



China's Role in Afghan-Taliban Peace Talks: Afghan Perspectives

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China has maintained relations with all Afghan administrations except for the pro-Soviet governments (1979-1989) which it refused to recognize. While Beijing condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it also remained officially inactive in Afghanistan during the Taliban government. However, the Afghan analyst Malik Setiz writes that China did have unofficial relations with the Taliban Government (Setiz 2015).

Since 2002, China has been supporting the new government in Kabul both financially and politically. China is one of the biggest foreign investors in Afghanistan. The Logar Aynak, copper extraction project, for instance, is the biggest foreign investment in the country so far. In the meantime, it has two further stakes: one, diversification of energy resources by investing in Central Asia's gas-rich countries like Afghanistan,

which is geopolitically significant as a corridor of transportation and source of energy, and two, national security concerns. China fears that the trauma and political instability of Afghanistan could strengthen the political forces of East Turkestan represented by Uyghur Muslim separatist activities in its Xinjiang province.

Withdrawal of US and NATO from the country will create a vacuum which could be filled up by India, Russia and China. As one analyst has noted, 'So far, all three [regional powers] have been content to let the US handle the security situation in Afghanistan' (Bose 2014). This paper explores China's role in Afghan-Taliban peace talks in general, and argues that China can facilitate Afghanistan's peace process by utilizing its influences over the members of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In other words, reconciliation will be more conducive if China transforms the peace

process from solely a Chinese initiative to a SCO regional mobilization for peace and stability in Afghanistan. This paper looks at the issue from the perspectives of ordinary Afghan citizens, social activists and other political forces. At the same time, it explains the power-sharing and structural barriers to peace talks. It also explores the Taliban stances towards peace negotiations with Chinese initiatives, and the regional atmosphere.

Afghan Views on China's Peace Mediation

Afghan citizens have a neutral, if not blank, historical memory of China's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan. The two adjacent countries have no border dispute and China has never actively interfered in the internal affairs of the country. China has always kept a deliberate distance from its western neighbour. It has neither come too close nor stayed away; its bystander's position of in Afghanistan being informed by its concerns in Xinjiang.

China can facilitate Afghanistan's peace process through its influence over the members of Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The Sino-Pak relation is controversial within Afghan political discourses. Ahmad Saidi, an Afghan political activist, believes that China-Pakistan relations will influence China's decisions and make its peace initiatives ineffective. He argues that Pakistan will use the opportunity to empower the pro-Pakistani political forces and secure its own influence in the future. Former Afghan president, Hamid Karzai,

motivated China to play a more active role in Afghan-Taliban peace talks (*Negaah TV* 2014). However, after his presidency, his spokesman warned current president Ashraf Ghani's government of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)-led negotiations. They argue that Pakistan uses China's benevolent intentions instrumentally to further its own interests.

On the other hand, Abdul Baqi Amin, a professor at Kabul University, has criticized the Karzai administration for failing to achieve any success in peace talks with Taliban and spreading distrust about the peace process and Sino-Pak initiatives. He further propounds that the current boost in Taliban diplomatic relation may be independent and free of Pakistan's influence, because they too want to have good relations with more countries (Amin 2014). Thus, no one can overlook the presence of Pakistan in peace talks, considering the massive Pakistani influence over the Taliban, and its political and social interests in the region.

Ghulam Jay Lani Zuak, head of Kabul News TV, believes that both China and Russia want to end the instability in their southern borders and that the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan will destabilize these two countries as well. Amin argues that both parties, the government and the Taliban, trust China. The Taliban do not see Chinese as adversaries like they do the Americans and the Afghan government has received China's support during the last few years. However, Amin believes that Chinese should not try to impose the Afghan government's agenda on Taliban. Instead, it can play a constructive role in building trust and mutual understanding between the government and Taliban (Amin 2014).

