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Can Dragon and Elephant Dance Together: Sino-India Strategic Involvement in Post-2021 Afghanistan

Subrat Kumar Ratha^{1*}, Sivakumar M. V.²

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, Afghanistan has been a rising strategic hotspot, a link road between South and Central Asia for Energy resources and an uncertain place for power equations. With the decline of U.S. military engagement, Afghanistan has become a key strategic asset for superpowers to utilise for leverage. As emerging powers in the South Asian region, given the geopolitical importance and regional security, both China and India have been the obvious players in planning their strategic game inside Afghanistan. A cooperative venture between China and India in Afghanistan has depended mainly upon the mutual acceptance of strategic interests. This paper attempts to understand the strategic implications of U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan for China and India. Moreover, this paper will examine the policies and programs the two countries undertake to expand their respective importance. Apart from that, with the application of Defensive Realism as a theoretical framework, this paper deals with the emerging grounds and challenges before China and India to maintain a win-win situation in Afghanistan. The paper is expected to extract the results signifying the accommodative condition for both China and India in Afghanistan

INTRODUCTION

South Asia is a crucial geopolitical arena and the site of increasing rivalry between Asia's most considerable powers—China and India (Donnellon-May, 2023). Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the world has witnessed a progressive and aggressive entity whose emergence might mesmerise historians, create hope for communists and develop threat perception amongst the competitors. As an abstract species like the Dragon, China's gigantic upliftment at the global level persuades us to imagine the existence of a creature which has been embedded with both myth and modernity. China has a unique governance style; its political structure, mobilisation capacity, social contract, and control of the Party-steered bureaucracy can mobilise resources to achieve specific objectives whenever needed (Almotairi, 2021). On the other hand, India has entered a new era of economy, security and diplomacy. Starting from poor economic growth, today, India's economic performance gives a broader platform for global investors and creates a perception of a superpower. Three-quarters of a century after independence, India is a nuclear power about to become the world's most populous country, and its economy has overtaken its former colonies to become the globe's fifth-biggest (AFP, 2022). From the very beginning, the track record of the friendship between both China and India has been unsatisfactory; in addition, both countries have fought the war, experienced military standoffs at the Line of Actual Control and have yet to embrace each other for having an identity of the oldest civilisations of the world. The rivalry between China and India intensifies the regional power structure; furthermore, both have pre-established norms to nurture

their foreign agenda against each other. However, it could also influence the extent to which those countries choose to cooperate or compete with each other—and whether they collaborate with other major powers—regionally and globally, including in international institutions or interest-based coalitions (Madan, 2021).

After the withdrawal of the U.S. military from Afghan land, the entire South Asia now seems to be a free geographical entity with no external control; in general, the years of military engagement have been wiped out through a negotiation between the Taliban and the U.S. Government. Through this deal, Afghanistan clarified, through the voice of the Taliban, that Afghan land would not be used for terror attacks. Having invested both man and material resources for 20 years, the U.S. military was dismissed by the Taliban, which clarified the end of American diplomacy in South Asia. After the Withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. has lost its footprint on the Eurasian landmass. It will have to depend upon bases in the Middle East or carrier task forces operating in the Persian Gulf, even as Taliban forces consolidate and extremist groups regroup (Deshmukh & Sahgal, 2021). The chaos that ensued in Afghanistan after the hasty American withdrawal and the dramatic takeover of power in Kabul by the Taliban brought an era to an end, and with it, Washington's South Asia strategy stood at an inflexion point (Nawid, 2019). Now, the power-sharing in South Asia would gain the attention of both China and India; in particular, Afghanistan has been an open land for the countries to conduct trade and diplomacy. Apart from that, with the fall of U.S. domination, China's aspiration on Afghanistan also got new momentum to expand the horizon of Chinese policies toward Afghanistan. Over

¹ Department of International Relations and Politics, Central University of Kerala, India

² Department of International Relations, Capital Centre, Central University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, India

* Corresponding author's e-mail: subratratha78@gmail.com

the years, China has maintained direct communication with the Taliban, and both sides have met on several occasions, bilaterally and internationally, underscoring China's warming ties with the Islamist group (Ghosh, 2022). Unlike China, India holds a different viewpoint on South Asian geopolitics. As a propagator of peaceful coexistence and regional harmony, India's primary focus has been on the independent foreign policy of all the South Asian members; moreover, efforts toward anti-terrorism and extremism uplift the security intention of New Delhi towards making a more engaged and effective diplomacy against insecurity. India — a key player in the region — has the potential and interests to provide some stability in South Asia and, so far, has been at the forefront of engaging proactively with its neighbours in helping them out of the crises (Pant & Shivamurthy, 2022). In a nutshell, China-India engagement in Afghanistan also has a Pakistan factor. India's actions in Afghanistan stem more out of pique for the triumph of the radical Taliban and its mentor, Pakistan, and less due to the lack of strategic options (Adlakha, 2022). Over the years, Sino-Pak relations made India reluctant to pursue her diplomatic agenda for a peaceful South Asia; moreover, in the context of Afghanistan, India's insight is critical towards Pakistan for the contribution made towards the extremism and fundamentalism inside Afghanistan. New Delhi's suspicions that Islamabad is supporting extremists in Afghanistan who could target India and India's efforts to establish influence in South Asia to counter China are also factors on the minds of Indian policymakers (Sharma, 2021). China could use Pakistan for its strategic depth in Afghanistan through the Flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); in contrast, India has been raising concerns about the BRI by acknowledging the infringement of the sovereignty of member states along with India's POK region. It is imperative to understand the strategic concerns of both China and India in light of recent political developments in Afghanistan.

