Kabul and a Strategic Triangle

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In the wake of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover, three major regional states—Pakistan, India, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—all have significant and overlapping stakes in the future of Afghanistan. As the Taliban struggles to govern an utterly impoverished land, all three have been carefully monitoring developments in the country. Simultaneously, they are keeping a close watch on the choices of the other two. As this essay argues, all three states are keen on ensuring that they will be able to wield a modicum of influence in the country for different as well as overlapping reasons. Pakistan’s goals will remain geostrategic: ensuring that the Taliban maintain their anti-India stance and sympathy for Islamabad’s concerns. The PRC’s interests in the country, meanwhile, will be twofold, both economic and strategic. It will look for ways to obtain access to rare earths and simultaneously attempt to ensure that pan-Islamic sentiment does not percolate from Afghanistan into its restive province of Xinjiang. Chinese and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan are likely to dovetail. Consequently, in all likelihood the US will turn to India to deal with concerns about the PRC, and also for intelligence cooperation purposes.

This article will first spell out the underlying interests of all three states, discussing the strategies that they have pursued in the wake of the return of the Taliban to Kabul, and will then explore the possibilities and limits of their likely influence in the country in the foreseeable future. Finally, it concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of this strategic triangle for the United States.
Pakistan: More Concerns than Meet the Eye

Pakistan, which shares a long and disputed border with Afghanistan that harks back to the era of British colonialism, has long been deeply involved in its politics. Of the three countries, it enjoys as cordial a relationship as is possible with the Taliban regime. This is hardly surprising, as Islamabad’s involvement with the Taliban itself has a long history. The Taliban, as thoughtful analysts have shown, emerged from Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of the country.1 Subsequently, Naseerullah Babar, the Minister of the Interior under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, nurtured and sustained the movement. He is on record as referring to them as a “strategic and political ally.”2

Subsequent governments, both military and civilian, under the tutelage of Pakistan’s powerful Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI-D), continued to maintain ties to the Taliban. All subsequent governments in Pakistan have had two major goals in common. The first was to install a regime in Afghanistan that would be broadly sympathetic to Pakistan’s interests; the second was to keep India, its archenemy, at bay. The latter objective stemmed in considerable part from an idée fixe of the Pakistani military establishment: namely, the quest for “strategic depth” in the event of another war with India in which Indian forces made significant incursions into Pakistan. To that end, Pakistan might consider moving vital strategic assets into Afghanistan and also regrouping its forces as it coped with an Indian onslaught. This goal has remained a constant in Pakistan’s strategic vision, even after its overt acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1998 and the subsequent forging of a viable nuclear deterrent.3

The 1996 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan represented a realization of both of these goals in one fell swoop. Pakistan was one of three countries in the world, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to recognize the regime’s legitimacy. Since it wielded considerable influence in the country, it also successfully eliminated Indian influence in Afghanistan. In fact, it reinforced the Taliban’s innate hostility toward India owing to the vexed Kashmir question. Among other matters, when an Indian airliner was hijacked and flown to Kandahar in December 1999, the Taliban protected the hijackers and eventually allowed them to flee to Pakistan. This symbiotic relationship would thrive until the tragic events of 9/11. Following the American invasion, even after the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001, the ISI-D maintained its ties with its leadership, even as it purported to cooperate with the United States in its “war on terror.”4 Consequently, it is hardly surprising that Islamabad is for the most part
comfortable with the recent return of a Taliban regime in Kabul. This was exem-
plified in the visit of the ISI-D’s current director, Faiz Hameed, to Kabul, hard on
the heels of the Taliban seizure of the capital.\textsuperscript{5}

More recently, Pakistani decisionmakers at the highest levels of government
have sought to put the best possible gloss on the Taliban government. To that
end, they have forcefully argued that to avert a humanitarian crisis in the
country, the world needs to engage with the Taliban regime.\textsuperscript{6} However, Pakistan
has held off on recognizing the Taliban regime as the legitimate government of
Afghanistan, arguing that a regional consensus is first needed before such recog-
nition can be granted.

