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**China in Afghanistan: Security,
Regional Standing, and Status**

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ABSTRACT

With the traditional liberal order appearing agile, newer questions on international security and peacemaking have come to the fore. In the current context, global players are according Afghanistan greater strategic importance. As NATO troops continue to make headway in that region into the safe havens of ISIS, and with US posturing purportedly getting more robust, China's role in Afghanistan merits scrutiny. Even though China's involvement, military or otherwise, has been rather constricted, it has nonetheless been prominent in shaping the domestic and foreign policy architecture of Afghanistan. Against that backdrop, this paper investigates China's accommodation strategies for Afghanistan. The concept of 'accommodation' is understood as a desire for a rising power to elevate both its status and material interests in the regional sphere by accommodating the interests of a weak state. This allows the rising power to secure for itself a crucial position in an evolving regional political scenario.

INTRODUCTION

With Afghanistan emerging as a strategic focal point in the regional ambit, global players are flocking to secure an eminent position on the establishment of peace and stability in the country. Approximately 9,500

troops deployed by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) still remain in Afghanistan, creating a potential vacuum that entices major actors towards Kabul. In this scenario, China can emerge as a game changer. From engaging minimally with Kabul in the early decades of the last century, to positing a proactive Afghan policy after the period of Taliban rule, China's interest has grown, especially since the drawing down of US forces in Afghanistan in 2014. China's strategies of accommodation towards Afghanistan in recent decades thus merit close analysis.

Most studies of accommodation strategies focus on relations between established and rising powers. Great powers accommodate rising states through varied strategies of mutual adaptation to, and acceptance of, their statuses, respective rights, and institutional membership.¹ However, studies so far have paid relatively little attention to accommodation between rising powers or the approaches of rising powers towards weaker states.

This paper focuses on China's accommodation strategies towards Afghanistan, which is perceived as a "secondary state" in the global realm. For a rising power like China, the increasing significance of Afghanistan in the regional strategic realm has spurred an accommodation strategy intended to enhance the former's status aspirations. While China did not indulge directly in the protracted Afghan civil war (neither aiding nor siding militarily with any faction), it has nonetheless occasionally played a prominent role in the Afghan conflict.

The paper is in five parts. Taking a brief look at the theoretical premises, the first section describes accommodation strategies as understood against the broader canvas of "international relations" theories, while charting China's strategies as a rising power to accommodate a secondary state. The second section presents an analysis of Sino-Afghan relationship until the end of the Soviet rule in Kabul. The paper argues that during this period, China had a posture of "ambivalent accommodation," primarily reacting to the actions of the major players: the US and the Soviet Union. The third section describes the period between 1990 and 2001, when

China gradually developed a “new security doctrine,” that included a strategy for accommodating Afghanistan peacefully. In the fourth section, the paper describes the gradual shift witnessed in China’s policy. It was at this time, against a compelling post-Cold War backdrop, that China aimed at securing a place in the regional realm; it shaped its strategies towards Afghanistan as well. Here, China opts for a calculated accommodation that suits its interests in the region. In the final section, the emphasis is on China’s present-day policies. Betraying a significant surge in Beijing’s interest towards Kabul, the accommodation strategy in place aims to enhance China’s status in the regional and global geostrategic realms.

The paper employs a qualitative analysis of secondary literature while also examining public statements made by leaders of both China and Afghanistan. Media reports and official documents also provide important sources for the external policies of the states involved.

The paper aims to help comprehend Sino-Afghan behaviour in the regional sphere and enhance the understanding of China’s geostrategic, security and status concerns. It can assist academics and policymakers in understanding China’s approach towards Afghanistan, as a major contender against India in the region, in both status and material terms.

I. THEORETICAL PREMISES

In the realm of international relations, accommodation—as far as the major powers are concerned—encompasses both the mutual adaptation and acceptance of established and rising powers, and the elimination or substantial reduction of hostility between them.² It involves, to an extent, status adjustment and sharing of leadership roles through the accordance of institutional membership and privileges, and acceptance of spheres of influence, something established powers rarely offer to the newcomers.

The process of accommodation can be partial or symbolic. Where substantive, some see accommodation as the creation of “sustained peace”

or “deep peace” among major power actors, akin to the “warm peace” described by Kenneth Boulding.³

Historically, wars have been the major propellant of structural change and status accommodation in the international system. In addition, theories of “power transition” and “hegemonic stability” argue that war is the principal agent through which systemic changes occur in international politics, whereby one global leader replaces others. There has been, however, much less focus on accommodation of status or structural changes involving rising powers or between rising powers and weaker states.

In the present global milieu, the shifting balance of power generates an unevenness in the international system. In this scenario, it is worthwhile to also scrutinise the accommodation strategies of rising powers vis-à-vis potential contenders and weaker states.

