

Event Transcript

**China in South Asia: Examining Beijing's Strategic Role
in Afghanistan and Pakistan**

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Featuring:

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Event Description

The U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan marked a significant shift in the economic, political, and security make up of South and Central Asia. With Afghanistan and Pakistan not considered strategic priorities in Washington's pivot to the Indo-Pacific, analysts question whether China would fill the gap left by American leadership to increase its presence and influence in both countries. Statements from the Taliban regime regarding Afghanistan considering joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and Beijing's USD \$62 billion infrastructure and energy investment in Pakistan lend credence to these concerns. While wrought with challenges, connecting South and Central Asia presents significant economic and geostrategic opportunities for the region. At the same time, a resurgence of terrorism threats, potential for instability spillover, and domestic political power struggles in Islamabad and Kabul caution against Chinese involvement in the region.

To mark the 10-year anniversary of CPEC this July, join South Asian Voices for the first in a two-part webinar series discussing China's evolving role in South Asia. In this event, authors will reflect on their recent contributions for an SAV series examining Chinese strategic interests in expanding its economic role in Afghanistan and Pakistan through CPEC, security challenges China may face in achieving its goals, and the broader geopolitical implications of this for regional stability in South Asia.

More information and event video available at: <https://www.stimson.org/event/china-in-south-asia-examining-beijings-strategic-role-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan/>

Event Transcript

Emily Ashbridge: Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening everyone, wherever in the world you're joining us from. Thank you for tuning in for the South Asian Voices Webinar, the first and two-part webinar series, examining China's role in South Asia. My name is Emily Ashbridge and I'm the Managing Editor of SAV.

For those unfamiliar, South Asian Voices is an online policy platform for analysis and debate on South Asia. SAV was founded in 2013 and this September we'll celebrate our 10-year anniversary. If you have not already, please do check us out.

Today's discussion builds off a series recently published on our website examining China's role in South Asia. As part of the series, authors examine China's role in six regional countries. In today's panel, we'll discuss Afghanistan and Pakistan.

At the 10-year anniversary of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and nearly two year anniversary of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the authors here today offer their thoughts on China's role in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the broader region. Today's topic is one SAV has been interested in a long time. In 2017, we published our first series examining China's role in the region. All of the authors that join us today have written for SAV multiple times, and in Fatima's case, contributed to the 2017 series. This will allow us to take a longer timeframe on how relations with China have evolved.

With that, I'll introduce the speakers, and then turn to each of them for a brief summary of their articles' main points before posing a few questions.

First I'd like to introduce Arash Yaqin. He is a national security, foreign policy and cultural intelligence analyst focused on great power competition in South and Central Asia. He is a native Afghan but has lived in a whole host of countries around the world. Today Arash will speak on China's role in Afghanistan, building off his contribution to the series co-written with Saba Sattar.

Next I'd like to introduce Fatima Raza. She is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad, Pakistan. Her area of expertise is the foreign policy of major powers, particularly in the Persian Gulf and South Asia. She contributes regularly to one of Pakistan's leading newspapers, The Express Tribune, and has also contributed often to SAV. Today, she discusses her article on China's role in Pakistan, which she authored recently for this series and also for the 2017 edition.

Finally, I'd like to do introduce Noor Naseem. She's an academic and a researcher on Afghan refugees, border security, and ethnonationalism. She's currently working with the Islamabad Policy Research Institute as a researcher on Pakistan-US relations and has also been a visiting fellow at the Stimson Center here in Washington DC. Noor has also been a frequent contributor to SAV and in May, contributed a piece that examined China's role in South and Central Asia. Today she serves as a discussant connecting Afghanistan's and Pakistan's perspectives. Many of the factors

that she identified in her May contribution foreshadowed the topics we'll discuss today.

It's my pleasure to have you all with us today. Please do check out the website for both the articles mentioned in today's discussion and also those rolling out over the next week. With that, I'll turn it over to Arash, then Fatima, and finally, Noor, for a brief summary of your main arguments.

Arash Yaqin:

Good morning and good morning other contributors, and everyone who's listening everywhere in the world. Thank you so much for offering this platform and for South Asian Voices. On behalf of Dr. Saba Sattar, and I, myself, we appreciate it.

There's a big picture in terms of how China is looking into the entire region, but also specifically in each country. Today, we're going to discuss what me and Dr. Sattar discussed in this piece. In particular, we reviewed China's policy towards Afghanistan, specifically towards the Taliban. It focused only on the last couple of years since the Taliban's return. Firstly, through leadership perspectives, we saw that that from the leaderships' perspectives, looking into the cooperation between Beijing and Kabul, we saw that there's a lot of promises. Specifically, strategic communication promises in terms of cooperation between the Taliban and China.

However, later, we discuss that, in terms of strategic communication there are a lot of promises, but in the actual piece we did not see a lot of tangible cooperation. Also the security situation in Afghanistan- we discuss it. We also discuss a part that says unlike like other countries in the region like Pakistan and Iran, Afghanistan in itself is not offering greater opportunities for China. It's not as important as, for example, Pakistan or Iran, but when talking about the bigger vision of China towards Central Asia, China sees Afghanistan as part of that cooperation.

