan have incessantly called for the Taliban-led Afghanistan's political and economic stability. However, how the regional dynamics would unfold for Pakistan in the future is yet to be seen. At the same time, China's increasing engagement in Afghanistan is somewhat new phenomenon, and it may require time to strengthen and deliver substantial dividends to regional stability. Similarly, the Afghan Taliban are yet to develop strong governance and law enforcement structures to ensure domestic stability, as well as guard Pakistan's and China's stakes in Kabul. In this regard, this research article seeks to study Beijing's growing engagement with the Taliban-led government at Kabul, and how it is perceived in Islamabad.

1. China-Afghanistan ties: a brief historical context

Afghanistan was the first country to officially recognise the People's Republic of China in 1950. However, during the next two decades, direct inter-state engagement between the two countries remained limited and inconsequential. A major development in Sino-Afghan relations took place in 1956, when the two countries signed an agreement over China-Afghanistan border. Nevertheless, any meaningful political or economic exchange between the countries did not occur for many years to come.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, China's threat perception about Russian encirclement of its frontiers, through a Soviet-influenced Afghanistan, raised Chinese stakes in Afghanistan. This set the stage for inflow of Chinese military assistance into Afghanistan. The underlying Sino-Soviet rift served as the premise of Chinese engagement in Afghanistan, thereby aiming at bringing down the Soviet influence in Afghanistan. Hence, Chinese military assistance was directed towards the rebels or mujahideen rather than the Soviet-backed Afghan government. However, China was not a party to the Geneva Accords, signed in 1988. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was not followed by an internationally led post-war reconstruction effort, and hence, internal security issues like brewing civil war, extremism, terrorism, and drug trafficking became rampant, and also held the potential to become transnational threats. However, China cautiously chose to refrain from any meaningful engagement with its eastern neighbour in subsequent years.

After years of civil war, Afghanistan was taken over by the Taliban in 1996. Following Taliban's rise to power, China closed its embassy in Kabul, which remained shut until the establishment of provisional Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai in 2002 (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021). During and after the Taliban rule, the presence of foreign extremists in Afghanistan, particularly from China's Xinjiang province and Central Asian Republicans had become a threat for regional stability, particularly for China. In order

to mitigate this threat, a Chinese delegation held talks with Mullah Omar in 2000. As a result of these talks, Mullah Omer pledged that the land of Afghanistan would not be allowed to be used against China.

Following the withdrawal of Soviet troops, China became a part of the '6+2 format', which was constituted by the United Nations to devise a way forward for establishing peace and political reconciliation in Afghanistan. In 2002, China became a signatory of the Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations, thereby pledging to respect the independence and territorial integrity sovereignty of Afghanistan. Over the subsequent years, China fully supported the cause of stability in Afghanistan.

2. The nature of contemporary China-Afghanistan relations

Quite evidently, Beijing's foreign policy in Afghanistan has entered into a new phase with both countries upping their bilateral cooperation on strategic and economic matters. An evident shift in China's Afghanistan policy was observed back in 2014 including in terms of its support for Afghan reconciliation process. However, after August 2021, Chinese engagement in Afghanistan has increased manifold. China's contemporary Afghanistan policy is characterised by a pragmatic, yet cautious, acceptance of Taliban as a political force in Afghanistan. In recent past, China has also engaged with Taliban for the facilitation of inclusive intra-state reconciliatory politics (Zhang, 2022). It is also believed that by strengthening its diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan, China may also seek to override the influence of the United States there. While the future role of the U.S. in Afghanistan is not certain, yet it is quite likely that Chinese role in Afghanistan, shall be of selective engagement rather than an all-out dominance, as was the case of the U.S.

It is generally understood that Chinese interests in Afghanistan primarily lie on the premise of security concerns. China seeks to curb the threat of Uighur militancy emanating from groups like Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which have significant

presence in Afghanistan. However, this is also coupled with the goal of achieving economic stability and protection of Chinese human resource and investment in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. On a wider spectrum, China also seeks to extend its soft power projection in Afghanistan. This is currently being achieved by Chinese military and humanitarian assistance. Lastly, some observers believe that Afghanistan's natural resources remain another key area of interest for policymakers in Beijing. According to one estimate, Afghanistan possesses \$1 trillion worth natural resources that still remain untapped. Hence China's resource-dependent economy deems Afghanistan as a potential hub for its resource extraction and development industry.

On the other hand, the Taliban-led Afghan government desperately looks forward to establishing a working relationship with the regional countries. On the one hand, the Taliban government is struggling to gain international recognition, and on the other hand, it is facing dire financial crisis and humanitarian emergency in terms of rising inflation and poverty. Therefore, Afghanistan's reliance on China's financial, diplomatic, and commercial support renders China a significant leverage in the country.

However, the future of Chinese engagements in Afghanistan would heavily depend on Afghanistan's ability to fulfil Beijing's security interests, in particular Beijing's threat perception viz-a-viz the ETIM (Taneja, 2022). Therefore, in order to achieve better outcomes, Kabul will need to attach special focus to catering to Beijing's interests. In an otherwise case, a possible delay or derailing in Chinese investment projects might be expected as a worst-case scenario for Kabul.

3. Mapping Chinese engagements in Afghanistan

China's political ties with Afghanistan have been characterised by pragmatism. Realising its commercial and security interests vested in Afghanistan, China has been able to sustain a working equation with competing power centres in Afghanistan for decades. Beijing's post-9/11

foreign policy in Kabul primarily relied on provision of economic aid and foreign investments, with the overture of enabling post-war reconstruction. Of now, China also views Afghanistan as a potentially important player in China's regional connectivity ambitions and strategic contingencies in the China's Xinjiang province.

This section seeks to map Chinese engagements in Afghanistan, primarily in the domains of diplomacy, trade, security, and humanitarian assistance.

3.1 Diplomatic engagements

Diplomatic ties between China and Afghanistan have generally played out on the pretext of furthering security cooperation and trade-based engagements. As noted earlier, following Taliban's rise to power in 1996, China closed its embassy in Kabul, which was reopened during Karzai regime. In subsequent years, Beijing provided diplomatic support to Kabul in a number of U.N. resolutions concerning Afghanistan. Afghanistan has also been given the status of an observer state in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with the aim of curbing terrorism, drug smuggling and other crimes within the country. While China officially recognised the provisional Afghan government led by Karzai, in the next few years, also sought to establish informal ties with Afghan Taliban.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to China in 2010 resulted into the signing of a number of trade agreements, leading to an enhanced cooperation in infrastructure development, natural deposits, electricity, and agriculture. Another politically significant development was the conclusion of a 'Joint Declaration on establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership between China and Afghanistan' in 2012.² The declaration also signified China's recommitment to the "Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation" of 2006 (Maan, 2021).

² Details are available on the official website of the Embassy of People's Republic of China in Afghanistan: <http://af.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zagx/asdfg/201311/t20131115_1312054.htm>

Over the years, China also participated in initiatives on intra-Afghan talks for political reconciliation. In 2015, China participated in the Murree peace talks as an observer state along with the U.S. It also became part of the 2016 Quadrilateral Coordination Group and the six nation talks (Khan, 2016). In 2017, China participated in the Kabul process, which was organised by Ashraf Ghani, the then Afghan president. In 2018, talks between the Taliban and Afghan politicians were carried out in Russia, which were also attended by Chinese diplomats. Apart from this, formal meetings between the Afghan government's representatives and Taliban were also held in Beijing. Once again, in October 2019, Taliban representatives were invited by China to take part in an intra-Afghan conference, which continued for two days in Beijing (Al Jazeera, 2019). A number of unconfirmed bilateral meetings between the Taliban and Chinese reportedly took place in the recent years (Stone, 2019a).