Theoretical Framework

According to international relations studies, state behaviour is always guided by interests. It was long believed in the true tradition of realism that international relations are conducted in an environment of anarchy, where each actor is constantly working towards maximisation of its power and realising its interests (Behuria, 2024). Interest can usually be readily defined – security, prosperity and well-being of the country and its people are the essential features (O'Brien, 2013). In the interest-centric world order, a state has to defend its pre-determined agenda, policies and programmes against the rival state. Driven by interests, a sovereign state usually retaliates as a response to the rival state to protect and promote one's capability. Within the Neo-Realist tradition, two significant fractions – Defensive and Offensive- are popularly used to examine the state's approach towards the rival one. The famous book of Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* 1979, represents defensive realism where the

state has to maintain the balance of power against the opposite side to avoid violence and misunderstanding; on the other hand, John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* 1990 gives a critical estimation of offensive realism where the state behaviour seems to be more aggressive due to the anarchic situation. Defensive realism asserts that aggressive expansion, as promoted by offensive realists, upsets the tendency of states to conform to the balance of power theory, thereby decreasing the primary objective of the state, which they argue is ensuring its security (Lobell, 2010). Unlike Cold War politics, where the ideological conflict between the U.S. and the USSR was worsened, China's engagement would never have been so extreme due to a stable trade relationship. Under Defensive realism, no country would likely be offensive against the opposition because of the fear of economic instability. For that reason, both China and India have yet to approach the offensive path. In the present context, China and India have distinct interests in Afghanistan; moreover, at the strategic level, China-India relations in Afghanistan have been a matter of interest articulation, not a confrontation. Through defensive realism, this article will examine the possible defensive instruments available before the two countries to restore one's strategic gain in Afghanistan. Apart from that, this theoretical tool will show a golden mean between competition and conflict between China and India about the strategic opportunities in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan: What Does It Mean For Both China And India?

Afghanistan is the quintessential “crossroads of cultures” where the civilisations of Central Asia, South Asia, and China interacted for thousands of years in a dynamic mixture of trade, cultural exchanges, and migration (Times, 2022). Despite bloodshed, Afghanistan has been a complex entity in the global political landscape. In ancient times, the country was at the crossroads of many civilisations as a junction on the Silk Road, linking the East to the West and Central Asia to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean (Salahi, 2022). From ancient to the present, outsiders have been attracted to the Afghan land to maintain their supremacy, but nobody has conquered it. From Alexander the Great to the United States of America, Afghanistan has become a nightmare for the superpowers. Apart from that, instead of dividing the land geographically, different tribal groups and their inherited identities made the Afghan land one geographically integrated nation. Afghanistan appeared to be a buffer state during the great game between the British Empire and Russia. It oscillated during the Cold War through the ideological hypocrisy of Capitalism and Communism, which had nothing to do with Afghan culture. During the Cold War, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union sought to gain footholds in Afghanistan, first through infrastructure investments and then military intervention (Stewart, 2021). After the Cold War, Afghanistan experienced a brutal civil war between

different internal factions, and eventually, that made clear the path for the creation of the Taliban. Following the attacks of Mujahideen in the United States, Afghanistan experienced the most prolonged foreign occupation from 2001 to 2021. America's retaliation was backed by the intention of keeping the Taliban outside the track with force; moreover, it was an expensive war for Americans with the heavy drainage of both man and material resources. After routing the Taliban, the United States and NATO turned to rebuilding a failed state and establishing a Western-style democracy, spending billions trying to reconstruct a desperately poor country (Hayworth, 2018). Eventually, the pre-planned ambitions of the United States vanished in Afghanistan and transferred the sceptre to the Taliban on the 15th of August 2021. Winning in Afghanistan may not be an option, but losing certainly is, and a precipitous departure, no matter how rationalised, would mean choosing to lose (Dobbins *et al.*, 2019). American withdrawal from Afghanistan reflects the failure of the U.S. policymakers and the triumph of a small fraction of Afghanistan; furthermore, it has also opened up the door of Afghanistan for the superpowers of the region. This section will examine Afghanistan's importance for both China and India.

