

Role of China and Iran in Afghanistan Peace Process

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Abstract

China and Iran are the two important neighboring states of Afghanistan. Afghanistan shares a long border of 936 km with Iran but a small border of 76 km with China. China is the most rapidly growing economic and military power of the World with a large number of people. China has great economic, security, and political interests in Afghanistan. China is keen to get natural resources from Afghanistan. China is using regional organizations like SCO and SAARC to get closer to Afghanistan. China is trying to bring peace to Afghanistan so that Afghanistan could get economic benefits from Chinese expertise. Iran is another important state that has stakes in Afghanistan has a historical connection with Kabul. The ouster of the Taliban from power provided a chance to Iran to enhance its historical and cultural ties with Afghanistan. American presence on Iran's eastern border is a great worry for the religious-minded state of Iran. Iran has cordial relations with the Afghan government in Kabul and working on various projects in Afghanistan. Iran also has ties with hard-core militants of the Taliban. This paper highlights the relations of China and Iran with Afghanistan. This paper also shows the role of China and Iran in the Afghan peace process.

Keywords: China, Iran, Peace, Afghanistan, Taliban

Introduction

The world powers have always shown great interest in Afghanistan due to its strategic position. The Soviet Union and America are examples of foreign invasion in Afghanistan. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is beneficial for the region and most importantly for the neighboring states. China and Iran share a border with Afghanistan and instability in Kabul affects both states directly. China and Iran consider the presence of American troops in Afghanistan a security concern for Beijing and Tehran. China is enhancing its influence in the world arena and America is trying to eradicate China's influence. China and Iran have a long history of rivalry with America and considers America a real threat to its national security (Sun, 2020). Iran has a long history of cultural, political, and economic relations with Afghanistan. Iran shares a long border of 936 km with Afghanistan and Afghanistan's official language Dari has roots in the Persian language. Hazaras are living in Afghanistan belong to Shia Islam which is largely practice in Iran. The actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan are dreadful for the theocratic state of Iran (Kaura, 2020). Iran wants to protect the rights of non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Iran wants to connect Central Asian Republics with Europe via Iran. Iran and China want peaceful Afghanistan because militancy in Afghanistan disturbs the internal security situation of both states. Iran is trying to establish Chabhar port which is 100 miles away from Gawadar. China and Iran are going to engage in big economic deals. China is going to invest 400 billion dollars in Iran in various projects (Baz, 2020). It will boost economic activities in the region and Afghanistan will get benefit from all these economic activities. The peace deal between the Taliban and America is a ray of hope for the people of Afghanistan and neighboring states. Peace in Afghanistan is helpful from an economic and security point of view in South and Central Asia. This research highlights the role of Iran and China in the Afghan peace process.

Literature Review

In China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan Raja Muhammad Khan explains the importance of Afghanistan for China. The writer divides Chinese interest into three categories. The writer explains that China sees Afghanistan from the lens of economic and security. China and

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Afghanistan's cooperation in the fields of security and economy is necessary to bring stability in the region. The writer also highlights China's concerns over militancy in Afghanistan (Khan, 2015).

Sumeera Imran in *Sino-US Involvement in Afghanistan Implications for South Asian Stability and Security* explains the involvement of China and America in Afghanistan after the incident of 9/11. The writer expressed in his publication the competition of China and America in Afghanistan. Beijing and Washington are working to surpass in every field to become to sole power of the existing world. China is very keen to work in Afghanistan in economic and security fields to bring stability to Kabul. The writer expressed in detail the ongoing sense of competition between China and America in Afghanistan (Imran, 2019).

In *Iran's Policy towards Afghanistan: In the Shadow of the United States* by Shahram Akberzadeh, the writer explains Iran's policy towards Afghanistan. The ouster of the Taliban regime from power provided a chance for Iran to establish its ties with the new government in Afghanistan. The writer discusses the fears of the Iranian regime regarding the American presence in Afghanistan. Iran considers American troops in Afghanistan as a threat to her national security. The author explains American withdrawal from Afghanistan as a vital chance for the theocratic state to enhance its influence in Afghanistan (Akberzadeh, 2014).