In October 2021, the Afghan interim government agreed to establish a working-level mechanism with China after the representatives of the Taliban met with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in Doha, Qatar. In December 2021, China also established a bilateral working group with the Taliban on humanitarian assistance and economic rebuilding (Yau, 2022). Also, in March 2022, prior to the Tunxi Initiative, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi paid an unannounced visit to Afghanistan.

3.2 Trade-related engagements

Trade ties between China and Afghanistan have mainly relied on the Silk Road for the greater part of history. Likewise, in current times, the Silk route, coupled with China's increasing demand for natural resources have directed Chinese trade-related engagements in Afghanistan (Ehsan, 2013). Particularly, the past two decades have experienced a relatively expanding Chinese economic footprint in Afghanistan. As of now, China stands as the largest business investor in Afghanistan. The fact that Afghanistan is a resource rich but financially impoverished state, whereas China is vice

versa both financially as well as in terms of resources, offers quite a functioning bilateral equation.

In 2002, as Chinese diplomatic engagements with Karzai's provisional government increased, trade-related ties were also augmented. In 2008, Chinese investment gained substantial significance in Afghanistan. Between 2000 and 2009, China emerged as Afghanistan's biggest trade partner, as bilateral trade between Beijing and Kabul rose from \$25 million to \$250 million (Tahiri, 2017). Most prominently, the development of Mes Aynak copper mine emerged as Afghanistan's biggest ever foreign-investment worth \$4 billion project. Nevertheless, this project was fraught by delays, discrepancies, and still remains controversial.

In particular, the formation of the Sino-Afghan Economic Committee in 2006, and the signing of the "Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership Agreement" in 2010 paved the way for an increased economic activity between the two countries. The two countries also established China-Afghanistan Joint Committee on Economics and Trade (JCET), which has continued to meet intermittently over the years. Additionally, in 2014, Beijing and Kabul also signed the 'exchange notes on granting zero-tariff treatment to the exports of some Afghan goods to China'. Consequently, it is estimated that since 2015, almost 97% of Afghan exports to China enjoy zero-tariff treatment.³

In 2016, Beijing and Kabul signed a memorandum of understanding, which is generally viewed as a major Chinese step towards bolstering Afghanistan's inclusion into the BRI (Stone, 2019b). In 2017, the number of government-level visits that happened between the two countries' representatives, as well as agreements signed and summits held, indicated the growing convergence between Afghanistan and China (Cowan, 2018).

³ Joint statement can be seen here:

<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201605/t20160530_679461.html>

In 2017, an Afghan delegation also attended the China's Belt and Road Forum (Sacks, 2021).

Chinese leadership has also expressed its wish to incorporate Afghanistan into the CPEC. In June 2021, during the ministerial-level trilateral dialogue among China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the representatives of the three countries reached an 8-point consensus. The ministers also pledged to expand the economic dividends of the BRI for regional growth (CGTN, 2021). During an international conference at Tashkent in July 2022, China's special representative for Afghanistan Yue Xiaoyong said that China would provide finances for building a railway line in Afghanistan, connecting Uzbekistan to Pakistani seaports.

In July 2022, as Afghan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi met at the sidelines of the SCO Foreign Minister Summit, Wang Yi expressed the Chinese government's willingness to extend CPEC to Afghanistan (*Pakistan Today*, 2022). Most recently, in November 2022, during Pakistani premier Shehbaz Sharif's visit to China, both President Xi and Prime Minister Sharif pushed for extending CPEC to Afghanistan. The joint statement of the visit emphasized on increasing Afghanistan's connectivity got regional growth and prosperity (Yousaf, 2022).

In January 2023, Beijing and Kabul signed an agreement for the extraction and development of Afghan oil reserves in Afghanistan's northern Sar-e Pol, Jowzjan and Faryab provinces, covering an area of approximately 4,500 square kilometres. This was the first international agreement, signed by the Taliban government since coming into power back in August 2021. The deal would pave way for increased Chinese investment in Afghanistan.

3.3 Security engagements

Security ties between Afghanistan and China are a relatively newer phenomenon spanning over not more than two decades. China's security-

related engagements in Afghanistan primarily hinge on its threat perception arising from militancy and terrorism, coupled with security concerns for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Nevertheless, the current times are witnessing Chinese security-related engagements in Afghanistan at a relatively unprecedented level.

Apart from the mutually agreed-upon border agreement between China and Afghanistan signed in 1965, Chinese security ties with Afghanistan have remained largely non-existent. In the cold war era, China militarily supported the Afghan mujahideen, rather than the Afghan government. Different accounts have presented different estimates of the magnitude and worth of Chinese military assistance to the mujahideen groups, ranging from \$100 million to \$400 million (till 1985). Peter Tomsen, America's former ambassador to Afghanistan, in his book, "The Wars of Afghanistan" states that Chinese military factories were "switched over to producing Soviet-type AK-47s, RPGs, and 122-mm rocket launchers [for Afghanistan]" (Khalil, 2016). After the Soviet forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan, security threats emanating from Afghanistan due to the onset of civil war rather increased for China. However, China refrained from any kind of military-oriented interference in Afghanistan. During the post-9/11 era, China provided some military assistance to Afghanistan; however, it was too meagre to merit a mention (Ibid).

In, during Afghan president Ashraf Ghani's visit to China, the leaders of both countries pledged to join hands to curb ETIM. As a continuation to the pledge, in February 2015, Afghan 2014 government handed over more than 15 Uyghur militants to the Chinese government. In May 2015, Afghanistan's then interior minister Noor-ul-Haq Ulomi visited China and signed an MoU regarding security cooperation. Agreements mainly revolved around providing financial assistance, military equipment, and trainings to Afghan security forces. Additionally, an agreement for cooperation between the border police of the two countries was also signed. In February 2016, the Chief of China's Central Military Commission

General Staff, General Fang Fenghui visited Afghanistan. During the visit, he announced China's willingness to cooperate with Afghanistan against terrorism. In this context, he also announced Beijing's assistance to Afghan security forces, which amounted to around \$73 million. The overarching objective was the protection of Chinese connectivity infrastructure in the region.

In 2017, the international news media reported that the Chinese security forces were present at the Wakhan Border. In response, Beijing maintained that it was rather "joint counter-terrorism operations (Stanzel, 2018). In 2018, once again reports regarding China's alleged funding and training of the Afghan Brigade (operating at the Wakhan Border) made rounds in media. These reports, however, were denied by Beijing. China also asserted that it never intended to deploy its military personnel in Afghanistan (Standish, 2021). Most recently, during Ashraf Ghani's government, the Afghan security forces collaborated with Beijing for monitoring and targeting Uyghur militants (Rehman, 2022). Even before Afghan Taliban's rise to power in 2021, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi was reported of obtaining guarantees from the Taliban regarding their all-out resistance to anti-China militant groups (Ibid).

3.4 Humanitarian aid and assistance

An overarching feature of China-Afghanistan bilateral ties has been humanitarian aid and assistance. In 2010, a report titled "Humanitarian Assistance: Truly Universal?" published by the Global Public Policy Institute, Germany, suggested that total Chinese aid disbursements to different states could be much higher than the documented estimates.⁴ Likewise, China has been disbursing aid to Afghanistan on different instances.

