

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan: Implications for South Asian Stability and Security

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Abstract

In the aftermath of 9/11, the US' and China's engagement in Afghanistan has portrayed competitive underpinnings manifested in the matrix of great power politics. Viewed under neo-structural realism and complex interdependence perspectives, Sino-US interests have straddled on convergence and divergence, portraying the desire to subdue the other players in Afghanistan. Sino-US competitive balancing has unleashed wide implications for the South Asian regional security and stability. Within this context, this study aims to analyse Sino-US involvement in Afghanistan post-9/11 to draw implications for regional security, particularly Pakistan-India and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations. It seeks to answer the following questions: i) What is the broad pattern of Sino-US competitive involvement in Afghanistan? ii) What implications can be drawn of Sino-US competitive balancing for stability in South Asia? The study argues that Sino-US power interplay has polarised the region while unleashing negative imprints for Pakistan's relations with both India and Afghanistan.

Keywords: Extremism, Separatism, Stability, Political Violence, Terrorism, Regional Spillover, Convergence and Divergence of interests, Regional Security.

Introduction

Emerging strategic environment, in the post-9/11 era, has granted pivotal importance to South Asia due to Sino-US rivalry. Broadly speaking, although Sino-US interests converge on stability but the problem lies in defining stability. The US and China diverged on the extent of power each should exercise in South Asia.¹ This study explores the US and Chinese

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engagement in Afghanistan from 9/11 to 2019 by employing neo-structural and complex interdependence paradigms. Also, it reviews great powers' interplay of power politics in Afghanistan and draws implications for South Asia. The article argues that Sino-US rivalry holds negative imprints for stability in the region while inducing polarisation, the US and Chinese competition have worsened Pakistan's already fragile relationship with India and Afghanistan. Moreover, Sino-US competition has darkened the prospects of the South Asian economic cohesion and interconnectivity, which is a prerequisite to restoring stability in Afghanistan and the entire region.

With respect to significance and influence in South Asia, the US, China and Russia are considered as first-tier states whereas Pakistan, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are regarded as second-tier states. In the post-9/11 era, the American objectives in Afghanistan remained the basic focus of scholarly research. However, the existing literature has furnished a broad overview of Trump's South Asia policy or concentrated mainly on the details of the successive US-Taliban talks held in Doha. At another level, scholarly research has focused on a regional perspective, involving discussion of India-Afghanistan and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The studies have tended to provide interesting analysis of China's rise and politico-strategic repercussions entailed therein for Asia. A conspicuous omission in the mainstream literature, however, relates to Sino-US balancing of interests on the Afghan front with special reference to geostrategic changes in the post-9/11 era.

This study intends to fill the gap by analysing the interplay of Sino-US strategic involvement in Afghanistan to chalk out the future imprints for regional stability. Applying neo-structural realism and complex interdependence, the study aims to draw implications of great power balancing for the South Asian security.

In the post-9/11 Afghanistan, the US and China foreign policy drivers can be viewed from neo-structural realism.² Global security has shaped the

¹ Najeeb Ahmad "Sino-Pak Anti-Terrorism Collaboration," NDU Monograph IV, issue I (2013), ISSN: 2220-2161.

² Neo-structural realism refers to both internal and external compulsions driving the need for state security. Major-country status in International Relations' theoretical parlance refers to elevated state status in international ranking. See Scot Burchill,

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

contours of Sino-US commonalities on a stable Afghanistan.³ Both countries have jointly mentored the capacity building of diplomatic services in Kabul. The US and Chinese commonality of the shared aim of security in Afghanistan can also be reviewed under the paradigm of complex interdependence. However, observed minutely, Sino-US global power interests portray huge competitive imprints for the South Asian security, revealing a pattern of offence-defence balancing in Afghanistan.

Sino-US power competition has unleashed negative imprints for stakeholders' bilateral relations in the region. Although successful in bringing Taliban leader Mullah Baradar to the negotiating table, successive rounds of US-Taliban, in Doha, may be viewed as painful interludes to the vague prospects of "a comprehensive ceasefire and interim Afghan dialogue."⁴ Despite portraying high hopes, the US and China have failed to furnish much success in establishing peace in Afghanistan.

With this background, the study is divided into the following three sections to analyse the main argument:

- i. The first part, the US security objectives in Afghanistan, offers analysis and review of the US multifarious policy objectives in the post-9/11 Kabul.
- ii. The second part, China's security interests in Afghanistan, reviews Beijing's Afghan policy interests in the post 9/11 era.
- iii. The third part, Implications for regional stability and security, examines the US and Chinese balancing in Afghanistan to draw implications for stability and security in South Asia.

"Neo-structural Realism," in *Theories of International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

³ China's sustained economic growth is greatly dependent upon a stable international environment. The US also retains hegemonic interest in long term international stability.