Among the main theories of international relations that address accommodation of status and structural changes, “constructivism” focuses mainly on ideas and security communities. The literature on security communities, for example, discusses the way regions change into peaceful communities and the sources of such change.⁴ The evolution of Western Europe as a pluralist security community in a region where bitter power-transition wars were waged for centuries offers hope for change without war. The major challenge according to constructivists or the literature on security communities, however, is the question of what a rising power and an established power will opt to do if they do not share the same peaceful norms or if the former views the norms created by the established power as perpetuating its hegemony in the region.

From a constructivist perspective, as Mlada Bukovansky concedes, successful accommodation must satisfy the status aspirations of powers, where status should encompass pre-rational considerations or at least not be entirely amenable to rational bargaining.⁵

To an extent, taking insights from the constructivist perspective—emphasising the status concerns of a rising power, and viewing material acquisitions and diplomatic ties as means of accommodation—this paper defines accommodation as the greater or lesser adaptation by a rising power (China) of the needs and demands of a weaker state (Afghanistan). In such a scenario, accommodation is between unequal powers, and therefore, partial or one-sided accommodation fits the case.

Here, accommodation also includes a desire by the rising power to elevate its status in the regional sphere by securing for itself a crucial role in the regional political scenario, including the establishment of peace and stability in the weaker states. A rising power's accommodation of a quasi-failed state does raise certain questions regarding intent. In the China–Afghanistan situation, however, multiple factors have propelled China's accommodation of Afghanistan over the years.

The increasing strategic importance and status concerns of a rising power like China prod it to accommodate important nations, including weaker nations such as Afghanistan. While for most of the last century, Sino-Afghan ties advanced with no significant diplomatic transactions, China opted for “ambivalent accommodation” when confronted with Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Responding to the Soviet and US aids to Afghanistan, China offered—sometimes symbolically—diplomatic and economic ties with Afghanistan. “Ambivalence” captures China's approach in this phase, characterised by no specific strategy but aimed at counter-encircling Afghanistan amidst Soviet domination. The onset of Soviet rule in Afghanistan limited China's participation in the Afghan affairs. Under the New Security Doctrine propounded in the aftermath of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, China advanced extensive economic ties with Afghanistan. However, it chose to limit its interaction with Afghanistan until formally re-establishing its relationship in 2001.⁶

In this period, shifting from its “ambivalent” posture, China opted to re-engage with Kabul in a calculated manner, prompted by the daunting

consequences it would otherwise face. Afghanistan emerged in this phase as a strategic hub, which grabbed the attention of all the major powers in the region. This also laid the ground for China's accommodation strategies to muster a significant status for Beijing in the affairs of Afghanistan.

II. PHASE OF AMBIVALENT ACCOMMODATION: SINO-AFGHAN TIES 1955-90

Historically, Afghanistan has never acquiesced extensive strategic focus from China, at least for the better part of the last century. Even though Sino-Afghan trade ties grew as early as the 16th century, there was no motif for establishing stronger bilateral relations until 1944. It was with the coming to power of the nationalist government in China that Afghanistan signed a treaty of amity with Beijing.⁷ Later, under the auspices of People's Republic of China, Sino-Afghan ties surged. On 12 January 1950, Afghanistan officially recognised China, although failing to obtain a reciprocatory response. Ultimately, emerging concerns pertaining to US' economic and military aid to Afghanistan propelled China's official recognition of Afghanistan in 1955. As an extension of diplomatic recognition, China sent Ting Kuo Yu as its ambassador to Afghanistan, and the latter reverted by appointing Abdul Samad as its ambassador to Beijing.

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two nations, political and economic cooperation has been on the sidelines. China's concerns about the Soviet Union's growing closeness with Afghanistan have largely guided Beijing's bilateral trading with Kabul. This has made space for perceptible 'ambiguity' in China's Afghan policy. To this end, the Soviets have been equally anxious about Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, so much so that several Soviet military operations were stationed for long in Afghanistan. China views such engagements as a threat to both Afghanistan's sovereignty and China's national interest. On a defensive stance, China has legitimised its increasing focus on

Afghanistan. Concluding a trade agreement in 1957, China expressed willingness to improve ties with Afghanistan.

Under the Premiership of Zhou Enlai, Beijing signed a treaty of friendship and nonaggression pact in 1960,⁸ followed by a border treaty and a protocol on border demarcation in 1965. China made significant progress on ties with Afghanistan by recognising the common frontier of 40 miles in the Wakhan–Pamir region.⁹ During a visit by Liu Shao-qi to Kabul, the two sides, in a joint communique, affirmed strong support for the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence” and the “Ten Principles of the Bandung Conference of 1955.”

