

# China's Interests in Afghanistan: Post U.S. Military Withdrawal

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*By Zara Qurban*

Since the withdrawal of the U.S. troops and its European allies after decades of war in April 2021, Afghanistan is entangled in the wickedest kind of security. Afghanistan's commandeering by the Taliban after the U.S. military withdrawal has presented the regional States with many new emerging challenges. An abrupt withdrawal of the U.S. military from Afghanistan has created a huge power vacuum and neighboring States are extending helping hands to avert the possible fall of Afghanistan.

Countries such as Pakistan, Russia, India, Iran and Turkey have their own grounds to intervene but now the global are on China including re-evaluating its persistent 'non-interference' policy. China was against the invasion of the U.S. military and also opposed the abrupt withdrawal stating that it will leave Afghanistan in mayhem. China's Foreign Ministry said "the recent abrupt U.S. announcement of complete withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan has led to a succession of explosive attacks throughout the country, worsening the security situation and threatening peace and stability as well as people's life and safety."

Many spectators are considering the exchange of dialogues between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the Taliban leaders an attempt by China to exert more influence in the region. But, China does not look at Afghanistan from the lens of prospects, the Chinese influence and involvement, especially after the U.S. military withdrawal, is all about the management of threats. Another observation entails that Chinese political and economic interest in Afghanistan revolve around the wariness of Afghanistan becoming a safe

haven for militant groups targeting China like the last time Taliban were in power.

Though Mullah Baradar and Wang Yi in Tianjin have been in contact for decades, the Taliban's ideological agenda does not fit well with China. Andrew Small, Associate Senior Policy Fellow, states, "China certainly has substantial commercial and economic interests in the wider region, but they are minimal in Afghanistan itself. Its major investments there, the Aynak copper mine and the Amu Darya energy projects, have been in stasis for many years. There have been numerous discussions about Afghanistan's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative, including connections to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, but Beijing's view has been that, in Afghanistan, stability has to precede serious new economic commitments." Other than copper, Afghanistan has untouched mines of minerals such as cobalt, iron, mercury and lithium which are estimated to the value of about \$1 trillion.

In order to maintain better political and economic relations with Afghanistan, China offered to rebuild the infrastructure "by funneling funds directly to the group through Pakistan." As a result to continuous exchange of dialogues and China's commitment of support in Afghanistan, the spokesman for the Taliban Political Office in Qatar established that they recognize China "as a friend of Afghanistan", he also stated that Taliban and Afghanistan will no longer provide refuge or safe haven to Muslim Uyghurs. On one occasion the Chinese foreign minister said that Taliban are expected "to play an important role in the progress of peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan."

China's policy towards Afghanistan is primarily based on the security implications resulting from the U.S. and Taliban peace agreement, which China believes in not going in the right direction. The disturbances, instability and radicalization will eventually seep through the borders into China. As per the researchers based in Afghanistan, "through military assistance, China helped Kabul build its military mountain brigade in the Wakhan Corridor near Afghanistan's northern Badakhshan province with the primary goal of preventing infiltration by the Islamic State into China." It is believed that Beijing will keep close bilateral ties with Afghanistan in order to tightly manage any spill over into China by engaging all its diplomatic energies because it fears that the success of Taliban might encourage militant groups to carry out terror activities. If the security situation becomes better in Afghanistan, China is likely to go forward with more investment plans and programs but it will be very cautious.

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## **Making Sense of the CPEC Controversy**

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## Making Sense of the CPEC Controversy

**Rafiullah Kakar**

The controversy around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) seems far from subsiding. In recent developments, political parties from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) and Balochistan have upped the ante and have accused the ruling party of ignoring the smaller provinces in the multi-billion dollar project. In an attempt to make sense of the concerns advanced by representatives from Balochistan and K-P, I am going to examine the position taken by the federal government in a series of articles.

The CPEC is a multi-route corridor that will be completed in multiple phases over a period of 15 years. As per the decision of the May 28, 2015, APC, the western route of the corridor passing through the relatively lesser-developed provinces of Balochistan and K-P is being built on a priority basis. To judge whether the federal government has actually prioritized the building of the western route or not, let's develop a simple test and check if its claims about having prioritized this route pass the test. According to the test, the western route shall be considered prioritized if it meets the following conditions:

- 1) The quality of infrastructure of the western route should be better or at least similar to that of the eastern route. For this to happen, the government must have allocated the required financial resources to the route.
- 2) Ideally, the western route should be constructed first so that it can become functional before the other two routes. If circumstances are not ideal, as is often the case, then it should become operational at least simultaneously with the other routes. Timing is central to economic planning and development. The question of 'which-route-to-take-first' is very important and is likely to play a key role in shaping the subsequent path of development.
- 3) At least half of the proposed industrial parks and economic zones and other supporting components of

the corridor, including energy projects, railway tracks, and gas pipelines should be located along the western route.

