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Introduction

Attention to Afghanistan from the academic world, public media outlets, and government officials has increased significantly in the past months. However, Afghanistan has inherently been a place of instability, located at the heart of Asia. This security deficit and void has time and again been filled by various stakeholders for their benefit, and once again the country finds itself in a volatile environment. Its Taliban-led interim government, as well as a vast majority of civilians, are desperately seeking financial assistance. For the civil population, the foremost priority is to avoid the humanitarian disaster from unfolding further, and to prevent Afghanistan from becoming, as frequently quoted in public news outlets, a *'hell on earth'* in the coming winter months (Simpson 2021). Being at the heart of Asia, Afghanistan has been of interest to various external parties.

Already the original Silk Road, regularly used from 130BCE during the Han Dynasty (202BCE– 220CE), located Afghanistan as a significant point in its structures. While the original Silk Road was boycotted by the Ottoman Empire, which eventually led to its closure, the Silk Road is said to have established a basis of trade for the modern world (Mark 2018). The centrality of Afghanistan in Asia then placed it between the Persian Empire to the West, and the Chinese Empire to the East (UNESCO n.d.). Significant cities where the Silk Road was located at were Balkh, Bamiyan, Herat, Badakhshan, and Kabul (UNESCO n.d.). Up until the 16th Century, Afghanistan was showered in wealth because of the Silk Road and its central position as a trading hub (Safi & Alizada 2018) and remains of the trade networks are still visible, with continuing modern trading routes and historical sites at these locales. What stands out, is the spread of Buddhism via these trading routes, which first reached Afghanistan, and only later spilled over to China, encouraged by the Kushan Dynasty, and vice versa the cultural exchange visible in 14th century Islamic architecture, as well as the influence-taking in Afghan laws (UNESCO n.d.).

Today, China is pursuing its ambitious and influential project, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across the globe, and Afghanistan would be a crucial link to induce far-reaching success in the wider scope of South Asia. Even more so, a peaceful and stable Afghanistan would help advance these global ambitions which are underlined by Chinese efforts of diplomatic and political engagement in Afghanistan and with the Taliban (Jain 2021).

This article explores the main themes of Chinese contemporary priorities in Afghanistan, Sino-Afghan relations, and influences, and provides a theoretical basis of understanding an eclectic perspective on security in Asia and China's role in it. Moreover, it attempts to illustrate Chinese investments in Afghanistan through a case study, illuminating on opportunistic behavior as well as the difficulty of execution due to a conflict-ridden environment. Finally, it explores geostrategic engagement in 2021 post-Taliban takeover, and consequentially the future trajectories these developments can entail.

Conceptualizing Chinese interests in Afghanistan

Presently, widespread attention is placed on Chinese ventures globally through the BRI, and more so in its close geographic proximity. After control and military dominance of the United States (US) in Central Asia in joint approaches with Russia has seized to play a dominant role, China now attempts the opaque role of a regional hegemon in Asia to promote and deeper root its strategic, political and economic interests (Mühlhahn 2021). Following Scobell's (2015) thought, the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) views China's national security from core to periphery in four steps. This approach then would perceive the first circle to include all territory viewed as Chinese territory by China, which includes the autonomous region of Xinjiang. The second circle extends beyond the borders of China and includes geographically proximate, prioritized areas for China, into which for instance the Wakhan Corridor at the Sino-Afghan border would fall because of the shared border (Scobell 2015, 326t2). The third circle includes South and Central Asia, and thus Afghanistan would partly count into the second, and foremost into the third ring. The fourth circle extends around the globe.

China's interests in Afghanistan consist of five major themes: First, limiting influence of external powers in South Asia. Second, extracting profitable natural resources from Afghanistan. Third, curtailing extremism in the region and preventing a spillover in problematic areas of internal affairs of China. Fourth, bringing the illicit drugs economy in Afghanistan to a stop. Finally, and fifth, incorporating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These themes are explored subsequently and indicate the intrinsic significance for part-taking and manifesting Chinese ideals into the *'heart of Asia'*.