Despite an overwhelming majority that supports the peace process, there is also a

trend of criticizing the negotiations. This trend asserts that talking to Taliban means overlooking all the atrocities which this group has engaged in the last two decades. They also argue, '[T]alks provide legitimacy to the other side, a concession that some insurgent groups desperately seek' (Byman 2009: 125). A columnist in an Afghan newspaper writes, 'We want peace but not at any cost'. He also believes that running after Taliban will not bring them to the negotiation table (*Daily Etilaat Roz* 2015).

It is evident that a majority of Afghan political forces support China's initiative for peace talks but that some are also concerned about the influence of Pakistan over the negotiations with Taliban. Another concern is raised by women's rights defenders, 'It is clear that women's rights have been a low priority [in peace talks]' (cited in Donati 2014). The Afghan Human Rights Commission also warned the government that in peace talks with Taliban, freedom of expression, the Afghan constitution, civil freedom, human rights, women rights, and liberal values should not be compromised.

The Afghan government desires to lead the peace process and China seems to be supportive of it. President Ghani made his first foreign trip in October 2014 to China and encouraged it to play a more robust role in Afghan-Taliban peace talks. In January 2015, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei said that 'China supports the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" process' (cited in Wong and Mashalmay 2015).

However, the power-sharing nature of Afghan public administration along communal lines, which was designed in the Bonn Conference (2001), leaves a very narrow passage of entry for those political forces that were not present in the

conference. Beijing too, seemingly, does not want to change this status quo. So far, China has restrained itself from offering a particular social engineering of Afghan society. Beijing tends to go along with the central government and has supported the status quo. However, discord about whose stakes should be given to Taliban creates structural and official barriers to successful peace talks.

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Analyst Nasser Saghafi Amiri believes that existence of the non-Pashtun combined traditional anti-Taliban forces, Northern Alliance, inside the government, is another cause of governmental inconsistency in the peace process. '[A]s the main rival of the Taliban in the past, this group...is believed to constitute more than 60 per cent of the Afghan National Army' and Amiri believes it 'would obviously resist any concessions to the Taliban affecting the areas populated by ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks' (Amiri 2015). Nevertheless, so far, cries for negotiation with Taliban have not faced any official barriers by non-Pashtun political forces despite many fears of losing their freedom and stakes with coming of the Taliban.

Taliban Vacillation

Daniel Byman notes that '[t]alking with insurgents is often a necessary first step toward defeating them or reaching an acceptable compromise' and that "'talks must often be done even as insurgents and state soldiers shoot at each other'. However,

he clarifies that talks cannot be an alternative to use of force and that the two usually go hand-in-hand. Negotiations are fruitful only if insurgent groups 'believe they have little chance of success on the battlefield' (Byman 2009).

The challenge is that Afghan insurgents are far from united, and the many different factions are further internally divided.

Western involvement in Islamic countries demonized the face of West in the eyes of religious insurgent groups. However, as mentioned earlier, historical memory of Afghan political forces at least, is not hostile to China's peace initiatives. The prevailing hatred among religious insurgents toward the West, in fact, advantages China. The PRC tried to build unofficial relations during Taliban rule over Afghanistan and afterwards to leverage them tactically to stop and manipulate Uyghur Muslim (*Fars News Agency* 2015).

In December 2000, in Kandahar, Lu Shulin, the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, met Mullah Omar. He assured China that Taliban will not 'allow any group to use its territory to conduct any such operations' against China. In exchange, the Taliban leader demanded 'two things from China: formal political recognition and protection from U.N. sanctions'. However neither side delivered on their promises. Uyghur militants remained in Taliban-controlled territory and China did not use its veto to halt UN sanctions against the Taliban (Small 2013). Notwithstanding this, China kept its 'off and on' relations with Taliban circle of leadership based in Pakistan, the Quetta Shura. By preserving its connection with Afghan insurgents, Beijing is trying to isolate Uyghur separatists and the Taliban

probably could show a soft corner to China since they 'have enough enemies already' (Small 2013).

