

ASIA PROGRAM

**THE BEAR, THE DRAGON AND THE ISLAMISTS:
RUSSIA AND CHINA AMBIGUOUS STANCES WITH
REGARD TO THE ISLAMIST MILITANCY THREAT
AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR SOUTH ASIA**

BY NATHAN BAILLEUX

ANALYST, INSTITUT VAUGIRARD, PARIS

JUNE 2019

ASIA FOCUS #115



“Your neighbour is your natural enemy and the neighbour of your neighbour is your friend.” - Vishnugupta Chanakya, heretic Brahmin and one of the first Indian political thinkers.

In February 2019, India nearly took up arms against Pakistan after two Indian warplanes were shot down by the Pakistani Army. India had struck terrorist camps (JeM and/or LeT infrastructure) located in Pakistan after attacks on Indian soil. The crisis eventually de-escalated when Pakistan gave back the captured Indian pilot as a goodwill gesture. But the relationship between the two countries remains tense. Often analysts tend to describe the ISI (Pakistan secret service) as the main supporter of Islamist militancy in South Asia against India. Indeed, ISI-LeT (*“Lashkar-e-Taiba”*), ISI-HuM (*“Harakat-ul-Mujahideen”*) and ISI-IM (*“Indian Mujahideen”*) links were exposed in past attacks. The ambiguous role that Great Powers play regarding Islamist militancy in South Asia will be underlined in this study. Since 2014 and the coalition drawdown in Afghanistan, the Pakistan-China-Russia triangle plays a key role in fuelling or ignoring the Islamist militancy growing threat for the stability of the region. Both Russia and China see inaction regarding this threat as a way to further their national interest in the region. This is an important issue as the region is already plagued by Islamist militancy, from the FATA to Kashmir and Afghanistan where the war between the Ghani regime and the Taliban is a stalemate.

There is thus a regional dimension to the Islamist militancy threat, a disturbing fact as both Moscow and Beijing seem to acknowledge the Pakistani framework making a distinction between ***“good Taliban”*** and ***“bad Taliban”***. There are numerous works on Islamist militancy in South Asia, such as those of Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid and former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel. For an up-to-date analysis on Pakistan, one should read William J. Topich’s *Pakistan: The Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the Rise of Terrorism*. The *“utility-threat matrix”* of Stephen Tankel¹ will be used to describe the various stances Russia and China have regarding Islamist militancy in South Asia:

¹ TANKEL Stephen, “Beyond the Double Game: Lessons from Pakistan’s Approach to Islamist Militancy”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2016 in: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2016.1174114>

- **“Collaborators”** are militant groups closely working with the state to further its national interest.
- **“Benign neglect”**: the militant group may pursue a goal foreign to the national interest of a state, but it is both non-threatening and useless to the state.
- **“Frenemies”**: depending on the circumstances, the militant group can be an ally or an enemy of the state.
- **“Belligerents”** are often characterized as an « *existential threat* », the militant groups in this category are both useless to the state and an active threat to various interests.

Russian and Chinese stances on terrorism since the beginning of the GWOT

Following the 9/11 attacks, China and Russia got “*carte blanche*” by the United States in the context of the “*war on terror*” triggered by George W. Bush’s administration. The American media was more indulgent in the post 9/11 context to the anti-terrorist methods of Moscow and Beijing. Russian attitude after 9/11 allowed Russian officials to pursue the repression of the Chechen insurgents and join the other Western countries after troubled times for Russia. Chinese attitude after 9/11 allowed Chinese officials to show less restraint in their treatment of Uyghur minorities. On the one hand, the Russian counterterrorism framework is based on the Weberian idea of the state as the sole provider of authority and the Hobbesian idea of the state as the sole legitimate user of force. This framework is very close to the EU and U.S. frameworks on terrorism. On the other hand, the Chinese counterterrorism framework defines a struggle against “*three evils*”: terrorism, separatism and extremism. China created the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in order to enforce this conception of security, even though this organization became more of a business forum overtime². Both the Chinese framework and the Russian framework contradict the idea of “*global security*” as defined by George W. Bush’s administration after 9/11, that is to say the idea that the U.S. has to be a provider of security at the global level³. Pleased by the relative consensus between the U.S., Russia

² KELLNER Thierry, « La tranquille montée en puissance de la Chine en Asie centrale », *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2006, p. 153 in: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-internationale-et-strategique-2006-4-page-143.htm>