Limiting influence of external powers

First, limiting influence of external powers in the region, such as the United States meddling and competing with China, would provide for a clearer reaffirmance of China's regional hegemonic role in South Asia (Girard 2018, Scobell 2015). As EFSAS study paper, "Rise or Resurgence? China's 'Century of Humiliation' and the Role of Historical Memory in Contemporary China" indicates, China has already repositioned itself as the dominant force in East Asia, comparable to the role it played there in the 19th century (EFSAS 2021). By limiting the influence of external powers in South and Central Asia, China assumes this role on a scale of extensive breadth. Afghanistan, often referred to with the sobriquet of *'Graveyard of Empires'*, with its never-ending conflicts, its intrinsic structures of limited Statehood, and the clashing ideologies, has presented itself to be an intricate endeavor to engage with based on following the characteristic policy approaches of China, *"patience, caution and long-term strategic planning [can be used] to exercise its leverage"* (Jain 2021). In essence, a changing nature of the stakeholders in Afghanistan and the geopolitical realm in Asia post-Taliban takeover presents a possibility to extend the Chinese arm and limit other external powers' workings in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

Extraction of profitable natural resources

Second, extracting natural resources from Afghanistan which could be worth up to \$1 trillion, according to a 2014 report, would benefit for instance Chinese State-owned companies in the electronics business (Grossman 2021, Scobell 2015). While for China its internal rapid economic development created power and wealth, it also resulted in a growing demand for energy and a variety of raw materials by its citizens (Mühlhahn 2021). Because of the volatile circumstances in Afghanistan, China has kept a comparably low profile for the last two decades as security matters have made it more difficult to invest into Afghanistan, largely by reason of the multiplicity of foreign interests, which inserted opportunism of foreign actors on the ground. However, minerals and other Chinese projects have found their way into the hands of Chinese State-owned firms in the early 21st century. These contain a vast range of profitable locales, which could be expanded and exploited in the coming years. To date, China is the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan, holding various mining and exploration rights for the foreseeable future (Safi & Alizada 2018). EFSAS paper “Disjointed Multilateralism: Economic Development, Economic Integration and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia” emphasizes the expansionist pragmatic approach China takes in South Asia (EFSAS 2021), which reiterates the political stakes China continues to identify in consolidating a BRI in the realms of South Asia.

Preventing extremism and the Islam identity from entering

Third, curtailing extremism, radicalization, and the identity of Islam within China benefits the pursuit of de-islamifying Xinjiang, a key priority of internal policy-objectives in China, as well as averting threatening societal and cultural opposition and part-taking in the matter receiving critical international attention (Girard 2018, Scobell 2015, Jain 2021). What is noteworthy, is the historicity of religious expansion to China through Afghanistan, where both Buddhism and Islam were transferred (Jin 2016). While historically the spillover was noteworthy, presently China is focused on preventing possible interferences with internal security and stability and prioritizing guarantees of non-involvement by the interim Taliban government (Jain 2021).

Avoiding an Afghanistan that interferes with internal Chinese affairs is of crucial importance to China, be it run by Taliban or others, and it reiterates previous official statements made by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “*reaffirm[ing] its commitment to the one China policy and firm support for China’s positions on issues related to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang and stated that Afghanistan would not allow its territory to be used by any forces for any separatist activities against China*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2014). As EFSAS Research Fellow Dr. Dorotheé Vandamme explained in a recent interview, Chinese policy was smart and rapid as a response to the Taliban takeover to engage with Taliban leaders to prevent any conflict-inducing situation regarding Chinese internal affairs (Vandamme 2021).

