

## **China Working 24x7 to Establish China-Pakistan-The Taliban “Troika” in Afghanistan to Make India “Inconsequential”**

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### **Abstract**

As China gears up for “seizing the golden opportunity” in Afghanistan under the Taliban, a key component of Beijing’s Afghan strategy is to render the Indian role there “inconsequential.” Repeated reiteration by the Taliban in recent weeks dismissing the Indian concerns further confirm New Delhi’s apprehensions.

### **Keywords**

Foreign Policy, China-Pakistan-Taliban Troika, Geopolitics, Afghanistan

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What does China-Taliban “bonhomie” in a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan indicate for India? Numerous speculative analyses have been voiced in the past one month in India, and many more will follow in the coming days. So far, disappointingly, the usual clichéd routine and unimaginative interpretations are being offered, i.e., now is the time India should discard its policy of non-alignment; in addition to the Taliban take over, a friendly, pro-Beijing Taliban is not only a foreign policy setback but it is also a blow to India’s national security concerns; it will mean India being pushed into deeper conflicts with both Beijing and Islamabad, and so on.

Why is there a broad consensus among China’s scholars that an “ambitious” India must be rendered “inconsequential” in an Afghanistan full of uncertainties?

Let us view the real situation from another perspective. How should India measure China’s advantage(s) under a pro-Beijing regime in Kabul? Should India be anxious/concerned over the so-called China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan ‘new Quad’? Why is there a broad consensus among China’s scholars that an “ambitious” India must be rendered “inconsequential” in an Afghanistan full of uncertainties? Why are analysts in Beijing asserting that because Afghanistan is a small part of India’s strategy, the US folly in Afghanistan will not deter New

Delhi from going ahead and upgrading relations with Washington into “a quasi-alliance relationship”?

Following the chaotic US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, there has been a “tsunami” of editorials, op-ed pieces and commentaries in the Chinese offline and online media. Interestingly, on the popularity scale, the opinion pieces written by the Chinese scholars and analysts have been in the range of 10,000 to over 100,000 clicks. Indeed, most of these articles and opinion columns are focused on or highlight the rapidly changing political situation and the stakes for China under the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. However, an article uploaded on the website of the popular digital *guancha.cn* showed a surprisingly and unusually large number of clicks – as high as close to 400,000!<sup>1</sup>

What attracted such a huge number of readers to the article? Possibly, two factors. First, the popularity and huge-swell of readership for its author – Francis Fukuyama; second and more important reason is the title of the article in the Chinese version: “Biden says US troop withdrawal is to prepare to better deal with China and Russia Challenge. I hope Biden is serious.” The Chinese translation of Fukuyama’s write-up was based on his article in the *Economist*, three days before, titled “Francis Fukuyama on the end of American hegemony.”<sup>2</sup> The article in Chinese also generated over six hundred “comments” from the readers – an unusually high number.

Interestingly, just like Fukuyama’s commentary attracted reactions from the Chinese readers from wider society, within hours of the US completing the withdrawal, an article entitled (*in Chinese*) “India suffers a severe strategic blow in a changing Afghanistan” clicked nearly 200,000 visitors.<sup>3</sup> Edited by *guancha.cn* staffer Chen Sijia, the article<sup>3</sup> in Chinese was based on an Indian analysis by a former Lt. Gen. on a digital news and current affairs platform, entitled “India backed the wrong horse in Afghanistan, and has gone into a strategic sulk now.”<sup>4</sup> The Indian analysis claims “India’s actions in Afghanistan stem more out of pique for the triumph of radical Taliban and its mentor Pakistan, and less due to the lack of strategic options.”

