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# THE EVOLVING SIGNIFICANCE OF AFGHANISTAN IN CHINA'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS: FROM AN INSIGNIFICANT 'BACKYARD' TO A CONSEQUENTIAL GEOSTRATEGIC HUB

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**Abstract:** Paradoxical to its historic no-interest policy, China's projection of strategic influence in Afghanistan has become increasingly visible. This shift in Beijing's behavior is part of a broader strategy to expand and consolidate its influence in Central, South, and Western Asia. Such a policy revision in China's strategic calculus transforms Afghanistan into a geo-strategic 'backyard,' that consolidates China's influential position in the country. Additionally, China perceives the U.S. posture in Central Asia as a potential threat to its interests. These emerging rivalries reinforce Afghanistan's geo-strategic significance, rendering it susceptible to a milieu of contested interests and engagements. For Afghanistan to reverse the historic curse of its geo-strategic location, it must overcome the pressure of competing big powers in the larger strategic arenas by focusing on domestic issues. Rather than historic and geographic determinism, structural changes through the development of its own resources, industries, and capacities should drive Afghanistan's strategic outlook. To realize this vision, support from the U.S. is crucial to maintaining security and democratic institutions, promoting civic education, and creating a responsible and accountable political setting.

**Keywords:** Geostrategic significance, Competing interests, New Great Game.

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### Introduction

Since establishing bilateral relationships with Afghanistan in 1955, China's engagement in Afghanistan has never been as active and diverse as it has become in recent years. From military assistance to initiating economic cooperation and engaging in peace processes, China has diversified its interests and strategic engagements in Afghanistan (Katzman & Thomas, 2017). Recently, it has emboldened its strategic advances by encouraging Afghanistan to follow the precedent set by the Sino-Pakistan cooperation model (Kaura, 2020).

The scope of these engagements may be trivial. However, in the backdrop of uncertain political and security settings in Afghanistan, and the emerging international milieu characterized by the down spiral relationship between the U.S. and China, such an unprecedented shift in China's strategic posture raises questions.

Is such shift part of a 'New Great Game' in the region for China's global economic and geo-strategic aspirations? Is it moving towards realignment of the region's balance of power and hegemony? Is China using Afghanistan as a stepping stone for broader regional strategic, economic, and political endeavors? Or simply, is it a political marriage of convenience between the two neighbors for their respective concerns and insecurities?

To explore this enigma, it is important to have a brief retrospective look at China's relationships with Afghanistan. This provides a crucial analytical context for scrutinizing China's current strategic aspirations that drive its evolving priorities and interests in the volatile and crowded Afghan strategic theater.

### A Brief History of Sino-Afghan Strategic Relations

After establishing diplomatic relationships in 1955, the two neighbors officially demarcated their tiny and inhabited border at the end of the Wakhan Corridor in 1963 (DoS, 1963). In the same year, China and Pakistan had signed the Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement (Times, 1963), which set the stage for their future long-term strategic and economic alliances. The two border agreements by China were preceded by two strategic events for the country. The Sino-Indo war of 1962, and the ideological Sino-Soviet split of 1963. The former was over a border, while the latter was over the bid of becoming the vanguard of communism in the developing world. These events pushed Afghanistan more towards China's new rivals—India and the USSR. China, however, kept its neutral or no interest policy.

After the communist revolution in Kabul, which was followed by the Soviet invasion in 1979, China realigned its Afghan policy in the backdrop of the U.S. containment strategy. It was intended to hold back the USSR's expansionism in the Middle East and South Asia and to stand in the way of Soviet hegemony (Mackerras, 2001). Accordingly, later in the mid-80s, embracing the Reagan Doctrine of rolling back Soviet influence and toppling the USSR's backed socialist states around the world, China operationalized its anti-Soviet agenda in Afghanistan.

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China started training and providing arms to the Afghan Mujahideen and other fighters that poured in from all over the Muslim world to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to fight against the USSR (Kinsella, 1992). In addition to sending military trainers to Pakistan to train Afghan fighters, China also established training camps in its Xinjiang province to train Uighur fighters for the Afghan Jihad (Cooley, 2002). In response, the government in Kabul blamed Beijing for subversive activity against the Afghan republic (Survival, 1980).