In stark contrast to the economic aid offered to Afghanistan by the Western countries, China extended interest-free loans to be repaid over a period of 10–20 years through Afghan exports to China.¹⁰ China’s foreign policy stance during the 1950–60 emphasised on aiding and abetting revolutionary and anti-imperialist struggle, in the process provoking a Sino-Soviet tussle for influence in the third world.¹¹

With Soviet Union’s expanding influence in Kabul, Beijing dwelled upon strategies to counter-encircle Afghanistan.¹² In a military coup on 17 July 1973, inspired by the Soviets, Mohammad Daoud was placed at the helm of affairs in Kabul.¹³ Under Daoud’s republican regime—considered the “main architect” of Afghan–Soviet special relations—Beijing faced a considerable rise in Soviet influence in Afghanistan.

To pacify reluctant forces, China formally recognised the Republican regime in July 1973. However, Daoud resisted by attacking a pro-Beijing organisation, to which China responded by providing military and economic support to the Pashtun and the Baluch dissidents in their struggle for autonomy.¹⁴ On an equally provocative note, the Government of Pakistan reciprocated by aiding the Islamic fundamentalists with arms and ammunition, targeting the Daoud regime in Afghanistan.¹⁵

Furthermore, China’s “threat perception” germinated also from the closer proximity of its nuclear arsenal Lop Nor (in the Province of Xinjiang)

to the Afghan border. China shared a short border (90 km) with Afghanistan, formed by the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. In this region, the Uyghurs had been an identifiable group, considered a troublesome national minority by the Chinese.

In the North-West Frontier Province, the Durand Line—drawn by the British government in 1893—divided the Pashtun population into Afghanistan and Pakistan. From the Afghan's viewpoint, the Durand Line division was exacerbated when the Pashtun-dominated portions—soon-to-be the nation of Pakistan—were denied the choice to join Afghanistan. Even the United Nation's intervention in recognition of the colonial-era borders as national boundaries has not contributed to conflict resolution. Earlier holding a stronghold of the Pashtun tribesmen from both Afghanistan and Pakistan in their 1948 battle against India in Kashmir, Pakistan—much like the British before them—set out to control Afghan politics for their own benefit. It considered any form of Soviet influence a threat to Pakistan's sovereignty, and regarded occasional Indian support for Afghanistan's Pashtunistan movement as a strategy in India's attempt to decimate Pakistan.¹⁶

While China lent full support to Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan on the question of Pashtunistan, the Soviet Union backed Afghanistan. In the forefront of the Soviet-Afghan entente, Washington, Islamabad and Riyadh covertly aided Mujahedeen forces aiming to carry out anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Chinese leadership maintained that the Soviet domination of Afghanistan posed a major security threat to China and the littoral states in the Middle East.

In 1979, dealing a severe blow to US and China, Soviet troops stormed the presidential palace and killed President Hafizullah Amin and his men. Babrak Kamal took over as the head of the Parcham faction of the PDPA and the President of Afghanistan. In doing so, the Soviet Union took refuge in the Brezhnev doctrine signed in 1968, which ordained the Soviet Union with the right to intervene in preserving communist regimes confronting

domestic upheavals. Calling for an immediate withdrawal of Soviet forces, China refused to extend diplomatic recognition to the Soviet rule. Earlier housing disenchantment over the Soviet–Afghan treaty of friendship in 1978, China made efforts to develop stronger links with the US leadership.

Change of leadership in China, with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, initiated China’s affirmative stances towards the US. By 1978, Afghanistan dropped its “active neutrality,” that led to Soviet Union’s formal seizure of Afghanistan in 1979. The Soviet government cited the growing Sino-US closeness as a pertinent threat that spurred the invasion. Consequently, China reduced its involvement in Afghanistan’s development initiatives and urged instead for a counterstrike by supporting radical Islamic groups in Pakistan.

In a statement by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he maintained: “Afghanistan is China’s neighbour and therefore the Soviet armed invasion of that country poses a threat to China’s security. This cannot but arouse the grave concern of the Chinese People.”¹⁷

Although China’s concerns regarding Afghanistan saw a decisive upsurge during this period, the former had no specific agenda vis-à-vis Afghanistan, except reacting to the US and the Soviet Union’s policy on Afghan. Therefore, Chinese Afghan policy can be rightly characterised as a case of “ambivalent accommodation,” which largely attempted to erect hedges against hegemonic domination by the Soviet Union and avert the Soviet’s encirclement of Afghanistan, holding no specific agenda in Afghanistan. In this context, China’s accommodation of Afghanistan’s interest was partial, conditional and sometimes inconsistent. While at times opting to accommodate Afghanistan, China soon oriented its focus towards the Taliban.

