



SHIFT IN PAKISTAN POLICY REGARDING AFGHAN-TALIBAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR BEIJING-ISLAMABAD RELATIONS

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Abstract

Since middle of year 2023 Pakistan policy regarding Afghanistan and particularly towards Afghan Taliban Administration has been registering an observable shift. While the underlying objective of this shifting Afghanistan policy of Pakistan is to address the critical threat to Pakistan security posed by Afghanistan-based and Afghan Taliban-supported Pakistani Taliban known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorist-militant group, there are some other very important causes of this shift in Islamabad Afghanistan policy. This policy shift of Islamabad towards Kabul has very important implications for Pakistan ties with her most trusted ally China, the only country which has extended a sort of diplomatic recognition to Afghan Taliban Administration since the group usurped state power in Afghanistan in August 2021. This research paper looks into the causes of Pakistan policy shift towards Afghan Taliban and its implications for China.

Key Words: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Afghan Taliban, China, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Introduction:

Since returning to state power in Kabul for the second time in August 2021 the militant Afghan Taliban group against all expectations particularly of Pakistani decision-makers and specifically of Afghan Taliban Pakistani apologists have had taken an apparently anti-Pakistan stance (Qazi, 2022; Bilal, 2023). This stiff anti-Pakistan stance by Afghan Taliban against Pakistan on the one

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hand testifies serious shortcomings of Pakistan decades-long Afghan policy of giving all-out support to Afghan Taliban whereas on the other hand has compelled Islamabad to revisit this policy and resultantly a clear shift in Pakistan Afghan Taliban policy was very much obvious by end of 2023 (Sheikh, 2023). The most vivid evidence of this shift in Pakistan policy towards Afghan Taliban Administration (ATA) is that it has plainly refused to recognize the regime itself and fight for its case of diplomatic recognition by other countries (Yousaf, 2023). In this regard Pakistan has towed US-led World of not recognizing Afghan Taliban regime. However, China is the only country in the World by June 2024 which had sent a resident envoy to Kabul but also accepted the diplomatic credentials of a Taliban ambassador to work in Beijing on behalf of Afghanistan. Thus arguably for the first time Pakistan and China's policy on Afghanistan diverge (Chia, 2024). This situation analytically is quite interesting but simultaneously very disconcerting for both Beijing and Islamabad.

Apparently, Pakistan decision not to support Afghan Taliban in getting international diplomatic recognition is due to latter continued support to Pakistani Taliban which has been carrying out large-scale deadly terrorist attacks in Pakistan (Basit, 2023). In October 2023 the then Pakistani interim prime minister, Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar disclosed that there was a 60 per cent hike in terrorist attacks and whopping 500 per cent spike in suicide bombings since the Afghan Taliban came to power in August 2021 (Raza, 2023). Another important reason for Islamabad to withheld diplomatic recognition for 2nd Afghan Taliban regime is Afghan Taliban overall anti-Pakistan stance including resuscitating the dead horse of Afghanistan official irredentist claims on large-tracts of Pakistani territory inhabited by Pashtun ethnic group.

Additionally, one important cause of Pakistan transforming policy regarding Afghan Taliban is China increasingly bypassing of Pakistan to have strong ties with Afghan Taliban. Apart from not extending diplomatic recognition to Afghan Taliban there are some other key indicators of Pakistan shifting policy towards Afghan Taliban. These include Pakistan decision to send back four millions Afghan refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers after nearly 43 years of stay in Pakistan; in this connection Islamabad has already forced 0.5 million illegally staying Afghans in Pakistan to go back. Moreover, Pakistan has also refused to renew the 2010 Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) or sign a completely new trade agreement with landlocked

Afghanistan. Pakistan shifting Afghan policy is going to have important consequences for both countries relations as well as Islamabad relation with China and the United States.

