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Regional Security Complex Theory and Soft Power: Mapping China's Engagement in Afghanistan

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REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY AND SOFT POWER: MAPPING CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The paramount interest of China in Afghanistan seems to ensure peace and stability in the region. Beijing's soft power approach towards Afghanistan through its neutral stance and minimum involvement in domestic politics within Afghanistan proved to be an advantage in cementing China's role in Afghanistan as a credible mediator. China extends its influence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative, where the importance of CPEC is interlinked with the development of China's western sector. China aims to harness the Afghan territory for its transit routes because Afghanistan bridges the connectivity gap between Central Asia and West Asia. This paper highlights that the current interests of China in Afghanistan are multiple. China is utilizing all the soft power elements to promote and expand the areas of activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to South Asia because stability in Afghanistan cannot be achieved solely. Understanding Regional Security Complex Theory and Soft Power can encapsulate China's engagement in Afghanistan. It has made a considerable effort by highlighting regional complexities on various multilateral fronts like China-Pakistan-Afghanistan, China-Russia-Afghanistan, and China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran. This study develops an analytical framework of South Asian security from the regional point of view and analyses external powers' role in the transition of regional security complexes.

Keywords: Regional Security Complex Theory, China, Afghanistan, Soft Power, CPEC.

Introduction

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is a relatively new theoretical perspective in understanding international relations. It has been propounded by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in light of the ongoing complexities of the modern world. It views the importance of security interdependence in forming region-based clusters that have brought new and unprecedented socioeconomic, political, legal and security challenges.¹ Barry Buzan and Ole Waever are highly notable for refining the definition of security more broadly from the context of social construct. They deconstruct security threats along with all their dynamics at the regional level before judging them at the global level. They believe that the regional level is the most vulnerable as most security complexities occur at this particular level. Therefore, it is valuable to understand regional security constructs to judge the changing international security perceptions or

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trends. Most international clashes at the behest of major powers have their sources embedded at the regional level.² This study develops an analytical framework of South Asian security from the regional point of view and highlights external powers' role in the transition of regional security complexes.

Similarly, 'Soft Power' is a modern concept and indeed the most efficient and effective; unlike hard power, it focuses on non-visible power, which does not involve coercion. This concept ardently believes in cooperation and persuasion rather than coercion, which realists pursue.³ The soft power approach is relatively more pragmatic in the long run. It is the ability of an actor or a state's ability to change other actors' preferences through appeal and persuasion. Joseph Nye coined this term in 1990; he argued that "if a country wants other countries to do what the former wants [and] if they do it willingly without feeling any humiliation or without the use of force, it is called soft power."⁴ It is non-coercive in nature which makes it a notable phenomenon. Recently, the concept has expanded to encompass modifying features because of its low-risk and low-cost factors.

In RSCT, the overall security of every state at regional level correlates with the security of other states within the same region. In the larger context, security concerns stay confined to the region only, with a few exceptions when countries with supreme power act and interfere in other regions. However, every state cannot adopt the latter course of action, considering the limited resources at its disposal.⁵ Therefore, soft power claims that in order to bring forth productive outcomes, hard power is not enough to fight modern wars, especially when the enemy is living in the shadows of its own neighbourhood.

China's Engagement through the Prism of RSCT

This study applies the analysis of RSCT on South Asian regional issues that involve great power strategies and political policies. In light of such investigation, the US political posture, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, should be taken into consideration. The fall of the USSR made the US unbridled, and because of this, it made decisions that left deep imprints on its foreign policies to this day. The USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan left the country in a dilapidated condition that shattered it domestically and led to the dilemma of a civil war. Reminiscent of civil war are still visible today as the country is divided into many political spheres.⁶

Afghanistan has been plagued by war for decades; interestingly, conflicts during this period involved major powers and neighbouring states. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 to oust the Taliban regime and its ultimate withdrawal in 2021 made it lose its credibility. The initial objective of the US invasion was to capture Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaida leader, but with time other objectives were also added. Consequently, with several political interests in play, the security condition deteriorated. Under such circumstances, regional dynamics made China careful not to interfere in Afghanistan. Although China's interests in Afghanistan remained significant, these began to mount

in the after-war peace rebuilding efforts. China became an active supporter and anticipator through its concluded observation that Afghanistan was drained by prolonged presence of US troops, which failed to uplift the marginalized Afghan society. Afghanistan had immensely suffered due to civil war, but the US-led war on terror destroyed it more.

