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China's Objectives in Afghanistan in the Geo-Strategic Dynamics

Dr. Saima Parveen

Assistant Professor

Political Science at Women University Swabi

Correspondence: perveensaima58@gmail.com

Dr. Syed Akhtar Ali Shah

Former Home Secretary, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

ABSTRACT

Afghanistan is important to China not only for curbing religious extremism to prevent its further spread into and beyond Xinjiang, but also for serving its economic interests and making the region safe for the One Belt One Road Initiative now briefly called Belt Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese current engagement in Afghanistan is mainly based on resource exploitation and infrastructure development. With its fast-growing economy, political stability at home and increasingly successful foreign policy, China is in a good position to create the image of projecting stability in this troubled region. Indeed, geo-strategically, China is now in a position to play a decisive role in regional affairs. It has become a solid, stabilizing influence with the power to materially impact the region. This research is conducted through sequential mixed method design with three major phases namely, an initial data gathering stage, a questionnaire survey, and a qualitative data gathering phase. The study concludes that Afghanistan is significant for China because of investment in economic projects and for the success of China Pakistan Economic Corridor and BRI. And next important to it is to counter terrorism for the safeguard of Xinjiang

Keywords: *Strategic, Natural Resources, Terrorism, Xinjiang, Belt and Road Initiative.*

Introduction

China seeks an independent defense and foreign policy having defensive nature whereby she denies any hegemonic design and interference in her own national affairs. China accredits mutual benefits, coordination, equality, mutual trust, common and cooperative security. (Beijing, 2013) Chinese declared strategy accentuate on establishing peaceful, stable international order to sustain its economic development. Peaceful development rather than hegemonies is unvarily national commitment of China since cold war. (Steinberg & Hanlon, 2014)

Starr has termed Afghanistan as pivotal in this region as it provides a land bridge between Greater Central Asia northern and southern parts and between Middle East and Greater Central Asia as well. (Starr, 2008, p.168) Pre 9/11 the Beijing policy

lines towards Afghanistan were specified to the safeguard of Xinjiang. In the decade after 9/11 China's policy contours in Afghanistan were mainly to foster economic terms as investment in natural resources and to safeguard Xinjiang hence the major stakes are development, energy and security from China perspective. These contours are in consonance with Beijing post-cold war grand strategy of peaceful development and in accordance with the dynamics of regional geo-politics. (Clarke, 2011, pp. 123-128)

The US was engaged in Afghanistan and CARs militarily and became an immediate neighbor of China but the later did not enmesh herself in Afghanistan during that time. (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) China was not interested in Afghanistan until former president Hamid Karzai government's initiative of energy, raw material and mineral for foreign investment. It was in 2007 that China has become fifth trading partner of Afghanistan after Pakistan, India, US and EU. China is investing in Afghanistan's infrastructure development comprised telephone networks, irrigation projects and public hospitals.

Afghanistan's abundant and mostly unexplored natural resources drew China's interests. According to US Geological Survey, Afghanistan possessed mineral resources worth US\$1 trillion. Afghanistan's Minister of Mines, Wahidullah Shahrani, made even a bigger claim of natural resources of value US\$3 trillion. (Najafizada, 2011) China started utilizing these resources even while had low diplomatic terms with Afghanistan because China could foresee the future shortage of natural resources. Hence, Chinese companies contracted an agreement of value US \$ 4.4 billion for Aynak Copper deposits development situated at Afghan province of Logar. (Marty, 2016), while another agreement was made in 2011, at Amu Darya for oil extract. (Shalizi, 2012)

China has played huge role for boosting Afghan peace dialogue for which the Istanbul Process (also known as the Heart of Asia) was arranged in 2014. Since China is mediatory between the Afghan factions for settlement through using bilateral and multilateral mechanism. Since the Chinese government used its good offices for reconciliation between Kabul government and Taliban. Recently the Taliban delegates have paid several visits to China after the Doha agreement. (Hirono, 2019, pp, 239, 614-634)

Afghanistan stability and peace is important for the China economic projects like BRI and and above all for the safeguard of Xinjiang. China is focused on abundant natural resources of Afghanistan and is destined to shape the regional dynamics according to the parameters giving her maximum gains and leverages. Accordingly, the China policy is transformed to an active participant by having significant economic engagement in Afghanistan.