BRIEF BACKGROUND OF PAKISTAN TRADITIONAL POLICY REGARDING AFGHANISTAN

The shift in Pakistan policy towards Afghanistan and Afghan Taliban could only be intelligible if seen in the backdrop of traditional Pakistan Afghan policy. Animosity between Pakistan and Afghanistan started right from September 1947, just one month after formation of Pakistan, when Kabul refused to recognize Pakistan statehood on the floor of the United Nations. Afghanistan was the only country which opposed Pakistan membership of the U.N., arguing that Pakistan was in possession of “Afghan” lands (referring to Pashtun-inhabited Pakistani areas) and as a successor state of British India it shall return these areas to the sovereign control of Afghanistan (Omrani, 2009). However, this was totally unwarranted irredentist claims as under the terms of 1919 Anglo-Afghan Treaty also known as Rawalpindi Treaty, Emir of Afghanistan had given up all claims on British Indian territories including Pashtun-inhabited territories that later became part of Pakistan. In return British colonial rulers of India had recognized Afghan sovereignty beyond the Durand Line, the international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan demarcated in 1893.



BRITISH INDIA (INCLUDING PAKISTAN PASHTUN AREAS & AFGHANISTAN TERRITORY 1919)

It has been a typical Afghan national character to first enter into international agreements and then refuse to abide by them. For instance, Afghan Taliban signed Doha Agreement with Washington in February 2020 and had promised international community to respect human rights if return to power. But today Afghan Taliban are violating the terms of Doha Agreement. Thus all Afghan irredentist claims on Pakistani lands have had no legal or moral standings but Kabul has always used them unnecessarily to create problems for Islamabad. Situation of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan from 1947 to 1973 was one of tense-calm or what we call ‘cautious distance’ from Kabul in case of Pakistan. In 1973 former Afghan Prime Minister, Sardar Daud Khan, deposed last Afghan King, Shah Zahir Shah, who was also his cousin and declared Afghanistan a ‘republic.’ That was the key turning point in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. It was the height of Cold War when Sardar Daud staged a coup on the behest of erstwhile Soviet Union. Delivering his first speech from Radio Kabul, Sardar Daud, declared that Afghanistan had no enemies in the World except Pakistan and Kabul would try its utmost to take back “its lands” (Pashtun-inhabited areas of Pakistan) come what may. This struggle to wrench away Pakistani Pashtun lands particularly Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (then known as North West Frontier Province or N.W.F.P.) has historically been known as *Pashtunistan Movement*. Sardar Daud as Afghan self-proclaimed president started hosting and nurturing Pakistani Pashtun militants and formed a group known as Zalmay Pashtun (Young Pashtun) and carried out tens of terrorist attacks particularly bomb blasts in Pakistan.

PAKISTAN RESPONSE & GENESIS OF ISLAMABAD AFGHAN POLICY:

Pakistan under Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1972-77) Pakistan got extremely terrified of Sardar Daud anti-Islamabad stance particular because he had the backing of Soviet Union, which a couple of years back in 1971 was instrumental in breaking up of Pakistan by facilitating India’s intervention in former East Pakistan province where ethnic Bengali separatist insurgency was going on. The Soviet Union was after Pakistan survival as the later was part of Washington camp during Cold War. So Pakistan PM Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto with the help of his aide particularly, late Major General Naseerullah Babar, formulated a comprehensive Afghan policy. This policy was based upon harboring Afghan mullahs by carrying out propaganda that Pakistan was a brother

Muslim state to counter Afghan Pashtun nationalists so that the latter could not support Pakistani Pashtun separatists. Moreover, as a response to Afghanistan Sardar Daud strategy of nurturing Pakistani Pashtun separatist militants, Pakistan started nurturing Afghan mullahs thinking that for mullahs Pakistan would be a brotherly Muslim country not to be harmed. However, to get state power for Afghan mullahs, Islamabad brought some important Afghan leaders like Burhanuddin Rabbani, a teacher of Islamic Studies at Kabul University and his two disciples, Gulbaddin Hikmatyar and Ahmed Shah Masoud to Pakistan. Rabbani later became a powerless Afghan President in early 1990s while Hikmatyar as a powerless Prime Minister simultaneously while Masoud was Afghanistan defense minister. Back in 1970s Sardar Daud was compelled by Pakistan to give-up anti-Pakistan stance and he was ready to do so by 1978 due to which he was killed in April 1978 along with 18 members of his family in a Soviet back palace intrigue-cum-putsch.