In *The Taliban: A New Proxy for Iran in Afghanistan?* By Shahram Akberzadeh and Niamatullah Ibrahim, the authors have discussed the double standard of the theocratic regime of Iran. The writers focused on the contradictory policy of Iran towards Afghanistan. Iran has got benefits from the ouster of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan by the American troops. Iran has established its political, economic, and cultural ties with the new central government of Afghanistan. The writers also focused on the ties between the hard-core Taliban militants and Iran. The authors also discussed the emerging threat of the ISKP in Afghanistan and its impact on Iran. Iran considers the Taliban a strong force against ISKP in Afghanistan (Akberzadeh & Ibrahim, 2020).

Research Questions

1. Why is China taking an interest to bring peace to Afghanistan?
2. What is the role of Iran in the Afghan peace process?

Role of China

China and Afghanistan are neighboring states sharing a small border of 76 kilometers. There is no big city linked with border areas from both sides and border areas consist of mountains. The gently populated Wakhan Strip links Afghanistan with China. The geostrategic position of Afghanistan compels China to keep an eye on Afghanistan's affairs. Afghanistan's political and military history of the last 40 years and the interventions from two great powers Soviet and America do not allow China to ignore Afghanistan. There are two main objectives China is following to get its interest in Afghanistan. First thing China's non-interference policy prevents her from its direct involvement in Afghanistan. Although China supported Operation Enduring Freedom but did not join NATO forces in Afghanistan to fight against militants. The second thing is the fear of China that China's intervention in Afghanistan will create disturbance in Xinjiang province. China is worried about the Islamic movements in Turkmenistan. China fears that Uyghur Muslims who are oppressed by the locals can be provoked by the American's to create disturbance inside China (Rank, 2018). In the larger picture, both states China and America are keen to eradicate terrorism, enhance cooperation, and build Afghan institutions. China and America both want peace and stability in Afghanistan but both have different views on security. China wants to prevent the spillover effect of terrorism in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. It shows China's approach toward Afghan security. America thinks the establishment of a strong Afghan central government provides cement to security in Afghanistan. Since the deal of the US and Taliban has been signed America thinks withdrawal of American troops must be on a priority basis. America and China want to minimize each other's influence in Afghanistan and the region. China wants Afghan security forces must be trained and handle the security of the country and international factors must support in this regard. China's main focus is to handle terrorism, radicalism, and external elements involvement in Xinjiang. China always prevented itself from interfering in the internal politics of neighboring states. China has learned from the fate of the US and Soviets in Afghanistan and stopped itself from interfering in internal matters of other states especially Afghanistan. China is keen to eradicate terrorism, promote economic activities, and to support institutional building in Afghanistan. China's enlargement plan is seen in setting up its military base in Afghanistan (Toktomushev, 2018).

China's government rejected this claim that China's military base is a plan for Chinese imperialism. China said its military involvement is only for the enhancement of Afghan forces' capability and to provide the material and training. China is helping to build a Mountain Brigade to destroy camps of Eastern Turkmenistan Islamic Movement in the eastern border of Afghanistan. In reality, China accepts the establishment of a brigade for its security importance. China has made rapid progress on the economic front. It looks China will excel economically from America by 2032 (Huasheng, 2016). China did not set up a military base outside China except Djibouti. It shows China wants to play its role in world security affairs. China is not taking part in international peacekeeping openly, China does not want to do any work under the US umbrella. China is working on the economic front BRI and CPEC are examples of China's efforts to enhance its influence on the world. For this purpose, China promised Afghanistan strong incentives and development in the country. China is also showing interest to support Afghanistan politically. China-Afghan security cooperation shows China's vital role in Afghanistan. China has provided a handsome amount for rebuilding and reconstruction of the Afghan province Badakhshan (Chansoria, 2020).

Afghanistan and China are cooperating in different fields to provide benefits to each other. Kabul and Beijing are building their relations in economic terms, China is also providing relief in loans to Afghanistan. China is investing a huge amount to get minerals from Afghanistan (Stanzel, 2016).

China has signed different agreements with Afghanistan in 2006. In 2014 China provided a handsome amount worth 327 million dollars to Afghanistan. It was a big amount that China offered to Afghanistan. China also provided debt relief of 19.5 million dollars to Afghanistan (Spegele & Hodge, 2014).

China has started different projects to provide benefits to the local people. China is also working to train Afghan professionals in different fields. China has granted 1.5 billion RMB aid to Afghanistan. Beijing has provided training to the Afghan people from different fields (Xiaoqiang, 2014).

