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China-India Plus in Afghanistan and Beyond:

How Far Can It Go?

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The bilateral relationship between China and India begins to warm up after the Modi-Xi informal meeting in Wuhan, Hubei Province in April 2018. Other than a series of official meetings, China also launched the “China India Plus (CI+).”¹ As a pilot project aiming at possible co-management of regional affairs such as the Afghanistan situation, the Rohingya issue as well as the Iran nuclear issue, the CI+ reflects the Chinese ambition to extrapolate the model to countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka in areas such as infrastructure, economics and even security. Beginning with a joint training program for Afghan diplomats in New Delhi and Beijing, China and India are also planning to work on a joint economic project in Afghanistan.²

How far can the China-India Plus initiative go in Afghanistan? Can the CI+,

¹ KV Prasad, “China-India Plus Can Be New Model in South Asia,” *Tribune India News Service*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/-china-india-plus-can-be-new-model-in-south-asia/661149.html>

² Shubhajit Roy, “PM Modi, Xi Jinping Issue ‘Strategic Guidance’ to India, China Militaries on Border Affairs,” *The Indian Express*, April 28, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/narendra-modi-xi-jinping-china-informal-summit-wuhan-east-lake-doklam-border-afghanistan-5154859/>

as China has eagerly proposed, be applied to more countries of the Indian Ocean region.⁹ In this article, we argue that due to the structural limits between the two countries, CI+ can only attained limited results, as the mutual cooperation in Afghanistan would also be confined by various factors.

Current Chinese Interest and Policy in Afghanistan

China has accelerated its involvement in Afghanistan since the launch of its Belt and Road Initiative in late 2013. From the US invasion in 2001 to the announcement of a “new” strategy by Barack Obama in 2009 that urged more Chinese participation in Afghanistan, Beijing had not shown much interest in intervention. The Joint Statement by China and Afghanistan in 2014 is a watershed which China promised to increase its level of assistance to Afghanistan. China then hosted the Fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process, marking the first attempt of China to further participate through an institutionalized multilateral mechanism.³

Beijing, however, have been cautious about its unilateral commitment in Afghanistan. Although China’s foreign minister Wang Yi has mentioned in December 2017 that China and Pakistan would discuss the possibility of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan, it is so far, however, more the rhetoric than possible actions in the near future.

For Afghan-related issues, Beijing has been risk-averse and avoided direct commitment. The major concern of Beijing is its domestic security in Xinjiang threatened by the connection between Taliban and insurgent groups such as the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM). However, China knows well that the cost of a long-term military commitment is something that it will not able to afford. On the security front, Beijing has engaged in capacity building efforts, such as the training and exchange programs with the Afghan police forces on anti-terrorism and drug enforcement. At the military level, China has increased its activities in the Wakhan Corridor linking Southern Xinjiang and Afghanistan. Also, there are reports that the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is helping Afghanistan set up a mountain brigade to be dispatched in the northern part of the country for

³ Zhu Yongbiao, “China’s Afghanistan Policy since 9/11: Stages and Prospects,” *Asian Survey*, Volume 58, No. 2 (2018): 281-301.

counterterrorism efforts.⁴

Trade wise, Afghanistan is a small market with not much significance. China has begun the investment in sectors like energy and metal ore. At the end of 2011, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Watan Group signed the agreement on drilling in Amu Darya in the northern part of Afghanistan.⁵ China Minmetals Corporation (CMC) has acquired the rights to Mes Aynak copper mine in Logar Province 40 km south to Kabul. However, these two big projects of China have not been going well. Mes Aynak has not begun mining in 2018;⁶ Amu Darya oil field has faced difficulties such as the competition from Western counterparts⁷ as well as halts on production⁸ and the delay of oil pipeline construction through Central Asia.⁹

According to Xiao He of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), China's recent strategy in Afghanistan can be summarized as "Stopping economic losses and deep intervention (經濟止損，深度介入)," of which stability is at the core. Instead of sticking with the "development diplomacy," i.e. deepening economic connections without involving with political issues, China now increases the assistance on security-related issues and steps up diplomatic efforts on them. These efforts include:

