

# EXPANSION BY STEALTH: CHINA'S INTERESTS, INFRASTRUCTURE & INVESTMENTS IN PAKISTAN & AFGHANISTAN

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**A**s the US and Nato forces prepare to withdraw or draw down their forces from Afghanistan in 2014, there is considerable speculation regarding a possible power vacuum, questions about who will fill it, and the probable implications involved. Certainly, there are a number of regional players that are likely to play a role or to contest for a larger share of the Afghan pie. However, this issue is not just about Afghanistan, but is also about Pakistan as well, which has become closely linked with Afghanistan due to the conditions in the region before and after 9/11.

This paper considers China's role in the Afghanistan-Pakistan sub-region from the perspective of how it will add to existing problems or help to solve others. Specifically, it will examine some of the projects initiated by China in the two countries, in order to: (i) understand the direction of China's ongoing and future activities; (ii) understand the nature of Chinese political and economic stakes in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and (iii) whether these will strengthen the region or pose greater challenges for the US and NATO forces, for Europe, and for the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as part of the process of exploration of the main sources of tension and fault lines in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the role regional actors, such as China, play in this regard

The present study will therefore also examine the overall set of challenges faced by Afghanistan and Pakistan. The study depends on secondary sources for Afghanistan and on a mixture of secondary and primary sources for Pakistan. The initial sections of the paper will entail an analysis of the state of the region, before entering into a discussion of China's relations, its future investments and the impact its presence and policies will have on peace, security and development in the two countries.

## **The Afghanistan-Pakistan Region**

The plan for the withdrawal of Nato and US forces in 2014 will pose huge challenges for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. This is due to the particular conditions of the region, which suffers from heightened militancy, poor governance, and the relative weakness of state systems.

While the weakness of the state in Afghanistan is a major problem in restoring peace and stability in the region, Pakistan is also no different either in many ways. There too, corruption is rampant and law enforcement is weak.

In Afghanistan's case, the Taliban seem to have a better position militarily that may strengthen, unless the state has a sustainable and reliable law enforcement system and a security apparatus in place. The weakness of the state and its lack of monopoly over violence enhance internal political conflict arising out of ethnic divides, ideological divides and communal conflict. A weak state system will not be able to resist other problems such as drug trafficking that seems to have fed the Afghan war lords: (reportedly, the Taliban earned as much as US \$ 250 million in 2008: Gretchen 2009: 19). The problem of drugs and poppy cultivation, however, is not restricted to Taliban-controlled areas, but is widespread in Tajik areas as well (Khan 2011: 118). Pakistan's former foreign secretary Riaz Khan is of the view that the drug mafia is extremely powerful and constitutes one of the sources of ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. The illegal drug economy therefore is, and will remain, an independent source of financing for the Taliban and other warlords who may tower above a weak and resource-constrained state.

However, the drug economy is not the only issue.

There is also the problem of regional states such as Pakistan investing intellectually and otherwise in the survival of the Taliban, who, as Islamabad insists, should be included as part of any political setup in Kabul.<sup>1</sup> Their inclusion, it is believed, denotes popular Pashtun sentiment, thus ensuring representation of the Pushtuns, who are an ethnic majority, in Afghanistan's political system. The Taliban are generally considered friendly to Pakistan as compared to the Northern Alliance that is seen as having links with India. The strengthening of the Taliban in Afghanistan thus poses considerable questions regarding the ideological nature of the state and society, as well as its impact on religious minorities and on women, who suffered greatly under the Taliban's Shari'a system of law and justice. Moreover, the continued Taliban presence is likely to strengthen the Pakistan-based *jihadi* groups that are spread all over the country including in the Punjab and Sindh provinces, where the state claims to have under its writ, in comparison to the tribal areas, where establishing state control has always been a problem and which has enhanced since the beginning of the war on terror. Pakistan too has developed major law and order problems and increased militancy that directly affects the country's socioeconomic development. Even extensive development assistance has not managed to have a substantial positive effect, in part due to the rise in ideological, ethnic and sectarian violence.

