



CHINA GEO-POLITICAL CONTOURS IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Afghanistan as pivotal in this region as it provides a land bridge between Greater Central Asia northern and southern parts and between Middle East and Greater Central Asia as well. The US intervention in Afghanistan has opened a channel for Beijing geo-political objectives in Afghanistan. China's economic interests are connected with Afghanistan and investing in Afghanistan's infrastructure development but threats from Islamic extremism has inundated the region which has been infested into Xinjiang province with enhanced drug trade. This research investigates the interests of China through analytical and qualitative approaches. China's interests in Afghanistan revolve around various geo-political imperatives. China has longer presence and investment plans in Afghanistan because Afghanistan has huge oil and natural gas reserves in northern part. Besides, China wants an access to natural gas supply of Central Asia and Afghanistan. China is interested in stable Afghanistan that has military capability to secure its borders. For regional aspiration China is to counter United States hegemonic designs. Besides, the other significant contour is having foothold in Pakistan especially through strategic designs in Balochistan.

Key Words: Geo-Political, Hegemony, Natural Resources, Foreign Policy, Strategic Interests.

Introduction

China foreign policy stands for peaceful development and its strategic culture is peaceful and non-offensive contrary to the western hegemonism. (Feng, 2007). In economic and energy requirements, with enhanced Chinese dependence on Middle East hydrocarbons and overseas investment in natural resources, the safeguard against vulnerability for protection of sea lanes of communication in Africa and Asia gets stretched.

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Specifically taking China foreign policy contours towards Afghanistan then it seems that she is interested in stability of Afghanistan in order to serve her large economic interests there, which run parallel with the policy of the US on the subject of the stability of Afghanistan. China has also being co-opted in connection with reconciliation between Afghanistan and the Taliban which will not only enhance communications between China, Afghanistan and the Taliban but will also benefit China through the tightening supply line of the fighters of East Turkistan.

However according to the realists China grew more powerful when she became expansionist. Her strategic interests grew to the extent the resources permitted both on Asian canvas and beyond ocean. (Wang, 2010)

China's interests in Afghanistan revolve around the following sectors as she is firstly taking it head on to counter US hegemonic designs, reach to the resources of Afghanistan, Central Asian Republics and having foothold in Pakistan especially through strategic designs in Balochistan. Further to these objectives China has Afghanistan's policy in this region of geo-political and geo-economic significance. Following are detailed of China's policy contour in the region.

1. Countering US Hegemony in the Region

During Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, China was United States ally for curbing Soviet in Afghanistan and South Asia. Accordingly China helped Mujahedeen with US arms sale for defeating Soviet. (Coll, 2004) After collapse of Soviet Union, China was no longer a pivot and buffer state but only a surviving communist and revisionist power which was incommensurate with US sole super power status. In 1990s this aspect of China's foreign policy became imminent in Yichao duoqiang system (one superpower, many great powers). (Curtov & Hwang, 1998) During 1990s the US policy makers fashioned policies on how to contain China in the emerging scenario. There was great debate on engagement versus containment whereby the latter signifies containing China from strengthening its power and becoming a regional and international player. The engagement policy sucks China into various agreements and regimes to entangle her in intricate network of international norms so that China can hardly challenge the existing global status quo. It can be viewed in context of 'sticky power' which brings states into complicated arrangements and organization by

pledging benefits but once entered they cannot abandon it due to economic and political costs. (Mead, 2004) The US is apprehensive about China and deems it a challenge but Chinese peaceful rise manifests that she is not going to threaten the US-led world order any time soon.

However, Chinese rise has divided American policy makers and academicians on how Chinese power to be handled by the US. The advocates of US-China stable relations consider and highlight the enhanced political and economic interconnectedness. Both seek economic cooperation in global market, international security issues like fighting terrorism etc which constitute common grounds between them. Since both US and China possess nukes hence any confrontation will prove disastrous for them. Resultantly the US will endeavor to integrate China in global affairs. On the contrary those who consider China's assertive military power threat to the US argue that it will challenge US strategic interests in Asia Pacific region. This school of thought takes ideological tussle, economic differences, nationalism, American concerns on Chinese thriving market muscle into consideration. (Broomfield, 2003) Besides their differences on human rights, interventions in other states and democratization, China and the US have rivalry over natural resources, energy in particular as China is enhancing its purchase of oil and gas supplies. The security of United States is targeted by transnational militant groups more than that of China because the policy of China is not to lock horns with militants except East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). (Small, 2015)

China foreign policy stalwarts in China Communist Party (CCP) and People Liberation Army (PLA) have reservations with recent US foreign policy and its tendency towards hegemony because China foreign policy is itself oriented towards multipolar world order. When contemplating the US hegemony, it becomes evident that the US will still remain the largest if not super power in coming times as US is armed with the soft as well as hard powers embodied as culture, institutionalized diplomacy, military and economics. Although the US military troops are engaged in Afghanistan yet it can bear the cost of high tech warfare. Given the US dominance in international arena, China must give priority to America in foreign policy for obtaining maximum benefits by deeply integrating the world community.