Hypotheses of Study

Afghanistan is significant for the China for not only curbing terrorism but also for serving its economic interests and to making the region safe for its Belt and Road Initiative.

Method

This research has been conducted by mixed method approach to answers the research questions by sequential mixed method design with three major phases

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namely, an initial data gathering stage, a questionnaire survey, and a qualitative data gathering phase. The primary focus of the quantitative data was to get an insight of strategic significance of Afghanistan for the China. The data is collected through the initial data gathering stage, the survey and qualitative data gathering phase. The sample area comprised Pakistan Foreign office, Defence Ministry, ISI, Various public sector universities (Behria University Islamabad, COMSATS Islamabad, Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi, National Defence University Islamabad, University of Peshawar, Indian Think Tank, Thailand Senior Journalist, Director of UK Statecraft).

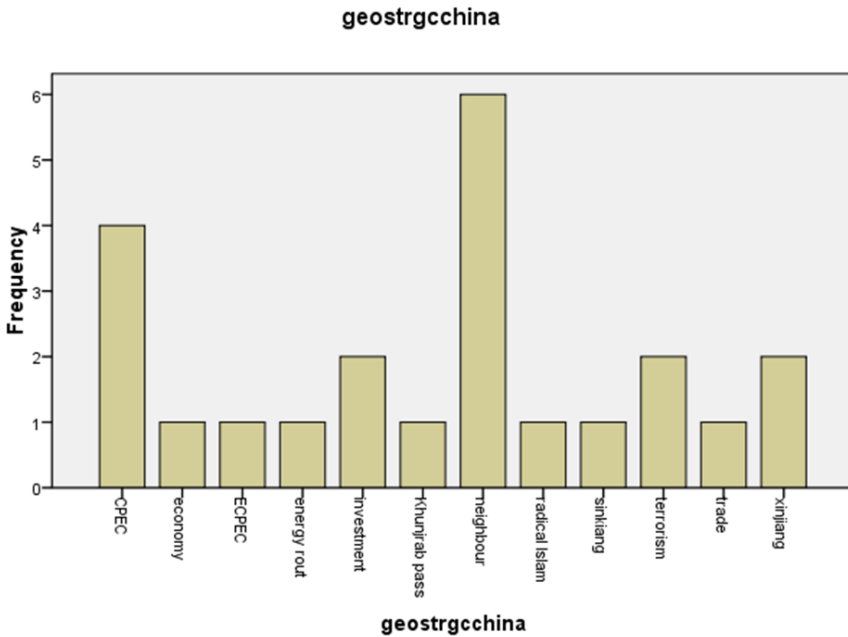
Results and Discussion

Primary data of research was analyzed by using statistical package of 'Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Relationship between variables is given through graphs. This research investigated about strategic significance of Afghanistan for China. As shown in Table 1, Graph 1;

Table: Afghanistan significance for China

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | CPEC | 4 | 17.4 | 17.4 | 17.4 |
| | Economy | 1 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 21.7 |
| | ECPEC | 1 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 26.1 |
| | energy rout | 1 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 30.4 |
| | Investment | 2 | 8.7 | 8.7 | 39.1 |
| | Khunjrab pass | 1 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 43.5 |
| | Neighbor | 6 | 26.1 | 26.1 | 69.6 |
| | radical Islam | 1 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 73.9 |
| | Sinkiang | 1 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 78.3 |
| | Terrorism | 2 | 8.7 | 8.7 | 87.0 |
| | Trade | 1 | 4.3 | 4.3 | 91.3 |
| | Xinjiang | 2 | 8.7 | 8.7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 23 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Graph:



Discussion on Primary Data

China's Security Interests

China Western province Xinjiang security is connected with Afghanistan security and violent extremism originated from Afghanistan specifically has had fall out for China. While checking the China interests in Afghanistan then at the end of cold war and specially at the event of 9/11 revolved around the Xinjiang security and for constructive terms with Central Asian Republics (CARs) came into being after the collapse of USSR. The Xinjiang issue emerged on ethnic ground and the Pan-Islamic regional movement aggravated it. The fissiparous trends in it developed during various dynamics in the region as Soviet defeat and consequent withdrawal from Afghanistan, rise of CARs based on ethnicity and religion, Taliban coming into power in 1990s.

