



PERSPECTIVES

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India and China Are Converging on Afghanistan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The “informal summit” between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at Wuhan in China in late April generated worldwide interest. Aimed at sidestepping contentious issues and enhancing greater strategic communication at the leadership level, [the summit witnessed](#) the two leaders recognizing the “common threat” of terrorism and expressing commitment to cooperate on counter-terrorist measures. However, an issue that largely escaped attention is an agreement between them to work jointly on economic projects in Afghanistan. This has been interpreted as [Beijing’s message to Islamabad that China “approves” India’s positive role in stabilizing Afghanistan](#), a fact already recognized by the Trump administration in its new Afghan policy.

Afghanistan has emerged as a platform for new possibilities in India-China cooperation. This development has huge strategic implications. Not only will it improve trust between New Delhi and Beijing, but it can contribute significantly towards peace and the development of war-ravaged Afghanistan. India and China are likely to hold a bilateral dialogue very soon to identify projects that can lead to improvement in the lives of Afghan citizens.

India’s engagement with Afghanistan has been significant since 2001, with New Delhi investing considerably in many capacity-building projects for the Afghan state. The Kabul regime believes India’s involvement is crucial for Afghanistan’s long-term viability. The Modi government has extended vital economic and political support to the regime led by President Ashraf Ghani.

While New Delhi is of the view that any negotiation between the Afghan government and the Taliban to end the conflict must be “Afghan-led and

Afghan-owned,” without any outside interference to dictate terms, Pakistan’s security establishment continues to thwart all efforts at finding a sustainable means towards lasting peace in Afghanistan. In pursuit of its policy of having a pliant regime in Kabul, Islamabad has never stopped nurturing terror groups in Afghanistan. The use of terrorist proxies is justified by Pakistan to pursue its “legitimate” security concerns.

Islamabad’s exaggerated fear that New Delhi wants to cultivate the Kabul government so as to trap Pakistan militarily has led it to oppose Indian involvement in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s military establishment frequently levels unfounded allegations of an Indo-Afghan nexus stoking ethnic Baloch and Pashtun separatist movements in Pakistan.

There have been many instances of kidnappings and attacks on Indian workers in Afghanistan aimed at frightening India into leaving the country. In particular, a car bomb attack near the Indian embassy compound in Kabul in July 2008 that killed fifty people, including India’s defense attaché, was the handiwork of the Haqqani, a network that is responsible for increasingly deadly terror attacks in Afghanistan. The Afghan government openly [accused Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence \(ISI\) of having a hand in the attack.](#)

Despite Islamabad’s policy, Indo-Afghan ties show an upward trajectory. This is reflected in the opening of an air corridor between the two countries and the Afghan-India-Iran trilateral agreement on the Chabahar port.

On May 6, the [abduction of seven Indians](#) working with a power company in Afghanistan again brought to focus the role of Pakistan’s “deep state” in applying pressure on India to scale back its presence in Afghanistan. The engineers were working for an Indian company involved in a power transmission project in Baghlan province. Though there are reports of the abduction’s having been a case of mistaken identity, with the workers mistaken for Afghan government employees, speculation is rife that the Taliban’s local unit is under pressure from the [ISI to draw out the kidnapping](#) in an attempt to force Indian power companies out of northern Afghanistan.

China has its own interests in Afghanistan. In particular, Beijing does not want Afghanistan to become a safe haven for Uighur Muslim militant groups active in China’s Xinjiang province. ISIS has already declared that Uighur Muslims will “shed blood like rivers” after returning home. The impact of Afghan destabilization will be felt as much in Kashmir as in Xinjiang, where the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is active. Beijing also fears that further insecurity in Afghanistan can have a destabilizing influence on Pakistan and other Central Asian republics. These undesirable fallouts could substantially

weaken the prospects for Xi Jinping's pet geopolitical project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China has attempted to increase its sway in Afghanistan with Pakistan's help. The primary instruments have been the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), which is comprised of the US, China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. However, as this strategy has not yet borne fruit, China would like to involve India in its drive to enhance its own influence in Afghanistan.

Sino-Indian joint projects in Afghanistan will not upset Pakistan, which is a close ally of China's. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a centerpiece of the BRI, is strongly opposed by India on sovereignty grounds as it passes through territory under Pakistani occupation but claimed by India. With India firmly refusing to change its position vis-à-vis CPEC, China must find other ways to engage with India.

Joint economic projects with China in Afghanistan would be beneficial for India both economically and strategically. Besides protecting Indian nationals in Afghanistan, such projects might also provide security from terrorist attacks backed by Pakistan's security establishment.

The Ghani government is in dire need of regional and global support in areas of health, education, and food security, as it has been relentlessly fighting both the Afghan Taliban and IS in Khorasan (IS-K). Although both India and China recognize the need to converge on Afghanistan, the complexities of regional geopolitics have thus far prevented any forward movement.

If India seeks to be an influential regional player, its economic and political interests must complement one another. India and China have held discussions on the Afghan situation in the past with the aim of kick-starting a joint project, but nothing ever came of them. While critics may be skeptical of China's commitment and sincerity as a strategic partner for India in Afghanistan, the idea is worth exploring for pragmatic reasons.

China has expressed appreciation for India's developmental work in Afghanistan within a broader understanding that both countries must strengthen the Kabul government. As the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate due to constant terror attacks from the Afghan Taliban and the IS-K, there seems to be fresh thinking in New Delhi and Beijing on how to navigate their respective interests in Afghanistan by working in close coordination. It remains to be seen whether anything significant will come out of the Wuhan consensus.

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