

China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

Raja Muhammad Khan

National Defence University-Islamabad

Afghanistan has a unique and indeed, an immense significance in the strategic calculus of People's Republic of China. The geopolitics of this Chinese neighbourhood has four glaring peculiarities, which include; political, strategic, geographical, and economic. In the rapidly changing global security environment, these aspects demands a deeper cooperation not only between China and Afghanistan but also for the regional integration of all those countries eager for regional peace and harmony, based on mutual respect and sovereignty. The central argument of this research is based on the postulation that in the post 2014 scenario, 'constructive engagement with Afghanistan will serve the Chinese strategic, economic and security interests. In the academic sphere, the argument is strongly supported by the realist school of thought. It directly correlates with China's own national security stakes and economic opportunities. Indeed, a fragmented, fundamentalist and anarchic Afghanistan would stand contrary to China's interest of maintaining stability and defying the ongoing militancy in its autonomous region, Xinjiang. Though security may be the immediate objective, the long-term aim is economic and strategic cooperation with Afghanistan, driven by the liberal paradigm, which China finds as the most crucial and enduring. Such a Chinese engagement will improve security situation and bring economic development in Afghanistan; a win-win situation.

Key Words: Economic, strategic, xinjiang, stability, realist school

Visualizing a buoyant and constructive Chinese role in Afghanistan, the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, visited China soon after taking over the power in October 2014. Afghan president's first official trip to China explains the growing realization of importance of bilateral relations on both the sides. While on one hand, Afghans look towards China for a major role both in its economic development as well as in the security stabilization, on the other hand China too seems to be forthcoming for playing a positive role in the contemporary Afghanistan. While the contemporary developments in the bilateral relationship of both countries are in the making, the Sino-Afghan relationship dates back to centuries. There has been a huge impact of Buddhism (originating from China) on the lives of people of this country from 7th century B.C to 1st century CE (Alikuzai, 2008, p.57). Besides, it had the influence of Turks, Arabs, and Mongols (New International Magazine, 2008).

Historian Arnold Toynbee has described Afghanistan as the "roundabout of the ancient world" (Blood and Aghajanian, 2007, p.3). Indeed, this terrain has been at the junction of the land routes from China and India to the West and a place of convergence for numerous, dynamic nations and cultures. It, therefore, is rightly said that Afghanistan is a bridge connecting the present day South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and East Asia. Over the years, the migrants who passed through this region left behind "a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic groups" (Mazhar, Khan and Goraya, 2013). Thus, Afghanistan is truly a multi-cultural land and there have been Chinese civilizational impacts over this country.

Owing to the global power play between the major contenders, Afghanistan has been subjected to foreign invasions and intrusions quite frequently, mainly owing to its geopolitical location. It was in fact the geopolitical location of Afghanistan, which attracted global occupying powers from Alexander to former Soviet Union, and now NATO and US. In recent history, following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 (Grau and Gress, 2002, p.6), U.S being the key beneficiary of the covert campaign left the region in haste. In the absence of any substantial representative and consensus Government in Kabul, factional fighting prevailed until the administration was taken up the by religiously motivated Taliban in the middle of 1990s (Rashid, 2001, p.239). Coldblooded in nature,

Taliban neither succeeded in securing public acceptance at home, nor won the recognition of international community (Rashid, 2001, p.239). The failure was mutual. In the post 9/11 scenario, the US led NATO action also could neither subdue the Taliban, nor could it reinstate stability in the war-ravaged Afghanistan. The US objectives to occupy Afghanistan were in line with Dr. Brzezinski's geostrategic imperative of "managing" Eurasia (Phallon, 2013). It aimed at gaining access to and in turn, greater influence in the Eurasian Heartland. The strategy hinged upon containment and not cooperation with China. Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski writes in *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* "For America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia...how America manages Eurasia is critical" (Phallon, 2013).

