

## **China's Interests and Challenges in South Asia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the arena of international politics, South Asian region has been magnetizing greater interests and China is its close neighbor. There is no significant change in China's strategic interests since the end of Cold War but her economic capacities and requirements, from natural resources to transit routes have changed the level of influence and interest of her ties with South Asian region. China is continuously expanding economic activities and investing in trade and development in the region. The drive to reinforce economic development through building up transport and infrastructure connections with her neighboring states as Gwadar-Xinjiang route and Kunming-Chittagong route will have an increasing impact on regional stability and the states across the region. The ongoing and forthcoming projects of China, to use them in future, will surely have an impact on the economies in the region. China's South Asia policy is refracted through China's 'all-weather friend' in the region; Pakistan. The presence of Uighur extremists in China's Xinjiang province and absence of a comprehensive counter-terrorism policy provide other areas of attention to the Chinese government with ramifications for stability in the region. China's interests in South Asia include attainment of a matching role against India, containing the terrorist threats and expansion of her economic base in South Asia. China's strategic interests can be maintained through her complete approach to move towards the path of progress and managing better ties with South Asian neighbors.

**Key Words:** China, Pakistan, interests, economic activities, matching role.

### **Introduction**

China views South Asian States as 'neighbours' and wants to have cooperative and friendly ties to boost her economy, to gain political influence, to decrease the U.S potentials that will surely damage China's interests and to lessen the Indian influence in the region. China's broad term objective in South Asia is to raise multi-dimensional cooperative ties; diplomatic, fiscal and security interests with all the countries in the region (Whyte, Feb 13, 2013). However, the attraction of the region lies in its natural wealth, which China sees as vital to further boost her status as a regional and global power.

Since 1980s, under Deng Xiaoping, China follows an "independent foreign policy of peace". The People's Republic of China's fundamental goals of her "policy are to safeguard China's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, create a favorable international environment for China's reform and opening up and modernization in construction, maintain world peace and propel common development" (China Balance Sheet: Chinese Foreign Policy, n.d). China has gone to great lengths to stress the "peaceful" nature of her impetuous rise

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(China's Foreign Policy, 2014). Caine et al (2011) laid down the five principles of peaceful coexistence:

1. "Peaceful development is the inevitable way for China's modernizations;
2. promoting world peace and development with China's own growth;
3. developing by relying on its own strength, reform, and innovation;
4. seeking mutual benefit and common development with other countries; and
5. building a harmonious world of substantial peace and common prosperity" (Whyte, Feb 13, 2013).

Closer to home, China has made colossal efforts to lessen tensions in South Asia; her relations with her next-door neighbours have become stable during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To advance the strategic interests, China began to flex her strength in the region and in the recent years disputes rose due to her dominant role in South Asia. Assertive conduct of China is greatly due to her increased economic expansion and pursuit to secure energy supplies. In the last three decades, China made a colossal progress and development and became a second largest economic power and at present is hovering to overtake the US, which is at the top.

Beijing, in her drive for development, wants to utilize South Asian economic resources and building up trade routes towards Central Asian States. China seeks to slot in South Asian governments in talks and collaboration on issues of mutual concerns: countering narcotics traffic, smuggling, and terrorism and stabilize the governments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. China's extreme concerns and reservations about terrorist activities, stability concerns, extremism and separatism in Xinjiang province will put forth substantial influence on her dealings in the entire region.

### **Kunming-Chittagong Route**

The proposed Kunming-Chittagong trade route will connect Bangladesh to China. By building up an infrastructure of economic corridor, Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM countries) would have increased imports and exports, sub-regional cooperation in BCIM region and boon their infrastructure and trade. "The BCIM region, inhabited by two-fifths of the world population, and producing one-tenth of the global GDP (gross domestic product), include two of the rising global power-houses of the twenty first century, India and China" (Arora, June 18, 2015). A direct trade route would give access to Chinese products in Indian markets on one hand and would benefit the two Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the group; Bangladesh and Myanmar on the other. It would also help Pakistan to increase trade. The route would provide a cheaper substitute to the current transport options; costly air shipments or long sea routes for transporting goods between China and her western neighbours. Shipping by sea requires freighters to pass south of Singapore and through the US-patrolled Malacca Strait. Building a road and rail system to Bangladesh would cut the trip by thousands of kilometers (Scally, October 19, 2012).