Afghanistan had a civilisational linkage with China and India; from trade to people-to-people contact, Afghanistan has been a matter of priority for dragons and elephants since the ancient era. Afghanistan was a trade destination for China that eventually shaped the New Silk Road policy; earlier, the ancient Silk Road connected the Xinjiang Province of China and the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. From the fourth and fifth centuries onwards, Chinese pilgrims began to flock towards the Afghan-Indian centres of Buddhist learning, while Middle Eastern goods and crafts travelled to China via the same Silk Road (Dai, 1966). After the creation of the People's Republic of China, Sino-Afghan relations were enhanced with the recognition of China by Afghanistan as the first South Asian country.

The bilateral diplomatic relations were established by instilling respective embassies for China and Afghanistan. Due to an ideological difference between China and Russia, Afghanistan did not attract much attention from China during the Cold War; moreover, During the 1980s, Afghanistan became a battleground, with China collaborating closely with the United States in a common effort to thwart the Soviet invasion of the country. With additional help from Pakistan, it provided Soviet-style arms to Afghan insurgents (Zhang, 2022). while there are unconfirmed reports that China is providing some limited material aid to the anti-Soviet resistance fighters in Afghanistan, the most significant measure has been Chinese pressure on the Soviets in the diplomatic arena, the objective being to tarnish Moscow's image and isolate it in the international arena (Qaiser, 1987). China's first and foremost objective inside restive Afghanistan is to ensure modest stability to prevent any spill-over militant activity within its periphery (Sattar & Yaqin, 2023). China has long been concerned about the spread of extremist

ideas and activism from Afghanistan through Central Asia and across its borders, particularly into its westernmost territory, Xinjiang (Kley, 2014).The most significant aspect of Sino-Afghan relations has been the rise of Uyghur militancy in the Xinjiang province that shaped the security threats for China in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal. China has long regarded popular expressions of social and political dissent and the vocalisation of grievances by Uighurs as a threat to domestic stability (Zambelis, 2010). Afghan stability is required not only for the success of Chinese investments and economic interests but also because it has implications for the security situation in the western region of Xinjiang (Ramachandran, 2023).

In order to counter the extremism and possible aggression, the Chinese government has systematically imposed restrictions such as sterilisations, surveillance, and mass detention. Such a radical approach of China towards the Muslim population in the region has allowed critics to place their voices against Chinese political authority; in addition, after the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the immediate step before the PRC was to close her diplomatic presence with a strong response to the spillover of Taliban and the Islamic radicalisation in the territory of China. Apart from this security perspective, China has been a major player in penetrating its economic ambition inside Afghanistan, from infrastructural development to extracting rare materials. China's economic strategy in Afghanistan and Central Asia is to expand its economic zone of influence through funding infrastructure and communication networks (Wieringen & Claustre, 2023). Given its wealth in minerals, gas and oil, the country has long-term potential for Chinese companies, small and large, private or state-owned, particularly if it remains relatively stable under the emirate (Rutting, 2023). However, developing them and bringing income to one of the world's most impoverished countries has been hampered by persistent instability and conflict, out-of-control corruption, inadequate infrastructure development, and since the Taliban seized power, by Western sanctions (Felbab-Brown, 2022).

Having a legitimate border sharing with Afghanistan, China would certainly be in constant thought of accelerating the economic ties since the possibility of economic engagement has been doubled due to the open call from the Taliban for investment and the resumption of unfinished projects inside Afghanistan. The Taliban administration has expressed its interest in formally joining China's Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in a bid to attract investment in Afghanistan (Reuters, 2023). China has also signed the first international deal with Afghanistan, agreeing to oil extraction in the northern part. By the agreement, Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) will contribute \$150 million annually to Afghanistan, rising to \$540 million for the 25-year contract in three years (Amir, 2023). In addition, China also has geopolitical aspirations for Afghanistan in the aftermath of the U.S. military exit.

As an immediate neighbour and surrounded by Pakistan, Russia and India, China's presence in Afghanistan could not be neutralised, following the rivalry with India and the perception of China by the central and Middle Eastern states as a prosecutor of the Muslim population. The current mindset of China in Afghanistan would be to erase the past and start with a new zeal of engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan in order to grab strategic leverage beyond Afghanistan.

India's Afghanistan, unlike China, has been civilisational, friendly and romantic. Imagining India without Afghanistan and Afghanistan without India is impossible (Paliwal, 2017). Getting the smell of emotional attachment from Rabindranath Tagore's *Kabuli Wala*, the image of Afghanistan among the hearts of Indians is more than geopolitical. At the heart of this great bonding is India's policy towards Afghanistan, which is guided by 'friendship' and 'priorities' with the Afghan people (Shanti, 2022). From humanitarian assistance to student scholarship, India has followed the principle of non-reciprocity throughout the engagement journey between the two states. Therefore, India's humanitarian diplomacy has given it space to engage with the masses of Afghanistan, initially limited to northern Afghanistan; however, in the last couple of decades, to the other major power centres, including southern Afghanistan (Dixit, 2023). Credits for making new parliament buildings and medical centres and supplying essential materials reveal India's soft power investment in Afghanistan. With the changing nature of India's foreign policy, India's stand on Afghanistan has been moving from idealisation to *realpolitik*, owing to the experience of historical contradictions, ideological misfortunes and regional power rivalries. Most of the contending discourses on Indo-Afghan ties point to a different spectrum of Indian interests in Afghanistan, which range from countering Pakistan to countering radical Islamic groupings and building a bridge towards Central Asia to expand its regional influence (S., 2016). To some extent, India has been struggling with the same menace of terrorism as China.