How successful the US strategy has been is another debate, but what's known is the fact that after almost fourteen years of military commove, the US led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), has finally pulled out maximum combat forces from Afghanistan, leaving behind approximately 10000 US troops on nine strategic bases. While there still exists ambiguity regarding future US involvement in Afghanistan, the new regional alignments are in the making. In this regard, after a prolong silence, the People's Republic of China; geographically contiguous to Afghanistan implied for the first time in June 2012 that it would play a major role in the stabilization of Afghanistan in the post 2014 scenario. The apparent Chinese role can be inferred from the statement of its former President, Mr. Hu Jintao, who clearly envisioned that, "We will continue to manage regional affairs by ourselves, guarding against shocks from turbulence outside the region, and will play a bigger role in Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction" (Bryanski and Buckley, 2012).

Since, the former Chinese President implicitly referred to his country's plans regarding post-2014 Afghanistan, President Xi Jinping reiterated Chinese commitment for Afghanistan's peace, stability and economic prosperity, once he met President Ashraf Ghani in October 2014 in Beijing. President Xi even said that, he was all set to work with his Afghan counterpart towards, "a new era of cooperation in China-Afghanistan relations and take development to a new depth and breadth" (Panda, 2014). President Ghani endorsed the Chinese Silk Road Initiative and remarked that, "We feel that our vision of Afghanistan as a hub of regional trade, transit, and peace would be an illustration of your vision of East Asia and South Asia cooperation" (Panda, 2014). China has already made huge financial investments for the development of Afghanistan's mineral sector. It has pledged \$330 million grants over next three years and agreed to provide professional training for 3,000 Afghans.

Indeed, China has lot at stake in Afghanistan, security of its western autonomous region (Xinjiang) being the most significant. Consequently, restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan is in the interest of China, besides this being vital for Afghan masses. Not only has China sufficient resources for making long-term investments in Afghanistan, there is a strong will of the determined Chinese leadership to strengthen communication, coordination and collaboration in dealing with major international and regional issues. China is analyzing new cooperation models and suggesting ways to identify non-resource sectors as a new priority for economic cooperation in Afghanistan and the region. Apart from its own interest for stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan, there is acceptability for China's increased role in Afghanistan amongst the masses and leadership alike. At such a crucial time, deep-rooted economic and strategic relations with Afghanistan would not only bring economic gains to China but would also enhance its global stature. If China can rebuild the war torn Afghanistan, it will be seen as a triumphant alternative to U.S.

Chronology of Sino-Afghan Relationship

The history of Sino-Afghan relationship can be traced back to 7th Century when Chinese Monks used to travel to Afghanistan through Silk Road, visiting Buddha statues in Bamyian province of Afghanistan (Scott, 2008), provided that the Afghan land had once been the focus of Buddhism. Under Buddhism, by 500 B.C, Kandahar and Heart provinces (then known Arachosia and Aria) were considered as the jewels of the world. Buddhist rule on Afghanistan remained from 650-321 B.C (the Mauryan Age) (Alikuzai, 2013). The largest Buddha statue (one thousand meters long, Sleeping Buddha statue) was made in the Bamyian province. There were twelve small and large Buddhist monarchies in Afghanistan; Kingdom of Bactria with its capital at Kandahar as the biggest and most significant (Alikuzai, 2013). Indeed, the Buddha statues of Bamyian (destroyed by Taliban in March 2001) had greater attraction for Chinese people, apart from many followers of this religion (UNESCO).

CHINA'S ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC

During the recent digging at the Aynak copper mines, some archaeological sites have been found that are not only part of Afghanistan's cultural heritage but also of Chinese interests. Afghan and foreign archaeologists and historians have repeatedly highlighted the cross-border cultural links interspersed throughout this region. These sites are also part of China's history. According to China, "this is China's neighborhood, and they are committed to making sure it works out well" (UNESCO).

Through the extensive use of the Silk Road, a robust trade relationship existed between Asia and Europe. While China was the hub of Asian trade, Afghanistan played significant role as key transit trade route between the two continents; Asia and Europe. The cordial Sino-Afghan relationships have been maintained through ages. It was after the re-positioning of global power centers, sequel to World War-II, People's Republic of China and Afghanistan established their bilateral relationship in 1950s.

