

ФИКСИРУЕМ ТЕНДЕНЦИЮ

PARSING CHINA'S GEOSTRATEGIC DESIGNS IN THE POST-WAR AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

China boasts prolonged history of relations with Afghanistan. Throughout the 2010s, China has seen Afghanistan as a key part of what can be described the dynamically transnational “Belt-Road-Initiative”. Now with the Taliban takeover of the country, the question arises how China would be able to play a premier role in the post-war Afghanistan while trying to shun itself to be embroiled into the geopolitical mire as the superpowers did in history? The current study addresses two questions through an analytical-empirical approach to how China will realize its geostrategic design in Afghanistan. First, what are China's objectives which are supposed to differ from those of the USSR and the USA? Second, why would China likely succeed in the country where the superpowers had failed before? Over the past decades, China has geared up its strategic ties with Russia, Pakistan, Iran, known as the Eurasian partners on the Afghan issue, and Central Asian states which are either the neighbors of Afghanistan or the member states of the SCO. Since Beijing endorses multilateralism and inclusive partnership in foreign affairs, it will unlikely act alone on the issue of Afghanistan. Rather, China is supposed to work on it through triple-level platforms—the Eurasian partners, SCO member states with border proximity of Afghanistan and the multilateral organizations such as the U.N. and the G-20—to fulfill its geostrategic designs in Afghanistan.

Keywords:

China; Afghanistan; Eurasia; geopolitics; SCO; multilateralism.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has pursued the Pax Americana in the new century. Now with the rise of China and a resurgent Russia in sight, the U.S. has spurred the AUKUS pact, the Quad security dialogue and the Partnership of Blue Pacific (PBP) in the Asian-Pacific to contain China while deliberately trespassing the Russian security interest in Europe. Like all the previous U.S. govern-

ments in history, the Biden administration is preoccupied with the unilateral world resulted from the so-called “victory without war” [Nixon 2013; Bender 2003].

Yet, since 2021, the changing tides in Afghanistan have grabbed the world's attention to how Beijing would respond to the geopolitical void left by the U.S. For China has further enhanced strategic coordination with Russia,

Дата поступления рукописи в редакцию: 30.03.2022

Дата принятия к публикации: 22.08.2022

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Pakistan and Iran, known as the Eurasian strategic partners on the Afghan issue. To the strategists in Washington, such a grouping would have the capacity to outstrip the United States economically and, in the end, militarily. As Henry Kissinger argued in the 1990s that strategic danger for America—the domination of Eurasia by a single power from either Europe or Asia—would be resisted even were the dominant power apparently benevolent or cooperative [Kissinger 1994]. To that end, the United States has mastered its economic and high-tech advantages to buttress its military supremacy globally. This is the fundamental reason why the United States has increasingly treated China, Russia and Iran as strategic competitors and systemic rivals in Eurasia due to its geostrategic dimensions and tremendous resources available in the upcoming competitions of the major powers.

For the similar reason, China's transnational projects like the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) led by Russia are seen by the U.S. and its allies as the Sino-Russian joint efforts to remove the West out of Eurasia. Since the Afghan Taliban returned to power in August 2021, the world has further questioned how China would play a seminal role in the post-war Afghanistan where the U.S. had faltered during the two-decade military occupation. On 16 September, the Foreign Ministers of Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran held talks in Dushanbe and presented a five-point formula on national reconstruction in line with the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" principle proposed by China¹. One month later, Moscow hosted a round of talks on the issues concerned with Afghanistan and the region among the member states of the

SCO plus Iran and Turkmenistan. It indicates that since Afghanistan links the BRI straightly to the heart of Eurasia and also likely acts a new haven to all the terrorists once again as it did before, the future of the country would affect all the neighboring countries including China if the chaos surges again². The Moscow meeting reaffirmed the SCO support to rebuild the war-torn Afghanistan in line with universally accepted principles and norms of international law, primarily the UN Charter. What China wants to see is a peaceful and friendly Afghanistan as the neighbor. Yet, the issue remains how China would work with its strategic partners and friendly countries to help the Taliban, now the ruling body of Afghanistan, to attain political stability, enact economic recovery and receive diplomatic recognition from the international community.