## China & the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region

Economic development could potentially solve the problems of conflict and militancy in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, where poverty seems to be one of the major drivers of violence and instability. Such investment in the region by major players such as China could help, as it could increase the possibility of job creation and thus increase incomes. However, it is questionable as to whether the prevailing rampant corrup-

1. <http://jinnah-institute.org/programs/strategic-security-program/324-pakistan-the-united-states-and-the-end-game-in-afghanistan-perceptions-of-pakistans-foreign-policy-elite>

tion in Afghanistan would allow the much-expected boost to take place, because – on past performance - powerful segments in the government are likely to manipulate the job market.<sup>2</sup> The Karzai regime, in any case, has a very bad reputation as far as financial mismanagement is concerned. Corruption also tends to deepen instability, as warlords struggle to capture and dominate resource distribution.

Nevertheless, an important issue is that of the impact of Chinese interaction with the region, and how it impacts on existing sources of tension within both countries.

During a recent conversation with a US diplomat, a Chinese diplomat reportedly labelled Pakistan as “China’s Israel”.<sup>3</sup> More than just a statement about the military-strategic ties between Beijing and Islamabad, the statement is symptomatic of China’s growing interest in South Asia, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The partnership between China and Pakistan will certainly be critical in enhancing Beijing’s potential in a post-2014 South Asia.

Chinese interest in the region is based on its geo-political and geo-strategic needs. While the former pertains to its political competition with other emerging Asian powers like India, the latter concerns Beijing’s great need for energy and other resources that are required for expanding China’s economic potential. As a result, China is slowly, gradually, and tactfully increasing its presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan by investing in critical sectors such as mining and communication. It has sought (and won) major mining contracts in both countries and is investing in building dams, road and other strategic infrastructure as well: (the Gwadar port in Pakistan is a case in point). Interestingly, China is expanding very cautiously, which means that unlike the US, Beijing is not building up its military force in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but instead, is trying to develop Kabul and Islamabad’s own stake in Beijing’s presence in the region. Instead of providing general economic assistance or military support, China is bringing direct investments into the two countries, focusing particularly in areas that are most beneficial to Chinese interests. According to Marco Mezzera, the Sino-Pakistan relations are based on four types of interests: (i) economic security, (ii) internal security, (iii) energy security, and (iv) geo-strategic concerns (Mezzera 2011: 9). We argue that this focus is not just limited to Pakistan, but extends to the entire Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

## Historic Relations

The nature of current Chinese investment in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region indicates a diversification of its interests as compared to those of the past.

In case of Afghanistan, China historically has shown relatively little interest in the country till recently. Prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the China-Afghan border was the only one without conflict (Segal 1981: 1161). However, Afghanistan has now become critical, due to the question of China’s Xinjiang autonomous region, with a Muslim population and hence susceptible to unrest and conflict spreading from neighbouring countries. In dealing with the Af-Pak region, historically

2. Synovitz, Ron, “China: Afghan Investment Reveals Larger Strategy”. Report for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. See, [http://www.afghan-web.com/economy/china\\_investment.html](http://www.afghan-web.com/economy/china_investment.html)
3. [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C09%5C19%5Cstory\\_19-9-2011\\_pg3\\_2](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C09%5C19%5Cstory_19-9-2011_pg3_2)

China has traditionally leaned towards Pakistan, with whom it has a military-strategic relationship dating back to the early 1960s, due to Islamabad and Beijing's common focus on India as a foe. However, in the past couple of decades, the India factor has evolved into other forms. China is more inclined towards building economic and political ties with India, which is now Beijing's important trade partner (Mezzera 2011: 5), but always without sacrificing relations with Pakistan. The bilateral linkage, in any case, is diverse but continues to have considerable emphasis on defence ties. Pakistan owes its nuclear weapons programme to cooperation with China, as well as for a major segment of its defence industry. In the coming years, and especially in the context of the future of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, China and Pakistan both have a common interest in supporting each other's presence in the region, as will be discussed below.

