

Competing Interest of Regional and Extra Regional Countries in Afghanistan

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Key Points

- Stability in Afghanistan is imperative for regional and international peace.
- The narrow and self-interested approach of a few regional countries has the potential to derail the process, make Afghanistan a hotbed of proxies and cause a threat to regional and international peace.
- The Afghan conflict can only be resolved through an inclusive peace process; hence it needs to be insulated from spoilers' actions and negative influences.
- The region will only develop as a whole and not as individual countries; a stable Afghanistan favors a stable and prosperous region.
- Connectivity through Afghanistan is a regional necessity and a prerequisite for development of the Afghan economy.
- Contingent upon the security situation, regional countries are willing to invest in communication infrastructure and mineral development projects.
- Under the current situation, no regional country seems interested in getting involved in Afghan domestic politics, despite wishing for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.
- Regional broad-based engagement with a desired end state of a peaceful and prosperous region could deliver the security interests of the West.

Introduction

Afghanistan has remained a battle ground for great powers for centuries. In a bid to achieve others' national interests, the interests of Afghans faded away and the country witnessed devastation and misery. Great powers did their best to bring stability to Afghanistan by translating their respective understanding of the conflict into action. However, none was able to achieve that aim. At the heart of the failure remained favoritism to one faction over another, an inability to understand the competing national interests of regional and extra regional countries and a failure to find common ground for achieving peace, stability and prosperity. The geographic location of Afghanistan makes the country the heart of Asia as all arteries connecting the region have to pass through it. Weak governance structure, highly polarized society, overly fragile and stagnant economy, political expediencies, and diplomatic necessities have made Afghanistan a textbook example of a fragile state, prone to foreign influence. This contest of respective interests in Afghanistan took a turn after 9/11; however, the situation post a US withdrawal presents a different landscape. In a relative vacuum the contest could easily turn violent, or

mutual ground could be found to achieve stability in the region. The perceived national interests of the regional and extra regional countries in Afghanistan are highlighted in the following paragraphs.

China

Chinese involvement in Afghanistan has largely remained focused on economic, connectivity and security domains. China is not a strong proponent of aid but instead puts its capital into financing development, to generate profit and gain influence.¹ Almost two decades ago, China was perceived to have entered Afghanistan in a big way by investing \$3 B in metal mining and hydrocarbon extraction projects. Although it is inconceivable to separate the Chinese government from its business entities, Chinese are businessmen first and something else later. Chinese economic and infrastructural projects in Afghanistan were perceived as China taking advantage of the relative stability brought by ISAF. However, the development vacuum and inability of other competitors to compete and lobby the Afghan government to develop their resources were overlooked.² These projects have not able to mature due to host of reasons including diplomatic, security, overstretched resources of companies involved in the projects and complexities of preserving the cultural heritage.³ However, the engagement has provided an opportunity to Chinese companies to have a head start as and when situation warrants. In the longterm, the balance gets tilted towards Chinese firms as they are already operational in neighboring countries and have considerable advantage over others due to their early engagement in Afghanistan.

Keeping in view the business minded approach, opportunities in Afghanistan are not likely to be missed by Chinese companies; however, security of investment will be their foremost concern. A security audit of the short to midterm environment does not present any positive outlook and, therefore, precludes any worthwhile economic engagement by the Chinese. Connectivity through Afghanistan is another focus area. Geographic location and contiguity to energy rich Central Asia provides an unmatched opportunity to China to further its interest through developing an economic, trade and energy corridor through Afghanistan. The multi-billion-dollar CPEC initiative can bring optimal dividends to the whole region particularly addressing the economic needs of Afghanistan. However, the realization of extending CPEC westwards can only be achieved if stability prevails in Afghanistan. This makes security a pre-requisite to any Chinese economic and connectivity initiatives in Afghanistan.

