

Geo-økonomiens æra bryder frem: udvidelse af Bælte- og Vejinitiativet til Afghanistan

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På engelsk:

The hasty withdrawal of U.S., British and other North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops from Afghanistan after 20 years of 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 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, which means that a terrible era is potentially ending and a new one is ushered into world politics, overturning decades and centuries of destructive zero-sum geopolitics, "great games" and wars.

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). While there are great risks embedded in the chaotic situation left by NATO in Afghanistan, any peace and reconciliation initiative should contain the reconstruction of the economy as the main item on the agenda.

Following 20 years of military operation by the U.S., Britain and their allies, and with at least 71,000 civilians killed in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, these forces were hastily withdrawn in July and August of this year.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 main antagonists of NATO and the Western-backed government, expanded their control over every part of the country. While 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 and even India were busy arranging a flurry of diplomatic moves to both contain the situation and get the Taliban and the Afghani government in Kabul to talk peace and reconciliation.

The Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi visited several Central Asian capitals in July already to discuss the situation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which includes all the above nations plus other Eurasian nations, held a meeting of its foreign ministers on Afghanistan on July 14 in Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan. Wang Yi said at the meeting, 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 to "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 Afghani factions and groups, making them a suitable broker of peace and reconciliation. Point five urged the SCO 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 this latter point, which was neglected in the past 20 year, while the focus was placed only on the use of military and security measures that have had devastating consequences on the nation and. According to certain estimates, an incredible US\$ 2.2 trillion was spent on this war, while the overall cost of the U.S. wars since 9/11, 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 6 times the amount China invested in the BRI since 2013. But China has built thousands of kilometers of railways and roads, power plants, ports, airports, water management systems, across Eurasia and Africa. It is for this reason the current case of Afghanistan could become an inflection point in current 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 Chief Executive of Afghanistan, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah to China, in May 2016, 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 in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in 2017. However, due to the situation in the country, and obvious 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 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 are 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 dialog.

RECCA, which is mentioned in this joint statement, is an initiative launched by the Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan to agglomerate 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.



Putting Afghanistan on the Belt and Road to Peace and Prosperity

So, the plan is to build a number of development corridors for transport, power, and oil and gas through Afghanistan. There are a number of the projects outlined by the RECCA. One of them is the CASA-1000, the Central Asia South Asia regional electricity market. Turkmenistan is a natural gas-rich country. Iran, too, is a natural gas-rich country and both of

them provide power to Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is dependent on its neighbor countries to provide its electricity, which has not been built in the past 20 years. CASA-1000 includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan as one electric grid. The TAP-500, another electric power line connecting Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan. There is the TAPI, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline, which was backed allegedly by the United States and NATO, but this was used as a geopolitical tool to make sure that the Central Asian countries and the gas- and oil-rich countries avoid working with Russia and Iran and China to get their natural gas outside because they are landlocked countries.

So, the idea was to connect Turkmenistan directly to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, and get the natural gas from there. But this is, in itself, a very useful project, and it also helps to connect Pakistan and India through mutual interest. But it does not exclude building gas pipelines to Russia or to China or through Iran. But reality has its final say, and the Turkmenistan-Central Asia-China natural gas corridor has become one of the most vital gas supply lines in Asia. Iran, Pakistan and India also had their "Peace Pipeline" plans, which the Iranians built all the way to Zahedan on the border with Pakistan. But pressure from the United States did not allow Pakistan to pursue the project. In addition, the conflict between Pakistan and India stopped that project. So, there is no conflict between these different oil and gas pipelines if geopolitics are pushed aside and economic and social considerations are adopted instead.

Today, there is no contradiction between Pakistan benefiting from cooperating with both. The energy requirements of all countries, including India and China are so enormous, that it takes more than one pipeline to meet.