## **Current Relations**

### *Pakistan's Interests*

Pakistan hopes to benefit by Chinese presence in Afghanistan as a counter-balance to Indian interest and influence there. For instance, the government of General Pervez Musharraf actively encouraged Chinese investment, in building an alternative seaport in the South Western province of Balochistan at Gwadar, to tie Chinese interests with Pakistan's in the long run.

China also considered that Pakistan could be "softly" used to challenge India, in the same manner as Delhi has tried to counter-balance China by building ties with Vietnam. In the past decade or so, Islamabad has very consciously tried to develop Chinese interests in the province of Balochistan, via inviting Chinese investment to develop an alternative seaport in Gwadar, which could be used by Beijing for its navy when required. This was a strategy deliberately formulated to encourage China's vested interest in Pakistan's security.

### *China's Interests*

Currently, Chinese interest in Afghanistan and Pakistan seems to be more than just purely military. There seems to be an increased emphasis placed on energy and economic security as well as – domestically - on ensuring internal security in the Xinjiang autonomous province. One of China's major domestic security concerns is to ensure that Islamists do not penetrate the western autonomous region of Xinjiang. Bordering on Afghanistan, this area has experienced unrest in the past decade or more as a result of political influence from the region probably inspired by the increasing insurgencies in a number of Muslim countries. China, it is believed, has expressed its concern to Pakistan on several occasions, with Beijing's reaction varying from diplomatic protest to extreme annoyance expressed in the form of temporary closures of the border with Pakistan.

Some analysts take the view that securing its territory from extremists' influence is so critical that Beijing is likely to put pressure on the Pakistani government and military to contain militant forces in the entire South

Asia region, but especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, in the long run, greater Chinese influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan may actually benefit the elimination of the Taliban, some of whom are reportedly currently being supported by Pakistan's military.

### *Avoidance of Conflict*

There is certainly the possibility that China may use its new partners in the Afghan government and its old partners in Pakistan's political government and in its military, to keep non-state actors away from threatening Chinese interests. Interestingly, many of the *jihadi* groups have shown inclinations towards showing restraint as far as China is concerned - as opposed to the US - and consider China to be a friend rather an enemy despite the difference in religious ideology.<sup>4</sup> Beijing has also engaged in direct negotiations and deals with right-wing religious parties and groups like the Pakistan-based *Jamaat-e-Islami*<sup>5</sup> and *Jamaat-ud-Dawwa*. In case of the latter, China, on the behest of Pakistan, blocked any adverse move in the UN Security Council against the JuD.<sup>6</sup> This indicates an active cooperation between Pakistan and China to manage the militant problem to their mutual advantage. Sources also point fingers towards the fact that the Taliban present in Nooristan (Pakistan) have not tried to obstruct the Chinese presence in nearby Gilgit-Baltistan<sup>7</sup>. This, they believe, indicates some form of tacit understanding between the two sets of actors. In this regard, this approach may have long term implications, as these partners could work as a buffer in the Af-Pak region between China and its competitors like India.

Such co-existence appears to be part of Beijing's two-pronged approach of building ties with state and non-state actors in the region, as well as enhancing presence mainly through indirect economic investment.

This strategy makes the Chinese presence appear relatively benign, especially in comparison to Pakistani and Afghan perceptions of the US and Nato's military presence. China has shown no signs of wishing to help the US and NATO forces or even the Karzai government. Reportedly, Beijing has refused to provide any active political support to the Afghan government. Instead, it expects Kabul to sort out its problems itself with the various warlords (Pantucci 2011). This is generally the approach that Beijing has adopted towards the problem of militants and militancy in the entire region, with avoidance of confrontation being a key element.

### **Strategic Economic Importance**

The desire to seek both state and non-state partners in the region pertain to Beijing's effort to smoothen its access to the Af-Pak region which seems to have become critical due to its economic resource potential.

