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Russia-China Engagement in post-9/11 Afghanistan and its Impact on the South Asian Regional Security Complex

Abstract

The 9/11 catastrophe had a profound impact on the security dynamics of South Asia. After this event, new actors and parties started to actively involve themselves in the region. Subsequently, the Global War on Terror (GWOT), as pursued by the United States (US), resulted in the loss of Afghanistan's traditional buffer status, making it a chief concern of South Asian regional security. Moreover, Kabul's admission in April 2007 to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) contributed to this change of status. Given the complex nature of the security undercurrents, developments in Afghanistan increasingly affected the internal power dynamics of Pakistan. Some pressing issues, as well as newly emerging geopolitical and geostrategic interests, motivated both Russia and China to engage in this volatile region. In the case of China, its involvement in Afghanistan led to regional commercial development in South Asia and increased its geopolitical influence in the region. Russia, on the other hand, has taken a different approach. It focused more on terrorism and drug trafficking than on commercial development. Russia is interested in maximising its geopolitical influence in the Central Asian Region mostly to stem terrorism and crime emanating from Afghanistan. This paper analyses the comparative strategies behind Chinese and Russian engagement with the help of Barry Buzan's theoretical model for security analysis, as modified in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and using the notion of securitization. The study underscores that this engagement in the post 9/11 period has had a number of implications, both for Afghanistan's security and for South Asian security mechanisms at three different levels, i.e., domestic, regional, and global.

Introduction

The regional security situation in South Asia has drastically changed in the post-9/11 period, as it was previously dominated by tensions between India and Pakistan and the subsequent massive nuclear and conventional military buildup. As far as South Asian regional security is concerned, there are three defining landmark events: the end of the Cold War (1989), the Nuclear Tests (1998)¹ and 9/11, all of which attracted global attention. These events impacted the evolution of the South Asian region, not only in terms of its regional security architecture but also its interaction with the evolving regional security architecture within the larger Asian order.

While examining the South Asian Regional Security Complex (SARSC), the role of great powers during the Cold War and their influence in the post-Cold War era cannot be dismissed. The pervasive nature of their activities served their interests by maintaining the status quo of enmity and hostility in the region. The fact that Pakistan aligned itself with the US-led network in the 1980s is one of the dominant causes of Pak-Afghan inimical relations. Despite its Non-aligned Status, India became an ally of the former USSR.² Subsequently, India and Pakistan's connection with the two great powers augmented tensions and brought the region to the brink of war, spurred militarisation, and proliferation of nuclear armaments. During the War on Terror, US-led NATO forces were very active in Afghanistan and the northwestern regions of Pakistan; Pakistan's deceptive participation in this war further contributed to regional instability. India has always demanded that Pakistan diminish support for terror groups that operate on its territory, and the Kashmir issue is the main cause of most major conflicts between the countries, giving rise to four Indo-Pakistani wars. If India wants to achieve great power status, New Delhi should nurture its sphere of influence across South Asia and uphold regional stability. Also, Pakistan's dealings with China affect the SARSC as it increases the scepticism and deteriorates relations between India and China.

If we were to apply Buzan's concept, SARSC is slowly moving towards internal and external transformation. Further, to comprehend this transformation, he explains that, in terms of internal transformation, the SARSC is gradually moving from bipolarity to unipolarity. This means that

¹ Baruah, Amit (2016, May 11), The Meaning of Pokhran And Chagai, The Hindu, Retrieved from: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-meaning-of-pokhran-and-chagai/article8581468.ece>

² Lyon, Peter (2008), Conflict Between India and Pakistan: An Encyclopedia- Roots of modern conflict, ABC-CLIO, p.167.

India is growing stronger while Pakistan's regional influence weakens. Externally, South Asian security is increasingly tied to the East Asian Regional Security Complex due to the rise of China. By and large, shifts in the SARSC are incremental and slow, rather than abrupt and dramatic. On the global level, despite the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity after the Cold War, the US, China, and Russia continue to increase their interaction with South Asia.

Afghanistan's history clearly illustrates its key role in regional geopolitics, it has been called "the Heart of Asia" by the eminent Indian poet Mohamed Iqbal, or "the cockpit of Asia" by Lord Curzon, the early 20th century British Viceroy of India, due to its geographical position.³ In the 19th century, Afghanistan was the main factor sparking rivalry between Tsarist Russia and British India in the famous "Great Game".⁴ Since the early 1990s, Afghanistan has been at the centre of what is seen as a new "Great Game".⁵ In the aftermath of 9/11, the instability in Afghanistan continues to affect regional security in Central Asia and South Asia. However, Afghanistan is a country where 1) multiple regions and 2) a regional complex interact with each other. As such, Afghanistan is an insulator state or single regional complex, simultaneously affecting South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. It can be considered a mini regional security complex among the above mentioned multi-regional complexes. While analysing the Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, they do not only seek to gain a foothold in the regional economy but also to increase China's geopolitical influence in the region. Differently, Russia focuses primarily on the growing terror threat and on drug trafficking rather than economic relations. But, Russia is also deeply concerned with Central Asia and wishes to maximise its geopolitical influence. For obvious reasons, extremism and drug trafficking stemming from Afghanistan are a major concern for Russia. Moreover, while Russia has not been involved militarily in Afghanistan since the start of the US-led invasion in 2001, it has offered logistical support to assist in the reconstruction of the war-torn nation and the NATO-Russia Council was set up to monitor this cooperation. China is also playing a key role as it engages indirectly in peace dialogues with the Taliban.