Halting Afghanistan's illicit drug economy

Fourth, limiting and halting the illicit drugs economy of Afghanistan is of importance to China. On the one hand, this is because of the small border the two countries share and the possibility of spillover. On the other hand, the direct routes into Xinjiang, and the estimated 20% share of Afghan opiates in China, as well as the high number of trades of acetic anhydride through these crossroads indicate a trade of a direct and significant link of possible transit, especially in comparison to the much more difficult trading routes through Pakistan, India, and eventually to China (Townsend 2005). As explored in EFSAS article "Taliban: The switch from Heroin to Methamphetamine", the illicit drugs economy of Afghanistan is not to be underestimated in providing for an underlying structure for crime groups, terrorists, and other extremist networks to prosper and grab control of communities, and, as the world has come to see, the Afghan State (EFSAS 2021). The spillover of drugs in form of narcotics to the Chinese population and providence of a possibility of entrance at the border of the autonomous region of Xinjiang could lead to increased addiction of Chinese nationals, and additionally to non-State actors meddling in Chinese internal affairs. This would, connected to the preceding theme of preventing extremism entering China and interfering with Chinese internal affairs, escalate the already dire situation of the disengaged region of Xinjiang.

Incorporating Afghanistan into the BRI

Fifth, the infamous Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's staple project in the 21st century, has received large-scale attention from multitudinous personas. While Chinese pursuits in South Asia are visible through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it appears to be more difficult to include a war-torn State like Afghanistan into its framework (Marsden 2021). A multifold of Asia-focused scholars however indicate Chinese hopes for expansion into Afghanistan (Yang 2021). As a theme on a grander level, the incorporation of Afghanistan into the BRI displays the overarching pursuance of the previously discussed priorities, and illustrates an underlying objective of these priorities, namely the firm rooting of China in Asia, and beyond. As Xi deliberated at the 2019 Belt and Road Forum, China "*will adopt widely accepted rules and standards and encourage participating companies to follow general international rules and standards in project development, operation, procurement and tendering and bidding. The laws and regulations of participating countries should also be respected*" (Xi 2019). This, as well as various other statements by Chinese officials, demonstrates the influential nature of the BRI, its normative dimension, and its complex clouts and perhaps repercussions for those who engage.

The focus on limiting external stakeholders in South Asia, exploiting natural resources, preventing a spillover of extremism and drugs, and an incorporation of Afghanistan into the BRI show the inherent aspiration of a wide immersion into Afghanistan by China. However, while these themes show a definite interest of China in Afghanistan, simultaneously China has been hesitant to accept Afghan refugees, and most Afghans residing in China are there by means of short-term visas for one year, or in exceptional circumstances, for five years (Marsden 2021). The calculations China must make, weighing the ambitions and interests with intrinsic unpredictability in Afghanistan, could force the Chinese to stain their projection of

undertakings in Afghanistan by solidifying engagement with the Taliban (Jain 2021, Parakkal 2021).

Diplomatic endeavors

To create a deeper understanding of Chinese undertakings in Afghanistan, the diplomatic relation of the two countries needs to be explored. Afghanistan and China have long-standing diplomatic relations, underlined through their early trade relations tracing all the way back to the Han Dynasty. On a more contemporary line, Sino-Afghan relations have been friendly during the past 200 years, exempting only the brief period of Soviet invasion in Afghanistan which engineered a pro-Soviet and anti-Chinese regime, quickly overthrown however after the collapse of the Soviet Union. China there provided moral and military support for the Mujahideen, alongside the US, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UK. This was in pursuit of defeating the Soviet Union by sponsoring those anti-Soviet Mujahideen fighters, which forced the Soviet Union to reorganize its strategy and eventually resulted in a détente between the two countries. Presently, Afghanistan and China share only a narrow border of 97km, on the Chinese side the autonomous region of Xinjiang, and the Wakhan Corridor on the Afghan side, a border which was finalized and drawn up in 1964 (Jin 2016, Siddiq 2012). According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China's part-taking in economic reorganization in Afghanistan during Karzai's presidency up until the end of 2014, whilst foreign actors were on the ground, initiated restructuring and provided humanitarian assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014).

Indicators that provide an underlying imagery of current Chinese endeavors in Afghanistan show several priorities. Economic investments, through large Chinese companies like Huawei or MCC active in Afghanistan, and trade between the two countries, China being Afghanistan's third-largest trading partner, suppose a plan of improved trade, not the least through an expansion of CPEC, or a Peshawar-to-Kabul motorway.