- playing the middleman role between Taliban and the government of Afghanistan;
- exercise influence multilaterally, e.g. through Pakistan;
- link Afghanistan security issues to the domestic terrorism in Xinjiang;
- provide training, equipment and logistics to Afghan security forces;¹⁰

⁴ Minnie Chan, "China Is Helping Afghanistan Set up Mountain Brigade to Fight Terrorism," *South China Morning Post*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161745/china-building-training-camp-afghanistan-fight>

⁵ 李明三，〈中石油挺進阿富汗內情〉，鳳凰週刊，2012年3月5日，

http://news.ifeng.com/shendu/fhzk/detail_2012_03/05/12979236_0.shtml

⁶ 肖河，〈中國的新阿富汗政策：經濟止損，深度介入〉，中國網，2016年1月3日，

http://opinion.china.com.cn/opinion_87_143187.html

⁷ Franz, Marty, "Project to Exploit Afghanistan's Giant Copper Deposit Languishes," *Chinadialogue*, last modified on April 24, 2018, <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/10577-Project-to-exploit-Afghanistan-s-giant-copper-deposit-languishes>

⁸ "Amu Darya Basin Oil Extraction Operation Halted," *Tolo News*, last modified on August 20, 2013, <https://www.tolonews.com/business/amu-darya-basin-oil-extraction-operation-halted>

⁹ "Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline Expansion Delayed Again," *Eurasianet*, last modified on March 3, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-china-gas-pipeline-expansion-delayed-again>

¹⁰ See footnote 6 above.

Compared with Western countries, China has been more conservative on the efforts of natural resources extraction, showing that the current focus of BRI is rather on the infrastructure, export of excess production capacity and market creation instead of the acquisition of natural resources per se.¹¹

Collaboration with China: the Indian Perspective

Afghanistan thus becomes a potential case for China to work together with India. From the Indian perspective, working with China could first help India curate an identity for itself as a responsible and cooperative regional power; secondly, both New Delhi and Beijing could benefit from sharing and thus reducing security risks by collaborating with each other in the shadow of possible US military withdrawal.

China and India have common concerns regarding the activities of non-state terrorism in the region. India has been involved in Afghanistan longer than China and has multiple investment and infrastructure projects in the country, including the Hajigak iron mine, several power projects by companies such as KEC International and AIPL and other smaller Indian traders dealing in food, spices, logistics etc.

New Delhi has also strengthened the support in security affairs in Afghanistan, including the training programs for over 4000 Afghan Army and Air Force officers. The National Defence Academy (NDA) in Pune, the Indian Military Academy (IMA) and the Officers Training Academy (Chennai) have hosted Afghan cadets and officers, with the OTA even running a special preparatory training program for Afghan Lady Officers. India has also supported the Afghan forces with 4 Russian-made Mi 25 attack helicopters and three Indian-made Cheetal Helicopters.

On the other hand, India begins to shift gradually the policy towards the Taliban, moving from non-acknowledgement to an “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” peace process.¹² Lacking the willingness of talking with the mercurial

¹¹ Franz Marty, op. cit.

¹² “India for ‘Afghan-Led, Afghan-Owned’ Peace Process,” *The Hindu*, last modified on August 11, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/India-for-Afghan-led-Afghan-owned-peace-process/article16203906.ece>; Shubhajit Roy, “The Shift in India Position on Taliban: From Rejection to Unofficial Talks,” *The Indian Express*, last modified on

Taliban however, a multilateral structure is what New Delhi prefers. Collaborating with China under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) thus provides India with more accessibility in Afghanistan affairs.

Terrorism thus becomes one potential focus of mutual cooperation. In October 2018, India and China signed their first internal security cooperation agreement that included intelligence sharing. In the past couple of years, China has also publicly (through statements released at the 2017 BRICS summit in Xiamen and the 2017 Heart of Asia declaration in 2018) shown its support for the condemnation of Pakistan-based terror groups such as the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). Compared with the previous block in the UN Security Council recognizing the JeM leader Masood Azhar as an internationally-designated terrorist, China seems to have shifted its stance.¹³ An even bigger move made by China is the decision to shift its earlier position on the putting of Pakistan on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) “gray list”.¹⁴

Joining the anti-terrorism efforts of China would further enable India more access to the information on Pakistani separatists in areas such as Jammu and Kashmir. New Delhi can also use the improved relations with China to pressure the ISI and the Government of Pakistan on various issues.

