

RISE OF TALIBAN AND GEOPOLITICAL AMBITIONS OF CHINA IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The year 2021 has seen some dramatic events taking place in Afghanistan. Since the beginning of the year, the US began leaving Afghanistan. After July 01, US forces began massive evacuations from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. At the same time, Taliban fighters enter in to Kabul. In continuation of these events, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. With this, the interim government of Afghanistan collapsed. Soon after that Taliban became the 'New Government' of Afghanistan. Now it controls a large part of the country.

Although the evolving situation unnerved the international community, it was a moment of great geopolitical change. It opened greater space for the expansion of Chinese influence in Afghanistan.

As Taliban seized Kabul, China poised to make 'big gains' in Afghanistan. If successful it may achieve a position of international supremacy.

With the rise of Taliban, China has offered a greater cooperation with the 'New Government' of Afghanistan. There are well-established geoeconomic and geostrategic reasons for it. This research explains the different dimensions of Chinese geopolitics. It also explains the geoeconomic and geostrategic interests of China. The research critically evaluates the geopolitical calculations of China and its potential options in Afghanistan.

Key Words: Taliban, Afghanistan, China, Geopolitics, Geoeconomics

Introduction

The year 2021 has seen some dramatic events taking place in Afghanistan. Since the beginning of the year, the US began leaving Afghanistan. After July 01, US forces began massive evacuations from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. At the same time, Taliban fighters enter in to Kabul. In continuation of these events, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country. With this, the interim government of Afghanistan collapsed. Soon after that Taliban became the 'New Government' of Afghanistan. Now it controls a large part of the country.

Although the evolving situation unnerved the international community, it was a moment of great geopolitical change. It opened greater space for the expansion of Chinese influence in Afghanistan.

The rise of Taliban brought a situation of insecurity for many countries. But it was not a surprise for China. Beijing has been waiting for this moment for a long(A. Malemnganba Singh, 2021).China has always maintained a cordial relationship with Taliban. With the rise of Taliban, China has offered a greater cooperation with the 'New Government' of Afghanistan. There are well-established geoeconomic and geostrategic reasons for it. This research explains the different dimensions of Chinese geopolitics. It also explains the geoeconomic and geostrategic interests of China. The research critically evaluates the geopolitical calculations of China and its potential options in Afghanistan.

Geography and Geopolitical History

Afghanistan is a unique geopolitical space. Due to its geographic location between the Iranian plateau and the Hindukush-Himalayan mountains, over the centuries Afghanistan has become the crossroads of various empires. But, fortunately or unfortunately, none of the Empires has been able to permanently occupy the country (Julian Voje, 2021).Besides, geopolitically, it has remained one of the fiercest battlegrounds of the world. Britain, Russia and the US have failed in the geopolitical arena of Afghanistan. The geopolitical history of Afghanistan proved it a 'graveyard of empires.'As Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021, China poised to make 'big gains' in Afghanistan. If successful it may achieve a position of international supremacy.

Afghanistan and China share a 76 km long border. Both the countries have good neighbourly relations. An important feature of their relations is that China never had any ideological or political clashes with Afghanistan. It never interfered in the domestic affairs of Afghanistan. Therefore, Afghans have no bad memory about China (Khan and Ayaz, 2016).

Historically, China had good neighbourly relations with Afghanistan. The story of cordial relations dates back to the 7th Century. The ancient Silk Road served in the flow of people, goods and ideas from East to West. This ancient trade route has been fundamental in the Chinese history and its relations with the outside world. It continued until the 16th Century (Sara Mastrococco, 2015). The contact between the two countries remained at minimum level during the conflict between the British and Russian Empires.

During the contemporary period China has regarded Afghanistan as a close neighbour but it has little significance for China. Afghanistan was one of the first countries to recognise the Communist regime of China in 1950. Five years later in 1955, it established diplomatic relations with China. The relations between the two countries were further strengthened through the 'Treaty of Economic Cooperation in 1964'.

