

ISSUE BRIEF

Outside-the-Box Sino-Indian and Indo- Russian Cooperation on Afghanistan

Joint Infrastructural projects in Afghanistan offer new opportunities, accompanied by old challenges and new risks

AUGUST 2018 **OMAR SAMAD AND BHARATH GOPALASWAMY**

China and India have long been known to jostle for influence in various parts of Asia, especially in the continent's south and central areas. But, at an “informal summit” held in the historic Chinese city of Wuhan in April, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed, in principle, to undertake a joint economic project in war-battered Afghanistan—marking a geographical paradigm shift in their strategic ambitions.

Interestingly, a few weeks later at another informal summit in the Black Sea city of Sochi, Modi offered Russia's Vladimir Putin a partnership to work on another joint project. Media reports indicate that Putin readily agreed to join India in implementing such an initiative. India has urged both China and Russia to put other existing geopolitical considerations aside for the moment, and sent a strong signal to all regional and international stakeholders that all three countries are willing to step into the Afghan arena with the intention of playing a larger role.

The South Asia Center works to overcome entrenched rivalries and foster collaboration in one of the world's most volatile, dynamic, and strategically significant regions.

These developments coincide with fresh attempts by the United States to seek a negotiated settlement of the Afghan war, and even a possible

policy shift that resulted in direct talks with the Taliban in July, the details of which are still a work in progress.^{1,2}

These unprecedented moves come at a time when the region is still reeling from the geopolitical reverberations of its fractious politics and conflicting interests. These have occurred in several forms, including: a short-lived ceasefire between the Taliban and the Afghan government during Eid al-Fitr celebrations; intensified fighting and mounting casualties since the start of the 2018 fighting season in Afghanistan; new and severe US sanctions on Iran; reports of Russian and Iranian contacts with the Taliban amid growing fears of activity by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (locally known as IS-Khurassan Province); new tensions between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran; and further pressures on Pakistan—viewed by some as a sanctuary for Taliban leaders and other violent groups, and by others as a linchpin state critical to any peace deal.

These projects may turn out to be a Sino-Indian rail or road infrastructure that could benefit both countries' future investments in the untapped Afghan mining sector. Details about the ultimate plans are unclear. Nevertheless, these new partnerships—involving India, China, and Russia—have the potential to both reinvigorate regional interest in an Afghan peace process and lead to shifts in regional alignments based on evolving security-threat perceptions.

Whether these fresh initiatives could potentially evolve into a harbinger for further peace-building efforts—and, eventually, open a path to genuine peace talks—will depend on many factors. The current turmoil and fighting within Afghanistan are key indicators, as are the real and perceived security, geopolitical, and geo-economic interests at play.

Mining, Moving, and Connectivity

More than six years ago, an Indian consortium signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to invest more than \$10 billion in the Hajigak iron-ore mining complex in central Afghanistan, linking it via road-rail access

to the Iranian Gulf port of Chabahar. The proposal included a steel factory, but reports soon emerged that the group was no longer interested due to growing security concerns and other technical challenges. The region in question is reported to have the largest untapped iron-ore deposits in Asia.

Earlier, in 2008, two state-owned Chinese companies signed another MoU worth \$2.9 billion to acquire a thirty-year lease for the copper mine at Mes Aynak, estimated to contain some 450 million metric tons of ore. The agreement called for rail connection toward both Pakistan and Iran. However, due to worsening security conditions in Afghanistan and displeasure with the terms of the deal, the project remains in limbo.

As the two largest importers of Iranian oil, and as important trading partners, India and China see stability in Afghanistan as a precondition for their own large-scale connectivity projects—among them China's overland Silk Road Economic Belt to the Maritime Silk Road (One Belt, One Road), and India's Chabahar link. "Chabahar will also serve as the Indian Ocean outlet for Central Asia, and the proposed 7,200 km International North South Corridor (INSTC) running northward through Iran and Afghanistan, will also provide India vital access to the markets of five Central Asian Republics (CARs), Russia and, ultimately, Europe."³

Sino-Indian rivalries are more pronounced in the arena of large-scale infrastructural work, where China intends to invest much larger sums of money than India. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connecting China to Pakistan is valued at more than \$48 billion. Last year, China announced plans to extend CPEC to Afghanistan.

There is a growing realization that continued fighting in Afghanistan is an obstacle to the implementation of geo-economic strategies that include pipelines, rail, fiber, and road infrastructure stretching across the subcontinent.

