



Re-calibrating Afghanistan: China's Westward Approach

Speaker: Raghav Sharma

Chair: Debasish Chaudhari

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ICS Seminar Room

The speaker commenced the seminar by noting that China's involvement in Afghanistan has not always been visible. He noted that the Chinese engagement with Afghanistan had become prominent only post 2010 with China acting as a mediator between Rawalpindi and Kabul. Therefore, it can be surmised that China has been slowly re-calibrating its engagement with its neighbor and has been steadily expanding the scope of its role in the region. The speaker stated that in the presentation he would trace the contours and footprints of the relationship that the People's Republic of China and Afghanistan have been sharing for the past 60-70 years.

The speaker began by outlining the linkages between the two countries whose relations predate the modern conception of nation states. There are several archaeological evidence to prove that the two ancient civilizations had been in contact on several fronts. However, in the modern period, the contact between the two countries has been weak especially in the first part of the 20th century, there was very little engagement between the two neighbors. Through the 1950's-1970's, PRC established diplomatic relations with the Afghan government, but it was only after the military backed coup in Afghanistan that Kabul started featuring in the political calculus of Beijing. China contributed to the anti-Soviet Jihad in the 1970's by providing aid worth \$100 million and 59 tanks. China worked along with the US and several other countries to rid Afghanistan of the Soviets. Through the decade of the 1990's China maintained contact with the Mujahedeen government but did not contribute financially to the development or welfare of the

country. China has also restricted its involvement in the country to the commercial front focusing solely on trade with Afghanistan. Therefore, the PRC has often been accused of free riding on the benefits derived from the role of the West in Afghanistan which focused on social welfare and development. The year 2012 saw a shift in China's policy towards Afghanistan, they moved from a strictly commerce-oriented approach to one where they were open to other avenues. This shift saw the Chinese sign agreements with Afghanistan and Pakistan which ranged from security on the borders to training of the police forces.

The speaker then moved on to talk about the role China is playing in building peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to the speaker, China, with its major clout over Pakistan and its rich engagement with the Taliban, will play a crucial role in the peace talks, one which will be beneficial for the Chinese as well. This is so because the Chinese believe that any instability within Afghanistan has the potential to spill over and have an impact in its own land. Therefore, they have demanded Afghanistan to arrest and deport any Uyghurs back to the mainland. The Chinese are apprehensive of the spread of radical ideology that might empower the Muslims in China and fuel their fights against the government. This apprehension is further fueled by the growing presence of ISIS operatives in Afghanistan.

In the last segment, the speaker talked of the possible implications of the westward approach of China. The first was the possible friction between the Indian and Chinese ambitions and goals in Afghanistan. The two countries are vying for the same things: increased trade, development and stability in the region, but the approaches adopted by them could be the cause of the said friction. Another factor that could possibly contribute to the friction is the growing proximity between Moscow and Beijing at a time where relations between New Delhi and Moscow are lackluster. The second implication according to the speaker is the growing schisms within the Afghan political circles. There is a fraction in Afghanistan which is weary of the increasing role of China in its matters and does not perceive this intervention in a positive manner. Thirdly, by increasing their involvement in the country, the Chinese are now faced with greater responsibility and vulnerability. Finally, the Chinese will be attempting to rid themselves of the "free rider" critique by increasing their engagement and involvement.

The chair, Dr. Debasish Chaudhari, started the discussions by questioning if the Chinese engagements in Afghanistan could be seen as a way of safeguarding their economic and security concerns. He also questioned if there was any assurance that anything substantial would emerge from China's role in the conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan and if it would finally result in any peace in the region. The floor was then opened to questions from the audience. The questions that were asked pertained to China's geopolitical ambitions and the possibility of bringing peace to the region through its projects. To this the speaker answered by clarifying that the BRI project does not intend to bring stability to Afghanistan but it is to ensure that there is no spillover to China. On the question of military aid, the speaker threw light on the training of Afghan police forces by the Chinese who are also equipping them with uniforms. However, there is no information available officially on the military aid. On being questioned on the commoner's perception of the engagement by China and Pakistan, the speaker answered by saying that there exists hatred towards Pakistan because of the conflict between the countries. When it came to China, the lack of visibility of its engagement publicly lead the people to perceive it as disinterest in matters related to Afghanistan.

About the Speaker

Raghav Sharma is an Associate Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs. Prior to this he has taught in the Conflict Studies and Management Program and the Good Governance Afghanistan Program at the Willy Brandt School Of Public Policy, University of Erfurt. He has also been associated with the Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi in his capacity as a Visiting Associate Fellow where he led two Research Projects on Indian membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and examining the Indian and Chinese roles in Central Asia. Both projects were commissioned by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. As Research Officer at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies he published extensively on issues of strategic importance for Afghanistan and Central Asia.

He has also been associated with the development sector having worked and traveled extensively across Afghanistan in his capacity as an International Humanitarian aid worker and having undertaken consultancies for the Aga Khan Foundation and Community World Services in Kabul. He holds a doctoral degree in Political Science with a specialization in Conflict Studies

from the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt, a graduate degree in History from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi and in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University, Budapest.

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