The application of RSCT provides an understanding of how China can play a significant and constructive role in mitigating the instability in Afghanistan that has provided safe havens for transnational terrorist organizations to conduct their activities. For example, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, operating from Afghanistan, has created serious concerns for peace and stability in Pakistan. Similarly, in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the insurgents have roots and connections with terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Moreover, the presence of ISIS, an international terrorist organization, in Afghanistan has also created serious issues for China and Pakistan. It can boost insurgency in XUAR bordering Afghanistan and threaten China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Likewise, the East Turkistan terrorist groups are also exploiting the fragility of Afghanistan and creating a security dilemma for the Central Asian states.

In RSCT, multilevel interaction between states exhibits a density of interaction and flows of amity or enmity, highly dependent upon security interdependence. Security in a region is characterized by clear patterns of amity or enmity and the involvement of great power that can hinder the emergence of a region-building process. From this perspective, the relationship between China and Afghanistan from the very outset was relatively moderate.⁷ However, the years preceding Hamid Karzai's government in Afghanistan proved beneficial when he initiated an association with China to side-line US diktat. China exhibited warm appreciation for the effort put forward by the Afghan government to curb militancy. This reciprocity proved to be quite beneficial in forming a direct Sino-Afghan relationship. The US and India were immensely annoyed over the build-up of this relationship primarily because it was based on mutual interests.⁸

China, with the second-largest growing economy, is rising rapidly. It has the capacity to challenge the US in contemporary world affairs, especially in its immediate neighbourhood like Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia. However, it promotes the idea and value of a peaceful rise to power with an aspiration to become a responsible superpower following the principle of peaceful co-existence. To fulfil the burgeoning demand, China cannot afford militancy to thrive in its immediate neighbourhood or within its own country.⁹ Today, China is motivated primarily by security interests in Afghanistan. The intelligence warfare between Pakistan and India and the proxy war between militant groups within Afghanistan hamper China's political and economic interests and target Chinese companies and workers at risk.¹⁰ India is already creating instability in Balochistan and repeating the same in Xinjiang. This covert warfare is critical to Pakistan's security and political stability. These security issues also threaten the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a project considered to be a game changer that tends to change the South Asian strategic and economic landscape.

China is the largest single investor in Afghanistan, home to over US \$250 billion worth of iron deposits, US \$400 billion worth of copper reserves, and a considerable quantity of lithium. Though there are speculations that China aims to seek dominance over Afghanistan's mineral resources, China has purchased rare mineral rights from Afghanistan. Through this deal, China has been extensively exploring different parts of the country, specifically in the Amu Darya Basin, with the help of the Metallurgical Corporation of China to search for new raw materials and minerals. China is exploring natural resources in Afghanistan through a soft power approach. Through the advanced industrial technology of China, these resources are enough to bring the country back in rhythm.¹¹ China has also played a significant role in supplying Afghanistan with telecom equipment and invested in laying and upgrading Afghanistan's fibre optics system. Since 2012, China has been granting Afghanistan US \$240 million in annual development aid, besides establishing aerial corridors between Kabul and Urumqi.

Beijing aims to structure regional management through consensus in Afghanistan that demands tangible support and assistance for reconstruction and development, widening interaction with the business community, strengthening security lines at the Afghan-Tajik border, and consolidating political and economic issues. In light of China's engagement in Afghanistan, its economic dominance in critical supply chains poses a threat to the green energy transition of Europe and the US.