Eventually, China's Afghan Jihad strategy backfired. In the late 1980s, upon the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, the trained Uighur militants started returning home to Xinjiang. There, they militarized the East Turkistan freedom movements. China once again returned to its no-interest policy towards Afghanistan.

During the Taliban regime, China yet again increased its engagements in Afghanistan (Weinbaum, 2006). The motive was the existence of Uighur separatist training camps in Taliban-controlled areas. Reportedly, these camps were established under the direct instruction of Osama bin Laden in order to open a new Jihadi front in Xinjiang (China Report, 2002). As it did not officially recognize their Islamic Emirates, China had engaged with the Taliban largely through Pakistan. However, it did not help. China continued to have problems with the activities of Uighur militants in the historic region of East Turkistan—Xinjiang. Despite their denial, the Taliban never gave up on harboring Uighur fighters up until late 2001, when their Emirate was defeated by U.S. military intervention.

In the post-9/11 international military and developmental interventions in Afghanistan, China's engagement and contributions to the global efforts of stabilizing the country have remained minimal. In the years following the intervention, the U.S. repeatedly encouraged China to increase its share of engagements and responsibility in Afghanistan. China avoided having an increased share. While largely remaining a bystander, China did however, jump on the bandwagon and used the global anti-terrorism dynamism to curtail the anti-China terrorist groups (Yun, 2020). China did not invest in the war on terror, but it did get a free ride.

Considering the historic trajectory of the two countries' relationships, Afghanistan has largely remained of marginal interest in China's strategic calculus. The exception is when it was able to bandwagon on other power's strategic imperatives in Afghanistan. However, with the emerging pattern of Chinese behavior and strategic posture in the region, it seems that China has adopted a new strategic outlook towards its neighbor. With China's newly transformed audacious regional and global geo-strategic aspirations and economic interests, Afghanistan may have become its new arena for its strategic maneuvers towards regional and trans-regional strategic hegemony.

### **Is It All About Terrorism?**

Justifying the evolving interests and engagements in Afghanistan, Chinese officials often resort to the potential terrorist threats to its Xinjiang province from Afghanistan (Ramzy, 2019). Such a concern overshadows all other interests of China in Afghanistan (Huasheng, 2012). However, three considerations fog the validity of Chinese justification of its emerging strategic adventurism in Afghanistan.

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First, China has adequately invested in securing its borders with Afghanistan. It has established military outposts not just on its own territory but reportedly in the Tajik and Afghan sides of the borders as well (Shih, 2019). On top of that, China has established military cooperation mechanisms with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan—three countries neighboring Xinjiang. In sum, China has already created physical infrastructure and multilateral cooperation mechanisms, namely the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in Counter-Terrorism (QCCM), that can fully buffer Afghanistan, should the latter descend into chaos. Such protective and preventative measures have the potential to minimize the movement of terrorists between the two neighbors.

Secondly, looking at China's support to terrorist groups in South Asia, mainly those with an anti-India agenda (see Kugelman, 2019), it does not seem that the mainstream terrorist organizations in the region pose imminent existential threats to China. China's transactional relationships with terrorist groups stationed in South Asia is not an anomaly, but a pattern. China has conceptualized terrorism, more specifically Islamic terrorism, through a narrow angle of domestic actors. While China itself blames other powers of playing a "double standard" on the East Turkistan problem (ChinaDaily, 2015), its own narrow perspective on Islamic terrorism drives the country's treacherous anti-terrorism strategies.

On many occasions, China showed supportive behavior towards terrorist organizations that are based in Pakistan, including Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jaish Muhammad, Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), all of which focus on operating in India. An early Islamic oracle—Ghazwa-e-Hind [Raid of India] — accompanied by contested and controversial interpretations, drives the India-focused terrorist motivation of these groups. On several occasions, China has blocked efforts to pressure Pakistan to cease its support for these groups (Riedel, 2015). In addition, evidence suggests that China has been in business with terrorist organizations that largely target Western interests, including the Taliban's Haqqani Network, Hezbollah, and even Syrian terrorist groups (Bodetti, 2020).

Thirdly, since the initiation of the War on Terror in late 2001, China's behavior towards and contribution to tackling global terrorism has remained opportunistic. It has started with its initial opposition to U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. Subsequently, in terms of both security contributions and developmental interventions, China's support for the U.S.-led global intervention in Afghanistan has remained nominal, at best (Kley, 2014). However, the war provided China with a free ride and a dictum to advance its domestic repression. It operationalized the global consensus on the war on terror in oppressing its own Uighur Muslim population to the extent of genocide (Canyon, 2020).