China's official line on the Afghanistan issue is essentially consistent: first, the Taliban needs to make a clean break with all the terrorist groups under UN Resolutions. Second, the SCO and the Eurasian partners would take part in the post-war reconstruction from humanitarian aid, security to diplomacy. Third, the Taliban now in charge of the country should be recognized as the de jure government of Afghanistan. Doing this can help the restructuring a modest and inclusive governance in the already impoverished country³. Historically, China was cautious to avoid taking part in directly the Afghan politics, e.g. during the previous foreign occupation of the country. But now China has not only exuded its moral and pragmatic support to the Taliban government, but also advanced multi-level cooperation and direct dialogues with it through the SCO, the G-20 and the U.N. on the Afghanistan question.

¹ Joint Statement on the Results of the Meeting of Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran on the Margins of the SCO and CSTO Summit in Dushanbe. *MOFA*. 2021. 17 September. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202109/t20210917_9889875.html (accessed: 25.09.2022).

² Li W. China's role in post-U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. *CGTN*. 2021. May 14. URL: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-05-14/China-s-role-in-post-U-S-withdrawal-from-Afghanistan-10fWHYORehO/index.html> (accessed: 25.09.2022).

³ United Nations Security Council Resolution 2615, December 22, 2021. URL: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions-adopted-security-council-2021> (accessed: 25.09.2022); Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Afghan Issue among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan. *MOFA*. 2021. 09 September.

This study then addresses two questions through an analytical-empirical approach to how China will realize its geostrategic design in Afghanistan. First, what are China's objectives which are supposed to differ from those of the USSR and the USA? Second, why would China likely succeed in the country where the superpowers had failed before? To make a sound inquiry into the issues, this study applies the classic realism as it defines national security in terms of power and diplomacy to test China's geostrategic design and approaches to Afghanistan. Looking into this strategic trajectory, China will likely bet to outmatch the U.S. in the case of Afghanistan. This is what this study tries to verify as follows.

Historic evolution of Chinese engagement with Afghanistan

During the first decade of the People's Republic of China (1949-1959), Beijing was eager to receive recognition from foreign governments for the sake of legitimacy, economics and security. In 1955, the Zahir Shah government of Afghanistan came to recognize Beijing as the legitimate government of China regardless of the different social-economy and ideology. Since then, the two countries have kept the bilateral relations in line with the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence that served to conclude the treaty of friendship and mutual non-aggression as a milestone to assure the good-neighborhood relations for six decades. Even during the Soviet invasion of the country and the Islamic Emirate ruled by the Taliban, Beijing still had its consular and trade businesses in Kabul according to the international laws and diplomatic norms.

However, the September 11 attacks on the United States led to a massive bombing campaign of Afghanistan by the Bush administration with a view to changing the regime in Kabul. The Taliban fled to the mountain areas

bordering Pakistan but continued fighting against the U.S.-led coalition for two decades. Soon afterwards, Hamid Karzai was installed to act the head of an interim regime in the post-Taliban era⁴. It is self-evident that China is regarded as a good-neighboring country as the bilateral relations between the two countries were restored in 2004 when President Karzai made a visit to Beijing where a package of economic and technical assistances was signed. As one of the major powers of the world and also the largest neighbor to Afghanistan, China contributed in a practical way to the reconstruction of the country which eventually led to a strategic partnership in 2013 and paved the way for Afghanistan to be admitted as a SCO observer state⁵. Yet, considering that Afghanistan was under the full control by the U.S. forces, China had kept a low profile until 2014 and declined the requests from the U.S. to send military personnel to the spot and to reopen the Wakhan Corridor—the only pass connecting China and Afghanistan.