We also discussed that China is not the only partner, as many suggest, for the Taliban. The Taliban is also open in their policies. It still looks to the west and to other countries, and has relationships with other actors in the region.

We concluded with the idea that, while there are a lot of potential opportunities for cooperation between Beijing and Kabul, with the current situation of instability in Afghanistan, there are lots of ongoing problems with China in Afghanistan, and it's a partnership of necessity at this point. How that will work in the future all depends on stability in the region, and specifically in Afghanistan. That is it so far. Back to you.

Emily Ashbridge:

Awesome, great. I'll turn it over to Fatima.

Fatima Raza:

Hello. Good morning everyone. I hope you can all hear me.

So basically my article that I contributed to South Asian Voices, I wrote it back in 2017 when I contributed to the part one of the series. I had demonstrated previously how Pakistan had been a linchpin for China to leverage its regional influence. Since then, this influence has deepened based on a broad range of economic and defense collaborations. Even amid all these turbulent times in Pakistan's domestic environment over the past five years, the Chinese government has retained its influence in Pakistan by building strong diplomatic ties with its Pakistani counterparts and it has provided support to Islamabad amid all of the political and economic volatility that the country has been going through.

This article, this follow-up piece that I've written now, has examined the state of Sino-Pakistan ties in the backdrop of regional developments that have taken place over the last five years- and quite a number of developments have taken place. So it was hard to focus on just a few.

My particular focus has been on the future of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, naturally with its tenure anniversary coming around the corner, and then the US Indo-Pacific strategy as well. Then, Pakistan's place and Pakistan's role that it could actually play in this regard as well. With the particular focus on the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as well, that has brought about a greater room for a more positive Chinese presence in the region in my opinion. And in my opinion, it could be utilized to create a more symbiotic relationship with an important regional partner like India.

It's hard to do but, well, we can only begin by talking about it. I will also talk about how Pakistan could aspire to become a connecting bridge between China and the United States as it once used to be. As opposed to picking sides, which could escalate a great power competition even more and endanger regional stability and prosperity.

And my piece which hopefully people will read in more detail, talks about the Sino-Pakistan economic cooperation. There are facts and figures included and you can all have a look at that when you read the piece.

In that portion of the essay I talk about how CPEC, being a vital component of the BRI, has contributed to direct jobs and employment opportunities for the local population by continuously creating this bridge and link of communication between the two sides, and by conducting more than almost 11 joint cooperation committee meetings, which have taken place during this time.

The problem lies with Pakistan's internal institutional weaknesses and ineffective planning. And there have been a lot of implementation gaps that have stagnated the progress of the project. And while these barriers, in my opinion, have not demoted Pakistan from the position of importance

that it holds for China and China's South Asia policy, the stagnation has now highlighted the need for some sort of change and some sort of improvement that is badly needed with regards to Pakistan's economic outlook, and serious steps now need to be taken.

I've also focused on the sign of Pakistan defense cooperation, which is not at this point a formal alliance. Obviously China does not really do alliances like that, but it is, as Sameer Lalwani in his report mentions, a "threshold alliance" between the two countries. And defense collaboration between two sides has steadily increased over time, with a lot of technology transfers, and more compatibility, and the inter-operative ease between the two countries that has increased.

So with new security challenges emerging like the growing India-US strategic partnership, as well as rising terrorism under the Afghan Taliban, it has made sense for both sides to increase the defense and strategic partnership between them.

And then I have finally talked about Sino-Pakistan ties with respect to the US Indo-Pacific strategy. And in that regard I have talked about how the strategy has deepened the US footprint in Southern Asia, and it has actively incorporated partnerships and methods that have tried to curtail the Chinese economic and strategic expansion within this region.

And how it has done that is by revitalizing the Quad, increasing cooperation with ASEAN, forging new security arrangements like the AUKUS, and adopting a new Indo-Pacific economic framework, which specifically is designed for competing with the China's economic footprint in the region as well.

India is, yes, the cornerstone of the strategy and aims to contain Chinese influence. And they have naturally always opposed the propagation of CPEC. However, even with US backing, Indian military and naval capabilities are inadequate to undermine Chinese regional ambitions, to their satisfaction, obviously.

So in this regard, to effectively contain China's regional advances, Pacific strategy needs to broaden its approach. They need to garner support from other regional countries alongside India as well. And from Pakistan's perspective, I basically then rounded up piece by piece by talking about how the Indo-Pacific strategy has only propped up India as a regional threat in Pakistan and other regional countries naturally do not feature prominently in this regard. However, since I say that Indian capabilities may not be enough, Pakistan's hypothetical inclusion could actually be a game changer for that.