Furthermore, China's lip service to the war on terror in Afghanistan also had a strategic reason. While it provided minimum tangible support to the cause in Afghanistan, the direct and the opportunity costs of the war for the U.S. gave China the comparative advantage to invest more in asserting its economic and military power outwards (Yun, 2020). China's total investment stock by the end of 2017 was 400 billion (Yun, 2020). The tangible costs of the war for the U.S. is in the trillions. As such, this gave China the economic and political resources to systematically emerge as a competing power and eventually initiate supplanting the U.S. from the region.

### Beijing's Confusing Messages to Kabul

China's Afghan policy has been in transformation since 2012. From abstentions during the 2002-12 period to diverse strategic engagements, the revisionism of its policy is a welcomed move for Afghanistan. Initially, what instigated China's change in its policy was its concerns related to possible eventualities of any precipitous withdrawal of the international forces from the country. Accordingly, in the subsequent years, parallel with emphasizing the need for a responsible and orderly withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, China has initiated to create an enabling and conducive to strategic maneuvering environment. It has deployed and expanded its economic, diplomatic, and military instruments in Afghanistan to secure its vital interests. However, Beijing's new dynamism came with puzzling messages to Kabul. This has shrouded the nature and type of its interests and strategic goals in the country largely in secrecy.

China, as with almost all its neighbors, has established bilateral partnerships with Afghanistan. While the two countries have established different bilateral and multilateral cooperation and coordination mechanisms, China did not fully integrate Afghanistan in its strategic calculus. Afghanistan is still an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In 2012, the two countries agreed to upgrade their bilateral relations to a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership (China Daily, 2012). Although, in the following year, both countries forged to deepen their Strategic and Cooperative Partnership (EPRC, 2013), it was never officially formulated and established.

Similarly, China, unlike most of its neighbors, did not integrate Afghanistan in its broad-based economic initiatives. In 2013, China inaugurated its transcontinental infrastructure Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-regional infrastructure network connecting over 60 countries in different regions of the world. Afghanistan, however, was not integrated into it (Stone, 2019). It is despite the fact that the country has geo-strategic comparative advantage in offering the shortest road access to South Asia, Persia, and the Middle East (Safi and Alizada, 2018).

In subsequent years, the two countries signed several agreements that have the potential to improve Afghanistan's land, air, and cyber connectivity, including the Digital Silk Road, the Kabul-Urumqi air corridor, and the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway. However, Beijing has kept Kabul perplexed, if not frustrated, about its unwillingness to integrate Afghanistan into the BRI.

Similarly, Beijing security initiatives and narratives are dubious. In 2016, China collaborated Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan into the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in Counter-Terrorism (QCCM) (China Military Online, 2016) The QCCM is a new counterterrorism, international and regional security mechanism between the armed forces of the four countries. Subsequently, China assisted Kabul in building a mountain brigade in the Wakhan Corridor (Chan, 2018). In addition, China also established military outposts on the Tajik side of the border of the Wakhan Corridor. All of these measures are facilitated by China to safeguard its weak link—Xinjiang province— from the 'three evils'—terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism—directed from the borders of these countries.

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Despite establishing the multilateral anti-terrorism coordination mechanism, China is among a few countries that have maintained cordial relations with the Taliban (Pandey, 2019). Furthermore, as one of the few countries that have strategic leverage over Pakistan, China does not seem willing to use its influence in curtailing Islamabad's patronage to the Taliban's terrorism. Reportedly, China explicitly told Kabul that it will not exert pressure on Pakistan pertaining to its support to the Taliban (Felbab-Brown, 2020). Such admission should have been alarming for Kabul regarding China's strategic outlook towards Afghanistan.

In general, while China's willingness and dynamism in engaging with Afghanistan is undoubtedly welcomed in Kabul, China's overcautious and puzzling strategic maneuvers indicate that Afghanistan is still its strategic conundrum. On one hand, China has responsively reduced the potential security threats directed from the borders of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan to its western periphery. On the other hand, China remains cautious about increasing its economic and political stakes in Afghanistan. However, in the backdrop of the downward spiral of U.S.-China relationships that started with the trade war and intensified with the spread of Covid-19, China's strategic calculus about Afghanistan appears to be changing. Afghanistan, from a piece of puzzle, is becoming part of a broader envisioned picture of China's strategic domain.