China is taking great interest to explore natural resources in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has the 2nd largest undiscovered copper reserves in the world (Downs, 2013). On the other side, Afghanistan is getting a huge amount of money from China in terms of loans and aid. China and Afghanistan are very keen to enhance their trade ties, both countries have 278 tariff-free items. China has shown great interest in road building, farming, and other projects related to the energy sector. China is also working on the power sector in Afghanistan (Petersen, 2013).

China's largest investment is seen in mining projects in the Aynak area. It is the biggest investment from China in Afghanistan except for oil. Its worth is 3.5 billion dollars (Khalilzad, 2014). Lithium is another source of Chinese interest in Afghanistan. China is facing security problems in Afghanistan. Although Chinese policies related to workers are harmful to the locals. China is spending money on different sectors in Afghanistan. China has developed railway links with the Afghan rail connected port Hairatan (Najafizada, 2016).

This project will boost the trade ties between both countries. Although Afghanistan has a low export rate which is a very sad thing for the country's economy. China is only looking towards getting resources and to eliminate terrorist havens in the eastern parts of Afghanistan. China has also tried to engage in the internal politics of Afghanistan. America appreciated China's role towards peace in Afghanistan back in 2014. America openly appreciated China's role in Quadrilateral Dialogue which was conducted to bring peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan, America, China, and Afghanistan were part of those talks (Curtis, 2016). China had no harsh history of relations with Afghanistan. China has a strategic advantage through its strong ties with Pakistan. In the year 2018 forum of SCO was used to put great stress on member states to play their parts in Afghan peace talks (Voltaire Network, 2018). Due to the strategic importance of Kabul and trilateral talks including Beijing, Islamabad and Kabul increase Islamabad and Beijing's role in Kabul. China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have been met continuously for the last few years. These meetings were held in Beijing, Islamabad, and Kabul (Xinhua, 2017).

Beijing has played a significant role to bring peace to neighboring state Afghanistan. China is playing the same role as Moscow and Washington are playing under the United Nations framework. China has participated in several world meeting on Afghanistan. Two things are considering hurdles in the way of Chinese efforts to bring peace in Afghanistan. First thing China has no vast experience

to resolve disputes on the international level. The second thing is the Chinese tilt towards Pakistan. It is considering a hurdle in the way of Chinese efforts to play its role to bring peace in Afghanistan. The alarming thing is for America that after US withdrawal China will control the region. China's interest in Kabul will prevail after American forces withdraw from Afghanistan. It is difficult for America to accept China's hegemony in the region but America also wants to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan and to end this long war.

Role of Iran

Afghanistan shares its 936 kilometers of western borders with Iran. Provinces of Farah, Herat, and Nimruz are linked with Iran. Afghan-Iran border crosses through rivers and deserts. Before 1979 Iran had a pro-American government headed by King Raza Shah Pehlevi. The primary concern of King's government was to stop communism in the region. But Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and the establishment of the Communist government in the country endangered the core objectives of Iran in the region. After the revolution in Iran, the government of Ayatollah Khomeini also considered Soviet Invasion as a threat to the stability of Iran. But due to the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), Iran could not help the Afghan Mujahedeen. America, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan supported Mujahedeen to defeat Soviet Union (Emadi, 1995).

Later with the help of Pakistan Taliban took control over Kabul and most of the parts of Afghanistan. Taliban established their government in Afghanistan in 1996. Iran considered the government of the Taliban as a threat to the stability of Iran and its influence in the South and Central Asian region. Iran had wanted to enhance its influence on the energy-rich region of Central Asia. But after the arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan it was difficult for Iran to reach out to the Central Asian States. Although Iran shares its borders with Turkmenistan. Iran also shares cultural and ethnic ties with the other Central Asian States. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have a large number of people who can speak and understand Farsi. But in Afghanistan, the control of the Taliban with the help of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was the real worry for Iran. The Eastern province of Iran has a large community of Sunni Muslims. Sunni Muslims in the eastern province of Iran named Baluchistan were opposing Shia theocracy. Taliban also supported those insurgents in Iran (Boone & Dehghan, 2016).

