

The Role of Pakistan and China in Afghanistan: Prospects for Regional Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese presence and its ensuing role in Afghanistan can be attributed to China's economic ambition that carries prospects as well as implications both within and beyond the region. The prospects for regional cooperation are quite significant as opposed to any negative implications. A proactive and meaningful Chinese role along with Pakistan is instrumental for peace and stability of Afghanistan as well as for South Asia as a whole. The most imperative way for the regional cooperation in South Asia is the land connectivity but more importantly if the maritime routes are inter-connected. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) vision entails the connectivity of both maritime and road networks. Hence, the regional cooperation of South Asia is abounding with prospects that can transform the destiny of the connecting regions.

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Introduction

The ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative unveiled by China in 2013 spans over 70 countries with projects estimated to the tune of \$1 trillion, involving 4 billion people and approximately one-third of the global GDP. It restores the ancient silk route connectivity between Asia and Europe. The OBOR also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes building huge networks of railways, roadways, gas pipelines, maritime ports and power grids that are linked with infrastructural projects of “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. While the former is land based connectivity of China with Europe and Central Asia, the latter would connect Southern Coast of China to the Mediterranean, Central Asian, South-East Asian and African sea routes. In addition to South, Central and West Asia, other regions can also be connected to these maritime and road networks. Its farthest extension connects the Horn of Africa and potentially the shores of Oceania. Southern most extension of the BRI comprises the coasts of Australia, while the farthest Western extension is the coasts in Djibouti and Somalia; similarly, the South eastern extension of the BRI reaches the coasts of Java Sea; thereby making the BRI the largest trade network of the globe.

China’s National Security Interests

With the modernization policies of Deng Xiaoping, China began to seriously assert itself as not only the most populous country of the world, but it also asserted itself as the emerging superpower of the world in the field of economy as well as in the military might. With the assertion of the Chinese power, the new competitor and rivals emerged on the scene, which modified the national security interests of China within the region and beyond.¹ At the moment, China has made an identity of it as the new economic giant of the world. Since economy is the epicentre of the projection of power aboard, the national security interests revolve around the economic

1 Andrew Small, *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics* (New York: Vintage, 2016): 219-225.

interests. With this economic projection of power, China has a quite ambitious plan; it wants to realign the oceanic boundaries with the continental boundaries to pave the way for its trade routes and, thus, to influence and dominate the globally pivotal trade routes.

There are certain factors that bear testimony to the growing engagement of China in Afghanistan. China has envisaged a new security strategy to demonstrate its might called as the “Westward March”, which means to expand its influence, its trade routes and security networks towards the West and Afghanistan is the epicentre of this approach. It was proven instantly after 2014 when China not only appointed its first envoy to Afghanistan in a long time but it also increased the aid to Afghan government asserting a shift in its approach towards Afghanistan. To put it more plainly, China is emerging as a world leader, but before asserting its presence at the global level, it needed a starter and Afghanistan provided that opportunity to assert its regional leadership.²

China’s Political Interests in Afghanistan

The political interests of China define its post-isolation involvement in the world politics and the assertion of its role as a global leader. Various political interests of China in Afghanistan include the expansion of its role in peace building through proactive engagement in the conflict zone, policies to counter Indo-US nexus and by promoting the role of SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) in the stability of Afghanistan. From the last decade, it has been seen that China has increased its efforts to mediate in the conflict zones that means it is China’s policy globally to outreach its influence throughout the world.

China had traditionally maintained a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan throughout its history; however, a shift in its policy became evident in 2014, when for the first time China intervened to promote its political interests. The subsequent

2 Arif Rafiq, *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; Barriers and Impact*, (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2017):13.

engagement occurred after a thorough cost-benefit analysis when strategically it was perceived to be the most viable course of action.³With the intended US and the NATO withdrawal, the increasing violence in Afghanistan compelled China to protect BRI trade routes and to prevent infiltration of extremism within China; thereby directly engaging Afghanistan. China hosted “The 4th Heart of Asia – Istanbul Ministerial Process” in October 2014, regarding future stability of Afghanistan. This was the first time China convened a peace conference pertaining to Afghanistan, clearly expressing its intent for a deep engagement with Afghanistan.⁴ Since then, China has become more of the leading stakeholders in convening peace talks and persuading all parties to the conflict to come to the negotiating table. It conducted separate bilateral meetings with all parties as well as Afghanistan. Another incentive for an increased China’s role in Afghanistan is its rising interest in South Asian affairs. This seems to be the first time when China realized the significant link between its economic aims and regional security. To protect the \$150 billion BRI flagship at all costs, a direct involvement in security affairs of Afghanistan is the best course of action for China.⁵