Hence Beijing's stakes in Afghanistan revolved around securing Xinjiang from fall out as radical Islamism, traditional and non-traditional security threats specially trafficking and supply of weapons. (Chang, 1997, pp. 401-425) These apprehensions of fall out were perceived by China during Taliban emergence in 1994 and in coming into power in 1996. Because Taliban's harboring of Central Asian radical Islamists, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), was alarming for authoritarian and secular Soviet CARs regimes but for China and Russia too. (Rashid, 1999, pp. 22-35)

In the background China concluded to handle the Taliban in order to escape the threats. In late 1990s through Pakistan, Beijing sought Taliban cooperation in

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preventing heroin flow into Xinjiang, the trafficking because the movement according to China perception was funding the extremist Uyghur. (Rashid, 1999, pp. 30-31)

After 9/11 Beijing interests in Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan were mainly for development, security and approach towards natural regional resources. This approach yield China in multilateral diplomacy in shape of Shanghai Five and Shanghai Cooperation Organization processes.

After 9/11 China kept its approach towards Afghanistan by limited economic engagement and no direct security involvement. China interests in Afghanistan were based on no boot on ground in Afghanistan. At some times containment of Taliban was taken as productive for Xinjiang safeguard but on the hand US led NATO forces were also threatening to the geo-political imperatives of the US in post-cold war foreign policy China objectives. (Wishnik, 2014, pp. 138-140)

In the recent context any instability in Afghanistan is ruinous to China economic interest as the BRI will be at stake. The fall out of the instability will jeopardize both BRI and CPEC. It will be detrimental to the China investment in Afghanistan as China has invested billion dollars in two major economic projects; Aynak copper mine and Hijigak Iron ore deposits. Accordingly, China is attempting for more and more involvement in Afghanistan.

Economic Interests

China is engaged with Afghanistan economically through investment in Infrastructure development, reconstruction, financial assistance and through most significant 'Belt and Road Initiative' and CPEC. Taking Afghanistan in its economic fold is China priority due to which she has extended economic measures towards Afghanistan as in the month of October in 2014, Beijing was willing to assist Afghanistan with US\$327 million. (Morgus, 2019) Humanitarian help of value US\$1.56 million was given in earthquake (Andersen & Jiang, 2018) Besides military assistance of US\$70 million was also provided. China ensured 150 scholarships and 1000 training programs to Afghanistan yearly and built so many health and educational institutions there as the Chinese Language Department Teaching Building, the Jumhoriate Hospital, the Guest House at the Kabul University and the National Centre for Science and Technology Education. China planned for increasing trade with Afghanistan for which train service to Hairatan, through CARs is established. Beijing offered duty-free treatment to 278 Afghan commodities and has also given invitation to Afghanistan delegations for attending trade exhibitions. China through Wakhjir pass in the Wakhan corridor was building direct road with Afghanistan. (Foster, 2019)

China has hugely invested in Afghanistan as China has longer presence and investment plans in Afghanistan because Afghanistan has huge oil and natural gas reserves in northern part. Afghanistan has larger deposits of iron ore in some parts as between Herat and Panjshir valley, gold reserves in northern provinces of Badakhshan, Ghazni and Takhar and copper fields in Jawkhar Darband and Aynak (Muzalqeky, 2010) which are more alluring to Chinese interests because China has quest for copper and iron ore.

Aynak copper mine which is 28 km is world second largest project and is in Afghanistan Logar province. The Chinese Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC)

planned for US \$2.9 million investment which is expected to reach US \$ 5 billion. MCC has conceded with construction of 400MW power station which will be utilized both in mine and for residents. MCC is envisaged for excavating coal mine resource for energy resource and for construction of a railway line from the Logar province to Afghanistan's border for exporting copper. Additional to Aynak deal Chinese government along CMGC have approved construction of 400 Megawatt, coal fired power plant and railroad, which will link Xinjiang with Pakistan through Afghanistan-Tajikistan.