China's Engagement in Afghanistan through Soft Power

Joseph Nye illustrates that institutions enhance a country's soft power and promote its policies, ideas and values. If the country's interests are legitimate, then it would appeal more to other states and institutions around the globe. For example, dispersing the importance of connectivity through BRI defines an excellent example of promoting basic tenets of the soft power approach. Nye further affirms that a free trade economy also produces soft power and incorporates other countries in its economic model.¹² States that follow the fundamentals of *realpolitik*, like the US, Russia, Germany and Britain, achieve their national interest through a hard power approach to attain their core national objectives from weaker states. States with moderate military power but stable economies, like Japan, follow the basic heuristics of modern liberalism. In this regard, foreign aid has been one of the core tactics for applying soft power. Poor economies have been exploited in exchange for foreign aid.¹³ The US has a history of politically exploiting states through foreign aid and influencing their domestic and foreign policies. On the other hand, China has not relied on foreign aid alone as the only tool to control or influence the regional countries. It has clung to all aspects of soft power.

Chinese investment in rebuilding the infrastructure of the war-torn country without using military means has proved beneficial to Afghanistan. The use of soft power assists in revolutionizing local education and health standards.¹⁴ China has offered Afghanistan good ways of boosting its economy by helping it establish economic corridors via its territory. If functional, these corridors will change the lives of millions

across Asia. In other words, the entire continent is now attached to the stability of Afghanistan, and China is playing the lead role in making it so.¹⁵ China has made a heavy presence in Afghanistan; factors are too many to contemplate. First, the US withdrawal has paved the ground for China to strengthen its regional footing. The second reason is to ascertain that economic corridors would remain unharmed. The third factor is to ensure that India does not hamper these projects by any means available. China has offered to build schools, health centres, roads and bridges, and rehabilitation centres for Afghan people if they ensure peace and stability.¹⁶ The borders are weak; thus, they need to be secured, and the Afghan locals should be politically aligned. China is making all efforts to achieve these goals through economic development activities.¹⁷

China is putting considerable effort into bringing Pakistan and Afghanistan on cordial terms, which was difficult before as both countries were and still have border issues and cross-border interventions. China has offered modernized equipment to excavate mineral resources and bring them to maximum use for economic development.¹⁸ Although there is much to criticize CPEC, perceiving it as a debt trap, Chinese firms have considerably surpassed others in gearing up economic activity. China's state-owned National Petroleum Corporation plans to revamp Afghanistan's Amu Darya oil and gas project. China has also made advancements to make considerable use of Afghanistan's lithium resources, in which Xinjiang TBEA Group Corp. Ltd. serves as a strategic partner for lithium exploration. However, Chinese investments in Afghanistan would come with many obstacles through corruption and insecurity. To eliminate such barriers, China uses potential investments and mining as a bargaining tool to bring geopolitical connectivity.

Effectiveness of RSCT and Soft Power

The effectiveness of RSCT has come on stage in recent years. According to Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver, the core prerequisite for the concept relies upon the processes of de-securitization and securitization. These processes occur in the international system and are then transferred to regional clusters. It draws our insight into the English school of thought, where great power management at times of crisis is quite visible. In RSCT, the central part can be looked upon at the regional level to understand the activities of states and their interaction adjacent to each other. Both concepts, RSCT and Soft Power highlight that China has developed flexible policies in South Asia. Unlike other major powers that strived to subdue South Asia through force, China has moved on towards regional cooperation while endeavouring to resolve unstructured security conflicts mutually.¹⁹

Security has grown much more complex in the modern age and now moved beyond boundaries encompassing humans and the environment as a national security threat. Therefore, adopting a liberalist viewpoint or merely a realist course of action would not bring the desired outcome unless the approach changes. The focus should be regionalism to cultivate a soft power approach by articulating interests, thus bolstering a system of active participation for a well-defined agenda analysis. The political

engagement of China with the Taliban to end militancy is based on RSCT, while economic engagement is purely a demonstration of soft power.²⁰ China's active participation through regional assistance promotes peace and stability that assists in mitigating conflicts in Afghanistan. China has expanded its economic and trade network throughout Asia, Africa and Europe purely on the grounds of a soft power approach, but to maintain this network, specific regional responsibilities also need to be fulfilled. Through active participation, China ensures tackling security complexes that strengthen strategic cooperative partnerships in trade and economy, people-to-people exchange, and political security.