⁴ "US, Taliban Pause Peace Talks in Doha for Two Days, Afghanistan," *RFERL*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/amp>

US Security Objectives in Afghanistan

This section argues that the US realist balancing in Afghanistan originates from South Asia's increasing significance as the hub of global interconnectivity due to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the post 9/11 era. Washington's objectives in Kabul holds geo-strategic underpinnings for China in Southwest Asia. Painted in the backdrop of offence-defence realist balancing, the US and China portray divergence of the interests at all three levels: strategic, economic and political. Strategically, the US military presence in and around Afghanistan, which is close to China's doorsteps, has irked Beijing. Politically, Washington's intentions of portraying a larger Indian role in the Afghan affairs has conflicted with China's aspiration to expand its influence in South Asia. Economically, America's interests have competed with China's desire to have access to mineral resources in Afghanistan.

Contrary to its official stance, the successive US administrations have only marginally reduced the American military presence in Afghanistan. From Bush to Obama to Trump, all have delayed military pull-out from Afghanistan. Ironically, evading limitations of time, Trump administration's "New South Asia policy" (2018) has hooked electoral promise of the Afghan pull-out on "conditions on the ground in Afghanistan."⁵ Announcing deployment of 4,000 additional combat force, the US new South Asia policy seeks to integrate "all instruments of the American power - diplomatic, economic and military toward a successful outcome in Afghanistan." Earlier, despite Obama's announcement of the US drawdown, Af-Pak strategy (2009) saw 30,000 additional troops to the existing combat force for Counter-Terrorism (CT) and Counter Insurgency (CI) in Afghanistan.⁶ Under the US-Taliban talks, there should be a discussion on the possible future peace settlement along with the parameters of intra-Afghan dialogue in Afghanistan.

Forty years of troubled history speak volumes about Afghanistan's unfortunate geo-strategic profile, making it a quagmire of great power

⁵ "Full Text of Donald Trump's Speech on South Asia Policy," *Hindu*, <https://www.thehindu.com/newsinternational/full-texts-of-donald-trumps-speech-on-south-asia-policy/article19538424.ece>

⁶ Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 23.

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

rivalry. Afghanistan has served as a key arena for Washington's multi-faceted security interests in South Asia. Since the Soviet pull-out in 1991, international support for the regional players continued for controlling power dynamics in Afghanistan. Legitimacy for the US intervention in Afghanistan developed in the backdrop of Global War on Terror (GWOT) for toppling Taliban regime (1996 to 2001).⁷ Earlier, the grounds for such an intervention were provided in August 1998 by al-Qaeda's assault on the American embassies in Nairobi and Tanzania. In retaliation, the US launched cruise missiles attacks on Afghanistan from the Arabian Sea, prior to 9/11.⁸ However, the US plan for physical control of Afghanistan cooked up earlier than the attack on Twin Towers in New York.

The Taliban tried to block the American plan of pipeline construction from the Central Asian oil reserves.⁹ Unocal cooperation had acquired 75 per cent shares of the Caspian Sea oil reserves in 1991.¹⁰ However, transportation remained a major problem across the landlocked region of Central Asia. The access to global markets could only be possible either through Russia or through Iran to the Persian Gulf. Washington's twisted relations with the Taliban and Iran impaired all the prospects for oil transportation from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The Bush administration had offered to willingly overlook the Taliban's extremist credentials in case the latter had acquiesced into the US oil transport via Afghanistan.

The US-Taliban talks, however, broke off in July 2001 and, within the next 60 days, the US launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom' (September 2001).¹¹ Taliban's refusal to provide access to the Central Asian oil reserves invited the US wrath in Afghanistan. Interestingly, China had harboured similar aspirations and sought favours from the Taliban.¹² Patrick Martin has argued that Taliban-China talks continued with indications for positive

⁷ Abdul Sattar, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: A Concise History 1947-2012* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 199.

⁸ Jean Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie, *Forbidden Truth: US-Taliban Secret Oil Diplomacy, Saudi Arabia and the Failed Search for Bin Laden* (New York: Thunder Mouth Fresh/Nations Book, Trans., 2002), 17.

⁹ Patrick Martin, "US Planned War in Afghanistan Long before September 11," World Socialist Website, wsws.org, November 20, 2001.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

fruition in favour of Beijing when Washington launched an attack on Afghanistan. The US military action bore fruit because, unlike the Taliban, the new government of Hamid Karzai expressed no ill-intentions against the American desire to ensure access to the Central Asian mineral reserves.¹³ However, the US military action in Afghanistan alarmed China right in its backyard. Regarding the US-NATO involvement as a violation of international norms, deployment of the American troops adversely affected the US-China relations.¹⁴

Following the US-NATO action in 2001, China remained deeply sceptical of foreign involvement in Afghanistan. Beijing refused to concede to NATO's request for the provision of logistical supplies from Badakshan to Afghanistan. Supported mainly by China, the Communiqué of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) initially approved a US-backed interim government in Kabul but, later on, the SCO Joint Communiqué of Foreign Ministers Council declared emphatically that, be it specific countries or organisations, the involvement of the external forces jeopardised the regional security. The SCO's predecessor Shanghai Five (1996) had been created to enhance border security, seeking to counter the threat emanating from Afghanistan.¹⁵ Shanghai Five acquired a new name of SCO to tackle terrorism in Central Asia and beyond exacerbated in the backdrop of the US intervention in Afghanistan. The US presence in Afghanistan has lingered on since 2001.