Pakistan’s unwillingness to promptly recognize the regime probably stems from
some unresolved security concerns. For instance, Pakistani authorities remain
acutely concerned about the presence of an anti-Pakistani terrorist organization
in Afghanistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Islamabad has been bat-
tling the TTP for some time and at the cost of considerable blood and treasure.
Initially, Pakistan had reached out to the TTP through Sirajuddin Haqqani, a
senior member of the Taliban government. In an effort to reach an accord
with the TTP, Pakistan had reached a ceasefire agreement and had offered to
release as many as 100 TTP operatives currently lodged in Pakistani jails.\textsuperscript{7}
This overture, however, proved to be unsuccessful. Consequently, Islamabad
fears that Afghanistan remains a safe haven for the TTP, leaving Pakistan vulner-
able to continued terrorist violence.

Apart from the question of the TTP, Islamabad also has a longstanding, unre-
solved problem with Afghanistan. This deals with the demarcation of the Afgha-
nistan-Pakistan border—an issue that can be traced back to the British colonial
era. Afghanistan, regardless of the regime in power, has never accepted the sanc-
tity of this 1640-mile-long border, known as the Durand Line (named after a
British colonial administrator, Sir Mortimer Durand, who was responsible for
its cartography). To enhance the security of its borders and prevent infiltration
from Afghanistan, Pakistan has sought to literally fence the border, with the
Pakistan Army in the process of constructing one along this disputed border
since 2017. The issue, not surprisingly, came to the fore once again following
the Taliban takeover last August. In late December of last year, it appeared
that the two sides had reached an accord over the border fencing issue.\textsuperscript{8}
However, more recently the Taliban have denounced Pakistan’s attempts to com-
plete the fencing and have even destroyed parts of it. Afghanistan’s unhappiness
stems from its unwillingness to countenance any steps that could legitimize the
Durand Line.\textsuperscript{9}

The final concern that lurks in the minds of Pakistan’s leadership is the ques-
tion of a possible humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan. In the wake of the
Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan became a safe haven for millions of
Afghan refugees fleeing the civil war in their country. Though burdened with the costs of sheltering these refugees, Pakistan also found ways to exploit them for its own ends in Afghanistan, supporting select mujahideen groups with recruits from the refugee camps. Today, however, Pakistan fears that a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan could lead to the flight of substantial numbers of refugees and place an intolerable burden on Pakistan’s already fragile economy. Not surprisingly, high-level Pakistani officials have been issuing repeated calls to the US in particular, and the global community in general, to ensure that such an outcome is not in the cards. On this occasion, however, unlike during the Soviet period, the United States has a very limited interest in the future of Afghanistan. Unless it threatens to become a staging ground for global terror, it is unlikely that Washington, DC will evince much concern about the country. More to the point, given the long history of Pakistan’s double-dealing on counterterrorism cooperation, it is most unlikely that the United States will again turn to Islamabad for assistance and lavish economic and military largesse upon it.

It appears that long-simmering issues concerning the TTP, the border fence, and a potential refugee crisis are unlikely to be easily resolved, despite Pakistan’s overriding quest for “strategic depth” and its deep-seated interest in limiting any Indian influence in Afghanistan. Unquestionably, the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan was initially viewed with much satisfaction in Islamabad. However, tied up as they are with crucial security interests, these three critical issues will continue to dog Pakistan’s otherwise cordial relationship with the Taliban.

India: It’s Principally about Terror

India, which has been at odds with Pakistan since its inception, had no presence in Afghanistan during the first Taliban regime. Prior to the Taliban takeover, it had backed the Northern Alliance, a sworn enemy of the Taliban. The Taliban had been complicit in allowing the hijackers of a routine flight from Kathmandu to fly into Kandahar in late December 1999. From there, the hijackers issued a set of demands which involved the release of a number of Pakistani terrorists who had been incarcerated in Indian prisons. Seeing no viable alternative, the authorities in New Delhi capitulated to those demands. Subsequently, the Taliban allowed the hijackers to flee to Pakistan. In the wake of this debacle, India came to view the regime with even more distrust and hostility.
Not surprisingly, following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 India quickly moved to work with the new Karzai government. Owing to Pakistani objections and the US willingness to heed those misgivings, India’s role in Afghanistan during the both the Karzai and the Ghani governments was mostly developmental. To that end, it fashioned a robust program of economic assistance, disbursing as much as $3 billion over a span of twenty years. In 2011 it renewed and expanded a 1950 treaty, which had led to the forging of initial diplomatic and trade ties between the two countries. Under the terms of this new treaty, the two countries formed a strategic partnership which included political dialogue, cultural and scientific cooperation, and a commitment to combat terrorism.12

India had also sought to expand its influence through various scholarships for Afghan students to study in Indian universities, primarily for the purpose of training Afghan bureaucrats and some security personnel. Multiple accounts indicate that India’s developmental assistance was viewed quite favorably in Afghanistan.13 Most importantly, from New Delhi’s standpoint, the Ghani government (2014-2021) in particular was quite favorably disposed toward India and suitably skeptical of Islamabad.

