

India and China: Exploring Partnership in Afghanistan

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Summary

In his final part of the Policy Paper series, P Stobdan deliberates that if India and China make a calibrated move for working together in Afghanistan, the outcome could be more harmonizing than conflicting. So when India reviews its post-2014 Afghan policy, the China factor should not be seen in a zero-sum perception for many in the West may press India playing a countervailing role to China.

As the US prepares to pull its troops out of Afghanistan by July 2014, a growing realization in the West is that the situation in the region may ultimately hinge on the kind of role India and China may play in Afghanistan. India's role in Afghanistan is being fully acknowledged, but China is also now viewed as potentially a stabilizing force in Afghanistan. It is recognized widely that at the end of the day, it is going to be Asian powers which will have the experience and the capacity to implement even the New Silk Road Strategy envisaged by the US. Even the Taliban perhaps painfully understand this reality. If India and China make a calibrated move for working together in Afghanistan, the outcome could be more harmonizing than conflicting.

India's good friend Russia is unlikely to get redrawn in Afghanistan. Moscow realizes that Central Asia has separated Russia with Afghanistan. But, Russia is engaging Pakistan, hoping it will dissuade the Taliban, if they come to power, from interfering into the areas of Russia's influence. Of course, Russia will get some role depending what the Taliban will want it play. Presumably, Moscow will consult New Delhi. But, Moscow is also keen to discuss Afghanistan only under the China-led SCO framework.

So far, an onlooker on the Afghan scene, China and its likely role in Afghanistan is increasingly gaining importance. *A former Japanese Ambassador to Central Asia, Akio Kawato recently wrote in a column "Afghanistan is not alien for China....it was a vital part of the Silk Road and was a conduit to India from where China imported Buddhism."* Kawato wrote, the Taliban, more 'civilized' now than in 2001, may incur China's strong involvement in the Afghan affairs.

Make no mistake; Beijing will never get drawn militarily in Afghanistan. It would still like the Americans to ensure security of Afghanistan and want countries like Turkey and India to build its infrastructures. All China has to do is to be ready with a smart strategy to turn Afghanistan into an economic engine and connect the resource rich country to its own industrial towns. And this is what the 'civilized' Taliban would also bargain for.

The Chinese investors have on their laptops figures of Afghanistan's untapped deposits; copper, iron ore, gold, oil, gas, massive vein of rare earth elements including critical lithium (estimated \$1 trillion dollars worth) which are imminently suited for their needs. Billions of dollars have already been spent in mining and China's visitors to Kabul are invariably seeking mining privileges. Several road, railway, pipeline projects are underway to link Western China to Afghanistan through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

True, Afghans have shown aversion to investments. Surely, they have no particular likings for the Chinese, for they represent a blotchy or alien culture - danger to Islam. But same was said about the Chinese in Central Asia as well. The fear was that non-Muslim outsiders extracting underground riches would invoke powerful resource nationalism. But, if the Chinese benefited from the Soviet fall and Russia's decline, to be sure, they hope to gain in Afghanistan too.

Both China and India have high stakes in the Afghan stability, for they need a peaceful environment to achieve high growth in the next two to three decades. The chaos could bring negative consequence and for China the stabilizing efforts in Xinjiang have not been easy. So the logic of establishing links with Afghanistan makes sense. China has successfully experimented this with Pakistan for decades. In the changed context, China and Afghanistan need each other. Even the Taliban know that if China shed no blood, it committed no sins in Afghanistan. The Taliban too wasn't much of a headache for China. The Uighur extremist elements were supposedly linked only to Al Qaida.

China pretty well knows about Afghanistan's political instability, its lack of governance, the threat of Islamic extremists and flow of drugs etc posing threat to its Western region. The current Chinese reforms aim to preclude social and political unrests from aggravating in the Western region. Surely, India's own Afghan policy has not been designed to counterbalance anyone but for reasons not only of helping Afghan people, but also for India's own security.

Therefore, when India reviews its post-2014 Afghan policy, the China factor should not be seen in a zero-sum perception. Many in the West may press India playing a countervailing role instead of letting China monopolize the Afghan affairs. Pakistan may also like to engineer additional battle front for China and India in Afghanistan. But here, on a serious note, it needs to be underlined that Indian and Chinese interests historically converged in Afghanistan as Ambassador *Kawato noted*.

Afghanistan has an observer status in the SCO, a powerful economic organization led by China. It has become an enthusiastic member of SAARC seeking greater involvement in trade and commerce with South Asian states. The truth is that the Afghan economy is more likely to be connected to the Chinese and Indian economies than they are to Europe, partly because of proximity, but also because of the availability of markets for Afghan goods in India and China. This has been proven in Central Asia where the economies are now closely linked to China. India alone imports millions of dollars worth dry fruits, spices, carpets, wool, etc from Afghanistan which can easily be expanded. Moreover, the Afghan economy driven by low-wage subsistence agriculture and massive unemployment can only be dealt by learning from the Chinese and Indian experiences. Also, it is only China and India that can commit large-scale investments in Afghanistan needed for its reconstruction – the process has already begun though. In fact, many commentators already started to view that the greatest beneficiary of Western work, apart from the Afghan people, is going to be India and China.

China could take advantage of India's cultural familiarities in Afghanistan. Being conscious about Afghanistan's human heritage, both countries can jointly rebuild Afghanistan's rich archaeological sites, which alone can revive Afghan tourism industry and generate billions of dollars revenue and jobs for its people. Also there is no case for competition, India has a

clearly cut out role to perform in the Afghan i.e., health, education, tourism and cultural affairs.

Together, India and China could train the Afghan Army and build its defence capabilities. But to be cautious, Pakistan is likely to make full efforts to draw China's involvement into the Afghan game. Pakistani leaders reported to have told the Afghan government to split ties with the US and hold China's hand. China should be particularly careful about Pakistan's intention to get Beijing dragged in Afghanistan to play its own game against India.