⁴ The report can be seen here: <<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/121615/GPPi12.pdf>>

The Afghan economy remains heavily reliant on foreign aid. While China's providing development aid to Afghanistan since 2001 has been documented, yet this aid remains modest if compared with western states (Weitz, 2021). Chinese financial assistance to Afghanistan has mainly comprised development assistance funds, customs-duty waivers, infrastructural development, loan forgiveness, and emergency aid disbursements. It is also argued that Chinese economic assistance to Afghanistan also lacks transparency.

In January 2002, after the formation of Afghanistan's provisional government led by Hamid Karzai, China committed to offering \$150 million to Afghanistan for post-war reconstruction. China also funded the construction of a hospital in Kabul, along with the Parwan Irrigation project. In 2003, Beijing and Kabul arrived at a mutual agreement for increasing technical and economic cooperation, which resulted into Beijing disbursing a grant of \$15 million to Afghanistan (Bukhari, 2012). Additionally, China also offered human resource and technical trainings to different Afghan officials. Zhao Huasheng, in one of his research reports for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C., stated that between 2002 and 2010, China was estimated of providing around \$205.3 million to Afghanistan, along with \$19.5 million, remitted as debt. In 2009, China was estimated of providing \$75 million to Afghanistan as economic aid (Paliwal, 2011). Once again in 2011, the Chinese government decided to provide another \$23.7 million (approximately) of free assistance to Afghanistan. According to a recent report by the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, China provided around \$240 million of economic aid to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2013 (Huasheng, 2015).

In October 2014, president Ashraf Ghani paid a visit to China, which was followed by Chinese pledge to providing \$327 million as financial aid to Afghanistan. Additionally, in the next four years, the Chinese government assisted Afghanistan in expanding Kabul University and solar power plants

in Afghanistan. In 2016, Beijing once again pledged to provide \$100 million to Kabul.

An increasingly convergent Pakistan-China posturing viz-a-viz Afghanistan was observed on the issue of humanitarian assistance following the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan. China was once again quick to furnish its position on the question of Afghanistan's economic stability. China called on the international community for the provision of unconditional assistance to Afghanistan and unfreeze Afghan financial assets in order to "remove obstacles to reconstruction." Along with Islamabad, Beijing pledged to provide \$31 million worth of life-saving drugs, food, and winter supplies. to Afghanistan as foreign assistance (Calabrese, 2021). On December 19, 2021, Pakistan hosted the "17th Extra Ordinary Session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation" in Islamabad. The session was organised with the aim of arriving at a practical solution to Afghanistan's impending humanitarian and economic crisis. The session was also attended by representatives of United States, China, and Russia.

In March 2022, China spearheaded the Tunxi Initiative, with the aim of encouraging the regional states to step up financial assistance and reconstruction for Afghanistan. Over the next few months, China cut down tariffs on Afghan imports by 98%. In June 2022, after a massive earthquake hit parts of Afghanistan, China disbursed emergency financial assistance worth RMB 50 million.

4. The trends of emerging China-Pakistan-Afghanistan convergence

Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a chequered history of bilateral relations. While a growing convergence between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China has been observed recently, however, the former two have generally relied on a third-party mediation for maintaining a functional relationship. For the larger part of history, this role had been played by the U.S. owing to its presence in Afghanistan (Khalil, 2018). However, the extent to which that role remained useful is debatable. At present, China

has a growing relevance to South Asian politico-economic realities, which warrants an enhanced Chinese diplomatic activity in the region.

In Sino-Afghan-Pak equation, apart from China's mediatory role between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but its efforts for Afghanistan's internal political stability warrant a special mention. The off-start of Chinese engagement in the South Asian region, particularly the Afghan crisis can be said to take place in 2014 after the draw-down of US and NATO forces from the Afghan soil. With an increasing probability of diplomatic manoeuvrability, as well as the inception of the BRI, China found greater space for engagement in the region. Hence, it is believed that ahead of 2014, China's Afghanistan policy shifted from "calculated indifference to strategic engagement" (Chia, et al., 2021).

In the past, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan came together on different multilateral fora. For instance, in July 2015, China attended the 2-days Murree peace talks in Pakistan. The talks were facilitated by Pakistan and marked the first ever officially acknowledged interaction between the government of Afghanistan and the Afghan Taliban. Called as '2+2+1', the talks also involved representatives of the Haqqani network and the U.S. While acknowledging the centrality of ceasefire, both Afghan government and the Taliban agreed to observe it in case Pakistan and China guaranteed the formation of a 'united national government'. The second round was scheduled to be held on July 31st, however it failed to take off including due to revelation of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar's death two years before.

Similarly, in 2016, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi became part of a quadrilateral coordination group comprising Afghanistan Pakistan, China and U.S. The formation of the QCG was agreed upon in 2016 following the 2+2 meeting between the delegations led by above-mentioned parties at the side-lines of the 5th 'Heart of Asia' Ministerial Conference (2015), which took place in Pakistan (Idrees, et al, 2019). The first meeting of the

group took place in August 2016 highlighting the urgency of resumption in direct talks between the Afghan government and Afghan Taliban. After a series of five meetings, the quartet experienced a halt for around a year and a half following the killing of Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, the Taliban chief, in May 2016 in a U.S. drone strike (Dagia, 2017). The last meeting of the group took place in October 2017, ending inconclusively. The QCG could not yield any substantial results (Khan, 2016).

In 2017, the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers Dialogue was also initiated, first session of which was held in Beijing, on December 26th. The talks took place between Afghan foreign minister Salahuddin Rabbani and Pakistani foreign minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif. It was presided over by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. The joint press release of the dialogue highlighted the three countries' commitment to economic cooperation for the promotion of the BRI.⁵ Most importantly, the dialogue resulted into the decision of extending the CPEC to Afghanistan. The countries also pledged to enhance bilateral ties and work towards counterterrorism efforts.

On similar lines, three further rounds of trilateral talks were conducted in the successive years, the latest of which took place in 2021. The fourth round of the three countries' trilateral talks was held in June 2021, via video link.⁶ While resonating the previous commitments, the three countries vowed to deepen trilateral cooperation through forums the Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process, Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECCA), and BRI. Recognising the Taliban's increasing and inevitable relevance to Afghanistan's political landscape, Chinese leadership also cozied up with the Taliban. In July 2021, a nine-member

⁵ Joint press release of the 1st China-Afghanistan-Pakistan FMs' dialogue is available here: <<https://mofa.gov.pk/joint-press-release-of-the-1st-china-afghanistan-pakistan-foreign-ministers-dialogue>>

⁶ Details can be seen here:

<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202106/t20210604_9170564.html>

Taliban delegation met Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi during its visit to China.

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, China has been displaying even greater interest in Afghanistan. On November 11, 2021, China participated in the Troika Plus talks, which comprised U.S., Russian and Pakistani representatives, and met with the Taliban leadership at the side-lines of the meetings. The talks led to the development of a consensus-based message which was delivered to Afghan foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. On the other hand, China avoided becoming a part of Indian-led Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan. This depicted the growing policy convergence of China and Pakistan viz-a-viz Afghanistan. On March 30, 2022, a foreign ministers' meeting among China, Afghanistan and Pakistan was organised in China. The meeting was called on to respond to the evolving situation in Afghanistan and to expedite humanitarian assistance and inter-state relations at the regional level.

5. Pakistan's perspective on evolving China-Afghanistan engagement

To Pakistan, a stable Afghanistan offers the prospects of greater regional connectivity, bilateral cooperation, as well as domestic security. As a consequence, power-centers in Islamabad have consistently looked forward to a friendly government in Kabul. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, bilateral ties between the two countries have always experienced a topsy-turvy trend. Since the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan has been pushing for enhancing bilateral ties with the newly formed Taliban government. In the new setting, a key geopolitical development has been Beijing's involvement in Afghanistan. The future of U.S. diplomatic engagements in Afghanistan and their probable impacts on China-Afghanistan ties also remain uncertain. Hence, the current geopolitical make-up of the region leaves little space to predict with certainty.