During the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance Pakistan used Afghan mullahs as *Mujahideen* (Holy Muslim warriors) by imparting them militant training and giving them money and arms, financed by US and Saudi Arabia along with its Arab allies. Pakistan hoped that once Soviet forces would withdraw from Afghanistan Afghan mullahs would capture power. Although this never happened as last communist ruler of Afghanistan Najeebullah Ahmedzai valiantly resisted *Mujahideen* and Pakistan by holding its own. Whereas, anti-Soviet-Afghan *Mujahideen* also started fighting each other with Pakistan trying to make its main Afghan stooge, Hikmatyar, as Afghan president, which he could never become. Other former Pakistani stooges like Rabbani and Masoud, both hailing from minority ethnic Tajiks turned against Pakistan.

PAKISTAN AFGHAN TALIBAN PROJECT

In 1994 Pakistan came up with an idea to raise a strong pro-Islamabad Afghan group in a bid to capture power in Afghanistan. This was Pakistan Afghan Taliban project. Under this idea a strong Afghan militia comprising Afghan students studying in Pakistan at Muslim seminaries was to be raised. Former military officer Gen. Naseerullah Babar, who was instrumental in forming Pakistan Afghan policy in 1973 as Inspector General Frontier Corps (IGFC), and later Governor of KP province (1975-77) is blamed to have conceived the idea of Afghan Taliban. Gen. Babar was then serving as Interior Minister in the government of late PM Benazir Bhutto (1993-96), who was the daughter of former PM Zulfikar Bhutto (1972-77). As Pakistan *Mujaheen* stooges got engaged in infighting and despite getting power in Afghanistan could not be effective and also turned against

Pakistan, Gen. Babar came up with the idea of forming Afghan Taliban, which he famously called ‘my children.’ one of the authors personally asked Gen. Babar (1928-2011) in two interviews (also published in Pakistan top English language daily *The News* on February 02, 2007) and he admitted of being instrumental in forming Afghan Taliban, who were mostly studying at Pakistan madrassas and living in Pakistan as refugees. The idea behind Afghan Taliban formation was to produce a group that are mostly born in Pakistan as refugees, had Pashtun ethnic background and having families living in Pakistan to capture power with the support of Pakistan military to control Afghanistan and behave like a friendly (practically stooge) of Pakistan. Islamabad was able to install Afghan Taliban regime by September 1996 but to Pakistan chagrin and very true to Afghan national character Afghan Taliban refused to follow Pakistani dictates. Its biggest proof was Taliban regime refusal to accept finality of international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and thus give up irredentist claims on Pakistani territory (Kaura, 2021). From Afghan traditional standpoint the first Afghan Taliban regime rightly refused to tow Pakistan dictates. Because ideally no non-separatist militant group could be expected to go against the solidified ‘national’ interest as is present in the national narrative of its homeland.

SECOND AFGHAN TALIBAN REGIME & PAKISTAN HOPE AGAINST HOPE

When in 2001 US dislodged Afghan Taliban regime for harboring Al Qaeda, Pakistan distanced itself from Taliban and officially joined Washington Global War on Terror (GWoT). However, with no other supporter or friend in Afghanistan, Pakistan decided to unofficially continue supporting Afghan Taliban and thus helped them fight Afghan state as well as US-N.A.T.O. forces. From 2001 till very recently Pakistan has been hoping that this time Afghan Taliban would ensure a really friendly regime if not a stooge government in Kabul. However, to Pakistan utter surprise instead of putting to an end its worries, Afghan Taliban started harboring Pakistan No 1 enemy, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Following are the main reasons for Afghan Taliban support to the TTP

TTP Serving as *Tactical Assets* for Afghan Taliban

Common Pashtun or Pakhtun ethnicity of Afghan & Pakistani Taliban

To use TTP as a pressure tool in its relations with Pakistan

To feign an anti-Pakistan posture to win over domestic Afghan public support

To prove that Afghan Taliban are not Pakistani stooges

Fear of the TTP alliance with Islamic State-Khorasan (I.S.K)

Afghan Taliban are fundamentally a non-state actor and support to another non-state actor the TTP is something natural for it.