Stability is also important for Chinese economic and security ambitions. Unrest in the bordering Xinjiang region and ETIM's safe havens in Afghanistan present a potent threat to the Chinese internal security situation. China has neither interfered with internal Afghan power politics nor contributed to the international anti-terrorist effort. Other than the historic Chinese approach to complex issues, fear of rebuttal from VEOs, i.e., ISIS and Al Qaida, and danger of spoiling its relations with Taliban are envisaged to be the motivation behind this restraint. Though, a Chinese intelligence network was unearthed in Afghanistan, it is largely believed that the mandate of the network was restricted to addressing the threat from ETIM.⁴ Unsettled political and power contests between

¹ Yun Sun, "China's Aid to Africa: Monster or Messiah?" Feb 7, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/chinas-aid-to-africa-monster-or-messiah/> (accessed Apr 12, 2021).

² Erica S Downs, "China Buys into Afghanistan," Feb 21, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/china-buys-into-afghanistan/-:~:text=Many%20discussions%20of%20China%E2%80%99s%20involvement%20in%20Afghanistan%20begin,Faryab%20in%20northwestern%20Afghanistan%2C%20which%20CNPC%20expects%20to> (accessed Apr 12, 2021).

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Afghanistan busted Chinese spy ring, kept it a secret. NDS chief explains why," Jan 6, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/worldnews/afghan-intel-chief-confirms-busting-chinese-spy-ring-says-it-s-sensitive/story-iFqT1qRYtftMikEN7ATxN.html> (accessed Jan 7, 2021).

Afghan factions can lead to a chaotic situation impacting regional security. China views instability as a direct threat to its economic and security interests in the region. China neither supports the Taliban assuming power through force nor wants to see an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan due to threat of greater instability and rise in extremism as a possible outcome of these actions. To guard its interests, China has beefed up diplomatic efforts to avert any untoward situation in Afghanistan.⁵ These efforts are likely to remain confined to diplomatic and political initiatives and are not likely to enter the military domain. Chinese aversion to military use, in order to address its concerns emanating from Afghanistan, is not only because that Afghanistan is a graveyard of empires but also due to the notion of becoming a legitimate target of ISIS, Al-Qaida and other proxies. No country in the region has put boots on the ground to secure respective interests and none is likely to do so in foreseeable future. However, to address its security concerns additional military or paramilitary deployments along the Sino-Afghan border and establishment of intelligence gathering mechanism cannot be ruled out.

Russia

Russia invaded Afghanistan and, upon withdrawal, helped establish a favorable government in Kabul and later assisted the Northern Alliance against the Taliban to address the threat of rapid Taliban expansion towards the North. Post 9/11, Russia supported the US invasion and accepted US bases in the Central Asian States (CAS).

However, Russia and the Taliban have always remained in contact since the Taliban came into power.⁶ The Taliban intent is to have better relations with Russia were more pronounced than now. Russia has three major concerns in Afghanistan: VEOs, radicalization and extremism, and drug trafficking.⁷ Other than those, Russia does have a desire to keep its influence in any future political construct in Kabul. The threat of radicalization and extremism, and drug trafficking have a direct bearing on the perceived Russian 'soft belly', the CAS. VEO – especially ISIS – are of great concern to the Russian domestic security environment. Even though Afghanistan does not emerge as a threat,⁸ continued Russian engagement in Afghanistan is envisaged as it seeks to keep its influence in Kabul.

US-Russian cooperation in Afghanistan was unable to eliminate drug trafficking from Afghanistan and led to Russian criticism of the US.⁹ To address the threat from ISIS, Russia supported the Taliban with weapons and equipment. This support can be seen as addressing common the threat, keeping influence over the Taliban and creating an irritant for the US. After the dismemberment of Soviet Union, the limited Russian resources have negatively affected their influence and capacity to maneuver.¹⁰ The US efforts for resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan started a new phase of regional and domestic political contestation, forcing Russia to enhance its role. To keep its influence on Kabul, Russian engagement with Taliban and region gained strength over a period of time. This does not mean that Russia is vying for a dominant role in Afghanistan but it desires having a neutral

⁵ Ayaz Gul, "China Offers to Host Afghan Peace Talks," May 18, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/china-offers-hostafghan-peace-talks> (accessed May 18, 2021).