As it may appear from the onset, Pakistan's ambitions and policies in Afghanistan may fall in congruence with China, thereby leading the two countries to achieve better partnership and deriving better outcomes. For instance, soon after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, Pakistani foreign minister and his Chinese counterpart held a telephonic conversation, discussing their mutual interests in Afghanistan (*Pakistan Today*, 2021). In March 2022, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi stated that China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan could jointly build BRI by extending the CPEC to Afghanistan (*Global Times*, 2022). In July 2022, China's special representative for Afghanistan Yue Xiaoyong was reported of having stated that China was all set to support a railway project that could connect Peshawar in Pakistan to Kabul in Afghanistan, which could further connect to Uzbekistan (Silk Road Briefing, 2022).

As Islamabad keenly looks forward to Chinese connectivity initiatives in Afghanistan, it can be predicted that Pakistan may be freely riding the political and economic dividends of the growing China-Afghanistan convergence. However, such an assessment will come at the cost of ruling out some important regional realities. For instance, towards the end of last year China and Afghanistan held bilateral talks for reopening the Silk Road trade routes, specifically the Wakhan Corridor. According to Nooruddin Azizi, Afghanistan's industry and commerce minister, the Wakhan Corridor holds the potential to increase the level of trade between the two countries and become a reliable route for the transit of goods (D-Ellis, 2022). However, the operationality of the Wakhan corridor may reduce Pakistan's relevance to the overall regional connectivity framework. This is coupled with China's decreasing reliance on Pakistan for holding talks with Afghanistan, as China and Afghanistan are holding bilateral talks on issues of regional connectivity.

Additionally, several other ground realities currently in the offing may pose challenges to Pakistan's position in this growing trilateral engagement among the three countries. Foremost of these challenges remains the

Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral issues including cross border clashes, terrorism, and border fencing. Apart from this, CPEC's expansion, and Afghanistan's incorporation into it remain to be accomplished yet.

5.1 Pak-Afghan bilateral issues

Contrary to the popular belief that the Taliban-led government could offer political leverage to Pakistan, fact of the matter is that it is not offering a smooth-sailing for Islamabad's interests. In particular, the issues of terrorism, border fencing, and cross-border clashes have continued to remain as outstanding irritants.

After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, Islamabad proactively assisted Afghanistan in the process of evacuations, and the delivery of medical and other humanitarian supplies. On August 15, 2021, Pakistan hosted a high-level Afghan political delegation, which discussed the future of Afghanistan (News 18, 2021). Moreover, Pakistan also pledged for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan worth \$28 million (Hashim, 2021). In December 2021, as an effort to enable financial assistance to Afghanistan, Islamabad hosted a foreign ministerial level emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). In order to respond to the impending economic and food crisis in Afghanistan, the meeting agreed to set up a humanitarian trust fund under the Islamic Development Bank (Middle East Eye, 2021).

However, since the beginning of the current Taliban rule in Afghanistan, several untoward incidents have taken place that may seemingly signify a continuity of strain in the Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral ties. To begin with, in August 2021, the Taliban government freed Maulvi Faqir Muhammad, a senior TTP commander, along with other prisoners of the Pul-e-Charkhi prison. The freeing of a TTP commander served as the first blow to Islamabad's interests in Kabul since the Taliban takeover (Raashed, 2021). Apart from this, the Taliban expressed their discontent for Pakistan's fencing of Pak-Afghan border. Kabul has also accused Islamabad of

carrying airstrikes in the Afghan territory aiming to attack TTP strongholds (Al Jazeera, 2022). In November 2022, Afghan authorities claimed that Pakistan carried out air raids in Afghan provinces of Khost and Kunar, that led to around 47 civilian casualties. Once again in January 2023, Afghan authorities claimed that Pakistani forces launched air strikes in Eastern Afghanistan, more specifically, the Salala neighbourhood, near the Gushta district. Islamabad, however, denied the Afghan claims (Siddiqi, 2023).

Terrorism has always constituted as a key facet in the Afghan-Pakistan relations. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, terrorism, particularly, spearheaded by the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), has once again surfaced in Pakistan. In 2022, a total number of 376 terror attacks were recorded, mainly in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces (*Dawn*, 2022). Despite the Afghan Taliban's earlier reassurances against harbouring terror groups, it has failed to meaningfully crack down on the TTP leadership in Afghanistan. Hence, the rise of terrorism in Pakistan has been generally attributed to the developments in Afghanistan. It is estimated that terrorism has experienced a spike by 50 percent since the Afghan government has come into power. In particular, terror attacks dramatically rose after the TTP's announcement of ending ceasefire with the Pakistani state in November 2022 (*Ibid*). By the end of November, Pakistan's minister of state for foreign affairs Hina Rabbani Khar visited Afghanistan. The visit came amid the rising threat of terror activities from the TTP, and therefore it was aimed at pressing Kabul regarding Islamabad's security concerns. Also, two months earlier, Pakistan's foreign office had written to Kabul, requesting it to locate and arrest Maulana Masood Azhar, who was allegedly in hiding in Afghanistan (Syed, 2022). In January 2023, policymakers in Islamabad, during a National Security Committee meeting, iterated their resolve for zero-tolerance for terrorism and violence (Abrar, 2023). In this scenario, Pak-Afghan bilateral ties hinge upon Afghanistan's propensity to act against the TTP leadership that finds safe havens in Afghanistan.

Fencing of the Durand Line is an ever-impending point of contention between the two countries. As mentioned earlier, the Afghan Taliban have already expressed their contentions against Pakistan's fencing of the border, deeming it illegitimate, one-sided, and a blatant attempt to change the status quo. In many reported instances, the Taliban border troops had removed or attempted to remove the barbed-wire fence at many places along the Durand Line. As an extension of Taliban's contentious stance on the Durand line, it is estimated that Pak-Afghan border clashes have only increased after the Taliban takeover in 2021. In November 2022, the Chaman border was closed down after clashes took place between the security forces of Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, it was later reopened (*The Express Tribune*, 2022). On the other hand, an unfenced Pak-Afghan border has been seen as the primary reason for cross border infiltrations, crimes and terrorism in Pakistan.

5.2 Expansion of CPEC

Multiple official statements and press releases by foreign ministries of all three countries have talked in the favour of CPEC's expansion to Afghanistan. However, practical efforts to that end have not begun yet. Most importantly, the expansion of CPEC (particularly infrastructure development) shall be an economically hefty project. A Pakistan-based researcher, who was interviewed for this research project, sceptically argued that neither Pakistan's foreign office, nor the planning ministry is displaying any meaningful commitment to pursuing the subject of CPEC expansion towards Afghanistan. Additionally, security concerns might also continue to pose challenges to it. In particular, China shall seek a fool-proof solution to the threat of Uyghur militancy, stemming from Afghanistan. In this regard, Kabul shall have to display its utmost ability to curb this threat. While the Taliban had initially relocated the Uyghur militants from Afghanistan's areas bordering China's Xinjiang province, however, the militants continue to find havens in Afghanistan (RFERL, 2021).