But obviously that is a hypothetical scenario that I discuss here, Pakistan's inclusion to the Indo-Pacific strategy. I do not obviously see that happening at the moment at least. So, it's unlikely for now. However, it could actually benefit the strategy, the Indo-Pacific strategy in that regard if it actually is only focused on curtailing China's presence.

And then in the end, I just talk about how instead of compelling these regional partners and regional countries to pick sides in this power competition, China and United States could act more responsibly. They could involve both India and Pakistan in a collaboration on emerging challenges which are shared challenges. Such as rising poverty in the region, terrorism, and particularly climate change as well. So maybe we could try to move the discussion towards at that point as well. So that's all from my side. I hope I've not taken a lot of time.

Emily Ashbridge: No, thank you so much, Fatima.

Now that we've heard from the Afghanistan and Pakistan perspectives, I want to turn it over to Noor, whose piece connects Afghanistan and Pakistan throughout South and Central Asia and talks about China's broader strategy in the region. Noor.

Noorulain Naseem: Thank you very much Emily. Yes, I think in my piece I was basically trying to highlight how China has bolstered its economic and diplomatic investment in central and South Asia. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, I think if we closely look at the number of meetings that China has scored bilaterally with Central Asian states, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Afghan Taliban in particular, with whom it had its engagement aligned even before the US withdrawal, it really tells you that it was moving quite strategically. It was quite patient and was looking for an opportune moment that when the US withdrew, it really moved in. Since then we have seen a speeding up of ties between Central Asia and China.

In fact, in 2022 Central Asia-China trade reached \$70.2 billion USDs, which is a remarkable increase since the last three decades of establishment of diplomatic ties between the region and China. And also, as Fatima also highlighted, CPEC did face a few challenges in the last government. But China was quite patient and it did not roll back the investments and now even during the interim government, our ministries more recently had several meetings with their Chinese counterparts and in his recent address to IPRI, he was quite hopeful that CPEC is going to actually roll in full swing in coming months.

So I think that what I was trying to highlight, was the fact that US had to withdraw from Afghanistan without having any of its major foreign policy goals being met. Which included countering transnational terrorist

organizations, and protection of women and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan under the Taliban government. And also, I think nobody was really hoping or looking forward to the humanitarian crisis that is deepening every month in Afghanistan.

China, meanwhile, did everything it could. It also engaged at several points in time since 2021 with the foreign ministers of neighboring states of Afghanistan. And the basic agenda of those meetings was to create a regional stance on whether, or, if, to engage with Taliban for recognizing their government. What kind of engagements or offerings can be made for example, in return for assurances of security on ground.

And there is a bilateral understanding, it seems, between China and Pakistan. If not overtly in the form of a policy document, the engagements of the foreign ministers of both with the Afghan Taliban, really tells you that both China and Pakistan have an underlying tacit agreement that Afghanistan will be included in BRI and CPEC by projects. Particularly those that interconnect Central Asia through Afghanistan, to Pakistan.

In that context we recently saw signing of a deal for railroad link between Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. And even a few months before that, Chinese diplomats visited Pakistan and Central Asian states.

So, it really tells you how strategically China is moving. Even if it is slow, it is quite deliberate in its attempts to make sure that these routes are not dead and that its engagement is alive. It has political rapport with both military, like Fatima has very rightly pointed out, and political leadership in Pakistan and Central Asia. And also littoral states to the Indian Ocean region, for example, Bangladesh. The defense engagement between Bangladesh and China has really bolstered in the last two years. It really tells you how significant these connectivity routes are in actually opening the Indian Ocean region to China.

The Indian Ocean region is of great consequentiality to Chinese energy entries and transits. It is one of the major trading partners with Indian Ocean electoral states, and its threat perception in the Indian Ocean for the critical sea lines of communication is ever heightened in light of the growing US-India defense ties and also the new deal signed between Canberra and Washington for nuclear submarines. And there has been instances when Australia has submerged its submarines in Indian Ocean for intelligence exchange.

So yes, I think that I was trying to connect the connectivity projects, and how they're eventually going to increase Chinese stakes in Indian Ocean even more. And with that, China might become more aggressive and more possessive of these international waters of Indian Oceans. Yeah.

Emily Ashbridge: Thank you so much to all of our speakers for that summary of their articles. Again, please do check them out on the website at southasianvoices.com.

With that I'll turn it over to some of the questions and take moderator's prerogative to ask some of my own.

I think in all three of your pieces you each balance China's potential ambition to leverage investments for geostrategic advantage with the very real challenges that are inherent and operating in unstable environments. So I wondered if each of you could speak on whether Beijing has been able to exercise leverage in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and what factors have allowed it or disallowed it from doing so. Perhaps we can reverse the order and go Noor, Fatima and then Arash.

Noorulain Naseem: I think that when I say that there is a strategic undertone to China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, Central Asian and Pakistan, what I really mean to say is that I think there's a trend in Chinese foreign policy which believes in extending a favor first. China kind of acted like a savior and invested in very impoverished economies of Central Asia and in the staggering economy of Pakistan in times of great need. It particularly invested in infrastructure projects that were critical for the energy needs of these states. And that automatically translates into a certain political sway that it has established in these states.

