

Afghan Peace Process: Regional Complexities and the Role of China

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Abstract

In the wake of the 9/11 ‘war against terrorism’, Bush’s vision of ‘Pax Americana’ and ‘Axis of Evil’ played a crucial role in shaping the global interactions among states. It resulted in the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition forces, against transnational terrorism. However, almost two decades later, they neither could eradicate terrorism from the global map nor are anywhere close to achieving the Pax Americana. An analytical study in this paper shows that their exit from Afghanistan, even if it is not a complete exit, will not be an easy task without losing a strong geostrategic foothold in this sensitive region where Russia, China, and India are already looking for opportunities to develop their dominance for regional power aspirations. The theoretical model — comprising the theory of complex interdependence and the regional security complex theory — aptly explains the complexity of Afghanistan’s situation. With regards, this paper focuses on the different facets of conflict resolution in Afghanistan, focusing on Pakistan and China’s interests and other regional players. China has also emerged as one of the noteworthy players in this context since a peaceful Afghanistan has a long-term impact on the smooth progress of the Belt and Road Initiative. This complex interdependence of multiple players in the Afghanistan peace process has turned it as one of the most thin-skinned and almost unattainable goals. Nevertheless, with various geostrategic and economic interests at stake, we must recognize the efforts being made to bring the peace process to finality.

Keywords

Peace process, Afghanistan, China, complex interdependence, regional players, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Introduction

In the wake of 9/11, Bush’s vision of ‘Pax Americana’, and ‘Axis of Evil’ played a crucial role in shaping the global interactions among the states. Both the phenomena resulted in the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 led by the coalition forces — i.e.,

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North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO; see e.g., Hart, 2004). However, even two decades later, the 'international' efforts have failed to eradicate terrorism and materialize the 'Pax Americana'. 'Pax Americana' refers to the US definition of 'peace' denoting the operational liberal democratic government(s) in the conflict-ridden area(s) of the world (such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria). Here, the main focus remains on the human security and/or socio-economic development of the worn-torn countries to ensure sustainable global peace and security (Dower, 2017).

However, the situation has become more critical not only for US but also for Afghanistan and its neighboring countries. With regards, Afghanistan has remained a highly debated topic since 9/11. The US war on terror and the subsequent operations on Afghan soil have left the whole region in chaos (Betts, 2017), primarily because the efforts could not achieve the strategic objectives set at its onset after 9/11. Consequently, there is a growing realization towards a non-military solution to Afghanistan, mainly due to its increasing importance for the regional trade routes. For instance, the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and the regional energy trade excessively depend on Afghanistan's security situation. This interdependence among the different states of the region has encouraged them to take a keen interest in the (ongoing) Afghan peace process since their critical economic, political, and security stakes depend on Afghanistan's peace (Khattak, 2019).

It is crucial to acknowledge that Afghanistan presents many complexities because of its peculiar features regarding its geographic location. In addition to being in the heart of Asia, it is surrounded by some important regional actors with whom it shares historical, religious, economic, political, and security bonds (Clarke, 2016). This study aims at highlighting these complexities by raising the following questions: (i) How do the security and socio-economic complexities involve the geographically adjacent states of Afghanistan and the impact they (may) have on the unprecedented growth these states have experienced during the last five years, especially after the initiation of the BRI project?; and (ii) How has the increased connectivity tied China's economic interests in particular, and other states of the region in general, to the Afghan peace process more critically.

To answer these questions, this article analyzes the critical security situation during the last five years by looking at the two parallel developments; first, the Afghan peace talks and related security issues, and second, Afghanistan's growing economic importance for China's connectivity drive, the ultimate success of which depends on the security situation in Afghanistan.