5.3 Afghanistan's domestic challenges and instability

While the Afghan Taliban have established its rule within the country, yet the situation of law and order and socio-economic stability remains in limbo. On one hand, the Taliban's government has little experience of governance, and on the other hand, it faces the western world's isolation on account of Taliban's failure to honour its commitments to protect human rights and freedoms. This isolationism has further exacerbated the already deepening socio-economic crisis domestically. Afghanistan is estimated to be on the verge of an economic collapse, with foreign investments experiencing a drastically downward trajectory due to the country's disconnect from the international banking system. In this regard, the US played a particularly ostentatious role by freezing Afghan assets (worth almost \$7 billion) present in U.S. banks. The country has plunged into a food crisis, with decreasing incomes, sky-rocketing inflation, and a high unemployment rate (Mohmand, 2022).

On the other hand, terrorism, most prominently being spearheaded by the IS-K, also continues to threaten social life, as well as Chinese and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan. Most recently, in January 2023, the IS-K carried out a suicide bomb blast in Kabul, outside the Afghan foreign ministry, where Chinese officials were scheduled to meet (BBC News, 2023). Another high-profile terror incident by the IS-K had taken place in December 2022, when the militants attacked Pakistan's embassy in Kabul (Reuters, 2022). Both the attacks were condemned by the respective targeted countries. While geostrategic and economic interests in Kabul will continue to constitute as one of top priorities for China and Pakistan, yet the issue of domestic instability and insecurity in Afghanistan will continue to pose a potential threat to a smooth and operational bilateral relationship at functional level.

6. Conclusion

China's diplomatic sailing in Afghanistan is a recent phenomenon. The uptick in China-Afghanistan bilateral ties may well be on the way to acquiring some substantial shape in the future. However, this hinges on a number of factors, foremost among which remains Afghanistan's inability to maintain domestic political and security stability. For Islamabad, the threat of cross-border militancy may continue to challenge its policies and options in Kabul. While Islamabad may seek to reap the gains out of this emerging rapprochement between Afghanistan and China, yet it shall require bureaucratic proactivity, coupled with greater political efforts to achieve the desired ends. In either case, Afghanistan's internal instability and its limited leverage on transnational groups shall present as the biggest challenge. For China, Pakistan and Afghanistan to achieve tangible outcomes of trilateral engagement, they need to practically ascertain the parameters of their partnerships in political, strategic and economic domains.

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The emerging role of India in Afghanistan: Pakistan's concerns and policy response

Amir Rana & Safdar Sial⁷

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The emerging role of India in Afghanistan: Pakistan's concerns and policy response

1. Introduction and historical background⁸

India has remained a key factor in Pakistan's Afghan policy. Bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have always been more or less uneasy since the former's independence in 1947, which many attribute to Indian influence in Afghanistan from early on. Since the signing of Friendship Treaty on January 4, 1950, India and Afghanistan had started to consolidate bilateral ties, which they have maintained quite effectively over the past decades with the exception of few periods of hiccups. Even during the periods when Pakistan had a leverage over India, such as during the Soviet-Afghan war, Delhi “maintained its influence in Afghanistan through investments in developmental activities including irrigation, agriculture, and hydroelectric projects” (Ganaie, 2022).

On the other hand, Afghanistan had started to promote the idea of annexing Pakistan’s Pashtun-dominated areas immediately after the founding of Pakistan and continued troubling Pakistan in this regard through the 1950s and 1960s to the late 1970s. Pakistan's Afghan policy in the 1980s and 1990s largely remained focused on seeking oft-quoted ‘strategic depth’ in Afghanistan, which actually meant to countering the traditional Afghanistan-India alliance. This alliance had been creating trouble for Pakistan by supporting the Balochi insurgents and promoting the idea of a greater Pashtunistan.

Afghanistan rejected the July 1947 referendum in Pakistan, saying it offered no choice to the Pashtuns of the erstwhile North-West Frontier Province, now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, other than that of becoming part of either India or Pakistan (Grare, 2006). Nonetheless, Afghanistan continued

⁸ Parts of this section are reproduced from the following 2013 report by one of the authors (with original references retained): Sial, Safdar. 2013. “Pakistan’s role and strategic priorities in Afghanistan since 1980.” Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF), May 2013.

<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/165432/9bc5b02e91c5a9b8ba49a5c46dbfd41a.pdf>

to challenge Pakistan over the Durand Line “through diplomatic pressure, tribal incursions, and support for secessionist movements” in Pakistan (Tellis, 2011: 3). As far as Pakistan's response is concerned, according to Naseerullah Khan Babar who at the time was serving as inspector-general of the Frontier Corps, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s government had started supporting the anti-Daud resistance movement in Afghanistan as early as 1973 in the form of providing weapons and clandestine guerrilla training, with a view to countering such moves by Afghanistan (Amin, 2001). Later, during Ziaul Haq’s rule in Pakistan, Hekmatyar and Rabbani continued to receive funding, training and equipment from Pakistan.

Indeed, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent Soviet-Afghan war (1979-89) gave Pakistan the opportunity to counter the Indian and Soviet influences in Afghanistan, and to attempt to install a friendly government there. Although the war was called a “jihad” against “Soviet infidels”, there is a near consensus among political analysts that Pakistan’s decision to support the Afghan Islamist resistance groups in the late 1970s and 1980s was strategic and not ideological in nature (Rana & Sial, 2013). At the same time, not all of the Afghan mujahideen groups received equal treatment from Pakistan in terms of the channelling of funds and weapons to them and training. According to Pakistan’s former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, there were significant elements within the Afghan mujahideen that were more open to cooperation and civility with the West, and there were hard-liners, but the hard-liners were supported by General Zia. Looking beyond the end of the war, Pakistani security agencies “seemed keen on developing close working relations with these elements within the mujahideen whom they would try to empower to rule the new Afghanistan and give Pakistan strategic depth by extending Islamabad’s influence northward to counter Kabul’s traditional ties with India” (Bhutto, 2008: 113-14).

While Pakistan was courting mujahideen groups to seek strategic depth in Afghanistan, India considered it extremely important that Afghanistan should not fall under Pakistani influence. Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had told the Soviet president in 1987 that such a scenario would

be absolutely unacceptable to India.⁹ Afghan president Najibullah told his Soviet counterpart during his meeting with him in Moscow on August 23rd 1990 that India was pursuing its own interests in connection with Kashmir and was “stubbornly trying to involve Afghanistan in opposing Pakistan without trying very eagerly to give specific support to settling the Afghan problem” (Ostermann, 2003: 191). India had initially opposed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. However, fearing that the Soviet withdrawal could lead to victory of mujahideen and serve Pakistan’s interests, it “chose to abstain from key UN resolutions calling for the complete Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan” (Ganaie, 2022).

During the 1990s Afghanistan witnessed the fall of the Najibullah regime, a subsequent civil war and then the rise of the Afghan Taliban to power. Till the advent of the Taliban regime in 1996, India remained open to establish contacts with anyone and everyone willing to meet India, and deal with whosoever was in power in Kabul with a focus to cultivate a friendly government in Kabul. Another Indian policy focus was to contribute to Afghanistan’s economic welfare within its capabilities and resources. According to an Indian observer, this policy certainly did not help India’s cause, mainly due to civil strife and violence, and “India had to close down its embassy on several occasions owing to heavy shelling in and around Kabul” (Bhadrakumar, 2011).

The Taliban victory came at a cost of political isolation for Pakistan because no other country in the region was happy with either the Taliban or Pakistan’s support for it. Pakistan was one of the three nations that had recognised the Taliban government, the other two being Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Rashid, 1999). India, Iran and Russia supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, fearing that the Arab, Central Asian and Pakistani militant groups sheltered in Afghanistan could create security challenges for them. India was concerned about the Kashmir-

⁹ Excerpt from the record of a conversation between M. S. Gorbachev and the then-general secretary of the Central Committee of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, Najibullah, July 20th, 1987, as cited in Ostermann (2003).

focused Pakistani militant groups' nexus with the Taliban and the Arab and Central Asian militant groups.