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the accompanying collapse of the Ghani government almost immediately led to a complete loss of Indian influence in the country. India shuttered its embassy, removed all diplomatic personnel, and sought to evacuate all its citizens working in Afghanistan. Without the security cover that the American presence had afforded, it became all but impossible for New Delhi to maintain any kind of a presence in Afghanistan. However, probably in an attempt to probe the goals and interests of the new Taliban regime, a senior Indian diplomat did meet with a Taliban representative, Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai, in Doha in late August 2021.14

Having mostly evacuated its citizens from Afghanistan, India is now in the midst of formulating a policy toward the Taliban regime. Its principal concerns, apart from humanitarian ones, will remain mostly intact. One of its enduring security interests will be to ensure that the new Taliban government does not again start playing host to a number of terrorist organizations that remain active in the disputed state of Kashmir. This issue is of no trivial significance to New Delhi because the political situation in Kashmir remains quite fraught, especially after India stripped the state of its special status under the Indian constitution in August 2019.15

In a related vein, India will keep a close watch on Pakistan’s activities in Afghanistan. It is deeply concerned that members of the Haqqani terrorist
network, which long had connections with the ISI-D, are now in prominent positions in the Taliban regime.\textsuperscript{16} This development is of particular concern to New Delhi because there is considerable evidence that the Haqqani network was responsible for a deadly attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul in 2008 that left 54 Indian civilian and military personnel dead.\textsuperscript{17} Consequently, New Delhi will be especially vigilant about the possible restoration of ties between the ISI-D and the relevant segments of the Taliban regime.

In the interim, it appears that India is seeking to work with other like-minded states to see how it can deal with the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan. To that end, it has already held a “two plus two meeting”—involving their respective foreign and defense ministers—with Australia, another member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Not surprisingly, the talks, among other matters, focused on ensuring that Afghanistan not become a haven, yet again, for international terrorists.\textsuperscript{18}

Though reportage on the subject is far from widespread, it appears that India is quietly sustaining its ties with the Northern Alliance, an organization opposed to the Taliban and composed mostly of ethnic Tajiks. This stands to reason, as India has a history of involvement with the Northern Alliance beginning in the days of the Soviet occupation. Even during the first incarnation of the Taliban, India renewed its support for the Alliance. The question, of course, is whether it will prove willing and able to resume covert supplies of weaponry to the Northern Alliance should it choose at some point to militarily confront the Taliban.

Beyond its efforts to resurrect this relationship, India’s strategic options in Afghanistan remain limited. The principal obstacle that India confronts, obviously, is the exigencies of geography. Since it has a hostile neighbor that stands between its borders and Afghanistan, its choices are hobbled. Furthermore, the Taliban’s ideological orientation as well as its relationship with Pakistan make Indian decisionmakers wary about the regime’s trustworthiness. Yet, policymakers in New Delhi believe that they wield an important trump card: the dire economic circumstances of the Taliban regime and its acute need for humanitarian assistance.

In the view of India’s policy elite, at some point the Taliban are likely to make overtures toward New Delhi in an attempt to alleviate their disastrous economic plight. At that juncture, New Delhi could well make much-needed aid conditional on the Taliban addressing some of New Delhi’s concerns. The most important of these, of course, is that the country not become a safe haven for anti-Indian terrorists, or worse still, a staging ground for terrorist attacks on India. In other words, in an attempt to maintain some semblance of influence in the country, India will try and sustain its efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. To that end, despite Pakistan’s fitful cooperation, it has provided limited amounts of such aid since the Taliban takeover. In December 2021,
for example, it provided a tranche of much-needed medical supplies to Afghanistan. In February 2022, India provided 2,000 metric tons of wheat as part of its commitment to providing humanitarian assistance.

The hope of policymakers in New Delhi is that Afghanistan’s acute financial woes and the limited options that it commands to ease them in the foreseeable future will inhibit the Taliban regime from pursuing policies that are directly inimical to India’s key interests. Now that New Delhi has successfully evacuated its citizens from Afghanistan, its principal, immediate, and long-term concern is that the regime in Kabul not provide any aid or comfort to various anti-Indian terrorist organizations.