Although several relevant reports and data are available in the academic and policy-making circles, this study attempts to take the earlier assessments a step further by focusing specifically on three important dimensions of the conflict. First, it focuses on the recent developments in peace negotiations (especially during the Trump administration) and their possible implications. Second, this study tries to integrate the region's security aspect with its economic vitality, bringing together the crucial interest of the regional powers. It is recognized that their interests in the Afghan peace and security are unavoidable owing to the important connectivity projects passing through Afghanistan, exclusively focusing on the Chinese role through BRI. Besides, other adjacent states (including Iran, Pakistan, Central Asian states, and Russia) also have some compelling interests in the region. Third, the whole scenario is discussed in the prism of a new theoretical model based on complex interdependence and regional security complex, which is elaborated in the subsequent section.

Complex Regional Interdependencies

The contemporary world politics and its imminent conflicts have multiple dimensions, often being a conjunction of security and economic aspects. One of the major factors contributing to the multiplying complexities of the security issues, and the conflicts in general, is increased interconnectedness. This research realizes that Afghanistan is a puzzle which cannot be defined and understood only through 'hard' security issues (Huasheng, 2016). To solve this conundrum, this article employs a theoretical model based on 'complex regional interdependencies' that provides a plausible theoretical explanation of the research problem under study. The model is built upon two theories: the complex interdependence and the regional security complex theories.

The basic assumptions of the theory of complex interdependence include the growing economic interdependency of states and abating importance of military use (Keohane & Nye, 2016). On the other hand, the regional security complex theory explains the complexity, which denotes that security threats are often posed by regional proximity. It assumes that security is overwhelmingly a regional issue, and threats do not travel long distances; instead, adjacent states are more prone to security issues (Buzan, 2003). Therefore, geographically adjoining states face common and interrelated security threats forming regional security complexes. The economic implications of the Afghan security situation and its geographic importance for China's connectivity drive and trade necessitate studying the Afghan issue through the lens of complex interdependence theory. Moreover, Afghanistan is in Asia's heart and is surrounded by important regional powers that enjoy historical, religious, and cultural affinity with Afghanistan. Moreover, since the security vulnerability of Afghanistan deeply affects the region in general, these states have also been subject to economic and security issues (Price, 2015); thus creating a regional security complex. Hence, Afghanistan and its adjoining region provide a suitable case for complex regional interdependencies where the security threats — emanating from the Afghan conflict — have deep-rooted (security-related and economic) implications for the neighboring states.

Afghanistan is diversely connected to the different states in the region. For instance, Iran and Pakistan have strong religious, cultural, and ethnic ties with Afghanistan. Similarly, it has historic and close political relations with the Central Asian states and Russia; this landlocked region also being (inter)dependent for trade routes, for which the precarious security of Afghanistan poses a regional challenge. Finally, the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in this part of the world, greatly depends on land routes, and therefore, the Afghan conflict poses an immense threat not only to the economic interests of China but also to its Muslim majority western regions located near the Afghan border. Thus, the region, having overlapping economic and security concerns, presents a complex interdependence and a regional security complex. In this context, there is an intense desire for peace — through negotiation — to safeguard the interdependent economic interests of the (regional) actors involved.

Finding Solution to the 'Afghan' Issue

Since the start of 2015, Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) is being carried out in Afghanistan led by the NATO forces. It comprises two complementary missions; first, the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) focused on training, advising, and assisting the Afghan government forces and second, the combat operations by the US

counterterrorism forces along with some partner forces (Gurney, 2018). However, violence has taken a new direction in recent years, as many casualties and injured personnel are Afghans — mostly civilians, police officers, and soldiers. The UN report on the Afghan war confirmed that more than 32,000 civilians were killed in the last decade, and these deaths reached a record high in 2018 (UNAMA, 2019). It is also observed that the number of Taliban fighters killed in this war through airstrikes, night raids, and ground fighting is much higher than that of the foreign nationals. A BBC report has stated that according to the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, till January 2019, “more than 45,000 members of the country’s security forces had been killed since he became the leader in late 2014. Over the same period, “the number of international casualties are less than 72” (Azami, 2019, para. 9).