The diplomatic relationships, however, were established between the two neighbours in 1957. During the Cold war era, Chinese Prime Minister, Mr Zhu Enlai visited Afghanistan in 1957. Earlier, Prime Minister Daud Khan paid a visit to Peking in the same year. These visits strengthened the bilateral relationship between the two states. The Sino-Afghan Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression was signed in August-1960 (Rahimi, 2008). Thereafter, the Peking Treaty of formal demarcation of boundary between China and Afghanistan was signed in 1963, thus settling the 76 Kilometres long border issues once and for all (Rahimi, 2008).

Being a signatory of 'Good Neighbour' Declaration-2002, China has pledged to respect Afghanistan's independence and territorial integrity. Indeed, both the states enjoyed friendly relations since the beginning of the bilateral relationship in 1950s; something that could perhaps be exceptional in the realm of international relations. China suspended her official relations with Afghanistan amidst the Soviet Union and restored relations only after the fall of Taliban regime in 2001. Since then, the Sino-Afghan relations have transformed and improved. Recently, the bilateral meetings and high level meetings have become quite frequent. Just last year, Chinese Foreign Minister, state Councilor, and Deputy Chief of PLA General Staff visited Afghanistan separately. In fact, this is the first time in history that this many Chinese visits have been made to Afghanistan in a span of one year only. Furthermore, China's has massively upgraded aid to Afghanistan. While it provided a total of \$240 million aid to Afghanistan from 2001-2013; in 2014 it has provided \$80 million aid to the country and pledges to provide another \$240 million from 2015-2018 (Huasheng, 2015).

Within the regional context, Afghanistan's relations with China are likely to figure out much, both during the ongoing transition period and in the post-2014 scenario, as China is not only the most powerful regional country, with a thriving economy but also has the will to play a positive role in Afghanistan. China, as an economic power and neighbour can play a key role to help Afghanistan overcome the devastation of more than a decade long war. On its part, Afghanistan can offer China the easiest transport route for exploration of energy and mineral resources within Afghanistan and in its neighbouring region of Central Asia and Caucasus.

As of today, thousands of Afghan citizens acquire visas to travel to China in order to find good opportunities for business and trade. In addition to this, there are hundreds of Chinese citizens living and working in Afghanistan. Another important aspect of Sino-Afghan relationship is that China never had any political or ideological conflicts with Afghanistan, thus providing it with a special and unique privilege, unavailable to those countries that are apparently struggling to stabilize and democratize Afghanistan for their vested interests. "They are rare among the actors in Afghanistan in that they are not seen as having been too close to any side of the conflict. All sides are happy to see China's expanded role" (Gray, 2013). China has had balanced relationship with almost Afghan ethnic groups and therefore has not favoured any particular faction against the other; a policy that should have been learnt by others. According to Andrew Small, a US based Chinese expert, "China is the only actor which can foot the level of investment needed in Afghanistan to make it succeed and stick it out" (Wadsam, 2013).

The geo-economic significance of Afghanistan as well as Chinese huge investments in Afghanistan reflect an urge by both the sides to further expand relations and economic cooperation. Currently, several Chinese companies are engaged in various economic and construction activities in Afghanistan. It is likely that in near future, China emerges as the largest investor in Afghanistan's enormous energy and mineral resources. The payoff

for China could be enormous, despite having provided little aid and no blood over the last decade. In October 2009, Sultan Ahmad Baheen, Afghanistan's ambassador to China stated that, "We believe that Afghanistan should be the ground for cooperation of civilizations, not the competition between the countries. I think there is room for everyone in Afghanistan" (Kuhn, 2009). If Beijing uses its strategy of less politics, more economy; it can definitely enjoy the larger share of room.

Chinese Role in the Economic Development of Afghanistan

Sino-Afghan political relationship, economic cooperation and trade relations date back to the era of Silk Road. The relations were established in 1955 and then were further strengthened through the 'Treaty of Economic and Technical Cooperation in 1964.' In the recent years, trade between the two countries has steadily increased and China has swiftly emerged as one of the main exporters to Afghanistan in the past decade. The Sino-Afghan trade has already reached over \$700 million. A look at China-Afghan Trade volume highlights certain facts which points towards the environment conducive for China's business interests. Just between 2002 and 2010, the trade volume remained considerably high i.e. China's export volume increased from \$19.91 million to \$704 million. There also is a small but significant increase in China's import volume which increased from \$.08 million to \$11.7 million (Huasheng, 2012, p.7). Furthermore, recently the Afghan Government and the donor agencies are contracting a number of Chinese companies for diverse areas of reconstruction activities.