Limited and Symbolic Collaboration Most Likely in Afghanistan and IOR

However, the collaboration on terrorism could be limited. Since both India and China lack the willingness and capability of direct military intervention, and the multilateral RATS (Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure) has not been very effective in dealing with terrorism in Afghanistan either, with a discordance among major members in the organization, especially Russia and China as well as India

November 14, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-shift-in-india-position-on-taliban-from-rejection-to-unofficial-talks-5445060/>

¹³ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Heart of Asia Declaration Condemns Pakistan-based Terror Groups for First Time,” *The Economic Times*, last modified on July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/heart-of-asia-declaration-condemns-pakistan-based-terror-groups-for-first-time/articleshow/55822260.cms>; “Did India Force China to Dump its All-Weather Friend Pakistan?” *The Economic Times*, last modified on July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/did-india-force-china-to-dump-its-all-weather-friend-pakistan/articleshow/60358996.cms>; Arushi Kumar, “China Pressuring Pakistan on Terrorism?” *Carnegie India*, last modified on September 14, 2017, <https://camegieindia.org/2017/09/14/china-pressuring-pakistan-on-terrorism-pub-73126>

¹⁴ Pranab Dhal Samanta, “Pakistan on FATF’s Grey List: How India Convinced China & Pak Shot Itself in the Foot,” *The Print*, last modified on February 23, 2018. <https://theprint.in/security/pakistan-fatfs-grey-list-india-convinced-china-pak-shot-foot/37751/>

and Pakistan,¹⁵ it could cast a shadow for further achievements.

Unlike what is propagated by China, the recent China-India joint training program for Afghanistan diplomats is hardly a breakthrough in mutual cooperation. Rather, it is a relatively low-cost diplomatic action, which actually a replica program that the United States and China have done since 2012.¹⁶

Secondly, the attempt for China to expand the mutual cooperation into a bilateral coordination model in the Indian Ocean Region could paradoxically kill the China India Plus model per se. The India-China relations basically is a strategic competition at its core, especially in the IOR, where India has long recognized as its sphere of influence. One major reason for India to adopt a cooperative posture with China is to lessen the strategic pressure it has been facing from China's BRI in IOR countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka. The Indian foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale has admitted in Lok Sabha (the Indian Lower House) in a hearing that China's infrastructure projects in IOR under BRI is "far greater than our (India's) capacity, both financially and technically and this has been a constant concern of the government (of India)."¹⁷

If India can't beat China in the infrastructure diplomacy, then adopting some cooperative stance helps not only alleviating too much competition but also monitoring China's actions in the region. But if China wishes to institutionalize the coordination and co-management of Indian Ocean affairs with India through CI+ model, it would eventually face the objection from New Delhi.

A more likely path will be a multilateral one in the framework of IGOs such as the United Nations and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in which India is an active and enthusiastic player. The two countries would have more multilateral interactions, meetings, and conferences, as there might be some smaller-scaled and piloted collaborative projects participated or lead by India and China in Afghanistan in AIIB, SCO or other IGO and NGOs. But beyond these symbolic interactions, it is still difficult for Delhi and Beijing to reach more substantial cooperation in Afghanistan, let alone in the IOR countries due to the

¹⁵ Manabhanjan Meher, "India's Participation in RATS-SCO: Challenges Ahead," *Indian Defence Review*, May 7, 2018.

<http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/indias-participation-in-rats-sco-challenges-ahead/>

¹⁶ 李博雅,〈中美聯合培養阿富汗外交官合作模式受肯定〉,人民網,2014年10月21日,
<http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/1021/c1002-25873039.html>

¹⁷ Devirupa Mitra, "India Sounds Alarm on Chinese Infra Projects in Neighbourhood," *The Wire*, last modified on March 14, 2018, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/china-making-headway-in-infra-projects-in-indias-neighbourhood-foreign-secretary-gokhale-to-panel>

lack of trust as the result of strategic competition between the two regional powers.

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