China’s Economic Interests in Afghanistan

Since 9/11, China has shaped its Afghanistan strategy that is an interesting but unsurprising fact. In Beijing circles, the issues have increasingly received massive attention since 2013. Furthermore, China, with its renewed interests, wanted to create such a helping environment that can secure its heavily invested regions under the Belt and Road Initiative as well as securing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in and around. An extension of the CPEC is offered by China

3 “The Current Situation in Afghanistan” United States Institute of Peace (USIP), *Fact Sheet*, (May 1, 2019).

4 Asle Toje, *Will China’s Rise be Peaceful? Security, Stability and Legitimacy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 250-251.

5 Hafeez Ullah Khan, “Regional Security Threats to CPEC: A Strategic Overview,” *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 56, no. 1 (January-June, 2019): 299-306.

to Afghanistan as well.⁶ Since May 2016, Afghanistan has been an official partner of the BRI. Several discussions of the presidents of Afghanistan and China were held in the following years regarding Afghanistan serving to connect China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and BRI corridors as well as China-Central Asia-West Asia corridors.

China's role in Afghanistan predominantly focuses on economic ventures. With its economic projection of power, China's ambitious plan aims to realign the oceanic with continental boundaries to pave the way for its trade routes and, resultantly to influence and dominate pivotal trade routes globally. However, from a security perspective, Afghanistan is most relevant as all trade route corridors invariably pass through it.⁷ As the security of Afghanistan is directly associated to the functionality of trade routes; such corridors remain a focal point of Chinese security interests.

China just like other countries, has multiple interests in Afghanistan that include the natural resources like copper and iron, which China wants to exploit. China has made its commitment to \$300 million aid. By doing so, China wants to create a closer economic relationship with Afghanistan. Over \$62 billion deals were signed between Pakistan and China in 2015, as a part of the CPEC. According to this deal, roads, fibre optics, rail and energy networks will be built. The Chinese Metallurgical Group Corporation bought a \$3 billion copper mining concession in Mes Aynak in 2007, which is almost 25 miles away from southeast of Kabul. Unfortunately, no profit is yet earned from this investment due to the Taliban insurgents in that area so far.⁸

6 David Rank, "Leveraging US-China Cooperation to Build a Regional Consensus on Afghanistan," *Special Report 420*, United States Institute of Peace, (2018): 42-48.

7 Lei Zou, *The Political Economy of China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Berlin: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2018): 9-17.

8 Lloyd Thrall, *China's Expanding African Relations: Implications for U.S. National Security* (California: Rand Corporations, 2016), 88-91.

Military Cooperation between China and Afghanistan

Up until now, China's military presence in Afghanistan is geographically restricted. It is centred on Badakhshan territory and confined to the Afghan side of province, which adjoins China. However, it is not going to operationalize its military learning from the failed experiences of Soviet Union and United States and wants to make its presence felt through economic and diplomatic means.⁹ China is working on the capacity building of the Afghan security forces to avoid a new civil war and at the same time it is exerting influence on the Taliban and its splinter groups to exercise their influence in their own respective areas and to divide the country in their power gambits without hampering the position of the other.

In former times, the People's Liberation Army of China trained hundreds of the Mujahedeen during the Soviet aggression on Afghanistan. They were trained and provided with the necessary logistic to fight the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Many training camps, which were previously held in Pakistan, were moved to China in order to train the Mujahedeen.¹⁰ Anti-aircraft missiles, rocket launchers and machine guns, valued at hundreds of millions of dollars, were given to the Mujahedeen by the Chinese army. During the training sessions, the top brass from the Chinese army was present to guide the Mujahedeen to inculcate in them the fighting skills during tough combating conditions.¹¹ However, the military coordination broke during the Taliban rule; it has been resumed since 2001. In 2018, Janan Mosazai who was the ambassador of the Afghan government to China declared that the military coordination will be revived and the Afghan troops will revive training from the People's Liberation Army of China

9 Zou, *The Political Economy of China's Belt and Road Initiative*, 9-17.

10 Deepshikha Shahi, *Understanding Post-9/11 Afghanistan: A Critical Insight into Huntington's Civilizational Approach* (E-International Relations, 2017), 29-36.