⁶ Arkady Dubnov, "Why Russia and the Taliban's interests objectively coincided," Jan 16, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/62459> (accessed Mar 22, 2021).

⁷ "Why is Russia so interested in Afghanistan all of a sudden?" Mar 1, 2017, [Why is Russia so interested in Afghanistan all of a sudden? | Asia | An in-depth look at news from across the continent | DW | 03.01.2017](http://www.dw.com/en/why-is-russia-so-interested-in-afghanistan-all-of-a-sudden/a-4010301) (accessed Mar 22, 2021).

⁸ Nurlan Aliyev, "How Russia Views Afghanistan Today," Oct 19, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/russias-contemporaryafghan-policy/-:~:text=Russia%E2%80%99s%20interests%20in%20Afghanistan%20center%20on%20ensuring%20the,Security%20Treaty%20Organization%20and%20the%20Eurasian%20Economic%20Union> (accessed Mar 22, 2021).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

government in Kabul and to improve its image as a resurging power. Russia has not favored any group in Afghanistan; however, its successful engagement in Afghanistan demonstrates its influence over various domestic factions. Therefore, key Russian interests can be defined as the withdrawal of US forces, some degree of control over Kabul, a desire for early negotiated settlement, inclusive political dispensation in Kabul and a largely stable Afghanistan. At the moment there are no envisaged Russian economic interests in Afghanistan.

Turkey

Turkey has exercised its influence in Afghanistan mainly through the Turkmen and Uzbek population. Gen Rasheed Dostum has remained aligned to Turkey and has repeatedly sought refuge in Ankara whenever under pressure.¹¹ The heart of the Asia-Istanbul process is a Turk initiative launched in 2011 which is one of the most effective forums for discussions on economic and security matters pertaining to Afghanistan. In 2012, Turkey hosted a trilateral conference in a bid to facilitate resolution of the Afghan conflict. Turkey hoped to host the Taliban office in their country; however, the Taliban choose Qatar given its status as a neutral state.¹² The Turkish desire to gain a prominent position in the process is based on its economic and political interest beyond Central Asia. In Central Asia it has to compete with the near duopoly of Russia and China, however, in Afghanistan, Turkey expects to make good ground.¹³

Afghanistan has also requested to be included in the Turkic Council as an observer.¹³ As part of NATO, Turkey has contributed militarily to Afghanistan; however, it has remained away from siding with any faction in domestic political contestation. Recent speculation regarding a potential Turkish military base in Kabul, to secure Kabul Airport, will likely draw the Taliban's attention and may impact Turkey's future role in the country. Primarily, the Turkish interest is visualized to be economic in its quest to gain a larger political influence.

Central Asian States

Major interests of CAS in Afghanistan remain in security, connectivity and economic domains. Though Tajik and Uzbek ethnicities form a considerable part of the Afghan population, support to these minorities from CAS have generally remained negligible. It is envisaged that CAS do not hold any appetite to use these ethnicities to gain influence in Afghanistan; rather Tajik and Hazara fighters are considered as militant threats and a source of radicalization in CAS. Also, Russia is amongst the top 10 countries with drug and alcohol addicts; the drug supply finds its way to Russia through the CAS.

Economic interests of the CAS are limited mostly to exploiting consumer markets to investments in mineral development projects. The biggest interest of the CAS neighboring Afghanistan is connectivity and establishment of trade and the energy corridor between CAS-Pakistan and CAS-Iran through Afghanistan. TAPI and CASA-1000 are a few of the projects which have already been negotiated and are in the development phase. Central Asian states are working with Iran and Pakistan to develop the railroad link through Afghanistan. Under the stewardship of DFIC, Pakistan-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan are in the process of developing a trade corridor linking three countries.