Pakistan continued to pursue its traditional Afghan policy during the post-9/11 environment and the subsequent "war on terror" without making any compromise on its legitimate interests in Afghanistan. By joining the U.S.-led war on terror, President Pervez Musharraf tried to avoid Pakistan's isolation from the world and its being bracketed with the militants; counter India's possible rise in the Afghan theatre; and secure political legitimacy and financial assistance for his regime. Pakistan wanted the inclusion of some moderate Taliban leaders in the new Afghan setup, but the Northern Alliance, Russia, India and Iran were against this option (Grare, 2006). Despite being disturbed by the possible rise of the pro-India Northern Alliance, Pakistan had fewer options in the post-9/11 situation to assert its likes or dislikes (Abbas, 2010).

Pakistan's decision to join the war on terror was also due to the fear of a potential U.S.-India alliance in Afghanistan that could further cement the traditional Northern Alliance-India alliance against Pakistan. Secondly, India could have placed Pakistan under immense pressure with support from the international community over the issue of militancy in Kashmir by Pakistan-based groups (Zeihan, 2010). The Musharraf regime remained worried over Indian policy and activities in Afghanistan. While India's key concern was that the Taliban should not hold power again in Afghanistan and give shelter to anti-India militant groups supported by Pakistan, Pakistan thought "India's economic and political linkages were building up Indian capacity to destabilize Pakistan through supporting Baloch insurgents" (Verma & Schaffer, 2010: 1).

And Pakistan's concerns were not unfounded. The US-led military intervention had indeed offered India a much-needed opportunity to re-establish diplomatic ties with Kabul (Ganaie, 2022). Acting swiftly, India's minister for external affairs Jaswant Singh reached Kabul and participated in the Karzai government's inauguration and reopened the Indian embassy, which had been closed after the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996. That ushered a new era in Indian-Afghan ties with a number of factors

facilitating the 'renewal and rejuvenation of bilateral diplomatic ties' For one, on October 4, 2011, India and Afghanistan signed the "Strategic Partnership" agreement that included "provisions for both security and economic cooperation, training and equipping of Afghan National Security Forces, provision of economic aid and assistance, development of mining and energy production, and establishment of 'strategic dialogue' between their national security advisers to provide a framework for cooperation in the area of national security" (Wright & Stancati, 2011).

Unlike his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani initially adopted a policy of rapprochement towards Pakistan. To that end he delayed the implementation of the strategic partnership agreement with India, sought close ties with Pakistan's security establishment (unlike Karzai, who preferred to establish warm military and defence ties with India), and instituted specific initiatives to alleviate Pakistani concerns over cross-border terrorism. Pakistan, in turn, managed to bring Taliban representatives to the negotiation table in Murree on July 7th (2015). The fledgling Afghan government-Taliban peace process derailed after the announcement of the death of Mullah Omar (Sial, 2016). Bilateral pledges made by the two countries during Karzai regime could not be fully realised. There were two main reasons for this: firstly, Ghani's high-level decisions vis-à-vis Pakistan did not enjoy across-the-board and top-down acceptance in Afghanistan; and, secondly, increasing Taliban attacks after the announcement of Mullah Omar's death increased political and security opposition to Ghani's pro-Pakistan overtures. It was just a matter of time that the both states again engaged in mutual blame-game of not doing enough to stop cross-border terrorism and providing sanctuary to the other's militants.

2. Emerging role and engagement of India in the Taliban-led Afghanistan

Most official and public responses from Pakistan welcomed the Taliban takeover of Kabul; some government officials even described it as victory for Pakistan and defeat of India. Pakistani government and military establishment apparently also seemed content with the Taliban takeover

thinking it would give Pakistan long-sought strategic depth in Afghanistan against India and alleviate the fears of Indian use of Afghan soil to create trouble in bordering provinces of Pakistan (PIPS, 2021). Most religious circles and groups also supported the Taliban 'victory' on religious-ideological grounds, apart from Indian factor. Still, some nationalist political parties and others have been critical of the Taliban takeover thinking it could be counterproductive for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Meanwhile, a key notion that ran through most of the media commentaries and analyses also manifested this belief that the Taliban takeover gave Pakistan long-sought friendly government in Afghanistan and alleviated the fears of Indian use of Afghan soil to create trouble in bordering provinces of Pakistan.

However, as things later unfolded, Pakistan's expectations of the Taliban did not come true. Apart from their indifference to repeated denial of growing TTP threat to Pakistan and border insecurity, the Taliban have gradually become more pragmatic in establishing relations with India, thus invalidating Pakistan's fledgling jubilation. Initially, India thought the Taliban's capturing Kabul could pose a renewed threat in Kashmir due to a possibly growing role and influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan. However, as the Taliban expressed their aim of broadening their diplomatic and economic clout in the region, it became highly unlikely that they would maintain a hardline approach towards India, which has invested in development projects in almost each province of Afghanistan. Indian delegates' first formal meeting with the Taliban in Qatar in August 2021, where a Taliban representative assured the Indian envoy that India's concerns regarding Afghan soil to be used against India would be positively addressed, was the first glaring example of this approach (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Indeed, India has a history of creating a strategic space and capital in Afghanistan, including through assistance and engagement in economic and social development projects. India continues to follow the previous tradition of providing financial and development support to the Taliban-led Afghanistan, creating warmer conditions of bilateral engagement. In June 2022, India reopened its embassy in Kabul, after security guarantees

from the Taliban, to coordinate humanitarian assistance and restart engaging with the Afghan people (Haider, 2022).

According to one assessment, over the past two decades or so, India has provided about "US\$750 million in humanitarian and economic aid, invested US\$3 billion in the welfare of the Afghan people, and has undertaken 500 projects in critical areas of power, water supply, road connectivity, healthcare, education, agriculture and capacity building" (Wani, 2022). While most Afghan people have a favourable view of India, as compared to Pakistan, many in the Taliban also see India as a sincere friend. Also, as cited earlier, the Taliban appear more pragmatic this time, which is also facilitating their reproachment to India.

In October last year, the head of Afghanistan's central bank, Abdul Qadir Idris, met with Bharat Kumar, head of the Indian government's technical team, to discuss Afghanistan's economic situation, banking issues and joint cooperation between the two states. According to officials of Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), the Indian government had agreed to offer technical assistance to the bank. A trade agreement was also signed for the reopening of the air corridor between India and Afghanistan. The agreement allows Afghan traders to continue their trade with India via the air corridor (Ariana News, 2022a).

Earlier, on February 1st (2022), New Delhi had allocated around US\$ 27 million for assistance to Afghanistan in its 2022–23 fiscal budget. The amount was earmarked to pay for existing Indian projects in the country, scholarships for Afghan students, and aid for the Afghan people. According to Afghan ambassador to India, the assistance was a signal that India was not switching off (Ganaie, 2022).

The Taliban de facto government's minister of urban development Hamdullah Nomani met with India's Charge d'Affaires to Kabul in December 2022. He stated his country needed Indian help in rebuilding and sustaining Afghanistan's infrastructure. Nomani also told the Indian diplomat that India could also resume work on their over dozen incomplete or stalled projects that they had started during the previous Afghan regimes (Ariana News, 2022b). Similarly, in his meeting with Indian

foreign ministry joint secretary in Kabul in June 2022, the acting deputy foreign minister of the de facto Taliban government, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai thanked the Indian government for its humanitarian aid, and said their bilateral cooperation "would not be influenced by other countries' inter-rivalry" (Wani, 2022).