Overall, China's fundamental interest, as research indicates, presents a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, which could halt the spread of extremism and illicit drugs, enable for CPEC to expand into Afghan territory and provide for a successful integration of the BRI in Afghanistan to further promote strategic and security interests (Jain 2021).

An eclectic perspective on Chinese explorations in Asia

Relations between States can be approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives, be it from Liberalism and the State at the forefront, to Constructivism and the interaction of identities in these realms. Combining segments of a range of theoretical approaches to social inquiry enables for an eclectic perspective, a philosophical thought which encompasses and focuses on the following:

“An extraordinarily complex set of phenomena involving multiple types of units connected through a wide range of relations, [and] understanding this complexity initially requires a more specialized examination of particular elements, institutions, and actors” (Katzenstein & Sil 2010).

Thus, an eclectic approach to themes of International Relations (IR), allows for a more inclusive angle without a restriction to only one specific school of thought or approach to the nature of a subject and policies. Rather, it provides for the opportunity to ‘pick and choose’ from a broad pallet of approaches to fit the respective objective of a State. Moreover, it places the actors and a consortium of dimensions at the forefront of analysis. This eclectic perspective provides an angle to analyze national security and regional involvement from a distinct perspective.

For China’s stakes in East Asia, Kang draws on the theoretical foundation to analyze the present rise of China and explains the band wagoning effect of States to follow Chinese policy and endeavors (Kang 2013). Furthermore, he emphasizes the historical dimension of China in East Asia and examines the phases of Chinese weakness correlating to East Asian States decreasing in prosperity, and vis-à-vis the increase of prosperity for East Asian States in times of Chinese prosperity (Katzenstein & Sil 2010). What this helps understanding is the special position China claims in the region, not just in East Asia, but in South and Central Asia as well. While many scholars criticize a rising China in the region for its imminent possibilities of instability, Kang’s perspective allocates Chinese policies and policy-successes as pointers for geographically proximate States and their own stability when they are entangled with Chinese policies. For Afghanistan, this is visible through its linkage with economic institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as well as the Chinese State-owned companies investing into a vast selection of sectors in its neighboring States. The core of Kang’s argument is the idea that relations of Asian States with China result not only in benefit or loss for the respective States, but those norms, identities, and preferences are conveyed through the Sino-Asian relations in the region.

Wong & Li (2021) discuss the eclectic approach in the context of Chinese peacebuilding efforts from a theoretical and practical perspective, illuminating the varying approaches of Chinese policies in this thematic. While keeping in mind China’s long-standing position of non-intervention, the eclectic approach China uses in Asia depends on the varying conflict types in the States of South Asia (Wong & Li 2021). Given the non-standardization of development efforts, the pragmatic approach China takes in Asia is visible as an eclectic approach, putting focus to central elements of importance (EFSAS 2021, Wong & Li 2021). These adaptive approaches, connected to the elaboration of Katzenstein and Sil (2010), underscore China’s very distinctive position in the Asian realm.

Applying the eclectic approach to Sino-Afghan relations, an Afghanistan wary of the intertwining and transferring of Chinese norms and ideals onto its communities, particularly due to its nature of limited Statehood, non-State nature, and tribal communities, would pose a challenge to circumvent a shift in Afghan day-to-day life because of an increased dependency on Chinese prosperity. Yet, following Kang’s analysis, it could (strangely) benefit Afghanistan in the case of growing Chinese wealth, as it would benefit Afghanistan on a State-level, with a more immersed standing in its region, remaining at the heart of Asia, rather than being pushed to the side. Wong & Li (2010) deliberate on the adaptable approach China takes in their foreign policy for Asia.