The years 1979–89, until the overhaul of the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, witnessed the coming together of Pakistan–China and US. China’s eagerness to advance a strong strategic deterrence against the Soviets led to its bonding with other major stakeholders including

Pakistan, US and Iran. The Chinese leadership aimed at convincing the US and Western European leaders that the Soviet stance in Afghanistan was part of its grand strategy that stood as a pertinent threat to Europe.¹⁸

The Sino-Soviet rift provoked the trilateral alliance—US, China and Pakistan—against the Soviet’s adventurism. Over this, India made efforts to promote good ties with China, helping reduce its reliance on the Soviet Union. In 1979, Indian Minister of External Affairs Atal Bihari Vajpayee made a landmark visit to Beijing and both countries officially re-established diplomatic relations.¹⁹

China’s evolving threat perception on the behest of a weak defence compelled them to inch closer towards the West, as a defensive stance to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. From 1971 onwards, the US administration under Nixon attempted to enhance US’ strategic value in the triangular regional diplomacy.²⁰ Nixon’s rapprochement added weight and credibility to US efforts at convincing the Soviet that military pressure against China would be unacceptable to the US. Since the US Department of Defense had been keen on selling arms to China as a way to “complicate and burden Soviet’s planning,”²¹ the Soviet Union housed intense threat perception emanating from the strengthened Sino-US partnership, which could also have ultimately provoked Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. PRM-24 had recognised that the continuation of Sino-US collaboration would have counterproductive consequences.²²

Following the Soviets’ Afghan invasion, China grew extensively sympathetic of Pakistan’s situation. Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua, on a visit to Pakistan in 1980, affirmed Beijing’s support and sympathised with the Afghan refugees in Pakistan.²³ Beijing also extended massive humanitarian aid to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. In 1988, China sent over 1,250 tonnes of rice and approximately 1 million yards of cloth to the Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Additionally, China promised extensive support to the Islamic parties in Pakistan. During 1980–95, China provided the Pakistan-based Islamic

parties with approximately 400 million weapons, which also included HN-5 surface to air missiles and their launchers, rockets, mines, anti-aircraft machine guns and anti-rocket grenade launchers. To complement this, the US also extended tremendous support to the Mujahedeen and anti-Soviet forces. In a rebuttal to the Soviet annexation of the Wakhan corridor, concluding a border agreement on 16 June 1981, China reacted very strongly, viewing this as an attempt by the Soviets to penetrate Pakistan's northern border area to gravely imperil the security of Pakistan.²⁴

In 1985, the Soviet-backed government claimed that China was discreetly indulged in training of more than 30,000 counter-revolutionaries in over 120 camps in Pakistan, including in camps of Azgar, Gogiefeng and Maryang in Sinkiang province of China.²⁵

Towards the end of 1980s, the Soviet's strength began to wane considerably, faced with an increasing anti-Soviet opposition strongly backed by the US and China. The UN-sponsored Geneva Accord was signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan, which also received US endorsement. Subsequently, the Soviet Union adopted it in 1988. The Geneva Accord confirmed that the Soviet Union and the US would end outside interference upon the Soviets' withdrawal.

Taking cognizance of the accord, the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan, thereby kickstarting the process of normalisation of Sino-Afghan relation. The Soviet Union, during 1987-88, took unprecedented steps for demobilisation, reducing its ground strength and scaling down the operation of the Soviet forces by at least 30 percent. However, Beijing continued its support for Pakistan-based Islamic parties, providing arms and ammunition supply to Mujahedeen. Post the Soviet withdrawal, China publicly opted for a political settlement of the crisis in Afghanistan.

During this phase, China's policy was one of ambivalent accommodation of forces that aimed to encircle Afghanistan. Along with China's increasing strategic emphasis on Afghanistan, by the 1980s, there

were perceptible signs of a new foreign-policy doctrine, placing the limelight on Afghanistan's affairs. Beijing's earlier acknowledgement of the sheer possibility of war—"inevitability of war"—changed into an urge to avert war by uniting with "enemies of the enemies."²⁶ To this end, Chinese leadership—including Hu Yaobang, Huang Hua and even Deng Xiaoping—proclaimed that war was no more inevitable in the world. As Geral Segal says, China's declaratory and strategic position pertaining to Afghanistan, since the establishment of Sino-Afghan diplomatic relation, has been "uncertain" and ambiguous.²⁷

III. FROM CHINA'S AMBIVALENCE TO ITS "NEW SECURITY" DOCTRINE: SINO-AFGHAN 1990–2001

Throughout the 1980s, Beijing put great pressure on Moscow to withdraw from Afghanistan. In March 1982, following a speech by the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, his Chinese counterpart Deng Xiaoping remarked that Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was one of three tasks that had to be completed before Sino-Soviet relations could be normalised. The last Soviet forces left Afghanistan in April 1989, the month before Gorbachev arrived in Beijing to normalise ties and end the protracted Sino-Soviet dispute.²⁸

Following a tumultuous civil war in Afghanistan, the Pashtun-dominated Taliban seized power in 1996. China stayed clear from the Taliban government for as long as it could afford. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recognised the nascent Taliban rule in Kabul. Other regional powers—such as Iran, Russia and India—along with the US gave their support to the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance of Ahmad Shah Massoud after it became apparent that the Taliban would not be able to survive as a stable security provider in Afghanistan.