While on the other hand the US has concern about China military rise and enhanced military budget especially its power projection in naval aspect which poses challenge to the US in the Pacific as in shape of security of South China sea, East China sea and Malacca

Straits. Economic interests of both have another identical dimension of contest for energy between Washington and Beijing. As enhanced energy demand has prompted China for seeking supplies in Central Asia, Middle East and Africa and the same is by the US. The enhanced economic interdependence between Beijing and Washington will play greater role in future foreign policy also.

China engagement in Afghanistan is limited to resources exploitation and infrastructure development. With its fast growing economy, political stability at home and successful foreign policy China is in much better position to play role for stability in the region. Geographically China is in position to play decisive role in regional affairs. It has become a solid stabilizing power that can materially influence the region.

The US has strengthened engagement in South Asian countries (like Afghanistan, India, Pakistan) after being ousted from Central Asian Republics (CARs) in order to have access to CARs which has compelled China to renew relations with Pakistan. The US engagement of Pakistan and China in Af-Pak policy has rendered a chance to China for playing a significant regional role and partner in development and stability of troubled regional environment. If the US overcome and end terrorism from Afghanistan then China geopolitical status will be increased whereby connection with Pakistan enabled Beijing to pressurize the NATO/US for prompt exit.

The US pivot towards Asia will probably create vacuum inside Afghanistan but if that happens, it's most likely that China would like to occupy that though the costs are high and it is not clear if China is ready to pay those costs.

2. Reach to the Resources

The geo-political theory of sir Halford Mackinder's that one who controls the 'Heartland Controls the World' has shaped new framework applied to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Accordingly the US, EU, Iran, Pakistan, China, Japan, South Korea and Turkey have revived their historical ties with this region beyond era of Iron curtain. For resource importing states the availability of gas and oil is connected with secure energy supplies. Central Asia is pivotal strategic region between two large energy consumption market of Asia and Europe. Beijing has sensed this enormous potential hence having strong political, economic and strategic ties in post-Soviet region. China craves for presence in energy rich Central Asian

states for access to hydrocarbon supplies and to get stability in Uighur autonomous region of Xinjiang. Hence China has active participation in development of gas and oil fields, east directed pipeline projects. Central Asia is geo-economically significant as emerging market for Chinese manufactured goods, energy supplier and geo-politically for stability of Xinjiang. Central Asia resources are geographically closer than African and Middle Eastern petroleum suppliers that ship 80 % of oil through Malacca Straits. It is strategic significance of Central Asia which will lead to great powers contest over regional influence in center of Eurasia.

Central Asian reserves are immense as Kazakhstan has more than 30 billion barrel of oil and 1.9 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, 15 % world's uranium resources and coal reserves. It is largest gas producer with 11.7 % of world natural gas reserves. (Strategic Review, 2012) Turkmenistan's gas production is mainly from three assets as fields on the left banks of Amu Darya, smaller offshore blocks and old onshore fields. (Pirani, 2012) China has limited natural resources deposits as according to one estimate People Republic of China has 14.7 billion barrel of oil reserves and 3.1 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. (Strategic Review, 2012) Hence oil demand will be approximately 15 million barrels daily in 2035. Chinese regional strategy is comprised of purchase of fields and construction of pipelines whereas investment is mainly by Chinese state owned energy enterprises as Sinopec and CNPC. The China-Central Asia gas pipeline extended from over 8,000 km, 200 km within Turkmenistan, 1,300 km through Kazakhstan, 500 km through Uzbekistan and sealed to China second West-East gas pipeline start in Xinjiang and end in Hong Kong.

China has sensed the political instability on its north and northwestern borders due to collapse of Soviet with consequent implication for territorial unity hence she adopted good neighborhood policy with Central Asia and Russia. Resultantly, China became partner from enemy for developing economic and diplomatic collaboration with post-Soviet states. CARs are sovereign states independent of power contesters. Any instability in Central Asia will have adverse impacts on regional security as in case of China the fall out will embroil Xinjiang. Since 9/11 Central Asia is destabilized due to drug trafficking and finances covert groups having linkages with Islamism and criminalization of economy.