Talks have also been underway, since 2014, regarding how to execute a peaceful exit for the US forces in Afghanistan; often referred to as another ‘Vietnam War’ for US (Nordland, 2019). Even if it is not a complete exit, leaving Afghanistan will not be an easy task for US as it cannot be accomplished without losing a strong geostrategic foothold in this sensitive region. Though all the three regional powers — China, India, and Russia — were content previously to let the US handle the complicated security situation in Afghanistan, they are now looking for opportunities to develop their dominance for regional power aspirations (Goodson, 2015). Keeping this under consideration, various American policymakers are not in favor of the announcement, made by the Trump administration, of leaving Afghanistan. It is a long and complicated process that is conditioned by many factors, especially the Taliban’s response to peace talks, Afghanistan’s financial needs, the security-related situation during the peace process (as the unprecedented number of airstrikes by the US forces and retaliation by the Taliban forces continue), and aspirations of the involved parties (Hudson & Dawsey, 2019). Even if the circumstances unveil in an ideal form, a completely peaceful exit for the US still seems like a far-fetched reality. The US policymakers claim that the main objective of the US invasion in Afghanistan was to prevent any attack on the US soil and this invasion has significantly reduced the terrorist attacks during the last two decades.

However, the situation is different *within* Afghanistan. Despite the US military official stance that the Afghan forces are resilient against the Taliban forces, Taliban either already occupy or are contesting to occupy more territory in the present time than at any point since 2001. With 2,400 military fatalities and an expenditure of \$ 133 billion exclusively for reconstruction (CRS Report, 2019), the Afghan war is the longest and third-most expensive war that America has ever fought, and there is no possibility so far of an easy exit from this war. This is evident from the US President Donald Trump’s statement who — during his meeting with the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan — said that he could win the Afghan war in a matter of a week, but he did not want to kill 10 million people (O’Connell, 2017).

Simultaneously, US is engaged in diplomatic measures to end the war which primarily include direct talks with the Taliban representatives. Seven rounds of such talks have been held since October 2018. The move to engage in talks is quite an overturn to the previous US foreign policy vis-à-vis insurgency. A draft framework was concluded, in January 2019, through which the US forces’ withdrawal from Afghanistan was aligned with Taliban prohibiting any militant attack on the Afghan soil. Despite this, the chief negotiator from the US side, Zalmay Khalilzad, claimed that nothing had been finalized until then (Global Conflict Tracker, 2019). The Afghan government’s reluctance to get involved in such a negotiation has raised a

concern among the Afghans that the process would lead to some complex political settlement that would further destabilize its political situation. It has already resulted in pushing the last presidential elections in Afghanistan from April 2019 to September 2019. In short, the whole situation is encompassed by immense uncertainty; as Zalmay Khalilzad stated, “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” (Ruttig, 2019, para. 13). However, the Trump administration was willing to bring the peace process to a meaningful stage before September 2020 but remained unsuccessful (Azami, 2019). Nevertheless, there is a diminutive possibility that the plan will materialize as per schedule.

Regional Impact

The Afghan peace process essentially has a more important and complex regional dimension which needs to be understood to grasp the whole scenario. Due to its central location in Asia, Afghanistan’s adverse security situation puts the economic and security interests of the adjacent states into jeopardy; since its geographic position contributes to forming a complex web of linkages between the regional security and economic interests. This section sheds light on the regional actors and the implications of the Afghan conflict for them.

The use of slogans, such as ‘either with us or against us’ in the fight against terrorism, indeed led several states to partake in the war. One such state is Pakistan which, to this day, is plagued by its ally status. The US’s continued demand to ‘do more’ has cost Pakistan many military and civilian lives and created an immense economic crisis. Following the US President Trump’s accusations over Pakistan pertaining to its anti-terror efforts, the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan (through his social media account) responded,

Record needs to be put straight on Mr.Trump’s tirade against Pakistan:

1. No Pakistani was involved in 9/11 but Pak[istan] decided to participate in [the] US War on Terror. 2. Pakistan suffered 75,000 casualties in this war & over \$123 bn was lost to the economy. [The] US ‘aid’ was a minuscule \$20 bn. (Khan, 2018).