In Afghanistan, I think that the signing of the Aynak Copper Mine Project, and the new assessments that Chinese corporates are doing on ground for the Amu Darya oil reserves, really tell you how China is quite eager to invest in regions and areas where western financial institutions and states are quite reluctant to invest for obvious reasons.

I think that one of the obvious reasons for China to do this, is to establish a necessary integration in terms of economy with Afghan Taliban, which, obviously, will in the future make sure that their economic stakes are aligned to the point that security concerns on ground are also aligned. By far, Taliban did, in 2022, entertain some of the Chinese concerns and moved ETIM away from Xinjiang border. But it did not entertain China to the extent that it handed over ETIM terrorists. But the readiness of Taliban also, to sign these economic deals with Central Asian states, Pakistan, and China really tell you that there are certain assurances that they will be ready to give as a return. Because it's inevitable that the dividends will be due eventually. I hope I answered your question Emily.

Emily Ashbridge: Yes, for sure. I'm keen to get Fatima's perspective as well.

Fatima Raza: Yes, well I completely agree with Noor. I would like to talk about China's involvement in this region that is very politically and economically

unstable – it is a very insecure environment. What actually stands out to me more than anything is the huge amount of historical baggage related to the US involvement in this region that has up till this point created a level playing field – now, China is increasing involvement to increase its own interests because the US has been exhausted after its exit from Afghanistan. Noor mentioned that before that exit strategy was even in place, China had already been laying the groundwork for a more regional approach and had been a loyal influencer in the region for a very long time, but it was time for it to obviously now reduce its footprint finally. And that vacuum that was created in the region also in terms of the new Taliban government in Afghanistan was filled by China.

China has a lot of opportunities now to create more linkages in terms of, political cooperation, even defense and other cooperations that they can initiate as a kind of dominating partner. They could try to guide them in a manner that is very different from the United States that they had been used to.

So they could actually try to outpace the US in its strategy here in the region. They could actually end up making it quite successful if they approach this whole thing carefully. So more than anything is that China is allowed to create these linkages, this connectivity and to propagate it even further and to sustain it in the long term. I think that factor is the exhaustion, the baggage and vacuum left by the US region. So I'd like to say this, I hope I have also answered your question.

Emily Ashbridge: Yes, for sure. Arash, could you give the Afghanistan perspective?

Arash Yaqin: Thanks Emily, just to clarify, me and Saba wrote this piece together. Right now, we are going into the Q&A, and what I'm answering, in some cases, could be my own opinion and not shared by Dr. Saba. So I want to make that point clear.

I look from a China-Afghanistan perspective more. For example, I see Taiwan and North Korea, and how China is looking at it. For Beijing, Pakistan is a Taiwan. Not and in terms of a historic perspective, but in terms of strategic values and the short term. What can give an advantage.

However, when it comes to North Korea, it's kind of an "enemy of the enemy is my friend" situation. It's more relaxed. It's using it more as a buffer state. It's not really a necessity to invest in a very short term. And as long that they're not Americans, and there are no Russians involved in Afghanistan, it's fine for China. And its also that one of China's cheapest projects will be coming to Afghanistan.

At the same time also, I think it's necessary to view how China is very new to Afghanistan despite the historic background. Such as, it being a

part of the silk route. Let's say from 16th, 17th century, Afghanistan never looked towards China it always had to look north towards the Russian Empire, and then to the west. And since its foundation from 1919, in terms of policy, in terms of cultural ties, in terms of everything, it was all towards the Osmanic Empire, and the west with the Persian influence.

Also in the last 40-50 years there has been huge Indian influence. Not only from language, but also the presence of India in Afghanistan policy, from Bollywood, to everything. For China, in the short term it will be very difficult to change the perspective of an average Afghan. To take all Afghan ideas out and then replace it with the Chinese. It will take a very long time and that's why China cannot replace it in the very short term.

However, for Pakistan it's an economic deal. It's a win-win situation for Pakistan. This week probably will see the inauguration of the CPEC airport at Gwadar- very touchable pieces. Shows connectivity.

It's also in terms of accessibility, I think it's important to say that Afghanistan is not very accessible to China. Its current access has to come entirely from Iran, or from Pakistan. But both countries are hostile-historically but also practically at this point. I mean we see almost weekly clashes at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and also Iran-Afghanistan border clashes.

You cannot do wholesale business with a country, or have larger economic projects when you do not have accessibility, and when you are very dependent on other countries that are hostile towards that country.

So from that perspective I see, it's true that Beijing sees the entire region from a bigger picture. But in the short term there is a definitely a priority to focus on Pakistan. Whether it's economically, politically, or militarily to not allow Pakistan to move to Washington. So that is it. It's also a touchable partner. Not to forget India-China relations. You have a partner who is a nuclear power. Whether when it comes to Afghanistan, I think it's more strategic communication, going back to our original paper.

