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On the background of the geopolitical realignment of [allies and partners](#) in the world and particularly in Asia, China pushing its agendas through multilateral groupings, new economic institutions and geo-economic projects. In this vein, China held the first China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' (FM) [Dialogue in Beijing](#) on 26th December, in which Chinese FM expressed his desire to invest in development and connectivity projects by extending [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#) (CPEC) to Afghanistan. With parliamentary elections scheduled in July 2018, Pakistan's ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) has accelerated efforts to advertise its achievements in the last five years. The majority of these achievements include projects under the CPEC.



Development of Gwadar Port holds a pivotal role in the execution of CPEC | AFP

Keeping aside apprehensions and concerns regarding [structural economic issues](#) in Pakistan vis-à-vis Chinese investments, China managed to make considerable progress and completed most strategic projects such as [Gwadar port](#) and [mega energy](#) and connectivity projects among others. However, the real geo-economic outcomes and their effects on Pakistan's economic and social situation remain to be seen. In addition to this, China is now working to improve Pakistan's geopolitical standing in the region, which is expected to eventually facilitate Chinese national interests in Afghanistan and the region at large. If CPEC becomes CPAEC (China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Economic Corridor) it is likely to pull Kabul into the Chinese and eventually Pakistan's geo-economic sphere. As of now, the idea is yet to be implemented on the ground. However, China has rolled out its plan to play an important role in Afghanistan.



Pakistan is mulling upgrading the constitutional status of its northern Gilgit-Baltistan region, which is also claimed by India, in a bid to provide legal cover to a multi-billion-dollar project | Image: Tribune

While there are already many bilateral, trilateral and multilateral arrangements in place to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, the requirement of this new initiative is [explained](#) by the Chinese Foreign Minister “to help Afghanistan and Pakistan to establish a sound platform for communication and dialogue, and boosting practical cooperation among three countries”. At the end of the summit, China laid down its goals and future course of policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Pakistan which, in the [words of the Chinese FM](#), are “traditional friendly neighbouring countries and Strategic Cooperation partners”. These goals are;

- To help Afghanistan and Pakistan improve and develop their bilateral relations by establishing mutual trust
- Support peaceful reconstruction and reconciliation process of Afghanistan
- Enhance trilateral security cooperation and push forward connectivity and economic integration of the three countries under the umbrella of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

To achieve these forecasted goals, all three countries agreed on the [roadmap](#), under which, initially Pakistan will put forward the Pakistan-Afghanistan Action Plan to strengthen the unity between two countries and also set up five liaison working groups in politics, military, intelligence, economy and refugee. In the second phase, Afghanistan will reinstate a reconciliation process with Taliban with the support of Pakistan and China. Following this, both the countries will work on the joint construction of BRI, proposed by China and further jointly work to carry out projects to aid multi-sectoral development projects in Afghanistan. It is indeed “quite normal and natural for neighbouring countries to enhance dialogue and cooperation” as [Chinese FM said](#), but in normal circumstances not in a situation of conflict. Hence the timing of launching this new initiative is important, especially in the backdrop of the announcement of the new [National Security Strategy](#) by US, which focuses on pressurizing Pakistan to stop engaging in destabilising the region and also refers to the (role of) “China and Russia as a challenge to American power....attempting to erode American security and prosperity.”

It is evident that the US will maintain its presence in Afghanistan in the long run and further deepen its strategic partnership with India. The other recently published documents such as National Defence Authorisation Act for the year 2018 and Department of Treasury report 2017 reiterates the same line.

The US and India have already started acting on this new strategy. This view is further bolstered by the uptick in [US drone attacks](#) targeted many Taliban, ISIS-K and Haqqani commanders in the Af-Pak area in the past two months and, the surge in numbers of [NATO troops](#), alongside upcoming redeployment of US troops in Taliban strongholds of Helmand over the coming months. On the other hand, Indian imports from Afghanistan through Air Corridor reached the [\\$20mn marks](#) in last six months and [another shipment of 4,200 tons of wheat was donated by India reached to Kandahar via Chabahar, Iran.](#)



India sends 1st wheat shipment to Afghanistan via Chabahar | Image DNA

An increasing Indian footprint in Afghanistan is indeed worrisome for Pakistan as well as China as the latter's Afghanistan policy has been routed through Pakistan. Now, due to fluid US strategies China cannot rely directly on Pakistan to play its cards but needs Pakistan on its side. Therefore providing a platform for dialogue to principal actors in this scenario namely Pakistan, Afghanistan and Taliban are likely to be the first step China has taken. Prior to that, Beijing has already earned a significant level of influence in Pakistan due to its flagship CPEC projects. It is now set to leverage it in Afghanistan before other actors scope out space, as this is the last point in the aforementioned roadmap.

Given the number of previous failed initiatives in the country, the Afghan perception of the Chinese government's ability to deliver on the promise of bringing Pakistan to the negotiation table will be a critical factor. The Afghan FM, Mr Salahuddin Rabbani has [categorically](#) stated in the trilateral meeting that, "it has been a sincere and principled policy of the government of Afghanistan to seek practical and result-oriented cooperation with the Government of Pakistan." This is a clear indication of Afghan scepticism towards the dialogue.

Further, the success of this strategy will be contingent on Pakistan's genuine efforts to bring Taliban on the negotiation table, but the challenge is further compounded with the emergence of ISIS-K, unseating Taliban as the lone insurgent group, in Afghanistan.

The final factor would be the extent of China's willingness to concede or gain a geo-political foothold in Afghanistan. Geographically China does not need Afghanistan to get access to or connect with any other country in the region or beyond, neither does it have any major [economic interest](#) beyond the Aynac Copper Mine. China has always projected a fear of the spread of extremist ideologies to its volatile Xinjiang region from Afghanistan. However, this

contention seems baseless, because China only shares a 76 km land border with Afghanistan and has a [heavy security presence](#) in Xinjiang. China would like to have a constant, visible presence in Afghanistan given its aspirations to be the globally accepted dominant Asian power.

Also, read: [Why Chabahar agreement is important for Iran? India's quest to Tehran](#)



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