In the legal and political terms, the Kabul government was not only the protégé of the U.S. military authorities, but also formally recognized by the United Nations. Given this, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made his *debut* visit to Kabul in 2014 and met with the Afghani leaders. Wang reiterated that China hoped to see a politically moderate and socially stable Afghanistan as a good neighbor. This visit to Kabul ushered in a new phase in the bilateral relations as China began to play the role of a mediator in the Afghan politics, yet it is by no means to depart from its previous non-intervention policy [Hirono 2019]. In May, the Obama administration announced a scheduled withdrawal of the partial U.S. troops from Afghanistan by next year and the peace talks would be inclusive of the Afghan Taliban⁶. As the geostrategic value of the country is important to all the neighboring states and also to the U.S., the EU, India and

⁴ The Aurora in Afghanistan: UN Talks on Afghanistan in Bonn. *China Daily*. 2001. December 3. URL: <https://news.sohu.com/43/07/news147340743.shtml> (accessed: 21.01.2022).

⁵ Karzai H. Chinese leaders' wisdom contribute to strong China-Afghanistan ties. Taiwan.cn. 2014. February 12. URL: http://eng.taiwan.cn/opinion/201309/t20130929_4956104.htm (accessed: 21.01.2022).

⁶ Obama approves fresh guidelines for U.S. military in Afghanistan. *Finance*. 2014. November 23. URL: <https://finance.qq.com/a/20141123/002859.htm> (accessed: 21.01.2022).

Turkey, the challenge remains how to make a peaceful and neutral Afghanistan integrated in the regional collective security structure.

China has endorsed the multi-level forums and inclusive dialogues on the Afghanistan issue. As the first move, Beijing hosted the 4th session of the Istanbul Process on the Afghanistan reconciliation among the warring parties. According to “The Beijing Declaration”, China acted to mediate the civil war in accordance with the Afghan-governing initiative highlighting all Afghan people together to solve common problems and preserve the Islamic values of unity, equity and justice. This can be defined as the domestic peace guidelines for Afghanistan: all political forces in the country were invited to work for domestic peace and stability, and all Afghan ethnic groups were assured to participate in an inclusive governance in the post-war era. To achieve these goals, it required China to make all efforts to remove mutual suspicion between Islamabad and Kabul through its good offices and then move to end the civil war between the Kabul government and the Afghan Taliban forces.

In compared with other countries which are also concerned with the future of Afghanistan, China has a few advantages to allow it to mediate the Afghan-Pakistan rows. Historically, China has never intervened in Afghan internal affairs through open or clandestine support of its political groups. Meanwhile, other neighbors including some major power in or out of the region were more or less involved in the clashes among the different Afghan ethnic or religious tribes. Due to this, China is seen as a trustable neighboring country by the ruling elite in Kabul as they looked to China to speak for them at the world’s forum in terms of their fundamental rights and security concerns. Moreover, what is described the “ironclad brotherhood” between China and Pakistan has greatly enhanced Beijing’s leverage in Afghanistan. Since 2014, China proceeded with mediating the rifts between Kabul and Islamabad which had sided with the Afghan

Taliban. As a result, China and Pakistan are able to jointly advance the direct talks between Kabul and the Taliban [Zhao 2012].

It is noted that in 2014, a new security concept of “NEWS” was adopted by the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group of the CPC. It reads that strategic partnership between China and Russia or in Xi’s words of “back-to-back strategic coordination” was defined as the bulwark to deal with the adverse scenarios on the East Sea and the South China Seas. Thus, China could divert its geostrategic and economic connectivity into the ASEAN and Eurasia [Xi 2017]. Geopolitically, Eurasia is what can be described by Hans Morgenthau as the “heartland” stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Himalayas to the Arctic Ocean [Morgenthau, Thompson 1985: 127, 179]. It is under the jurisdiction of China and Russia in term of geography. In realpolitik, geography is seen as the most stable factor on which the power of a state depends because national security concerns are related to its specific living space. Accordingly, it often turns into the thorny issue when geography leads to a dilemma, e.g. the ruling power has pretentiously ignored the legitimate security concerns of the rising powers, such as China and Russia of today. They are logically sensitive to the geostrategic circumstances surrounding them since the U.S.-led allies have aimed to hinder China’s ascendance to a peer power in the Asian-Pacific and intentionally provoke Russia in Europe and arrogantly reject Iran’s legitimate rights in the Middle East. Given this, China, Russia, Iran and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan have no choice but coordinate their common interests and shared security concerns with the future of Afghanistan and the Eurasian continent as well⁷.