However, the Chinese quickly showed keen interest in doing business with the Taliban, at least in terms of natural and energy resources. As Andrew Scobell remarks, China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shunlin,

secretly met with the reclusive Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, in December 2000. According to Lu's Taliban counterpart Abdul Salam Zaeef, in his 2011 book, *My Life with the Taliban*, Mullah offered the ambassador assurances that the Taliban "would not allow any group to use its territory."²⁹ Further, the Taliban agreed to not facilitate any attacks on China in return for Beijing's recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate Government of Afghanistan and its assistance to blunt any potential UN sanctions against the regime.

Reporting for the *Washington Times*, Bill Gertz confirmed the involvement of Huawei Technologies and Zhongxing Telecom in Afghanistan from 1999 to 2001.³⁰ Such cooperation was untenable without the involvement of high-level Chinese government approval. Even though the Taliban's alliance with Al-Qaeda posed serious security threats in light of the insurgency in the Xinjiang region, the Chinese continued its cooperation with the Taliban. Beijing was keen to secure assurances that the Taliban would not support Uighur militants. Additionally, the Chinese provided relentless support to their Pakistani counterparts and, subsequently, their official and unofficial relationships with the Taliban.

As David Denoon rightly stated, "China shifted from its aggressive posture and violent policy of the 1970s and 1980s where it was quite willing to use force, to a much more diplomatic route in the 1990s." In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the Cold War, China adapted to decisive changes in the world. To accommodate these changes, China has made significant efforts to evolve a new security doctrine.³¹ Beijing has considered extending multidimensional channels of communication and multifaceted economic cooperation in this part of the world.

Many scholars, such as Nerkez Opacin, argue that China has aimed at enhancing economic rather than military aspects to strengthen its bilateral ties and position in the global realm.³² Under the new security doctrine, the idea of China's peaceful development has come to prominence. This policy asserts that China can prosper economically in a peaceful environment and

be a vital contributor to world peace. Alongside contributing to global peace through its own development, China proactively pursues its economic goals. This has been particularly true in the case of Afghanistan.

Throughout the 1990s, China made significant advances from its stance of “ambivalent accommodation” to forging newer economic and diplomatic engagements, to accommodate the demands of Afghanistan as well as the Taliban. Beijing was not particularly keen to take on a security role in Afghanistan, because it would then have to confront multiple stakeholders and could even risk becoming a primary target for international terrorist groups.

Some sceptics have argued that China was trying to give the impression of peaceful intent while preparing for aggression to fulfil its “antagonistic ambitions” with regard to global peace and security. On the other hand, many conceded China’s tendency of “free riding” in Afghanistan, leveraging potential benefits from the “secondary” state. Minxin Pei writes, “China enjoys the practical benefits of the current world order but refuses to share its costs.”³³ Some have advanced the argument that China will benefit from peace and stability in Afghanistan and that material gains in terms of natural resources, notably oil, more than offset security concerns. Maintaining a balanced approach, Bates Gill argues, “Looking back over the past 15 years and looking ahead to the next 10 to 15, the trend is clear that China is becoming a more responsible stakeholder.”³⁴

With the onset of US military operations (Operation Enduring Freedom) to eliminate international terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan, the state of affairs in Kabul changed dramatically, as the US sought to dislodge the Taliban government from power, to provide safe havens. In such a scenario, multilateral cooperation over Afghanistan acquired greater attention. It is noteworthy that from engaging with the Taliban regime in the late 1990s, China now lent support to the US’ Operation Enduring Freedom against the Taliban regime in October–November 2001.

Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf pledged support to the US in its efforts to arrest Osama bin Laden and appealed to his nation to render support. George W. Bush, the then US president, called upon the Taliban to hand over bin Laden and all other Al-Qaeda leaders, and to close its terrorist training camps. The American and British forces began intense bombing of the Taliban's air-defence installations and airport-based command centres. Ultimately, the Taliban abandoned Kabul and Northern Alliance forces took control of the city in November 2001.

Thus, during this phase, from a stance of partial, conditional and ambivalent accommodation, Beijing shifted to full accommodation of both the Taliban and the Afghan government, through several modes of diplomatic negotiations and economic transactions.

IV. A PHASE OF CALCULATED ACCOMMODATION

Sino-Afghan ties were formally re-established in December 2001.³⁵ In the aftermath of 9/11, China's engagements with Afghanistan reached greater heights. During this phase, China sought to accommodate the interests of both the Afghan government and the Taliban, covertly, replacing its earlier strategy of distancing itself completely from the Taliban.

Given the security, economic and political engagements that Afghanistan sought from the major regional players, China emerged as a strong contender. Afghanistan showed China that it wanted its demands to be accommodated. In doing so, it convinced China of its limited goals, so that China could consider accommodation rather than conflict.