Despite deep differences, the Iranian regime started to support the Taliban against America in Afghanistan. Iran played both sides of the wicket, she also supported the Afghan government to stop America to hit Iran's nuclear sites. Taliban got benefits from the American-Iran rivalry. Iran presently sees its interest in Afghanistan through the spectrum of American-Iran rivalry. Iran is supporting both militants and the Afghan government at the same time. Although Iran does not want a complete victory of the Taliban. But Iran wants to minimize American's influence in South Asia and Afghanistan. In the beginning, both America and the Taliban supported each other to topple the Taliban regime and to set up a new government in Afghanistan. Both Iran and America supported the foot soldiers of the Northern Alliance to defeat the Taliban (Slavin, 2005).

Iran and America both wanted a centralized government in Afghanistan that would stop the revival of the Taliban in the country. Iran had closed ties with Northern Alliance leaders. Northern Alliance did not want to share power with Hamid Karzai in the government. Iran used her influence on Northern leaders to sit with Karzai in the government (Worden, 2018). The end of the Taliban regime provided Iran an opportunity to build its relations with her neighbor and enhance her influence in Afghanistan. The Taliban had been strongly against the Shia community in Afghanistan during its reign. In the year 1998 in the city of Mazer-e Sharif, 8 diplomats were killed. Iran deployed its forces on the Iran-Afghan border. It was a tense situation but Iran did not try to go for a war against the Taliban. Iran increased its support to the Northern Alliance to harm the Taliban. But the end of the Taliban regime had been a positive thing from the perspective of Iran-Afghan relations. But still today Iran has a demented policy towards Afghanistan. Iran is hosting Taliban leaders and militants of Hizb e Islami but on the other hand, Iran is also providing financial aid to the Afghan government. It's a difficult thing to understand Iran's policy towards Afghanistan. America toppled the Taliban regime in 2001. As a result, American troops have been stationed right in Central Asia next to the Iran border. This presence of the military in the region disturbs the security dynamics of Iran (Akberzadeh, 2014).

Iran's eastern areas have the same modern history as the border areas of Afghanistan in the west. Both states have some common things like traditions, religion, and language. But Sectarian differences create troubles between both sides. Afghanistan has a Sunni majority while Iran has Shia Muslims in large numbers. Afghanistan is the only country in the region that shares Islamo-Persian

identity with Iran. Iran only sees Afghanistan as a state intervened by Super Powers and its serious effects on Iran. Soviets invaded Afghanistan and approximately 1.5 million refugees fled towards Iran. While the American invasion put up thousands of soldiers in front of Iran (Kugelman, 2018).

After the removal of the Taliban government, it was a vital chance for Iran to get into Afghanistan on the premise of the same culture and history. Iran also tried its best to support Afghanistan's reconstruction phase. In 2002 Iran announced to help Afghanistan's reconstruction phase with 570 million dollars. This was a positive sign of the relation between Afghanistan and Iran. President Karzai thanked Iran for her assistance to bring peace to Afghanistan (French, 2002).

Economic ties between Iran and Afghanistan has become stronger. In the year 2006, Iran tried to enhance its economic relations with Iran and announced 100 million dollars for the reconstruction phase of Afghanistan. Different companies in Iran are also working in Afghanistan on different projects. Iran's main focus on constructing roads to connect both countries. Afghanistan has not connected directly with the sea route. Iran and India want to decrease Afghanistan's dependency on Pakistan. For this purpose, Iran is going to work on road projects to connect Afghanistan with Chabhar port (Farooq, 2019).

The government of Iran has supported directly the development of Herat city. Iran has planned a rail track from Herat to Mashhad. This rail track will support the economy of Afghanistan. Herat is considered the most developed and well-managed city of Afghanistan due to the cooperation of Iran. Many districts to Herat province back in 2011 were transferred to the Afghan forces. It shows Iran's role to stabilize Herat province (Zarif & Majidiyar, 2009).

Iran's efforts towards the strong economy of Afghanistan are seen in western parts of Afghanistan. Iran is providing non-stop electricity to the residents of Herat. Even though Kabul has a shortage of electricity but Herat has enough electricity to use. Iran's different companies are investing in Afghanistan. Iran's largest automobile company announced to invest about 20 million dollars in Herat. This project will boost the economy of the country. These steps had shown Iran's interest in Afghanistan. Iran also showed great interest to enhance trade ties between both countries. To enhance trade relations Iran set up the Chamber of Commerce in 2009 (Christensen, 2011).