The Role of SCO in China’s policy

In addition to keeping strategic coordination with the Eurasian partners on the issue of Afghanistan, the leadership in Beijing is aware

⁷ President Xi. Jinping Had a Virtual Meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. *MOFA*. 2021. 15 December. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202112/t20211215_10470186.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

of the major role of the (SCO). As one of the dual-drivers of the SCO, China has endorsed the multi-level security structure and inclusive cooperation in foreign affairs⁸. Since 2001, the SCO had eyed on the vicissitudes in Afghanistan: first acting on the Bonn Agreement and then abiding by the UN Security Council Resolutions. It defined the mission of anti-drug security belts along the Afghanistan borders and in 2012 created the SCO-Afghan liaison group which in turn helped Afghanistan to become an observer status. Now the SCO has grown up to the largest permanent inter-governmental organization in Eurasia and one of the most dynamic multilateral platforms in the world. Given that Afghanistan is a land bridge linking China's westernmost frontier to Central Asia, the Middle East and beyond, China has hoped the post-war Afghanistan to be "a neutral, independent and peaceful nation free of terrorism and drug-related crime"⁹.

Firstly, it required a series of trilateral or multilateral ministerial-level talks among China, Pakistan and Afghanistan (or other players) to spur the process of political reconciliation in the war-torn country. Secondly, it necessitates inclusion of Afghanistan into the SCO to insure the successes of the CPEC and the BRI as the transnational frameworks of trade and infrastructure networks through it to the heartland of Eurasia¹⁰. These projects will help to recover the war-torn economy in Afghanistan as it is a pre-requisite of peace and stability of any country. For sure, the poverty and lack of economic opportunities are always the main factors to nourish the growth of terrorism and other militant mafias.

The turning point came out in early 2021 when the U.S. announced that it would with-

draw its troops from Afghanistan prior to September 11, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks that drew America into the longest war in its history. With unrest rapidly engulfing Afghanistan, China insisted that any foreign military withdrawal be in line with the Doha agreements to guarantee the peaceful transition in Afghanistan. Geopolitically, China is obviously sensitive to the U.S. military bases in the country close to its own territory but also not in favor of the chaos due to its rapid retreat from Afghanistan. In essence, *realpolitik* requires China to act in concert with the SCO and particularly with the Eurasian partners to tackle the worst symptoms in the fragile social-economic scenario in Afghanistan. Accordingly, China decided to take another step towards the direct talks with the Afghan Taliban and to facilitate peaceful talks among all Afghan political groups.

On July 28, a senior delegation headed by Mullah Ghani Baradar was invited to China where he met with Chinese high-ranking officials who presented a three-point proposal. First, the Afghan people had rights to decide the future development. Second, the Taliban was regarded as an important military and political force in Afghanistan and, therefore, it should play a responsible role in advancing the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" principle in the post-war era. Third, under the UN Resolutions, the Taliban needed to make a clean break with all terrorist organizations for restoring the stability, security and development which are badly needed in the country¹¹.

On behalf of the Afghan Taliban, Baradar appreciated China's policy towards Afghanistan which had seen China not only a reliable good-neighbor over the past decades but also a

⁸ Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the SCO. SCO. 2002. 27 January. URL: <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/> (accessed: 21.01.2022).

⁹ Meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of SCO. SCO. 2012. 6 January.

¹⁰ Trilateral diplomacy prevails at China-Pakistan-Afghanistan meeting. *China Daily*. 2019. 10 September. URL: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/10/WS5d770511a310cf3e3556ab43.html> (accessed: 21.01.2022).

¹¹ Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. MOFA. 2021. 28 July. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202107/t20210729_9168328.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

major player in the world affairs. He vowed that once the country was fully under control, the Taliban stood ready to work with all other parties concerned to prohibit any groups from using the Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental to China's security. This meeting marked a new phase of China's direct involvement in the Afghan politics [Valori 2021].