Maritime silk route

In parameter of Chinese greater neighborhood policy, Xi Jinping is making headway in transit corridor for air, rail and infrastructure. For the same very purpose Chinese president Hu Jintao in 2012 called for making China a maritime power and to secure maritime rights and interests. This idea was furthered by president XI Jinping in order to render China the status of maritime economy. This maritime silk road will comprise the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia and Mediterranean. Maritime silk road was maritime trade and cultural route between Asia, China, Europe, East Africa and Middle East in historical perspective. Recent maritime silk road is an initiative by Xi to restore old maritime leverage of China. It will cause development from China to Europe, will foster trade between Europe and Asia and will attract foreign investment in the region of security imbroglio. New silk road is lynchpin which will stabilize China's strategic relations with neighbors and to have contest for leverage with US and Japan. (Mustafaga, 2015) This belt, which is originated in Chinese eastern coastal region which will assist economic development in central and western provinces and will allow regional trade, and state owned enterprises to invest in it. This economic belt would sideline the US and only then EU will rebalance between Atlantic and Pacific. (Yiwei, 2015)

It is counterpart of silk road economic belt presented in 2012 for linking China with Central Asia and then into Europe. It is termed as 'one belt one road'. These two projects known as 'one belt and one road' are aimed for bilateral and multilateral partnerships across Asia. It is based on regional investment strategy against the US rebalancing. Furthermore, its economic dimensions are to strengthen economic ties between China and littoral states in Asia. This 'belt and road' seems Chinese diverse foreign policy in Eurasia which encompasses various overland and maritime transport corridor for economic development. This economic development is envisaged to curb extremism and separatism because the western part of Xinjiang and Tibet is infested with separatist elements. Furthermore, it will calm the south China sea dispute. Politically it will grapple to overcome the distorted image of China due to South China sea confrontation.

In geo-strategic perspective New Silk Road (NSR) is of prime significance as the new Great Game specially embodying Central Asia and Pakistan, which is at crossbridge of South, East and West is pivotal between a landlocked geopolitical prize (Brezinski, 1998, p. 30) and with rest of the world where every player is serving own interests and grappling to overcome others. NSR is a highway to supreme geopolitical and economic leverage and to enhance capabilities which gave emergence to geostrategic uncertainties competition and complexities among geostrategic players in whole world by creating countervailing coalitions. NSR initiative was coined in 2011 and although many inroads in the region were made by

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2001. However, the recent trends to increase inter and intra-regional interconnectivity and cooperation with Central Asian states at the heart of it is primary focus of NSR. This is mainly for diversification of energy resources for fulfilling energy needs, and to deviate dependence from Middle East towards Central Asian region through enhanced economic cooperation. NSR is amalgamation of transport structure comprised East-West and North-South Central Asia regional economic cooperation (CAREC) embodying 10 countries including Pakistan supported by six multilateral institutions promotes six CAREC roads and rail corridors expanding over 83,800 km of transport network. This region is vital with plenty of oil and gas reserves but also hinged upon geo-strategic layout in the midst of energy wanting economies and lucrative consumer markets in Russia, India and China. As the energy demand of world is expected to enhance by 41 % till 2035 (Energy Outlook 2035, 2014) whereby India competed China as number one energy consumer till 2025 while the region capacity to fulfill these mounting needs enhance its significance with proven oil and gas reserves approximately 31.246 billion barrels and 265 trillion cubic feet respectively.

Reach to the Resources

The geo-political theory of sir Halford Mackinder's that one who controls the 'Heartland Controls the World' has shaped new framework applied to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Central Asia is pivotal strategic region between two large energy consumption market of Asia and Europe. Beijing has sensed this enormous potential hence having strong political, economic and strategic ties in post-Soviet region. China craves for presence in energy rich Central Asian states for access to hydrocarbon supplies.

Central Asian region is strategically significant for China for its ethnic and cultural linkages with Turkic Muslim minority in Chinese western province of Xinjiang which keep both connected due to security concerns. Xinjiang's 60 percent population comprised ethnic minorities having affiliation with Turkic population in Central Asia than with Han Chinese. (Mark, 1999, p.9) Chinese leaders have apprehensions that these Turkic forces of Central Asian states will cause fissiparous trends in Xinjiang. (Bao, 1999, p. 1) The perturbed security in Xinjiang which is having majority Muslim of Turkic origin is one of main reasons of Chinese excitement for having close ties with CARs. (Fueller & Starr, 2003) Xinjiang minority population is having strong ties with CARs. China would improve relation with Central Asian governments in order to resolve the Uighur minority conflict in Xinjiang and to curb rebels.