With the 2002 visit of the Afghan leader Hamid Karzai, China reopened its embassy in Kabul, followed by a pledge of US\$150 million in aid for reconstruction. Indeed, China was one of the first countries to officially establish relations with the new Karzai government. During this period, Beijing strongly emphasised achieving specific goals in Kabul. First, China was wary of increasing resentment of Uighur separatists and made

determined attempts not to allow Afghanistan to turn this into a sanctuary for them. Second, drug trafficking from Afghanistan into China was a major concern. A report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that over 25 percent of opiates in China originated from Afghanistan, and its share has been growing ever since.³⁶ The two main gateways for the smuggling of opiates into Xinjiang were the Karakoram Highway running through northern Pakistan and the Tajik–Afghan border. Furthermore, an emerging threat was that drug trafficking could become a lucrative source of funding for the Uighur separatists and other disaffected sections of the population.

As with the presence of the Soviets before, US intervention elicited a response of “encirclement” from China. The growth of US military activities irked many in the Chinese leadership. For most of the next decade, Beijing refrained from indulging militarily in the conflict between the insurgency and coalition forces, confident that none could gain an upper hand.³⁷ Beijing also stressed on NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, urging boldly for a political negotiation. China sought to ensure a positive image of itself in the eyes of Kabul and China’s long-time ally, Pakistan.³⁸ Similarly, China did not wish to risk engendering potential threats by not engaging sufficiently with Afghanistan, which could have unravelled potential security as well as economic impacts on China.

Furthermore, considering the Taliban’s linkages with Pakistan and prior Chinese relations with Islamabad, there was a strong need for Beijing to accommodate Taliban’s concerns simultaneously.

China made stronger attempts to engage with Kabul’s commercial ventures. In 2007, its state-backed Metallurgical Group won a \$3.5 billion contract for Aynak mines, slated as the world’s largest unexploited copper fields. It was touted as the largest-ever foreign direct investment in Afghanistan, accounting for over 40 percent of government revenue. Alongside, Kabul inked an agreement with Beijing to study the feasibility of developing rail and road links between China and Iran, via Afghanistan.

China also made active attempts to strengthen its ties with Afghanistan through its involvement in the peace process. In December 2002, China signed the “Kabul Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations,” under which China pledged to respect Afghanistan’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.³⁹

China, however, exerted negligible impact on Afghanistan’s reconstruction efforts as it expanded its foothold in Afghanistan’s mineral wealth.⁴⁰ Therefore, Sino-Afghan relations have not reached greater heights in the recent decades. Karzai paid two short visits to China in 2003; Afghan Foreign Minister Rangi Dardar Spanta visited Beijing in 2007 and his Chinese counterpart in the latter part of that year. These visits were mere reaffirmations of the earlier rhetoric of “cooperation, friendliness and resolve to jointly fight terrorism.”⁴¹ In the face of enveloping threat from the Taliban, Afghanistan claimed that Beijing maintained a low profile. Beijing continued covert engagement with the Taliban, and in 2005, Afghan government officials voiced concerns over the flow of Chinese arms to Taliban fighters.⁴²

Moreover, in 2007, the US and British press reported that “Americans are being killed by Chinese supplied weapons, with the full knowledge and understanding of Beijing where these weapons are going.”⁴³ In the London conference, it was clear from the Chinese leadership that Beijing was willing to engage in accommodation of the Taliban. The Chinese foreign minister expressed support for the idea of “promoting national reconciliation and making the reconciliation process more inclusive.”⁴⁴ This was reiterated at the Kabul conference in July 2010.

During this period, the US’ success in its fight against terrorism was largely contingent upon its ties with Pakistan. However, the US had significant convergences with the Chinese, at least in driving away extremist influence and tackling the growing menace of drug trafficking. In a joint statement by the Chinese and US presidents in November 2009, Hu Jintao and Barack Obama agreed strongly, indicating their approach to

establish a stable Afghanistan.⁴⁵ While China condemned the presence of Permanent NATO Mission, it supported US attempts at reconciling with the Taliban to achieve a degree of stability and allow a phased withdrawal of foreign troops.

However, a *China Daily* article in September 2009 severely blamed the US for the turmoil in Afghanistan and mooted a political reconciliation. China was strict on not extending support to the US in military terms, since this would have projected Beijing as against the Islamic world, with the inevitable fallout of exacerbated trouble in Xinjiang.

As a major player, China thought it wise to leave Russia to play a profound role in smoothing the responses of the Central Asian Republics to US demands with respect to the Afghan mission.⁴⁶

V. POST-NATO, CHINA'S ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY: STATUS AND SECURITY INTERESTS

Since 2014, China has exhibited renewed interest in Afghan affairs. Amidst rising speculations of a complete withdrawal of NATO forces, China grew extensively concerned of a strategic vacuum that loomed in Kabul. With the US retaining just 9,500 NATO troops in Afghanistan, Beijing did not just vaunt its strategy of calculated accommodation and is instead attempting to secure a unique status in the regional realm.⁴⁷ In a milieu where India, Russia, Iran and Pakistan emerge as significant stakeholders, China has been attempting to acquire a prominent status and play a profound role in establishing regional stability through multilateral cooperation. As many scholars view, status is the rank ordering of states—based on material capabilities, coercive strength, culture and diplomatic clout in the international regime—conferred on a state by other states, by the community of states, or by a club formed by major powers, which the state seeks to join, thus assigning legitimacy and recognition to it.