The Afghanistan and Pakistan region is critical as both a transit route for energy supply and a trade corridor as well as a source of vital mineral resources for China. The Gwadar port in particular is important as one of the sources for fulfilling China's growing energy needs. By 2003, China emerged as the second largest consumer of oil (Mezzer 2011: 5), a need which will grow steadily as Beijing industrializes and develops

4. Discussion with Maulana Tahir Ashrafi of Jamia Ashrafia, Lahore (Islamabad: 2011).
5. <http://pakteahouse.net/2009/07/15/jamaat-e-islami-and-the-chinese-communist-party/>
6. [http://article.wn.com/view/2010/12/06/Wikileaks\\_China\\_thwarted\\_action\\_against\\_antindia\\_terrorists/](http://article.wn.com/view/2010/12/06/Wikileaks_China_thwarted_action_against_antindia_terrorists/)

economically. Under the circumstance, Gwadar could be used for bringing crude from the Gulf and the Middle East. This route is vital especially from the perspective of developing western regions of China that have better accessibility from Pakistan than from China's eastern ports like Shanghai. Gwadar and Karachi could play a vital role in both bringing energy into the region and in feeding Chinese products into the world market. Although the autonomous region of Xinjiang was historically not significant and its development generally ignored (Segal 1981: 1162), developing this region may now be crucial, to curb internal political unrest.

However, the greatest significance of the region lies in its natural wealth, which China sees as being required to further boost Chinese position as a regional and global power.

Although Beijing is slowly developing its military potential, evolving its economic potential still remains the vital component of China's "great power" strategy. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan fall in the belt of the "Tethyan Magmatic Arc", which extends from Mongolia to Pakistan to Turkey and carries minerals like copper, gold, zinc, lead, iron ore, aluminum etc. Copper, for instance, is a critical mineral required for industrial development. The various mining agreements that China has signed with Kabul and Islamabad underscore this interest.

In 2007, China signed a contract with Kabul for the Aynak copper deposit, estimated to be worth US \$ 80 billion. The Chinese state-owned China Metallurgical group has a US \$ 3.5 billion copper mining venture in Logar province. Reportedly, the Chinese bid includes building a 400-megawatt, coal-fired power plant and a freight railroad passing from western China through Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Pakistan. The plant is considered necessary to generate electricity for mining and extraction. The rail link will contribute to supplying the mineral resources to western China to be used for the region's development.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Chinese companies ZTE Corporation and Huawei are building up their presence in the telecommunication sector in Afghanistan,<sup>9</sup>

A similar presence is being built in Pakistan where Chinese companies have been investing in mining, building dams, roads and telecommunication infrastructure. In fact, the recent Chinese interest in Pakistan is of a different nature to that of the past.. The linkage no longer revolves around military ties, but rather on Beijing's growing interest in the region's resources.

Pakistan has impressive mineral reserves. There are currently 5,000 operational mines in the country, employing nearly 300,000 workers. It has the world's 5<sup>th</sup> largest reserve of coal (184 billion tons) and has large reserves of copper, zinc, lead, and aluminum. According to Dr Shaukat Hamid Khan,<sup>10</sup> the country's copper reserves are huge and if properly explored, could turn the country from a "cotton" (producing) country to a "copper"(producing) country.<sup>11</sup> China has already started working towards exploiting these resources, starting from the Saindek copper mining project, awarded to it in 2001/02. Official sources and others in the mining industry predict that China will also be able to win the contract for the largest copper and gold mine at Reko Dik, Balochistan.<sup>12</sup>

7. Conversation with journalists from Gilgit-Baltistan (Islamabad: October 2011).

8. Synovitz, Ron, "China: Afghan Investment Reveals Larger Strategy". Report for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. See, [http://www.afghhan-web.com/economy/china\\_investment.html](http://www.afghhan-web.com/economy/china_investment.html)

9. Huq, Aziz, "Chinese Takeout". In Foreign Policy," June 15, 2010. See, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/15/chinese\\_takeout](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/15/chinese_takeout)

10. He is a physicist who served with the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission and also as a member of the Planning Commission.