Chinese investments in Afghanistan

While China has a variety of interests in multiple themes related to Afghanistan, the country offers a significant number of natural resources, and China's BRI has time and again been tailored specifically towards exploiting such opportunities. Following the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *"Both sides agreed that construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt would be significant to promot[e] pragmatic cooperation between China and Afghanistan and the region"* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China 2014). The framework of the BRI is yet to be officially connected to Afghanistan, however, investments, infrastructure projects, and exploitation rights for areas of rich natural resources have fallen into Chinese hands. Though various Chinese State-owned firms in multiple locations have rights for exploitation, these companies have been rather slow and hesitant in executing their mandate during times of instability and uncertainty. To illustrate Chinese involvement in Afghanistan in the past years, a summary of three leading examples of Chinese investments and stakes in Afghanistan follows. First, Mes Aynak, a mining site in Logar province, located around 40km southeast of Kabul, has been granted to China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) on a 30-year lease. Second are developments of oil blocks from Amu Darya of the Kashkari, Bazarkhami and Zamarudsa basin, located in proximity to Faizabad and Sar-e Pol. The basins were given to the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in 2011 (Zhang 2013). Third, the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project is in the process of being constructed between Herat to Khaf, and Hairatan to Mazar-e-Sharif, and projected to eventually be of 1,148km length. It is supported by ADB, World Bank, Bank of China, and the US (RECCA 2015).

Chinese economic investments and aspirations of connectivity in Afghanistan suggest comprising complex consequences for Afghanistan. Given the limitations of this article, an attempt to provide an in-depth analysis will focus on one of the three cases, namely the mining site Mes Aynak.

Case Study: Mes Aynak

Mes Aynak, meaning *مس عینک* in Dari (The Persian Dialect widely spoken in Afghanistan), which translates to small copper field, is a copper site close to Kabul, and was a major trading hub on the original Silk Road (Huffman 2013). Being the biggest single foreign investment in Afghanistan in its history, the Chinese State-owned firms China Metallurgical Group (MCC Group) jointly with Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCC) put forward a US\$4.4 billion bid to receive exclusive mining rights from 2007 – 2037 (Downs 2012, Huffman 2013). Aside from being a copper site, Mes Aynak, located in Logar province, also comprises an ancient Buddhist city active from the 8th century onwards, which encompasses *"400 statues and wall paintings across a citadel, numerous monasteries, stupas and small forts"* (Gronlund 2021). This ancient Buddhist city is of importance not only for its archeological richness, but also for uncovering the development of Buddhism within the realm of Afghanistan, and indications of transfer of knowledge on the original Silk Roads.

Justification of Single Case Study

The Case of Mes Aynak and Chinese ventures presents a most-likely case study for Chinese resource exploitation. By elaborating on this case, the intercorrelation between the lease for a Chinese State-owned company and the effect on Afghanistan, the Sino-Afghan relations, and the consequences of resource exploitation and other Chinese interest pursuance's become clear. Mes Aynak, being a monstrous project in size, provides the possibility for a detailed analysis on the intricacies of Sino-Afghan relations, and the expansion of Chinese part-taking in the regional sphere of South Asia.

Drawing up a contract

The MCC and JCC jointly entered the lease agreement made with the Afghan Ministry of Mines (MOM) in 2007. In the contract between MCC and MOM there is an indication of a production of 200,000 tons of copper per anno. However, various events delayed the actual process of resource extraction. Because the nature of a conflict-ridden State does not allow for an underlying security net, large investment projects in Afghanistan like Mes Aynak frequently get delayed. In this case, MCC and JCC had to halt the, as per the lease agreement, aspirations of mineral extraction in the time frame proposed.

Development of the project

According to surveys conducted by Zhang et al (2020), the primary barriers to initiating the extraction at Mes Aynak are the degree of administrative capacity, terrorist activities, and religious issues. Not only for Mes Aynak, but also for other Chinese infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, terrorism and religious extremist activities increase factors of instability and uncertainty. The execution of the project due to the conflict-ridden environment underlined by the unrest in Afghanistan proves difficult. Exemplary, Mes Aynak's Chinese workers were attacked by militants in November 2012, which caused one of the several delays of the initiation of the copper mining objective (Zhang et al 2020). What is more, is the historical and religious relevance of the site of Mes Aynak for Afghanistan, Buddhism, and for the original Silk Roads. The historical relevance of sites like Mes Aynak provides for a perspective of how Buddhism moved from India to China, with Afghanistan as the 'key transmitter' (Barfield 2012). As deliberated by Gronlund (2021), the site of Mes Aynak not only is rich in copper but encompasses the historical treasure of an archeological site of an ancient Buddhist city. According to Zhang et al (2020), who cite Sun et al (2016), *"Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) requested an archeological survey before mining could take place. Hence, the construction process of the Aynak Copper Mine was suspended"*.