It is the Taliban every day, using Beijing to tell to local Afghans that "Hey we are isolated from the world, but see, our Chinese friends have good relations with us." And Beijing is using the same narrative from, "Hey see these Americans left and they messed up in the region, now we can replace them. And see how Afghans are happy with our hope." So this is strategic communication in terms of both party using each other, rather than factual, actual, touchable cooperation. And that's going to take a while, I think. And China knows that the Afghanistan is not done in terms of peace and security. With Pakistan you also have challenges but at least you have a strong military that you can rely on, that at some point will

keep it all together. Through a democratic way or not, it will keep together. In Afghanistan that guarantee does not exist for Beijing.

So I think therefore they will very, very be careful. But at the same time it costs them next to nothing. I mean if you get something for free, you take it. So Washington left and gave up Afghanistan to China for and they can enjoy that.

Back to you.

Emily Ashbridge: Thank you so much Arash. I want to drill down a little bit more on this point of strategic communications and teasing out what happens on the ground tangibly and some of the rhetoric that comes out. And so for instance, how would you assess recent reports of China eyeing Afghanistan's lithium reserves? Is it helpful to distinguish between the strategic communication side and the tangible development of these natural resources. And additionally here, is there a difference between Beijing and China and also interests of Chinese firms that seek profit?

Arash Yaqin: So the idea of having the Chinese get involved in the mining sector in Afghanistan is nothing new. The idea does not come from the Taliban in the last couple of years, it has always existed. In fact, this entire contract with the Chinese happened under American support. This entire process under the government occurred with the USAID's projects to fund and bring it into the market. The Chinese bid that was offered was the highest, unfortunately, it didn't work out. So, it is a longer process and that's why I am saying it's more about the communication than the value.

In terms of what's touchable, nothing happened in the last 15 years. There's nothing happening in terms of the actual process. Secondly, instability is another side that we discussed. For Beijing, whether it is small individual companies or the country as a whole, it is for the lack of stability that they do not want to get involved.

The landlocked situation and accessibility would be another topic. How you get to Afghanistan. The idea that you use CPEC. We hear a lot about China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the reality is there's a lot of enmity between Pakistan and Taliban. We all know that the Taliban was supported, created and based in Pakistan. But just because the Taliban was created by Pakistan 30 years ago, doesn't mean they are listening to Pakistan today. So that's two different things. And constantly, I hear this argument used by the Afghans that they always blame by seeing the Taliban as a Pakistani force. I don't see it, I see its originality but I don't see it at this point. So it's also not that the Chinese can use CPEC to connect with Afghanistan. It's going to take time.

In terms of small businesses, we can say there's no wholesale in terms of business, but there is retail. And sometimes you get here and there are businesses. Afghan companies go to China and then bring some items. And Chinese small companies come in for some small projects. But on a large term, operationally it is impossible. The country's abilities, the lack of labor... I agree that there are Chinese bringing their own engineers, it's happening in all the projects with Chinese involvement. But you at least need some type of capacity in a local area and you don't have it. Almost everyone educated left the country with the US withdrawal. So you lack really, the human capacity in terms of running the country.

And again, I think because of the nature of the Taliban, the Chinese are not trusting them, especially with the Uyghur issue and ETIM. And finally, I think I will end here, the Taliban are not done with Americans. They fought each other for two decades but they are still today, through Qatar, and through other channels, still in communication. And Beijing knows that because of the dependency, because of the recognition, at the end of the day, recognition will not be offered by Beijing. If Taliban has any chance for recognition it should come from Washington. Taliban knows that and Beijing know that too.

So therefore they deal with them but they don't trust them in the long term. We really don't know which direction they'll go. And that's why you sometimes see Beijing from one side saying, "Hey Afghanistan is great, we have cooperation." And other times you see them saying how these "These Americans or others are using ISIS, bringing them here in the region, and using us in great power competition as tools to destabilize Central Asia." So that's the communication of Beijing.

Emily Ashbridge: Thanks for that. I think I want to turn it over to Afghanistan Pakistan, bilateral relations and how that impacts dynamics with China.

So we got a question from the audience. China's involvement and perhaps approval or cooperation with the Taliban, how does that impact Pakistan's relations with the Taliban government? Would China's cooperation influence Pakistan to support or recognize or cooperate with the Taliban led government or does China's relationship with Afghanistan not really factor into Afghanistan-Pakistan ties? Perhaps Noor, I could turn to you first given that much of your work is focused on the Afghanistan-Pakistan bilateral relationship and then go to Fatima.

Noorulain Naseem: Yes, I think that it's no secret that Pakistan and Afghan Taliban relations are not at an all time high right now. It's quite obvious that Taliban have contested the newly fenced border multiple times engaging Pakistan's security forces in cross border fire. They have not cracked down enough on TTP, as a result of which both TTP and ISK are resurgent and quite potent in terms of their operational capacity across the Afghanistan,

Pakistan region. Which includes ex-FATA that are problematic, and also the Balochistan region. There have been some reports that TTP now has its hands on M16 rifles that were left behind by NATO forces. Which really tells you that they have the capacity to move about in Afghanistan. I mean transnationalize their operations across that terrain and also gather tactical support from groups like ISK and ETIM in terms of intelligence exchange, weapon exchange, financial exchange, et cetera.

