

Blossoming China-Afghanistan Ties, Deepening Faultlines in Af-Pak

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China recently accepted the credentials of an ambassador appointed by the Taliban dispensation. On December 1, 2023, Assadullah Bilal Karimi – a former Taliban spokesperson -- handed over his credentials to Hong Lei, the director-general of the protocol department of China’s foreign ministry. In doing so, China became the first country to accept an ambassador appointed by the Taliban government.

Afghanistan’s Taliban administration described this as an “important chapter” in the bilateral relationship. This step has been perceived as an important step by observers and as ‘de-facto’ diplomatic recognition of the Taliban dispensation.

China Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin on December 3, 2023, stated that Afghanistan could not be excluded from the international community. Wang Wenbin however flagged the point that for full diplomatic recognition, the Taliban dispensation will have to carry out important political and social reforms. Wang called upon the Taliban to adopt “moderate” domestic and foreign policies and move towards a more “inclusive” political structure. Wang

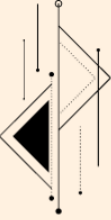
China became the first country to accept an ambassador appointed by the Taliban government. The timing of China accepting the credentials of the Afghan ambassador, appointed by the Taliban, also comes at a time when ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan have witnessed a significant deterioration. While China is likely to engage with Kabul, with an eye on enhancing economic and strategic ties, it cannot ignore the concerns of the international community regarding the Taliban dispensation.

also called upon the Taliban to take a firm stance against terrorism. A few months ago, China became the first country to appoint a new ambassador, Zhao Sheng, in September 2023 after the Taliban took over in 2021. The Taliban had dubbed this as an important decision as an indicator that China was keen to strengthen ties with Afghanistan.

Beijing has also been showing interest in strengthening economic ties with Afghanistan – which is rich in natural resources, especially crude oil and lithium. A contract was signed between the Taliban government and a Chinese oil company, Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) for drilling oil from the Amu Darya Basin in January 2023. The agreement was signed for 25 years. A Chinese company, Gochin also expressed interest in investing \$10 billion in the country’s lithium sector.

Afghanistan to join BRI

Afghanistan had also announced that it would be joining China’s Belt



and Road Initiative (BRI) Project. Discussions regarding Afghanistan's participation have been going on since 2017. During the BRI Forum, held in October 2023, the Taliban's acting Commerce Minister said that Afghanistan had expressed its desire to join the BRI. In May 2023, during the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, all three sides agreed to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan.

It would be pertinent to point out, that Beijing while engaging with Afghanistan has been reiterating the need for the Taliban to take firm action against terror groups and follow moderate policies. In December 2022, the Islamic State Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K, claimed responsibility for a deadly terror attack -- targeted at Chinese nationals -- carried out on a Kabul hotel. Senior Chinese officials have also flagged concerns regarding the security of Chinese nationals in Afghanistan.

Pakistan-Afghan ties

The timing of China accepting the credentials of the Afghan ambassador, appointed by the Taliban, also comes at a time when ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan have witnessed a significant deterioration. Two key factors have been responsible for the same. Firstly, Pakistan recently announced expelling Afghan refugees from the country without legal documents. It is estimated that over 4,00,000 Afghan refugees have left Pakistan since October 1, 2023.

Senior officials of the Taliban government have repeatedly said that this decision would lead to a deterioration of ties. The UN has been

critical of this decision saying it could pose serious crises. Afghanistan's economy faces serious challenges. A staggering 2/3rd of the population (an estimated 29 million) need humanitarian assistance.

Second, Pakistan's repeated claims that terror attacks in Pakistan have increased significantly ever since the Taliban took over has not gone down well with the latter and has led to the deterioration of bilateral ties. Pakistan has accused the Taliban dispensation of sheltering the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, which according to Islamabad has been responsible for terror attacks on Pakistani soil. Last month, Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar stated that terrorist attacks in Pakistan increased by 60 per cent ever since the Taliban took over in 2021.

In conclusion, the decision to accept the credentials of an Afghan diplomat, appointed by the Taliban dispensation is an important step. While China is likely to engage with Kabul, with an eye on enhancing economic and strategic ties, it cannot ignore the concerns of the international community -- flagged earlier -- regarding the Taliban dispensation. Ties between China and Afghanistan are also important from a regional dimension, especially with Afghanistan-Pakistan ties witnessing a downward spiral in recent times.

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