



# BETWEEN WAR & PEACE

THE AFGHANISTAN ESSAYS

Beijing as Broker  
Salman Bashir

## The Afghanistan Essays

This 2018 short-essay series by the Jinnah Institute (JI) reflects a range of Pakistani thought leadership on Afghanistan and its complex history with Islamabad. With the region in the current crosshairs of a seemingly intractable conflict, these essays attempt to spur old and new thinking on the history of Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan and existing challenges. The essays cover a range of subject matter on Afghanistan-Pakistan including efforts for peace and reconciliation, threats to security, the broader geopolitical dynamic, and the role of civil society and economy.

This essay titled 'Beijing as Broker' examines the evolving geopolitical role of external actors in the Afghan endgame; in particular it shines a light on China's rise as a central player in not just reconstruction but also reconciliation efforts geared at promoting political stability in the war-torn country.

## About the Author

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# BEIJING AS BROKER

Salman Bashir



## Introduction

For almost four decades, Afghanistan has been in a state of turmoil. A victim of its geography, the country continues to be rocked by geostrategic storms that have impeded attempts to foster lasting unity and peace. The challenge, now, is to quieten the agonizing spirits that continue to wreak domestic havoc, and to insulate Afghanistan from further regional and global turbulence. Any credible initiative for real peace in the country must also address the economic issues underpinning its present chaotic state. Two generations of Afghans have grown up in a war economy. Mercenaries, tribal lords and external patrons dominate the landscape. This must change. A fundamental prerequisite for peace in Afghanistan is the rebuilding of a normal economy.

Suffice to say, if regional and international efforts had focused on reviving the economy, the results would have been apparent by now. A major reason for the failure of various peace initiatives in the last two decades is the fact that this essential issue was never squarely and earnestly addressed. Contemporary narratives on Afghanistan have fluctuated between often-conflicting extremes: the struggle for freedom versus counterterrorism; nation building and a working progressive democracy versus medieval tribalism; reconciling ethnic constituents versus effective governance. These narratives have usually been self-serving, and pursued by those who wish to realize their own vested interests. Various global and regional peace processes, alien to the Afghan ethos, have been self-limiting because they ignored the reality of Afghanistan and the culture and traditions of its proud people.

But where political re-structuring has failed, economic engineering may work. After all, it is time to prioritize Afghanistan's economic opportunities. A real turnaround in the Afghan economy with assured equal opportunities for all Afghans including women could potentially make a major difference in wedding divergent interests to a cohesive whole. This is where China comes in. Their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to create ever-larger circles of peaceful economic and trade partnerships. China also enjoys excellent relations with both Afghanistan's government and its people. The Chinese have historically maintained cordial links with a range of Afghan political actors, including backchannel links with the Taliban. Beijing is in a great position to lead the process of robust economic engagement and drive Afghanistan out of isolation.

## A Framework for Peace, Stability & Development

Beijing has strategic interests in seeking peace and stability in the states adjoining its borders. China has no political favourites, and a desire to see a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. China has also never interfered in the internal affairs of its neighbours. It has no ideological biases. Above all, China has a unique sense of history, compounded by its long-term strategic priority of connecting Asia with Europe through economic cooperation.

The way forward in Afghanistan is to plan a constructive global consensus, most notably between the United States and China along with Russia, and to forge an inclusive approach to the country's economic and social development. China and the US can and should cooperate in evolving a viable framework to work together with the full cooperation of Afghanistan's many political actors. Such a framework may enable the corporate sector from across the globe to participate for profit in investing in the country. An immediate suggestion would be to encourage Afghanistan, along with Iran and Turkey, to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC could further be extended to include Afghanistan's other neighbours – notably the Central Asian Republics. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) linked by road could change the economic landscape of Afghanistan and the region. Afghanistan and Pakistan could subsequently become bustling hubs for north-south and east-west trade routes, thus transforming existing geostrategic vulnerabilities into economic and social strengths. Such a vision of stability, peace and progress is already coded in the Belt and Road Initiative.

The obvious question is: is it possible to work a development agenda without peace and without adequate governance? Conceptually, a province-wise or district-wise consultative process with Afghans of all affiliations is a prerequisite for development to work. In areas controlled by the central government, this should not be a problem. However, in areas that are not fully in Kabul's control, local notables will have to be identified. The Taliban and their various factions may also be happy to be a part of the consultative process, in so far as their economic and social development is concerned.

But, there is also a risk that China may shy away from pursuing such an intrusive agenda. Historically, China has been averse to anything that might be construed as interference in the domestic affairs of other states. A solution will thus have to be found. The best course of action would be an economic initiative at Kabul's behest. This would have to be followed by concurrent outreach to the Taliban, with the Afghan government taking the lead.

Theoretically, a "Beijing as broker" scenario could sequentially unfold as follows:

Simultaneous consultations between China-US, China-Afghanistan, China-Russia and China-Pakistan on:

- Establishing a framework for bilateral and multilateral investment, engineered by China and Afghanistan
- Discussing the modalities of the aforementioned framework with all political actors within Afghanistan
- Sharing the Sino-Afghan framework and concurrent potential economic projects with Pakistan, the US, Russia and Iran, and having interested states offer to participate in these projects
- Allowing the private sector to consider and propose projects on a profit-sharing basis

- Setting up a special development fund for Afghanistan, sponsored by China, that can support and administer resources for infrastructure projects and commercial-term support for private sector projects
- Ensuring the security of the projects by engaging all vested stakeholders including the Afghan government, and provincial and district authorities
- Building a facilitation regime and related mechanisms to ensure that interested states do their utmost to work in tandem within the given framework

On the political front, meanwhile, Beijing should be encouraged by Kabul to play a more proactive role in promoting national reconciliation. This may include the convening of an assembly of Afghan elders in Beijing. The assembly may deliberate on all issues related to promoting national reconciliation. This assembly could also have the tacit support of the international community, which would help ensure that its decisions be respected. Those Afghan factions deviating from assembly decisions should be isolated and penalized. Furthermore, a Beijing-sponsored national reconciliation process should be subject to arbitrary timelines. Simultaneously, economic investment should not be made contingent of a final political consensus.