Simultaneously, Afghan Taliban regime has again refused to recognize international border with Pakistan rather they have refused to respect it and there have been several incidents in which Afghan Taliban commanders tried to uproot border fence erected by Pakistan on its border with Afghanistan. In this situation Pakistan sensing complete failure of its old Afghan policy has no other option but to shift its policy regarding Afghanistan and specifically regarding Afghan Taliban regime. To Pakistan chagrin Afghan Taliban Administration has started presenting Afghanistan as an alternative route to China to connect her western regions with sea through Iran. This is an effort to fail the CPEC. Here it is important to note that ATA invested \$35 million in Iran's Chahbahar Seaport juxtapose to Pakistan strategic Gwadar Seaport on the Arabian Sea (Mehmud, 2024). With a cash-strapped economy and most of its foreign economic assets frozen by Washington, Afghanistan under the Taliban making such huge investment in a foreign seaport raises many questions. It is possible that India may have secretly provided the ATA to invest in Chahbahar so that CPEC may be failed. The distance between Gwadar Seaport and Chahbahar Seaport is merely 170 kilometers.

For its part the TTP has also realized that it has no place in the prevailing conditions and peace is counterproductive for its activities and ultimate aim of gaining territory and power. Therefore, the only modus operandi to survive and attain its objectives is through militancy and terrorism whose main target has to be security forces as attacks on civilians and their sufferings due to terrorism have proved counterproductive for the TTP public image and support within Pashtun population. However, the TTP may have different reasons to fight on Pakistani state but Afghan Taliban have been completely uncompromising on Pakistani Taliban despite Islamabad pressure and cajoling to give up backing to the TTP. There are several reasons in Afghan Taliban calculations which are critically important due to which continued rather increasing support to Pakistani Taliban serves

the interests of Taliban regime. Therefore, it (TTP) is more important for Kabul than to strengthen relations with its long-time largest benefactor Pakistan.

KEY MANIFESTATIONS OF PAKISTAN POLICY SHIFT

Pakistan on October 03, 2023 announced that all illegal 1.7 million Afghans in Pakistan shall leave country by November 1, 2023. This was a kind of surprising policy decision because the time given was very limited. According to sources in Pakistan government, a large number of illegal Afghans have been involved in terrorist activities of TTP in Pakistan including suicide attacks. This was later publicly disclosed by Pakistan interim Prime Minister, Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar. However, the decision to send back illegal Afghan to be followed by Afghans living as refugees and migrants (with indeterminate status) numbering around officially 2.7 million and unofficially more than 4 million, must be looked at in the backdrop of Afghan Taliban support to Pakistani Taliban to carry out terrorist-militant-criminal activities in Pakistan using illegal Afghans in Pakistan. This alarmed Pakistani strategists regarding grave security risks Afghans living in Pakistan pose to Pakistan interests.

Against this backdrop shift of Pakistan decades-long Afghan policy is very much understandable. Because the West in general has quite been against the Taliban since the emergence of the group in 1994 and particularly the US has been vehemently against Afghan Taliban for its support to Al Qaeda, once a grave security threat to Washington. However, it has been the singlehanded all-out support of Pakistan to Afghan Taliban that they have sustained and have been able to recapture power in 2021 after 20 years of insurgency following their ouster by US-led international security & assistance force (I.S.A.F.) in 2001. So by withdrawing that support from the Taliban, is motivated by Pakistan national interest of Kabul support to Pakistan terrorists. At the same time by shifting its Afghan-Taliban policy Pakistan is also trying to agree with the US-European stance vis-à-vis Afghanistan. While the shift in Pakistan Taliban policy is more than obvious however, it remains to be seen that to what an extent that policy shift is going to be sustainable or real.

