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**Pakistan, China
and Afghanistan
Discuss Trade
And Counter-
Terrorism**

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AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Pakistan, China and Afghanistan Discuss Trade And Counter-Terrorism

<https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistan-china-and-afghanistan-discuss-trade-and-counter-terrorism-1.95622835>

Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan held a tripartite dialogue in Islamabad to discuss trade, connectivity, counter-terrorism, and political engagement. The foreign ministers from the three countries engaged in productive talks, Pakistani officials said they look forward to advancing regional cooperation under the trilateral framework.

During the talks, Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari emphasized the importance of peace and stability in Afghanistan for socio-economic development, connectivity, and prosperity in the region. He also stressed the need to work together with all stakeholders for a peaceful, stable, prosperous, and united Afghanistan. Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang reiterated China's commitment to stepping up counter-terrorism and security cooperation with Afghanistan and Pakistan to jointly fight terrorist threats. Bilawal Bhutto also said that the issue of terrorism which "poses a serious threat to regional stability and peace" is the core issue for Pakistan and that working together is vital to helping the people of Afghanistan.

Comments

Background

A Beijing-led Troika?

Understanding China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral

The long standing-relationship between Beijing & Islamabad has often signalled hopes (for the two nations) to cooperate on measures to bring peace and stability in Kabul. Such expectations did not deliver the intended outcomes since regional actors (which share boundaries other than the two mentioned states) are key stakeholders, sharing ethnic/cultural connect and tribal hierarchy.

MAY 1-15 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

To that context, Pakistan hosted the 5th China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Dialogue of foreign ministers in Islamabad and discussed matters of trade, intra-regional connectivity, counter-terrorism initiatives, and political engagements.[1] During the dialogue the Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang re-emphasised Beijing's commitment on security cooperation with Afghanistan and Pakistan, reinforcing their fight against terrorism.[2] To that, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Bhutto Zardari echoed the same sentiments pointing to terror threats as a serious challenge to regional stability and peace, highlighting it as a critical pillar in Pakistan's commitment towards the people of Afghanistan.[3] The foreign ministers then discussed the establishment of a counter-terrorism platform with key representatives nominated by the member states.[4] The talks further witnessed Pakistani Foreign Minister Bhutto Zardari emphasising the importance of a peace and a stable Afghanistan, especially for regional socio-economic development, connectivity, and prosperity. This was followed by Islamabad and Beijing exhorting the international community to provide greater humanitarian assistance to Kabul, such as providing Kabul access to overseas frozen accounts/financial assets.[5]

Although unclear in open source, those who attended the discussion highlighted Chinese led troika refraining from mentioning efforts to support neighbouring states (stakeholders) in the interest of maintaining regional peace, security and prosperity. [6] That said, with terror groups with safe havens in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Chinese-led troika did not discuss future actions to be undertaken against them. What followed by the discussions were Chinese and Afghan foreign ministers separately meeting the Pakistan's army chief, General Munir.[7] While the two agreed to enhance existing cooperation in defense and security mechanisms, Qin Gang reiterated Beijing's commitment to timely completion of projects under CPEC, connecting Pakistan and China.[8]

[1] PTI. 2023. "Pakistan, China and Afghanistan Agree to Combat Terrorism at Islamabad Meeting." The Hindu, May 7, 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-china-and-afghanistan-agree-to-combat-terrorism-at-islamabad-meeting/article66823837.ece>.

[2] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China. 2023. "Qin Gang Attends the Fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue." Press Release, May 6, 2023. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202305/t20230508_11073154.html.

[3] Khan, Iftikhar A. 2023. "Pakistan, China Vow to Work for Afghan Stability." The Dawn, May 7, 2023. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1751362/pakistan-china-vow-to-work-for-afghan-stability>.

[4] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China. 2023. "Joint Statement of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue," May 2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202305/t20230509_11073522.html.

[5] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China. 2023. "Qin Gang Attends the Fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue." Press Release, May 6, 2023. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202305/t20230508_11073154.html.

[6] Author's interaction with an expert from Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

[7] Zehra, Zarmeen. 2023. "Pakistan's Security Concerns Prioritised as Gen Asim Munir Meets Afghan FM." The International News, May 7, 2023. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1067920-coas-stresses-on-afghanistans-cooperation-to-tackle-terrorism-in-meeting-with-muttaqi>.

