

## Implications of China's BRI Expansion in Afghanistan

---

### Background:

On 9 May 2023, on the occasion of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Islamabad, Pakistan, a joint statement was released. This statement mentioned many key initiatives. Out of those, one of the key takeaways was their commitment to further extend the trilateral cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and to jointly extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan.<sup>[i]</sup> The Chinese objective of Afghanistan's participation in the BRI has been in the pipeline, since an Afghan delegation attended the 2nd International Belt & Road Forum in 2017. With this announcement, one more economically unstable poor Asian country with a divided society came under the influence of China. With this, question arise because unlike other BRI nations, Afghanistan under the present Taliban government is under sanctions and conflicts. So it's an interesting development from Geopolitical aspects also.

### What are China's intentions?

In 2021 after the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan, the USA placed Afghanistan under sanctions and froze its overseas assets, including gold and forex of the Afghanistan Central Bank. This caused many humanitarian problems for civilians and the ruling Taliban. Although the UN, the US and other western European countries continue to provide humanitarian aid like food, medicines, educational support etc, Taliban desperately wants frozen funds for payment to its soldiers, fighters, as well as purchasing arms, surveillance equipment etc.

The West is aware that the Taliban may further erode civil liberties and cause human rights violations. Hence in the long-run, unless the Taliban rulers agree to form an inclusive government and provide basic human rights to Afghan women, children and civilians in general, the Taliban's cash problems are here to stay. In this context, Taliban's vulnerability is being exploited by China by providing funds in the name of development of BRI projects. This will help China to develop friendly relations with Taliban only, not the Afghan people because unlike western countries and India in particular which had begun to provide humanitarian assistance to the poor civilians, China was least interested in capacity building or humanitarian assistance. Unlike India, which has been constructing dams, bridges, schools, the parliament building of Afghanistan, the Chinese never undertook any such projects in the rule of the previous regime as the government was being backed by the US. Hence right after the US withdrawal China is trying to become the next development partner of the Taliban.

### Will Afghanistan gain anything?

The key question here is will Afghanistan gain anything from this BRI project? The common Afghan people won't gain anything. Only the Taliban will get the required funds for their own operational activities. It is widely known that under the promise of infrastructure development and economic prosperity, the BRI has been used as a debt trap tool by China, example being the Sri Lankan economic crisis. We have witnessed how the Hambantota port has been leased to China over a period of 99 years in 2017.<sup>[ii]</sup> The BRI projects in Pakistan or Sri Lanka never provided any job opportunities for local people. Instead the Chinese workers and companies

only work in these projects to make profit. In most of CPEC projects, the quality and feasibility of the projects like rail and road construction has been questioned.

Unlike India, which places core importance on the people to people connect & economic development, the Chinese will place their agenda on China to Taliban connection only, neglecting the people. Whatever funds or projects to be provided to Afghanistan have a high chance of going to the pockets of the Taliban. We have seen how corrupt political parties in Sri Lanka have gobbled up millions of dollars in the name of white elephant projects and have eroded the forex reserves.<sup>[iii]</sup> Afghanistan is in much worse condition than Sri Lanka. If the same happens there, the people will be devastated.

### **What will China gain?**

Historically Afghanistan is known as the 'Graveyard of Empires' and has been in a state of war for the past many decades. It is a hotbed of terrorist organizations. By far, Afghanistan's security situation remains a major challenge for China and its ambitions to connect South and Central Asia through the BRI. China desires stability in Afghanistan to check the flow of militancy, radical ideologies, and narcotics into Xinjiang Autonomous Region. It also wants to gain access to the Indian Ocean & achieve regional connectivity through the BRI. China has invested in infrastructure projects across the Xinjiang region, which is a key connecting point for CPEC and BRI routes situated near the Wakhan Corridor & thus connects Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan with China. Closer to this route, Beijing wants to keep the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) away from this area, curtail ISIS-K gaining momentum inside Afghanistan, and is wary of TTP resurgence across Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas.<sup>[iv]</sup>

Apart from the security perspective, China will most probably try to exploit the natural resources. Earlier on January 5, this year, the Taliban regime signed an agreement with the Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC), a subsidiary of the state-owned China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), for the extraction of oil from the Amu Darya basin. Under this treaty China will invest \$150 million annually for three years and increase it thereafter to \$540 million for the contract's 25-year duration. Then on April 13, Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum announced that the Chinese company Gochin had expressed interest in investing \$10 billion in Afghanistan's lithium reserves. Meanwhile, China is reported to be in talks with the Taliban regime over renegotiating the terms of a 2008 contract to mine copper from the Mes Aynak reserves in Logar province.<sup>[v]</sup>

### **Implications for India:**

The above BRI expansion can have strategic implications for India. The more China invests in Afghanistan and Pakistan through CPEC and BRI, the more these critical regions will rely on China. Increased connectivity and integration of CPEC and BRI routes from Central Asia to South Asia via Afghanistan could increase China's reliance on Indian Ocean routes for its energy and trade needs. This could heighten the threat perception of the United States and its allies including India towards China's potential naval dominance in IOR and disrupt the geopolitical calculus in the region, resulting in increased naval competition in the IOR.<sup>[vi]</sup> Also since the CPEC passes through Indian Gilgit-Baltistan territory under occupation of Pakistan, and if India remains silent, this will give approval to Taliban and China that CPEC doesn't violate Indian sovereignty.

### **Conclusion:**

The BRI expansion in Afghanistan is definitely designed to give an edge to China in the region. But its success will depend on the local security situation on ground. Although India's engagement with Afghanistan is limited to humanitarian aspects, India should not hesitate to raise its concern to Taliban regarding the CPEC violating its sovereignty in J&K.

## References:

---

[i] Joint Statement of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue', *Ministry Of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China*, 9 May 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/202305/t20230509\\_11073522.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202305/t20230509_11073522.html)

[ii] Akhila Nair, 'China's Debt Trap Diplomacy in Sri Lanka', *Vivekananda International Foundation*, 30 July 2022, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2022/july/30/china-s-debt-trap-diplomacy-in-sri-Lanka>

[iii] Akhila Nair, Ibid.

[iv] Noorulain Naseem, Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri, 'Beyond BRI Connectivity: Chinese Access to the Indian Ocean Through Afghanistan and Pakistan', *South Asian Voices*, 18 May 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/building-bri-connectivity-chinese-access-to-the-indian-ocean-through-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

[v] Sudha Ramachandran, 'Can the Belt and Road Initiative Succeed in Afghanistan?', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 19 May 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/can-the-belt-and-road-initiative-succeed-in-afghanistan/>

[vi] Noorulain Naseem, Ishtiaq Ali Mehkri, Ibid.

**Ajay Kumar Das is a Independent Scholar of International Affairs & Security Studies**

**Disclaimer :** The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.