On the whole, while the share of Afghanistan aid has reduced in the Indian annual budget, the country still passed a budget of 26.7 million USD for 2022-2023 (Maitra, 2022).

The Taliban regime has apparently also engaged with India for training Afghan human resource including security forces. According to some social media in March this year, India has started a training course for the Taliban diplomats in the capital Kabul. The Taliban officials being trained will probably take control of the Afghan embassy in Delhi after this course.¹⁰ Similarly, the Taliban officials warmly welcomed a batch of 25 Afghan military cadets on July 29th (2022), who returned to Kabul after completing their training in India. The returning Afghan cadets were sent to India before the Taliban came to power. (*The Print*, 2022). A month before this event, Afghanistan's defence minister Mullah Yaqub (son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar) expressed his willingness to send Afghan army personnel to India for military training, saying the Taliban did not have any issue with it (*The News*, 2022).

India has recently also provided humanitarian assistance in form of wheat or food to Afghanistan including through Pakistan under an agreement it has signed with the World Food Program. While initially, Pakistan showed some reluctance in allowing India to use its soil for sending food assistance to Afghanistan, the government later allowed Indian aid through Pakistan. In a rare gesture, the first shipment of 2,500 metric tons of Indian wheat reached Afghanistan in February 2022, crossing Pakistani land with whom India had suspended transit trade three years ago over heightened tensions. However, earlier in January 2022, the National Security Advisor,

¹⁰

<https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1636636628612521984?cxt=HHwWgIC9rfWVwLYtAAAA>

Dr Moeed Yusuf had called the Indian pledge to send wheat to Afghanistan a “publicity stunt” and a deliberate effort to blame Pakistan, believing that Pakistan would not allow Indian assistance through its land (AP, 2022).

Like Pakistan, other neighbours of Afghanistan including Iran, India and Central Asian states are concerned about the regional security implications of the Taliban takeover of Kabul. For instance, the 31st report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC, released on February 13th, noted that Afghanistan remains the primary source of terrorist threat for Central and South Asia. It originates from groups including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan, Al-Qaida, Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan, as well as ETIM/TIP, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Jihad Group, Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari, Khatiba al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, Jamaat Ansarullah, and others. The report further noted that these groups, many of which are a direct security threat to Central Asia, enjoy greater freedom of movement in Afghanistan owing to the absence of an effective Taliban security strategy.¹¹

In that backdrop, India also sees Afghanistan as an important country due to its proximity with Central Asian states; India has strengthened its relations with these states over the past few decades in the areas ranging from military technology, defence, counterterrorism, and economy to culture. Many Indian foreign policy analysts have been highlighting following the Taliban’s return to power that India must further consolidate its ties with Central Asia due to emerging security, geostrategic, and geo-economic challenges. For one observer, it was due to Pakistan's resistance to facilitating any Indian connectivity through its territory that New Delhi established connectivity with Central Asia and contracted with Iran to develop the Chabahar port; India has invested US\$150 million in the 218-km Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which connects Afghanistan to the Chabahar port via Milak in Iran, and linking further to Tajikistan (Wani, 2022).

¹¹ The 31st report by the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team of the UNSC, 13 February 2023, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/038/91/PDF/N2303891.pdf?OpenElement>

India also continues to voice its concerns, like other countries in the region, about the use of Afghan soil by militant groups to attack India or its interests in the region including in Central Asia. This also helps India in promoting its traditional narrative of linking militant groups of Pakistani origin to terrorism landscape of Afghanistan and thus undermine Pakistan. In the Indian-hosted conference of top security officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Delhi in December last year, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval termed the existence of terrorist networks in Afghanistan as a matter of concern for India (Sultana, 2022). Similarly, at the UN Arria formula meeting in November 2022, India's UN representative Madhu Sudan had stated that "Afghanistan should not be used for sheltering terrorists or training, planning or financing terrorist attacks. The deputy spokesman of the Taliban regime downplayed these concerns and said Afghan soil would not be used against other countries (Daryosh, 2022).

Apart from terrorism concerns, India has been raising voice about human rights violations. For one, on April 11, 2022: India foreign minister Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd J Austin III in the 2+2 minister dialogue urged the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to respect human rights, rights of women and girls, rights of minorities, and uphold rights to travel. The four ministers also called on the Taliban to abide by the UN Security Council resolution which demands Afghanistan not be used again to threaten other countries' security.¹²

3. Pakistan's concerns and responses

Since the U.S.-Taliban February 2020 deal in Doha, Pakistan's responses on the Afghan situation have remained oriented around some of its key strategic as well as geo-economic foreign policy objectives. Before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Pakistan repeatedly asserted that it supported

¹² The opening remarks can be seen here: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-austin-indian-minister-of-external-affairs-dr-s-jaishankar-and-indian-minister-of-defense-rajnath-singh-opening-remarks-at-the-u-s-india-22/>.

a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict and opposed the Taliban taking over Afghanistan militarily. It also frequently stated that it did not want the Afghan soil to be used for perpetrating and supporting terrorism against Pakistan including through Indian influence.

As cited earlier in the report, after the Taliban takeover of Kabul, most official and public responses from Pakistan were welcoming, with some describing it as victory for Pakistan and defeat of India. Pakistan has also been urging the international community to engage with the Taliban and not leave Afghanistan alone to avoid humanitarian crises, governance collapse as well as the likelihood of a civil war. Similarly, Pakistan has been helping in facilitating and providing humanitarian aid to the country including from India. Still, Pakistan may not be the first country to recognise the Taliban government because there are many political risks and security threats attached to that.

As the Taliban approach to completing their second year in office in August this year, initial Pakistani jubilation is almost over now. Indeed, Islamabad is increasingly concerned about the Taliban not being willing or able to help in countering the TTP threat with the terrorist group becoming a major irritant in Pakistan's relations with the Taliban government. Apart from the establishment of the Taliban government next-door, Pakistan's negotiation ventures also emboldened the banned TTP to regroup and escalate terrorist violence in Pakistan. According to yearly data collected by PIPS, the group carried out 89 terrorist attacks in Pakistan in the year 2022. However, the TTP itself issued an infographic for attacks it carried out in 2022 (for 8 months excluding 4 months of ceasefire) according to which the group perpetrated 367 attacks, compared to 282 in 2021.¹³ According to a report of the UNSC-led 1988 Taliban sanctions committee monitoring, "the group [TTP] is focused on a long-term campaign against the Pakistani state," and that it "has arguably benefitted the most of all the

¹³ An overview of PIPS' Pakistan Security Report 2022 can be downloaded here: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SR22-Preview.pdf>.

foreign extremist groups in Afghanistan from the [Afghan] Taliban takeover” (Syed, 2022).

Pakistan has also been concerned about the deteriorating security situation at the Pak-Afghan border since the Taliban took power in Kabul in August 2021. Cross-border migration also remains a pronounced worry of the Pakistani government, but due to border fencing and strict security measures the phenomenon has so far been under control. However, if further humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan is not prevented, more refugees will certainly cross the border to enter Pakistan.

The Taliban have apparently taken a stricter and nationalistic stance in their response to Pakistan's efforts to fence the border. Secondly, apart from incessant cross-border terrorist attacks, the refugee issue as well as illegal cross-border movements have also added to border tensions. There is evidence to suggest that not only the number of cross-border attacks and clashes has increased but intensity of such incidents has also grown resulting in more deaths and injuries. Only in 2022, 34 Pakistani citizens lost their lives (including 20 security officials) in 13 such attacks/clashes along the Durand Line.¹⁴ Importantly, in the past, or during Ghani regime, most of the cross-border attacks from Afghanistan were carried out by the TTP or other militant groups, but now many of such incidents involve Afghan border forces under the Taliban regime.