11. Interview with Dr Shaukat Hameed Khan (Islamabad: 16/11/2011).

12. Ibid., A similar view was expressed by Nadir and Anwar Moin (Islamabad: 30//09/2011 & 08/10/2011).



Besides mining, Chinese companies are heavily involved in the oil and gas sector in Pakistan. There are about seven Chinese companies currently operating there spread across various locations, primarily in three provinces of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, involved in mining; Sindh (mainly oil and gas and mining); and Balochistan (mining and road construction), with fewer projects in Punjab which are primarily limited to the private sector. It is also operating projects in Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir, including dams and road construction, such as the Karakorum highway.

These projects are meant to be mutually beneficial. However, the extent of the relative benefits for the recipient states is an issue worth evaluating.

### **Bull in the China Shop: The Chinese Investment/Expansion Model**

It is, however, questionable whether Chinese investment in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region will automatically result in a seamless socio-economic development. This is due to the existing problems in the regional states and the nature of Chinese expansion.

Rampant corruption, poor governance and deficiencies in planning in both Afghanistan and Pakistan make the region highly vulnerable to exploitation and poor management of resources. Indeed, poor governance may actually in certain cases make Chinese investment a bane rather than a boon. For instance, Beijing's investment in projects, as is obvious from numerous cases in Pakistan, may not necessarily enhance the country's human resource potential or its technological capabilities, since the jobs being created are mostly for unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Chinese companies tend to bring their own workforce, particularly in technical areas. Currently, the number of Chinese workers in Pakistan is estimated to be around 30,000.<sup>13</sup> Such a presence tends to contribute to existing socio-political conflicts, due to the linguistic and cultural inability of these workers to interact with the local population, thus giving them the aura of being representatives of the central state, which in certain cases, is viewed as an exploiter. This particularly applies to China's investment in the mining sector in a province such as Balochistan, which already has an existing insurgency problem that has been running for decades.

A representative of a local NGO in the Saidek area of Balochistan, where China has mining interests, complained about the Chinese company making minimal investments in the socio-economic development of the people and the area.<sup>14</sup> Similar reservations have been expressed in context of apprehensions about the Riko Dik mining project being awarded to China. The circumstances surrounding the award of Saindek project to a Chinese company in 2001 and the cancellation of the Riko Dik contract previously awarded to the Tethyan Copper Company (TCC) in 2011 are viewed as suspect.<sup>15</sup> Discomfort has also been expressed about the nature of China's expansion in Gilgit-Baltistan, where numerous Chinese companies have engaged in various projects leading to the speculation that they may actually represent the Chinese military. Although such rumours are usually denounced as Indian propaganda, local people were of the view that they may in fact not be too far off the mark, as a lot of the Chinese workers in the area appear to have had military training or to be military personnel in civilian clothing.<sup>16</sup>

13. Discussion with senior director of National School of Public Policy, Lahore (NSPP).

14. Telephonic interview with Zahid Mengal, director of Azat Foundation (14/5/2011).

15. Interview with Dr Shaukat Hameed Khan (Islamabad: 16/11/2011).

16. Interview with correspondent Express Tribune, Farman Ali (Islamabad: 29/10/2011).



Sources have also expressed reservations about Chinese business practices and their impact in perpetuating an environment of financial mismanagement in the region. For example, sources have pointed to kickbacks in certain oil & gas deals in Sindh<sup>17</sup> and violation of public procurement rules while awarding contracts to various Chinese companies.<sup>18</sup> The organization Transparency International Pakistan has also pointed out discrepancies in certain contracts awarded to Chinese companies, in writing to the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) of Pakistan. While it is clear that such irregularities can occur in other cases too, in part due to inherent state weaknesses, as previously discussed, the risk may be higher in the case of Chinese involvement due, to the strategic dependence of Pakistan - and increasingly, of Afghanistan - on Beijing's largesse. There is, in any case, Pakistani discomfort with what is viewed as the Chinese monopoly on oil and gas drilling in Pakistan. This is sharpened further due to the relatively poor quality of Chinese technology in the oil and gas sector, which is none the less apparently preferred by the government to that from other better quality sources.<sup>19</sup> Such conditions add to the existing concerns around pressures on Pakistan's small and medium enterprises, due to the Free Trade Agreement signed between Islamabad and Beijing in 2006.