There is also among these infrastructure projects the Five-

Nation Railway (China-Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran), and the corridor from Peshawar (Pakistan) to Kabul and to Dushanbe. Another corridor goes from Peshawar to Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif and into Turkmenistan. There are a number of railways which were built from the neighboring countries; like Iran, which just last year completed the railway from Khaf and Mashhad in Iran to Herat in the northwest of Afghanistan. A corridor should also extend from from Tajikistan to Kunduz. Many regional railways reach the border towns of Afghanistan from the neighboring countries but then stop there, because the missing links are all within Afghanistan itself. In 2016, a train, arrived from Xinjiang in China into Hairatan in northern Afghanistan passing through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In 2019, a freight line was established along this route to China. Therefore, building the missing links inside Afghanistan should become the focus for the reconstruction plans.

In February of this year a strategic agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan for building a 573 km railway from Mazar-e-Sharif, via Kabul to Peshawar, Pakistan, was signed. It will connect with the existing Termez, Uzbekistan – Mazar-e-Sharif cross-border line, which opened in January 2012. This line offers a direct link between Pakistan and the Uzbek capital of Tashkent. The three countries had jointly signed a proposal in December 2020 for plans to seek a \$US 4.8bn loan for the project from global financial institutions. Reportedly, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, European Investment Bank, Islamic Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the International Finance Corporation have all expressed interest in the project. The line will also connect with the 112km Atamyrat, Turkmenistan, – Aqina – Andkhoy cross-border line, linking Turkmenistan with Peshawar.

Surrounded by BRI projects

All the neighbors of Afghanistan are actively involved in the BRI. The CPEC, the flagship of the BRI and the most advanced of the BRI corridors is an important vehicle for bringing the BRI into Afghanistan.

China's relationship to Central Asia has been evolving into a positive direction, especially after the initiation of the BRI by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The Central Asia nations, three of which share borders with Afghanistan, have adapted their national development plans to the BRI. Not only their trade with China has grown massively, many infrastructural and agro-industrial projects are now integral to the BRI and cooperation with China. The SCO, which initially was a security organization, has evolved into an economic cooperation vehicle. The Joint Commission on Facilitation of International Road Transport is one of the important platforms of the SCO, especially on infrastructure matters. There are several China-Central Asian initiatives such as the Sino-Kyrgyz Regional Cooperation Plan (2015-2020), Kazakhstan's Bright Road Initiative, Tajikistan's national development strategy 2030 and Uzbekistan's new development strategy.

Concerning connectivity, China's Xinjiang (Uyghur Autonomous Region) is connected to three main Belt and Road Corridors. These are the CPEC, New Silk Road, and the Eurasian Corridor. But to have an effective connectivity, there is need to upgrade the transport and power infrastructure of China's neighbors to match the fast development of China's own economy and rapid increase in China-Europe trade.

Iran, which shares long borders with Afghanistan to the west, have also consolidated its relationship to China and the BRI for years, but most emphatically through signing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in March 2021, which is an unprecedented economic, trade and strategic cooperation framework extending for 25 years. Iran has also strong economic ties to Afghanistan, and as mentioned above, recently extended an important railway from Khaf in eastern

Iran to Herat in Afghanistan.

Mineral wealth

Afghanistan is rich with rare-earth and other metals like lithium, beryllium and tantalum and others that are necessary for modern electronics and high-technology products. Afghanistan also has very large iron and copper mines.

One good thing the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) did, is a large-scale survey of almost the entirety of the Afghan territories to figure out the different deposits of special minerals and non-oil minerals. The study was completed in 2016 and has been updated several times since then.

The Mes Aynak copper deposit is one of the largest in Asia. A Chinese consortium (China Metallurgical Group) won the bid for developing this mine and producing copper in 2007. However, there were two major problems for pursuing the work. One was the security problem. The Chinese company sites were attacked by militant groups several times. The other problem concerns processing the copper, which required investing in building a 500-Megawatts coal-fired power plant, and a railway to bring coal from the northern part of the country and shipping the produced copper was also necessary. Lack of water, necessity for mining, was also another issue. That meant that the cost of the project as a result of such investments, would be higher than estimated. This meant that expected revenues both for the Chinese company and Afghan government were not as high as first estimated. This led to a dispute which is not resolved yet. But if the security situation is stabilized, and the development corridors are built, the power and transport will be available to utilize these mines more easily.

