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The Great Game is Not a Zero-Sum Deal: On Handling Afghanistan

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(This editorial is based on the article “The Great Game is not a zero-sum deal: on handling Afghanistan” which appeared in The Hindu on 10th January 2019.)

There is uncertainty about the U.S.’s intentions in Afghanistan. [Note that any form of uncertainty in Geopolitics is one of the worst kind of phenomenon there is.]

The likelihood of an American pullout raises the fear of instability in Afghanistan, South and Central Asia. If this happens, security could now depend on efforts made by regional powers [like India and China] to stabilize Afghanistan.

Will China emerge as the power broker in Afghanistan, will India help enhance Afghanistan’s security, still remains a question.

Like India, China never had any intention of contributing troops to NATO’s anti-Taliban campaign. But as Asia’s strongest power and challenger to the U.S., China will try and take the lead if the U.S. reduces its military strength or calls it a day after 18 years of a protracted and indecisive war in Afghanistan.

China’s Interest in Afghanistan

- Sharing part of a border with Afghanistan, China has a great interest in its stability.
- **China would be adversely affected by war and chaos in Afghanistan, which could spill over into north-western China, Pakistan, and Central Asia.**
- As all these areas are vital in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), peace in Afghanistan is critical.
- Over the last decade, China has gained considerable economic and diplomatic influence in Afghanistan.
- Unsurprisingly, Afghanistan’s President, Ashraf Ghani, made China the destination of his first official trip abroad in October 2014.
- China then announced its intention to build regional consensus on Afghanistan’s

security.

- It has joined the U.S. and Russia in several peace talks with the Taliban and is part of the four-nation Quadrilateral Coordination Group (with Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U.S.).
- It is giving military aid to Afghanistan, with the express intent of fighting terrorism and increasing security cooperation.
- Despite the prevailing instability in Afghanistan, China has used diplomacy and finance to appear influential and generous. It has invested in projects such as mining, roads and railways, and health.
- A rail link, completed in 2016, and running from far eastern China via Uzbekistan to the river port of Hairatan in northern Afghanistan, could reduce the time taken to make shipments, from six months by road, to just two weeks.
- China's diplomacy has highlighted its contacts with all parties to the conflict and enhanced its status as a power broker.

Consequences of a US Withdrawal

- **If the U.S. withdrawal exacerbates conflict, southern Russia will also face the threat of unexpected consequences. [That part of Russia is already tensed.]**
- Therefore, Russia and its Central Asian 'near abroad' would be willing to expand their cooperation with China to curb insecurity.
- Since 2011, China has continually blamed Pakistan for exporting extremists to Uighur in Xinjiang, and for extremist attacks on Chinese workers in the CPEC area. [This is a rare thorn in China-Pakistan relations]
- **But these incidents have so far not affected their friendship.** China has reportedly invested billions in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which cuts across the disputed territory in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. It is unclear how China is going to deal with Pakistan, its all-weather friend which trains and exports extremists across the Durand Line.

India-Afghan Relation

- India supports China's role in international negotiations on Afghanistan, the activation of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group and other mechanisms of dialogue and cooperation for the restoration of peace and development in Afghanistan.
- For its part, India has certainly contributed much 'soft power' ranging from telecommunications to education, Bollywood movies, and pop music.
- India (and China) have started a joint training project for Afghan diplomats. India could expand cooperation by facilitating Afghanistan's full membership of the SCO.
- **The building for the National Assembly was built with Indian assistance to support Afghanistan's democracy. Indian reconstruction largesse, amounting to some \$3 billion, has earned its goodwill and popularity.**

- Afghanistan-India relations have progressed exponentially over the years and the transformation of bilateral relation is mirrored with remarkable development in achieving the shared objective.
- The foremost driver of India's Afghanistan policy is its desire to strike a strategic balance between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In practical terms, it means that India wants to ensure that Pakistan does not manipulate the terms of reconciliation between the Afghan Taliban and Kabul. [This means that if Pakistan meddle too much in Afghanistan's internal affairs, Kabul will have the option to lean towards India to balance that out]
- **The harsh truth is that without the willingness to put the real military capability to project power in the region, India's considerable goodwill cannot achieve its strategic ends.**
- **India, which has been against holding talks with the Taliban for a long time, finally sent two retired diplomats, at the 'non-official level', to join them at the Moscow peace parleys in November 2018.**
- **But India's lengthy absence from regional diplomacy has resulted in its limited contribution to the negotiations that are necessary to stabilize Afghanistan.**

Way Forward

- **China's leadership role of the SCO and contacts with all parties (the U.S., the Taliban, the Afghan government, Pakistan, Russia, and the five Central Asian states) could give it an opinion in crafting a regional solution on Afghanistan.**
- That should not prevent India and China from working together, bilaterally and in the SCO, to build a secure Afghanistan.
- The Afghan government would like to see India-China economic cooperation in Afghanistan that could boost progress and enhance human security.
- **Because the Afghan conflict not only drains resources of Western powers directly involved in it but also limits the growth of the region around it, India should actively participate in the development of Afghanistan to help develop the entire region.**
- **Instead of thinking of short-term gains vis-à-vis Pakistan, then, India needs to think of a long-term strategy on how to end the Afghan conflict by supporting a genuine social reconciliation process.**