³ For more details on the Bush doctrine:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/themes/assess.html>

and China regarding the fight against the militants of *“global jihad”*, the U.S. did not pick up the differences between the U.S. framework and the Chinese and Russian frameworks. This eventually proved to be a problem as the *“unending wars”* resumed on a change of security authority (Iraq) or a *“resolute support”* mission (Afghanistan where the NATO troops withdrew in 2014 but where American soldiers are still on the ground). The U.S. discovered that not only Pakistan had its own strategy regarding South Asia, but also that Russia and China were back in the business of furthering their interests there. However, pre-9/11 relationship between Russia and the Taliban on one side, and pre-9/11 relationship between China and the Taliban on the other side, were very different. Russia was wary of a Taliban leadership in Kabul and backed the Northern Alliance against the Taliban along India and Iran⁴. Once in power, the Taliban recognized the free state of Chechnya, a slap in the face for Moscow who went through two costly wars against Chechen rebels. Nevertheless, China pursued its *“business as usual”* policy, promoting trade relations (food aid, military supplies and spare parts) despite international condemnation of the Taliban regime and maintaining a good relationship with the Taliban to secure Xinjiang. The Taliban promised to China that Afghanistan under their rule would not serve as a base for Uyghur extremists. Last but not least, a seal to *“win-win”* relations between the Taliban and China, China was able to buy (in 2000) two U.S. *“Tomahawk”* missiles that did not explode (\$20 million each) from the Taliban. This purchase sped decisively China’s missile program⁵.

The “eye of the storm”: the failure of the multilateral solutions to the Afghan war

If there is one distinct feature of the unending instability in Afghanistan, it is that no multilateral process ever triggered during the fight between the coalition (and then U.S.) forces and the Taliban produced tangible results. The Istanbul process, led by Turkey and including 29 countries, is stalling since 2017⁶. The Istanbul process includes India, Pakistan, China, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan for the neighbour states but also Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia⁷. The

⁴ RASHID Ahmed, *Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond*, IB Tauris, 2001, p. 44-45

⁵ YACINE Jean-Paul, « Le pragmatisme chinois et le borbier afghan », *QuestionChine*, 2014 in:

<https://www.questionchine.net/le-pragmatisme-chinois-et-le-borbier-afghan>

⁶ LINCOT Emmanuel, IHEDN lecture, *Nouvelles routes de la soie : enjeux idéologiques et stratégiques*, 46:35

⁷ YACINE Jean-Paul, « Le pragmatisme chinois et le borbier afghan », *QuestionChine*, op. cit.

Tashkent Conference, organized by Uzbekistan on 26th-27th of March in 2018, brings together 21 states including the EU and the UN but ignores India, a key state for a solution to the Afghan conflict. Iran and Saudi representatives used the conference as a stage for engaging in heated debates on their various proxy wars in the Middle East, a subject that was not planned for the conference. Peace in Afghanistan implies a consensus between powers with such various interests as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Central Asian Republics, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar⁸. As for the Doha process that was reset in 2019, it does not seem to allow an end to combat operations in Afghanistan. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said that the purpose of the Doha process is to establish a departure schedule for the U.S. troops still in Afghanistan and persisted in January 2019 when he claimed that the U.S. will soon leave Afghanistan⁹. At the same time, reduction in troop levels decided by the U.S is only about the structure of the force deployed in Afghanistan and is displayed as not linked to the Doha process¹⁰. It is a sure thing that there are positive dynamics in Afghanistan such as the ceasefire unilaterally declared by President Ghani on June 7, 2018. It was the first ceasefire for the Taliban in 24 years. It broke on June 26, 2018¹¹. There is also the strengthening of the authority of the Kabul regime against the warlords, with the choice of the electoral commission not to allow any warlord to compete in elections and the destitution of numerous warlords from their government offices. This was the case of Atta Mohammed Noor in Balkh province. This strengthening of the central authority against local actors is a first in Afghanistan since the era of the monarchy, from 1943 until Mohammed Daoud Khan's coup in 1973, under Mohammed Zahir Shah of the Mohammadzai dynasty. It was an era of social progress and political freedom¹². Despite those elements, numerous regional powers such as Iran, Russia, Pakistan and China have their own negotiation canal with the Taliban. That does not look too good for Afghanistan's unending war.

⁸ TOLIPOV Farkhod, "The Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan : Too Much Diplomacy, Too Little Solution", *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13521-the-tashkent-conference-on-afghanistan-too-much-diplomacy-too-little-solution.html>

⁹ LEFEUVRE George in: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/cultures-monde/linterminable-guerre-contre-le-terrorisme-13-afghanistan-les-talibans-reprennent-la-main>, 4:55

¹⁰ AL JAZEERA, *US may trim more than 1,000 troops from Afghanistan*, 2019 in: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/trim-1000-troops-afghanistan-190215174031146.html>

¹¹ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, *Taliban Resumption of Fighting Should Not Bury Afghanistan's Peace Process*, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13525-taliban-resumption-of-fighting-should-not-bury-afghanistans-peace-process.html>

¹² KRAUSE Johnathan, *The Age of Warlord Is Coming to an End in Afghanistan*, Jamestown Foundation, Commentaries, 2018 in: <https://jamestown.org/the-age-of-the-warlord-is-coming-to-an-end-in-afghanistan/>