### **Afghanistan in a Broader Perspective**

Lately, China's geopolitical ambitions in South and Western Asia have become apparent. These initiatives further reinforce Afghanistan's geo-strategic significance within China's strategic calculus.

In late July, the Chinese premier proposed a multimodal trans-Himalayan corridor of China with Afghanistan, Nepal, and Pakistan. He encouraged the two landlocked countries—Afghanistan and Nepal—to follow the model of the Sino-Pakistan cooperation (Kaura, 2020). Around the same time in South Asia, China began to intensify its incursions of strategic heights up in the Himalayas along the disputed Indo-China border that caused their first deadly encounter in decades (Verma, 2020).

Among other possible reasons, China's border security in the Himalayas is crucial for its BRI's flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Linking China to two ports on the Sea of Oman—Gwadar and Karachi—CPEC will open new inland energy channels for the country, which will reduce its heavy dependency on the Southeast Asian seaborne energy corridor of Malacca Strait. The CPEC does not pass through Afghanistan, though three indirect links make it strategically relevant.

CPEC is facing an existential threat from the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan. Originated by resource distribution injustice, the insurgency has openly opposed Chinese exploitative practices of resource grab in Baluchistan province, the homeland of the Baloch ethnic group that is also home to the Gwadar Port. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan and India for covertly supporting the Baloch insurgency, a claim obstinately denied by both Kabul and Delhi.

In addition, CPEC also faces a legal challenge from India. On its course, CPEC passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a contested region between India and Pakistan. Considering it a disputed territory in Pakistan-

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occupied Kashmir, India lays its opposition to CPEC based on claims of territorial sovereignty (The Hindustan Times, 2016). China denies India's claim. As such, with Delhi having strong and friendly strategic links with Kabul, this raises red flags for China's heavy investment in CPEC. Reportedly, China has explicitly told Afghan officials that it will not use its influence on Pakistan to open its border with India for the Afghan cargo (Felbab-Brown, 2020)

Thirdly, by attempting to ostracize India from the Afghan strategic theater, China is trying to disrupt the implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI) and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) power line transmission projects. If completed, both projects will open Central Asia's vast gas and energy markets for India, which will challenge the monopoly in the region envisioned by China.

China's anti-India rhetoric has expanded to western Asia, as well. Earlier in the summer, it was reported that China and Iran are finalizing a sweeping economic and military partnership (NYT, 2020). Iran's Chabahar seaport on the Gulf of Oman offers China another option to diversify its energy channels. Concurrent to the news, Iran unexpectedly suspended India from the USD 400 million 500-mile Chabahar-Zahedan railway project that extends to Central Asia through Afghanistan. This route reduced Afghanistan's dependency on the Karachi port in Pakistan, and it also has the potential to provide India with much-needed alternative access to Central Asia. By excluding India from the project, its access link to Central Asia is in jeopardy. With China's attempt to circumvent India's role in Afghanistan and Central Asia, Afghanistan's geo-strategic significance becomes more susceptible to manipulation and politicization.

Towards Central Asia, the downwards spiral of U.S.-China relations and the U.S. rapprochement to Central Asian republics will further drag Afghanistan into China's strategic calculus. A contested and embattled region will jeopardize China's BRI. The U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-25 seeks and promotes closer ties and connectivity between Afghanistan and Central Asian republics as regional stabilizing factors (DoS, 2020). However, in the face of its deteriorating relations with the U.S., China will presume that any effort towards realizing such a policy goal is a threat to its interests in the region. This will further push Afghanistan into a contested geo-strategic milieu.

### Conclusion

In the post-9/11 world, Afghanistan was considered as one of few places where the U.S. and China could remain in strategic synergy. However, this seems to be no longer the case. Although terrorism is still the imminent threat in Afghanistan, it is no longer the dominating global threat. Emerging rivalries of global and regional powers are on the horizon with strategic implications for different regions, including Afghanistan. Located at the crossroads of crucial strategic regions, the emerging rivalries reinforce its geo-strategic significance into conflicting and opposing strategic calculations. As such, Afghanistan appears to be one of the theaters of a new 'Great Game' between China, the U.S., and its neighbors, including India.