Central Asia is strategically important for China after East Asia and Taiwan. Central Asia-China economic terms are joined through network of railways, roads and pipelines for Caspian gas and oil. China has energy projects of multibillion dollars comprised oil pipelines to carry crude oil from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan. As Central Asia is landlocked hence its oil

and gas wealth can be approached through China, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. Chinese route can be used by India for access to gas and oil. China is building pipelines to the region which can be highway of economic and strategic importance from Central Asia along western China.

China's policy towards Central Asian Republics in post-cold war era is revolving around four main grounds as firstly she is grappling for security and stability on its borders, secondly to increase economic development of certain internal regions, thirdly enhanced needs for energy and fourthly its concerns over its position in post-cold war world. (Mark, 1999) China has made several military, political and economic agreements with Central Asian Republics for diminishing tensions related to border issues, security conflicts and to enhance economic development. China has equal policies for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan but practically the security parameters have been focused on Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan because China has geographical proximity with these countries. China has economic ties with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. China's policy contours in 1980s have been transformed from just survival in adverse environment to overcome international instability which is essential for flourishing its economy. (Xuetong, 1995)

For China, Central Asia is very important recently than it has been west of China as an integral part of China's tributary system. (China's Foreign Affairs, 2003) According to Chinese the very presence of China in the region is to secure its growing need of oil and gas in Central Asia to secure its western border and peaceful development of Xinjiang. (Swanstrom, 2002)

Due to enormous wealth of oil and gas and strategic location Central Asia has been termed as China's Dingwei Lebensraum, the new Great Game as Peter Hopkirk labeled it, the Brezinski's formulation of Grand Chessboard, and clash of civilization by Samuel Huntington. (Hopkirk, 1994)

Both China and CARs have always favored trade although currently weapons, oil and infrastructure trade has replaced that of silk, jute, tea and rhubarb. Oil and gas are pivotal financial factors for connecting China with CARs because these will be primary fuel for Chinese industries for longer time in absence of any other alternative energy resources. (Swanstrom, 2001)

Chinese current oil resources are inadequate to fulfill its growing rate. China has purchased several oil and gas fields in Central Asia as oil fields in Kyrgyzstan for US \$ 5 billion by China National Petroleum company. China has made agreements with Kyrgyzstan for building pipelines for US \$9 billion cost. (Xu, 2000)By Chinese control on Central Asian network of oil pipelines, China is with hope to have control over the oil transported from Middle East to Asia which can be possible only due to international cooperation.

The Chinese investment in Central Asia has been enhanced with improved infrastructure. The Xinjiang and Sichuan provinces in China are important trading partners with Central Asian states whereas Sichuan province has enhanced trade volume. Beijing has used financial means to make Central Asian states dependent on China, build on oil and gas along with politico-military cooperation. Besides China would improve relation with Central Asian governments in order to resolve the Uighur minority conflict in Xinjiang and to curb rebels.

China's increasing interests and involvement in Central Asian is driven by its growing energy requirements. China has become world's second largest oil consumer. Hence Chinese policy makers have sought to increase their approach to Central Asian energy resources in order to supplement Persian Gulf sources which are supplying more than half of China's oil imports. As China has realized that military tussles, terrorism and instability in Middle East could further destroy their energy import from Middle East so focus for Central Asian energy resources is enhanced.

According to Owen Lattimore China has controlled Central Asia for 425 years out of 2000. (Lattimore, 1940) In 18th century much of Central Asia was under strong and powerful China which was ended with fall of Qing dynasty in 1911. Central Asia loom large in Chinese canvas of energy security as it is second only to the Gulf as contemplated oil reserves. (Roberts, 2003)

China objectives in Central Asia are firstly to safeguard its borders with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan by treaties of borders demarcation for curbing breeding ground for Uighur independent movement. Secondly, China reservation over the US prolong presence in Afghanistan and CARs can diminish the chance of setting disputes of Uighur and Tibetan issue.

Central Asian region is strategically significant for China for its abundant natural resources, ethnic and cultural linkages with Turkic Muslim minority in Chinese western province of

Xinjiang which keep both connected due to security concerns. Xinjiang's 60 percent population comprised ethnic minorities having affiliation with Turkic population in Central Asia than with Han Chinese. (Mark, 1999) Chinese leaders have apprehensions that these Turkic forces of Central Asian states will cause fissiparous trends in Xinjiang. (Bao, 1999)

The perturbed security in Xinjiang which is having majority Muslim of Turkic origin is one of main reasons of Chinese excitement for having close ties with CARs. (Fuller & Starr, 2003) Xinjiang minority population is having strong ties with CARs. Central Asia is taken as major trading area by China and accordingly historically important trade centers were in Xinjiang or west of China's recent borders as Jarkand, Samarkand, Urumqi and Kokand.