As soon as Washington disclosed President Trump was contemplating a possible full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, Beijing instantly swung into action and began holding consultations with Islamabad on its future Afghan strategy

However, the *guancha.cn* picked up the Indian article for entirely different reasons – reasons perhaps India’s strategic affairs or China-watcher community are yet to pay attention to.<sup>5</sup>

First, though true that after the US initiated the peace talks with the Taliban in Doha in 2018, all major countries involved in Afghanistan except India have engaged with the Taliban to safeguard their respective interests. However, not unsurprisingly, as soon as Washington disclosed President Trump was contemplating a possible full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, Beijing instantly swung into action and began holding consultations with Islamabad on its future Afghan strategy. A *sputniknews.cn* editorial (*in Chinese*) had then commented: “Following reports in the US media of the [Trump] administration planning to vacate half of its 14,000 forces in Afghanistan, the US plan to withdraw troops has emerged as a major agenda for China and Pakistan.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, in December 2018, Hua Chunying, the Chinese spokesperson denied at a routine foreign ministry press briefing that the hurriedly called meeting between the foreign ministers from China and Pakistan in the Chinese capital Beijing was to discuss the issue of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> However, she did admit that the two foreign ministers met to deliberate on the “most recent changes” in Afghanistan. It is pertinent to mention, China has since been proactively and carefully recalibrating its moves – primarily aimed at safeguarding its investments and ongoing project in region, especially in Pakistan’s CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) region – together with Pakistan and both the Taliban forces and the Kabul government. Citing

sources, *Nikkei Asia* recently reported that China has been courting the Taliban since 2018 on possible projects in Afghanistan. “There are verbal agreements between Beijing and Taliban about investments. Once the Taliban government gains global recognition, China will start building infrastructure projects in war-torn Afghanistan,” Japan’s news agency said.<sup>7</sup> A report in China’s semi-official *Global Times* further confirmed Beijing’s Afghan strategy: “The all-weather strategic cooperative partnership between China and Pakistan enabled the two countries to act in coordination on the Afghan situation, bringing about positive changes to the region.”<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that Beijing has already started downplaying the significance of the recent meeting between the Indian ambassador to Qatar and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the head of the Taliban’s Political Office

Third, it is important to point out what are the key components in China’s strategy to safeguard its investments in the Af-Pak border region and in the CPEC under the Belt and Road Initiative? Two factors. First, to keep India out of Afghanistan; second, if at all India manages to adjust its policies and restores contact with the Taliban, make the Indian role under the Taliban ruled Afghanistan inconsequential, as was observed by a now retired senior PLA colonel in a guest column in the *NYT*.<sup>9</sup>

Marginalizing India in the post-US era Afghanistan will result in more than one advantage for China. Namely, the Indian opposition to BRI’s signature CPEC initiative will become totally ineffective; this will further facilitate China to smoothly expand Beijing’s efforts in financing and building infrastructure across the region, which in turn will extend the Belt-and-Road access to markets in the Middle East; and given the tense relationship between India and Pakistan, the Taliban-Pakistan-China “troika” will ensure India is not allowed to create trouble in both Pakistan’s troubled Baluchistan region and plot and execute terrorist strikes especially targeting the Chinese construction projects and the Chinese personnel, as both China and Pakistan have been accusing India of “engineering” recently.

It is in this backdrop, the increased relevance of the Taliban commitment made to Beijing recently must be understood. At the same time, it is important to note that Beijing has already started downplaying the significance of the recent meeting between the Indian ambassador to Qatar and Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, the head of the Taliban’s Political Office. Reacting to the outcome of the meeting held in Doha last Tuesday, a news daily in Beijing commented: “No information suggests that the Taliban has shown [to India] the sort of goodwill it has demonstrated to China.”<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, a Taliban spokesperson Muhammed Suhail Shaheen told media earlier

that “if India comes to Afghanistan militarily and has presence there, that will not be good for them.” Besides, Qian Feng, Director of the research department at Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University has said in an interview: “India’s past strategy has pushed itself into embarrassment. It cannot make a U-turn in its Afghan policies, nor can it cast aside the geopolitical influence of the US and its Western allies.”

“Pakistan is proud of its relationship with China. If the Taliban hold similar views, that is great.”