Two weeks later or that is to say on August 15, the Taliban's quick victory once again raised the concerns with where the country would move towards in the post-war era. During the phone talks next day, the U.S. Secretary of State Blinken and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi discussed the scenario emerged out of Afghanistan. They agreed that the Taliban must make a clean break with extremism, opt for an orderly transfer of power and establish an inclusive government while ensuring the safety of all those who wish to leave Afghanistan¹². Yet, China also called for "a soft landing" necessarily with regards to the unrest in Afghanistan and the future of the country should be decided by its people, not by the powerful war lords or external forces. To facilitate this end, China and its strategic partners and the SCO member states have worked closely not only to eliminate terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan and the adjacent areas, but also defend the legitimate rights of all Afghan ethno-political groups¹³.

Now it is clear that China's stakes and leverage in Afghanistan have shown a substantive increase. On the one hand, the Taliban has regarded Pakistan, China, Russia and some states in the Middle East as friendly countries. On the other hand, China has called for the collective security structure in the post-war Afghanistan. As the Secretary-General of the SCO Vladimir Norov put it in 2021, "With the complete withdrawal of foreign troops from

Afghanistan, the SCO member states believed it significant to responsibly restore the legitimacy of state power in Kabul through an inclusive peaceful dialogue ..., to deliberately work out a plan of practical measures to promote the socio-economic reconstruction of the country"¹⁴. This is what China has advanced the geostrategic objectives in Afghanistan even though numerous challenges loom now or later.

Accommodation of Afghanistan under Taliban

Historically, whenever the change of the regime was completed by the non-peaceful way, the main dilemma was how to minimize the adverse situations. Afghanistan is no exception. In the wake of the sea-changes there, it was imperative for all the political parties in Afghanistan to seek for a legitimate political order which meant the acceptance of the framework of peace and security by all major powers concerned. China has made diplomatic efforts to appeal to peace, stability and normalcy through a series of the summits and the ministerial-level talks or virtual meetings with all major countries (except Japan) and international or inter-governmental organizations including the UN, the EU, the NATO, the G-20 and particularly the SCO.

Since the changes that swept Afghanistan, China have held foreign ministers' meetings among the neighboring states of Afghanistan, such as Pakistan, China, Iran and three Central Asian states in September. They held that a durable peace in Afghanistan must be made through dialogue between all parties in light of the legitimate interests and political rights. Later, more countries declared their supports to political reconciliation, economic recovery and diplomatic engagement in Afghanistan regardless of the previous rifts and wars. As a

¹² Wang Yi Speaks with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the Phone at Request. *MOFA*. 2021. 16 August. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202108/t20210817_9168346.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

¹³ The Meeting of Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran on the Margins of the SCO and CSTO Summits in Dushanbe. *MOFA*. 2021. September 17. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202109/t20210917_9889875.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

¹⁴ Norov V. The SCO is entering its third decade. *Islamabad Post*. 2021. September 13. URL: <http://eng.sectsco.org/news/20210913/778271.html> (accessed: 21.01.2022).

joint statement issued in October argued, "The neighboring states of Afghanistan have a vital stake in the country where the radical changes should be guided to serve transit trade, people-to-people exchanges and common security concerns in the region"¹⁵.

Moreover, China has been engaged with the plural organizations to discuss the issue. In September, Chinese Foreign Minister spoke at the UN Security Council meeting on the Afghan reconstruction and declared that China stood ready to work with the United Nations in the most effective ways possible; yet, the destiny of Afghanistan should ultimately be decided by its people. Given Afghanistan under the looming pressures such as humanitarian crises, counter-terrorism, economic recovery and political legitimacy, the UN was supposed to play a major role in the post-war years¹⁶. Then in October, China appealed to the G-20 special session that the fundamental way out for this impoverished country was that the international community needed to restore the peace and stability in Afghanistan. Otherwise, unilateral sanctions on it would further retard the recovery of its social-economy¹⁷. China is among the few countries to have kept trade and business in Kabul under the Taliban control. Yet, if the Western sanctions against it were not lifted soon, the politico-social situation will be further strained and lead to much severe humanitarian miseries.