Through operationalization of the proposed economic corridor, "the gains are envisaged to accrue from greater market access for goods, services and energy,

elimination of non-tariff barriers, better trade facilitation, investment in infrastructure development, joint exploration and development of mineral, water, and other natural resources, development of value and supply chains based on comparative advantages, by translating comparative advantages into competitive advantages, and through closer people to people contact” (Rehman, December 2, 2012).

### **Gwadar-Xinjiang Route**

China's economic activities in Pakistan and the proposed economic corridor between Pakistan and China can prove vital to her economic development and it will be beneficial for the whole region. The Chinese vice Premier in his speech, emphasized the ample natural resources which South Asian states are having, that are essential to be mobilized for the common good of all. He highlighted Pakistan's key role in economic integration and her pivotal role as an economic corridor for Middle East, central Asian, and South Asian states. He also communicated the high importance being accorded to Pakistan in general and South Asia in Particular by the newly elected Chinese premier. The proposed economic corridor according to him, would benefit China, Pakistan and entire South Asia, and will facilitate economic integration of the whole region (Hali, June 14, 2013).

China's is strategically location is naturally designed to act as a bridge for South and Southeast Asian states. Her wise planning enables China to get advantage from the natural resources of her adjacent countries (Hilali, n.d). A significant aspect of China's economic planners is taking her adjoining states along on the way to development. China's desire for regional influence commensurate with her rising power and her bordering states welcomed her economic rise and promoted vital ties for investment and trade. “China is deeply embedded in international economic order that entails the free movement of trade and investments...fundamental stability of the international system, from energy supplies to global finance” (Small, January 2014).

### **China's Relations with Pakistan**

The relationships between China and Pakistan are termed as “higher than Himalayas and deeper than Oceans”. China and Pakistan's common perceptions, approaches and policies make their friendship, alliance and partnership durable. China's friendly ties with Pakistan remain a keystone in Pakistan's foreign policy. The conclusion of various developmental projects further strengthened the mutual ties between both the countries. Since 9/11, with the shift in the international scenario, major development is seen in China-Pakistan martial and strategic ties. Exchange visits of apex and other personages of both countries and their developing cooperation in nuclear and missile areas and signing of army and naval

agreements are advantageous for both states. China's close ties with Pakistan are a key to security dimensions of her policy towards India and Afghanistan.

Pakistan and China's time-tested friendly and strategic ties also help to contain Indian influence in the region. China's long-standing alliance with Pakistan is still supported by a shared contest with India. Believing that Pakistan can play a balancing role and curtail India on her Western outskirt as well as in the subcontinent more extensively, is still a key objective of Chinese strategy. It is also the main objective of Pakistan's foreign policy to ensure and contain Indian hegemonic designs and dominant role in South Asian region, Central Asia and beyond (Khan & Ahmed, 2015). The deep concurrence of strategic interests between China and Pakistan in this core area has provided a base for an extensive level of assistance, from military technology transfer to joint diplomatic support.

In mutual relations, Sino-Pak military relations became stronger after the conclusion of Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Peace and Cooperation in 1971 (Burke & Ziring, 1990) and further under the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, when China for the first time offered Pakistan for joint military exercises against terrorism (India Daily, August 26, 2005). After the conclusion of U.S-Indo nuclear agreements, their ties are more enhanced.

Defense cooperation has always been one of the most important dimensions between Pakistan and China (The Times of India, January 28, 2010). Having a complete networked relationship, The Peoples Liberation Army's (PLA) for the first time conducted an exercise with the armed forces of Pakistan and also "involved in joint production of supplies and equipment, continued cooperation on nuclear and missile technology, and military intelligence (2-PLA)" (The People's Daily, April 6, 2005). The intelligence services focused on militant threats and dealing with anti-state actors in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, established diplomatic contact with these actors since 1990s. Pakistan too plays an important role for Beijing in dissuading and cracking down the terrorist networks in North Waziristan, targeted and troubled China's Xinjiang province too.