*The Dawn*

Furthermore, the Chinese media is filled with news reports and commentaries about China-Pakistan-Taliban “troika” joint initiatives under Belt and Road Initiative, especially in the areas falling within or under the CPEC. Recent reports in Chinese and global media confirm China is willing to expand its multi-billion dollar BRI into Afghanistan. As reported in an Indian financial daily, “China has been repeatedly expressing hope that the Taliban too believes the initiative [BRI] is good for development and prosperity in the war-ravaged Afghanistan and the border region.”<sup>11</sup> The plan did not make much headway due to political differences between the previous Ashraf Ghani-led government in Kabul and Pakistan over Islamabad’s support to the Taliban militants, the financial daily further noted.

Rather intriguingly, an article in the popular Chinese language digital news platform *guancha.cn* on 7 September citing a *Times of India* news report highlighted the announcement made by Taliban spokesperson of the Taliban’s desire to join CPEC “projects” aimed at strengthening cooperation with both China and Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> The *guancha.cn* article further stated: “Zabiullah Mujahid on September 6 reiterated Taliban support to China’s BRI and expressed willingness to join CPEC project.” In the same article, the Pakistan interior affairs minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad was also quoted telling the Pakistan newspaper *The Dawn* that “Pakistan is proud of its relationship with China. If the Taliban hold similar views, that is great.”

The *guancha.cn* article cited numerous references in the month of September itself, of Zabiullah Mujahid and other Taliban officials/spokespersons repeatedly saying how important it was for the Taliban to support the BRI and join the CPEC project. Speaking at a joint function on the theme “Together Rebuild Afghanistan” organized by Pakistan-Afghanistan Youth Forum on September 3, Mujahid said “Extending CPEC into Afghanistan is crucial for improving Afghanistan connectivity.” Just two days earlier, in an interview with Italy’s *La Repubblica*, Mujahid remarked: “We, the Taliban, pay huge attention to China’s BRI, [for us] the BRI is like a revival of the ancient Chinese silk route. Afghanistan is rich in copper

resources. With the help of China, the Afghan copper mines can be put back into production and help in modernizing the industry.” Assisted by China, Afghanistan can connect with the global markets, Mujahid further told *La Repubblica*.

There are fears being expressed, especially in Kabul, that the Taliban’s relying on Pakistan is bound to provoke ISIS to organise terrorist strikes in the region.

In making an indirect dig at India, the Chinese digital news platform further quoted Mujahid as saying “China is a very important big power among Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries, it [China] is also a modern, economically developed nation with ‘excellent leadership and developmental experience’. We are very hopeful of making progress in future cooperation with China.” It is important to point out that the PRC government has promptly and positively responded to the repeated statements made by the Taliban in recent days to the effect that the Taliban wishes to see a solid, supportive and enduring cooperation with China under both the BRI and China-Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation template.

In a recent statement, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson, recalled China-Afghanistan cooperation under the BRI framework has always delivered tangible results. “China and

Afghanistan are traditionally friendly neighbours. We’ve noticed that the Afghan Taliban has stated its commitment to fostering an enabling environment for foreign investors. It also believes that the BRI can contribute to national and regional development and prosperity, and hopes to continue to support and participate in it. We hope there will be a steady transition in Afghanistan to deliver enduring peace and stability, which is the premise for external cooperation, and foreign investment and business presence in the country,” the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said in reply to a specific question at the ministry’s regular press briefing on September 4.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, fully aware that Afghanistan’s new Taliban government has a clear Pakistan (and China) stamp, there are commentators in the Indian media who do not see both Islamabad and Beijing look “relaxed” since Kabul fell into the Taliban’s hands. Several reasons are cited.<sup>14</sup> First, it took the Taliban forces three weeks after capturing Kabul to announce a caretaker government. Second, the new cabinet ministers (in the caretaker government) have had a past record of involvement in terrorist activities, with some among them actually sanctioned by the UN, while there are others on the “most wanted” list by the FBI. The interim Prime Minister, Mohammad Hassan Akhund, one of the main aides to Taliban founder Mullah Omar Akhund, 71-year-old, a co-founder of the Taliban, has