In the domain of diplomacy, China is also one of the few major powers to keep its embassy in Kabul for regular communications with the

Taliban, now the new rulers of the country. Two months after they took power, China called for the international community to extend recognition to the Taliban as the *de facto* government of Afghanistan. During his visit to Doha in October, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Baradar and Acting Foreign Minister Amir Muttaqi of the Taliban interim government. He reiterated that with the Taliban nearly stabilizing the country, "the U.S.-led allies should lift sanctions and to engage the Taliban-led caretaker government in a rational and responsible manner to help them to take on a path of nation-rebuilding"¹⁸. To accomplish domestic recovery and diplomatic recognition of the new government in Kabul, the Taliban leaders to look to the friendly countries including China to play the constructive role.

Yet, the United States has continued playing a very harmful role, an unacceptable role in the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. So the question remains if China will be able to outmatch the United States in the case of Afghanistan? This question should be treated through a balanced probe into China's relative leverages in terms of the geopolitics. First, since China and Russia see each other as the largest geostrategic asset in Eurasia and the world affairs, Beijing has tried to make sure their joint efforts to address common risks and challenges. Russia opines that it is unwise to turn China into a geopolitical adversary in view of the radical policy of the NATO and the EU against it [Trenin 2021]¹⁹. This scenario will

¹⁵ Joint Ministerial Statement of the Second Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighboring Countries. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021. 28 October. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202110/t20211030_10404009.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

¹⁶ Wang Yi. All Parties Should Help Afghanistan Tackle the "Four Challenges. *MOFA*. 2021. September 23. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202109/t20210923_9580053.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

¹⁷ Wang Yi. Attends the G20 Extraordinary Leaders' Meeting on Afghanistan. *MOFA*. 2021. October 12. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202110/t20211013_9550690.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

¹⁸ Wang Yi. Meets with Acting Foreign Minister of the Afghan Taliban's Interim Government Amir Khan Muttaqi. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2021. October 27. URL https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202110/t20211027_10230148.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

¹⁹ Wang Yi. Enduring friendship and win-win cooperation between the two countries. *MOFA*. 2021. December 31. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202201/t20220101_10478334.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

continue for decade or longer than expected since Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in early 2022.

Second, Russia's seminal role is indispensable in terms of consolidating and expanding the SCO while making all efforts to bridge the rows between China and India, which are the two principal strategic partners of Russia. In 2020, it chaired the trilateral Russia-India-China (RIC) consultative format to advance high-level meetings between Indian and Chinese ministers in Moscow. China and India agreed to follow their ancient wisdom to empathize with each other's core interests and security concerns. In 2021, China held the virtual meeting among the RIC foreign ministers who called for the humanitarian aid and all pragmatic help to Afghanistan and prevent it from again becoming a haven for terrorists²⁰. Iran is another exemplary case where Russia has played a major role in creating strategic security and coordination dialogue. Since 2019, Russia, China and Iran have normalized the joint naval drill in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean with a view to displaying their strategic cooperation in foreign affairs. In the meantime, Russia and China did all efforts to facilitate Iran's full member status of the SCO in 2021.

As Kissinger argued on the nature of *realpolitik*, a sound strategy requires a clear, well-considered vision of the world which is combined with a balanced doctrine that focuses action on viable objectives and creates power and clarity amid uncertainty and complexity [Kissinger 2014: 75-76]. Echoing his insight, China has performed quite well in Afghanistan because the Eurasian partners and the majority of the SCO member states have endorsed China's geostrategic designs and approaches to Afghanistan. This fact infers that China has used multi-level and flexible partnership to cope with the present challenges while accu-

mulating more resources to pursue the long-term strategy in the new geopolitical competitions of the century. In this context, China will continue working with the Eurasian partners and the SCO member states on the Afghanistan issue.