Beyond these fundamental concerns, New Delhi is also likely to continue to raise the question of the status of women and minorities in the country. However, humanitarian conditions notwithstanding, containing Pakistani influence and ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a sanctuary for terrorists are its primary objectives. These overriding concerns stem from India’s infelicitous experience at the hands of the previous Taliban regime, when Pakistan-supported terrorists enjoyed a free rein in Afghanistan. Thus, while New Delhi has trotted out the usual bromides about the importance that it attaches to the Taliban upholding human rights in general and women’s rights in particular, its principal misgivings remain firmly focused on the growth of Pakistani influence in the country and the possibility of it becoming a renewed staging ground for anti-Indian terrorist activities. To protect its interests, New Delhi can wield two possible instruments: it can withhold any diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime, or it can dangle the prospect of renewed economic and humanitarian assistance to the regime if it guarantees a minimum threshold of human rights and eschews any dalliances with anti-Indian terrorist organizations.

**China: Rare-Earth Metals and the Uyghur Connection**

During the American invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan, the PRC, contrary to its public statements, was not unhappy with the American presence in the country. The reasons were relatively straightforward. With the United States devoting significant amounts of blood and treasure toward Afghanistan, it was at least partially hobbled from extending its writ elsewhere. This, coupled with the fact that Pakistan—China’s strategic surrogate in South Asia—had a substantial role in the country under the aegis of the American presence meant that the PRC was not overly incensed with the American role on its doorstep.

Beijing has three principal interests in Afghanistan. The first is politically fraught: the PRC had and has a critical interest in ensuring that Islamic
fundamentalism not creep into its restive Uyghur population in Xinjiang province. To that end, the PRC will keep a wary eye on the small East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) operating on Afghan soil. Afghan Uyghurs quite understandably harbor fears that they may well become a bargaining chip between the Taliban and the PRC. Given the economic desperation of the Taliban government, it is possible that it will hand over Uyghurs to the PRC in return for any economic assistance that may come from Beijing. These fears are hardly unfounded. Almost immediately after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, the PRC signaled its willingness to work with the new Taliban regime. The focus on this issue will remain because of the PRC’s deep-seated fears about the rise of Islamic sentiment amongst the restive Uyghur population in Xinjiang.

Beijing will also work in concert with its “all-weather ally” Pakistan to limit any return of Indian influence in Afghanistan. This will remain a sturdy goal given that the PRC has for at least the last several decades seen Pakistan as a strategic surrogate for pursuing its interests in South Asia.

The third issue involves the PRC’s economic interest in extracting copper and rare earths from the country. It had previously pursued efforts to mine cooper from a major deposit in the country in Mes Aynak but the project stalled owing to security concerns. Now, one of the principal investments that the PRC is eying involves resurrecting its contract for extracting copper from the Mes Aynak mine. As early as 2008, under the Hamid Karzai regime, a 30-year contract had been signed with Chinese companies. Ironically, because of the depredations of the Taliban, the deal was never consummated. However, now with the country facing dire economic circumstances, the Taliban are actively wooing the PRC to return to the mining operation. This project, in turn, is of considerable interest to China. According to geological studies, the mine has the potential of yielding as much as 12 million metric tons of copper. If the previous agreement with the PRC could be revived, Kabul could, it is estimated, receive as much as 250 to 300 million dollars in revenue from the mine.

It is entirely reasonable to surmise that the PRC will remain interested in both of these politically and economically vital issues in the months ahead. It considers the restiveness of its Uyghur population in Xinjiang a serious security threat and remains convinced that it needs to contain any possible external forces that could provide aid and comfort to it. The PRC’s quest to acquire various raw materials will also be sustained because Beijing deems them to be essential for maintaining its economic growth.
As luck would have it, the interests of the PRC and the Taliban neatly dovetail in this latter interest. The Taliban, as is well known, confront an empty exchequer. Furthermore, few if any countries are willing to invest in Afghanistan, and only a handful have stepped up to provide any significant amounts of humanitarian assistance. Under these conditions, the PRC can emerge as a viable economic partner. Already the principal spokesman of the Taliban regime, Zabihullah Mujahid has publicly referred to the PRC as an “important partner” and has expressed pleasure that China has shown itself willing to “invest and rebuild our country.”

It is, however, important to bear in mind that this cooperation could be derailed if the Taliban fail to address the PRC’s deep-seated misgivings about the Uyghurs. The current regime in Beijing remains quite preoccupied with this question, and seeks to ward off any possible external support to the restless minority.