³ Rashid, Ahmed (2002), "*Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*", London: I. B. Tauris, p. 7.

⁴ Fromkin, David, The Great Game in Asia, Foreign Affairs, Retrieved from: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/article/s/south-asia/1980-03-01/great-game-asia>

⁵ Azami, Dawood (2017, January 12), World powers jostle in Afghanistan's new 'Great Game', BBC, Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38582323>

Afghanistan's Role in South Asian Geopolitics

Afghanistan has traditionally served as a connection between South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. South Asian countries consider Afghanistan to be a peripheral part of Greater South Asia. Moreover, its ties to the India-Pakistan conflict puts it on the South Asian geopolitical map. Furthermore, Afghanistan officially joined SAARC during the 14th summit held in New Delhi on 3-4 April 2007.⁶ Ultimately, the geopolitical involvement of both India and Pakistan in Afghan affairs also supports the aforementioned arguments.

As for its internal security and stability, many problems in Afghanistan can be attributed to external interference. The strategic location of Afghanistan will continue to attract external powers in the near future as well. Encircled by two nuclear states (Pakistan and China), a threshold nuclear state (Iran), and two other nuclear powers (India and Russia) in the near vicinity, Afghanistan faces a complex situation as it engages with its neighbours and other powers that are competing for influence in the region. Another geostrategically significant factor is Afghanistan's highland topography, which is an attractive location to install Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). From this location, medium range ICBMs could target almost the whole of Eurasia. Overall, stability in South Asia relies heavily on Afghanistan's security and stability. In this respect, US-led NATO troops pulling out of Afghanistan in 2014 and the subsequent spread of terrorism could have major implications for the region in the near future.

In terms of its own political transition, Afghanistan has made substantial progress in rebuilding governance systems and institutions that to some extent allows it to be on par with its neighbours. Afghanistan's 2014 elections witnessed a remarkable turnout, and the subsequent appointment of President Ashraf Ghani marked the country's first democratic transfer of power. Despite conflicting opinions of various scholars, we can say that Afghanistan is part of South Asia due to its largely inclined nature towards South Asian religious and political culture, ethnic connections with other countries in the region and, last but not least, its influence on South Asian security and stability.

⁶ Embassy of India Kabul, "India and Afghanistan Relations", Retrieved from- <http://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?0357?004>

Impact of Russian and Chinese Activities on the SARSC

Geographical proximity always matters for the security of states, as adjacent states often do not have the choice to disengage in case of conflict. In this regard, for the past 20 years, Russia has been alarmed by the spread of terrorism in South Asia, stemming from Afghanistan and Pakistan and destabilising Central Asia by cross-border terror activities. Moreover, Russia is seeking to rejuvenate its commercial links with the region after years of neglecting trade ties. These moves appear as part of its endeavours to enhance regional influence as the US gears up to lighten its footprint and (probably) as a reaction to rising concerns about the rapidly increasing commercial influence of China in Central Asia and South Asia. Since 9/11, Russia and the US both have strong mutual interest in Afghanistan and South Asia, both are concerned about growing terror threats emanating from Afghanistan. To deal with these threats they reached some kind of consensus. Moreover, peace and stability in Afghanistan and South-Central Asia is the foremost priority for both countries. Moreover, since 2009, Russia has considerably contributed to the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), supplying troops to the Afghanistan mission.⁷ Since the US started to withdraw its troops, Russia has grievous concerns about volatility in Afghanistan in the near future. Any further cooperation between Russia and the US in South Asia will likely focus on counterterrorism and counternarcotics. Since Russia's foremost concern in South Asia is security-related, military and intelligence agencies are most influential on its policy in the region. Additionally, its arms sales to India have long been the main source of economic cooperation. Principally, India and Russia also engage in counterterrorism cooperation in the region.