In March 2022, acting foreign minister of the Taliban government Amir Muttaqi was invited to visit China where he lashed out the United States for not only undermining Afghanistan political and economic sovereignty for decades but also severely demolishing much infrastructure and facilities during its hasty withdrawal. Now while the Taliban government is committed to peaceful coexistence and cooperation with the neighboring countries, it expects its neighboring governments act first to recognize it as de jure authorities of Afghanistan²¹. Although it requires the legal procedures, there has been plural actions beyond words from its neighbors and apparently from the Eurasian partners because they are predisposed to peace, with no cynical or self-serving reasons.

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Historically, three superpowers of the day suffered humiliating defeats or became mired in indecisive decades-long wars in Afghanistan owing to their strategic blunders. Now as a rising power bordering the same country, how can China avoid becoming yet another casualty in the so-called "Graveyard of Empires"? This article seems to verify that China's strategic partnership with Russia, Pakistan and Iran, along with SCO member states bordering Afghanistan, is the effective bulwark to China's participation in the post-war Afghanistan reconstruction. Having learned from the experience of the imperial power in history, China is not going to take unilateral action or any coercion in Afghanistan but through its soft

²⁰ Wang Yi. Attends Virtual Meeting of Russia-India-China Foreign Ministers. MOFA. 2021. November 26. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202111/t20211127_10454312.html (accessed: 21.01.2022); Renin D. How Russia must reinvent itself to defeat West's hybrid war. Russia Today. 2022. May 23. URL: <https://www.rt.com/russia/555916-russia-west-hybrid-war/> (accessed: 21.01.2022).

²¹ The First "Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan Plus Afghanistan" Foreign Ministers' Dialogue. MOFA. 2022. March 31. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/202204/t20220401_10663013.html (accessed: 21.01.2022).

power tools from mediation to reconciliation to negotiation among the diverse Afghan groups in line with the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned formula and social-economic development. All of these can be described to bring peace and stability to the war-torn country that would be supposed to act on its unique location as a land-bridge for regional interconnectivity and common security.

Suffice it to say, China's geostrategic design and its relevant approaches to Afghanistan are the principled and flexible under such adverse circumstances in the world today. The reward-

ing results for China would come out owing to the factors as discussed above: China's economic strength is seen as a key leverage on the issue of Afghanistan; its inclusive security structure further serves it to have strategic partners rather than acting alone in Afghanistan, and China's geography provides it the strategic advantages to compete effectively in Afghanistan with the geopolitical rivals nearby and far away alike.

Given this, China will likely have the cards in its hands to outmatch the ruling power and its allies in the case of Afghanistan.

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ГЕОСТРАТЕГИЯ КИТАЯ В ПОСТВОЕННОМ АФГАНИСТАНЕ

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Резюме

На протяжении 2010-х годов Китай рассматривал Афганистан в качестве одной из ключевых стран в рамках реализации транснациональной инициативы Пояса и пути. Вместе с тем после обретения талибами власти в стране встаёт вопрос о том, будет ли Китай играть главенствующую роль в поствоенном Афганистане. Ранее он старался не вовлекаться в геополитические игры

подобно тому, как это делали великие державы на протяжении истории. В последние десятилетия Китай занимался укреплением стратегических связей с такими евразийскими партнёрами по решению афганского вопроса, как Россия, Пакистан и Иран, а также со странами Центральной Азии, которые или являются соседями Афганистана, или являются государствами—членами ШОС. Пекин, выступающий за принцип многосторонности и инклюзивности в международных отношениях, избегает односторонних действий по вопросу Афганистана. Наоборот, он стремится действовать на различных уровнях, включая работу с евразийскими партнёрами, государствами—членами ШОС, непосредственно граничащими с Афганистаном, а также с такими многосторонними организациями, как ООН и «Группа двадцати», для реализации своих геостратегических интересов в Афганистане. Настоящая статья рассматривает исторический опыт и стратегический контекст политики Китая на афганском направлении, а также выстраивает прогноз её дальнейшей реализации.

Ключевые слова:

Китай; Афганистан; Евразия; геополитика; ШОС; многосторонность.