The preservation of the historical importance of this locale illuminates on a multifold of themes visible in Sino-Afghan relations. While the deal was brokered by the Afghan ministry at the time with the Chinese State-owned companies, little attention was paid to the exploitation of land and resources. The large paycheck for Afghanistan seemed lucrative, while the opportunistic behavior of MCC did not leave much room for a considerate and sustainable

approach for the historical site, the communities in its proximity, and the entailments of large-scale exploitation of resources.

What this case study tries to illuminate on are the various dimensions of the geostrategic engagement of China with Afghanistan. More specifically, what is visible here are multiple themes of China's interests that have been introduced. The extraction of profitable natural resources from Afghanistan, as the contract of MCC specifies explicitly, is of priority. The other side is the acceptance of the investments by the former Afghan government, in hope for prosperity, and indeed, a better-connected trade and infrastructure network which would result from Chinese endeavors.

Academic perspectives on Mes Aynak and Chinese involvement go two directions. The issue of exploitation, inconsideration for external factors that need to be considered for a pursuit of the corporate and State-interests of China. Free riding by the Chinese government, on the one hand making use of the stability provided by ISAF forces and foreign actors on the ground in Afghanistan. On the other hand, how Downs (2012) frames the matter for Chinese engagement in Afghanistan, "*China's apparent willingness to profit off of the blood and treasure spilt by other countries*", by making use of the engagement of other States, while not assuming responsibility in those matters. This pragmatic, and rather hypocritical, approach of China's non-involvement, yet part-taking and profiting from Afghanistan can be further reviewed in a pre- and post-Taliban takeover analysis.

Geostrategic engagement with Afghanistan

The East Asia Forum estimates that China is attempting to fill the security deficit and power vacuum mentioned previously to further its own objectives (Jain 2021). The historical security deficit and decentralized socio-economic realities in Afghanistan, as well as a weak State, indicate the high level of involvement of local, regional, and global powers in Afghanistan. Clashing priorities by Pakistan-backed Taliban, Chinese influence, failed American restructuring and assistance, the historical nexus of Soviet invasion and British collapse, all factor into heightened competition between stakeholders in the region preventing any underlying stability. China has pursued a role to promote economic connectivity through its staple BRI project in the past decades, which in essence is actually a strategic and expansionist project. With Afghanistan, China could increase regional connectivity for this underlying purpose, and the Taliban have already indicated a willingness to join CPEC after their takeover in 2021 (Grossman 2021). While the largest influence-taker in Afghanistan remains Pakistan, according to scholars there is a need to fill the security void and deficit in South Asia (Yang 2021). However, opinions diverge on who will come to be the greatest influential power in Afghanistan. In a recent webinar discussion of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), this question was discussed in detail within the time frame of two years. In this debate, Senior Colonel Zhou Bo (2021) expressed his belief of China becoming the most influential actor in Afghanistan in the next two years because of the economic investments discussed prior. Zhou Bo examined another angle which has not received wide attention in research, namely the political impartiality and non-involvement in Afghanistan in its contemporary history. An approach defined through a positively narrated '*humanitarian care*'

and 'humanity' itself provides for a much-facilitated attempt of increasing influence in the decentralized State of Afghanistan.