So I actually was on call a few hours ago with Pakistan's special representative to Afghanistan, Ambassador Asif Durrani, who just concluded a visit to Kabul and he was very hopeful that there will be a series of visits. There will be an increased engagement, the deadlock that we observed right after 2021 and in 2022 is likely to be over, considering that the writing is pretty much on the wall. I've already mentioned that the CPEC projects are on the roll and it is not possible for either Afghanistan or Pakistan, as rightly pointed out by Arash, to complete these mega infrastructure projects, for example the Gwadar and Kashgar rail link, on their own. China will have to step in. The feasibility reports are now out. It's a huge investment but China is very interested in it.

China is extremely interested in Gwadar probably because of its dual prospect use in case of an Indian Ocean contingency, the likelihood of which is increasing in coming decades given the posture of AUKUS, and also the growing military ties between India and US. And the belligerence with which US is approaching China. It's quite openly mentioned in its national security strategy that it aims to contain China by every means across the world.

And I've already mentioned that China has taken the lead in terms of congregating the regional leaders time and again to create a consensus on issues relating to Afghanistan. These include monetary interventions. This includes recognizing or not recognizing the Taliban. By far there is a regional consensus at least that the regional states will recognize Taliban not unanimously but collectively. They will do this at the right moment, but they will not do this individually.

As far as Pakistan and Afghan Taliban's relation is concerned, I think that that really depends upon the situation on ground. Afghan Taliban are always interested in business despite the fencing of the border. Millions of Afghans have migrated to Pakistan since 2021. Some 600,000 Afghans have entered officially and we already are hosting around 3.5 million Afghans. They keep back and forth movement alive by the Torkham and Chaman border. There's daily commute for business, health, education, and familial ties.

So this region's ethno-cultural construct is a little different from the rest of the world and it's quite tough to really tell at a certain moment of time,

how bad the situation is. The economic transactions or the trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan has also increased in subsequent years to the withdrawal.

So there's two sides of the story. I think if there is enough cooperation, if there are enough incentives on the table for the Taliban to engage with either China and Pakistan, I don't think there's any reason that they would not want to indulge, as they've already exhibited it by assigning multiple connectivity and economic engagements with Chinese and Pakistani officials.

TTP remains a bone of contention. I think one of the major reasons Afghan Taliban are not cracking down that hard on TTP is perhaps to keep them for dual purpose reasons. Maybe in the long run, use them as an asset to be mobilized against Pakistan military, which is heavily deployed across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

But also, because they are fearful that if they take the lead in persecuting TTP, its members might defect to ISK. And you have to understand that is an ideological affinity between transnational terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, and the link to Taliban Afghanistan to a certain degree. And this will be seen as a huge compromise on the so-called jihadist ideology followed by these organizations. So I hope I answered your question. I'm very interested in what Fatima has to say. Thank you.

Fatima Raza:

Thank you Noor. Well you've quite comprehensively answered the question. I would just like to add that in terms of aligning their policies, both with regards to counter-terrorism in the region, as well as on the economic front, it would be better for both sides, for both China and Pakistan to first completely align their own policies by indulging in more bilateral visits and more meetings Obviously, also not strictly bilateral. They could also include Afghan representatives in those meetings, and in those meetings they could discuss the strategies that they would take from here onwards.

Because Pakistan has learned a lot of lessons from its differences between its own counter-terrorism strategies as well as compared to the US counter-terrorism strategy in the region as well. So there was a lack of an alignment on that front that led to a lot of distrust between both parties in this regard.

And if Pakistani and China fail to first align their own policies, particularly in terms with counter-terrorism, the role of TTP Pakistan's border, and all of those scenarios...if Pakistan fails to align its policy with China and if both sides leave loopholes, which obviously happens, most likely there will be loopholes because it's obviously impossible to completely align the policies quite perfectly. But they will need to work

really hard on that if they want any kind of dividends coming out of this strategy that they both have.

If they don't do that, then it may actually result in creating more mistrust. It would add stress to a very positive relationship that both sides already have. So it would do well to not only align their policies economically. Obviously Pakistan is a requirement, as Arash mentioned, it's not possible for China to directly involve itself in any kind of economic, political or strategic partnership with Afghanistan without aligning regional countries like Pakistan. That's why Pakistan is going to be a very important factor in this regard. So Pakistan's and China's policies at first need to be in complete and perfect sync with each other in order to extend that outreach to Afghanistan. Thank you.

Noorulain Naseem: Emily may I add just one more thing to this point. I'm so sorry to cut you short. May I just add one more thing to this?

Emily Ashbridge: Yep, of course.

