



Pakistan, Afghanistan, and In Between

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan reached new heights at the end of May after the explosion of a fuel tanker in the diplomatic neighborhood of Kabul. The Chinese leadership, which until recently has watched these tensions from afar, decided to step in and build a mechanism of collaboration. This move is consistent with China's strategic aim: the stabilization of the global arena in general, and of countries that might be partners in the BRI initiative in particular. As much as the Chinese want to build land and sea roads, they will have to deal with difficulties in and among the countries these roads will cross.

Tensions between the two Islamic republics in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, reached new heights on May 31, 2017, with the explosion of a tanker in the diplomatic neighborhood of Kabul. The explosion killed 80 people and wounded hundreds. The Afghan news agency NDS reported that the explosion was planned by the Haqqani network in Pakistan with the direct help of Pakistan's intelligence agency (ISI).

Tensions between the two countries are hardly new; they have been going on for several decades. The issues include water resources; the Durand Line, which has served as the border between the two states since 1896; and, of course, the consequences of the war in Afghanistan that began in 1978 and continues on some level to this day.

The Chinese leadership, which until recently only watched these conflicts from a distance, decided to "reach out" and help Pakistan and Afghanistan cooperate. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was accordingly given the task of shuttling between Kabul and Islamabad. On June 25, 2017, the two sides issued a joint statement declaring their commitment to maintaining regional

peace and stability and improving economic and security cooperation. According to the statement, the two republics have agreed to work together to manage crises that may arise from time to time.

Why has China, which, according to its foreign minister, does "not intervene in internal conflicts, impose its will on others, or participate in geopolitical competitions," decided to step in in this case? According to the minister, "China is ready to lend a hand when friends are in distress." The parties are certainly in distress after the tanker explosion and other recent attacks, but China has another motive.

China stepped in to ease tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan for the benefit of President Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]". This initiative recently received significant reinforcement in the form of a forum led by the Chinese president in Beijing. The initiative, which aims to connect large parts of the globe to China via land and sea routes, will depend on cooperation among all the countries in which the initiative is focused.

According to the Chinese plan, Afghanistan and Pakistan have an important place in this initiative and in China's overall growth strategy. China is envisioning a railway line from northwest China through Pakistan to the Mediterranean, as well as other rail lines connecting Afghanistan to the existing and planned railway system and to Pakistan's Gwadar Port in China (the lease for which will end in 2059). China needs these countries to promote its initiative and does not intend to allow their rivalry to disrupt its plans – even if the price is to intervene to a limited extent in what is happening in their territory.

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan perceive the BRI initiative as an opportunity to upgrade their economic and geopolitical situation. Evidence of this was visible in the ranks of representatives sent by these countries to the Chinese president's forum in Beijing. Pakistan sent its prime minister and Afghanistan one of its most senior ministers.

The two countries see opportunity beyond the initiative itself. They expect China to pour money into their state coffers by purchasing their resources and promoting their infrastructure projects. China's commitment is certainly growing. It gave Afghanistan \$240 million in assistance between 2001 and 2013, but in 2015, it said it would provide \$327 million by the end of 2017.

In addition, China believes closer cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan may reduce tensions between the central government and the Uighur minority that populates the heavily contested Xinjiang province. The Chinese foreign minister has also asked for the help of Afghan President Ashraf

Ghani Ahmadzai against the Islamic Party of Turkistan, going so far as to call the danger posed by the party "a serious threat to China."

Neighboring India, which has been locked in a violent conflict with Pakistan since its independence in 1947, fears the rapprochement between China and Pakistan. Even without closer relations between Pakistan and China, India is having trouble dealing with China and its new initiative, and did not even send a representative to the BRI forum. It is possible that the Chinese decision to take this relatively unusual step of "helping friends" was done to signal to the Indians that they should join the Chinese initiative and not try to oppose it.

The Indians are not sitting idly by, however. Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a warm welcome from US President Donald Trump and they had a positive meeting. It appears the Americans are losing ground in Pakistan, which until recently was their ally in the war on Afghanistan-based terror (and which earlier assisted them against Soviet activity in the country).

At the end of his meeting with the Chinese foreign minister, Pakistani Prime Minister Sartaj Aziz said, "Pakistan's relations with China are the cornerstone of our foreign policy" – an indication that the alliance between Pakistan and the US had weakened. (It should be noted that Pakistan continues to receive hundreds of millions of dollars in aid from the US, so the link still exists).

The Chinese offer to help its neighbors, Pakistan and Afghanistan, ease their rising tensions seems a tactical move by China to achieve its strategic goal: the stabilization of the international arena in general and the countries affected by the BRI in particular. As the Chinese continue to build land and sea roads, they will have to deal with difficulties in the affected countries.

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