The US signed many defence and strategic agreements with Afghanistan for security collaboration. The US and Afghanistan signed a Bilateral Security Accord (BSA) on September 30, 2014.¹⁶ Containing 26 Articles, the BSA's Annexes A and B specify terms of the US engagements

¹³ Melkulangara Bhadrakumar, "A US-China Entente over Afghanistan," Strategic Culture Foundation, <http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2013/01/28/a-us-china-entente-over-afghanistan>

¹⁴ Qian Xuemei, "Regional Perspectives from China," Paper presented at International Seminar on "Regional Stability and Lesson Learned in Regional Peace Building," organised by National Defence University, Islamabad, October 23, 2014.

¹⁵ See "History of Development of SCO," *Xinhua*, 12-06-2006, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-06/12/content_6020347.htm

¹⁶ Embassy of Afghanistan, *Text of Security and Defence Cooperation Agreement Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and The United States of America*, <http://www.embassyofafghanistan.org>

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

in Afghanistan till 2025.¹⁷ The parties can renew the BSA for another ten years with mutual agreement. As per the agreement, the US has maintained military bases in Bagram, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, Herat, Kandhar, Shorab, Gardez, Jalalabad and Shindabad in Afghanistan.¹⁸ The National Unity Government (NUG) took no time in signing the BSA, bypassing Taliban and Karzai government's reservations on the controversial deal. In November 2014, the parliament accepted the deal, granting legitimacy to the US to stay in Afghanistan.

The BSA fosters the Afghan neutrality in maintaining access to energy resources of Central Asia. It offers an exemption to the US from paying financial remunerations for maintaining the military bases in Afghanistan.¹⁹ The NUG has upheld the BSA to enhance the Afghan internal security.²⁰ The Taliban, however, denounced the BSA as 'shameful and shocking - a sinister plot' to subjugate Afghanistan's independence and sovereignty. The US military presence has irked Beijing. Afghanistan's northeastern neighbour has blamed the US for fuelling resentment, militancy and terrorist backlash in the region. However, towards the wider campus of the north, the military presence has allowed Washington to check Sino-Russian influence in Central Asia.²¹ The pretext of checking extremism offers the US dual advantage: Washington can compete with the Russian monopoly on the Central Asian oil distribution networks.²²

This section examined the nemesis of the US foreign policy interests in Afghanistan from the neo-structural realist perspective. Retention of military bases may allow the US corporate sector to rely on the Pentagon's strategic support in the resource-rich Central Asia. The excuse of countering radical extremism offers a unique opportunity for the US to maintain a strategic presence along with China's backyard. The domestic drive of procuring energy security and international stability are the US dual exogenous compulsions to maintain a strategic presence in Afghanistan.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *US Afghanistan Joint Statement*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov>

²¹ Leonid Gusev, "The US Interest in Afghanistan and Central Asia," *New Eastern Outlook*, March 27, 2012.

²² Michal Romanowski, "Central Asia's Energy Rush," *Diplomat*, July 3, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/central-asias-energy-rush/>

The next section intends to review China's policy interests in Afghanistan in the contemporary era.

China's Security Interests in Afghanistan

In the following section, the study tries to examine China's politico-strategic influence on Afghanistan internal dynamics. It argues that growth in influence of China portrays global and regional aspirations based on offensive balancing vis-a-vis the Indo-US hegemony in Afghanistan.

Neo-structural paradigm throws light on the broad parameters of China's policy interests in Afghanistan in the contemporary era. Power and maximisation of security have assured Beijing of maintaining its 'major country status.' China's policy interests in Afghanistan have been primarily set by internal compulsions – the grand vision of 'strategic opportunity' 2025. The development plan of China's western regions remains wedded to Beijing's international status. BRI, along the old historic route, is an important manifestation of China's vision of great power status. An integral component of China's revival strategy hinges on stability. Beijing's primary focus has framed on the indigenous predicament of countering instability in Xinjiang. Viewed from this perspective, Beijing's grand strategy remains hooked to the development plan for inducing parity between the less developed western regions and China's more industrialised eastern parts.

Afghanistan and China are immediate neighbours – sharing a short border of 76 kilometres, which runs through high mountains and lies far away from the urban centres on both sides. The thinly populated Wakhan 'panhandle' links mainland Afghanistan with the Kashghar, prefecture of mainland Xinjiang. The immediacy of the geostrategic proximity of Afghanistan makes it hard for China to ignore. The country's politico-military profile of the past four decades of conflict straddled on the US-Soviet intervention does not allow China to set off its eyes from this important neighbourhood. Why then China has not militarily intervened in Afghanistan? Two key objectives have traditionally guided Beijing's policy interests in Afghanistan.