Since 2003, China's naval ships conducted joint maritime search-and-rescue exercise with Pakistan Navy for their shared interests in the arena of security of the sea lanes of communication. In 2006, Pakistan Navy signed a \$600 million defense deal with China that includes provision of four F-22P frigates to Pakistan (The Tribune, May 24, 2006).

China's continued provision of nuclear equipment, materials and missile technologies will invariably enhance Pakistan's offensive capabilities vis-à-vis India. In 2008, after the conclusion of Indo-US Nuclear Deal, the nuclear collaboration between China and Pakistan became more strengthened and intensified. Although, Pakistan is the close ally of US since a long, the Indo-US cooperation clearly manifests the ultimate desire of the US to recognize India as a leading regional power in order to contain China and to sabotage nuclear and missile capabilities of Pakistan (Khan & Ahmed, 2015).

China expanded economic relations with her regional neighbors, especially Pakistan, that is not only commercial in nature as the nuclear program and trade routes. China's support to nuclear power projects recently increased to implicit "counter" the U.S-Indo nuclear deal with two additional 330 MW reactors at the Chashma nuclear complex, and more recently 1000 MW reactors at Karachi nuclear reactors. These reactors have been under IAEA safeguards, with the spent fuel returned to China, and attract more criticism for their violation of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group rules and that are the direct concerns for stability in the region.

## **China's Landmark Investments**

### **1. The Strategic Importance of Gwadar Port in Sino-Pak Naval Cooperation**

Gwadar port is said to be China's "String of Pearls Strategy" and a milestone in Pak-China military and strategic cooperation. Its strategic location in the South-Western Arabian sea coast near the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz, a world key oil supply route is of concern to India as 63 percent of India's oil imports are transported via this waterway. China and Pakistan's naval presence will monitor Indian hegemonic, subversive and expansionist designs in Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf and Indo-US strategic cooperation too (The Nation, April 15, 2002). The construction of Gwadar port requires active support, cooperation and investment of China. It will provide China and Pakistan to safeguard their securities against India (The Express Tribune May 24, 2006). Pakistan's marine capacity does not pose any challenge to India; the combined Sino-Pak naval cooperation can counter Indian primacy in the region (The Times of India, January 28, 2010).

### **2. Karakorum Highway**

The Karakoram Highway (KKH) built by the governments of Pakistan and China, is one of the highest paved international roads in the world connecting Sinkiang Uighur of China and Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan across the Karakoram mountain range, through the Khunjerab Pass. The Karakoram Highway is also known as the Friendship Highway in China. It was started in 1959 and was completed and opened to the public in 1979. While building the highway, a lot of Pakistani and Chinese workers lost their lives due to landslides and falls.

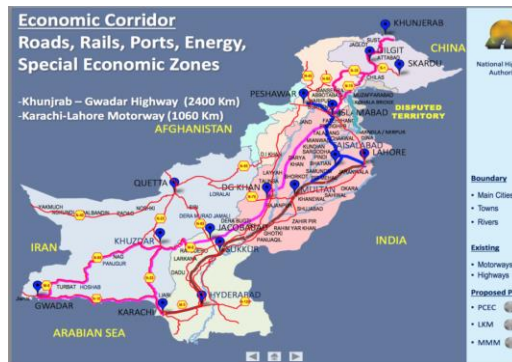
The route of the KKH traces one of the many paths of the ancient Silk Road. Due to its high elevation and the difficult conditions in which it was constructed, it is referred to as the Eighth Wonder of the World.

### **3. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**

As Pakistan enhances her level of cooperation with China in areas of economics, politics and defense, a seminal move has also taken place in Pakistan's strategic significance. Pakistan's close alignment with China is partially contributed to

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countervailing India's growing economic and military power. The CPEC, central of China-Pak ties, is an ongoing development megaproject which aims to connect Gwadar Port in southwestern Pakistan to China's northwestern autonomous region of Xinjiang. The Corridor is an extension of China's proposed 21st century Silk Road initiative. China's projected investment of \$46 billion that she pledged to materialize in varied projects in Pakistan expanding over 10 to 15 years. This will be the major investment China has ever made in any country. In order to achieve political and strategic goals, China signed 51 memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with Pakistan. Most projects will be in energy and transport concentrated in the proposed 'CPEC,' which stretches 3,000 km from Kashgar to Islamabad and the port cities of Karachi and Gwadar, near Pakistan's border with Iran through a network of highways, railways and pipelines to transport oil and gas as demonstrated in the figure below.