Nonetheless, Pakistan believes that through its engagements in Afghanistan, India has been playing a role of 'spoiler' with a key objective of restricting Pakistan's influence there. For one, Pakistan decided not to attend an Afghan moot hosted by India in November 2021 on the same pretext. “I am not going [to India]. A spoiler cannot be a peacemaker,” National Security Adviser Dr Moeed Yusuf told a news conference (Yousaf, 2021). The moot was chaired by India's national security advisor Ajit Doval and attended by his counterparts from Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan with key focus on terrorism,

¹⁴ The data and statistics are derived from Pak Institute for Peace Studies' digital database on security incidents: www.pakpips.com/app/database.

radicalization and extremism. After Pakistan's refusal to join, China cited 'schedule clash' as the reason for its absence, which many saw as a covert geopolitical message to the world. Pakistan also skipped an Afghan moot held in Moscow in February this year where it was invited alongside China and India. The two-day conference was attended by national security advisers of regional countries from India, China and Iran along with Central Asian countries. Experts agree that the main reason Pakistan opted to stay out of it was because it was the Indian initiative, and according to foreign office statement, Pakistan believes "(it) can make a better contribution in formats and forums which can contribute constructively to peace in Afghanistan" (Yousaf, 2023a).

According to some accounts, Pakistani efforts to talks to the TTP were also partly led by the Indian factor. In July 2022, the Parliamentary Committee on National Security (PCNS) discussed the emerging security threats from terrorist groups and options of talks with the TTP. The committee was also apprised that the RAW (Research and Analysis Wing of India) was attempting to re-establish itself in Afghanistan and that Pakistan needed to reach out to the reconcilable components of the terrorist organisation, i.e., TTP. Nonetheless, the military leadership informed parliamentarians that nothing was final, and that the negotiation team would follow the instructions of parliament and the administration. Thus, PCNS formally gave a go-ahead for continuing talks with TTP (*The Express Tribune*, 2022).

Nonetheless, because the hideouts of two major perpetrators of terrorist violence in Pakistan, i.e., TTP and Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), are in Afghanistan, Pakistan has been continuously requesting the Taliban regime for a crackdown against the terrorist networks operating from their soil. In response, the Taliban leadership maintains that all terrorist activities are happening "from inside Pakistan" – a position resonating with that of Ashraf Ghani's administration, which Pakistan used to see as an outcome of Indian influence in the region. For long, Pakistan has been connecting TTP presence in Afghanistan with ties between India and Ghani regime. Contradicting this view, the TTP has claimed and demonstrated strong alliance with the Afghan Taliban since the fall of Kabul.

The TTP has intensified its attacks in recent months compounding Pakistan's Afghanistan-related concerns. After the January 30th lethal attack on Peshawar Police Lines mosque, which claimed about 100 lives including mostly policemen, Pakistan recorded its strong protests before the Taliban. At the end of February 2023, Defense Minister Khwaja Asif along with DG ISI Nadeem Anjum and other high officials visited Afghanistan and met with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar of Kandhari group. This group is one of the anti-Pakistan factions among various groups of Afghan Taliban which includes Mullah Yaqoob Omar, who has given pro-India statements several times. This visit was important as Pakistan took a far clear stance and presented strong evidence against TTP hideouts along with the precise location of its leadership. In response to this, Afghan leadership reportedly proposed that Pakistan should bear the cost of disarming and rehabilitating the outlawed Tehreek-e Taliban members and their families numbered around 30,000 from the Pak-Afghan border areas (Yousaf, 2023b). As note earlier, the TTP continues to be a bone of contention between the two countries.

The security fallout of the Afghan situation and growing Indian engagement with the Taliban also threaten Pakistan's regional connectivity and geo-economic policy pursuits. In U.S.'s larger Indo-Pacific strategy, India is its key strategic partner. The China factor, among other things linked to U.S.-India bilateral engagements, will continue to increase U.S. inclination towards India strengthening its position as a U.S. pivot. As far as Pakistan's position on these battle lines is concerned, it is a major partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative and is also largely reliant on the U.S., as well as IMF and World Bank, for its economic survival. Pakistan is faced with great challenge in maintaining a balance in its relations with China and U.S. including in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it will be unrealistic for Pakistan to desire a zero involvement of India in Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan needs a specific policy frame to manage its equation with India in the Afghan context.

4. Policy recommendations for Pakistan

Revisiting and reordering its Afghan policy was never essential for Pakistan as today. But in order to achieve this aim, Pakistan also needs to reassess its policy towards India as any effort at rationalising Pakistan's official policy towards Afghanistan will largely depend on a similar rationalisation of its policy towards India.

Overall, Pakistan needs to revisit its ideological standpoint and employ a more practical approach towards Afghanistan. A new policy may be based on both its national interests and dynamics of the wider region.

Pakistan may also refrain from over optimism. As discussed earlier in the paper, the Taliban's government in Kabul neither means a zero Indian presence in Afghanistan, nor will the Taliban engage with India and Pakistan on zero sum game. There are already clear indications of the Taliban optimism shown towards Indian engagement in their country.

Pakistan also needs to adopt a regional perspective on the Afghan problem. Pakistan's policymakers need to seriously think about the future regional and national dynamics of Afghanistan crisis. In that context, foreign interventions and regional states' policies towards Afghanistan are also important to be evaluated.

In particular, Pakistan needs to be careful in its dealing with the Afghan situation as well as the Taliban. Some recommendations, based on Pak Institute for Peace Studies' expert consultations held on Pakistan's Afghan policy priorities in the past two years, are listed below:

- Pakistan needs a complete reorientation of its policy towards Afghanistan in the wake of growing threats of terrorism in the country after the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) called off a ceasefire it had agreed to with the government earlier 2022. Civil-military leadership, political parties, bureaucracy and ulema should be on the same page to tackle the threat, and there should be an inclusive policy on how to deal with Afghanistan and the TTP.

- Pakistan needs to bilaterally engage and talk with Afghanistan, i.e., the Taliban, on the issues of countering terrorism, enhancing trade, and evolving mechanism on border security and refugees, etc. Pakistan can formulate such agreements under the table, and once the Taliban government is recognized, these can be made formal. It seems strange that despite their proximity, Afghanistan and Pakistan share no formal agreement regarding refugees, trade, or border.
- Pakistan's Afghan policy has largely remained centred upon the groups, warlords, and politicians, instead of citizens of Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan may work on developing a policy that focuses on winning hearts and minds of the Afghan people. Reaching out to different factions of Afghan society and polity will help in removing misperceptions held by many Afghans about Pakistan, and also in countering Indian influence.
- Pakistan should continue taking lead in ensuring the reach of humanitarian assistance to poverty-ridden Afghanistan. The primary pathway to achieve this is by keeping its humanitarian air and road corridors open, along with the land routes for UN agencies, NGOs and other donors. Moreover, Pakistan shall be on the front foot with regards to implementation of OIC's commitments pertaining to the Afghan situation.
- Pakistan may devise a policy that facilitates trade with Afghanistan include doing so in Pakistan's national currency and enabling barter mechanism until Afghanistan gains financial stability. This will be a practical implementation of Pakistan's National Security Policy that asserts that Pakistan's security-oriented outlook has shifted to economic. An impetus to Pak-Afghan trade can be a game changer for both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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