Firstly, Beijing's approach of non-intervention prevented direct involvement in Afghanistan. While paying lip service to Operation Enduring Freedom, China abstained from joining NATO's military

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

coalition in Afghanistan. Secondly, China feared military intervention will instigate a militant backlash in the troubled region of Xinjiang. The province is beset by the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement's (ETIM). Beijing fears that Uyghur Muslim suffering and unrest against the mainland's religious oppression can be instigated by the US to hamper the territorial integrity of China. The Uyghur vulnerability is particularly acute since they live in the border area. Other Muslims are not maltreated because they are not concentrated in one geographical area but dispersed. In a bigger picture, Sino-US hold common grounds on anti-terrorism collaboration, capacity building and development of Afghan institutions. China and the US interests converge on Afghan security and stability yet both have differing opinions on security.²³ Prevention of terrorist spillover in Xinjiang defines the Chinese concept of security in Afghanistan. The US conception of security is conditioned with the success of the Kabul government in Afghanistan. Since the resumption of the US-Taliban talks, Washington's conception of security has, however, set on the US troops' successful pull-out from Afghanistan.

Each of the two players has rivalled the other's influence in Afghanistan. China's focus on Afghan security comprises a mix of internal and external factors. China's thrust, however, focuses on countering separatism, extremism and terrorism in Xinjiang. Any measure of security beyond this point to the extent of policing Afghanistan has never been China's concern. Beijing has traditionally refrained from interfering in the internal political dynamics of neighbouring states. Moreover, learning from the Western ill-experience in Afghanistan, China does not want to meet the same fate as the Soviets and the US did in Afghanistan. However, Beijing retains the desire to facilitate in building institutional capacity to curb extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan.

China's expansion of interests is manifested in establishing its first military base in Afghanistan.²⁴ Yet, the Chinese government has denied this claim, asserting that its military involvement remains restricted to

²³ "Leveraging US-China Cooperation to Build a Regional Consensus on Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/sr420-leveraging-us-china-cooperation-to-build-a-regional-consensus-on-afghanistan.pdf>

²⁴ Kemel Toktomushev, "China's Military Base in Afghanistan," *Diplomat*, January 18, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-military-base-in-afghanistan/>

establishing Afghan capacity building, military training and material equipment to finance and train the Afghan brigade. Beijing is helping in setting up a Mountain brigade for joint law enforcement operations against ETIM training bases in north-eastern Afghanistan. The fact that China admits building a brigade is itself of political value. Likely to surpass the US economy by 2032, China has not established a military base in foreign lands except Djibouti — an indication of its West like a model for China's growing role in the world. Absence of the Chinese participation in international peacekeeping offers a clue to Beijing's disinclination to perform a subordinate role to the US. China's rationale of involvement aims at preventing derailment of its grand economic vision in the form of BRI and its southern offshoot, the CPEC. Given its increasing economic clout, Beijing holds high promises for the powerful inducements of regional trade and development to Afghanistan.

On the political side, refraining from building Afghanistan politically, social patterns or ideological orientations, Afghan-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership envision China's larger role in Afghanistan.²⁵ Since 2001, China's has been providing huge reconstruction and development assistance with successive episodes of additional grants for development of Badakshan province in Afghanistan.²⁶ Intelligence sharing for border security and law enforcement, loan exemptions, minerals development and reconstruction projects has been China's multi-faceted investment ventures in Afghanistan.²⁷ Beijing signed "Good Neighbourly Friendship and Cooperation Treaty" with Afghanistan in 2006. In 2014, it offered US\$327 million to Afghanistan, much larger than what China had offered earlier since 2001. It has waived off Afghan debt worth US\$19.5 million²⁸ and also gave tariff waivers on imported items from Afghanistan. China has initiated multifarious social welfare projects while providing training to the Afghan professionals in various fields. China has allocated 1.5 billion Renminbi as

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *China-Afghanistan Joint Statement on Deepening Strategic and Cooperative Partnership*, <http://mfa.gov.af>

²⁶ See, Zhao Hua Sheng, "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances and Perspectives," CSIS, a report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Programme, March 2012, <http://csis.org/files>

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

²⁸ Yanzhe Yan, et. al., "Addressing the Insufficiencies of the Traditional Development Aid Model by Utilising the One Belt, One Road Initiative to Sustain Development in Afghanistan," *Sustainability* 11, no 2 (2019): 312, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11020312>, <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/2/312/htm>

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

an aid to Afghanistan, with 500 million Renminbi given as a grant. China has also trained 3,000 Afghan professionals in various fields.²⁹

On the economic side, China holds a huge interest in resource extraction in Afghanistan.³⁰ It has emerged as the second-largest recipient of the Afghan raw material exports. Whereas Kabul has emerged as the principal recipient of Beijing's huge financial grants. Sino-Afghan trade has witnessed tariff exemption on a sum of 278 commodities. China has expressed interest in infrastructure, agricultural resources, energy development projects and construction of hydropower plants in Afghanistan. Consequently, the Chinese companies have made huge investments in Kabul.³¹ Aynak mineral deposits remain China's biggest foreign investment (US\$3.5 billion) in Afghanistan apart from oil extraction from the Amu Darya basin.³² Lithium deposits in Afghanistan are another source of attraction for China. Security challenges, however, have restricted China's greater participation in Afghan development projects.