Source: [www.pakistanvtv](http://www.pakistanvtv)

Mushahid Hussain, Chairman of the Pakistan-China Institute, “calls the package a game changer. The economic corridor will play a crucial role in regional integration of the 'Greater South Asia', which includes China, Iran, Afghanistan, and stretches all the way to Myanmar” (CNN Money, April 20, 2015). Ambassador Masood Khalid stated, “Pakistan is a major gateway for China to South Asia. The Karakorum Highway (KKH) which is being jointly upgraded by Pakistan and China will not only be linked to the Arabian Sea, but also to South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia. A rail link between our two countries is also envisaged. Similarly, the development of Gwadar Port will greatly benefit the region. This will benefit China, Pakistan and entire South Asia, and will facilitate economic integration of the whole region” (Khan, January 2015).

The initiation of China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC) is likely to increase China and Pakistan's presence in Gulf and Arabian Sea; it will open up new prospects of business for both states. The presence of the Chinese fleet in the region will obviously increase with the initiation of the project. China's western region will benefit from shorter access to the sea. China's ongoing deployment of her naval assets to Gwadar and Karachi ports is a cause of concern for India. To alleviate India's feasible apprehensions and that of the West as well, China

emphasizes that her interests are essentially economic and commercial. Anyhow, in few years, the infrastructure related to Gwadar will be developed and as China has emphasized, her nautical deployment is not envisaged to be offensive. A number of advantages with construction of Gwadar port that will be connected to Kashgar are discussed as following:-

- To fulfill China's increasing energy requirements, Gwadar port is significant as one of the major safe trade routes.
- China emerged as the second largest importer of oil, a requirement which will grow gradually as China industrializes and develops economically. It gets a pipeline that stretches virtually from the Gulf to China, cutting out thousands of kilometers of ocean travel through Southeast Asia.
- Gwadar could be used to give China access to a deep water port close to the Gulf region and to bring crude from the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.
- This route is vital, especially from the perspective of developing western regions of China and in feeding Chinese products into the world market (Masood, April 21, 2015).
- China will have control over Indian Ocean, and
- China's interest lies in developing Pakistan and maintaining the existing balance of power between India and Pakistan. The project will make strong and confident Pakistan able and willing to challenge India that confers important advantages on China (Garner, July 22, 2005).

### **China's Interests in Afghanistan**

"China has friendly relations with Afghanistan and has become the largest investor in the country, but it has been a bystander to Western military activities in the country" (Scobell et al., 2014). The current strategic interest of China in Afghanistan is affected by various negative outcomes that are: the country becomes hideaway for Chinese Uighur militant outfits, as it was in the late 1990s. Central Asian states and Pakistan, the most important partners and immediate neighbours of Afghanistan are also destabilized due to the rise of militant outfits and their ideological influence again in Afghanistan and in and across the region that potentially hit Xinjiang itself. "China's broad interest lies in minimizing instability in the country, finding a stable balance of power between political forces there, and ensuring that there is no 'victory' for extremists" (Siddiq, January 2012). From the previous few decades,

"China has largely sat on the sidelines in Afghanistan for much of the last ten years, trying to avoid being seen to be actively cooperating with the United States or NATO forces, minimizing its political exposure, and carefully balancing its relations with different actors. More recently, Beijing has started to accept that it will need to take on a more active role in dealing with Afghanistan—at least diplomatically—if

it wishes to secure the set of political, security, and economic outcomes that it seeks” (Small, January 2014).

As the US, thinning her footprints in Afghanistan, Chinese presence is increasing rapidly. China’s interest and involvement in Afghanistan is confined to economic activities that largely focused on natural resources of the country such as copper, iron and oil etc. With the mining of US and NATO forces, China is leading the security umbrella provided by the West (Siddiqa, January 2012) and curtailing Indian influence there. The US and the West complain that China is not only a consumer in Afghanistan but she is showing greater willingness and interest to downbeat terrorism and helping maintain the regional security and stability. China pursues commercial activities and natural resources in Afghanistan but the security situation there became too difficult to pass opportunities up.

