

# ISAS Insights

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## The Rising Importance of Afghanistan and South-West Asia in China's Perspective and Global Politics<sup>1</sup>

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*Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, known as South Asia's West Front, has opened a new phase in Chinese foreign policy through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI has tremendously helped China rise as a game changer in the global transition of power. What is important to highlight here is the importance of Afghanistan, as well as Iran and Pakistan due to the potential threats they pose to crucial Chinese initiatives in the region, namely, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Gwadar Port and the BRI. The social, cultural and political atmosphere within these three countries make them a potential source of insecurity in the region, with roots in extremism, terrorism and separatism. This cannot be ignored in Chinese foreign policy while it is investing huge amounts of capital in the region. It is important to note that the only state that could provide a common stage to facilitate opportunities for cooperation between China and the United States (US) in this region, is Afghanistan. US-China cooperation in Afghanistan could help create security and protect the region's major developmental initiatives at the same time.*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on Dr Faramarz Tamanna's presentation at the 11<sup>th</sup> ISAS International Conference on South Asia which took place in Singapore on 3 March 2017, organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) an autonomous research institute at National University of Singapore.

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## **Introduction**

Afghanistan lies at the heart of Asia. It is the hub of connectivity between Central, South, West and East Asia. Arnold J Toynbee, the British historian, coined two terms, a “roundabout” and a “cul-de-sac”. A roundabout is a place where all ideas flow into and flow out of. A cul-de-sac is a place where an idea comes and gets stuck, it cannot leave. Afghanistan throughout the ages has been a roundabout, as it registers and is affected by movements in all parts of Asia.

Afghanistan is hardly located in the framework of South or West Asia. In his book, “Lost Enlightenment”,<sup>3</sup> S Frederick Starr argues that the best roads of connectivity between different parts of Asia go through Central Asia and Afghanistan. This strategic location has been a curse for the country in the past 200 years but in this century, it may be one of its biggest advantages.

## **Inter-regional trends: South and West Asia**

Before discussing some of the factual issues concerning South and West Asia, there are four facts that must be taken into account regarding inter-regional trends:

1. Neighbouring regions are affected by each other’s dynamism.
2. South-West Asia is the most interlinked region of the world.
3. Countries in both regions influence each other.
4. Afghanistan is a pivotal state in South-West Asia.

The positive and negative politics in both South and West Asia influence events in Afghanistan. For instance, terrorism is an independent variable which is used by states to achieve their geopolitical goals. Afghanistan is impacted by terrorism because it is rooted in the regions surrounding it. The longstanding Kashmir issue and the theological clashes among Arab states are two fundamental sources of terrorist organisations. In addition, the influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan began in South Asia, whereas the rise of Islamic State (IS) is the result of West Asian developments.

The Asian continental economy is in the process of emerging. The energy resources of the Caspian Basin and Central Asia – estimated at 600 trillion cubic metres of gas and tens of thousands of megawatts of electricity – will power South Asia.

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<sup>3</sup> Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane is book by S. Frederick Starr, published in 2014.

Looking at Afghanistan as a fulcrum point within a regional network – to the north, there are pipelines that extend deep into Central Asia and, to the west, there is access to oil and employment. Towards the south, transport and transit connectivity can be extended. Seeing Asia as a single region opens up entire horizons for re-thinking strategies for growth and development. Afghanistan’s potential is to become the land bridge and the “roundabout” of South and West Asian cooperation.

## **China in South and West Asia**

An understanding of Afghanistan’s place in China’s connectivity with South and West Asia is critical. Regarding Chinese foreign policy in South Asia’s western front, three important perspectives cannot be ignored. Firstly, it is critical to the route for China’s Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI). Secondly, it is an ongoing potential source of insecurity in terms of threats of terrorism and separatism. Lastly, it can be instrumental as a staging ground to balance other regional and extra regional stakeholders.

At present, Chinese foreign policy and economic perception has moved from risk-averse caution to optimistic ‘dreaming’ about a world in which China has recovered its prominent position. Whereas 20 years ago China used to say ‘no’, or at best ‘maybe’ to the international community, it now wants to say ‘yes’. In addition, it is taking the biggest initiatives to encourage trade and transit and is convincing countries to join and collaborate with the BRI. This Chinese ‘Marshall Plan’ aims to create demand and more contracts for Chinese enterprises in the major projects of infrastructure and construction. It will also pave the ways for Chinese goods and services to enter new markets.

With these intentions, there are two important initiatives in the western part of South Asia, namely the CPEC and the BRI that touch Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. The tremendous investment capital of approximately US\$1 trillion makes China an important game changer in rising Asia. It consequently makes South Asia’s western front vital in Chinese foreign policy.

In order to achieve stability across the South and West Asia regions, China indirectly mediates between state and non-state actors. This helps it avoid radical actors and it also uses its positive role to reduce tensions between countries. India is another important stakeholder in Asia. Due to the Kashmir dispute and strategic competition for Central Asian resources, it is unhappy

with Chinese regional economic initiatives. Similarly, the United States has shown concern for the non-peaceful rise of China in the international arena. Therefore, China attempts to keep Pakistan and Iran for its initiatives on the one hand and figuratively balances the United States (US) and India, on the other hand. South Asia's western front is thus a strategic and vital area for China's dream.

The transition of power in the global arena has increased sensitiveness about regional cooperation. Any regional economic and security cooperation can easily be translated into a source of mistrust by extra regional stakeholders. In other words, global trust, due to new security and economic considerations, has been reduced. Therefore, China's regional economic plans require a new chapter of Sino-US cooperation.

### **Afghanistan's Strategic Role**

Afghanistan can play a pivotal role in enhancing cooperation between China and the United States. Except for Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, the two regional powers, are both challenging US foreign policy in the region. As a result, China is deepening its relations with these two countries as a counter measure to US influence and foreign policy. Therefore, the only state which may provide a common stage to facilitate opportunities of cooperation between China and the US, is Afghanistan. In addition, China needs a stable region for investment and the US aims to integrate Afghanistan with regional economic routes in order to maintain security. Therefore, there is a common goal between US and China, and Afghanistan can be a good platform for cooperation and interaction. This cooperation can tremendously help generate regional security and protect major regional initiatives at the same time.

Afghanistan holds the potential of becoming a unifying ground for Asia's continental transformation. In terms of connectivity, it is eight hours by road from Delhi, six hours by plane from Beijing. Every single one of its neighbors can be reached within three hours of flight or twenty five hours by road. Moreover, it is located in the middle of three billion people, most of whom are living in India and China. Bilateral cooperation with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, India, China, Turkey, Iran and Gulf nations is well established. Afghanistan's key goal now is to become a regional transit hub and to secure its geo-strategic and geo-economic position.

## **Conclusion**

Regarding Afghanistan's role in promoting South-West Asian cooperation, there are two key takeaways. Firstly, Afghans are moving, together with their neighbours in South, East, Central, and West Asia, away from an emphasis on planning for and negotiating joint infrastructure and commercial deals, to witnessing tangible progress on new investments, construction, and trade opportunities. Secondly, from the Lapis Lazuli Corridor through Turkmenistan, the Caucasus, Turkey, and onward to Europe, to the Chabahar port in Iran, a new rail connection with China, emerging transport corridor opportunities with Pakistan and all of the Central Asian Republics, the Silk Road through Afghanistan, is being built. It will establish modern trade, transit, energy, and communication links at the crossroads of Central, South, and Southwest Asia.

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