The new Sino-Indian initiative to work on an Afghan connectivity project may finally address this old dilemma,

1 Frud Bezhani, "Feasts, Hugs, And Selfies: A Tantalizing Glimpse of Possible Afghan Peace," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, June 24, 2018, www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-cease-fire-peace-process-selfies/29316598.html.

2 Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, "White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations," *New York Times*, July 15, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-direct-negotiations.html.

3 Anil Bhat, "Can Chabahar, India's Strategic Gateway to Central Asia, Trump Gwadar and OBOR?" *Indian Defence Review*, December 1, 2017, www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/can-chabahar-indias-strategic-gateway-to-central-asia-trump-gwadar-and-obor/.



Trucks wait to cross the Afghanistan-Iran border in Zaranj, Afghanistan *Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

and offers a solution that puts both contracts back on the table, produces financial benefits, and may serve as a catalyst for an overarching political settlement.

Impact of US South Asia Policies and Iran Sanctions

Last August, the Donald Trump administration announced it would continue stabilization efforts aimed at breaking the military “stalemate” on the ground in Afghanistan by expanding the NATO/US military “train, advise, and assist” footprint, removing operational barriers, and adopting a timeline-less and conditions-based approach to the seventeen-year-long Afghanistan mission.⁴ Notably, the Trump administration has also decided to put the onus on Pakistan, and has demanded that Islamabad stop aiding and abet-

ting violent extremist groups that undermine Afghan security and threaten US-led stabilization efforts.

Less than a year later, an ongoing mini-review of US South Asia policy is raising new prospects for direct talks with the Taliban, although the fighting season is not over and the context for dialogue has yet to be determined. The Taliban remains opposed to talks with the Afghan government despite numerous attempts by Kabul to extend an olive branch, and instead demands that Western forces withdraw from Afghanistan as part of direct talks with Washington.⁵

The most severe blow to regional connectivity plans—including the Sino-Indian project and, ironically, the United States’ own South Asia policy objectives—may come in the form of new US sanctions imposed on

4 Hans Nichols and Jonathan Allen, “Still in a Stalemate,” *Top U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Says*, *NBC News*, November 23, 2017, www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/still-stalemate-says-top-u-s-commander-afghanistan-n823671.

5 “Afghan President: Taliban Could Join Peace Talks, Despite Rejection,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, July 17, 2018, www.rferl.org/a/afghan-president-suggests-taliban-could-join-peace-talks-despite-rejection/29368046.html.

Iran in May. Although the United States has recently indicated that it is considering an exception to allow India to use the Chabahar Port for access through Iran to Afghanistan, there are concerns that businesses and operators may feel skittish about using the Gulf port.⁶

The traditional route through Pakistan's Karachi Port has experienced politically motivated closures and bottlenecks, as part of Islamabad's attempts to put pressure on the Afghans and prevent direct trade with India through Pakistani territory. In March, during a visit to Pakistan, Iranian Foreign Minister Javed Zarif said, "We offered to participate in the China-Pakistan economic corridor. We have also offered Pakistan and China to participate in Chabahar."⁷ While officials in Kabul downplay the impact of the sanctions in question—saying that trade via Chabahar will not be affected because the port is, to a large extent, managed by India and not Iran—there is no exclusionary clause or risk-mitigation clarity on whether business interests and investment are protected if they connect to or use the Iranian network.

Following the formulation of a trilateral framework between India, Afghanistan, and Iran, India has invested in developing a complex around Chabahar. This development will provide Afghanistan an alternate route to the sea, and will connect trade and transit via rail and road networks to Central Asia, Turkey, and China. "Indian officials said they hoped the route would boost annual trade with Afghanistan from US \$700 million to US \$1 billion in three years."⁸

This agreement was in line with the new US strategy in South Asia, and is especially likely to bolster US-India ties in the context of President Trump stating that he would like to see an enhanced Indian role in South Asian security. Furthermore, according to Tridivesh

Singh Maini, assistant professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs, the real importance of the Indian trade route through Chabahar Port was to "develop an alternative narrative to the [Belt and Road Initiative]."⁹

The strong possibility of an American decision to exempt Chabahar from the sanctions list will help other nations, such as China and Japan, to reassess the situation and opt for more permissible investment and trade. Most recently, Japan—which had expressed interest in investing in the project to bolster economic relations with India—expressed caution following the imposition of fresh US sanctions upon the Iranian regime. "According to Indian analysts, Japan's participation would have brought more political clout to the project. Besides, it would have also helped accelerate the implementation of the project given Japan's participation as a foreign collaborator."¹⁰