Thus, it is more than apparent that Beijing is keen on working with the Taliban regime to boost its economic interests in Afghanistan. Hard on the heels of a surprise visit of Wang Yi, the PRC’s Foreign Minister, to Kabul in late March 2022, Beijing hosted a regional conference on Afghanistan in Tunxi. The presence of none other than Xi Jinping at this conference underscored its significance. Also present at the meeting was the newly-appointed Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, as well as representatives from Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. (India, quite conspicuously, was not invited to participate.) At this conference, apart from supporting the predictable causes of peace and development in Afghanistan, Xi quite pointedly urged the United States to unlock Afghanistan’s frozen assets. It is more than likely that the PRC will coordinate its policies with Pakistan to pursue both its political and strategic interests in Afghanistan. Beijing is, no doubt, aware that despite some differences between Islamabad and Kabul, the two countries nevertheless have much in common. Consequently, it is likely to use Pakistan as a stalking horse in Afghanistan.

Ties that Bind the US Further with India?

The interests of these three regional powers clearly intersect in Afghanistan. For the most part, Pakistan and the PRC find that their interests converge. The only area where they are likely to have a minor disagreement involves the presence of the Uyghur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Afghanistan. Islamabad has no particular animus toward the ETIM. However, given its acute dependence on the PRC for economic, military, and diplomatic assistance and support, it is more than likely to accede to any demand from Beijing that it not provide the
slightest comfort to the group. Indeed, Pakistan’s deafening silence on the plight of the Uyghurs, who are fellow Muslims, suggests that Pakistan will subordinate any concerns about the fate of fellow Muslims to the preferences of the PRC.

India will of course keep a wary and watchful eye on the activities of both Pakistan and the PRC in Afghanistan. That said, Pakistan will remain its principal source of anxiety. Given the deep-seated ties between the Taliban and Islamabad, New Delhi remains fearful of the renewal of any possible terrorist nexus between the two capitals. From India’s standpoint, this is no small matter. Under the previous Taliban regime, Afghanistan served as a sanctuary for various terrorist groups intent on wreaking havoc in Indian-controlled Kashmir and elsewhere. India will also remain concerned about the possible emergence of the PRC’s influence in Afghanistan as it sees such an imprint as inimical to its interests. The reasons are twofold. First, New Delhi fears any possible collusion between Pakistan and the PRC in South Asia. Second, it is also averse to the growth of any form of PRC influence in the region given its manifold differences with Beijing ranging from the ongoing border dispute to a strategic rivalry in the region and beyond.

What implications, if any, does this triangular contest have for American interests in Afghanistan? The Biden administration has not focused much on Afghanistan since the American withdrawal last August. However, in February 2022 it decided to split $7 billion of Afghanistan’s funds in American banks between the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attack and a humanitarian fund for Afghanistan. Given its interest in isolating the Taliban regime, it is unlikely that the administration will make any overtures toward it, beyond attempts to provide further humanitarian assistance to alleviate widespread misery. More to the point, it will keep a close watch on the country to ensure that neither Al-Qaeda nor the Islamic State manages to regroup in Afghanistan.

This, however, will be a difficult task because of the lack of suitable material capabilities and intelligence assets in the region. Also, given Pakistan’s long record of duplicity on this subject in its dealings with the United States, it is unlikely that the administration will seek to renew its past strategic ties with Pakistan to obtain intelligence on terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Consequently, it may turn to India and pursue enhanced intelligence cooperation, as both states share a common interest in keeping these and other transnational terror organizations at bay. Despite India’s fitful cooperation with the United States on other security-related matters, it is likely to prove quite cooperative on this particular issue given its acute concerns.
about regional terrorism. This is likely to be the case despite extant differences over the Russian invasion of Ukraine.\(^{31}\)

Finally, even though it lacks any real means to thwart the growth of the PRC’s influence in Afghanistan, the United States will nevertheless remain keenly interested in the steps that China takes to expand its presence in the country, likely in concert with Pakistan. The American interest in limiting the PRC’s footprint in Afghanistan stems largely from its goal of preventing the PRC from further consolidating its presence across South Asia. Indeed, it can be argued that given the Biden administration’s commitment to ensuring a rules-based order in Asia, it will feel compelled to find ways to keep the PRC’s baneful influence across the region at bay. Once again, given India’s fraught relationship with the PRC, the United States is also likely to find it to be a useful partner in this endeavor.

**Notes**


