

I. Economics

AFGHANISTAN AND THE BRI

Extending the Belt and Road to Afghanistan— The Geo-Economics of Growth

by Hussein Askary

Hussein Askary is a Board Member of the Belt and Road Institute in Sweden (BRIS), and is the Southwest Asia coordinator for the Schiller Institute.

Aug. 18—The hasty withdrawal of U.S., British, and other North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops from Afghanistan after 20 years of a failed “war on terrorism” can potentially become an inflection point towards a new era in world politics.

The comparisons with the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Saigon, Vietnam in 1975 is somewhat inaccurate. There is now a new mechanism and a constellation of regional and global powers willing to bring peace, stability, and economic development to Afghanistan with well-defined plans along the Belt and Road Initiative.

The comparison should rather be with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This means that a terrible era is potentially ending and a new one is being ushered into world politics, overturning decades and centuries of destructive zero-sum geopolitics, “great games,” and never-ending war.

If calmly and wisely approached, this new situation has the potential of reaching peace through economic development and win-win cooperation. The key to this new policy is the integration of Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There are great risks embedded in the chaotic situation left by NATO in Afghanistan. The best possible policy to minimize, if not totally negate the risk, is to make sure that the peace and reconciliation initiatives contain the reconstruction of the economy as the main item on the agenda.

Role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Following 20 years of military operations by the United States, Britain and their allies—with at least 71,000 civilians killed in both Afghanistan and Pakistan—these forces were hastily withdrawn in July and August of this year. The Taliban, the purported target of the Afghanistan war and the main antagonists of NATO and the Western-backed Afghan government, expanded



USMC/Victor Mancilla

After 20 years of military intervention in Afghanistan, U.S. and other NATO coalition forces are executing a hasty withdrawal. Here, U.S. Marines assist a child during an evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul on August 20, 2021.

their control over every part of the country.

While the Western mass media was filled with panicked reporting about the rapid onslaught of the Taliban in many parts of the country, cooler heads in China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, and many Central Asian nations, and even in India, were busy arranging a flurry of diplomatic moves to both contain the situation and to get the

Taliban and the Afghan government in Kabul into peace and reconciliation talks.

Wang Yi, the Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Affairs Minister, had already visited several Central Asian capitals in July to discuss the situation. On July 14, the Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes all the above nations, plus other Eurasian nations, held a meeting in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

At the SCO meeting, Wang Yi said that due to the hasty withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops, “Afghanistan is once again faced with the grave challenge of moving toward war or peace, chaos or stability.” He proposed a five-point initiative, the third point of which was “working together to boost a reconciliation process” to ensure that no civil-war scenario develops, “in line with the principle of ‘Afghan-led and Afghan-owned.’” All neighboring countries of Afghanistan have a stake in this situation and have influence on certain Afghan factions and groups, making them suitable brokers of peace and reconciliation.

Point five of the Chinese proposal urged the SCO to “continue to contribute to peace and reconstruction in Afghanistan. The SCO should make active use of existing cooperation mechanisms in economy, trade, culture, and other fields to support Afghanistan in enhancing its capacity for independent development and achieving genuine and sustainable development.” Integrating Afghanistan “into regional economic development” plans and structures will insure durable peace.

No Peace Without Development

It is this latter point which was neglected in the past twenty years when the focus was placed only on the use of military and security measures, warfare which has had devastating consequences on the nation. According to certain estimates, an incredible US\$ 2.2 trillion was spent on this war, while the overall cost of the American wars since September 11, 2001, has reached US\$ 6.4 trillion. Almost none of that was used to build infrastructure, housing, hospitals, schools, power, or water management systems. This is six times the amount China has invested in the BRI since 2013. But China has built thousands of kilometers of railways and roads, power plants, ports, airports, and water management systems across Eurasia and Africa. Those differences, and the potential for positive change, are the reasons the



CGTN

Wang Yi, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Affairs Minister, proposed a five-point initiative for peaceful development of Afghanistan at the July 17, 2021 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