Afghanistan is lucky to have abundance of natural resources like; copper, iron, coal, marble, precious metals, lithium, gemstones and above all hydrocarbons, some of which have been discovered while most remains un-explored, owing to the ongoing conflict. According to Afghan and American Geological Surveys, conducted between 2007 and 2009, deposits of copper, mercury, rare-earth elements, sulfur, chromites, asbestos, potash, graphite, and sand and gravel were found in over 20 mineralized areas. The survey reveals that, "The most significant known metal deposits are of copper and iron. The total copper resources in Afghanistan range up to 60 million metric tons of copper of which the sediment-hosted copper deposits at Aynak are estimated to contain nearly 30 million metric tons copper. Resources in undiscovered porphyry copper and skarn deposits are estimated to be about 28.5 million metric tons of copper, with additional molybdenum, gold, and silver resources. Sedimentary iron deposits are abundant, and the Haji Gak and surrounding deposits are estimated to contain about 2,260 million metric tons of iron ore with grades higher than 62 weight percent iron. Additional resources in similar deposits are likely" (Huasheng, 2012).

During the first decade of the 21st Century, trade between China and Afghanistan has steadily increased and China has emerged as one of the main exporters to Afghanistan. China is making substantive contributions in terms of developing the natural resources and infrastructure of Afghanistan. In 2007, Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCL) agreed to make the single largest foreign investment of \$3.5 billion in Afghanistan by winning a tender to develop what geologists believe is the world's second largest undeveloped copper deposit at Aynak in Logar Province, 35 kilometers southeast of Kabul (Downs, 2012). These copper deposits are estimated to be worth \$1-\$3 trillion (United States Geological Survey, 2007).

Indeed, China became the first foreign country in decades to sign an oil exploration deal with Afghanistan, making it possible for the later to earn \$7 billion over next 25 years (Space Daily, 2011). In 2011, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its Afghan partner, Watan Oil & Gas, secured the rights to three oil blocks in the provinces of Sari-i-Pul and Faryab in northwestern Afghanistan (Downs, 2012). China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its Afghan partner are exploring crude oil from Amu Darya River Basin oil deposits in northern Afghan region. Amu Darya River Basin deposits are of more than 87 million barrels of crude oil reserves (Downs, 2012). Besides this, Northern Afghanistan region is believed to contain more than 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 500 million barrels of natural liquids gas (Downs, 2012). China has initially invested \$400 million for the oil exploration in these oilfields in Afghanistan (Harooni, 2011).

The general perception is that the Chinese provide economic assistance in the form of part and parcel of the bid which makes it uncompetitive for anyone else to bid against Chinese companies. On the other hand, China has offered to build a power plant and a railroad to service the mine, which could nearly multiply the investment and will be beneficial for the population with civic facilities for the local population. It is interesting to note that

while U.S. troops risk their lives in Afghanistan, it is Chinese companies that reap the economic benefits (Daishi, 2009).

Wakhan Corridor and New Eurasian Land Bridge

For long Afghanistan has desired that China should construct a direct road link to open the narrow Afghan-China border through Wakhan Corridor across the remote 47-mile border between the two countries. Wakhan border lies close to the city of Kashgar and its economic zone. China hopes to restore Kashgar as a launching pad and serve its previous position in the legendary Silk Road (Lin, 2011). Such a route would connect China to Central Asia, Europe and warm waters of Gulf via Afghanistan. In other words, it will be present worlds' Silk Road, a new China's Eurasian Land Bridge. According to Afghan Ambassador to China, Afghan Government has asked Beijing to open the narrow Afghan-China border. "If we have this link, for sure the Afghan people will benefit from this way. So this is why we proposed to the Chinese to build a road, even a railroad from this Wakhan Corridor to Afghanistan" (Kuhn, 2009). During his visit to China in October 2014, President Ghani proposed to his Chinese counterpart, President Xi, that both countries should "work to set up a transport link along their narrow border at the easternmost tip of the Wakhan Corridor, an inhospitable and mountainous region" (Panda, 2014).