Regional Realignments

Meanwhile, with heavy fighting continuing across contested Afghan territories and casualty counts rising, there are also signs of regional geopolitical realignments that hold the potential to turn Afghanistan into a more lethal battlefield, as Russia and Iran opt for new hedging strategies that include establishing, and building upon, further contacts with the Taliban.¹¹

Russian officials have warned that Afghanistan could become a trap for Americans, alluding to the parallel Soviet experience in the 1980s, if Washington does not engage in direct talks with the Taliban, which would focus on a US military withdrawal timetable.¹² Additionally, Russia and Iran allege that the Islamic State (known as IS-Khurassan Province in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region), more so than the Taliban, is threatening their security from Afghanistan.

6 Michelle Nichols, "U.S. Envoy Haley Tells Modi Important to Cut Imports of Iranian Oil," *Reuters*, June 27, 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-india/us-envoy-haley-tells-modi-important-to-cut-imports-of-iranian-oil-idUSKBN1JN24K.

7 Shailaja Neelakantan, "Iran Says It Has Offered Pakistan and China Participation In India's Chabahar Project," *Times of India*, March 13, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/iran-says-it-has-offered-pakistan-and-china-participation-in-indias-chabahar-project/articleshow/63282800.cms>.

8 Kinling Lo, "India Deal on Key Iranian Port a Potential Check on China," *South China Morning Post*, February 19, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2133853/indian-deal-key-iranian-port-potential-check-chinas>.

9 Ibid.

10 Elizabeth Roche, "Japan 'Cautious' About Investing in Chabahar Port," *LiveMint*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/r4G8DfX5Sg3PSJVZs9tyUL/Japan-cautious-about-investing-in-Chabahar-port.html>.

11 "Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan Hit Record High – UN," *UN News*, July 15, 2018, news.un.org/en/story/2018/07/1014762.

12 Tom O'Connor, "U.S. Has Lost the War in Afghanistan and Should Withdraw Troops, Russian and Taliban Say," *Newsweek*, August 15, 2017, www.newsweek.com/us-lost-war-afghanistan-withdraw-troops-russia-taliban-651160.



Soldiers quickly march to the ramp of a helicopter that will return them to Kandahar Army Air Field *Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

According to media reports, at a recent meeting hosted by Pakistan, intelligence agency chiefs of China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan “reached an understanding of the importance of coordinated steps to prevent the trickling of IS terrorists from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan, where from they would pose risks for neighboring countries.”¹³

The Afghan government and the United States say they are using all means to eradicate the Islamic State threat, which is seen by security analysts as more local in nature, and less connected to the Mideast brand.¹⁴ Although parts of IS-KP are made up of former Pakistani

Taliban (TTP) and foreign fighters, who were pushed from Pakistan’s tribal regions into Afghanistan during military sweeps in 2014-15, Islamabad has played an important behind-the-scenes role in focusing attention on IS-KP, while facilitating Taliban contacts with Iran and Russia.¹⁵

Furthermore, in a departure from tradition, Iran’s “IRGC-affiliated media outlets now openly express support for the Taliban’s latest territorial gains in western Afghanistan, arguing that the Taliban pose no security threats to Iran and have managed to keep IS

13 Shubhajt Roy, “Intel Chiefs of Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan Discuss IS Threat,” *Indian Express*, July 27, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/intel-chiefs-of-russia-china-iran-and-pakistan-discuss-is-threat-5255825/>.

14 Confidential source.

15 Adam Garrie, “After Key China-Russia-Iran-Pakistan Meeting, Moscow Official Says Taliban Control 50% of Afghanistan,” *Eurasia Future*, July 16, 2018, www.eurasiafuture.com/2018/07/16/after-key-china-russia-iran-pakistan-meeting-moscow-official-says-taliban-control-50-of-afghanistan/.

away from the Iranian borders.”¹⁶ Commentary from similar outlets endorses the idea that Iran’s support for the Taliban is centered around pushing for expulsion of US and NATO forces from western Afghan provinces.