Furthermore, the general pattern of China's single-minded approach has led to contractual issues centred on the detriment of local worker rights, bringing some of the Chinese projects to a halt. For example, the MesAynak concessions concerned with copper ore extraction failed to take off. In infrastructure development, Beijing has established fibre-optic and railway links to Afghan rail-port of Hairatan,³³ which provides a medium for the value-added Chinese export item to the markets in Afghanistan from Jiangsu province in China.³⁴ However, Afghanistan's low export capacity has crippled the project. China's tiptoe approach, thus, portrays a cautious expansionist pattern of engagement which is focused on resource extraction

²⁹ Ilal Khalil, "The Afghan National Unity Government's 'China Card Approach' to Pakistan: Part 2," *Diplomat*, April 12, 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/04/the-afghan-national-unity-governments-china-card-approach-to-pakistan-part-2/

³⁰ Interview conducted by the author with Hu Shisheng, Director, Institute of South & Southeast Asian & Oceanic Studies, CICIR, Beijing, China.

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

³² Zalmay Khalilzad, "Why Afghanistan Courts China," *New York Times*, November 3, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/opinion/why-afghanistan-courts-china.html?_r=0

³³ "Afghan-China Railway to Boost Trade Ties," *Kabul Times*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.thekabultimes.gov.af/2019/03/17/afghanistan-china-railway-to-boost-trade-ties/>

³⁴ Ibid.

and selective elimination of terrorist hide-outs in the north-eastern part of Afghanistan.

Politically, China tried to engage in the internal political dynamics of Afghanistan, in 2014, by reviving the Afghan-Taliban peace talks.³⁵ The US encouraged China's reconciliatory role and lauded its intentions of shouldering greater responsibility for Afghan peace. The US actively supported China's Afghan peace initiative, 'Quadrilateral Dialogue,' comprising Washington, Beijing, Kabul and Islamabad.³⁶

China carries no burden of troubled legacy in Afghanistan - a position that allows it extra leverage both with the Taliban and Pakistan. In June 2018, the Qingdao Declaration of the Council of Heads of SCO, in line with the Shanghai Spirit, called the member states for their commitment towards 'inclusive peace process.'³⁷ The forum strengthens regional states' resolve to disallow the use of their territories 'for activities targeted against the other.'³⁸ The "Heart of Asia — Istanbul Process" initiative includes membership of Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates and Uzbekistan.³⁹

Based on their geostrategic leverage, 'China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Dialogue' builds high hopes on Sino-Pakistan collaboration in Afghanistan. The successive rounds of the trilateral dialogues took place over the past years to build peace in Afghanistan. The first trilateral dialogue was held in Beijing in 2012, the second in September 2014 in Islamabad and the third one in July 2015 in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ Observed

³⁵ Shubhangi Pandey, "Can China Drive the Afghan Peace Process," *Diplomat*, May 18, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/can-china-drive-the-afghan-peace-process/>

³⁶ Khalil, "The Afghan National Unity Government's."

³⁷ "Qingdao Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organization," June 10, 2018, <http://eng.sectsco.org>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process (HOA) was founded as a series of ministerial level meeting platform on November 2, 2011 in Istanbul, Turkey with three main pillars: political consultation, confidence building measures and cooperation with regional organizations, for further details visit, <http://www.hoa.gov.af/>

⁴⁰ The China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral dialogue is a series of initiative taken between these states at the foreign ministerial level to hold in-depth exchange of views on matters pertaining to reconciliation, development, security and counter terrorism.

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

minutely, however, Beijing seeks to incorporate Pakistan and Afghanistan deeper into its sphere of influence.⁴¹ The multiplicity of extra-regional and regional players' involvement led to the failure of this initiative.

China also played a larger role in international peace initiative that included the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan such as Russia and the US under the UN framework, the international conference on Afghanistan in London in 2006,⁴² the conference in Paris in 2008,⁴³ the Hague conference in 2009⁴⁴ and the conference in London, Istanbul and Afghanistan in 2010.⁴⁵ Two more factors prevented a successful outcome: firstly, China lacked experience in the field of conflict resolution; and secondly, China' is disregarded as an honest broker by Afghan government due to its tilt towards Pakistan.

From the discussion above, it is clear that the Chinese quest to influence the internal security dynamics of Afghanistan is driven by multifaceted interests. The Chinese interests in Kabul imply huge stakes for the Afghan government at the expense of the US. The US force withdrawal will lead to China's hegemony in the region. The US itself is interested in withdrawal and now with Pakistan's support, it wants to progress in the ongoing peace process in Afghanistan. However, given China's interest in the success of BRI, it is much likely that the Chinese interests will prevail in Afghanistan. The interplay of great powers rivalry, hence, makes it less likely to expect that the US-Taliban talks would deliver any peace dividends in Afghanistan.