It was not only an economic and human cost, but it also resulted in a long-lasting social and international prestige dilemma for Pakistan. The country’s international image was torn to the worst-possible level, and it will take years to heal and regain some of its lost reputation.

Meanwhile, when Pakistan was internally battling with its own ‘Axis of Evil’ (i.e., terrorism and economic crisis), India was enjoying economic benefits that come from being a US unusual ally for nuclear and military cooperation — as it serves the US to counterbalance the Chinese dominance in the region. However, to this day, Pakistan has continued to acquire a central role in establishing peace in Afghanistan as has also been acknowledged by many US policymakers and diplomats. Nevertheless, a segment of the US policymakers tends to deny Pakistan’s endless efforts in the war against terrorism and portrays the country negatively, especially since President Trump came to power in 2018 (Nadeem, 2018). The US inclination towards India has a major role to play in this matter and, hence, is a source of the regional disturbance. One of the US primary reasons for supporting India and belittling Pakistan is to counter the Chinese positive and flourishing economic and political relationship with the Afghan government and Taliban. The Indo-Afghanistan

relations are supported and assisted by US; thus denying Pakistan of its strategic importance. Pakistan is the country that shares over 1,600 miles of border with Afghanistan and has also given its land to millions of Afghan refugees who have been enjoying a peaceful environment and socio-economic benefits on its territory within Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan is a 'safe-haven' for Afghan refugees and not for terrorists and their allies as claimed by India and US.

Pakistan is indeed a valuable partner for US, and this serves as the reason why the international community actively seeks the assistance of Pakistan for peace talks with the Taliban. Khalilzad has openly acknowledged Pakistan's positive role in the Afghan peace process, such as in the Doha Conference of July 2019 (Aljazeera, 2019). The US Congressional Research Service has itself affirmed a two-pronged view regarding Pakistan's significance. As per its report, the State Department stated to Congress in April 2019, "While Pakistan has taken some limited, reversible actions in support of the [US] South Asia strategy [...] we have not seen it take the sustained, irreversible actions that would warrant lifting the [security aid] suspension" (Thomas, 2019, p. 10). A biannual Department of Defense report on Afghanistan (released in July 2019) further asserted, "Pakistan is actively supporting Afghan reconciliation" (Ibid). According to the journalist Rupert Stone (2019), Pakistan might have been on top in the Afghan war due to its long-lasting stance that war in Afghanistan could only be resolved through peaceful negotiation and the recent developments show that its stance has been vindicated. Pakistan's support for the intra-Afghan dialogue and Abdullah Abdullah's visit — head of the High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) — to Pakistan in September 2020 are also seen as efforts to alleviate mistrust and differences between the two states. The visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, in November 2020, to Afghanistan is also indicative of Pakistan's deep desire to find a peaceful solution to the Afghan issue. The interaction at the highest level shows the commitment Pakistan has with the Afghan peace and the intent to safeguard Pakistan's national and crucial regional geo-economic interests.

Being the most important part of China's global connectivity plan — through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in BRI, Pakistan needs to have peace in its neighboring countries. With its efforts in the Afghan peace process, Pakistan is trying its utmost to realize peace despite facing many hurdles from the Indian side. It is not only Pakistan but also China that has its interests in peaceful Afghanistan, as China has repeatedly expressed the desire to extend CPEC to Afghanistan by connecting Jalalabad (in Afghanistan) to Peshawar (in Pakistan) through a road (Gul, 2018). Afghanistan was initially not a part of BRI, but the gradual increase in the Sino-Afghan economic cooperation and China's active role in the Afghan peace process exhibits the change in Chinese policy. China's geo-economics is making a great leap forward to adjust to the changing interaction patterns among states where increased dependence and coexistence is the basic rule to survive, and 'isolationism' is an outdated concept. As the biggest foreign investor in Afghanistan, China is quite concerned about every development in the region (Bokhari, 2019). There is no denying that China has a direct stake in the peace of Afghanistan. It will contribute to the peaceful implementation of BRI in the region which has restructured the global economic system with new transport and energy corridors financed by new financial institutions led by China itself.