In reaction to the May 2015 *New York Times* report – 'Taliban and Afghan Peace Officials Have Secret Talks in China' (Wong and Mashalmy 2015), the Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahed rejecting any secret peace talks said, that the Islamic Emirate had diplomatic relations with all countries and sent delegations to neighbouring countries, including China every now and then' (cited in Ruttig 2015). However, the former foreign minister to Taliban, Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, is positive that China can play a significant role in peace talks and negotiation mobilization among the political forces of Afghanistan (cited in *Radio Azadi* 2015b). Sayeed Akbar, a former Taliban official, argues that American involvement brought troubles to the region and to the countries that have stakes in Afghanistan as well as to Taliban and Afghan citizens. He prefers an intra-Afghan peace talks (cited in Azizi 2015). However, the challenge for external players is also that Afghan insurgents are far from united, and the many different factions are further internally divided.

Favourable Regional Environment for China's Mediation

The peace initiative by Chinese appears to have the support of other regional powers. Amar Sinha, the Indian ambassador to Afghanistan, in an interview with *Radio Azadi* stated, '[W]e support China's role in the peace process, the PRC knows that peace is crucial for the region'. However, he was concerned that the achievement of Afghanistan's people in the last 13 years should not be compromised in the peace talks (*Radio Azadi* 2015a). Indian support

for the Chinese initiative would make the peace process more plausible and conducive to success. In the meantime, China's special envoy to Afghanistan, Sun Yuxi, is aware of the crucial role which India could play for peace and reconciliation and has assured a close working relationship with India to fight terrorism (*The Economic Times* 2015).

During the civil wars of the 1990s, Pakistan supported Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and later, the Taliban. Recent developments show Pakistan's inability to control and contain Islamic extremism and this could lead to the re-emergence of Taliban as the prevailing political power in Afghanistan. This is a cause of concern for China. It sees Taliban's relations with Uyghur separatists as endangering its sovereignty and jeopardizing its territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, given the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan, the practical advantage goes to Pakistan due to its influence over Taliban. China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, said in a press conference in Pakistan, 'Pakistan is an important country to Afghanistan'. He went on to say that 'this country has a special access to the region' (cited in *Business Standard* 2015). However, Chinese emphasis on giving a more active and important role to Pakistan makes China's diplomacy objectionable to Afghan government and anti-Pakistan forces and reduces it to merely one bargaining for Pakistan's demands for power. .

Another influential neighbouring country, Iran too, benefits from stability in Afghanistan. The presence of more than two million Afghan migrants has created social problems and undercut employment in the country. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on its western

borders also pushes Iran to seek peace in its eastern vicinity. So, there is no reason why Iran would oppose Chinese initiated peace talks.

An increased convergence of interest between Beijing and Washington regarding Afghanistan is foreseen.

Washington has welcomed Beijing's involvement in Afghanistan after a decade of being 'rebuffed'. China is cooperating 'and (has) working relations with the main parties, including Iran and Russia' (Page et al. 2015). Further, the Afghan President in his meeting with Xi Jinping in October 2014 expressed his hope that 'Afghanistan would be a model for cooperation between China and the United States' (Najafizada and Shi 2014). At the time of Ghani's visit to Beijing, a U.S. diplomat too, in a background briefing, stated that the White House was eyeing 'Afghanistan as a place of cooperation, not competition with China' (Chen 2014). An increased convergence of interest between Beijing and Washington regarding Afghanistan might thus be likely.

SCO: A Better Bet

Unlike many other countries that have cultivated warlords, partners and influential people in the localities (Weitz 2014), China does not have a local partner in Afghanistan. This is because of Beijing's principle of non-interference. However, recent trends suggest that Beijing is shifting from passive involvement towards being a more active player in Afghanistan. China's special envoy to Afghanistan, Sun Yuxi, in a press conference in December 2014, declared that his country wanted a peace settlement with

the Taliban and was ready to assist in the process (Weitz 2014). A Chinese author also reasoned:

‘A comprehensive involvement in Afghan affairs by China will bring huge risks. It will have to confront the mess that the US experienced, the different views of Afghan sects [sic] in addition to the remaining US influence, making it a nearly impossible idea. But the West insists China is taking a free ride in Afghanistan, urging us to offer more. Kabul also has high expectations on China over its rebuilding. China has many interests in Afghanistan. No matter how risky Afghanistan’s peaceful reconstruction is, China needs to be there...This is the cost of being a major power and we need to get used to it.’ (Global Times 2014).