11 Shahi, *Understanding Post-9/11 Afghanistan*.

and will also be equipped with necessary arms and logistics to combat wars like insurgent or guerrilla nature.¹²

The Role of Pakistan in Afghanistan

Pakistan shares 2,430 km long land border with Afghanistan. There are number of political and economic interests of Pakistan in Afghanistan. From the political lens, the driving motive behind the defence policy of Pakistan is concerned either directly or indirectly with India, its allies and its relations with Afghanistan, which is growing since 2001. India has been able to invest far more in reconstruction and development as compared to Pakistan. However, Pakistan plays a constructive role in Afghanistan through its active involvement in Afghan Peace Process. Pakistan's major achievement in the talks was to bring Taliban on the negotiating table. Though, Pakistan plays a positive role in intra-Afghan Dialogue, but relations between the two remained strained. However, the CPEC will help and give opportunity to Afghanistan to improve relations with Pakistan as well as reduce its dependence on foreign aid by making its economic condition independent and strong. Meanwhile, the cooperation among three countries – Pakistan, China and Afghanistan – with the Belt and Road Initiative, will provide benefits to all these countries. Pakistan perceives that the political and economic engagement of China in Afghanistan will minimize the influence of India from Afghanistan.

Prospects of Regional Cooperation

China's policy towards South Asia involves a series of balancing acts that not only involves supporting Pakistan on many political and economic fronts, but also involves the enhancement of cooperative ties with India. However, Sino-Indian border dispute remains one of the concerning issues of South Asia. Before 2000, China's South Asia policy was regarded as single dimensional policy but that changed with the modifications in its broader foreign policy objectives that

12 "Afghan Troops to Train in China, Ambassador Says" *Reuters*, September 6, 2018.

now involves Pakistan as a key player. South Asia remains one of the least unified regions of the world. Despite many efforts, The South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement, agreements of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and South Asian Free Trade Arrangements all have been unable to curtail trade barriers.

However, China's trade surplus in South Asia and its recent economic ventures through the BRI would provide ample opportunities to South Asian region as a whole. Though China's interest in South Asia faces major scrutiny specially from its border dispute with India and from unstable Xinjiang and the Tibet region. But, its aspirations to deepen ties with all the major and minor states of South Asia and promoting "Chinese Dream" for economic cooperation will enhance regional integration.

The first road to the regional cooperation in South Asia was paved by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 when he laid out the grand vision of One Belt One Road (OBOR) and drew a sketch of the Eurasian integration; Europe, Africa and Asia through road networks, energy corridors and infrastructural development.¹³ A new ray of hope emerged for Pakistan and Afghanistan for the first time through this Chinese effort. This model of development suited Afghanistan well as it neither has an industrial base, nor can it rely on heavy industrialization due to lack of resources and capital. However, with a long trade chain, such road networks and the corridors can provide ample opportunities to Afghanistan for using its labour and attracting foreign investors to use such routes in transit. As the BRI progresses, Afghanistan can also link its Silk Road vision with it.

The most important prospect for regional cooperation in South Asia can materialize if its maritime routes are connected to the road networks, which is precisely how the OBOR vision entails. Through the OBOR, the other regions can also be connected like the maritime silk route that connects to the

13 Toje, *Will China's Rise be Peaceful?*

Persian Gulf and in its farthest extension; connects to the Horn of Africa.¹⁴ On the other hand, the maritime silk route also links with the Bay of Bengal, through which it connects to the Java Sea and thereafter to the farthest and southernmost extension, the coasts of Australasia. Thus, the prospects for regional cooperation within South Asia carry abundant opportunities that can dramatically change the fate of the entire world, not just South Asia.¹⁵