In the case of China, strategic and geo-economic considerations have been the focus of their relations with the region. The increasing Chinese involvement and interest in South Asia reflects three geostrategic imperatives. First, India's rise directly affects China's aspiration to be a great power in the region. Second, China seeks to meet its own growing energy needs. Third, China worries about Islamist-jihadist penetration into China's Xinjiang province. The rising threat of

⁷ Menkiszak, Marek and Jarzyńska, Katarzyna (2011), "Russia's Afghan problem: The Russian Federation and the Afghanistan problem since 2001", OSW Studies, 38, Warsaw. Retrieved from: http://aei.pitt.edu/58389/1/prace_38_en_0.pdf

Islamic radicalism intensified China's concerns about the risks of volatility across the region. After many years believing that the Pakistani military could manage and contain the threat, China gradually sees the need to take a more active role in dealing with it. This change in attitude is caused in particular by Pakistan's inability to meet its internal security challenges and uncertainties about the implications of US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Apart from its security liaisons with Pakistan, China's central agenda in the region continues to be mainly commercial and diplomatic rather than military. Furthermore, it can be assumed that China's continued attempts to balance against India, and its precarious conception of the terrorist menace (which is typically limited to Uighur radicals) implies that China is unable to cooperate with India to address instability in the region. However, its recent actions, providing assistance in the reconciliation dialogue with the Taliban and exercising its influence over Pakistan, imply that it is willing to take a constructive approach in handling these concerns.

As a landlocked country at the heart of Asia, Afghanistan has the ability to either facilitate or inhibit Russia and China from actualising their strategic ambitions. The 21st-century world is an ultra-globalized one and is characterised by a high degree of interdependence, whether it be politics, economy, or culture. Against this backdrop, Afghanistan is gaining geopolitical importance, as a link between Central Asian countries, Pakistan, Russia and China.

China's Stake in Afghanistan

Chinese manifold strategic interests in Afghanistan dictate its engagement with the country and are fueled by its concerns related to terrorism, extremism and separatism in Xinjiang province (Dhaka, 2013). However, it has to compete with US and Russia, and their actions may lead some to contest its 'Peaceful Rise' narrative. Besides, China considers the South Asian region as its new geo-economic frontier. China is also collaborating with the US and other countries, providing reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. It worries that the instability in Afghanistan could spill over into China and Beijing is already combating the rise of Islamic extremism in the Xinjiang province. The Tiananmen Square attack (October 2013) and Kunming train station attacks (March 2014) illustrate the dangers caused by the looming threat of the Uighur insurgency.⁸ Secondly, Beijing needs a stable Afghanistan as part of the Western component of

⁸ The Telegraph (2014), "China's Night of The Long Knives", Retrieved from: https://www.telegraphindia.com/1140306/jsp/opinion/story_18048424.jsp#.WNLvvVWGPIV

the New Silk Road. Moreover, China is also interested in the TAPI project, which was originally thought up by the US and was a major component of Washington's own version of the New Silk Road.⁹ Many analysts speculate that China may want to utilise Afghanistan to expand its Central Asian pipeline, which already runs across Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. A pipeline constructed in Afghanistan would profoundly expand Chinese influence in Central and South Asia. In this perspective, China is closely supervising the security situation of Afghanistan, going so far as to actively engage with the Taliban.

Afghanistan's neighbors have enormous economic interests in its resources and transit routes, by extension, this includes China. In late 2007, for instance, a state-owned Chinese company won the contract to explore the Aynak copper mine project. In 2011, the state-run China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a deal to obtain the oil blocks of the North-Eastern Provinces of Sar-i-Pul and Faryab (Chandra, 2015: 250-51). As China boosts its investment in Afghanistan, some have raised concerns and called for Afghanistan to protect its economic interests. In 2012, China National Petroleum Company succeeded to secure the rights to develop the oil fields in the Amu Darya basin. Recently, in February 2015, Beijing announced its plan to extend its economic footprints by declaring that it would provide assistance of \$300 million over the next three years at an Afghanistan-Pakistan-China trilateral dialogue (Maini, 2015). Actually, Chinese economic engagement with Afghanistan has been guided by its own peculiar security issues. Among the declared projects, China mainly wants to deal with security issues that threaten Beijing's New Silk Road initiative (South Asia-Central Asia component). As such, it seeks to improve rail connectivity between Kandahar (Afghanistan) and Chaman (Balochistan) and to build a motorway from Peshawar to Kabul.

To interpret this, one needs to take into account recent developments and fluctuations in China's progressively effective foreign policy towards Afghanistan. First, China's interests in Afghanistan have been amplified by the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, especially in the area of transportation; China increasingly considers Afghanistan to be an important transport corridor. Second, the complete departure of US military troops and the International Security Assistance

⁹ Maini, T Singh (2015, March 27), China and India: Competing for Influence in Afghanistan, The Diplomat, Retrieved from: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-and-india-competing-for-influence-in-afghanistan/>

Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan by January 2017 impacted China's policies.¹⁰ Based on these developments, China enhanced its engagement and took on more responsibilities. This increased engagement is clear from the unprecedented frequency of senior Chinese statesmen visiting Afghanistan, the substantial growth in bilateral assistance to Afghanistan, and most importantly, the fact that Beijing has started to coordinate negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. It appears that China is trying hard to fill the void left by the US.