The quest of China for vast energy sources is another of its rationales for a peaceful Afghanistan. With its expanding economy, China is also interested in

Afghanistan because it provides access to the Central Asian states (CAS) — the world's richest energy sources (Umarov, 2017). China is also aware that any disturbance, whether political or security-related, will have a spillover effect on East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) that it has been trying to curtail in the Xinjiang Muslim majority area. China has already made joint efforts with the Afghan forces to curtail terrorist activity on its mainland, including joint patrols and building a military base in the Badakhshan province (Chan, 2018). Another effort of China to curb terrorism was launching a Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism (QCCM) with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. So, for political, economic and social reasons, and to curtail American hegemony, China tends to be actively involved in peaceful settlements between the American government and the Taliban. Historically, except the pro-USSR regime (1979-1989), China has maintained cordial relations with all Afghan governments. According to Malek Setiz (2014), China had unofficial contacts even with the Taliban regimes. This makes China the only country, other than Pakistan, to be in contact with the Taliban regime (Seerat, 2015).

With the high dependence of Afghanistan on foreign aid for its administrative and socio-economic stability, it is evident that the vacuum created by even the partial exit of the US forces and aid will immediately be filled by other (regional) powers that are looking forward to having a strong foothold in this geostrategically crucial region. Afghanistan's perspective on Chinese involvement is quite positive, and there are instances where it has been expressed that China can play a crucial role in the peaceful settlement of the Afghan issue through the platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO; Yongbiao, 2018). This clearly shows that the states in closer proximity are more prone to security threats emanating from the Afghan issue, as is also maintained by the regional security complex theory, which talks about the adjacent states coming under security threats. Secondly, it also indicates that the regional interdependence is closely tied to peace in Afghanistan.

According to a report published by an Afghan think tank, Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), Afghanistan will fit well in BRI as it has a serious infrastructure deficit. However, its geographical proximity makes it the shortest route between Central-South Asia and China-Middle East (Safi & Alizada, 2019). According to Mariam Safi (who is one of the contributors of the report and director of DROPS), "Looking at the BRI map, it seemed that it was bypassing Afghanistan, So we wanted to know if there is any thinking in the Afghan government and stakeholders here on the BRI when it comes to Afghanistan's potential linkage" (Stone, 2019, para. 5). The report asserts that CPEC — being the flagship project in BRI — is the most feasible option to integrate Afghanistan into China's larger regional connectivity plan (Safi & Alizada, 2019).

Although various road and rail connectivity links under BRI are still incomplete, there is hope in peaceful Afghanistan, and China wants to capitalize on it. The Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan, Liu Jinsong (the former head of the Silk Road Fund), has also declared Afghanistan a 'vital partner' in BRI. Therefore, the Chinese policymakers consider the peace process the most important development of the recent time As ambassador Jinsong has suggested, "[by] making the best use of its advantages in geography, resources, demography, connections and international attention and bypassing any disadvantages, Afghanistan may play an active and important role, and make considerable gains, in the development of the BRI" (Zia,

2019, para. 7). Nevertheless, there is a need for a conducive environment to conceive the envisioned role of Afghanistan in the mention project development.

The Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) even stated the appointment of Liu Jinsong as a strong indicator of the Chinese interest in integrating Afghanistan in the peace process (Safi & Alizada, 2019). Terming China and Afghanistan as 'odd couple', Rupert Stone (2019) has argued that one is a communist state already wary of extremism and terrorism and the other member is a religious hardliner. However, the two have eventually developed a closer relationship driven by a mixture of security concerns and economic factors. Peter Frankopan, a British Historian and author of 'The Silk Road: A New History,' has also acknowledged China's more significant and high-profile role in Afghanistan (Frankopan, 2015).

In addition to contributing to CPEC, Afghanistan will also provide China smooth and trouble-free trade and connectivity with Europe through the Lapis-Lazuli corridor. This was agreed upon on the sidelines of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) in 2018. Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey will serve as different nodes of this corridor (Siddiqui, 2019). Afghanistan-China air corridor is another major development from November 2018. It has opened the possibility for other air corridors with countries like Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and India (Kelemen, 2020). Jonathan Fulton has described China's strategy for Afghanistan as 'fence-sitting'. China has tried to maintain cordial relations with opposing sides similar to its policy in the middle east where it has maintained cordial relations with both Israel and Palestine, and Saudi Arabia and Iran (Fulton, 2019). Afghanistan is one of the primary beneficiaries of China's opening-up policy, and these benefits can grow further in the case of stability and peace in this part of the world.

Other regional actors, such as Russia, Central Asian states, and Iran, also have their interests in Afghanistan. Their proximity to the Afghan territory makes it vital for them to cooperate in the Afghan peace process. As far as Russia is concerned, it has a history of relations and engagement in Afghanistan, and the memories of the cold war have not faded yet. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation has not initiated a clear and comprehensive policy on Afghanistan (Gurganus, 2018); instead, after 9/11, it came up in support of the US policy in Afghanistan to combat terrorism and extremism, and against human and drug trafficking. However, the growing US presence in the region poses threats to Russian interests in Afghanistan and its neighboring Central Asian region historically considered the Russian sphere of influence.

Since the announcement of the US forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, a new opportunity has evolved for Russia to strengthen its role in its immediate neighborhood (Trenin, 2014). Russia has been trying, since 2016, to engage with the Taliban and other states in the region to find a peaceful solution to the Afghan issue. Nevertheless, US did not participate in the process, and Afghanistan also refused because the Taliban are part of the discussion. Apart from this, the major concerns of Moscow in this peace process have two critical dimensions. The first relates to its own regional position which has suffered a significant setback since 1991. With other powers emerging in the region, Russia does not want its significance to fade away. The second and more important concern pertains to the spread of terrorist and extremist elements (Kaura, 2018); with the expansion of ISIS emerging as a real security threat for Moscow. Through Afghanistan, Russia fears that ISIS can easily establish links with the regional like-minded terrorist organizations working in

Central Asia such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-KP; Sarkar, 2019). Moreover, such circumstances would also facilitate drug trafficking northwards. Therefore, it is essential for Russia to actively participate in the peace negotiations and strengthen its position in the region.

Although there is no consensus over the ‘Moscow Process’ between Washington and Moscow, the former has hosted three rounds of talks with the Taliban and the Afghan officials and prominent opposition leaders of Afghanistan in 2019 (Gul, 2017). US, in addition to avoiding participation in the Russian efforts, also initiated the Kabul process. These simultaneous peace negotiations make the negotiation process more complex. Even then, there is hope to bring the two cold war rivals to some understanding regarding the Afghan conflict. Since their interests in combating terrorism and narcotics in Afghanistan align with each other, the United States must be cognizant that it would be futile to imagine the success of the Afghan peace process without addressing the states’ interests in the region. There is no escaping the fact that international politics and conflicts have greater regional repercussions, and long-lasting peace cannot be achieved in the war-torn state while undermining their immediate implications for the region.