Noorulain Naseem: Thank you very much. I think I would just like to add to Fatima's point that transnational terrorist organizations, particularly TTP, is a joint concern to China and Pakistan. Considering that TTP has not only attacked Chinese installations and Chinese nationals across that terrain, but also helped Baloch insurgents with their operational capacity and intelligence exchange to engage Chinese targets.

I think that the border terrain of Balochistan and the KP region is absolutely integral because that is really how Afghanistan is connected to Pakistan. And the peace and internal security situation across that terrain is what will determine whether CPEC continues or not.

So yeah, that's definitely a point of convergence of interest between China and Pakistan. Thank you so much.

Emily Ashbridge: Thank you Noor. And I want to build off this focus kind of on internal insecurity in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also some of the domestic incapacity issues that you talk about, Fatima, in your piece. Having limited CPEC's grand ambition and vision over the past 10 years.

And so, someone in the audience asks "How could Pakistan navigate between Pakistan's domestic impediments to CPEC and also insecurity in Afghanistan? How do these factors limit the implementation or ambition of CPEC or China's role in South Asia?"

Fatima Raza: Yes, I have talked about that in my piece. I've talked about how with CPEC when the whole program first began and there was a lot of UN cry from the region, particularly led by India, when they talked about how it's going to be a breach on its land and maritime sovereignty and all of that.

So there was a lot of obviously competitive rhetoric coming in from within Pakistan and a lot of exaggerations were made by both sides when this project first began, that this would prove to be a game changer for Pakistan's economy in particular. This would help create a lot of opportunities for Pakistan to build upon and to stabilize its economic condition, which sadly has not happened. And the fault obviously lies within, as I mentioned, it's more so because of institutional weaknesses and mainly due to political unpredictability on ground that exists within the country.

The civil-military relationship- that's always been turbulent in the country as well. That has also contributed a lot to this factor. From here onwards, in order to actually maximize on the great potential that CPEC holds for the country, it would be first extremely important, it would be... It's integral. It's a very important point that we first act on ground synchronize our own priorities and policies in terms of our political interests in the region and our security interests in the region, which obviously stems from a very coherent domestic policy.

So at first Pakistan needs to hash out these details at home. We need to first put our own house in order. We first need to create more economic opportunities for countries like Afghanistan as well because in terms of direct negotiation and direct linkages that we can create with Afghanistan, that kind of linkage with the help of China would be instrumental, it would be monumental for the region. For overall regional development, for any kind of prosperity to enter Afghanistan, Pakistan can play a very important role.

And for that, we first need to set our own house in order and then we need to create more opportunities that would only come when the civil-military relationship in the country has improved, and it could only happen when we have a more synchronized approach at home. And only then, should we first try to strengthen the democratic institutions within the country, focus more on economic revitalization of the country. And only then we can move forward to create any kind of linkage, and only then we can hope to get any kind of advantage from the CPEC projects that it has been offering. So I think at first, we need to look inwards and only then the debate can begin.

Emily Ashbridge: And Arash, over to you on how the domestic political situation in Afghanistan or in Kabul particularly, impacts China's involvement in the country.

Arash Yaqin: Generally when it comes to China, it's not a priority for the Taliban to... So, you have good relations with China. So it's not whether you have differentiation or different opinions in the Taliban leadership about relations with the west, with Washington, with Europe etc. They are in

agreement in general, on how they should deal with Beijing. However, I think it's important to mention that the Taliban is also a Pashtun group, which has historically had enmity with Pakistan, let's not forget about that. And they used Pakistan get back power in Afghanistan.

However, from their perspective, they don't want to sell them to China through Pakistan. And that is not new, this is all... Pakistan's strategy always has been if you want to get access to Afghanistan, if you want to deal in Afghanistan, come to us and go through us to Kabul. That had been in the '70s, how Americans engage with Afghanistan. This has been in the last 20 years, how NATO through Pakistan could get... It's also practical because you have a landlocked country, but also from Washington we always had this AfPak vision- if we want to get to Afghanistan we have to deal with the Pakistan.

So this terms...right now I hear a lot that Pakistan tells the Chinese, "If you want to deal with us, you have to look at it from, from Pakistan's vision." And I think the Taliban doesn't want this. We heard this and that's kind of what they are trying to do, direct engagement with China, and if necessary, they want to keep the door open through Iran with China.

So for the Taliban, as we also wrote in this paper, Beijing is a good strategic communication. It's good for it even for economic opportunities, but it's not the only partner to rely on, in terms of everything. Definitely with Taliban now that they have no direct access to them, and they have to go through Islamabad to get access to Beijing. And that just doesn't warm the Taliban leadership at this point. Maybe small fractions in Taliban like Haqqani who has a close network with ISI and relations with Pakistan. But that core power, which is in Kandahar, doesn't have that view on Pakistan, and therefore, they just using them for strategic communication. Again, it's not for deep, real, relations. Back to you.

Emily Ashbridge: Thanks so much. I'm conscious of time. I wonder if we can just use the last two or three minutes for each of you to just highlight - what are the two or three factors that we should be watching over the next few years to understand China's evolving role in south and Central Asia? Perhaps Noor we can go first to you, Arash and then finish with Fatima.