Implications for Regional Stability and Security

The US and China power competition portrays divergence of strategic, political and economic interests in the region with far-reaching imprints for South Asia's regional stability and security. Sino-US interplay of power

⁴¹ Charlotte Gao, "Why is China Holding the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Dialogue Now?," *Diplomat*, December 27, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12>

⁴² "The Afghanistan Compact," France Diplomacy, January 31-February 1, 2006, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr>

⁴³ "UN Meeting Coverage and Press Releases," UNSC, SC/9395, July 11, 2008, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2008>

⁴⁴ The US Department of State, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, *The Hague Conference on Afghanistan*, Press Release, 2009, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2009/120805.htm>

⁴⁵ France Diplomacy, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr>

politics has increased polarisation, dimming the prospects of economic collaboration and regional interconnectivity in South Asia. And this entails far-reaching implications for South Asia. Firstly, the great powers strategic competition has eroded the common grounds of cooperation in Afghanistan. Foreign involvement and military presence have instigated local resentment, fuelled militancy, unleashed proxies and the terrorist backlash in the region. China has blamed foreign military presence, instigating al-Qaeda's support for ETIM in Xinjiang.

Secondly, militancy across the western side in Afghanistan would have perilous implications for Pakistan's security calculus. The US drone strikes have already increased the resentment in the tribal areas of Pakistan, exposing a precarious rift in state-society relations. This has affected polity's capacity to fulfil the prime task of provision of security upheld by the Hobbesian model. This has retarded the state's functional ability as prescribed by the Lockenian model to improve the growth of socio-economic and development indicators. Terrorist hide-outs have instilled militancy, terrorism and separatism in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Balochistan. Operation Zarb-e-Azab, FATA merger into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, elections on 16 new additional seats in KPK provincial assembly are fast-changing regional political dynamics as a manifestation of state control over its territory.

Regionally, the blame game of cross-border intrusions has ensued, with massive fall out on inter-state relations. The South Asian states have suffered from a lack of cordiality and goodwill in neighbourly relations. Political violence and unrest harboured ill-will and negativity, creating a spiral of suspicions and lack of warmth in Pakistan-Iran, Afghan-Pakistan and India-Pakistan relations. Turning it a hot-bed of regional intrigues, Iran has blamed the US overstay in Afghanistan to license instability in South Asia. Tehran has sought greater leverage in Kabul based on ethnic and sectarian Tajiks, Hazara and Shiite connections.

Iran works to promote Afghanistan's Shiite Hazara and other Dari/Persian speaking communities in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Iran participated in the Bonn Conference, playing an instrumental role in the establishment of the

⁴⁶ Nader, et al., "Iran and Afghanistan: A Complicated Relationship," in, *Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the US Drawdown* (RAND Corporation, 2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287mjf>.

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

Afghan Interim Authority in 2001. Iran constructed a 123 km road joining Herat in western Afghanistan to the Dogharoun region. Another road links Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabhar to alleviate Afghan dependence on Karachi port. Tehran's broader concerns include Afghan export market, curtailment of sectarianism and ethnic spill-over from Afghanistan.

Thirdly, Sino-US patronage of the regional players has infused some interesting patterns of alliance/partnership in South Asia. Great power politico-strategic mentorship has pitted regional rivals against one another. Although the new policy orientation of the US-Taliban peace talks has, at least for now, restricted the Indian role in Afghanistan with no involvement in the peace talks at all, within the larger ambit, the US is aspiring for expansion of the Indian role to circumvent Beijing's influence in the Afghan periphery of Central Asia. The proximity of geography, market interests and demographic overlay push China to project the SCO as an instrumental player in the region.⁴⁷ China's saddling on the SCO leverage and patronising 'Heart of Asia - Istanbul process portrays its natural desire to dominate Central Asia.⁴⁸ Beijing increased the projection of the SCO is a manifestation of this interest.⁴⁹ With the greater Indian leverage and hegemony, the US aims at neutralising Sino-Russian influence in Central Asia.⁵⁰ To counterbalance the US move, China has sought to break fences with India. Held on April 28, 2018, the Wuhan Summit saw the Chinese president insist his Indian counterpart to pursue greater autonomy in foreign policy.⁵¹ Xi Jinping went as far as to propose Sino-Indian joint economic collaboration in Afghanistan.

Fourthly, China's BRI stretch of geostrategic influence is a sore in Indo-US corporate interests in Central Asia. To benefit from Afghanistan and the Central Asian natural reserves, India has actively pegged in a competitive

⁴⁷ Jeremy Page et al., "As US Exits, China Takes on Afghanistan Role," *Wall Street Journal*, February 2015, <http://www.wsj.com>

⁴⁸ Li Lifan and Raffaelo, "China Relishes its new Role Fostering Cooperation," <http://raffaellopantucci.com>

⁴⁹ Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Beijing Heart of Asia Conference*, <http://www.afghanembassy.net>

⁵⁰ Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed, addressing "Islamabad Trilateral Dialogue: China-Afghanistan-Pakistan," organized by Pakistan-China Institute, October 20, 2014, Islamabad.

⁵¹ The Ministry of External Affairs India, *India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan*, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases>

mode with China, projecting itself as the fifth-largest donor.⁵² Kabul has offered India a potential market for selling the Indian goods while establishing long-term prospect of maintaining access to the Caspian Sea oil and gas reserves.⁵³ The Indian market and trade potential outweighs Afghanistan's other options in the region. India has aspired for a status equivalent to its financial outlay in Kabul. The Indian Steel Authority has eyed on Afghan mineral, hydrocarbon and mining potential at the Hajigak mine in Afghanistan's Bamiyan province. Thus, the low-intensity conflict may reflect the drive to access mineral resource potential in Afghanistan.