However, China's leverage in the region has been undermined by the US competing influence there. In coming times China has realized economic competition in Central Asia whereby superpower, the US will lead the quest for oil. Furthermore, China wants an access to global market for economic security through US who dominates world economic organization and powerful trading nation. China has grappled to enhance energy security interests in Central Asia whereas for diminishing political and economic dependence on Russia, Chinese state-owned oil companies have benefited from nearest Kazakhstan incentive and has outbid contest for controlling larger oilfields in western Kazakhstan. Accordingly Beijing has an agreement with Kazakhstan for constructing 1,240 km long oil pipeline in Xinjiang. Besides it has oil and gas development agreements in Uzbekistan. China needs the development of northwestern region whereby Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on east coast is recent initiative for bringing wealth to this poor region. (Becquelin, 2004) This economic development in north-west will not only pacify fissiparous tendencies of Uighur but will secure economic resources as oil which will turn into economic modernization. Hence China needs political stability in Central Asia which is integral part of Asia-Pacific. As in 1997 China sensed the strategic significance of Central Asia for the US in world politics as Central Asia connects Asia and Europe through Caucasus hence control over Central Asia could signify containment of Europe with impacts on East Asia besides curbing threat of Middle East. (Xinwen, 1998) China contemplates on US presence in Central Asia as mainly to weak Russian leverage, to curb spread of Islamic fundamentalism and to contain presence of China. (Xinwen, 1998)

Central Asia is important to every major Eurasian power: Russia, China and even India. The US has found Uzbekistan as an important ally for its anti-Taliban campaign in post 9/11 scenario. (Woodward, 2003) Hence Uzbekistan became an ally of the US in war on terrorism while facilitating the former with airspace to the US military personnel. Furthermore, Uzbekistan offered its potential for staging combat search and rescue operations and special forces operations from nearby Afghanistan border. (Frank, 2004) Recently the US facilities in Central Asia have been diminished to only Manas (base) Kyrgyzstan- is in doldrums due to internal chaos after Tulip Revolution. However if contemplate the US leverage in Central Asia then in aftermath of colored revolutions (Rose in Georgia in 2003, Tulip in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Orange in Ukrain in 2005) the region has concluded that US is not reliable partner because democratic dispensation is a challenge to their power while the US carve for promulgation of democracy just for its equities with Central Asian people rather with its leaders.

The US has presence in Afghanistan but its influence in Central Asia is of no significance because it has no any membership or an observer status to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) whereby it could have influence over China and Russia. Hence only option with US is establishing bilateral relations with CARs but that is not capable enough to be adopted by US policies. Moreover, this region is isolated and has inadequate cultural or historical ties with the US which could place it on the priority in the US foreign policy perspectives. The US is having big challenge in Central Asia to be an agent of change without endangering its terms with other players. Hence the US should grapple to be reliable for CARs especially for Uzbekistan to have greater understanding of the regional political dynamics, cultural and historical norms.

Both China and India have competition for access to oil, uranium and mineral resources and are expected for contest on communication technologies and service sectors. Central Asia will have more implications for India and China where its rich mineral wealth, civilizational ties, geographical contiguity make Central Asia attractive to both China and India. This region is pivotal for both countries economic growth leverage and power-play.

Furthermore, China in its economic sphere has amalgamated Central Asia where it connected Russia and Iran as major stake holders in the region. China has founded and backed Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which is balancing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and NATO. Relations of CARs with China will be in doldrums by turmoil in Xinjiang, Western

Asia especially Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moreover the intricate Central Asian governments and societies attitudes towards China and atheist ruler will undermine not only bilateral relations with China but also SCO role.

Leaders in Central Asia find Russia and China as more reliable as both have economic and political agreements with Central Asia and despise any of the US investment here. Ample manifestation of their enhanced leverage in the region is the emergence of Shanghai five in 1996 and later on its reshaping to SCO as largest Central Asian regional organization. Both China and Russia are uneasy about prolong presence of the US in Afghanistan. However, the Central Asian leader closer ties with Moscow and Beijing and consequently Russian and Chinese struggle to undermine the US leverage cannot hide the fact that yet the US is vital player in region especially due to its presence inside Afghanistan. Furthermore, in case of Taliban control in Kabul the policies of Moscow and Beijing for containment of US leverage in Central Asia is just a luxury because if the US would not present in Afghanistan, Taliban would had proved more hostile for the region.