Credit: Alyson Hurt / NPR

While the West has been using the rhetoric about a "regional strategy" as the key to Afghanistan's future, China is the one that is actually implementing such an approach, anticipating both China's readiness and the future in which Beijing will have much more of an impact on the region than Washington. "The deal is a way of getting a foot inside the door. China is looking towards a much bigger scale of investment. This could involve projects in infrastructure, including high-speed rail in times to come."

In the discussion of a New Silk Road the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, hearkens back to historic East-West links and suggests a long-term investment in the region, China's new Eurasian land bridge that is under construction. Linking Afghanistan to Central Asia—by developing direct land links between China, Europe and warm waters in the Gulf using a mesh of rail and road links—shows China is a serious, capable and long-term player in the region.

Security and Sino-Afghan Strategic Relationship

In June 2012, China and Afghanistan decided to form a framework for strategic cooperation between the two countries, both sides agreeing to bring about the strategic cooperation based on the UN charter and historic friendship. The strategic cooperation would guard national interests of both the countries, strengthen efforts for maintaining historic friendship between the two sides and develop support in political, financial, cultural and security sectors. Both countries have decided to support mutual issues of national integrity, unity and protection of land and not to let their soil be used against the other side.

The current President is more than willing for joint strategy to fight out terrorism like the former Afghan President Karzai who during his meeting with the then Chinese President Mr Hu in Beijing, agreed to step up cooperation in security and the fight against terrorism, other than upgrading intelligence sharing. China is trying to ensure that the Muslim separatist group: East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in a western Chinese Xinjiang

region does not benefit from the Taliban after the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. An important development in this context is China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue, whose first round was held in February in Kabul. With focus on peace and stability, Pakistan and China have reemphasized their support for “Afghanistan-led and Afghanistan-owned” reconciliation process (Nihao-Salam, 2015).

Chinese strategy has been that it does support the international community in its efforts in Afghanistan but stays away from direct military involvement (Perlez, 2012). China, however, has serious concerns about the highly instable, war torn Afghanistan that will affect China’s internal security too, other than making it important to guard the borders. “China’s first concern is national security and to make sure the Uighurs don’t get more strength” (Perlez, 2012). Two major aims in this context are to discourage unrest in the Uighur population and thwart terrorist attacks carried out by ETIM (Gartenstein-Ross, Trombly and Barr, 2014). As agreed in 2012, during the visit of China's domestic security chief, Mr Zhou Yongkang, the most senior Chinese official to visit Afghanistan in last 50 years, China would help train the Afghan police force. Under the new agreements, around 300 Afghan police officers would be sent to China for training over the next four years (Perlez 2012).

The Regional Scenario: Soundings from SCO

From SCO forum in June 2012, China clearly expressed its desire to play a greater role for the stabilization of Afghanistan alongside Russia. As mentioned earlier that President Hu vowed to make sure China would play an active role to manage the “regional affairs” against the “shocks from turbulence outside the region” and that would also include the reconstruction of Afghanistan and rehabilitation of Afghan population (Bryanski and Buckley, 2012). According to Mr Zhang Deguang, Chairman of China Foundation of International Studies (CFIS), “SCO can and will play a bigger role in Afghanistan after the NATO withdrawal” (Bryanski and Buckley, 2012). He added that China would provide \$10 billion for undertaking projects in the SCO countries. Since most of the SCO countries are geographically contiguous with Afghanistan, and thus are vulnerable to spillover effects of terrorism and Afghan-originated drug trafficking. Indeed, Afghan issue occupies importance throughout the history of SCO. This probably is the reason that SCO policy towards Afghanistan is evolving.

Owing to these facts, they have an interest to stabilize this country. SCO has laid down its views regarding Afghan policy and they are: promote political stability and economic development in Afghanistan, build a stable terrorism, narcotics and poverty-free Afghanistan, encourage the country to build an environment favourable for good relations with the neighbours, and further maintains that the international community must assist using the platform of United Nations (Huasheng, 2012). As presumed by scholars, the biggest test of the SCO would be its developmental role in post-2014 Afghanistan. Looking at China’s growing attention of Afghanistan, it becomes clear that China is well aware of all these realities and is ready to make an effort to ensure regional stability connected to that of Afghanistan. Former Chinese President Mr Hu once said that, “China will continue actively participating in international and regional cooperation concerning Afghanistan” (Bryanski and Buckley, 2012). Furthermore, Afghanistan has become the observer state to SCO.