Fifthly, the US and China designs for Southwest and Central Asia have saddled on the centrality of India and Pakistan role in South Asia.⁵⁴ Reciprocity of interests sustains small powers' alliance/partnership with the great powers.⁵⁵ India and Pakistan collaboration with the US and China foresee arms sales and increased political leverage based on political, strategic and economic gains.⁵⁶ However, emerging trends of the global strategic environment have brought great powers into the limelight of India and Pakistan relations, acting as catalysts in worsening their already strained relations. Great powers support for rival players has negative imprints for India-Pakistan relations.

Trump administration's support for India has made New Delhi defiant on Kashmir. Prime Minister Imran Khan's successful visit to the US has reset Pakistan's ties with Washington. However, Trump's offer of mediation on Kashmir appears to be the US carrot approach: conditioning Islamabad's support for a breakthrough in the US-Taliban talks. The surprise retaliation by Narendra Modi, abrogating Article 370 and 35 A in IOK, has appeared to coerce concessions from Pakistan in Afghanistan.

⁵² Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region*, (RAND Corporation, 2012), 16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1q6105.9>

⁵³ Talat Masood, "Why Obama's India visit is Significant," *Capital Talk*, <http://www.newscloud.pk>

⁵⁴ Nabiha Gul, "Post 9/11, Pakistan-India Relations," *Pakistan Horizon* 57, no.3 (July 2004):67-77.

⁵⁵ Abdul-Monem M Al-Mashat, *National Security in the Third World* (Boulder and London: Westview Press Inc, 1985), 1.

⁵⁶ Robert Wirsing, in Devin T Hagerty, ed. *South Asia in World Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 113.

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

The client-list credentials of India and Pakistan have induced rivalry in their bilateral relations, with the evident fall-out of increase in the regional polarisation. The US tilt towards India, in the wake of Washington's erstwhile policy of South Asia's balancing parity, has pushed Beijing to elbow Pakistan's frontline role in Afghanistan. Within this context, Afghanistan has become the strategic chessboard of clashing Indo-Pakistan regional security interests.⁵⁷ Sino-US rivalry has made Afghanistan a hub of proxy warfare, dimming prospects for Indo-Pakistan economic collaboration and regional interconnectivity.⁵⁸

Inducing fissures in already strained Pakistan-India relations, the Indo-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership (October 5, 2011) has stipulated New Delhi's larger role in Afghanistan's internal security.⁵⁹ The US projection and support for the Northern Alliance has instilled greater leverage of India in Afghan polity. Ironically, Pakistan's role has been frequently strained by the US as a peacemaker in Afghanistan. Failure to agree on a comprehensive ceasefire in Doha Talks and successive terrorist attacks indicate regional security quandary. For example, the release of the Congressional report foiled Indo-Pakistan and Indo-Afghan relations, by generating a heatwave of mistrust, regional apprehensions and insecurity. Released in November 2014, the report challenged Pakistan's public stance for a peaceful Afghanistan, criticising cross border attacks engineered from tribal areas in Pakistan.⁶⁰

Consequently, the US accusations led to a downturn in Pakistan's relations with India as well as Afghanistan. On the economic side, implementation of the Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Act (APTTA) for regulating trade at Port Qasim and Gwadar has become an apparent causality. India has already offered a diversion by constructing a rail and road network to link Hajigak in southwest Afghanistan with Chabhar. The

⁵⁷ Farooq G Azam, "Charting a New Course: Perspectives from the New government in Kabul," paper presented at Islamabad Trilateral Dialogue: China-Afghanistan-Pakistan, organised by Pakistan-China Institute, October 19-20, 2014.

⁵⁸ "Contemporary Geopolitics of FATA: An analysis of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Region," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 26, issue 4 (2013).

⁵⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Text on Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Republic of India*, <http://mfa.gov.af>

⁶⁰ "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability of Afghanistan," US Department of Defense (DoD), October 23, 2014.

Indian investment in the development of Chabhar port in Iran and reconstruction in 2008 of 218 kilometres (135 miles) road from Delaram-Zarang highway in south-west Afghanistan to Zarang on the Iran border guarantees an alternate exit bypassing Pakistan.

The disparity of interests among great powers has induced instability in the Southwest Asian region. Consequently, Afghanistan-Pakistan relations have become foiled in distrust and insecurity. Unleashing a spiral of suspicions, the two sides have accused each other of lending support to cross border proxy involvement. On one hand, Islamabad blames Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorists' activism in Pakistan engineered by the Northern Alliance in Kabul.⁶¹ On the other side, Kabul blames Islamabad for sabotaging of the Indian interests and rendering support to the Afghan Taliban. India blames the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) for assault on the Indian consulates and workers in Kabul.⁶² Contrarily, Pakistan found CIA, RAW and Afghan nexus involved in anti-state attacks in Pakistan. The Indian consulates' in Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Qandahar and Jallalabad have provided training to separatists in Balochistan.⁶³ All these aspects have worsened Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, resulting in foreign support for Baloch sub-nationalism, lack of transit trade agreement implementation, upsurge in political violence and unrest in the region.