3. Establish Foothold in Pakistan (to Counter the US as Naval Base in Gwadar and Economic Corridor)

China has always assisted Pakistan financially. Both countries are closely tied due to various reasons but their mutual concerns against India is main reason which has aligned them strategically. China has contributed to Pakistan's economy over the years for development of roads and infrastructure through advanced technology. China assists Pakistan in establishment of indigenous military-industrial complex by combine projects comprised tanks, fighters planes, ballistic missiles, satellites and guided missile frigates. (Pant, 2012) Besides Karakoram Highway (KKH) was constructed from 1966 to 1978, which connects China with the Gulf countries. China could prod Pakistan to change its approach towards Afghanistan for long-term stability.

Due to its peculiar geographic location and geo-strategic significance major regional and extra regional powers have special interests in Balochistan. The interests range from political to socio-economic.

Linking of China with Gwadar port provides immense financial dividends because Gwadar when operational will link CARs to outside world. Gwadar enhances strategic relations of

Pakistan and China where it imparts regional prominence to Pakistan and is located over coastal belt of 600 kilometers long stretch with merely a distance of 624 nautical kilometers from the busy commercial route of the Strait of Hormuz (which carries 13 million barrel oil per day), 120 kilometers from Iran border and 460 kilometers from Karachi. (Alamgir, 2011) These grounds are strengthening Pakistan's domination of the Indian Ocean from Persian Gulf to Southeast Asia and the Far East.

China is interested in Pakistan's Gwadar port for its naval base and in its strategy specified for Gulf region and West Asia and how to overcome US and China leverage in this region. Gwadar is crucial in the 'string of pearls' strategy which empowers China for controlling trade in Indian Ocean and to safeguard supply channel from rival and pirates. Gwadar deep sea port with the initial investment of 248 million US \$ was built on the unexplored seashores of Pakistan. (Mughal, 2009) The Chinese Western region to its eastern coast (3500 kilometers) and Gwadar (1500 kilometers) is approximately 2000 kilometers away. China is located in East Asia, having no land access to Middle East whereby Pakistan through Gwadar port provides this access.

Moreover, Gwadar Kashghar Economic Corridor (GKEC) will reduce 12000 miles between China and Middle East. Chinese exports will be prompted to Middle East, African and EU markets. The CARs, rich in natural resources, are at providence to control and channel their natural resources to the rest of the world through this economic corridor. Pakistan CPEC and Gwadar being linked with China can also be linked with Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Central Asia. This is win win for all. The Chinese view it as a strategic base and the US will take advantage of it without spending a penny. With the completion of the Economic Corridor all countries of the region including Afghanistan are likely to make union like the European Union. Instead of creating any situation the possibility is that all existing problems of the region will be solved.

It will be positive but it will depend on how effectively Pakistan is able to manage the security challenges it faces. To emerge like Hong Kong, Gwadar needs an external environment that is stable as the one facing in Hong Kong. The US is conscious of China's growing influence in the region which is greatly linked with peace and stability in Balochistan. India in collaboration with Afghanistan is adamant to destabilize Pakistan and towards this end conditions in Balochistan can easily be exploited. Revival of Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and continued pro nationalist propaganda in Indian media is a case in

point. Pakistan along with China should counter Indian influence in Afghanistan. Coordination with Iran will also prove helpful.

The US looks to China for assistance in fixing Pakistan and Iran whereby China contemplates Iran and Pakistan as integral part in its policy against America. According to James Fallow the China rise will “either the growing power of the Chinese economy will change the rest of the international system, effectively making it more Chinese, or the growing prosperity of the Chinese people will change their own country’s system, making it more international”. (Fallow, 2012)

Conclusion

China’s foreign policy emphasizes mutual trust, cooperative security and peaceful development rather than hegemonism. China strives for peace and stability in Afghanistan for serving her economic interests. China does not want foreign interference in Afghanistan in Afghanistan political dispensation and the territorial integrity and national sovereignty must be respected. Moreover, she wants an access to Central Asian countries and foot hold in Balochistan. China has strategic tilt towards Pakistan and has assisted Pakistan to the most in Gwadar Port, Karakoram Highway and recently cooperation in CPEC will prompt her export to the Middle East, African and European markets. She grapples for stability in Uighur autonomous region of Xinjiang. The US is apprehensive about China and considered it a challenge but the latter peaceful rise manifests that it is not threatening to US-led world order.

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