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (in 1980s) brought major changes in the geopolitical relation of the countries of the region. During this period China provided covert assistance to the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia against the Soviet Union. It helped in arming the Afghan Mujahideen to wage jihad against the Soviets (Shubhangi Pandey, 2019).

Although Beijing supports the US and NATO in their efforts to contain terrorism after 9/11, China expressed no interest in joining the War against Terror. It even refused to deploy Chinese army in Afghanistan. It was only in 2000, the bilateral relations between Afghanistan and China began to grow. It was the period when the government under Hamid Karzai was in command in Afghanistan (Shubhangi Pandey, 2019). However, the political and economic cooperation between the two countries remained very insignificant. President Ghani was the first president of Afghanistan who chose to visit Beijing in October 2014 (Sara Mastrococco, 2015). With the departure of US, the conflict-ridden space of Afghanistan is now open for the geopolitical manoeuvring to gain geoeconomic and geostrategic advantages. Although the future is unpredictable, the rise of Taliban once again in Afghanistan have opened up some opportunities for China. On the other hand, the geopolitical ambitions of China are also faced with certain strategic challenges in Afghanistan.

Geoeconomic and Geostrategic Relevance of Afghanistan

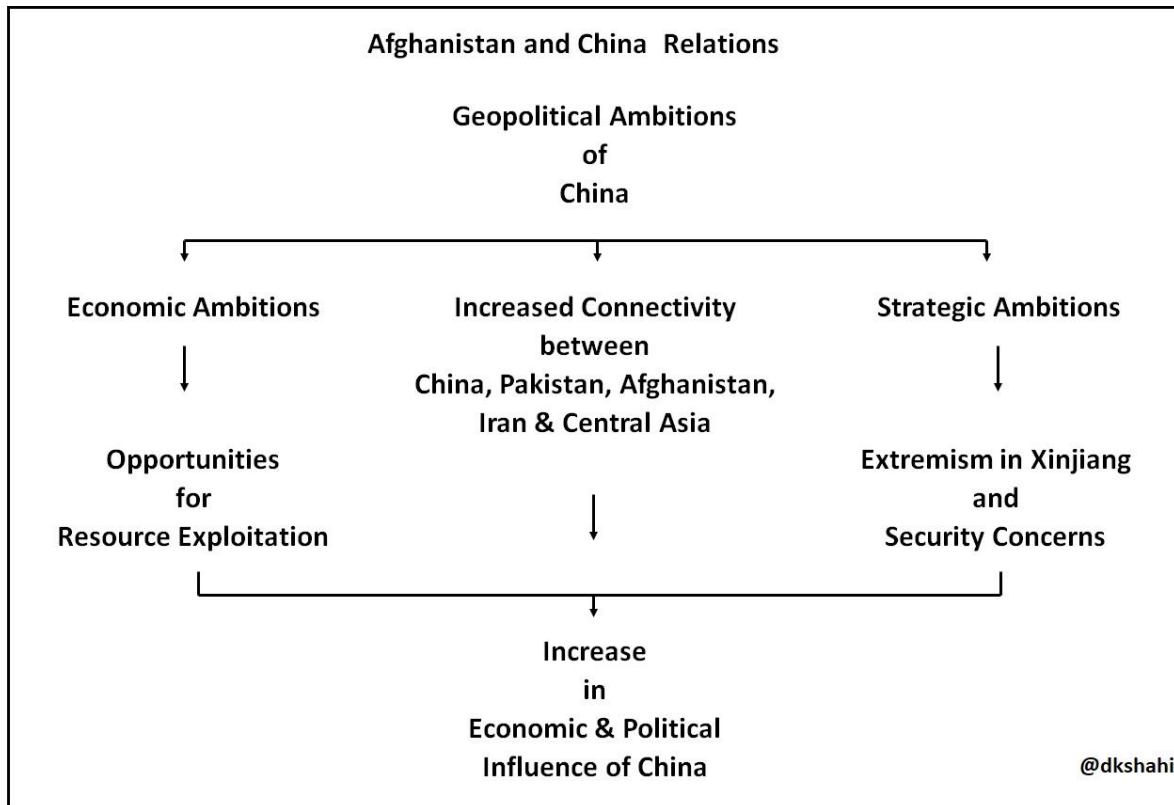
Afghanistan has an abundance of rich natural resources. It is a source of rare-earth metals such as lanthanum, cerium, neodymium and veins of aluminium, gold, silver and zinc worth of trillions of dollars (A. Malemnganba Singh, 2021). Beijing is also interested in the unexploited reserves of coal, iron, cobalt, mercury, lithium and thorium in Afghanistan. Beijing looks towards Afghanistan for the exploitation of its natural resources.