[8] Agence France-Presse. 2023. "China Reiterates Commitment to Ensure 'Timely Completion' of CPEC despite India's Objections." Arab News Pakistan, May 7, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2299141/pakistan>.

MAY 1-15 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

That said, analysing the five dialogue editions, the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral dialogue appears to be a platform for Kabul and Islamabad to remove their differences. By engaging with the two actors, does Beijing hold a unique position to eliminate constraints existing in the Kabul-Islamabad relationship. From a hindsight, the Beijing-led troika aims to reinforce its traditional Afghan policy (economic assistance focused on CPEC, diplomatic engagement) and repackaging it (in the light of Saudi-Iran peace process) with greater ambitions through the troika with an intent of facilitating an Afghan peace process.

Placing Pakistan in China's Afghan Policy

Pakistan's strategic dilemma

If the aforementioned turns out to be true, Pakistan will play a significant role in Beijing's Afghan policy and the latter may bolster its strategic ties with Kabul, through Islamabad.[9] For Beijing, Islamabad's experience in dealing with Taliban will come handy, which it considers as a key strategic advantage in its Afghan policy.[10] With China renewing economic investments in Afghanistan, Islamabad's experience with Taliban could result in deciphering Taliban expectations, preventing mistrust between the two. This is contradicting even for Islamabad as continued cooperation with China will be interpreted harshly, resulting in a distanced Washington, hindering Islamabad from reaping state of the art weaponry and financial assistance through its partnership with Washington. This comes as a time when Joe Biden announces its candidature for another Presidential term, questioning the future of Islamabad's concerted efforts to reset its relationship with Washington. It will not be incorrect to term this very moment as Pakistan's strategic dilemma: investing significantly in a strategic partnership with China through CPEC, while making efforts to renew engagement with the US.[11] It will be interesting to see how Islamabad is able to engage with the Biden administration (or a new president elect) and strengthen its strategic partnership with Beijing.

Pakistan As A Facilitator

While Pakistan, the United States (as part of Operation Cyclone), the United Kingdom, China, Iran, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf raised the mujahedeen in the early 1980s, Islamabad continued to support Taliban in the 1990s and aided and abetted Taliban members during post-9/11.[12]

[9] Panda, Jagannath P. 2021. "Beijing's Strategic Moments with Taliban: Policy, Strategy and Worldview." Delhi. <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/beijings-strategic-moments-taliban-jpanda-030921>.

[10] SABHARWAL, N. D. (2016). [Review of The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics, by A. Small]. Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, 11(3), 281-286. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45341962>

[11] United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission. 2022. "CHINA'S ACTIVITIES AND INFLUENCE IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA." Washington, DC. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/Chapter_3_Section_3--Chinas_Activities_and_Influence_in_South_and_Central_Asia.pdf.

[12] SAROHA, AKSHAYA. 2019. "Understanding The Instability In Afghanistan." World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues 23 (4): 118-29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48566201>.

MAY 1-15 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH



Source: Gulf News

Islamabad further ensured that its relationship with the Taliban does not deliver counterproductive results in a way that hinders Beijing's regional interests/ambitions. Between 1996 to 2001, Islamabad facilitated a direct engagement between Beijing and Taliban with an aim of preventing any alliance between Uyghur separatists and the group with a promise of preventing them from operating from Afghanistan soil.[13] Beijing's hope was to turn this engagement into a prospective partnership (with Islamabad as a mediator) if the Taliban ever came to power, with a surety of not interfering in Chinese interests. With the Sino-Afghan border inaccessible due to rugged terrain, Pakistan offers greater access to Afghanistan. This is also true as over two decades, all Pakistani governments favoured Beijing's investment in the development of Gwadar, a strategic access in the Indian Ocean with a prospective use for trade with Afghanistan.[14] Continued influence in the region would not only result in successful implementation of projects under the BRI but may facilitate China's connectivity to Iran and Turkey.[15]

Mapping Beijing's Expectations

For Beijing, the Taliban rule is a strategic victory, a prospective opportunity, and a possible entry to strengthen its position and impression within the Islamic world. Though Beijing has retained some influence in the West Asia/Middle East political sphere (post Iran-Saudi peace process), it wishes to make inroads into Iran and Turkey with an ultimate goal of gathering significant support within the Islamic world.[16] A stronger connection with the Taliban might allow China to build credibility, within the Islamic world.[17] With Taliban agreeing to extend BRI in Afghanistan, Beijing may open doors for Islamabad to strengthen its transit routes, especially the port of Gwadar and the Trans-Afghan corridor (Mazar Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar).[18] With Beijing as a broker, Pakistan may utilise this opportunity to formalise the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). If that turns out to be true, Islamabad will be entirely dependent on Chinese infrastructure projects making Beijing's contribution to the former's sinking economy significant.