These issues raise the question that an imbalanced strategic relationship may benefit China, but at the cost of the weaker states of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The latter two appear to lack the potential to negotiate sufficiently aggressively with Beijing to ensure, for instance, that mineral exploration and extraction of the resources carry equal benefit or bring greater dividends to the region being exploited. At present, Chinese investment in both countries seems similar to its operations in Africa, where the emphasis is on exploitation of resources, rather than on genuine development. Thus, the region appears as a potential "economic colony" more than benefiting from an equal-opportunity partnership.

## Conclusion

China is certainly an emerging force in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Thus far, its obvious interests pertain to achieving economic gains, fulfilling domestic security needs and those in the region which pertain to China's economic and domestic security concerns. In fact, the two options can be viewed as linked because possible economic development in Afghanistan and Pakistan may reduce security risks for China. However, then there is the question of Beijing's military and strategic interests in the region, as well, which translate into competition with India over control of Afghanistan.

China and India are likely to compete for greater attention of the government in Kabul through investment of resources. Given the level of financial mismanagement, cultivating personal stakes in the Afghan leadership may play an important role. The other method, of course is through investing in and aligning with Pakistan's military-strategic interests, which China is better placed to do than either India or the US. Whilst looking out for its own domestic security interests, Beijing has not hindered Islamabad's approach of cultivating the Taliban and vying for the inclusion of the group of non-state actors in Afghan politics. It would appear that China seeks security for its own interests through cultivating the Pakistan army as a possible filter, along with seeking partnerships

**17.** Interviews with senior sources from the Petroleum ministry and various oil and gas companies (Islamabad: 10-14 October 2011).

**18.** Interview with Dr Kaiser Bengali (Karachi: 09/11/2011).

**19.** Interview with Rizwan Khan (05/08/2011).

with number of non-state actors. This approach, however, has its potential long term repercussions, because the underlying assumption is that the Taliban and other *jihadis* can be dissuaded away from violence. This is indeed a risky plan which could fail - with consequent implications for the security and social structures of the entire region.

The other strategy used by China to build its presence in the region - financial investment, primarily in the mining sector - would see a post-2014 Afghanistan, and a Pakistan, in which China would be a key investor.. Although Pakistan would want to see a more direct investment in its economy through financial aid, this is unlikely to be a path which Beijing would want to tread. None the less, the current strategy is not without its flaws. There is a risk of exploitation of resources without substantive dividends in terms of human resource and value-added infrastructure development. Whilst Kabul may be close its eyes to an imbalanced development due to the lure of money, Pakistan has its long-standing relationship with Beijing to blame for this attitude. Thus, there is the risk of Chinese investment yielding short-term gains for both Afghanistan and Pakistan, which in themselves may eventually be diluted, because Beijing's investments would strengthen oligarchies, rather than society and the two states as a whole. The attitude of Chinese investment and commercial enterprises towards the ordinary people is different from its reaction towards the elite with whom connections are being buildup that may eventually turn them into Beijing's clients.

The above may establish a pattern of development that would, in turn, bring greater domestic disparities within these states, which could lead to conflict and violence as we already see in certain parts of these countries. Under the circumstances, there is a likelihood of further weakening of both states but with a substantial increase in Chinese influence in both, as well. This would also mean that the problems posed by drug and other mafias in these countries will continue for a long time to come. China's strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan may indicate a buildup of its political might with minimal military or financial cost, and maximum gain, but at the expense of domestic stability in both countries.

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