However, the frequency of experience for India would naturally be magnified through an Afghan-Pak axis. Throughout history, India's voice against terrorism sounds constant and precise; moreover, the close affiliation between Afghan-Pak terrorist groups imposed severe threats before India, particularly in the Kashmir region. The Kashmiri terrorist leadership has always had a strong connection with militant outfits hailing from Afghanistan, most prominently the Hizb-e-Islami (HeI) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-i-Islami (HUJI) (Singh, 2009). Since the withdrawal of foreign troops and the reconstruction of the Afghan political system by the Taliban, India has been telling the Taliban to cut off its affiliation with Pakistani terror outfits. In addition, the subsequent response of India in post-U.S. withdrawal was and has been to encircle Pakistan, highlighting her belligerent instincts of destabilising the region through cross-border terrorism, which India is still struggling with great care.

India's engagement in Afghanistan treats Pakistan as a factor which will, from New Delhi's decision-making table, eventually be a problem for further acceleration of tension; moreover, the closeness between Pakistan and China, for India, has been a serious issue to be taken from the strategic and security perspectives. Comparing the meaning of Afghanistan, from both Chinese and Indian standards, it somehow falls under three major areas: economic, strategic, and security. In addition, India's meaning of Afghanistan strives for a more humanitarian engagement. However, this essence has been breaking down paradoxically with the new political set-up after the U.S. military exit.

Dealing With Taliban-Led Afghanistan: China-India's Negotiations

After twenty years of rigorous engagement in Afghanistan, U.S. military personnel finally left on the 15th of August 2021. Before that, both the Taliban and the U.S. agreed to have a peace deal, which was passed and paved the way towards making the smooth transition of power. The Doha agreement does not augur peace and stability in Afghanistan, with the country predicted to suffer from protracted violence and even a civil war. The instability in Afghanistan will also cascade into the neighbourhood and beyond and lead to non-traditional threats/challenges (Verma, 2022). Central to the deal was a significant drawdown of U.S. troops and guarantees from the Taliban that the country will not become a haven for terrorists (Maizland, 2020). The re-installation of the Taliban in Kabul was treated as the horrible experience of the past, where both China and India were forced to close their respective embassies, considering the security and recognition. Now, the image of the Taliban has been entirely different from their first tenure (1996-2001); moreover, it has been clear that the tendency of militancy and cross-border engagement with Pakistan-backed militancy is supposed to decline in post-2021 period. Such a signal from the Taliban, who were in a close relationship with Pakistan in the recent past, preserves confidence inside the regional powers for establishing diplomatic relations. Having a common but differentiated experience, both China and India have been suffering from terror activities and the spillover of Islamic radicalisation. Despite the claim of the Taliban, the disputed Durand line has been bleeding with the straight confrontation between Pakistan and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (a terror outfit linked with the Afghan Taliban). Regarding these strange insights of Afghanistan, Pakistan has been disturbed for not complying with the agreement signed with the U.S., saying the non-usage of Afghan land against others. Pakistan had hoped that the Afghan Taliban, after coming to power, would stop the use of their soil against Pakistan by expelling the TTP operatives. However, they have refused to do so at the cost of straining ties with Islamabad (PTI, 2023a). Islamabad blamed the Taliban regime in Kabul for a spurt in terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Besides, Islamabad's recent move to drive out more than

1.5 million allegedly undocumented Afghan refugees and migrants from Pakistan has further worsened its relations with the Taliban (Bhaumik, 2023). From both Chinese and Indian perspectives, the belligerent nature between the Taliban and Pakistan would somehow degrade regional cooperation; moreover, as a strategic friend of Pakistan, China's current stand has been entirely different compared to the previous regime of the Taliban. China has already hosted a meeting with the Taliban immediately after the withdrawal of the U.S. military to make a detailed framework for further engagement with Kabul. Apart from that, China has been convinced by the Taliban to restart the projects which are yet to be completed inside Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the past horror is still hunting the Chinese experts; furthermore, the security concern of Chinese projects is required to be eradicated by the Taliban.

The Indian delegates have also reached the door of the Taliban for seamless diplomatic and strategic relations despite the horrendous explosion of experience in the mind of India. Like China, India has been equally assured by the Taliban of the permanent cutoff of terror activities and resume the infrastructural projects. However, the assurance from Kabul could not be assured since the networks of militancy are still operating in different parts and the Taliban are yet to bring an inclusive government. During the intra-Afghan peace negotiation at Doha, the Taliban were convinced to form an inclusive government with the amalgamation of all the stakeholders; further, Taliban representatives had also demonstrated their willingness to allow women for jobs and education. Eventually, all those promises were violated by prohibiting educational institutions for women. In such a scenario, the feasibility of India's wholehearted engagement in Afghanistan seems to be more incongruent with the expectation that flourished inside the Indian policymakers after being convinced by the Taliban. A promising and insightful approach from the Taliban and further deterioration of promises make Kabul unable to frame an intact and futuristic agenda in dealing with powerful and ambitious India.