China, by its geographic proximity, is well socialized with the fact that in its backyard lies the so-called 'graveyard of empires.' It also knows that the geo-strategic significance of Afghanistan is undeniably critical for its westward expansionism. Furthermore, China has itself experienced the consequences of a power

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vacuum in Afghanistan. In addition to security implications, a chaotic and failed Afghanistan is counterproductive for China's economic and strategic initiatives in Central, South, and Western Asia. That said, while China will not be willing to have a destabilized Afghanistan in its backyard, it will try to keep the country economically and politically susceptible so as to bully it into its strategic sphere of influence by economic, security, and political manipulation.

The Chinese model of economic practices, largely in the developing world, is not based on mutual benefits, but on a 'debt trap.' As an emerging global powerhouse, China will use its comparative advantages— proximity; financial and economic interventions, and strategic influence— as a means towards systematically co-opting Afghanistan into its sphere of influence. Towards that end, China will maintain and cautiously expand its diverse instruments of economic, diplomatic, and military engagement in the country. But will it occur without resistance? No. Afghanistan, in addition to its historic precedent of being hostile to global and regional hegemonic power, has structural contradictions for China.

First, because of China's strategic closeness with Pakistan, is a country that seeks 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan. China's failure or refusal to assert pressure on Pakistan to give up its political and military patronage to the Taliban and the notorious Haqqani Network, will make it challenging for China to gain the confidence of Afghans. Secondly, Afghanistan's historic cultural and strategic relations with India will make it a strategic troublesome game for China to upset Delhi-Kabul dynamics and subsequently to circumvent India from Afghanistan. Third, the heavy investment of the U.S. and other Western powers in the last 20 years to rehabilitate Afghanistan's strategic institutions, is a disadvantage for China in competing to hold ground in Afghanistan. The strategic and technical connections of these institutions with their founding supporters will cost China a pariah image.

So, within the prospective new 'Great Game,' will its geo-strategic location continue to be Afghanistan's curse? More than any actor of the Game, it depends on Afghans themselves. While the country is landlocked, it sits on riches, untapped deposits of natural resources. As an agrarian society, the country has relatively adequate freshwater resources to realize its food security and food safety nets. Its rivers flow to all neighboring countries. Afghanistan has unmatched potential in terms of human resources, as it is one of the youngest nations in terms of population demographics.

On top of that, it has strategic advantages. It is the gateway to the vast lands of Central Asia. As a nation, it has trustworthy and benign political and close cultural relationships with Central Asian republics. That said, Afghanistan can only utilize this unique geostrategic advantage to its benefit through enhancing its exporting capacity.

However, to change the course of history by not falling victim to the emerging regional and power rivalries, Afghanistan, as a state, must change its fundamental perspective. It needs to overcome its historic tendencies and aspirations of playing in the big and crowded strategic theaters. An active and robust diplomacy of non-alignment and a redirection of its strategic attention to domestic issues can realize this goal. Without doing its homework and building its own strengths, it does not seem practical and even

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rational for the country to have a fair and favorable playing ground in large arenas. It is imperative for Afghanistan to redirect its efforts towards developing its own resources, industries, and capacities.

For the U.S., as one of the main stakeholders in Afghanistan's security, China's regional and global aspirations should no longer be a strategic dilemma. Its actions are indicative of a primacy strategy. China is expanding its sphere of influence through its economic power and geopolitical influence towards its Western frontier (Central, South, and Western Asia). Liberal internationalism is not a practical approach for the emerging political and strategic situation in these regions. China's interests and aspirations are moving towards the opposite end of that of the U.S. Seeking common ground with China in the region does not seem to be a productive policy.

China is audaciously moving forward by limiting freedom and spreading and consolidating political oppression. Around the globe and in the region, authoritarian, corrupt, and reckless regimes and non-state actors bandwagon around China's rapidly-progressing military, economic, and diplomatic power. As such, Afghanistan's shaky democracy, prone to global and regional terrorism, combined with the Taliban's ideological totalitarianism and religious fundamentalism, can easily destabilize and become a threat to U.S. interests in the region. Supporting the Afghan republic by continuing to build upon democratic and civic institutions, promoting civic education, the continuation of strategic support to security institutions, and facilitating a domestic political environment that is conducive to participation, accountability and transparency, is essential to prevent Afghanistan from becoming another casualty in the sphere of the emerging ideological and strategic competing powers.

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