South Asia has continuously suffered from a lack of economic cooperation, which is the main reason behind its poor economic stature. If the Chinese vision brings economic stability, this region can embark upon a new wave of cooperation. Another bright prospect for the regional cooperation is that China shares borders with five countries of this region. Its membership bid in SAARC has also been welcomed by Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. India is suspicious of giving China a full membership, due to their conflicting interests, ideologies as well as due to its veto power status. With Afghanistan's positive relations with both countries, India wants to capitalize upon the benefit it can derive against the resurgence of Taliban attacks.¹⁶

As far as the prospects for regional integration are concerned, there is diversity of opinion on certain threats posed to every country. There is no single point on which all countries can join hands with each other. The primary threats of the weaker states are from the hegemonic Indian position and with the Indian threat perception linked to Pakistan and the vice versa.¹⁷ The prevalent benefit for China at the moment is that the weaker states are attracted towards it against their common threat which is India. Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the

14 Umbreen Javaid, "Assessing CPEC: Potential Threats and Prospects," *Pakistan Economic and Social Review* 54, no. 1 (June 2015):123-142.

15 Javaid, "Assessing CPEC: Potential Threats and Prospects".

16 B. M. Jain, *South Asia Conundrum: The Great Power Gambit* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019), 76-80.

17 Shanthie Mariet D'Souza and Rajshree Jetly, ed., *Perspectives on South Asian Security* (London: World Scientific Publishers, 2013), 24-27.

Maldives and a fraction of the Nepali Leadership have made an open pitch for the inclusion of China in the SAARC forum. They are keen for inclusion of China as it would automatically reduce the Indian hegemony from the platform that has been exploited ever since it was formed.¹⁸

Establishing Peace in South Asia

Establishing peace must be the paramount focus for China without which no efforts for the Belt and Road Initiative can come true. The foremost aim of China while dealing with the stakeholders in South Asia must be to emphasize that the CPEC is the pathway to a win-win success model. China's ambition to link the CPEC with Afghanistan is quite understandable as it knows that it is also the pathway to the West Asian Corridor; thus, Afghanistan has the potential to be the centre of gravity for the Chinese trade routes. Being a central point for the CPEC, the West Asian Corridor as well as the northern extension, Afghanistan provides the best connectivity for the Central Asian Corridor.¹⁹ Therefore, Chinese concern about the future stability of Afghanistan is quite prudent as without a stable Afghanistan, the future of CPEC could come into question because unstable Afghanistan has been a breeding ground for militancy and extremism. History is also witness that the militancy does not confine to specific borders and often spills over to neighbouring countries. Pakistan has been the most affected country in the entire South Asia from terrorism as it was directly exposed to this wave of militancy that bred in Afghanistan.²⁰

Afghanistan is a potential choke point, which has been smartly envisaged by China as the future of all its ambitious plans;

18 Saqib Mohammad, "China as a Factor of Stability in South Asia: Problems and Prospects," *Pakistan Horizon* 63, no. 3 (2010): 63-75.

19 Zakir Ullah, "Belt and Road Initiative: Geopolitics, Opportunities and Challenges for Regional Integration," *Euraisa Review* (August 9, 2019).

20 Jyotishaman Bhagawati, "China's Increasing Forays in South Asia: Prospects for More Integration?" *Vivekananda International Foundation* (February 15, 2017): 254, 259.

thus, China is also engaging in the dialogue process in a bid to bring the spate of terrorism toward closure. Another reason for Chinese interest in supporting the dialogue in Afghanistan is related to Balochistan where the wave of low intensity insurgency has cooled down to a great extent, but the political climate is still volatile. Concerned that a spill over of militancy from Afghanistan could re-ignite the insurgency in Balochistan, thereby posing direct threat to the CPEC and Gwadar; China perceives stability and peace in Afghanistan essential for a successful functioning of the CPEC.

China's volume of trade in South Asian region is a total of \$250 billion, which is quite enormous; the only exception being India with which it has a trade partnership of around \$120 billion.²¹ The Chinese involvement in the peace and dialogue processes in Afghanistan also bears testimony to the fact that China is keen for restoration of stability in the region. Other than the SAARC platform, China has also used alternate sources like the sub-regional platforms or sub-regional cooperation initiatives among which the CPEC and the China-Nepal-India (CNI) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) are worth a mention. All these listed initiatives are quite crucial transportation projects, which are essential for the economic cooperation of the region.²²

Peace and Stability in Afghanistan

There can be no peace in South Asia without the stability of Afghanistan; and resultantly the prospect of CPEC and the BRI in the region will also remain in jeopardy. There is more space for regionalism in Afghanistan than ever before. The prospects for the assimilation of Afghanistan into the South Asian region rose after the withdrawal of the Allied forces from the country followed by the reduction of US troops. It was

21 Ahsan Abbas and Saira Ali, "China Regional Trade Pattern and Prospects for Pakistan," *Centre of Excellence for China Pakistan Economic Corridor* no.1 (March 6, 2018): 1-10.