been sanctioned by the UN. Third, there are fears being expressed, especially in Kabul, but also in both Islamabad and in Beijing that the Taliban's relying on Pakistan is bound to provoke ISIS to organise terrorist strikes in the region. According to a former Indian diplomat, "the Taliban's are going to have a big problem in Afghanistan." Why? Because too much reliance on Pakistan will push the Taliban further descend into turmoil and internal conflicts, the Indian diplomat warned. Fourth, speaking of China's *concerns* with the Taliban, veteran diplomat who was India's Foreign Secretary, Ambassador Shyam Saran, has observed: "the Chinese seem to want daily assurances that the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, the Uyghur militant group, will not be allowed to threaten China's Xinjiang from Afghanistan's soil."<sup>15</sup> Fifth, last but not least, Russia too is very much aware of the Taliban's terrorist background. According to Saran, though Russia did not shut down its embassy in Kabul, at the same time it (Moscow) was busy conducting military exercises with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to "forestall cross-border terrorist attacks by "Jihadi" elements from Afghanistan.

China also announced its commitment to provide 200 million Yuan aid comprising food, winter clothing and medicines to Afghanistan

Moreover, it is telling that the Chinese and Russian concerns with regard to the Taliban assurances have been further confirmed. Hours before September 11, the day the Taliban was to formally form the Afghan government in Kabul, both China and Russia belied expectations that the two countries, given their pro-Taliban stance, will rush to acknowledging the new Afghan government. On the contrary, whilst Russia made it very clear despite being among a handful of nations who continued to operate their embassies in Kabul, Moscow will be represented at the ambassador-level presence at the new Taliban government's inauguration ceremony. According to recent reports, though the Taliban has officially invited several countries, including Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran, to attend the government formation ceremony in Kabul, Russia will not take part in any way in the new Taliban government's inauguration ceremony. In a statement released on September 10, the Russian news agency RIA said: "The speaker of the upper house of parliament said earlier this week that Russia would be represented at the inauguration by the ambassador-level officials."<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, as the inauguration of the interim government ceremony on the scheduled date was cancelled by the Taliban, largely due to non-participation announced by Russia and fears being expressed in several capitals that the "Taliban interim government" was non-inclusive, China issued an appeal to the US and the international community to take "active

actions” to help ease the economic crisis in Afghanistan by providing aid to the war-torn country.<sup>17</sup> Prior to issuing the appeal, China also announced its commitment to provide 200 million Yuan (about USD 31 million) aid comprising food, winter clothing and medicines to Afghanistan.

While some argue that China’s aid-package announcement must be seen in the context of the US government freezing the Afghanistan government accounts, however, analysts in Beijing view the Chinese assistance to the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as a clear signal from Washington of thawing of the US-China relations. Interestingly, or perhaps surprisingly, in spite of quite a few near-missed opportunities to break the ice between China and the US since Biden took office in January this year, some commentators in China continue to speculate a possible beginning of thawing in the world’s most important bilateral relationship each time there takes place a high-level interaction between China and the US.<sup>18</sup> In an article published on September 14 in an influential Chinese financial daily, it was claimed that the recent power shift in Afghanistan has ushered in thawing of China-US relations. “As a major force for maintaining stability, China has become a partner the US should seek cooperation with,” the Chinese article said.<sup>19</sup> It further quoted what President Xi told his US counterpart in a recent telephone call: “It is not a question of if, but how to improve China-US relations.”

Finally, in Beijing’s view, India must blame itself for the mess it is in following the chaos left behind by the US in Afghanistan. According to the *Global Times*, if India designs its regional policies simply on the basis of countering China or pandering to the US, these policies are bound to fail. Lan Jianxue, head of the Department for Asia-Pacific Studies at China Institute of International Studies, told the *GT* “To some extent, this is going to jeopardize India from keeping influence in the region.”<sup>20</sup>

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*This is revised and expanded version of an earlier article published as "With the Taliban on its side, Beijing mulls making India 'inconsequential' in Afghanistan" by **Indian Defence Review***

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