Yet, the role of Pakistan in geostrategic engagement with Afghanistan need not be underestimated. The relationship between Pakistan and operating terrorist groups like Taliban or the Haqqani network is vast. Particularly, this relationship crystallized during the move from insurgency to governance of Taliban during 1996 – 2001 (Fatima 2014) and more recently during the Taliban takeover in the summer of 2021. While China's role in Afghanistan might be reason for caution, the dominance of Pakistani influence in Afghanistan need not be forgotten. While Pakistan has secured a role of vast influence, the objectives of part-taking differ much from China. The Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies sheds light on the supposed underlying intentions of China during, and shortly after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. According to Tan (2021), China narrates the US withdrawal as a failure and promises to rebuild Afghanistan with a pragmatic approach, emphasizing on the typically positive nuanced narration and the prosperity of relations, albeit Chinese fear of engagement with the unpredictable extremist Taliban.

Geostrategic involvement of China, as for any other foreign involvement in Afghanistan, depends on the stability of the country itself. However, China's basic policy after the Taliban's military takeover can be termed imperialistic, opportunistic, exploitative, and highly selfish. While it will keep making feeble noises about an inclusive government in Kabul and human rights, China has made it clear that it accepts the Taliban as having all the legitimacy that China needs so long as the terrorist organization opens up all of Afghanistan's considerable natural resources for China to exploit in an unbridled manner. Given China's own gross disregard for human rights, it would be satisfied even if the new Taliban regime gives the impression of being just a tad more moderate than it was during its previous stint in power in the 1990s.

Future trajectories

Configuring a possible outlook onto advanced relations between the two countries poses a multifold of difficulties, including the biases and uncertainties of the stakes prioritized by the parties. What is clear, is that China is not the only influence and stakeholder in Afghanistan. A power play between the adjacent States, diverging interests, and dissentious operation methods all factor in. More importantly, the power structures of Afghanistan, with an inherently weak State and governance, be it the Karzai, Ghani, or Taliban-led, showcases the difficulty of a meaningful and long-term engagement by any foreign actor for their own- and to the benefit of the Afghan people. The regional influence China could take, however, would reaffirm its role as a regional hegemon, and reiterate the power structures of Chinese expansionism already visible in East Asia, and the entailments this carries (Girard 2018). A vast span of infrastructure development projects and Chinese State-owned firms exploring locations for profit and extraction of resources has been visible across the globe. From a Chinese perspective, the missing link in South Asia for this initiative, Afghanistan, has been attempted to be captured through various angles of engagement.

While Sino-Afghan relations have been relatively calm, the recent developments raise voices of concern. For China, an upfront engagement with Taliban leaders projects a ruthless approach to achieving certain objectives, while not accounting for the downsides for the population, and the long-term results of an engagement with Taliban. Furthermore, even an involvement, financial assistance, or recognition, would not secure any stakes of China given the cold-blooded nature of Taliban. The entanglement of Taliban with Pakistan will only further create dissonances between China, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. Ultimately, for China the instability and Taliban-run State of Afghanistan creates troubles for their foreign stakes and the BRI, while for Afghans an agreement between China and the Taliban would only result in an even more dire situation in the coming time.

Overall, what should remain at the center of attention is preventing a hasty transfer of assets and territories with natural resources from a Taliban-run government to China, which would not benefit the Afghan people, nor would it uphold long-term Sino-Afghan relations.

Since the Taliban have seized power in Afghanistan, the Chinese have been keen to the possibilities of cooperation with the group. For China, holding power over the Taliban heads could benefit the five themes discussed which China pursues in Afghanistan.

Yet, as China wades optimistically and expectantly into highly turbulent Afghan waters, it needs to be fully conscious of the perils that lurk ahead. It must bear in mind that the Taliban have already broken well-nigh every promise made in the deal with the US in Doha, and the terrorist outfit's attitude and principles are highly unlikely to change in the future. Such a misadventure, if China still chooses to push ahead with its plans, despite increasing and visible opposition to the Taliban within Afghanistan by thousands of exceptionally brave Afghans, predominantly women, who have hit the Taliban-patrolled streets braving threats to their lives against a radical ideology and a terrorist regime, may force it to realize the hard way that it possesses neither the resources nor the skills to subjugate the Afghan people in the same manner as it had done to other less complex and warlike nations that were characterized by their vulnerabilities.

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