**[Afghan connection](https://www.dawn.com/news/1432003/afghan-connection)**

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SHAH Mehmood Qureshi had a busy week. The trip by the US secretary of state was followed by a visit by the Chinese foreign minister. One theme ran through both meetings: Afghanistan. The US is pushing Pakis­tan to cut its alleged support for the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network; China is urging Pakistan to facilitate the Afghanistan peace process. So far, so familiar.

But there is a related dynamic that Pakistanis pay less heed to, and that’s the evolving China-Afghanistan relationship. A reminder of this came last week with news that China [would train Afghan troops](https://www.dawn.com/news/1431471). That budding bilateral relationship presents both opportunities and challenges for the Sino-Pak relationship.

China will reportedly train Afghan troops for deployment in the Wakhan Corridor, which links the Afghan province of Badakshan with western China. It is also considering Afghanistan’s request for combat aircraft. These are the latest developments in a growing military relationship: Beijing has granted $70 million in military aid to Kabul over the past three years. China has also held meetings with Afghan Taliban representatives over the past year, and was rumoured (alongside Pakistan) to have brokered and guaranteed the Eidul Fitr ceasefire.

*Islamabad has an opportunity to equalise its ties with Beijing.*

These developments should remind Pakistan that China only does what it does to serve its own interests. In this case, Beijing has three reasons to pursue closer involvement in Afghanistan.

The most important, in Beijing’s perspective, is to check Uighur radicalisation. China fears that oppressed Uighurs will increasingly depart for Afghanistan to receive militant training, and that fighters affiliated with both the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the militant Islamic State group will increasingly access western China via the Wakhan Corridor to carry out attacks.

The main goal of Chinese investment in a ‘mountain brigade’ in the Wakhan Corridor is to block this two-way flow. This also explains why the majority of Chinese development spending in Afghanistan — $90m worth in September 2017 alone — is concentrated in Badakshan, the proximate Afghan province.

Media reports suggest that part of China’s efforts to engage with the Afghan Taliban is to dispel the perception that the Chinese are anti-Muslim (apparently Taliban representatives were offered tours of a Chinese mosque). These interactions are aimed at staving off Beijing’s nightmare scenario of the Afghan Taliban formally joining forces with ETIM.

China’s second, related goal is to ensure the security of its Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing has recognised that an Afghanistan offering sanctuary to various militant groups poses the greatest threats to its flagship CPEC projects, and seeks to stabilise the country before the corridor is fully ‘online’.

Finally, growing Chinese influence in Afghanistan will help loosen the historic US grip over Kabul, something Beijing will in­­creasingly seek as Sino-US tensions intensify.

These drivers present Islamabad with an opportunity to equalise its relationship with Beijing. After all, China does not know Afghanistan the way Pakistan does. It requires Pakistani interlocutors to achieve its goals. And in exchange for facilitation, China will be the heavy hitter ensuring Pakistan’s seat on the table during any peace negotiations.

Knowing this, China is already playing an important role in brokering Af-Pak ties. It has urged the new government to establish a crisis prevention mechanism to prevent hostilities from escalating after incidents such as terror attacks within Afghanistan. Last December, it hosted trilateral talks where Kabul, Beijing and Islam­abad jointly called on the Afghan Taliban to engage in peace talks.

But China’s growing involvement in Afghanistan may also create tensions in the Sino-Pak relationship. Here’s the thing: China’s main goal in Afghanistan is ostensibly to keep ETIM out, while Pakistan’s is to keep India out. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s counterproductive visit last week is a good reminder of how alliances end up when supposed allies have divergent strategic objectives.

China will use all the resources at its disposal to achieve its ends in Afghanistan. And this includes India. Just this April, Xi Jingping and Narendra Modi agreed to cooperate in Afghanistan, including by launching joint economic projects to spur growth and stability. At some point, China may ask Pakistan to curb what some allege is its tolerance of militants in Afghanistan.

So far, Islamabad has not appeared averse to Chinese intervention in its security policies. But as Washington will tell Beijing, there is a point at which Pakistan will not budge from prioritising its security and strategic objectives, no matter how high or sweet the friendship. It remains to be seen whether Afghanistan will be the forge that further melds the allies, or the anvil on which the relationship faces blows.

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*Published in Dawn, September 10th, 2018*