¹¹ https://historica.fandom.com/wiki/Abdul_Rashid_Dostum (accessed Apr 18, 2021).

¹² "Q&A: Afghan Taliban open Doha office," Jun 20, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22957827> (accessed Apr 18, 2021).

¹³ Gokhan Ergocun, "Turkey, Afghanistan sign cooperation agreement," Dec 6, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkeyafghanistan-sign-cooperation-agreement/1666012> (accessed Apr 16, 2021).

¹³ "Afghanistan requests Turkic Council for observer status," May 5, 2021, <https://kabulnow.af/2021/05/afghanistan-requests-turkiccouncil-for-observer-status/> (accessed May 6, 2021).

India

Chanakya Kautilya was an ancient Indian teacher and royal advisor. He authored Arthashastra - the theory on geopolitics and international relations – which is considered the basis of Indian foreign policy.²¹ One of Chanakya's famous foreign policy lessons is that, "[y]our neighbor is your natural enemy and the neighbor's neighbor is your friend," therefore Pakistan becomes a natural enemy and Afghanistan a friend.²² The long history of India-Afghan relations is testimony of the above quoted lesson of Chanakya. From the Soviet invasion to the US invasion, India-Afghan relations have been predicated on support to the anti-Pakistan bloc in Afghanistan.²³ India supported the Soviet backed government in 1979, helped the Northern Alliance against Taliban, never recognized the Taliban government, and has developed close and friendly relations with US backed governments in Kabul; exactly the opposite to Pakistan. Historically, India has supported ethnic minority militant groups such as the Northern Alliance. However, after the US invasion, it distanced itself from the Northern Alliance and supported the US backed Pashtun dominated government. India considers the Taliban as a proxy of Pakistan and fears that a Taliban dominated government will seriously reduce Indian political space in Kabul. Further, the Taliban's success is also considered as a motivation for the freedom fighters in Kashmir to follow suit and ramp up the decades old indigenous struggle for obtaining the right of self-determination. India assumes that the Taliban, after gaining power, may funnel fighters to Kashmir contrary to the consensus of opinion that the Taliban only has a domestic agenda. In addition, the resolution of the Afghan conflict or even relative peace will leave only one burning issue in the region: Kashmir. After resolution of the Afghan conflict, Kashmir is likely to gain international attention which counteracts with Indian interest. The Taliban's growing military and political influence vis-à-vis having no option but to support the government in Kabul and has restricted the policy options for India. More importantly, in order to execute the Doval Doctrine of "Double Squeeze," considerable influence in Kabul is of extreme importance to India.²⁴

Other than security, economic interest is another area of Indian focus. South Asia is one of the least integrated regions in the world due to decades old unresolved conflicts. Indian access to Central Asia holds great potential for improving the Indian economy. The shortest route to Central Asia passes through Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan has repeatedly asked Pakistan to allow India access to Afghanistan through Pakistan as a condition to allowing Pakistani access to Central Asia through Afghanistan²⁵ against the bilateral Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. However, due to no transit agreement between India and Pakistan and perennial conflicts in the region, the option of land connectivity between India and Central Asia is still far from becoming a reality. In order to bypass Pakistan, India joined the International North South Corridor (INSC) project and

²¹ Seema Sirohi, "Exploring the Link Between Chanakya and India's Foreign Policy Today," Aug 9, 2017, <https://thewire.in/books/chanakya-foreign-policy-narendra-modi> (accessed Apr 20, 2021).

²² "Modi's Mandala: Why Indian Prime Minister Is Modern Chanakya," Sep 17, 2019, <https://www.thetruepicture.org/mandala-theorycurrent-times-modi/> (accessed Apr 2, 2021).

²³ Jayshree Bajoria, "India-Afghanistan Relations," Jul 22, 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/background/india-afghanistan-relations> (accessed Apr 5, 2021).