The Central Asian States (CAS) are also interested in the Afghan conflict and the peace process on similar grounds. Given the spread of ISIS in Afghanistan, the Central Asian states also feel a security threat that cannot be evaded unless peace is achieved in Afghanistan. Besides, peaceful Afghanistan will open a new regional economic development scenario for these resource-rich and strategically located states. As a manifestation of their interest in the Afghan issue, a conference was held in Tashkent, in December 2017, that brought together twenty states to discuss the issue (DW News, 2018). However, the Central Asian states are not the only resource-rich countries neighboring Afghanistan; Iran is another such country. It shares a long border with Afghanistan in its south. Being one of the most important regional actors and oil-rich state of the Persian Gulf region, Iran presents a paradox — one of the most critical security challenges and an essential avenue for opening doors for regional influence. The Iranian interests in the Afghan peace process are related to the former’s opposition to the US presence on the Afghan territory (Byman, 2018).

In addition to the security-related issues, Iran’s vital interests pertaining to the energy trade are also linked with Afghanistan; considering its gas trade agreement with Turkmenistan and the Iran-India gas pipeline (Bakrania, 2017). The situation becomes more complicated because of the Taliban presence and their growing role in Afghanistan. With the sectarian differences between the Afghan Sunni and Iranian Shia community, the Hazara Shia community’s protection is very significant for Iran. Furthermore, Iran aims to create permanent influence in Afghanistan, similar to what it has done through Hezbollah in Lebanon (Smyth, 2014). Iran is also concerned with the post-US setup in Afghanistan. Regardless, Iran does not oppose the peace process in any form; rather, it is inclined towards a (favorable) arrangement in Afghanistan that ensures its interests.

Concluding Remarks

A significant point emerging from the discussion above is that all states in the region seek to safeguard their vital national interests in Afghanistan. These interests are sometimes overlapping and conflicting at some other instances, especially when considering competing forces such as US and Iran, and Pakistan and India. The

regional puzzle of the Afghan conflict presents deeper complexities. However, it is hard to establish peace in the region without addressing concerns of all stakeholders. In all these circumstances, one should not expect US to exit from Afghanistan completely. Some US involvement in Afghanistan favors the world peace and stability as Afghanistan has catered to the US war aspirations and kept its immense defense budget engaged for over 18 years. In fact, Afghanistan can be a platform where US and China can engage in positive cooperative activities. The US wishes for a peaceful exit from Afghanistan can be well catered to by Chinese involvement. China enjoys close relations with the Taliban and does not hold the burden of negative historical legacy, and therefore, its role as facilitator is more acceptable. However, at the same time, the US is, and will remain, the primary player in Afghanistan. Hence, both the countries (US and China) need to coordinate their efforts. Both powers have to make sure that peace negotiations are 'Afghan-led' and 'Afghan-owned' as claimed in the last round of talks in Doha. Only this will ensure long-lasting peace for the people of Afghanistan.

China has the leverage of offering an economic activity to Afghanistan through BRI and can bring together more regional players like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran under one umbrella. As President Xi had declared BRI a win-win cooperation mechanism for regional connectivity, China can make Afghanistan realize the importance of positive cooperation with Pakistan for a shorter and more feasible trade route than the longer one through the Chabahar Port of Iran on the Indian initiative. However, China should not get militarily involved in Afghanistan to avoid getting caught in a security predicament. Instead, China should focus on peace dialogue measures such as the Pakistan-China-Afghanistan trilateral dialogue or 6+1 dialogue on Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can also be another platform to pursue peace in Afghanistan. Giving Afghanistan an increased representation in various regional forums will ensure its safe and economically progressive future.

Given the history of this region, it can be concluded that all the positive expectations for the regional development are heavily dependent on the peace process as one wrong move can ultimately sabotage the whole process. With several actors involved and their own regional and international strategic goals, there is a considerable possibility of putting the Afghan peace process at stake. However, a cautious and carefully crafted way towards peace can give birth to immense opportunities for the economic progress of Afghanistan, and the region in general, which has been plagued by the Afghan dilemma for long. Thus, Afghanistan can enjoy its position as a crossroad or land bridge only if great powers keep in mind the larger benefits of having peace.

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