



Article Type: Research paper

Afghanistan and China: Changing to Strategic Partnership

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Article Info.

Received: 30/05/2022

Accepted: 10/09/2022

Available Online: 11/09/2022

Abstract

In recent decades Sino-Afghan relations have been based on Beijing's approach to regional and international developments. The elimination of American troops from Afghanistan and the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban changed China's approach to Afghanistan from different perspectives. The US withdrawal will change the balance of power in Afghanistan and its environs. China's approach to Afghanistan has always been based on security considerations, and now economic considerations have been added to it. China's economic project in Pakistan and Central Asia, along with fears of links between extremist groups in Afghanistan and neighboring Uighurs, is one of China's top security concerns. The Taliban's presence in power and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan have changed the pattern of relations from expected indifference to strategic partnership. Components such as environmental uncertainty and strategic compliance paved the way for China to adopt this mod-

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How to Site:

Ahmadi, Hamid, Zakarian, Mahdi, Morovati, Somaye (2022) Afghanistan and China: Changing to Strategic Partnership. Fundamental and applied studies of the Islamic world, (4), (2), 1-29

el. In this context, the present study will examine why China's approach to Afghanistan changes from expected indifference to strategic partnership and will try to provide a clear picture of developments by mentioning China's role in Afghanistan.

Examining China-Afghanistan relations in the past decades proves that China's distance and proximity to Afghanistan depended on China's internal restrictions, regional and international developments, China's competition with other actors and dealing with extremist threats. In this regard, we can mention China's secret assistance to arm the Mujahedeen in 1980 during the seizure of Afghanistan by the Soviet forces. Therefore, the statement of relations based on the assessment of the needs of two actors has no place for Arabs here. The official relations between China and Afghanistan began in the 1950s with the recognition of China by Afghanistan. China's approach to Afghanistan has always been economic with an emphasis on security considerations. In the past decades, security considerations have always been the first priority in the eyes of the Chinese authorities towards Afghanistan, which include the seizure of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, the civil war in Afghanistan, the dominance of the Taliban and finally the presence of American forces. As a great power that is consolidating its hegemony in its surrounding environment, China definitely evaluates every impulse and the presence of competing actors in the region from the perspective of its competition with that actor. The presence of the Soviet Union and the United States in Afghanistan in the past decades can be examined from this point of view.

In this regard, we can mention China's cooperation and lack of cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan. In the 1980s and with the attack of the Soviet forces on Afghanistan, China stood by the United States and against the Soviet Union, and after the attack of the Western coalition led by the United States on Afghanistan in September 2001, it refused military and security cooperation with these forces and distanced itself from the efforts of foreign actors presented in Afghanistan. For political reconciliation and reconstruction, Afghanistan kept as far away as possible and avoided accepting the title of the West's partner in the reconstruction of Afghanistan (Huasheng, 2012), while the coalition forces were fighting the Taliban threatening China's strategic interests, Beijing exploration projects began monitoring Afghanistan's underground resources, and this action faced serious criticism from the United States and even Russia.

The withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan has serious consequences on regional equations in South and Central Asia; Therefore, all regional actors are trying to closely monitor the developments and present mul-

tiple scenarios to minimize possible security and political costs. Any change in the arrangement of forces in Afghanistan definitely affects the current and future interests and goals of regional actors. China, as a neighboring country of Afghanistan and one of the most important players in the economic war with America, is definitely closely monitoring the developments in Afghanistan. From China's point of view, everything that provides the ground for terrorism and international extremism on the edge of its territorial borders and around its economic super project will be specially monitored. From this point of view, the developments in Afghanistan have both components.

Despite Beijing's previous approaches to the developments in Afghanistan, the withdrawal of American forces from this country has caused China to worry due to the change in the nature of threats. Since 2016, with increasing speculations about the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and the creation of a security evacuation in this country, Beijing, like other neighboring countries of Afghanistan, initiated the project of securing its border lines with Afghanistan. China has detailed plans for Afghanistan without foreign military forces for several reasons: 1. Afghanistan is one of the focal points in the One Belt One Road project; 2. There are religious extremists on both sides of the border lines between Afghanistan and China, and China is worried about the connection between the Uyghurs with ISIS and the Taliban in Afghanistan; 3. To expand its political influence in the region, China should expand its influence to the remaining regions such as Afghanistan and advance its security and political goals through an economic lens; 4. Beijing expects American material and moral support for Chinese Muslim protesters in the west of this country, and from this point of view, the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan despite the ongoing crisis in this country has aroused China's suspicion.

As mentioned, China, as one of Afghanistan's neighboring countries, has chosen a "wait and wait" approach to Afghanistan's developments in the last twenty years; But since 2016, with the withdrawal of American forces, China has changed its policy of conscious and considered indifference towards Afghanistan and put a cooperative and step-by-step approach on the agenda. Strategic partnership is a new model of relations between governments that has entered international relations literature from the beginning of the 21st century. Based on the changing pattern of China's cooperation with Afghanistan, the current research tries to present a picture of the actions of foreign actors in the neighboring environment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in order to provide the basis for other researches in this field. Therefore, in this research, by introducing the model of strategic partnership and explaining

it, it will deal with the application of two economic and political components separately on the two variables of China's attitude and actions towards Afghanistan, and finally, the conclusion section and providing strategic recommendations for Iranian policy makers.

Key words: China, Afghanistan, Taliban, Strategic Partnership, Extremism.