²⁴ Sabtain Ahmed Dar, Ajit Doval and Kulbhushan, "Configuring subversion inside Pakistan," Feb 18, 2019, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/ajit-doval-and-kulbhushan-configuring-subversion-inside-pakistan/-:~:text=He%20is%20the%20founder%20of%20a%20military%20strategy,by%20creating%20problems%20in%20the%20province%20of%20Baluchistan> (accessed Apr 9, 2021).

²⁵ Khalid Mustafa, "Pakistan to have access to Central Asia for its products through China," Sep 10, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/712731-pakistan-to-have-access-to-central-asia-for-its-products-through-china> (accessed Apr 6, 2021).

invested over \$3 B in development projects in Afghanistan.²⁶ With increasing Taliban influence, India perceives this as a challenge to its enduring political, economic and security interest. To address Indian energy needs, the country joined the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas pipeline project. Likewise, the project is essential to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. A stable Afghanistan is imperative for Indian economic interests; however, India does not want a Pakistan influenced government in Kabul. The two contradictory requirements make it difficult to balance and can translate into a threat to security in the region.

Pakistan

Emanating from Afghanistan, security is the key Pakistani concern. Pakistan is a major victim of the last four decades of instability in Afghanistan. Support to US efforts against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan resulted in a huge influx of refugees into Pakistan. The refugees dispersed all around the country and brought guns and narcotics. Along with other social ills, the biggest downside of this support was the radicalization of the Pakistani society. To support Jihad in Afghanistan, a moderate society gradually became a radicalized one.²⁷ Other than having security and economic issues, the instability in Afghanistan thus led the country towards a deep sinkhole of intolerance. Pakistan has fought against terrorism for over two decades and successfully subsided the threat of radicalization and extremism to a considerable degree. It is envisaged that any instability in Afghanistan is likely to have the same negative impact. So, a peaceful Afghanistan is of benefit to Pakistan.

The long, porous border with Afghanistan has remained not only a security threat but also has had a huge negative impact on the Pakistani economy. Pakistan's economic interests in Afghanistan are more complex and intertwined than any other country in the region or beyond. Pakistan is obliged to provide Afghanistan with land routes to its seaports for Afghan imports and exports; governed through the bilateral Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Treaty. Due to the long porous border, a lack of enforcement capacity and the inability to use technology in ensuring smooth conduct of trade, Pakistan is losing billions of dollars annually in revenue collection.²⁸ The illegal trade along the Pak-Afghan border has been a source of income for the population living on both sides of the borders; however, the involvement of the wealthy and influential has made it a profitable business. The illegal trade has caused a huge hit on Pakistani revenue, along with an immense negative impact on the Pakistani domestic industry and agriculture; wheat, sugar and livestock smuggling are a few important ones. Smuggling of daily commodities hugely impacts the Pakistani domestic social environment.

CAS are a market to Pakistani goods in general and agriculture produces in particular; however, security conditions, the influence of local traders on policies and poor infrastructure inside Afghanistan precludes any worthwhile trade engagement. Pakistan has a huge population and a potential for economic growth which demands on an uninterrupted supply of cheap energy resources. CAS has plenty of resources and a willingness to export it to markets like Pakistan, India and China. The biggest impediment to the realization of CAS' economic interests is the lack of connectivity through Afghanistan. India considers it unviable to invest in energy and communication infrastructures through Pakistan due to its historic hostile relations towards Pakistan. India has been leveraging Afghanistan to gain access through Pakistan; however, India has been shying away from engaging

²⁶ Manvendra Singh, "India has invested too much in Afghanistan to let Taliban hold sway again with US blessings," Mar 3, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-has-invested-too-much-in-afghanistan-to-let-taliban-hold-sway-again-with-us-blessings/374393/> (accessed Apr 5, 2021).

²⁷ "Afghan Jihad," <https://historypak.com/afghan-jihad/> (accessed Feb 11, 2021).