Noorulain Naseem: I think that in coming years we will see China assume the leadership of the region with the US pretty much being gone from the equation. And also I think that we should not discount the growing threat perception that both China and Pakistan have against the growing US-India military ties in the region, and how it is only going to aggravate the existing asymmetry between the two nuclear rivals. This is a nuclear flashpoint, it's a very dangerous thing to disturb the geostrategic calculus like this. It's really hard for me as an analyst to understand what the US is actually trying to do in the region, considering that it was quite clear that it has removed

itself from good from South Asia and Central Asia. But then it's arming an actor in South Asia that is India, which is showing a posture of continuous non-engagement on economic connectivity projects with both China and Pakistan, which are actually geographical realities for India.

So in recent years I think China will be seen to bolster its economic integration projects which are already on the way with Central Asia, West Asia and South Asia and an increased subsurface and surface presence in Indian Ocean region. Bangladesh recently became a large import destination for China. And I think that it's a telltale sign that China is going to move both in terms of military cooperation and economic cooperation, and by it means it is also the state that has the most diplomatic missions on ground in states littoral to the Indian Ocean.

So it really tells you that China is moving strategically. It has every intention to extend a locus of influence in states littoral to the Indian Ocean, and particularly the neighboring regions of Central Asia, West Asia and South Asia, which are geographical realities to China, and it cannot afford as an aspiring great power to remain indifferent to the situation on ground in these regions. Thank you very much Emily. Thank you.

Emily Ashbridge: Thank you so much Noor. And I think this connection between China's role in Afghanistan and Pakistan into the Indian Ocean region is something that you raised and also Fatima. Arash, can I turn with you for just 30 seconds?

Arash Yaqin: Okay. I think one actor we did not discuss is Russia. When it comes to Central Asia and China, we sometimes forget Russia. But the Chinese don't forget it. We know that it's also an influence sphere. It's a backyard of Russia and although right now, currently, Moscow is pretty busy with surviving a war in Ukraine, it doesn't say that Russia will allow a long term China-influence in Central Asia.

It's allowed right now because it's good for them. It's better having the Chinese at the border than the Americans, as it was two years ago. However, we must be cautious in the long term. Aside from the Indo-Sino relations, and which direction it will go under Washington's influence, it is also important to watch China-Russia relations, which is escalating. I mean there's a lot of discussion here in Washington - "are they friends or are they enemies?" In my opinion, just to conclude, China is planning to engage to become bigger and at some point, it will create escalation in Moscow. Even if they need Beijing right now, in the long term, escalation can really affect countries like Afghanistan which does not have the power to survive in its own it. It's becoming a buffer state which will be ironic for Afghanistan, but that's the reality. Thank you.

Emily Ashbridge: Thanks so much. And Fatima, what are the two factors that we should watch in the years to come? I think you might be muted.

Fatima Raza: Oh, I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. I would just like to point out, what Noor mentioned, I would like to actually second that. I echo her concerns with respect to what actually might be the US policy in the region. It's very hard to follow that policy because it has extricated itself from the regional affairs, and with no plan in sight. There is no tangible scenario in sight.

They are very, very wary Chinese expansion in the region, they really closely follow it. They try to use and prop up India as an important competition to China. But that is no longer China's concern because in China's case, words actually meet deeds. When they say something, they follow through on it. They're actually on ground. They have begun all these projects. They are helping all these developing and under developed countries in the region. They have a lot of on ground influence, particularly now they're also in investing so much in Afghanistan.

And then this may not actually be linked to South Asia in that particular manner, but China has done work in terms of Iran and Saudi Arabia as well. The deal that they brokered has actually really completely changed the face and changed the perspective of how even the South Asian region now views the United States.

So I think in that regard, on China, yes, economic engagement will continue to be the base and foundation of Chinese engagement in the region, but we should also watch out for its shift to more strategic, and towards more security related interest in the region as well. I think that is an important point to keep in mind as well. Particularly after looking at how it brokered the deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Which seemed highly unlikely at that point.

I know it's not really a South Asian development, but it's very important since Pakistan and Iran shared borders in that relationship. Pakistan has a relationship with Saudi Arabia. And the United States' involvement in it. I think it was a huge strategic win that China scored right from underneath the United States. So we need to focus on that as well. That's all I think.

Emily Ashbridge: Thank you so much.

Fatima Raza: I think I've taken more time.

Emily Ashbridge: Yeah. Thank you so much to all the speakers. I think the diplomatic, along with economic factors that you highlight, are definitely things to look at in the years ahead, and things that South Asian Voices will definitely be examining, hopefully with future contributions from yourselves.

So thank you so much for joining and tuning in to this event. Please do check out the China and South Asia series on southasianvoices.com. We have contributions from six South Asian states along with an author commenting on China's perspective on South Asia as well. Thank you so much and I look forward to the next one.

Arash Yaqin:

Thank you.