Despite a close affinity between China and the Taliban, the promises of Kabul are still unfulfilled, and that would indeed contribute towards incompetency; moreover, such incompetencies have been consistently driving the image of Afghanistan as a repressive and illegitimate state due to the denial of inclusive administration. In such a situation, Kabul has been in a dilemma to clarify its strategic position before China and India. The foremost dilemma before Kabul is maintaining a balance between change and continuity; Afghanistan's foreign policy generally has always been based on available conditions. However, the consistent commitment towards regional cooperation was Afghanistan's priority, and that principle has been the guiding force till now. While the Taliban's view of foreign policy orientation is far from fully codified, its commitment to a neutral and non-interfering Afghanistan stands in clear contrast to the government's foreign policy

positions (Harpviken, 2021). However, the Taliban might not preserve such continuity of Kabul due to the anti-modern theocratic rules. The constant adherence to radical Islamic rules in the day-to-day business of the government makes Kabul powerless to gain international support as a full-fledged nation-state. Apart from that, Kabul's effort to gain support from both China and India seems incompatible due to their pre-determined national interests, driven by their footprints and development narratives built upon the land of Afghanistan. In addition, Taliban-led Kabul needs to take both countries seriously because the effort of Pakistan has resulted in the most significant blunder for Afghan nationals and long-term suffering. Despite the atrocities of Pakistani terror outfits, along with the Taliban subgroups inside India and China, both have clarified themselves as a developmental partner of Afghanistan.

Towards Cooperation Or Competition: A Matter Of Choice

With Afghanistan emerging as a strategic focal point in the regional ambit, global players are flocking to secure an eminent position in establishing peace and stability in the country (Mohanty, 2017). The involvement of global powers can impact regional dynamics, but experience tells us that distant global powers come and go, whereas contiguous neighbours stay (Harpviken, 2021). The Taliban's return to power raises questions not only about how the movement will use its newfound authority but also about what Afghanistan's neighbours will do in response (Group, 2021). Considering such narration in the context of Afghanistan seems to have a more justified version; in particular, in one way or another, the external powers were eventually withdrawn from Afghanistan. Still, the neighbours are prompting their respective foreign policy scripts. Afghanistan has been a land for all, and the desire to participate in economic and political reconstruction is supposed to be welcomed. With a view of the recent disclosure of interest by the Taliban for effective engagement of regional powers, China and India would be motivated to address their concerns of strategic depth and feasibility in the post-U.S. scenario. Among all the regional stakeholders, China and India are the most concerned parties regarding the political, economic, and security outlook of a post-secular Afghanistan (Askari & Khalid, 2023). The choices before both countries are manifold; moreover, the choices have been evolving throughout Afghanistan's journey in the global and regional spheres. Ranging from terrorism to energy security in Central Asia, both China and India need to place themselves in Afghanistan in order to find out the path to survival. Here, whether both intended to cooperate or compete in post-U.S. Afghanistan, this section has demonstrated a detailed analysis of all the two aspects of choices.

Cooperation

The fluctuation often happens between nation-states on

the grounds of cooperation and conflict; in a nutshell, the proposed theoretical framework, defensive realism, provides the ground for cooperation rather than long-term conflict. Taking the respective places of India and China, especially in the South Asian security conundrum, it is hypothetical to interpret a cooperative ground between both powers; in contrast, the smell of conflict seems inevitable. However, the recent playground of Afghanistan must be used to comprehend the possibilities of cooperation between the two Asian giants of the 21st century. Despite the overlapping strategies in the region, China and India's rivalry could not be sidelined unless a neutral ground is available to preserve and protect their strategic interests. Afghanistan's security quandary and spillover effects in and around its periphery have been the foremost disquiet. They have caused clear understanding but fluctuate in a self-contained approach to deal with it (Akhter & Yuan, 2020). Now, after years of terror and narcotic experience, the Sino-India strategic stand might take a distinct shape, acknowledging the further road towards economic and strategic gain in and through Afghanistan. Both countries are highly concerned about instability in Afghanistan and the possibility of the country once again becoming a base for global and regional jihadist terror groups (Sawhney & Sareen, 2015). A cooperative venture between China and India could be established to eradicate terrorism from the region; moreover, as a common threat, both countries have the capabilities to counter the expandable terrorism in the region. This common problem requires a common ground to achieve a reliable solution; in particular, terrorism must be raised at the global and regional platforms where both India and China have been working closely.

Platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have been the leading regional organisations with a consensual commitment towards stabilising Afghanistan. All the SCO members support the solution of the Afghan problem through political and diplomatic means and emphasise the need to form an inclusive government (Norov, 2024). As a multilateral, regional organisation, SCO represents the genuine players of Central, West and South Asia whose conscious engagement in the region can dramatically erase the menace of terrorism and extremism. The SCO has also pledged to reinvigorate its regional anti-terrorism institutions to prevent the spread of the "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism and extremism into the territories surrounding Afghanistan (Omelicheva, 2021). The unique wing of SCO, Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, has been working closely to diminish terrorism from the border area; furthermore, the primary task of SCO-RATS is to maintain a databank and facilitate information sharing of terrorist organisations and individuals, aiding and abetting terror activities amongst the member states (Guvvadi, 2022). India has shown keen interest in deepening its security-related cooperation with the SCO and its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), which deals explicitly with issues relating to security and defence (PTI, 2022b). The

RATS works in accordance with the SCO charter and is tasked with tackling terrorism issues by maintaining a working relationship with member countries and international organisations to gather information (Wani, 2023). Since the SCO-RATS has been competent in grabbing sensitive intelligence data, especially on the matter of terrorist activities in the region, India could access that information for bringing down the terror activities; furthermore, the China-India strategy towards dismantling terrorism could be strengthened with a collaborative exercise, not merely through the showcase of data. Pakistan's long-term affiliation with the Afghan-Taliban has been a significant hurdle between India and China for sharing a cooperative atmosphere to counter-terrorism; therefore, Beijing should not allow the Pakistani 'deep state' to dictate its links with India, especially in the context of cooperation in Afghanistan (Maini, 2018).

Apart from terrorism, Sino-India cooperation in Afghanistan can be nurtured through active economic exchange rather than a trade war. As the two largest economic giants of the region, both have a tendency for upward movement in terms of economy and status. About the economic initiatives of China and India in Afghanistan, the track record of footprints has revealed uncommon strategies in common ground. China's investment is driven through tangible outcomes such as oil extraction and widespread investment for connectivity, whereas India's investment has been empowered with people-oriented investment. Cooperation through economic exchange could only be possible when the two countries are convinced to rebuild their space inside the region without any offensive action. In addition, both economies are moving towards a tech-based power hub by muscling their indigenous and innovation platforms. The possibility of a cooperative technical venture inside Afghanistan could make a judicious application of economic cooperation by both countries; moreover, this initiative would facilitate long-term collaboration and reduce the unequal development in Afghanistan.

Competition

As the two emerging Asian powers, the competition between India and China has been a by-product of civilisational egoism, historical evolution, and ambitious developmental syndrome. Both are competing, directly or indirectly, for managing a regional power structure that is feasible, beneficial, and non-authoritarian. However, the competing nature of both powers makes the region volatile and restricts each other from holding supremacy over the region. However, the current scenario of China in the South Asian region reveals the emergence of great power politics. It rings the bell for India to replace a genuine competitor. After the complete exit of the U.S. military, Afghanistan has emerged as a new battleground for the region; in particular, India and China are the most qualified powers to be fought in this battle, considering their relative power, achievements and

hegemony. India and China have primary geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, which see Afghanistan as the gateway to oil and resource-rich Central Asia and European markets, besides the factors related to own national security due to growing extremism in the region (Jindal, 2020). Now, China has accelerated its engagement in Afghanistan through diplomatic and economic outreach. Since the Taliban's return to power, China has consistently sought to maintain an open communication channel with Afghanistan (Lemaitre, 2023). Despite the denial of full recognition to Taliban-led Afghanistan, China has maintained its availability to penetrate the diplomatic footprint, choosing the path of golden means of engagement between complete opposition and full recognition. While maintaining close contact with the Taliban interim administration, Beijing withheld recognition, especially over global criticism of the Taliban's treatment of women and girls, excluding them from educational institutions (PTI, 2023b). Such recognition keeps the Taliban in favour of China and also the more significant benefit of economic integration, which was stopped due to militancy and instability. Despite these limitations, Beijing and Kabul seem to be pushing ahead, and a few agreements have already been signed.

China remains one of the Taliban's only hopes for economic development, and Afghan resources particularly interest Chinese firms and government (Wieringen & Claustre, 2023). Concerning this, the Taliban has agreed to proceed with China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative project; however, the economic crisis-ridden Taliban regime has been suffering from tangible material outcomes, and the BRI project seems to commit reconstructing the Afghan economy through more comprehensive regional connectivity. Its success depends on fostering partnerships and securing access to critical regions, making Afghanistan's participation attractive due to its wealth of untapped mineral resources, including copper, gold, and lithium (SNS, 2023).