Now let's examine if the western route fulfills the criteria enumerated above.

The western route is a two-lane road whereas the eastern route is a high-speed six-lane modern motorway with controlled-access design. The pavement design of the eastern route is markedly superior to that of the western route. The latter can't withstand loaded trucks. The superiority of the eastern route is not surprising given the government's preferential funding for it. The allocation pattern of federal development funding clearly suggests that the eastern route is the government's priority. In the 2015-16 federal PSDP, the government has allocated only Rs20 billion to the western route while earmarking a handsome Rs110 billion to the eastern alignment. Out of the Rs20 billion, approximately Rs5 billion have been allocated for the Gwadar-Turbat-Hoshab (M8) and Hoshab-Panjgur-Besima (N85) sections, which constitute the common route shared by all three alignments. In strictly technical terms, therefore, the funds earmarked for the western route in the 2015-16 federal PSDP are approximately Rs15 billion, of which not even a penny comes from the approximately \$11 billion CPEC loans taken on for infrastructure development. As of December 31, 2015, only Rs1.6 billion of the Rs15 billion have been released.

Coming to the second pillar of the test, the two-lane road along the western alignment is likely to be completed by the end of 2018 whereas the six-lane motorway along the eastern alignment will be completed by the end of 2017. Lastly, the eastern route passes through the relatively developed parts of the country and is in geographical proximity of major urban centres, energy production sites and growth zones. Railway tracks and LNG pipelines will run parallel to it. As far as industrial parks are concerned, let's hope they will be equally distributed among the three routes.

Given the huge contrast in the infrastructural quality and spatial proximity of the two routes, the eastern route is destined to effectively become the primary route, the government rhetoric about having prioritised the western route notwithstanding. The two-lane western route, if completed by 2018, will remain an auxiliary route at best. The reality is that the government had decided to change the corridor route in late 2013 or early 2014. This is proven by the 2014-15 federal PSDP in which the government had earmarked Rs49 billion for the CPEC, all of which was to be spent on the eastern route. When confronted with mounting political pressure in 2015, the federal government allocated a nominal amount for the western route in the 2015-16 PSDP.

Now let us come to the government's claims that the revenue generated from the motorway on the eastern route will be used to upgrade the western route to become a four-lane and ultimately a six-lane motorway. Railway tracks will be laid from Gwadar to Peshawar passing through Quetta and DI Khan.

First, there are no credible guarantees that these commitments will be duly honored, especially given the long time horizon — 15 years — it involves. If history is any indication, complacency will creep in and the urgency and motivation, if any, to upgrade the western route will wane once the eastern route becomes functional. The federal government will keep fabricating excuses to delay the up gradation of the western route. Fiscal constraints and political crises of one or the other type will continue giving it plausible cover.

Protesting voices from smaller provinces will be coerced into silence by appeals to 'patriotism' and 'India's malicious designs over the project'.

Secondly, even if the credible commitment problem is somehow resolved, the up-gradation of the western route at a later stage is unlikely to alter the position of the eastern route as the primary route of the corridor. The western route will at best play second fiddle to the eastern one. Once the eastern route with its superior infrastructure and geographical proximity to the developed and prosperous urban centers takes the lead as a result of the initial preferential treatment it has received from the federal government, it is likely to stay ahead of the competing routes because of positive feedbacks and increasing returns to scale. Over time, development choices will be constrained within a progressively narrower range of possibilities that will tend to preserve the status quo. This is known as path-dependence, which among other things, partially explains the persistence of regional disparities. Nevertheless, the concept does not rule out the possibility of breaking out and establishing new paths, especially in the beginning of a process. The CPEC offered the government the formative moment to break out and create new paths of economic development by prioritising its under-developed regions. Unfortunately, the ruling elite have not taken advantage of this opportunity.

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## **China's Constructive Role in Asia**

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### **Sultan M. Hali**

CHINESE President Xi Jinping has made positive overtures for peace in the region as well as peace in the world. His meetings with US President Barrack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron as well as the other world leaders have been a one-point agenda: to shed rivalry and join forces to establish world peace. President Xi Jinping's proposal has been devoid of rhetoric and based on genuine concern for the uplift of the less developed countries, which have been caught in the crosshairs of superpower contentions.