Additionally, China is aware of the fact that Afghanistan’s stability will have a positive impact on the fidgety Xinjiang province. In the backdrop of whole situation, China is playing a more proactive role and engaging with the Taliban headship. Through economic prowess, China is projecting as a soft power in Afghanistan but her Xinjiang province has suffered many years of turbulence due to terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan’s territories and Pakistan has taken several measures to curtail militancy and terrorism in tribal areas of Pakistan near Afghan border and the ongoing Zarb-e-Azb will prove to be fatal for terrorist networks.

### **China’s Relations with India**

India and China are having complicated and at times overtly strife-ridden relations. Both countries as rising powers are rapidly increasing economies and facing heightened anxiety to secure reliable supplies of natural resources. Both the states have ambitious space programs, naval aspirations, and motivations to scrutinize a sphere of influence in South Asia.

The Sino-Indian border disputes of 1962 remain unresolved and continue to cause friction among the two states. So far, China keeps on questioning India’s autonomy over Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir states. “India also continues to host the Dalai Lama and over 100,000 Tibetan refugees is a source of ongoing tension between Beijing and New Delhi” (Cheng, August 31, 2014). Additionally, China’s ties with India’s innate foe, Pakistan, continue to be a source of tension amid the two states. To develop nuclear facilities, (Times of India, 2009) deep seaports and provision of Pakistan with military hardware such as JF-17 fighter jets are the examples of China’s help to Pakistan.

China’s strategic interests with India coalesce the steering of a deep-rooted security rivalry, maintenance of firm economic ties, and enhancing cooperation on points of convergence in global affairs. China has also forged cooperation with India on shared global goals, whether in the Doha trade talks, or in the context of



the BRICS. The traditional dimensions of security competition include; border clashes between India and China; Tibet, Kashmir and China and Pakistan's mutual cooperation. "The Times of India quoted the Indian prime minister as saying that China could use the soft underbelly of Kashmir and Pakistan to keep India in low level equilibrium" (The Times of India, Sep 7, 2010) The hottest issues are:

"India's rise as a power with capabilities beyond her neighborhood (such as the South China Sea), and her deepening ties to the United States (particularly following the nuclear deal), as well as China's own greater interests in the Indian Ocean and energy competition (more acute in India) because Beijing tends to believe that it has the economic wherewithal and political clout to 'win' most of the contests for access to natural resources against Indian actors" (Small, January 2014).

India with her rapid-growing, developed, and moderately affluent economy is trying to become China's strongest economic equal in the region. The continuing Indian fiscal take-off is something, on which China hopes to take advantage of, although trade links between both the states are up-and-coming, though so far tilted in China's favor.

Previously, India tried her best to frustrate the rising Sino-Pak Defence nexus, nuclear and missile technology and strategic relations between the both countries and used various tactics to protect and safeguard her interests in the region. In the past, China's backing to Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971; India was engaged in the 'two war fronts' (The Times of India, December 31, 2009). China's support to Pakistan in Kashmir agenda, China's greater involvement in Development projects in Pakistan Administered Kashmir and her huge monetary support to Pakistan in Bunji Hydro-electric project are really a great strategic setback to India. She was especially much concerned about Gwadar, a naval base in Baluchistan province and construction of Karakoram Highway. She time and again resisted against China's military relations and security ties with regional states, especially Pakistan.

Now India is greatly perturbed with the construction of CPEC linking Kashgar to Gwadar and increasing Sino-Pak interests in building infrastructure and trade routes in Pakistan. She has raised the objections to the route of the corridor, which passes through Gilgit-Baltistan territory which claims to be a part of Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (which, in turn, is claimed by Pakistan). India opposes the investment and development projects in Gilgit Baltistan, which is under Pakistan's control since 1947 (India's objection to CPEC, Jun 03, 2015: Dawn).