BRI may be appreciated and welcomed by countries from which economic corridors pass through, but there are elements in every country that are marginalized, and roots of resistance reside in them. Naturally, the majority takes advantage of resources and development; still, every state has marginalized communities unsatisfied with society's development and distribution of resources.²¹ The lesser a country is developed, the greater the number of people disenchanted with the order of the state. Since South Asia is one of the most volatile regions of Asia in terms of parity of development in society, marginalized communities are more proactive.²² These marginalized communities are disenchanted with their respective governments and foreign investment in development projects and perceive these as an attempt to colonize or exploit their resources. Similar is the case of Chinese development projects throughout Asia and Europe. Every corridor passes through an unstable zone, posing direct threats to the success of entire initiative. The soft power approach serves as a tool to satisfy the observation of vulnerable communities as it triggers opportunities to build people-to-people connectivity and linkages.

The reflection of soft power is visible in many collaboration efforts of China, but the overlapping security challenges overshadow their significance. There are certain critical areas in Beijing's engagement in Afghanistan. Afghanistan requires US \$6-8 billion annually to support economic growth and provide essential services. China's assistance to Afghanistan since the last decade indicates that the former would continue with humanitarian efforts and financial aid in the coming years. However, to deal with security challenges, China cannot merely rely on soft power; the regional security complex approach comes into play here.²³ China may confront security challenges due to its lack of understanding of Afghan culture. Although China's economic capabilities have been appreciated, BRI projects are criticized; due to this, China needs to identify critical areas of cooperation with Afghanistan.

CPEC is one of those routes where security risks are the highest. It partially passes through tribal areas that have seen draconian consequences of the war on terror and the wrath of militants and splinter groups. CPEC also passes through Balochistan, where India, with the connivance of Iran, the US and Israel, is deeply engaging in a proxy war that directly threatens peace in the region.²⁴ CPEC's strategic importance depends upon the fact that it aims to provide China with alternative routes for energy and oil supplies that cater to China's growing demand. Challenges to One Belt One Road

(OBOR) projects are immense; thus, intending to secure its corridors, especially CPEC, China has considered the entanglements of regional security. Since security is intricately linked with the economic interests of China, it has engaged in a strong political position in the region and beyond.²⁵

The soft image of China and improved strategic communication can open numerous avenues for China.²⁶ Strategic communication means promoting education and upgrading social and democratic values. From a regional security point of view, educating the people of Afghanistan at par with democratic values can minimize warlords' influence and de-escalating extremist tendencies in the region.²⁷ It is imperative than ever for Afghanistan to understand that through education, they can uplift the social status of Afghans internationally. Thus, education should become part of the peace strategy to safeguard the country from future extremism. Since economic connectivity and advancement are directly comparable to education status, China is working on upgrading Afghanistan's education system. It provides scholarships to Afghan students and the necessary training in various fields. If the US had adopted a soft power approach in the wake of Soviet withdrawal, the rise of extremism and militancy in the country could have been avoided.²⁸

RSCT analyses the importance of strategic significance that attracts major powers in international politics. The importance of this strategic aspect is consolidated by geographical proximity with regions that accounts for main choke points and sea routes and their proximity with great power.²⁹ Therefore, India's inclusion in CPEC can benefit all, but the Indian blank posture towards the project affects the whole South Asian region. Subsequently, from a regional security point of view, regional dynamics compel China to apply soft power approaches towards Afghanistan. China and India shape their own political strategies towards Afghanistan because the future of the given countries and their influence significantly, if not entirely, depends on the stability and control of the region.³⁰ The instability of neighbouring countries also matters because it affects growth and power balance in many ways.