Beyond security concerns, Iranian policy is also driven by a need for access to water—which is mainly sourced in Afghanistan—and opposition to the building of a hydroelectric dam funded by India. Despite the fact that Iran and Afghanistan signed a water-sharing agreement over the use of the Helmand River Basin in 1973, which could serve as the basis for a revised accord and reduce tensions between the two parties, Tehran remains sensitive to any attempts that would “reduce the flow of Afghanistan’s waters into Iran.”¹⁷

On the other hand, the Afghan government has become more assertive about calling out Iranian influence in the country. Earlier this year, the chief of general staff for the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces stated that the Kabul government has “evidence that Iran is providing weapons and other military assets to the Taliban in western Afghanistan.”¹⁸

The probability of heightened tensions between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran spilling into other hotspots may further destabilize fragile states and stir up new rivalries. Although Afghanistan’s Shiites have been targets of extremist violence—mostly claimed by IS-KP—for the past few years, those provocations have so far been contained and prevented from escalating into open sectarian warfare.

Meanwhile, a new quadrilateral meeting of national security advisors representing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Afghanistan has been operationalized to look into regional security dynamics, with the intent of helping promote Afghan peace prospects.¹⁹

The Pakistani Factor

The takeoff of any infrastructure project would require a buy-in from other regional countries. This includes Pakistan, which potentially offers access to the Karachi and Gwadar Ports for Central Asian countries seeking access to warm-water ports. China’s intention to extend CPEC to Afghanistan will help acquire those buy-ins. However, sporadically heightened tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, along with the tactical closure of trade routes and hubs, have hurt prospects for better relations. As a result, Pakistani exports to Afghanistan fell by 50 percent over a one-year period.

Although Afghan and Pakistani leaders have agreed to reduce tensions by finalizing the Afghanistan Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) in May, there is still longstanding mistrust between the two capitals. Kabul accuses Pakistan’s military establishment of undermining Afghan stability by providing sanctuary to Taliban and other antistate elements—a claim denied by Islamabad.

On the other hand, China’s decision to partner with India could upset Pakistan, which considers Beijing its “all-weather” ally. As a confidence-building measure, China has engaged both Afghanistan and Pakistan to hold trilateral talks, the first of which took place last December at the foreign ministers’ level. Yet, while China has paid serious attention to this partnership with Pakistan, its interests in regional stability, a broader intercontinental economic strategy and, to a lesser extent, the desire to unlock Afghanistan’s economic potential will likely take precedence over existing commitments to Islamabad from a pragmatic government in Beijing.

Due to all these factors, the Russia-India-China summit held in New Delhi last year held great significance. “At the RIC summit, the foreign ministers of Russia and

16 Ahmad Majidiyar, “Afghans See Iran’s Hand in Taliban’s Latest Gains in Western Afghanistan,” *Middle East Institute*, March 14, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/afghans-see-iran-s-hand-taliban-s-latest-gains-western-afghanistan>.

17 Fatemah Aman, *Iran-Afghan Differences Over Helmand River Threaten Both Countries* (Washington DC: Atlantic Council, 2016), <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-afghan-differences-over-helmand-river-threaten-both-countries>.

18 “Afghan Army Chief: Iran Provides Military Equipment to the Taliban,” *BBC Persian*, September 6, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan-41174669>.

19 “Afghanistan, US, Saudi Arabia and UEA Hold Meeting,” *TOLOnews*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan/afghanistan-us-saudi-arabia-and-uea-hold-meeting>.



Afghanistan Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons

China agreed to India's terms to condemn state-sponsored terror."²⁰ If India can successfully work alongside Russia and China to counter the threat of extremism proliferating in the region, that approach will seriously benefit its new objectives in Afghanistan. Although the grouping retains little real significance, it demonstrates an interest in cooperation on the issue of regional counterterrorism between three of the world's most influential emerging economies.

The Unknown Taliban Agenda

While economic activity can help create an environment conducive to talks, other considerations may impede in-

tra-Afghan negotiations down the road. Chief among them are Taliban demands to bypass Kabul and hold direct talks with the United States regarding a US withdrawal timetable, a demand that the United States is now considering as a discussion agenda item.²¹ Kabul and Washington continue to call on the Taliban to join peace talks as part of an "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" reconciliation process, separating the withdrawal and timetable issues from that of a political settlement.²²

While many Afghans remain skeptical of Taliban motivations, little is known about the group's political aspirations and objectives to reengineer Afghan society according to its strict religious interpretations.²³ The

20 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Russia & China Joins India to Counter State Sponsored Terror," *Economic Times*, December 12, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/russia-china-joins-india-to-counter-state-sponsored-terror/articleshow/62021396.cms>.