Russia's Central Asian Geopolitics

Afghanistan has been a focal point of interest for Russia since the Tsarist period. More recently, Russian policy towards Afghanistan can be seen as an attempt to solidify its sphere of influence in Central Asia. Power alignments are shifting in the region, as Russia, China, and the US find themselves competing for influence. Russia holds a relatively strong position in the region due to geographic, historical, and cultural ties, a military presence, and economic links (Ziegler, 2014). Moscow's ties with Central Asia weakened dramatically in the 1990s; but, under Putin, Russia has attempted to regain influence in its periphery.

From 2001 to 2016, Russia's policy towards Afghanistan has undergone some transformations, and provides hints on how its policy will evolve in the future. Russia's strategy towards the Afghan problem has become one of the important subjects in Russian foreign policy and is determined by Afghanistan's internal conditions, among other elements. Nevertheless, it has also been shaped by Russia's changing relationship with the US, other major western powers, the Central Asian countries, South Asia, and China. Following the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001, Russia's policy differs over time. Starting in 2001-2002, Russia first endeavoured to strengthen its presence and influence in Afghanistan, followed by a period of stagnation in 2003-2006, when it realised it could not successfully compete with western influences in the country. In 2007, Russia resumed its activities in Afghanistan, as Moscow started capitalising on the failing internal security conditions to ameliorate its relations with the Afghan government and to heighten its prominence compared to the Western coalition forces. Furthermore, 2009-2016 marks a breakthrough period as Russia actively works to improve the Afghan problem. Meanwhile, Hamid Karzai's government attempted to reach a political

¹⁰ Huasheng, Zhao (2016), "Afghanistan and China's New Neighbourhood Diplomacy", *International Affairs* 92 (4), p. 891-908. Retrieved from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-2346.12654/pdf>

agreement with the Taliban and the Western alliance sought to withdraw the majority of its troops from Afghanistan. These developments presented Putin with the dilemma of selecting a political strategy. In this condition, Russia stepped up its backing of the Karzai administration. In addition, it officially supports the ‘process of national reconciliation’ in Afghanistan and has built up liaisons with the Taliban. While Russia supported the withdrawal of western forces from Afghanistan, it is concerned that a hasty and abrupt withdrawal would leave severe local security challenges in its wake.

Conclusion

In the bigger picture of the SARSC, Afghanistan is at the periphery rather than at the core. India and Pakistan are the most important players in South Asia and they both have ambitious plans to influence Afghanistan’s future. However, first they need to resolve their own internal security dilemmas rather than focusing all their attention on Afghanistan. As stated by Buzan and Waever, the states surrounding Afghanistan are not able to establish hegemony over Afghanistan; these states have manifold security concerns of their own. Moreover, this ambition worries India and Iran, both want to prevent security dynamics of South Asia and the Gulf Complex from spreading into Afghanistan. As a consequence of the departure of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, none of these countries will not try to enter Afghanistan in an attempt to replace them. Meanwhile, both India and Pakistan want to increase their presence and influence in the region amid growing concerns of bilateral tensions. However, as long as the core factors, as identified by Buzan and Waever, within the SARSC are not resolved, the stabilisation process in Afghanistan may get hampered endlessly with certain negative side-effects. Ultimately, the SARSC continues to be dominated by the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan. While great powers compete for influence in the region, they were unable to resolve the enduring conflict within the SARSC. To the contrary, their involvement may have aggravated tensions. The role of Afghanistan is that of an insulator, “located in the zone of indifference between RSCs, helping to keep separate from each other two or more sets of regional security dynamics” (Buzan & Waever, 2003: 483). As such, its problems are at the periphery and not at the core of the security challenges of South Asia.

Today in Afghanistan, things are changing in entirely unexpected ways. Russia, China and Pakistan could be forming a sort of loose coalition, while India and the US provide an opposing

alliance. Moreover, currently, the US is naively hoping that India will facilitate its interests to assist in the country. Pakistan is replacing its partnership with the US, favoring China as its key strategic ally in the region. The conflicting interests of Russia, China and the US in Asia, paired with new strategic developments, further complicate the geopolitics of the South Asian region. The tectonic shift in South Asian geopolitics has also prompted Pakistan to deepen relations with China; the bond between India and Russia is still one of bonhomie. However, Russia is sceptical about India harmonising relations with the US and attempts to put pressure on India by reaching out to Pakistan. Meanwhile, China and Russia attempt to take advantage of weakening US influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in a bid to ameliorate trade relations and to protect their southern borders from Islamic extremism.

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