But for the above to work, the US must accept certain conditions, which includes providing a timeline for the withdrawal of its forces. The Taliban will have to be encouraged to emerge as a political force. In the interim they need to be incentivized to declare and abide by a ceasefire. All parties must also agree that Daesh and other such radical groups will not be allowed any space to operate.

China's proactive involvement, based on a combination of commitment and material strength to promote the Belt and Road Initiative, may help Afghanistan recover. No other state or entity can optimally fill this role. Furthermore, if Pakistan and Iran supplement China's efforts on the one hand, and active China-US coordination and cooperation materializes on the other, the region stands to benefit. Regional organizations such as the SCO and the ECO could also supplement such efforts. It is not clear, however, whether the United Nations can play a significant role. The UN suffers from several disabilities and its credentials as an honest peace broker are doubted locally within Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the UN could still help afford legitimacy to whatever framework is worked out.

## Getting Other Powers On Board

The most vociferous objection to China's involvement in Afghanistan is likely to come from India. Unfortunately, India's worldview continues to be premised on the tradition of a bygone age, where geopolitics and power play were the dominant themes. New Delhi must recognize that it stands to benefit from peace and progress in Afghanistan, as well as from the considerable dividends that would accrue from working the west-east trade routes. India is a large market and has the potential to contribute to enhancing the economic prospects of the region.

Tehran must also be on board. The Iranians should be well disposed to stabilizing Afghanistan, especially if the initiatives are primarily Chinese-sponsored. Current US policy towards Iran is both unrealistic and unfair. Without Iran, there can be no peace in Afghanistan. It would thus be prudent to configure a broad-based understanding between Iran and the incumbent US administration.

Similarly, Russia also has an important role to play. Russia has legitimate interests in securing its southern borders. It is also a prominent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),

and within this multilateral initiative Russia-China cooperation on Afghanistan is thus a distinct possibility. Turkey, too, has considerable influence in Afghanistan, and could play an important role in promoting economic development initiatives for Afghanistan. Turkey's incorporation into CPEC and the BRI would thus be beneficial for the region.

In the United States, the Trump administration's present strategy on Afghanistan is the result of policy having been contracted out to the US military. The President himself and the ideologues in his inner circle have reportedly raised questions about the utility of a continued military presence, with some even having suggested that the military enterprise be contracted out to private sector mercenaries. The deep state however, including the US think-tank community, has largely been unable to bring fresh perspective to bear on America's Afghanistan imbroglio. These groups continue to view the world primarily through the lens of geopolitics. The standard recipe of these specialists is to ratchet up the rhetoric against Pakistan.

Put differently, US myopia continues to be the result of convoluted logic and anti-Pakistan lobbying by India. But underestimating or undermining Pakistan and its relevance to regional peace could be detrimental for US interests not only in Afghanistan but also beyond. Pakistan's genuine apprehensions about India's negative role in Afghanistan must be recognised and addressed. The view from official Islamabad is that New Delhi has no *locus standi* in Afghanistan; either way, India can contribute to development, and be a beneficiary of regional and global cooperation for economic development projects related to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Furthermore, Pakistan's influence on unruly Afghan factions could increase if China were to get involved in a principled drive for stability and development. A trilateral mechanism between China, the US and Pakistan on counterterrorism could also be a useful modality to deal with the threat of insurgency in the region. A regular exchange of views and, where appropriate, active cooperation and coordination on the ground, could ensure that regional threats such as Daesh and ETIM do not take root and are effectively eliminated.

Another central element in pursuing peace in Afghanistan would be to align the Taliban, to the objective of national reconciliation. A first step in this direction would be to recognize their status as a political entity, and to incentivize them in terms of offering economic and political space. Unless the issue of reconciliation is squarely addressed, any initiative for peace in Afghanistan will remain illusory.

Given the known proclivities of India to act as a spoiler, it is also necessary to ensure that adequate measures are taken to check misadventures that may perpetuate strife within Afghanistan. India must know that it stands to gain as a beneficiary of peace. A range of incentives could be contemplated in this regard: were India to join the BRI, an economic landscape with definite political dividends would accrue to the region. This would also require the forthright support and actual participation of the US in BRI-related projects. India's participation as a full member in the SCO provides it further opportunity to become a legitimate stakeholder in regional peace and development. Simultaneous efforts to restore and rework SAARC alongside Chinese and American participation could dramatically change the shape of Central and South Asia.

The future of Afghanistan, indeed that of Central and South Asia, is predicated on the policy lines the United States, China and Russia take. President Ashraf Ghani must signal his readiness to work an economic development scenario geared towards achieving lasting peace and stability. Regional states would applaud such an initiative and pledge to cooperate. Ultimately, a truly win-win for all

stakeholders and principally the people of Afghanistan can be forged by sincere efforts of all the major powers, with China taking the lead. The key to working this scenario is to encourage China in this direction. Both BRI and CPEC could provide Beijing a solid foundation from which to prepare Afghanistan for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.