China's national security interests are interlinked with economic interests and a viable world-class economy. China is using soft power, but it is also mindful of security threats that arise from Indian espionage and sabotage activities in the region.³¹ The Indian countermeasures aim to derail Chinese economic engagement in Afghanistan, political engagement with the Taliban, and cooperative engagement to bring Pakistan and Afghanistan on the same page.³² China has acquired military supremacy and diplomatic and economic clout in the region, and it can use these resources to pressure militant groups to relinquish any activity threatening Chinese interests. Furthermore, it can facilitate bilateral and multilateral talks between the Afghan government and the international community.³³

Through the prism of RSCT, the US is an extra-regional force intervening in the regional affairs of South and East Asia. There is a general perception to characterize recent events in Afghanistan as a win for China and a loss for the US. However, the scenario is otherwise far more complicated. The collapse of Afghanistan's pro-western

government does not transform into China's absolute political gain as it does not practically exhibit China filling the gap in Kabul that has been left behind by US withdrawal. Afghanistan does see China as a credible strategic partner, but China is not the only alternative to the US. For the Afghan government, Pakistan and Iran are also significant regional players. This aspect reflects the geographical compulsions of RSCT, which plays a pivotal role in regional politics. Therefore, the political objectives of these states vis-a-vis Afghanistan have to be analysed appropriately.³⁴ In other words, regional security can be jeopardized if militancy wave spills from Afghanistan to neighbouring states.³⁵ Tackling the spillover of extremism in Xinjiang is China's primary regional security concern. As long as the people of Xinjiang remain underdeveloped, the wave of militancy can easily hit them.³⁶ Therefore, China needs to actively participate in the peace-building process to maintain the security balance. There are chances that Afghanistan might again become a key platform for narcotrafficking and transnational terrorism. Taliban, if unable to govern correctly through social and democratic norms and regional assistance, Afghanistan will once again transform into a hub of terrorism, infiltrating instability in other countries like China, Pakistan and Iran. Beijing fears that Afghanistan should not provide safe havens to Uyghur militants creating instability in the Xinjiang province of China.

Countering security challenges to CPEC becomes easier if Afghanistan is no more used as a harvesting ground for terrorism. Therefore, China's future policy is centered on promoting stability around China's periphery. With defensive foreign policy goals, China is open to enhancing its ambitions and influence in Afghanistan.³⁷ However, China has yet to move forward with diplomatic recognition of the new government in Afghanistan. In addition, a politically stable and economically developed Pakistan is also important for China to counter Indian hegemony in the region. Much of the security instability of Pakistan has its roots in Afghanistan.³⁸ Therefore, Afghanistan's economic restructuring is a primary concern for China, mainly on security grounds. China cannot complement regional security if local warlords are at loggerheads and the public suffers from abysmal poverty and underdevelopment. For this reason, developing the local economy and public welfare is imperative to establish peace. China is aiming at a Trans-Afghan Energy Corridor; moreover, China also intends to include Afghanistan as a potential partner in CPEC. The extension of CPEC to Afghanistan will consolidate Chinese ambitions for regional connectivity and deeper integration.³⁹

Ensuring security in the region (especially in Afghanistan) was one of the main reasons behind the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Afghanistan is getting tremendous support from SCO to eliminate the threat of terrorism and illegal smuggling. Many SCO members have provided various kinds of assistance and support to the people of Afghanistan. It has always paid great attention to the security issues of Afghanistan. Alongside SCO, South Asian Association for Regional Organization (SAARC) is also providing an opportunity for Afghanistan and China to create a better understanding of cooperation.

Conclusion

Peaceful Afghanistan is a key to regional connectivity. The desire for regional cooperation cannot be realized without peace in Afghanistan because it lies at the junction of regional connectivity. A peaceful Afghanistan could be an important player in the trade, transit and political stability. However, continued unrest in Afghanistan is hampering efforts made by China or other regional actors for peace and stability. For regional connectivity and broader BRI prospects, China aims to connect South Asia with West Asia by linking CPEC and West Asia Corridor. War is not the solution for Afghanistan; instead, political settlement and economic cooperation can be a peaceful solution to instability in Afghanistan. Only a stable Afghanistan can promote stability in the region, and Chinese engagement in Afghanistan ensures cooperation and stability in Afghanistan and the entire region.

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