In a statement, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said that member states should boost security collaboration to safeguard regional stability, including stepping up the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism, optimizing the model for cooperation in ensuring security for major international events, and carrying on joint anti-terrorism exercises. Yang also called for better links among the SCO member states, boosting infrastructural construction, further facilitating trade and investment and expanding cooperation in sectors such as finance, transport, energy, telecommunication and agriculture amid the economic slump.

The historical Ufa Summit of SCO-2015 has formally initiated the expansion plan for membership of this organization. The Ufa Summit of SCO has regional and global implications. Regionally, two important South Asian countries have been housed in the organization as full members; a step forwards the regional integration process of the Asian Continent. Globally, Russia and China has given a clear indication to present a joint disagreement against the current uni-polar world order, where US is the sole super power. At the level of South Asia, it is a well-coming step that Pakistan and India have been formally accepted as the members of SCO. Their entry into the organization will pave way for improvement in their bilateral relationship. This aspect has been even supported by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping, who said that, “India and Pakistan’s admission to the SCO will

play an important role in the SCO's development and it will play a constructive role in pushing for the improvement of their bilateral relations" (Daily Times, 2015). Chinese President also welcomed the expansion of SCO and called the members to "uphold the "Shanghai Spirit" for common development. He hoped that, admission of new forces into the SCO will inject new impetus into the organization's all-ranging cooperation and especially for the stability and peace in Afghanistan.

Contemporary Debate on Sino-Afghan Relationship

So far, China has invested \$4.4 billion through its two state-owned companies i.e. Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCCL) at Mes Aynak, one of the world's largest copper mines (Downs, 2012). As per US Geological Survey (USGS), "Afghanistan may be sitting on mineral wealth worth around \$1 trillion" (Downs, 2012). Besides, it has huge lithium deposits, which could turn the country into, 'Saudi Arabia of lithium'. Estimates of its iron ores are of some \$421 billion's worth and there may be copper of worth \$273 billion (Downs, 2012). Furthermore, in the north, "Afghanistan sits atop the lower end of the hydrocarbon rich Amu Darya basin" (Downs, 2012).

About the Chinese engagement in Afghanistan, there are two opinions. First, on the issues of its security, China has benefited from the NATO and US presence in Afghanistan, thus did not commit its own troops there. Chinese security planners argue had there been no foreign troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives would have enlarged their sway of militancy into its already disturbed autonomous region, Xinjiang, where Uyghur population is hostile to the Chinese rule. Since Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda have been fighting against the NATO and US troops, thereby, giving China a leeway for improving the security apparatus in this unstable region. However, there have been widespread demonstrations and violence in this region, mainly undertaken by East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Occasionally China blames foreign troops and their spying agencies for fueling this violence. However, there is no denying the fact that China has been an indirect beneficiary of this foreign presence in Afghanistan. This intentional ambiguity in the Chinese policy on Afghanistan can be attributed to this particular beneficial aspect; i.e. to make strategic gains on others' expense.

The second opinion, however, argues that China is only interested in the economic benefits of the region; Central Asia and Afghanistan, and therefore makes economic investments where it feels secured and ensured; Mes Aynak and Amu Darya being the prominent examples. Proponents of this opinion also argue that China has long waited for the right time for its future strategy in Afghanistan for its intimate involvement. This opinion strengthened the ground realities and statement of the former Chinese President Mr. Hu, who promised playing a major role for the stabilization of the Afghanistan in the post 2014 scenario. There is a strong feeling among the Western policy makers, academic circles and think tanks that while NATO and US forces fought the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other militants in Afghanistan, China garnered the fruits of their sacrifices, thus emerging as the true beneficiary. According to Raffaello Pantucci, a senior research fellow at RUSI, "Beijing correctly assumed that NATO's presence in Afghanistan would mean regional terrorist networks would remain focused on attacking Alliance forces rather than stirring up trouble in neighboring countries like China" (Pantucci, 2013).