22 Cheung Mahnken, "Planning for Innovation: Understanding China's Plans for Technological, Energy, Industrial and Defense Development," *US-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (July 28, 2016).

followed by the transition of power in Afghanistan from Hamid Karzai to Ashraf Ghani, who is more Asiatic than Western in his attitude. The transition of power into a new presidency and the change of mind set along with the withdrawal of western troops from the country have given impetus to the prospects of regionalism in Afghanistan. It has been quite resilient against the face of mounting extremism and pervasive militancy for decades and the insecurity has given strength to the Afghan resilience.²³

However, there is a shift in the policy approach in the neighbourhood due to the CPEC and there is a shift in the Afghan policy approach due to the transition of power to a new political group. Pakistan, in the past, always subordinated its bilateral ties with Afghanistan and gave more priority to its concerns on the growing influence of India in Afghanistan; however, for the first time a sense of cooperation has emerged among the political leadership on both the sides.

As far as the construction of war-torn Afghanistan is concerned, the first ever attempt was made in the Tokyo conference in 2002 when the western powers at the behest of US vowed to contribute in reconstruction of Afghanistan, but to no avail. However, this ambition was addressed by China after a decade. In 2013, China began to invest in Afghanistan's economic build-up by initiating reconstruction rising from the ashes of war.²⁴ China has encouraged Pakistan to use its influence over the Taliban to pursue a more peaceful approach, but so far the Chinese assessment of Taliban's resilience has not been accurate as Taliban have taken a much firm stance for their gains from the war torn country. The growing resilience of the Taliban and the use of excessive violence has exposed the inherent weakness of the Afghan government, after which the Taliban stance has become harder. Under these malleable circumstances where China works towards this delicate peace, the inherent

23 Ashutosh Kumar, *OBOR: China's Alternate Indo-Pacific Policy* (New Delhi: Prashant Publishing House, 2018), 79.

24 Kumar, *OBOR: China's Alternate Indo-Pacific Policy*.

weaknesses of the Afghan government and a rigid Taliban approach have further complicated the situation. In this backdrop, China has to be more vigorous in dealing with Taliban by exerting more pressure.²⁵

The socio-economic instability in Afghanistan does not permit fighting a sustained war against militancy. Therefore, the inclusion of China in the peace process is essential to uplift the morale and economy of Afghanistan whilst endeavouring to limit the extremists' spheres of influences. Bringing a change in the development of Afghanistan is thus a paramount concern and priority for China, which would be a welcome change for a country that has only seen war, internal stability and savagery during the last five decades.

Strategic Partnership for Regional Peace: China, Pakistan and Afghanistan

The long-standing differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan have prevented any positive process for their bilateral dialogue, where issues involving allegations of cross-border terrorism could be addressed. A mediator that could assist in the negotiating process can be a way out. On the other hand, China's interest in the stability of Afghanistan has grown due to its BRI interests. In this backdrop, a strategic partnership for regional peace for China, Pakistan and Afghanistan may be too wishful, but it can come true if China decides to play a leading role in it, including mediating between Pakistan and Afghanistan. If the region is stabilized with a due process and through diplomatic, political, economic and security measures with simultaneity and interdependence, they can usher in a new era of peace and progress which is mutually beneficial.