CAUSES OF SHIFT IN PAKISTAN POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN

After consistent requests and nudging by Afghan Taliban regime, Pakistan military leadership in 2022 held 'peace' negotiations with Afghanistan-based Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) but despite momentary ceasefire the same could not be sustained. In fact during ceasefire in 2022 it

was noticeable that the TTP used it as an opportunity to shift many militants from Afghanistan to Pakistan in order to stage a comeback and to start their trademark militant, terrorist and criminal activities like kidnapping and extortion. As the TTP has always been based in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan particularly its tribal districts along 2640 kilometers-long border of Pakistan with Afghanistan and carrying out its terrorist-militant-criminal activities in the province residents of this province have suffered immensely due to these activities and the ensuing military offensives against the militants. These sufferings of inhabitants of KP province of Pakistan at the hands of terrorists included most of the 85000 losses of human lives Pakistan suffered in the last 16 years, displacement of at least 6.0 million people from their homes, destruction of their livelihoods and businesses. Most of the residents of KP province know that Pakistani Taliban could not be defeated despite their open and daredevil challenging of the state writ, occupying of territory on the force of arms due to Pakistani strategists ambiguous handling of the TTP threat. Pakistani decision-makers may have tolerated the TTP shifting to Afghanistan after sweeping military offensives against the militants between 2014-2016 and their support to Afghan Taliban in the hope that Afghan Taliban supported by the TTP would put the U.S.-N.A.T.O and Afghan state forces on the defensive. This was in turn aimed at ultimately installing a Pakistan-friendly Afghan Taliban regime in Afghanistan.



When after 2022 peace talks with the TTP failed, the militant-terrorist group increased its attacks on security forces personnel including the January 29, 2023 bombing of a mosque inside police headquarters in KP provincial capital, Peshawar, killing more than 100 people, mostly police personnel. Afghanistan-based Pakistani Taliban attacks have registered an increase of 75 percent since Afghan Taliban have returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the latter all-out support to the TTP. In the aftermath of these terrorist attacks by the TTP, Pakistani military has attempted to launch offensives against the TTP militants in different districts of KP province

particularly in Swat, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Tank districts. Noticeably, Swat, was overrun by the TTP in 2009, which remained in its exclusive control for several months only to be overtaken by the state forces after massive operation.

PAKISTAN REALIZATION OF NECESSITY FOR TRANSFORMED AFGHANISTAN POLICY

Pakistan of late has been realizing that its all-out support to Afghan Taliban has boomeranged and now a grave threat to its national security. This realization is due to following main factors.

Afghan Taliban increasingly going out of Pakistan influence

Afghan Taliban Administration efforts to present Afghanistan as an alternative route to China for BRI corridors towards sea through Iran

Sweeping sense of deprivation and mistreatment among Pakistani Pashtuns

Large-scale anti-government, if not anti-Pakistan per-se, sentiments in Pashtun-dominated Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and Pakhtun-inhabited upper Balochistan province due to years long military (mostly pretentious) offensives against TTP, Al Qaeda and other foreign militant-terrorist affiliates.

Afghan Taliban refusal to give up historic irredentist claims of successive Afghan regimes on Pakistani Pashtun-inhabited regions and areas (Khan, 2022)

Growing strength of anti-state groups



MAP OF PAKISTAN WITH PROVINCES (KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA IN NORTH-WEST)

The TTP with the help of Afghan Taliban has been trying to make a comeback and to win public support in KP province and other Pashtun regions of Pakistan by exploiting anti-state sentiments there and thus to entrench itself. For Pakistani strategists this could be a disastrous situation for the country because it could trigger a kind of separatist insurgency in Pashtun regions of Pakistan. So in order to avoid this doomsday scenario in the strategically-located and politically important KP province the military has decided to shift its Afghanistan policy.