Chinese new leadership is zealous for improving its ties with its neighbors. In this regard, President Xi Jinping fully acknowledges that the good neighborly relations would help China's own development and the goals of achieving a prosperous, stable and a modern country. On Oct 24, 2013, while addressing the party central committee's political bureau on 'Diplomatic work on neighboring countries' President Xi said in his major policy statement that dealings with neighboring countries "should have a three-dimensional, multi-element perspective, beyond time and space." Owing to geopolitics and geo-economics' significance of the region, President Xi sought common grounds and converging interests of China and other regional countries. The new leadership is striving to promote friendship among its neighbors and other regional countries to extend communication in all spheres: political, security and economics. Mr. Xi further added, "We must have deeper security cooperation and closer people-to-people ties."

There can be no second opinion about the intent of the Chinese leadership for promoting good relationship with neighbors, but, exclusively on Afghanistan, Chinese strategy remains indistinct. During the visit of Central Asian region, President Xi did discuss the post 2014 Afghan scenario with the regional leadership, however,

it has not come out with a clear strategy, as how to deal with the post 2014 Afghanistan. After negotiation of Bilateral Security Agreement between US and Afghanistan, the situation would not be the one Chinese might have appreciated i.e the complete pull out of NATO and US troops from its neighborhood by December 2014. The scenario has changed now and US has only 10,000 troops on its strategically located military bases. Besides taking care of security aspects of Afghanistan, where primarily the Afghan National Army would be responsible for its security, these bases would pursue the US strategic interests in the region. Surely, a rising China and resurgent Russia fall within in the future radar of the United States, and the super power will definitely not encourage any obstruction in the exercise of its sole power status at the global level.

Notwithstanding these ground realities, China has its strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Since Afghanistan has yet to come out from the shocks of ill devised foreign invasion and thus is unable to take a clear line of action about its future correlation. The change of Afghan leadership in April 2014 is another factor that has benefitted China. The Central Asian states have mixed sentiments regarding the growing Chinese influence. It may affect the regional affairs in different ways. Firstly, it will invite other international competitors like United States and Russia to enlarge their sway or else to counter the Chinese influence in Central Asia. Already the major powers seem at loggerheads over their economic interests in the region. However, Central Asian states can benefit from the economic struggles of the great powers. If played well, these states can reap the maximum benefits.

However, the enhanced Chinese influence may convert the region as vassal states of the former. These republics are not ready to repeat the history through subordination of another major power after experiencing the despotic policies of former Soviet Union. Besides, the region has already been incorporated via multiple regional organizations: Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and security setup like Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Being the hub of hydrocarbon reserves and Eurasian in character, Europe and US would like to extend their influence on the region. Certainly, the Chinese soft power image and economic incentives are rewarding aspect for the Central Asian Republics in the continuation of their economic relationship with China.

In Afghanistan there is also a perception that, China has contributed little in terms of reconstruction of the country and provision of facilities to its masses. Even India has developed a lot in communication infrastructure and contributed in reconstruction of educational institutions, health services, transport services and training of the Afghan military personnel, its bureaucracy and intelligence agency (NDS). It is desired that, China should focus on providing facilities, extremely essential to win the hearts and mind of a common Afghan. To win the vote of masses, Chinese firms must provide employment opportunities to the locals. Raffaello Pantucci, a scholar at RUSI, conducted a field survey in some parts of Afghanistan and found that, "Kabul – China's optics in Afghanistan are not good. After a week of travelling around talking to Afghans and others in Kabul, the consensus is that China is doing little to contribute on the ground. In fact, the perception remains that China is trying to draw profit from Afghanistan's abundant natural resources while giving little in return" (Pantucci, 2013).

The Future Prospects

According to Davood Moradiyan of Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies, Kabul, "The Chinese are ambiguous. They don't want the Taliban to return to power and are concerned about a vacuum after 2014 that the Taliban could fill, but they also don't like having U.S. troops in their neighbourhood" (Gary, 2013). Definitely, China is not going to jump into Afghanistan after US pulls out. However, it is likely that it would have a new and a renewed approach towards its immediate neighbourhood. Indeed, "If you are able to see a more or less stable situation in Afghanistan, if it becomes another relatively normal Central Asian state, China will be the natural beneficiary" (Gary, 2013).