The Taliban regime signed an agreement with the Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC), a subsidiary of the state-owned China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), for the extraction of oil from the Amu Darya basin (Das, n.d.). Nevertheless, China is enticing Kabul to link up with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor by proposing to build cross-border railway networks from Peshawar to Kabul and Quetta to Kandahar (Kondapalli, 2023). The competitive nature of China, especially in Afghanistan, makes India reluctant to get a conducive placement; moreover, China's outreach to Afghanistan could be analysed as a conscious movement from a passive actor into a pro-active negotiator. China's consistent use of economic diplomacy and political restraint towards Taliban, despite security breaches across the CPEC relevant Pak-Afghan border, could establish a certain political leverage over Taliban, necessary to bring them on board not only for BRI but ensuring security of Chinese investment in Afghanistan (Naseem & Mehkri,

2023). Apart from the connectivity measures, China has been convinced to supply weapons to the Taliban, which indicates a strange signal for India. Throughout India's Afghanistan journey, it has kept military aid outside the purview of engagement to maintain the continuity of civic-economic diplomacy. Unlike India, the Chinese way of competition has been moving steadily to encircle Afghanistan and its utilisation for accessing the benefits which are yet to be processed effectively. Compared to Chinese outreach, India's top officials have refused to stand with the Taliban due to a growing concern about legitimacy and inclusivity; furthermore, India's deliberate refusal of military aid would probably create a positive atmosphere for China to hold the Taliban tightly by inserting military assets.

The Possibility Of Win-Win Situation: Emerging Grounds And Challenges

As stated in the theoretical framework of this paper, the state actors are not always in a direct contradictory orientation towards achieving absolute gain in a specific context. In the given subject, China and India must overcome their strategic barriers and pursue a defensive realist policy to maintain regional stability without compromising their excellent power status. Such a theoretical intervention has been possible due to the expectation and gain of both states; however, the balance of power in Afghanistan, between India and China, has been a prerequisite to maintaining stability. Since the stability in Afghanistan is likely a prime concern, both countries have been refraining from full-fledged engagement; moreover, Afghanistan has already indicated geopolitical willingness before China and India. Therefore, instead of creating a hegemonic standard, attaining stability inside Afghanistan has been a strategic goal for both powers. This section reveals the possible grounds for a mutual gain, also known as a win-win situation, of both China and India in Afghanistan; moreover, there are challenges before the mutual gain, which has also been identified.

Grounds

Afghanistan has been a ground for regional powers following the permanent abdication of foreign presence. Apart from the economic dimension, the strategic location of Afghanistan allows both China and India to inculcate strategic depth. As a link road to Central Asian countries, the engagement with Afghanistan could open up the ground for energy security. The outreach of China and India to Taliban-led Afghanistan has made the unstable region hopeful for a long-term solution; moreover, China and India's engagement seems mutually exclusive and paves the way towards uplifting respective expertise and grounds. There are numerous grounds where mutual gain or win-win situations could be visible; however, some emerging grounds have been identified below.

First, the ground before the Asian powers is the space for connectivity. China has been trying to uphold territorial

connectivity through BRI in Afghanistan; despite the lack of direct connectivity, India's presence in Afghanistan has been more civilisational and people-oriented. The Chinese connectivity provides an economic and strategic space for extracting crucial logistics and tangible rare materials. Unlike China, the Indian way of connectivity in Afghanistan has been developmental; in particular, India has been given credit for building a parliament, highways, dams and hospitals. India's effort for the completion of Chabahar Port and its usage has visibly upgraded connectivity to Afghanistan. Using the port at Chabahar offers substantial advantages over sending wheat through Pakistan, skirting the tense relationship between the nuclear-armed neighbours and allowing India to help Afghans more effectively (Gupta, 2023). On the ground of connectivity, China and India have their respective approach and model towards achieving strategic space.

Second, in a crisis-ridden country like Afghanistan, regional donors seem more fundamental for reconstructing the Afghan economy and society. Both China and India are the most valuable donors to Afghanistan. Recently, an emergency humanitarian cash assistance of \$200,000 to the Afghan Red Crescent Society on behalf of the Red Cross Society of China to relieve the devastation caused by the earthquake in Herat province (CGTN, 2023). India, in a similar way, has also extended support to the Afghan people to overcome the humanitarian destruction. About the allocation of Rs 200 crore to Afghanistan, it is learnt that it is a signal of India's commitment to the Afghan people, and the money may be spent on paying for old projects, scholarships and providing aid to the Afghan people (PTI, 2022a). During the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, both countries were convinced to restore humanity and extended medical support. In humanitarian aid, the possibility of mutual gain could be sharply visible between both powers.

Third, Sino-India engagement in Afghanistan also reveals the binary nature of hard-soft power. In particular, the grounds for the strategic involvement of China and India have been designed through a combination of both hard and soft powers. For instance, China has been providing military weapons to the Taliban to combat internal insurgency inside the country (ANI, 2023). In contrast, the Taliban government has clarified to induce India-trained cadets into the Afghan security forces, showing positive results for India's efforts in strengthening Afghan security architecture (StratNews, 2022). Apart from this, China has established different companies to process underground materials in numerous locations. Unlike China's, India's soft power footprints are diverse and multifaceted. With the help of international agencies and charitable groups, India has been training Afghan women for self-reliant livelihood.

Despite these emerging grounds, the possibilities of mutual gain have collided with numerous challenges; however, the following points are supposed to unveil the challenges before a harmonious existence of a Sino-India stake in Taliban-backed Afghanistan.