PAKISTAN AFGHAN POLICY SHIFT AND ITS IMPACT ON ISLAMABAD RELATIONS WITH CHINA

China is the emerging superpower and in the South Asian and Central Asian regions its influence seemingly unmatched. Progressively, China's interest in Afghanistan-Pakistan or for that matter South Asian region has increased manifold. Therefore, while having very good relations with Pakistan since Afghan Taliban came to power for the second time China has been trying to broaden and strengthen its relations with Afghanistan and sometime back it became the most important country to place an ambassador in Kabul. China since the withdrawal of US and other international forces from Afghanistan has been trying to establish firm relations with Afghanistan considering the group and its control a reality. Moreover, unlike the West, China has no issue with Afghan Taliban violation of human rights as this is something quite normal in totalitarian states like China herself. Moreover, this strategy is also in line with Beijing tradition foreign policy

principle of non-intervention in other countries internal matters. In the process of establishing relations with Afghanistan China has of late somewhat bypassed Pakistan, with whom Beijing traditionally consulted to deal with Afghan Taliban. Nevertheless, China has been cautious of Pakistan close relations with US and their community of interest in Afghanistan. However, sensing Afghanistan and Pakistan bilateral issues on the TTP and historical territorial dispute to be irreconcilable therefore in Beijing policy it is good to have more and more independent relations with Afghan Taliban and Afghanistan. This is obviously not like by Pakistan as she thinks that China should have taken into consideration Pakistan's problem emanating from the TTP and the support, which Pakistani Taliban get from Afghan Taliban regime. Moreover, growing relations between Afghanistan and China bypassing Pakistan as a bridge in Pakistan's calculation would lessen Afghan Taliban dependency on Islamabad that Pakistan doesn't like at all. Moreover, China's several economic projects in Afghanistan including mineral extraction would strengthen Afghan economy and Taliban regime revenues, which mostly have been raising an estimated 70 percent of Afghan revenue from custom duties on goods going to and from Pakistan. Therefore, in Pakistan's calculations experiencing economic strength, Afghan Taliban regime would support Pakistani terrorist Taliban with more vigor the ultimate result would be more trouble for Pakistan.

As China has been wishing to extend the \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) since its start in 2013 to Afghanistan but it could not be able to do so. This has primarily been due to US-influenced President Hamid Karzai and President Ashraf Ghani's elected governments' reluctance to agree to extension of CPEC to Afghanistan as it would have annoyed Washington but more not to let Pakistan take any advantage out of it. Although Afghan Taliban regime has shown its readiness to be part of CPEC to extend it to Afghanistan but this time Pakistan would not be interested in extending the same to Afghanistan. Because this would provide Afghanistan a huge route to export and import goods via Pakistani strategic port of Gwadar and historically Pakistan has tried to keep landlocked Afghanistan trade completely dependent upon itself. As the operation control of Gwadar Seaport of Pakistan has been leased for more than 30 years to China, the latter would give Afghanistan preferential access through Gwadar by using its influence on Pakistan. It may be recalled that Washington for long tried to prevail upon Pakistan to give Afghanistan preferential trade terms and the 2010 trade agreement between Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) was signed through the good offices of Washington replacing

the 1965 Afghan Transit Trade Agreement under which Pakistan had great leverage. The APTTA has already expired in 2020.

Pakistan shifting Afghan policy would definitely affect not only extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and in consequence affect Beijing plans to facilitate Afghan Taliban regime through trade corridor and routes. This would definitely have negatively impact on China-Pakistan relations. Moreover, a shift in traditional Pakistan policy regarding Afghanistan would have important consequences of US-Pakistan relations and in turn would also effect Pakistan-China relations. Significantly, since the birth of Afghan Taliban midwife by Pakistan in 1994 to the armed capturing of power by the militant group in September 1996 and Islamabad exhortation of President Bill Clinton Administration to recognize first Afghan Taliban regime to Islamabad material support to Afghan Taliban in their insurgency against US-led international community supported Afghan-state from 2002 to 2021, Washington has been asking Pakistan to withdraw support from Afghan Taliban. However, Pakistan remained recalcitrant and whatever avowed policy shift of ditching Afghan Taliban after 9-11 terrorist attacks in US by General Musharraf regime (1999-2008) demonstrated was only cosmetic. Therefore, now when Pakistan is shifting its policy regarding Afghanistan or more specifically Taliban then it would definitely improve relations between Washington and Islamabad. Because Washington during President Donald Trump may have recognized Afghan Taliban as a ‘political’ group and facilitated it to open a ‘political’ office in Doha, Qatar but it was merely for taking forward dialogue process for honorable withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Otherwise, there is near-complete realization within American policy circles that Afghan Taliban are basically a militant group and it would remain so, claims of the militia to the contrary notwithstanding. Therefore, if the strongest supporter of Afghan Taliban that is Pakistan distancing itself from the group then that would be welcomed in a hope that it would result in implosion of Afghan Taliban regime due to colossal challenges it is facing in running the state and fulfill the basic needs of Afghans.