According to Andrew Small, a China expert, "If you look across Central Asia that is what has already happened. ... China is the only actor which can foot the level of investment needed in Afghanistan to make it succeed and stick it out" (STRATAGEM, 2013). A stable Afghanistan is of vital importance to China for its reaching over to Eurasia; and moreover, it cannot afford to stand aside following the U.S. troop withdrawal and in the process of political transition. The strategic partnership Agreement signed between China and Afghanistan in 2012

signifies Chinese interests in Post 2014 Afghanistan. China fears that if Taliban come back to power, it will have a great impact on the “separatist group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Greene, 2012). China has a greater role in Afghanistan in any case, for this purpose China has already made benefits from the pre-Soviet era agreements with Afghanistan.

As far as Chinese policies towards Afghanistan are concerned, it goes beyond saying that China would like stability in Afghanistan. The Central Asian gas pipeline is only the most vivacious illustration of China's rising stakes (and its new vulnerabilities) in that county. Meanwhile, there are also indications that China is re-evaluating and reconsidering its responsibility as far as Central Asia is concerned, against the conditions of the renewed thrust by Moscow on Eurasian integration (with apathetic fallouts until now), after departure of major ISAF troops from Afghanistan and the ebb of US concern in the region that may proceed.

In the post 2014, China will stride carefully in assuming any major responsibility in order to bring harmony in Afghanistan, yet it intends to stay away from the wreckage of the war, security vacuity and shows little approval to a long-term US troop presence in Afghanistan. The point is, while China is looking forward to role played by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in stabilizing post-2014 Afghanistan, its key focus is on the bilateral proposals. From the US perspective, this has repercussions for the great-power enmity in Central Asia. China is ever more restructuring Central Asia to turn into its backyard rather than Russia's, and this will carry certain regional responsibilities that China has not yet figured out how to address. For that very reason, China will have to construct an appropriate strategy for Central Asia, other than the one for Afghanistan.

Regional countries will have the chance to play better role in Afghanistan. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has recognized Afghanistan as an observer member. Though tangential now, SCO is preparing itself to presume a larger task in Afghanistan. Following the exit of foreign troops, China has signed a series of agreements with Afghanistan and appears to be maintaining its policy of resource mobilization through “investment in mining and communications”, and guarantees to “facilitate, instruct, support and equip Afghan police.” However, the question of security remains the overriding issue. The SCO countries do not have the capital in order to utilize in Afghanistan, nevertheless they can present support for capacity building. There exists likelihood that Afghanistan will develop good relations with Central Asia in the post-2014 phase, as there is least probability that Afghanistan might come out as a “Transit Nucleus” between the Indian Sub-Continent and Central Asia. Apart from Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, it can yield considerable profits from ‘overland trade’, but only if the it gets stable.

Conclusion

To promote stability in Afghanistan, there is a pressing need for regional countries to play a vital yet neural role in Afghanistan through a regional co-operation mechanism. This all has to be done along with respecting the territorial veracity and sovereignty of Afghanistan viz a viz its neighbors. The geo-economic significance of Afghanistan as well as impressive Chinese investments in that country indicates a desire by both countries to upgrade their relations and uphold economic cooperation. By means of regional co-operation order, the Afghan imbroglio, uncertain security situation, fragile economy and divided society can be brought back to normalcy, thereby enabling Afghanistan to establish fruitful relations with the rest of the world. For this very purpose, China needs to design its post-2014 policy for the stabilization of Afghanistan carefully through its economic investment and reconstruction. It should also contribute in provision of facilities like communication network, educational and health services and impart training to Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police on the lines of US and many other regional and international countries. Surely, compared to the West's increasingly discomfort in last decade, China can set itself up to guarantee a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan and consequently a peaceful, secure and stable South Asia in the Asian century. In fact, the rising power of China cannot afford a confrontational approach towards its neighborhood and particularly in Afghanistan, where NATO and U.S still maintain their ascendancy. However, China is all set for the constructive engagement with Afghanistan and Central Asia for its subsequent influence and economic cum political gains beyond the region through Eurasia.

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Received: April, 20th, 2015
Revisions Received: Sep, 14th, 2015