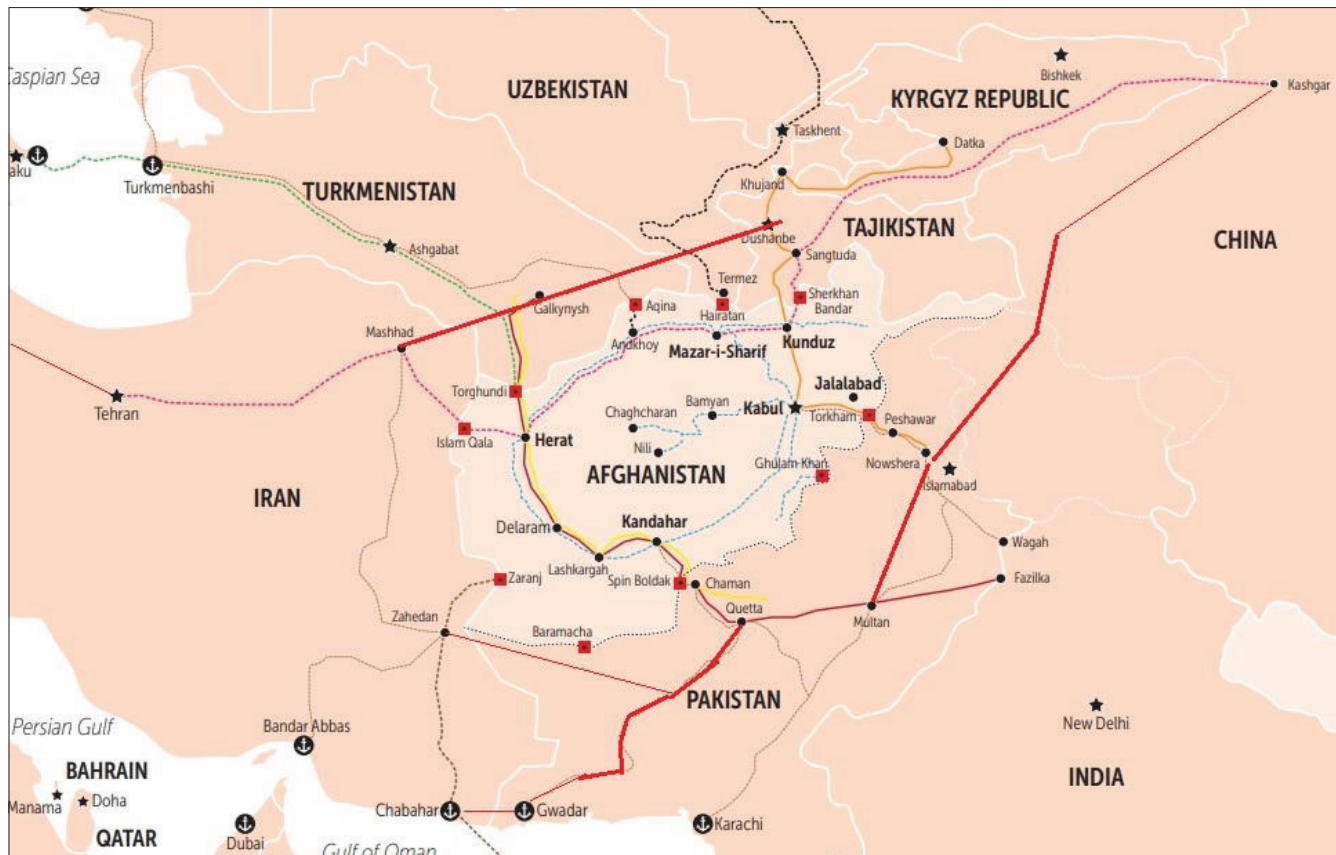
current case of Afghanistan could become an inflection point in current world history concerning the philosophy and achievement of peace through economic development rather than military force.

Afghanistan and the BRI

Contrary to its previous position as a buffer zone between the Russian and British Empires in the geopolitical “Great Game,” Afghanistan is perfectly positioned to become a bridge between northern Eurasia and South Asia, and between East Asia and West Asia. It is squeezed between two of the main BRI corridors; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to the south of its border, and the China-Central Asia-Iran-Turkey New Silk Road Corridor to its north.

Afghanistan formally joined the BRI in May 2016 during a visit by the Chief Executive of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, to China, in which the Afghan and Chinese Foreign Ministers signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation under the BRI. The Afghan Foreign Ministry stated then that “given its location at the crossroads of Central, South, and Southwest Asia, Afghanistan is well placed to partner with China and connect to the wider region via BRI.” Afghanistan also became a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in 2017. However, due to the situation in the country, and the U.S.-China antagonism, no infrastructure or other projects were launched jointly.

Interestingly, China managed to include the BRI as part of the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, and



Afghan Foreign Ministry/RECCA

The Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECCA), is an initiative of the Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan to join together all the different connectivity and development corridors connecting Afghanistan to its neighbors and larger regions.

Article 34 of the 2017 UN Security Council Resolution 2344 states that it “welcomes and urges further efforts to strengthen the process of regional economic cooperation, including measures to facilitate regional connectivity, trade and transit, including through regional development initiatives such as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (the Belt and Road) Initiative, and regional development projects.”

Almost one year ahead of the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, Wang Yi reached a nine-point consensus at the Inaugural China-Central Asian Countries Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on July 16, 2020. Of interest here is Point Three, which states that the parties will make more efforts to “synergize the Belt and Road Initiative and the development strategies of Central Asian countries, expand trade and provide more common ideas and concrete actions on the development of a Silk Road of Health and the Digital Silk Road.”

Point Eight, which concerns Afghanistan, stated: “China and Central Asian countries all support the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan and

stand ready to play a constructive role in promoting intra-Afghan negotiation, restoring peace and stability, advancing Afghan economic recovery and strengthening regional cooperation.”

In another important development, the joint statement of the Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue in June 2021, stressed that “the three sides reaffirmed that they will deepen cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECCA), Heart of Asia Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) and other regional economic initiatives.” Connectivity between the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Afghanistan was a key element in this dialogue.

RECCA, which is mentioned in the joint statement, is an initiative launched by the Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan to join together all the different connectivity and development corridors connecting Afghanistan to its neighbors and larger regions. It has published several studies on these corridors and how they will benefit Afghanistan and enhance stability and security in the country and the larger region.