"Given Pakistan's reluctance to provide India with overland access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, as it fears Delhi's rising influence in that region, Islamabad is likely to oppose India's involvement in CPEC. It is China that will have to convince Pakistan. How keen it is to get India on board the

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CPEC project will depend on whether China's goals regarding CPEC are economic or aimed at encircling India" (Ramachandran, Feb 9, 2015) .

India fears that China's 'String of Pearls' is aimed at encircling and containing India. It views the Maritime Silk Route project as a benign reinvention of the String of Pearls strategy. The CPEC project promises rich rewards not just to Pakistan and China but to India and other countries in South and Central Asia as well. India's markets are the big prize that they should be eyeing and work to connect with. This will require them to allay Indian misgivings about the project (Ramachandran, Feb 9, 2015).

Another area of clash between China and India is that, China, the only one of five permanent members (P5) to United Nations Security Council (UNSC), is reluctant to voice direct support to her bid for a permanent seat in UNSC only reiterating her view that she "recognises India's aspirations to play an active role in world affairs, including at the UN" (Kaura, June 03, 2015). China's aversion to India's bid is due to strategic competition between both the states, Indian stance on unresolved agenda of Kashmir, Indian support to Japan's bid, and India's status of a non-signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Possession of nuclear weapons is a source of great annoyance to the US.

### **Challenges faced by China in the Region**

India and Pakistan's inborn rivalry and risks of war are the longer-standing concerns for China, which will have an extremely detrimental impact on Chinese interests. She tries to reduce the tension between the two sides for the several times in order to avoid the worsening of security dilemma in the region, specifically the turmoil in India-Pakistan relations. She also hopes that Pakistan and India are able to solve their long-standing agendas mutually in a peaceful way (Jilali, August 14, 2012). China's help to Pakistan on civilian and military aspects of her nuclear program in 1980s, when China transferred bomb designs and highly enriched uranium, delivery of ballistic missiles and assistance to Pakistan's missile program is continued since then. All this has implicated and escalated the risk of any future war between India and Pakistan.

One of the major concerns of China is United States' growing relations and interference within the region. China has always supported Pakistan's civilian nuclear program and it has been increased in the recent years to implicitly countering to the U.S-India nuclear deal. U.S-India developing ties, especially following the civil nuclear deal poses a long-term threat to the relative supremacy of China's position with reference to build a balancing coalition against India and if US guarantee a continued military and monetary support to Pakistan, Chinese Investments and interests in the region; to reach out in Persian Gulf, Central Asian states and Indian Ocean, will be put in danger. Pakistan's ties with US should not escalate in a sense that it will put in the air China's interests and her own ties in the

region, with risks that China would even be stuck in the middle of a relationship of out-and-out opposition.

Rising instability and extremism in the region are the matters of concern for China and also have the broader impact on Sino-Pakistan economic projects and threats to Chinese citizens in the country, which have intensified. China also wants Pakistan to play an active role in ensuring stability in Afghanistan and to sentinel Chinese interests there for leading up in the aftermath of U.S leaving out from there. In view of the recent developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan's internal stability affairs and U.S withdrawal likely to happen by the end of 2016, the scholars are in favor of Beijing addressing the transnational threats more actively. China's South Asia relationships could weigh up a lot if relations with India worsen or if the security situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan deteriorates more heavily.

## Conclusion

The levitating risks of terrorism and instability in China's Xinjiang province have their roots in South Asia that has heightened China's concerns in the region. China strongly wants that Pakistan needs to take an active part in addressing them. After the U.S withdrawal from Afghanistan, the ramifications and deterioration of internal security structure of Afghanistan can be containable and navigable with the help of Pakistan army. China's large scale infrastructural projects, investments, economic and other resources that she has undertaken with Afghanistan and Pakistan are dicey, if South Asian stability remains alarming. Moreover, China's goals in the region are diplomatic and economic rather than military at one side and her continued aspiration of balancing India on the other. To contain longer standing conflicts in Afghanistan and addressing their concerns can however, be expected to be constructive. China's narrow conception about the menace of terrorism (limited to Uighur separatist groups) has changed recently in Afghanistan—from offering assistance in talks with the Taliban.

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