Water shortage

Afghanistan was a lush garden many centuries ago; but due to periodical long-term climate changes and also all the conflicts that engulfed Afghanistan and the lack of

development much of Afghanistan is quite arid. In Afghanistan, only 67% of the population has access to drinking water, not necessarily tap water. Many have access to drinking water only through wells. The mortality rate in 2004 in Afghanistan for children below the age of five, was 25%, which is a tragically high level. But half of the mortality is related to waterborne disease—so, providing drinking water is a matter of life or death immediately for many, as well as being critical for economic development.

Afghanistan has a number of rivers like the Helmand River, the Amu Darya River, the Kabul River, the Logar and Panjshir, and several other small ones. Because they depend much on snow melting on the mountains, they have large seasonal fluctuations and some of them even dry up in the summer and fall of the year. The water budget of Afghanistan is estimated to be 55-75 billion cubic meters per year. This is approximately what the Egyptians get in the Nile River annually. But the Egyptians get it literally served on a platter. But in Afghanistan, however, to be able to utilize as much as possible of this water budget; that is, instead of it running off and evaporating, there is need to build a massive water management infrastructure system.

One important point in terms of food security is the problem of opium cultivation, which had disappeared under Taliban control prior to 2001, but which increased dramatically under U.S. and NATO control. Afghanistan has become the source of 80% of the opium and heroin in the whole world. It needs support to convert the opium production into food production. The Taliban, upon taking over the capital Kabul on August 17, declared that they will once again eradicate opium cultivation.

Human Resources

The population of Afghanistan is 39 million people, according to 2021 statistics, including three million refugees, mostly

in Iran and Pakistan. But the amazing factor is that 46% of the population of Afghanistan are below the age of 15 years. And only 2.5% of the population of Afghanistan are above the age of 65. So, we have around 80% of the Afghani people are below 30 years of age, which is a very, very young population. And of course, it has enormous aspirations and demands. This population of 37 million is projected to double by 2050.

The concentration of the population in Afghanistan is to the south and to the north of the central mountain barrier. So, this has to be bridged through development corridors in order to connect all the different groups of Afghani population and resources—both water and other resources—together, to create one economic unit. This will naturally contribute to connecting it to the surrounding nations, to create an even larger economic unit.

What the initial support through the Belt and Road should be, is for the reconstruction of the infrastructure of Afghanistan to create the economic platform necessary to enable all those millions of young Afghanis to increase improve their skills and their productivity to utilize the natural resources and land to gain profitability and be able to participate in international trade.

The way forward

On July 28, 2021, Wang Yi met with the visiting delegation led by head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin. While much of the discussion dealt with the future perspectives of reconciliation, peace, stability and preventing terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base to attack China and other neighbors, economic development and reconstruction were key elements of the two sides discussions. Baradar emphasized that the Afghani side hopes that China will be more involved in Afghanistan's peace and reconciliation process and play a bigger role in future reconstruction and economic development. The Afghan

Taliban will also make its own efforts toward fostering an enabling investment environment.

The irony here is that the same Afghanistan, which was a pivot of geopolitics, could suddenly become the springboard to a new era of win-win cooperation rather than zero-sum game politics. Economic cooperation is the gateway to both security and prosperity for all nations, especially Afghanistan the people of which have suffered incredibly in the past 40 years. It is the right time now to put Afghanistan on the Belt and Road to peace. This current crisis carries within it a great opportunity, exactly as the fall of the Berlin Wall presented an opportunity for a new and just world economic order. Unfortunately, that 1989 opportunity was squandered. The world cannot afford to lose another such a unique opportunity.

*In an international conference held on July 31st by the International Schiller Institute, this author and several current and former government officials and nongovernmental think-tank experts presented a wide range of possibilities for reconciliation and reconstruction option for Afghanistan in the context of the BRI.

Artiklen er fra BRIX's hjemmeside.