[13] FELBAB-BROWN, VANDA. 2020. "A BRI(DGE) TOO FAR: THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS OF CHINA'S INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN." https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/fp_20200615_china_afghanistan_felbab_brown.pdf.

[14] Khan, Muhammad Zahid Ullah, and Minhas Majeed Khan. 2019. "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor." *Strategic Studies* 39 (2): 67-82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48544300>.

[15] Shariatinia, Mohsen, and Hamidreza Azizi. 2019. "Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and Fear." *Journal of Contemporary China* 28 (120): 984-94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1594108>.

[16] Lons, Camille, Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun, and Naser Al-Tamimi. 2019. "CHINA'S GREAT GAME IN THE MIDDLE EAST." *European Council on Foreign Relations*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21525>.

[17] Grossman, Derek. 2021. "China and the Taliban Begin Their Romance." <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/07/china-and-the-taliban-begin-their-romance.html>.

[18] Devonshire-Ellis, Chris. 2022. "China Ready To Assist In Afghanistan Belt And Road Railway Infrastructure." *Silk Road Briefing*, July 28, 2022. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/07/28/china-ready-to-assist-in-afghanistan-belt-and-road-railway-infrastructure/>.

MAY 1-15 2023

AFGHANISTAN WATCH

Options for New Delhi

Engaging Through Chabahar

Making the use of Shahid Behesti Port in Chabahar for shipping wheat from India to Afghanistan strengthens New Delhi's commitment to the people of Afghanistan. The port plays a strategic role in which India invested over \$85 million to connect Afghanistan with Central Asian nations.[19] Discussed as a key agenda in the India-Central Asia First Summit, held in January 2022, Central Asian economies engaged (in context of Shahid Behesti Port) to enable free flow of goods and services between India and the Central Asian economies. [20] The discussion resulted in establishing a joint working group on Afghanistan (to engage with Taliban) on matters of trade & transit, connectivity and security.[21] The inclusion of the Central Asian countries will pave the way not just for New Delhi but also for regional economies to discuss with Taliban (other matters besides the Shahid Behesti Port), strengthening India's image as a responsible stakeholder committed to regional growth and connectivity.

Strengthening Regional Connectivity

India's commitment to regional connectivity is further reinforced through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multi-modal transportation agreement (7,200 km multi-mode incorporating freight transport through ships, rail network, and road) established by India, Russia and Iran, connecting the Indian Ocean Regional with Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea and opening doors to Europe. One of its kind, the transportation corridor involves 13 nations, with India proposing Afghanistan and Uzbekistan candidatures primarily in Afghanistan's interest.[22] It is important for India to include the port of Chabahar within the INSTC initiative, giving boost not just for India's commitment to Afghanistan but strategically strengthening Afghanistan's position in the region. This initiative will not only counter China's Belt and Road initiative, but keep a check on Pakistan, which is eyeing for resources in Central Asia.

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[19] News Desk. 2022. "Taliban Back Usage of India-Built Chabahar Port, Say 'ready to Provide Facilities.'" Wion News, December 9, 2022. <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/taliban-back-usage-of-india-built-chabahar-port-say-ready-to-provide-facilities-541441/amp>.

[20] Zafar, Dr. Athar. 2022. "India-Central Asia Summit: A Milestone in Engagement with the Region." Indian Council of World Affairs, February 17, 2022. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=7074&lid=4798.

[21] CHAKRABORTY, SUBHAYAN. 2022. "India, Iran Get Back to Chabahar Port, INSTC Route Eyeing Renewed Russia Trade." Money Control, July 6, 2022. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/economy/policy/india-iran-get-back-to-chabahar-port-in-stc-route-eyeing-renewed-russia-trade-8665771.html/amp>.

[22] Rizwan, Hera. 2022. "Transportation Corridor Involve 13 Nations, with India Proposing Afghanistan and Uzbekistan." Indiatimes, 2022. <https://www.indiatimes.com/explainers/news/explained-why-is-india-pushing-for-chabahar-port-in-in-stc-corridor-583088.html>.