The past decade featured a significant growth in the presence of China in Afghanistan. Since 2007, during the period of the last government in Kabul, China has become the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan. It has also acquired the lease for the exploitation of its natural resources, especially the exploitation of copper deposits at Aynak, located in the province of Logar. The other projects include the oil exploration in the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan. It has steadily increased its economic aid and investment in Afghanistan. China still continues with its grand ambitions (A. Malemnganba Singh, 2021).

China is using all possible means (diplomatic or otherwise) to advance its economic ambitions in Afghanistan. In late July, before the advent of Taliban in Afghanistan, the Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi met with a delegation led by Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin. China reiterated its commitment to continue to develop good neighbourly relations and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan and its willingness to play a constructive role in Afghanistan.

Besides its geoeconomic relevance Afghanistan has got great geostrategic relevance too. Afghanistan has a unique geographical location. It is geostrategically located at the centre of Inner Asia, thus, it could provide links to the Middle East, Central and South Asia and Europe. It is the geographical situation more than any other factor which has ensured Afghanistan its continuing importance in Asian history. Historian Arnold Toynbee has described Afghanistan as the 'roundabout of the ancient world' (Anthony Hyman, 1984). Given its geostrategic significance, Afghanistan is expected to play a significant role in the overall economic prosperity of the region (Wang Xu, 2014). Thus, for China, Afghanistan remains an important pathway to connect with the rest of the world. China wants to connect it with its other geostrategic partners, Pakistan and Iran. Both of these countries already have deep ties with Beijing. They are connected through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridors (CPEC). China also aims to link Kabul and Pakistan. The successful implementation of these projects may expand its geopolitical influence. Most significantly, China needs to further develop its economic relations with Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. The expected energy corridor, road transportation and trade transit cannot be achieved without peace and stability in Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan could play an important role in achieving the geostrategic plans of China. Taliban also expects economic developments to overcome the internal instability of Afghanistan.

Diagram 1



Apart from acquiring these geoeconomic and geopolitical ambitions, China is faced with some geostrategic challenges. The most pressing security threat to China is also connected to Afghanistan. It is the growing separatism in Xinjiang. The independence-seeking Uighur militant and their movement (East Turkestan Islamic Movement or ETIM) is aided and abetted by the terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. There is a necessity of eliminating the sanctuary afforded by Afghanistan. China expects Taliban to deny a safe haven to these terrorist groups (ETIM and others) in Afghanistan. China also plans to increase its security presence in Afghanistan to prevent Afghan extremists from instigating unrest in the neighbouring region. In this respect China expects the help of Taliban to this end.

Geographical and Geopolitical Realities of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country. Economically it dependent on its neighbours, as the bulk of its trade is with neighbouring countries (Haroun Mir, 2010). It can only prosper with good trading relations with the neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, a stable Afghanistan must be in

the interest of the region as it can play an indispensable role when it comes to achieve regional prosperity through increased trade and transit. But the prospect of peace and stability in the country seems a remote possibility.

The location of Afghanistan is at the crossroads of Central, South and Southwest Asia. Its geographically location gives it a competitive advantage over others. It makes it geopolitically attractive for Beijing. Afghanistan can act as a trade and transit hub. It has immense potential to link the markets of South and Central Asia as well as China with Iran and the rest of the Middle East (Haroun Mir, 2010). China wants to link Kabul with the flagship project of Belt and Road and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Brahma Chellaney, 2021).