Pakistan's Afghan policy has gained great focus in the wake of the US backing of India in Afghanistan. Pakistan aspires for peace in Afghanistan, demanding termination of Indo-Afghan support for TTP. Stability and peace in Afghanistan constitute a pivotal concern for Pakistan. A hostile government in Kabul may re-invoke the Durrand Line dispute to challenge Pakistan's territorial integrity. Militancy across the western borders creates an enormous challenge of insecurity for Pakistan. The Peshawar school incident and Hayatabad mosque incidents have been described as Pakistan's 9/11. Pakistan has demanded foreign troops' withdrawal and disarmament of Afghan militia in the spirit of UN resolution (1883). To curb insurgency, Pakistan has called for a neutral, friendly and independent Afghanistan.

Pakistan-Afghanistan strategic partnership can overcome Islamabad's insecurity predicament in Kabul. Afghan-Pakistan military and intelligence

⁶¹ "Faisla Awam Ka," *Dawn News TV*, <http://www.dailymotion.com>

⁶² "Karzai issues Warning to Pakistan," *BBC*, June 15, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

⁶³ Hanauer and Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan*. 19.

Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan

cooperation can shrink militancy on each side of the Afghan-Pakistan border.⁶⁴ The start of Zarb-e-Azab improved Afghan-Pakistan relations as both sides pledged to disallow the use of territory irrespective of distinction between ‘Good’ and ‘Bad Taliban.’ Afghanistan alleged Pakistan of aiding the Haqqani Network for resisting the Kabul government. Pakistan alleged that TTP leader Mullah Fazalullah got assistance from Afghanistan. The Pakistani official position states that the Mullah Fazalullah, former head of TTP, received funds from Afghan collaboration as one official was caught giving funds to TTP.⁶⁵ Moreover, it is alleged that the Afghan Taliban find safe-havens in FATA while TTP in the border towns of Afghanistan.⁶⁶ In 2011, the Afghan-Pakistan Joint Commission proposed training assistance for Afghan Security Forces (ASF), Pushtoon representation in the Afghan government institutions and a friendly government as necessary steps to stabilise Afghan-Pakistan relations.⁶⁷

Pakistan supported ethnic Pushtoon representation in the governmental set-up of Afghanistan. Although Beijing supported Afghan indigenous peace process’ that includes the Taliban, peace in Afghanistan is dependent upon the outcome of successive rounds of the US-Taliban Doha talks. Intra-Afghan dialogue can bring fruitful outcome in the US-Taliban talks. Although intra-Afghan dialogue appears to be more difficult than the US-Taliban talks, success is contingent upon two conditions of the Taliban: first, the demand that Afghanistan must be made an Islamic state; and second, that all foreign troops should withdraw from Afghanistan.⁶⁸ Lack of progress on intra Afghan peace agreement, technical modalities of foreign troops withdrawal and non-inclusion of the Afghan government in peace talks may pose problems for success in the US-Afghan peace talks.

⁶⁴ “All to Play for: Pakistan Government is yet to Engage in the Battle against the Mindset that produces Terrorism,” *Express Tribune*, <http://tribune.com.pk>

⁶⁵ Abdul Basit, “Mullah Fazlullah: A Journey from ‘FM Mullah’ to Head of the Pakistan Taliban,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6, no. 10 (November 2014): 13-16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26351291>

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ “Pakistan-Afghanistan set up Joint Commission to Pursue Peace,” *Dawn* April 16, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/621350>

⁶⁸ “Peace Deal is Near: What we Know of the US-Taliban Talks,” *Aljazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/taliban-talks-peace-afghanistan-190510062940394.html>

Conclusion

Geo-strategic interdependence interlinks destinies of Afghanistan and Pakistan. A long-lasting peace remains hooked to an inclusive approach based on consensus to include all indigenous stakeholders within Afghanistan. The stalemate in the US-Taliban peace talks may break, following agreement on modalities of foreign troops withdrawal and conclusion of the intra-Afghan dialogue. However, the interplay of great powers strategic interests in the region may make peace a distant probability. India's absence in the peace talks remains a big question mark. The sustainability of long-term peace in South Asia remains integrally linked to the larger campus of genuine peace and stability in India-Pakistan relations based on the resolution of the conflict in Kashmir. Great powers must abandon 'cheers from the side-line approach,' implement the UN resolutions on Kashmir, encourage reconciliation on the Durand Line and promote India-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral dialogue. These conditions are the key to regional peace. At the same time, Afghanistan needs to maintain parity of collaboration with key regional players, based on equality, neutrality and non-partisan approach.

Pakistan's steadfast stance has held broad-based power-sharing arrangement without foreign interference, adhering to the principle of Afghan independence and sovereignty. Taliban participation in power-sharing while incorporating legitimate security concerns of key regional players will pay necessary dividends in Afghanistan.