With the US pursuing a proactive Afghan policy, as echoed in its recent bombing of ISIS safe havens and sanctuaries in Afghanistan, the international community, including such major stakeholders as Russia and Iran, has been looking for “regional solutions” to establish a stable government there. At the same time, China has increased its efforts in Afghan reconstruction via investment projects, in addition to its more recent and less typical contributions to peace talks.⁴⁸ For the last two or three years, Afghanistan has witnessed an enlarged contribution from China in development assistance and aid; in 2014 alone, China invested around US\$80 million.⁴⁹

During Afghanistan’s Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah’s visit to Beijing in May 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated China’s commitments to reconstruction and development. Engaging in several multilateral and regional efforts towards Afghanistan, China has also played an active role in the “Heart of Asia” process initiated in 2011.⁵⁰

In 2014, several state-level visits re-energised Afghan–China ties. In Kabul, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged Beijing’s unflinching support for Afghanistan in achieving smooth political, security, and economic transitions.⁵¹ The deputy chief of the People’s Liberation Army general staff, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, travelled to Afghanistan as a special envoy of China’s president. Meanwhile, as the newly elected president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani scheduled his first official trip to China in October 2014. This laid a firm foundation for strengthening the bilateral partnership and deepening strategic relationship between the two. In his speech, Ghani reiterated: “We count on the active engagement of the People’s Republic of China in promoting peace, prosperity, and stability in Afghanistan and in the region.”⁵² China went a step ahead to host the Heart of Asia Istanbul conference on 31 October 2014, described as a “historic juncture, and a testament to the collective efforts by both China and Afghanistan to better relations and forge closer cooperation in the region.”⁵³ In 2015, marking the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, a series of bilateral efforts consolidated the Afghan–China ties.

China has since been enthusiastically participating in regional security and economic cooperation in Afghanistan. As a leading member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a group that promotes regional cooperation on economics, politics, and security, China supported Afghanistan's full observer status in 2012 and has mooted for its full membership since 2016.⁵⁴

China has taken many steps, including increasing its anti-terrorism alliance with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan, to tackle the threat of terrorism and extremism. The quartet have agreed to establish a "four-country mechanism" to share intelligence and training. Beijing's growing concern about security in its border province of Xinjiang reflects in its adept participation in these alliances. Fang Fenghui, a member of the powerful Central Military Commission, which controls China's armed forces, remarked that Beijing is willing to "deepen counter-terrorism intelligence, joint drills, personnel training and other areas of practical cooperation."⁵⁵

Since early 2016, China has also played a key role in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, with the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Engaging in bilateral and trilateral meetings over Afghanistan, China has secured greater recognition as a preeminent regional player and aspires to secure a distinctive status vis-à-vis peace-building in Afghanistan.

The status of a state relies on legitimate recognition, for which these institutional forums serve as a primary gateway. As Nel remarks, recognition is a communicative process in the international society of states, through which states mutually acknowledge the status and esteem of other states. It is equally intersubjective and relational.⁵⁶

In February 2015, the first round of the China–Afghanistan–Pakistan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue was held in Kabul, having been preceded by talks between China, Russia and India in 2014. This highlighted Beijing's urgency to gain significant advantage—diplomatically and economically—

from involvement in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ Through these engagements, China does not just attempt to engage with Afghanistan as a secondary state but aims to accommodate its political, economic, security, and status concerns.

With China's increasing hopes for the revival of the old Silk Road ("One Belt, One Road"), Afghanistan's deficits in infrastructure and natural resources could reduce significantly. During Abdullah's visit to China, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding regarding the OBOR initiative. Recently, China started operating the first cargo trains to Afghanistan—Hairatan and Mazar-e-Sharif—in that framework. In addition, China had to provide housing projects in the urban centres and developed training and education programmes. In 2015, the Chinese government announced more than 500 scholarships for Afghan students to study in China and training for 3,000 Afghan professionals in fields including anti-drug trafficking, agriculture, counterterrorism and diplomacy.

With regard to establishing peace in Afghanistan, then Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proffered five suggestions, including China's insistence on Afghanistan being governed by the Afghan people, promoting political reconciliation, and providing stronger support from the international community.