Afghanistan is also home to a vast natural resource repository, from rare earth elements to copper, iron ore, gold, lithium and more. Just one location in Ghazni province showed the potential for lithium deposits as large as those in Bolivia, a country which currently has the largest known lithium reserves of the world. As nations switch to green energy, the demand for lithium and other rare earth elements, found in such abundance in Afghanistan, is soaring (John Dobson, 2021). If managed properly the natural resources can drive home prosperity. On the other hand, if not managed properly, the same natural wealth and strategic location may push the country deep into chaos, fuelling insurgency by way of illegal mining and exacerbating peace and stability and delaying economic development. One may therefore argue, that 'geography' alone can either make or break Afghanistan (Shubhangi Pandey, 2019).

To achieve desired success, China has developed new narratives of geopolitics. Its geopolitics follows the path of geo-economics. Logic of commerce prevails in all Chinese diplomacy. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the launch of the most ambitious infrastructure development project ever conceived, in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With the BRI, China aims to create a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways and streamlined border crossings. It also envisioned to effectively break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity. Although initially, the BRI seemed to bypass Afghanistan, focusing more on traversing through Pakistan and Central Asia. The signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between China and Afghanistan in 2016 served as an expression of commitment to jointly promote cooperation under the BRI. It marked an important development in the eventual integration of Afghanistan into the transcontinental infrastructure network, in line with Afghan expectations (Shubhangi Pandey, 2019). It is the interplay between Geopolitics and geo-economics. China has advantage(s) under a pro-Beijing regime in Kabul, irrespective of who is in command.

The geopolitical ambitions are always governed by geostrategic concerns. The security threats originating from Afghanistan would be the most severe challenge for China. Meanwhile, the protection of Chinese investments and especially the protection of Chinese personnel working on different projects in Afghanistan, need security cover and protection. Till date the economic investments of China in Afghanistan have remained significantly below potential due to intensifying insecurity threats. Due to this reason, Beijing recognizes the importance of having good relations with Taliban. The role of China in the economy of Afghanistan may rise with the active and constructive support of Taliban.

Islamic extremism is not just a problem for Afghanistan or China. The region of Central Asia is equally impacted by Islamic radicalization. China is also concerned about the peace and stability in Central Asia. It is the rising source of energy imports for China. This region is also facing challenges of terrorism and extremism. Islamic terrorist organisations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) impose huge threats to the energy corridor of China through Central Asia. The instability of Afghanistan and its implications for neighbouring countries would have a negative impact on the security situation in the region as a whole. The geographic location of China increases its vulnerability to Islamic radicalization.

China is also aware that the western region of China could hardly be secured without peace and stability in Afghanistan. China seeks to ensure that militancy against China does not spread out from Afghanistan and that the Uyghur militants do not receive support from the Taliban.

Afghanistan is deeply infested with the culture of poppy cultivation. Drug trafficking has become an important source of funding to terrorist groups in the region. Drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan is another concern of China. Narcotics reach China, Russia and Europe through the Central Asian Republics.

China and Neighbourhood Diplomacy

China has always had close contact with the Taliban. When the Taliban seized Afghanistan in 1996, China established a closer relationship with the regime. Even when the Taliban was ousted from power, Beijing quietly maintained its relations with the militia in Pakistan. With the US withdrawal, now China is likely to increase its strategic footprint in Afghanistan by taking advantage of its strategic relationship with Taliban.

Chinese concerns are essentially centred on its economic interests in Pakistan and Central Asia. It is especially interested in the resources of Afghanistan and Central Asia. China is also

concerned with the safety of Chinese nationals working on its extra territorial projects. The threat of terrorism, however, provides a convenient cover for Beijing to advance its geopolitical interests (Brahma Chellaney,2021).

In return for its favour China is providing Taliban with the much-needed things to govern Afghanistan – a reluctant acceptance to its rule, if not formal recognition and much-needed infrastructure and economic development assistance (Brahma Chellaney,2021). And the same time, Taliban is going out of its way to ease the concerns of China.