21 "Taliban Again Reject Afghan Offer of Peace Talks with Kabul," *Associated Press*, July 8, 2018, www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/07/08/taliban-again-reject-afghan-offer-of-peace-talks-with-kabul/.

22 "Afghan President: Taliban Could Join Peace Talks, Despite Rejection," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*.

23 Pamela Constable, "The Taliban Has Successfully Built a Parallel State in Many Parts of Afghanistan, Report Says," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/06/21/the-taliban-has-successfully-built-a-parallel-state-in-many-parts-of-afghanistan-report-says/?noredirect=on.

Taliban continues to use the 1990s Islamic Emirate designation, and there are no clear indications as to how far the group may be willing to compromise on key issues like reintegration, power sharing, constitutional rights, and gender rights.

Despite the Afghan National Unity Government's attempts at accommodating the Taliban by offering it an unconditional peace package, and even announcing a unilateral ceasefire during the Eid period in mid-June—an occasion that produced euphoric photo-ops—the Taliban has shown dogged reluctance to engage in any meaningful talks with Kabul.

While estimates vary, “Taliban currently controls about 45 of the country's 398 districts, and is battling for control of 117.”^{24, 25} As per the latest report of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the Afghan army and police together have “36,000 fewer personnel today than they did last year, as a result of desertions and casualties.”²⁶

On the regional front, the Taliban agenda is seen as anti-Western and intimately linked with Pakistani strategic imperatives.²⁷ Most foreign stakeholders, including New Delhi and Beijing, would welcome a stable and legitimate government with a monopoly on power in Afghanistan—a sentiment not necessarily reflected by other engaged parties in the region. For example, “Pakistan's security establishment views home-grown terrorist groups as a way to create strategic depth in its neighborhood—particularly in India and Afghanistan. As a result, a broad spectrum of terrorist groups has found sanctuary in Pakistan.”²⁸

Too Early or Too Late for New Thinking?

The jury is out on whether Sino-Indian and Indo-Russian cooperation in Afghanistan can materialize, and whether such cooperation will play a role in spurring political talks that lead to a credible reconciliation and political settlement of the two-decades-long war. According to Srinjoy Bose of the University of New South Wales, and Ankit Panda, *Diplomat* senior editor, “while New Delhi and Beijing have some overlapping geopolitical interest in stability in Afghanistan, their ability to productively pursue cooperation in the country may ultimately be limited by other structural factors.”²⁹

What is known, however, is that this initiative is unprecedented, offers a ray of hope, and is an outside-the-box attempt at resolving a complex issue through a geoeconomic, project-driven partnership. The idea of Sino-Indian collaboration in Afghanistan has existed in India since 2017, when former Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar stated during a high-level dialogue with the Chinese that “there was an understanding on how India and China can cooperate in capacity building in Afghanistan.”³⁰

To many, this unique step signals a new realization that the Afghan war needs new thinking, as old ways of reaching a desirable outcome have so far failed. However, if Sino-Indian cooperation and, to some degree, Indo-Russian cooperation in Afghanistan take root, that could be the beginning of enhanced cooperation between key stakeholders in other parts of an increasingly volatile and unpredictable international system.

24 Courtney Kube, “The Taliban Is Gaining Strength and Territory in Afghanistan,” *NBC News*, January 30, 2018, www.nbcnews.com/news/world/numbers-afghanistan-are-not-good-n842651.

25 “ISI Still Providing Covert Support to Taliban: US Media Report,” *Economic Times*, March 16, 2018, economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/isi-still-providing-covert-support-to-taliban-us-media-report/articleshow/63326776.cms.

26 Harsh V. Pant, “India's Growing Afghanistan Challenge,” *Diplomat*, May 10, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/indias-growing-afghanistan-challenge/>.

27 Ibid.

28 Bharath Gopalswamy, *Addressing the Terrorist Threat Emanating from Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2017), <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/addressing-the-terrorist-threat-emanating-from-pakistan>.

29 Ankit Panda, “How Far Can Sino-India Joint Economic Cooperation in Afghanistan Go?” *Diplomat*, May 1, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/how-far-can-sino-india-joint-economic-cooperation-in-afghanistan-go/>.

30 Ibid.

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He has been active and advocated for freedom and democracy in Afghanistan since 1979. In 1996 he managed the Afghanistan Information Center and was Executive Producer of Azadi Afghan Radio. Mr. Samad is a member of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, the advisory board of The Kitson (based in Paris), the Fletcher School's International Advisory Group, and Washington D.C.'s French-American Chamber of Commerce.

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