The Durand Line had been agreed upon in 1893 for a period of hundred years which expired in 1993. Since then, Afghanistan is arguing for renegotiation of the border

25 Shubhangi Pandey, "Understanding China's Afghan Foreign Policy: From Calculated Indifference to Strategic Engagement," *Observer Research Foundation*, (ORF) Issue Brief (August 6, 2019), available at: www.orfonline.org

settlement, but Pakistan supports continuity of the *status quo*.²⁶ That appears to be the basis for their respective interventions in each other's matters on frequent basis. The "Strategic Depth" policy of Pakistan was to use the land of Afghanistan against the expansionist and aggressive designs of India whilst Afghanistan perceives the Pakhtoon belt of Pakistan as a part of its own territory. The cross-border terrorism continues to fuel this trust deficit resulting into occasional killing and fighting on the border. The skirmishes between the armies from both the sides continue to feed this hatred. The political differences coupled with a lack of mutual security trust have impeded chances of bilateral economic cooperation. The 1965 Afghan Transit Trade Agreement has not been fully functional rather it further intensified such tensions.²⁷ As people from across borders are considered to be spies, India has taken full advantage of the Pak-Afghanistan mutual tensions by increasing its espionage activities along with strengthening its strategic ties with the Afghan government. The closer ties of the Afghan government with India have further deepened the trust deficit in Pakistan.²⁸

China can help to settle their differences amicably, as it has arguably commenced on this path by laying the foundations of CPEC. It has the potential to become the neutral mediator between the two countries. The CPEC has given Pakistan a new hope of economic revitalization and China's ambition to link the BRI with the CPEC by using Afghanistan as a traversing point has also provided Afghanistan a ray of hope for peace and cooperation.²⁹ The triangular relations amongst Afghanistan, Pakistan and China, with China holding a lead

26 Yongjin Zhang and Teng-Chi Chang, *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations: Ongoing Debates and Sociological Realities* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 84-86.

27 Bhagawati, "China's Increasing Forays in South Asia".

28 Ghulam Muhammad Kundi, "The Game Changer China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): A SWOT Analysis," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies* (November 2017).

29 Yongjin Zhang and Teng-Chi Chang, *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016): 84-86.

role is brimming with prospects for mutual trust and an economic boost. China has embarked upon bringing both countries on closer terms from the platform of the Quadrilateral Peace Talks. China is using its economic influence on Afghanistan to encourage it to resolve its political issues with Pakistan.³⁰

The CPEC is abundantly perceived to be a great game changer and that its success would entirely change the fate of Pakistan, and also that of entire South Asia. The major focus of China under this project is towards the development of infrastructure, which is crucial for regional connectivity. If China perceives the only workable linkage for regional connectivity to be giant projects for development of infrastructure. So far, this linkage would connect China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. However, China is willing to provide a chance to India and beyond to join in as well. A linkage of this kind and scale can, *inter alia*, rejuvenate the peace process once again in South Asia, which at the moment suffers a *status quo* due to the Indo-Pak rivalry and an array of mutual mistrusts and conflicts ranging from Kashmir to water dispute. China offers a unique chance to help establish peace in South Asia, a lasting peace that can restore the trust among states by overcoming the security dilemma.³¹

Peaceful Afghanistan as a Key to Regional Connectivity

No doubt, a peaceful Afghanistan is the key to the regional connectivity. In the past, any talks of regionalism in Afghanistan were totally useless because of the growing internal insecurity and political chaos coupled with the 'neighbourhood dilemma' as Pakistan was displeased with it regarding cross border terrorism or for leaning towards India.³² It may take a while before something tangible comes out of the dialogue process, but the sense of cooperation may

30 Zhang and Chang, *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations*.

31 Alex Their and Scott Worden, "Political Stability in Afghanistan: A Vision 2020 Roadmap," *United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, Special Report 408, (July 2017): 340-345.

32 Their and Worden, "Political Stability in Afghanistan".

help creating such appeal. The most important thing that caught China's attention is the location of Afghanistan as a centre point leading to several regions. On the western side, it is on the fringe of West Asia, on the southern side, it connects with South Asia, while on the northern and north-eastern side it is on the periphery of Central Asia and the economic giant China, respectively.³³

Such a central and strategic disposition places Afghanistan at the core of regional politics. Teeming with tremendous potential, it can become the transport hub of all the mentioned regions and is thus the key for regional connectivity. Even some of the Western powers share the Chinese interest in the context of the stability of Afghanistan. The regional actor that can play an undeniably vital role in the stability of Afghanistan is Pakistan. Therefore, the West encourages China to use its special relationship with Pakistan to motivate it towards the peace process in Afghanistan in the interest of accelerating the stabilization of the country.³⁴ Regional cooperation and regional ownership were never a concern of the West, as a result of such negligent behaviour, Afghanistan could never develop regional ownership. Now, China has endeavoured to fulfil such an ambition and ownership of Afghanistan towards regionalism that carries the potential to bring the latter unprecedented benefits.³⁵