American exit from Afghanistan has opened the way for China to make strategic inroads into Afghanistan and deepen its penetration of Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia (Brahma Chellaney,2021). For China, the takeover of Taliban in Afghanistan is an opportunity to redraw the geopolitical map of Asia and further its supremacy in the region (John Dobson, 2021). But there are certain uncertainties and risks.

The presence of other Islamic organisations in Afghanistan is a worry for Beijing. Another legitimate worry for China is that Afghanistan could again be a staging ground for terrorists due to the historical links of Taliban with other extremist organisations. The main concerns of China are the groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). It is composed of Uyghurs who are constantly opposing Chinese occupation of the north western frontiers of China (John Dobson, 2021). To reciprocate the concerns of China, in a recent meeting, the top Taliban leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, assured the foreign minister of China, Wang Yi, that Afghan territory would not be used to threaten the security of China. But Beijing stresses that the Taliban must take concrete measures to control all terrorist forces, particularly the ETIM (John Dobson, 2021).

Security Situation in Afghanistan

According to a UN report released in June 2021, there are about 8000 and 10000 foreign terrorists in Afghanistan. Most of these fighters are affiliated with Taliban. There are also a large number of terrorists who are affiliated with Al Qaeda or ISIS. Taliban works closely with Al Qaeda. Together they face a bitter rival in ISIS. ISIS-K (ISIS-Khorasan) is Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan. Although it is an Al Qaeda offshoot but sees its rivals as not hard-line enough. ISIS-K is the most extreme and violent of all jihadist organisations in Afghanistan. It considers itself as the true flag-bearer of jihad. ISIS-K (ISIS-Khorasan) calls Taliban the 'biggest enemies of Islam'. Recently ISIS-K attacked American troops at Begram airport. It is enough to foretaste the things to come.

Since its inception in 2014, the Islamic State has always been hostile to China (Lucas Webber, 2021). In recent years it has also increased attacks on Taliban over its ties to China. ISIS-K is against Taliban for maintaining close links with China despite their atrocities on the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. It has pledged to take revenge against China for imprisoning the Muslims (Uyghurs). In the latest incident, Islamic State-Khorasan claimed the responsibility for the attack on the Shiite Mosque in Kunduz in October 2021. More than 55 worshipers were killed and 140 wounded in that attack. Isis-K says its suicide bomber was Uyghur.

Even if Taliban pledged to refrain from exporting terror, it is not in a position to control (contain) the activities of others. There are many experts on the security situation of Afghanistan who are convinced that other organisations such as Al Qaeda and ISIS will inevitably re-establish a safe haven in Afghanistan and use it for the export of terrorism. Should this happen, Afghanistan will remain a failed state.

Taliban is carefully cultivating its relationship with China to seek international legitimacy and financial support. Beijing has also reciprocated it by inviting the Taliban to visit China several times since 2014. But its commercial ventures in Afghanistan have proved impossible due to the security instability in the country (John Dobson, 2021).

Any investment from China will, of course, depend on the Taliban creating some kind of stability and order in this fragmented country, which will be no easy task. If, however, the Taliban achieve the challenging task of uniting the country and neutralising the ultra-extremists, China will provide the kind of assistance that could enable Afghanistan to flourish is a big question (John Dobson, 2021).

Conclusion

China is willing to take advantage of the chronic instability in Afghanistan as an opportunity to make strategic inroads in the war-ravaged country. There is also possibly to expand its market. However, its unease is regarding the geographical proximity between Afghanistan and its Western Province of Xinjiang, which is dominated by Uyghur Muslim. Thus, it is logical that China is more interested in securing its western region. Besides, Beijing will certainly seek to secure and protect its investments in the infrastructure projects of the future. Indeed, a fragmented, fundamentalist and anarchic Afghanistan would stand contrary to the interests of China.

To initiate better neighbourly relations with China, Afghanistan has to show that it will oppose Uyghur separatists, can quash the ISIS threat in the region and cut off ties with all terrorist

groups, including Al-Qaeda. The future response of Taliban will define the geoeconomics and geopolitics of the region.

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