Challenges

First, the long-term territorial dispute and growing deficiency of confidence between China and India have made both powers reluctant to pursue mutually beneficial strategies in South Asia. While Beijing and New Delhi continue to vie for more significant influence in South Asia, raising the risks of inadvertent conflict, both have engaged in serious efforts to contain the fallout of border skirmishes on the one hand and ensure overall stability in Afghanistan on the other (Askari & Khalid, 2023). Taking the economic and strategic footprints in the region, China has been moving towards a hegemonic actor with widespread engagement and reconciliatory efforts to make the region suitable for strategic leverage. China's economic transformation and consequent expansion of its comprehensive national power have strategic consequences everywhere, including South Asia (Mohan & Singh, 2023). In the context of Afghanistan, China's proactive diplomatic and strategic engagement with the Taliban and subsequent efforts to grab their favour for fulfilling flagship projects like BRI have threatened India's stake and sustainability.

Second, for the Sino-India cooperative venture in Afghanistan, terrorism and radicalisation have been the riskiest factors to be dealt with; moreover, both the Asian powers are suffering from border terrorism from different locations but in similar proximity. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Pakistan's deep state will exploit its terror links further in a bid to create more instability (Dwivedi, 2021). As stated in the introductory part, the terror outfit in the border area of Xinjiang and cross-border terrorism in Kashmir have put both countries in suspense to proceed with the Taliban regime despite their green signal for fostering diplomatic and economic engagement. The drainage of energy and resources from both China and India to counter terrorism has been a tangible challenge, causing a trust deficit.

Third, Unlike China, who has strategically engaged with the Taliban; and Pakistan, that has actively engaged with the Taliban; India has always been averse to the same (Mishra, 2021). Pakistan and its affiliation with both China and Afghanistan have been and will always be a factor for India to consider for greater engagement. Starting from the creation of the terror outfit to providing help to Mujaheddin and the Taliban during the Soviet invasion and the 9/11 attack, Pak-Afghan relations have been tested as an unholy axis for the region and also for India. Afghanistan is an arena for India-Pakistan rivalry and zero-sum dynamics in which one side's gain is a loss for the other risks, victimising the Afghans further (Wani, 2022). Apart from that, Sino-Pak relations have further deteriorated India's stand. Through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and BRI, the legitimacy of mutual ties between Pakistan and China has been strengthened. However, while Beijing has leverage with Pakistan's security establishment, its close relationship with Islamabad has also been a real impediment to forcing it to deliver tangible results in a negotiated political settlement

in Afghanistan (Kaura, 2018). Pakistan was also a prominent actor in reconciliation between China and the Taliban; moreover, it has been sure that any Chinese engagement in Afghanistan would not be feasible without a proxy touch of Pakistan. Diplomatically, the trilateral dialogue of China-Pakistan-Afghanistan appears to be a platform to sideline India's significant initiatives and efforts in Afghanistan.

Lastly, Legitimacy and recognition serve as essential factors for any government to operate independently within the confines of the state and participate in the international system (Cogan & Gill, 2022). However, Taliban-backed Afghanistan has not been able to grab international recognition, which seems to be the primary prerequisite for the maintenance of authority over the land. The internal problem of Afghanistan could severely hamper the possibility of mutual gain for both China and India. Despite the lack of inclusive government in Afghanistan, China has extended diplomatic support by hosting meetings with the delegates of the Taliban. Still, India has refrained from claiming diplomatic affiliation with the Taliban, following the brutalities and radical rules adopted by the Taliban in their land. The legitimacy problem in the Taliban regime has made the outsiders reluctant to promote diplomatic and political goodwill.

CONCLUSION

The complete withdrawal of the U.S. military has allowed the emerging powers for strategic investment, diplomatic negotiations and political involvement with the Taliban-backed Afghanistan. As civilisational and emerging powers of the region, China and India are considered to be the most qualified stakeholders to influence the region, considering their footprints in economic and strategic status. Despite the conflictual relations between China and India, the current situation in Afghanistan indicates an opportunity to transform the perpetual conflict into plausible cooperation. Such a transformation requires the consideration of gain and loss; furthermore, in the present context, China-India cooperation would provide safety measures to the Taliban for grabbing legitimacy and approach both countries to participate in the journey of Post-U.S. Afghanistan's economic, political and humanitarian reconstruction. Apart from that, China and India have their voices about the Afghan-led solution to the Afghan problem; similarly, the same principle could be applied as the regional problem needs to be handled with regional players. Historically, Afghan land and its people were suffered by the British Army, Soviet comrades and Pentagon warriors. Taking a lesson from the past, Sino-India's strategic involvement in Afghanistan has the vitality to reconstruct the crisis-stricken region through humanitarian support, diplomatic problem-solving mechanisms, economic investment, and reconciliation of soft-hard power. Still, the problems are manifold, ranging from the differences in preference, partnership and policies between China and India. However, in the coming days, the future of Afghanistan and its legitimate

existence will primarily depend on Sino-India cooperation in common but differentiated strategies.

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