Hence China has active participation in development of Central Asian Republics gas and oil fields, east directed pipeline projects. (Petrokaz, pp.5-7) Central Asia is geoeconomically significant as emerging market for Chinese manufactured goods, energy supplier. Central Asia resources are geographically closer than African and Middle Eastern petroleum suppliers that ship 80 % of oil through Malacca Straits. It is strategic significance of Central Asia which will lead to great powers contest over regional influence in center of Eurasia.

China has limited natural resources deposits as according to one estimate People Republic of China has 14.7 billion barrel of oil reserves and 3.1 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. Hence oil demand will be approximately 15 million barrel daily in 2035. Chinese regional strategy is comprised of purchase of fields and construction

of pipelines whereas investment is mainly by Chinese state owned energy enterprises as Sinopec and CNPC. Central Asia-China economic terms are joined through network of railways, roads and pipelines for Caspian gas and oil. China has energy projects of multibillion dollars comprised oil pipelines to carry crude oil from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan. As Central Asia is landlocked hence its oil and gas wealth can be approached through China, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. Chinese route can be used by India for access to gas and oil. China is building pipelines to the region which can be highway of economic and strategic importance from Central Asia along western China.

China as neighbor of Afghanistan and then through non-interference and mutual co-existence foreign policy has influence in Afghanistan. Furthermore, China has an all-inclusive approach for Afghanistan as had nourished terms with all Afghan stakeholders. Being second largest economy China is in position to invest in Afghanistan reconstruction and rehabilitation. Afghanistan has collected US \$ 2.5 billion revenues against the expenditure of US \$ 11 billion as per report of World Bank issued in 2019. Afghanistan is facing budget deficit which was to some extent overcome by US foreign aid in post 9/11-time period. (Hong, 2013, pp.27-43) But as the US has already withdrawn hence has frozen the 9 billion dollar of Afghanistan reserved in US banks. In this situation the China assistance is urgently required in order to overcome the financial crisis. Until the natural resources of Afghanistan are exploited the situation will be miserable.

Inclusion of Afghanistan in the CPEC project would be a farfetched idea as long as US/Western interests are aimed at limiting China's growing influence in the region. China's use of Iranian territory for transit of goods to the western destinations could keep China within the evolving scenario. The situation is fluid and Pakistan has to keep all its options open. Pakistan must focus on using its trade, transit and economic potential for connecting various regions as long as it sees that security concerns are not outweighing economic interests.

A peaceful Afghanistan would be a springboard for accessing the Central Asian countries. It will play a crucial role in the iconic Chinese initiative of Belt and Road. It will benefit from exploitation of its proven mineral reserves of more than \$ 1.5 trillion.

It's BRI promises for transforming the politico-economic landscape of this area. It's important economic interests in Afghanistan include investments in copper, oil, gas and other sectors. Consequently, China has an abiding interest in stability in the region. China would like to see a stable Afghanistan, well integrated in the region and free from the extremist and terrorist elements. In support of these objectives, China would like to see an early exit of all foreign forces from the war-ravaged country.

Beijing is of the view that, as its influence in Afghanistan matures and its policy objectives are secured, its position as the dominant economic and military power in Afghanistan would have to be acknowledged by all regional neighbors. However, it is very keen to achieve this dominant position under a cloak of 'economic and cultural cooperation'. It does not want to be portrayed or exposed as a neo-imperialist state that seeks to assert a controlling influence over smaller regional countries.

Conclusion

China's foreign policy emphasizes mutual trust, cooperative security and peaceful development rather than hegemonism. China strives for peace and stability in Afghanistan for serving her economic interests. China does not want foreign interference in Afghanistan in Afghanistan political dispensation and the territorial integrity and national sovereignty must be respected. Moreover, she wants an access to Central Asian hydrocarbon resources and foot hold in Balochistan. China has strategic tilt towards Pakistan and has assisted Pakistan to the most in Gwadar Port, Karakuran Highway and recently cooperation in CPEC will prompt her export to the Middle East, African and European markets. She grapples for stability in Uighur autonomous region of Xinjiang. The US is apprehensive about China and considered it a challenge but the latter peaceful rise manifests that it is not threatening to US-led world order.

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