Iran is also helping Afghanistan in the energy sector. Iran itself an energy-rich country in the region. Iran gives almost fifty percent of Afghanistan's oil utilization. Iran-Afghan trade almost half of Afghanistan's economy (Hersh, 2012). Although this move is one way only. Iran sends only its products to the Afghan market. International sanctions not only affected Iran but also Afghanistan. Iran's currency is highly under pressure due to the sanctions. Iran's minister for trade said that a large number of Afghans are working in Iran and due to these sanctions they are going to lose their jobs. It reflects the pressure on Iran's economy as well as Afghanistan's economy (Bezhan, 2018).

After the Taliban regime, Iran has set up good relations with the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai and later Ashraf Ghani. Karzai was the first Afghan President with a Pashtun background. Iran accepted him as President and showed interest to work with him. Iranian foreign minister said we are ready to work with a positive approach with our brotherly country Afghanistan. He said Iran will continue to support her neighbor and brotherly Muslim country Afghanistan (Cole, 2010).

Iran has supported Afghanistan in the economic sector and Iran also wants to enhance people to people contact. For this purpose, Iran has invested in the education sector. Iran has set up a university in Kabul and also announced to establish campuses of well-known Iranian universities in Afghanistan (Sheikholeslami, 2010).

There is no doubt that Iran has invested a handsome amount in Afghanistan. Iran has a political, social, and economic interest in Afghanistan. Iran also has its support in the different parts of Afghanistan. Iran always talked about peace in Afghanistan. But as with all other stakeholders in Afghanistan, Iran also wants peace on its terms. Iran wants a strong grasp on all stakeholders of the Afghan society. Iran always talked about the Afghan-led peace process. Iranian Foreign Minister said in Tehran that Iran will not accept any peace agreement without the presence of the Afghan government. Foreign Minister said Iran will only accept those talks which will be held under the umbrella of Afghanistan. Foreign forces are getting their benefits. They are not thinking about Afghan people (British News Network, 2019).

Iran rejected the peace deal between America and the Taliban. Iran says America has no legal position to deal with the Taliban. America is not talking about ordinary Afghans. President Trump is

only looking at his next election. Iran favors only Afghan-led peace talks. Iran also pays stress that only neighboring states have the right to observe those talks. Iran wants the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. Iran thinks this peace deal only an attempt to provide legitimacy to America in Afghanistan (The Frontier Post, 2020).

Taliban have been divided into different groups in Afghanistan. Iran has captured the place of Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia has cut down its support to the Taliban militants and Iran took it a chance to get deep in the Taliban ranks and files. Iran supported Taliban militants with weapons and money. A group of Taliban has emerged who are against the peace process in Afghanistan. Iran is supporting the hardliner group of Taliban militants. The emergence of the hardliner group backed by Iran creates different questions regarding Iran's role in the Peace Process. Iran is working on a hedging strategy in Afghanistan. Iran is supporting Taliban militants and at the same time as the Afghan government. Pakistan-based Taliban group is supporting Peace Process while Iran is supporting spoilers of peace. Iran also some water issues with Afghanistan. Iran thinks the Taliban are getting a share in the future's Afghan government so links with both identities of Afghanistan are necessary. Things are not clear from Iran's side as Iran already rejected the peace deal between America and the Taliban (Bezhan, 2020).

Relations between Iran and America are going to worse day by day. Iran does not want the American presence in Afghanistan anymore. The American presence in Afghanistan is a matter of national security for Iran.

Conclusion

China and Iran are important states for Afghanistan. China is now has become the fast-growing economy of the world. Although China shares a small border with Afghanistan, Afghanistan is a very important country due to its geostrategic position for China. China does not want the Taliban's government in Afghanistan. China fears that the militant activities of the Taliban will disturb the internal security situation in Xinjiang. China has economic interests in Afghanistan, China has invested in various projects especially in coal projects in Afghanistan. China wants a peaceful Afghanistan to get its economic and security interests. Iran is another important neighbor of Afghanistan shares cultural, political, and religious ties with Afghanistan. Iran has deep roots in Afghan society and links with Northern Alliance. Iran also has links with hard-core militants of the Taliban who are against this peace process. Iran and China are working on a hedging strategy towards Afghanistan. Beijing and Tehran have connections with the Taliban and Afghan government at the same time. Both states have clear indications that after the withdrawal of America, the Taliban will be in power. Iran and China both are keen to bring peace to Afghanistan, the peace deal is a ray of hope for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan but a lot of work has to be done.

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