Transplantation of the reconciliation process from a solely Chinese peace initiative to a SCO peace mobilization will bring more cooperation and reduce the adversaries.

However, Tatar believes the Chinese have changed their perspective from a unitary and bilateral relation with the Taliban, Afghan government or Pakistan to one of regional mobilization. Naim Asas, an Afghan-French political commentator, believes the SCO can facilitate peace in Afghanistan and stabilize its borders. China’s influence on members of SCO can be used to mobilize them to play a more robust role in the peace processes and fighting terrorism (Asas 2015).

All the ethnic groups of Afghanistan have their branches and links with their co-ethnic brethren in member countries of the SCO. Social instability in Afghanistan will be

exported through migration to SCO member countries which undermines the national security of these nations, and affects their territorial integrity (Asas 2015). For instance, wars in Afghanistan helped Tajikistani extremists to find sanctuary to mobilize their anti-government activities from Afghanistan. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is similarly, embedded within Afghan insurgencies. Another collateral challenge for SCO member states is the production of poppy and its trafficking through the borders of SCO nations and thus contributing funds to ongoing conflicts.

Countries in the region need to mobilize their energies and work towards peace. While as one of the regional powers, China can play a significant role in Afghan-Taliban peace, transplantation of the reconciliation process from a solely Chinese peace initiative to a SCO peace mobilization will bring more cooperation and reduce the number of adversaries. In a SCO peace framework, the two neighbouring countries of Afghanistan who have been blamed for intervention, Iran and Pakistan, can find grounds to cooperate with the Afghanistan government. Asas believes that Russia’s pressure on Iran and China’s on Pakistan to stop political manipulation will lead to a successful peace process. He also believes members of the SCO can promote their own national interests by promoting peace in Afghanistan (Asas 2015).

A peace initiation by SCO would bring the passive Central Asian countries, including neighbouring countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, on board in a more active role in stabilizing Afghanistan. Indeed, Mohammad Mohaqiq, a prominent Afghan-Hazara leader, believes that peace in Afghanistan can be achieved only if adjacent countries desire for that (*Tolo News* 2015).

Iran, an observer member of the SCO, and Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as permanent members, will be important factors for peace. The nationalist separatist movements of these countries have links with Afghan insurgent groups and the Taliban. This should be enough motivation to get them involved in the SCO peace initiation process. Moreover, Afghanistan and its neighbours can work within the framework of SCO better than through bilateral relations and state-to-state talks.

Conclusion

The success of an Afghan-Taliban peace negotiation with China's initiatives, hinges on several factors.

First, disparity and absence of a central authority among the Taliban makes the peace process difficult and complicated (*Fars News Agency* 2015). However, Pakistan exercises considerable influence over the Taliban and other anti-government factions, and China could in turn use its influence over Pakistan to help bring the Taliban to the negotiation table.

Second, the indigenous political forces, the Afghan government and the ordinary citizens, the Taliban and the rest of insurgent groups, and religious hardliners, should not be hostile towards the Chinese diplomatic relationship with Afghanistan.

Third, the power-sharing structure of Afghan government needs to be dynamic and open for entry of those political forces which were not present in 2001 Bonn conference.

Fourth, all the regional powers and neighbouring countries, Russia, India, Iran, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics should favour China's peaceful involvement

in Afghanistan. Finally, the peace talks with Taliban will be more conducive if China promotes it within the framework of the SCO, drawing support from other member states. ■

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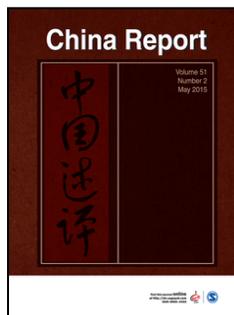
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