Believing that charity begins from home, China has endeavored to settle its disputes with its neighbors amicably through dialogue. Taiwan, which is a breakaway province of China and is expected to rejoin mainland China sooner than later, has never faced physical antagonism or threats from China. Instead, China is maintaining trade, tourism, and economic ties. The recent meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou on the

sidelines of a state visit by President Xi to Singapore, was an epoch making event. China's reaching out to Taiwan speaks volumes for its policies of 'live and let live' and reunification of Taiwan and China.

In the near past, the unprovoked incursion of a US Naval warship in the territorial waters of China adjacent to the disputed Spratly Islands, did not raise tempers in Beijing, instead the US and Chinese navies held high-level talks and agreed to maintain dialogue and follow protocols to avoid clashes. US chief of naval operations Admiral John Richardson and his Chinese counterpart, Admiral Wu Shengli, during their meeting agreed on the need to stick to protocols established under the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea and confirmed that the scheduled port visits by US and Chinese ships and planned visits to China by senior US Navy officers will remain on track.

With the display of such maturity, South Asia, which unfortunately has become a hotbed of conflict and tension, necessitates sagacious counseling by peace loving China. Notwithstanding the strategic cooperative Sino-Pak partnership, one would expect China to take a neutral stand and urge India to accede to international and regional overtures for Indo-Pak peace talks. Both India and Pakistan are nuclear weapons equipped states and any armed conflict between them will spark the flashpoint which will be

disastrous for the entire region. The world has stood by and observed China's peaceful rise to development. India, which is also desirous of achieving the same level of development as China, has unfortunately adopted the path of confrontation with its neighbors. Such a jingoistic and belligerent attitude is not only contrary to principles of humanity but will also prove counterproductive towards India's aspirations for prosperity, besides stunting the growth of its neighbors.

India's industrial development and its energy requirements including the peaceful use of nuclear resources are understandable. US has favored India with a civil nuclear energy deal, while denying Pakistan the same. Were it not for China, to have extended its support to Pakistan and expand its civil nuclear co-operation under IAEA safeguards, Pakistan would have been suffering even worse energy shortage. China understands and appreciates that Pakistan is a proponent of peaceful use of nuclear technology and supports objectives of nuclear non-proliferation and safety and security of its nuclear assets. While China is investing heavily in economic development of its neighbors through its One Belt One Road (OBOR) project and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), it is simultaneously reaching out even to India to support it in its development projects despite Indian animosity towards China.

In this milieu, where China understands and appreciates the multiple security challenges in South Asia and envisions a common, co-operative, comprehensive and sustainable security framework for the region, it is hoped that China also takes cognizance of South Asia's two major challenges. These challenges are firstly in the form of India's unprecedented and unwarranted quest for weapons and secondly conflict resolution.

An inclusive, non-discriminatory and criteria based approach needs to be adopted to treat regional states like Pakistan and India. This, however, is easier said than done. While Pakistan envisions a peaceful neighborhood, India is reluctant to improve relations with Pakistan. It has made it a state policy to avoid engaging Pakistan in peace talks. Even the four point proposal for structural dialogues submitted by Pakistan has been rejected by India. Under the circumstances,

calling on the sagacity of Chinese leadership and in view of China's constructive role in South Asia and East Asia, it would not be out of place to solicit Chinese support for urging India for a dialogue for peace with Pakistan.

In the post 9/11 era India and the US have edged closer to each other. They enjoy a strategic partnership and despite India's sovereignty, pride and independence, India is open to suggestions and recommendations of its well wishers. As China and Pakistan enjoy a deep rooted strategic partnership, India and the US too have developed close links. To ensure world peace, avoid an accidental Indo-Pak nuclear conflict, both China and the US can play a positive role. The US can urge India to sit at the negotiations table with Pakistan and resolve their outstanding issues including the core issue of Kashmir. Pakistan will need little prodding and would engage diplomatically with India willingly.

It is understandable that India is averse to third party role in conflict resolution but friends and allies can support peace talks without intervening directly. Sometimes a bit of cajoling and a slight nudge can do wonders. If the US and China can sink their differences and instead of competing with each other, resolve to support peace initiatives, Pakistan and India are prime candidates for such an undertaking. It is strongly recommended that the major powers of today the US and China, which are also major economic giants, can make concerted efforts for ensuring political stability in the region by resuming composite dialogue and resolving disputes between Pakistan and India.

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