Beijing has made strong attempts to negotiate with the Taliban, considered the lesser evil compared to Islamic State. In December 2014, a Taliban delegation went to China, although this was not officially confirmed.⁵⁸ Foreign Minister Wang Yi has affirmed that China is willing to play a "constructive role" in the Afghanistan peace process. The Afghan government has, however, expressed concern about China providing "a platform to those groups that are responsible for the killing of the people of Afghanistan."

Some scholars have reasoned that Beijing's increased focus on Afghanistan is because of China's escalating security concerns about the

Xinjiang region, which has witnessed a recent surge in riots and terrorist attacks. China is also wary that Uighur separatists might receive support from the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

However, as argued in this paper, China's engagement with Afghanistan in this phase goes beyond narrow security concerns. It can be attributed primarily to its goal of acquiring a significant status in the region, along with accommodating Afghanistan's growing interest. In any bargaining over states' relative status, each state is prodded to highlight the particular resources in which it enjoys a comparative advantage. China has made efforts to be a key stakeholder in multiparty talks, where India, holding contrary goals, has often been sidelined. Such international forums perform the role of status markers, defining status and further providing legitimacy to that status by assigning positive recognition via the participating members.

In December 2016 multiparty talks hosted by Moscow, China emerged as a key player. Moscow did not invite India, and Beijing enhanced its efforts to accommodate the Taliban, while also forging stronger ties with the Afghan government. The three participant nations agreed upon an approach to remove certain Taliban figures from the UN sanction list as part of efforts to foster a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban movement. The states underscored the urgency of accommodating the Taliban as a necessary bulwark in the global fight against the Islamic state.

China's special envoy to Afghanistan, Deng Xinjian, remarked: "China has always conveyed to the Taliban that it recognized the Afghan government and has encouraged the Taliban to join the peace process."⁵⁹ Considering China's established ties with the Taliban, Beijing is sure to secure greater recognition if other stakeholders in the region favour its strategy of political reconciliation with it. In recognition of China's growing presence in Afghanistan, Russia has made an effort to engage with China.

China's increasing security presence has, however, raised enormous concern, in both the regional and global arena. This is contrary to earlier claims by scholars such as Andrew Small, that a US withdrawal will not provoke China to play a crucial role in Afghan's security affairs.⁶⁰

There have been substantial claims of Chinese military vehicles stationed in the Wakhan Corridor, the narrow strip of territory in North East Afghanistan abutting on to China.⁶¹ The Chinese government has bluntly denied any involvement of its military proper in Afghanistan, referring only to "the law enforcement departments in China and Afghanistan that has carried out joint enforcement action to jointly combat terrorism and organized transnational criminal activities."⁶² Nevertheless, this reflects a shift in China's policy and military posture towards Afghanistan, which was never before considered strategically relevant by China.

As China's focus intensifies on Afghan territory, concerns on the part of other major players proliferate in equal measures. Russia and India have set distinctive goals in Afghanistan and, in the forthcoming decades, multilateral transactions over Afghanistan will generate larger global repercussions as China continues to battle for an elevated status and enhancement of its global position.


CONCLUSION

In engaging with Afghanistan, China has deployed varied accommodation strategies. From merely responding to policies of the big powers struggling to garner influence in Afghanistan to emphasising on its own status aspirations, China has swiftly allocated strategic importance to Afghanistan, apropos to the demand of time. While a perceptible ambiguity featured prominently in China's deliberations with Afghanistan in the 1950s, with the changing geopolitical scenario, its strategy has been in line with the "new security" doctrine that evolved after the withdrawal of Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Initiating larger economic dealings to

establish a stable diplomatic relation, China then engaged with Afghan's security infrastructure in a calculated framework, to avoid the daunting consequences it would face otherwise for not taking cognizance of Afghan needs.

In this scenario, China's accommodation strategies have also featured elements to accommodate the demands of the Taliban. While China sided with the US' "Enduring Freedom" operation, it nonetheless continued with its extensive support for the Taliban groups functioning both in Afghanistan and the neighbouring state, Pakistan. On several occasions, regional players such as India have construed this as a provocative stance, facing an urgency to tackle the extremist forces and their activities in the region.

Notwithstanding the terror activities sponsored by Pakistan, China has continued its engagements with Pakistan, albeit covertly. In this endeavour, China's accommodation strategy has been useful, not just in promoting China's diplomatic relations to proffer but also to balance its multifaceted goals in the regional domain.

As noted in this paper, it is highly pertinent for stakeholders in Afghanistan to look at China's strategies in Afghanistan. China is an eminent player as well as a regional actor with a strong relationship with Pakistan, whose actions in supporting the Afghan Taliban merit a close analysis. This paper manages to bring to the forefront the theoretical concept of accommodation, which complements an all-round understanding of China's activities in Afghanistan. As China attempts to achieve its strategic goals in the regional domain by accommodating Afghanistan—a weaker and unequal state—it also aims at ensuring security, economic and diplomatic stronghold, and consolidating its status to confront its strong regional competitor, India. 

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