China has brought Afghanistan on the regional front to evolve its regional ownership by bringing Afghanistan into the Heart of Asia Conference. It also strongly advocated Afghanistan's bid for the SAARC and the SCO membership. Through these platforms, China has brought Afghanistan on the forefront of the international diplomacy to facilitate its learning from international multilateralism so it can blend into regionalization in its own way.³⁶ Thus, it is gradually forging a regional

33 Liu Zongyi, "China's Economic Relations with SAARC: Prospects and Hurdles," *China Institute of International Studies* (December 2016): 34-41.

34 Small, "Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South Asia". 11-14.

35 Their and Worden, "Political Stability in Afghanistan".

36 Their and Worden, "Political Stability in Afghanistan".

approach for Afghanistan. The western countries always dealt with Afghanistan on bilateral basis, but China has introduced it to multilateralism so that its potential in South Asia is fully realized. Afghanistan is also in search of regionalizing itself because of its security challenges. It is endeavouring to resolve such challenges with the help of regional powers and wants to benefit from ensuing opportunities. Afghanistan has signalled to the entire Asian continent that it is ready for becoming the transport hub of the continent.³⁷

The top leadership of Afghanistan was invited to participate in the Heart of Asia conference to show that it is not isolated and no more remains in the shadows of war and instability. The goal behind such an approach was to embark upon diplomatic connectivity of Afghanistan with Asian countries, and especially to bring it closer to Islamabad.³⁸ On its part, Afghanistan needs a more vibrant diplomacy to persuade the Asian countries to help it overcome its internal issues. The economic and security imbalance is a hindrance in the way of regional connectivity. Therefore, China needs more persuasion to bring Taliban to a peaceful agreement with the Afghan government.

Hence, the positive role of China can help establish eternal peace in South Asia and stabilize the economies of the region. The partnership with China has opened the gateway for numerous opportunities for Pakistan in every field, including the path for a strategic partnership for regional peace for China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their bilateral ties have grown from politico-diplomatic to full-fledged strategic and economic relations, where numerous opportunities exist for Pakistan as far as its relationship with China is concerned. In addition, establishing peace is the paramount focus of China without which there can be no significant progress for Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI remains the foremost focus of China while dealing with stakeholders in South Asia, especially, with India with whom it has a long traditional hostility. The pursuit

37 Small "Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South.

38 Their and Worden, "Political Stability in Afghanistan".

of economic objectives has allowed China to keep political differences aside to move ahead. Prospects of cooperation are quite bright in South Asia as long as China plays a positive role in the socio-economic and strategic course of the region.

Conclusion

Afghanistan is a potential centre of gravity, which has been accurately envisaged by China as the hub on which its future ambitions are hinged. China has peacefully established itself as the second largest economy of the world connecting all major trading routes of the world. On account of this ambitious plan, Afghanistan has become central to China because most of the corridors and trading routes traverse this country. In order to fully bring Afghanistan in the regional loop, China is engaging the dialogue process in a bid to bring the spate of terrorism toward extermination because as long as terrorism continues to destabilize Afghanistan, it will be problematic for the Chinese future strategy.

China is a major stakeholder in the swiftly changing politics of South Asia, especially, that of Afghanistan. Its role for peace in Afghanistan has enabled it to deeply involve itself in the internal affairs of Kabul. China is endeavouring to establish itself as a peaceful player with purely economic ambitions sans any political or military objectives. However, its deep involvement in the Afghan affairs is not viewed well by the Indo-US nexus, which by itself carries enormous implications for the entire region.

The role of China in Afghanistan as a peace-maker characterizes it as a responsible world leader that endeavours to restore balance amongst weaker states. Afghanistan has seen only war and bloodshed over the last five decades. It needs peace and so does China for its economic pursuits which emphasizes on its soft power. Peaceful Afghanistan is in the benefit of all the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, and this is the only way to put it back on normalcy and course to development. Only a prosperous and peaceful Afghanistan would be able to participate in the development of the region and become a regional partner in trade and other exchanges that will also be beneficial for China.