²⁸ Shahbaz Rana, "Pakistan losing \$2.63b revenue a year due to smuggling," Jan 22, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1031958/impactof-smuggling-pakistan-losing-2-63b-a-year-reveals-confidential-report> (accessed Feb 12, 2021).

in any economic or trade agreement. Thus, it becomes an Indian interest not to allow development of energy and transport corridor through Afghanistan unless assured access to India is granted through Pakistan without its bilateral engagement with Pakistan.

The population in Afghanistan is mainly concentrated along the Pak-Afghan and CAS-Afghan border.²⁹ Given the acceptability of Pakistani products and the proximity of the Pakistani market to the Afghan population, the potential of bilateral trade is tilted towards Pakistan.³⁰ For Pakistan, a stable and secure Afghanistan is imperative for its security and economic interest. Therefore, it becomes a necessity for both the Pakistan and Afghan Governments to have better bilateral broad-based relations with a view to addressing the common interests of security and economic development.

Afghanistan

The most important aspect to align, coordinate and synergize the regional and international efforts is to make Afghanistan a country with peace within and outside. This can only happen if the Afghans are on board and their interests are addressed. Afghan national interests thus take a central place in finding a common ground, building on common interests, mitigating the threats, and proactively engaging against spoilers. The desired end state for Afghanistan can be ***“a relatively united society governed through a largely acceptable decentralized system of governance, gradually moving towards becoming a peaceful and stable country, development of domestic institutions to achieve a considerable degree of regional and international neutrality, exploitation of its geostrategic location and natural resources for relative economic independence.”*** To achieve the desired end state, establishing an inclusive government through a process of negotiation is of utmost importance. The greatest threat to this objective is spoilers’ action based on conflicting interests of regional and extra regional players, and resultant frustration creep. In the mid to long-term the economic prosperity of Afghanistan can be achieved through connectivity and development of its natural resources; however, in the short term continued support is necessary.

Key Takeaways

- US presence in Afghanistan has maintained relative stability for most of the regional countries; however, withdrawal without achieving a political solution has the potential to create greater instability.
- Stability and economic development in the region are contingent upon a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.
- The region desires a negotiated and inclusive peace settlement in pursuit of a neutral and relatively stable Afghanistan.
- China has economic, connectivity and security interests in Afghanistan; however, exploitation of the vacuum through their military and diplomatic efforts is not envisaged in the near to mid-term period.
- Russian engagement in Afghanistan is built on their desire to project their power, ensure limited influence on Kabul and secure security interests.
- Turkey desires to expand its political and economic influence vis-à-vis its relative neutral status, which provides prospects for advancing peace negotiations.

²⁹ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Population-density-map-of-Afghanistan-best-viewed-in-color_fig1_221103172 (accessed Feb 12, 2021).

³⁰ Sumaira Jajja, “Pakistan’s exports to Afghanistan up by 15pc in 10MFY21,” Razak, May 11, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1623192/pakistans-exports-to-afghanistan-up-by-15pc-in-10mfy21-razak> (accessed May 20, 2021).

- CAS' security and economic interests demand that they remain neutral in the conflict and support an inclusive peace process.
- Iran desires to secure its economic and connectivity interests while retaining some degree of influence through Dari speaking ethnicities. However, instability in Afghanistan would be highly detrimental to Iranian interests.
- Indian efforts are focused on substantially reducing Pakistani influence on any future political dispensation in Kabul or derailing the process to keep Indian security and political investment intact.
- Instability in Afghanistan directly impacts Pakistan's security and economic prosperity; a secure and stable Afghanistan is imperative for development of the region.
- Peace and stability are of paramount importance to Pakistan as it has a direct bearing on Pakistan's internal security necessities and economic aspirations.
- Regionally, China has the diplomatic capacity to synergize efforts for a peaceful settlement of the conflict and has the economic wherewithal to develop trade and energy corridor through Afghanistan.

Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM

- Develop a regional consensus for peace and stability through negotiated settlement of the conflict.
- Support a diplomatic surge in achieving a consensus based, negotiated and inclusive peace agreement.
- Engage with regional militaries for the establishment of a regional cooperation forum for managing security concerns.