Moreover, Pakistan distancing herself from Afghan Taliban may also convince policy circles in Washington to reengage with Islamabad to somehow together deal with Afghan Taliban. This would have repercussions for Pakistan ties with China. Because China’s interest to have independent relations with Afghan Taliban regime and resultant annoyance of Pakistan would push the latter towards Washington. Specifically, now after Pakistan reluctance to extend China-

Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan partly aimed at countering American great power status, China could not increase its influence in Afghanistan which otherwise it could with Pakistan in agreement or in the loop. In this context Pakistan relations with Washington would definitely improve. Here it is important to note that whatever strained relations Pakistan has had with Washington in recent years have mainly been due to neither Pakistan relations with India or Pakistan relations with China but Pakistan pro-Taliban policy regarding Afghanistan. Afghan Taliban support to Pakistani Taliban are directly hitting the interests and nationals of China in Pakistan (Rakisits, 2022) as in many terrorist attacks on Chinese in Pakistan have been either owned by the TTP or blamed by Pakistani authorities on the group. Interestingly, Afghan Taliban have instead blame Pakistan of sowing the seeds of discord between Kabul and Beijing by putting the blame of attacks on Chinese on Afghanistan-based TTP (Gul, 2024). Whether Afghan Taliban regime agreement is there in TTP attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan is unclear. Nevertheless, Afghan Taliban Administration (ATA) might have a tacit approval in these TTP attacks on Chinese in Pakistan calculating that this might result in Beijing abandoning CPEC and diverting its investments on alternative routes to Afghanistan. In this regard ATA claims to the contrary for not supporting Pakistani Taliban for attacks inside Pakistan could best be explained as *plausible deniability*.

CONCLUSION: WAY FORWARD FOR CHINA AND PAKISTAN

The relations of Pakistan and China are so entrenched that they could not let it get strained due to a militia-controlled regime in Afghanistan. Therefore, both would have to rethink and recalibrate their policy towards each other. China has to ponder that its historical relations with Pakistan and its investment in Pakistan is so massive and its interests in Pakistan so colossal that it has to keep its (Pakistan) key concerns while dealing with Afghan Taliban regime. Because it is the Afghan Taliban regime anti-Pakistan stance and support to Pakistani terrorist groups which has posed serious threat not only to Pakistan security but also her territorial integrity. On its part Pakistan has to realize that Afghan Taliban regime is really now whether it is no longer serving as Pakistan stooges. Secondly, that China is a great power and it has key interests in Afghanistan and therefore, its engagement with Afghan Taliban is quite justified. In this situation Pakistan could use its relations with China to prevail upon Afghan Taliban to give up support to Pakistani Taliban. China has its own interest in doing so because Pakistani Taliban in collusion with anti-Pakistan and anti-

China forces like India has been posing a grave threat to security of Chinese interest and personnel in Pakistan; the biggest of such interest is CPEC and potentially to Chinese territorial integrity as Pakistani Taliban could potentially band together with anti-China Uyghur separatists of ETIM. Thirdly, Pakistan has to put its house in order and improve security of Chinese projects, interests and nationals in Pakistan. Unless Chinese interests and nationals security in Pakistan would not be ensured, CPEC would not see the light of the day as desired by Beijing. Consequently, Beijing would increasingly look towards Afghan Taliban for alternative route to provide an outlet to Western China to Sea through Afghanistan and Iran.

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