The Indo-Pakistani conflict seems to jump into Afghanistan with India as the second supplier of weapons to Kabul, a fact fuelling tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad¹³. In 2016, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani brought support to the “*surgical strikes*” made by India on JeM terrorist camps in Pakistan and to Narendra Modi’s administration policy to isolate Pakistan due to its support to terrorist attacks in other countries¹⁴. Just like New Delhi, Kabul denies any difference between « *good Taliban* » and « *bad Taliban* ». In 2016, Sediq Seddiqi (Afghan Ministry of the Interior spokesman) declared that all ISKP members are ex-TTP members, adding that the greatest threat is formed by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network and Al-Qaeda¹⁵. India’s meddling in Afghan affairs is intended to protract Islamabad’s capacities for conducting low-key conflicts against India and broaden the scope of the economy¹⁶. In 2012, India spent \$1 billion in economic aid to Afghanistan, with the promise of the same commitment for the years to come. This makes India one of the top five donors for Afghanistan’s reconstruction, far beyond Pakistan. Indian funds are dedicated to health, education, energy and communication infrastructure. India spearheaded the building of the Zaranj-Delaram road connecting the “*Ring Road*” to the Iranian border¹⁷.

When the past is not prologue: Moscow’s strategic calculus regarding the “*Islamic State in Khorasan Province*” (ISKP) and the Taliban in Afghanistan

Moscow’s support to the Taliban is unexpected as 30 years ago the 40th Soviet Army was driven out of Afghanistan by an insurgency made of secular and Islamist armed groups. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader and founding member deceased in 2013, was a “*mudjahideen*” commander during the Soviet-Afghan war. Moscow’s strategic calculus has to be replaced in the context of the unending instability in Afghanistan since the drawdown of coalition troops in 2014¹⁸. The war between the Afghan security forces and

¹³ VANDAMNE Dorothée, « Inde/Pakistan : la paix improbable ? », *Areion24News*, 2019 in: <https://www.arenion24.news/2019/02/27/inde-pakistan-la-paix-improbable/>

¹⁴ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, “Sudha, Pakistan to repatriate Afghan refugees”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13426-pakistan-to-repatriate-afghan-refugees.html>

¹⁵ KAURA Vinay, “Russia’s Changing Relations with Pakistan and Taliban : Implications for India”, *Jadavpur Journal of IR*, 22 (1), 2018, p. 58-79 in : <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0973598418761727?journalCode=jnra>

¹⁶ MITTON John, “The India-Pakistan rivalry and failure in Afghanistan”, *International Journal*, Vol. 69 (3), 2014, p. 370 in : <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0020702014540281>

¹⁷ MITTON John, “The India-Pakistan rivalry and failure in Afghanistan”, *International Journal*, Vol. 69 (3), 2014, p. 363 in : <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0020702014540281>

¹⁸ JOSHI Nirmala et SHARMA Raj Kumar, “India-Russian Relations in a Changing Eurasian Perspective”, *India Quarterly*, 73 (1), 2017, p. 48 in : <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0974928416683056>

the Taliban is a stalemate. It is a war of gains always undone by the adversary, creating an unending conflict. For instance, Kunduz in the North of Afghanistan was occupied alternately by Taliban forces and Afghan Security Forces in 2015 and 2016.¹⁹ Between the beginning of 2015 and the end of 2016, the Taliban went from the control of 2 districts in Helmand province to the control of 5 districts in Helmand Province²⁰. The summer of 2015 saw the harshest fights between the security forces and the Taliban since 2001²¹. In September 2016, the Taliban did not capture new cities in Helmand and Uruzgan provinces in the South and went through a lot of losses in Kunduz, Takhar and Baghlân provinces in the North²². In October 2016, the Taliban refused Kabul's diplomatic openings and increased the scale of their operations in Uruzgan and in other provinces²³. In November 2017, the territory under Taliban control was assessed at 40% of Afghanistan and one third of the people²⁴. In 2018, the fighting between the security forces and the Taliban did not start in the spring as usual but a little before that²⁵. Aiming to secure their southern flank against the spill over of Islamism, Russian officials have opened a channel to the Afghan Taliban to counter the ISKP threat (subgroup of the Islamic State for Afghanistan, led by Abu Mohammed Al-Adnani²⁶). Indeed, the group was active in Faryab, Helmand and Nangahar provinces in May 2015²⁷. In 2015, Zamir Kabulov (President Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan) recognized that Taliban interests and Russian interests "*objectively coincided*"²⁸. In 2017, Kabulov announced publicly that

¹⁹ AL JAZEERA, *Taliban storms major city in western Afghanistan*, 2018, 1:00 in:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgTpBqUsw04>

²⁰ SIDDIQUE Abubakar, *Taliban Victories in Helmand Province Prove Test for Afghan Government*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2016 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-victories-in-helmand-province-prove-test-for-afghan-government/>

²¹ DALY John C.K., "The death of Mullah Mansour and the future of the Taliban", *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2016 in: <https://cacionalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13368-the-death-of-mullah-mansour-and-the-future-of-the-taliban.html>

²² RAHMANI Waliullah, *The Taliban's "Double Act": Will the New Leadership Strategy End Infighting in the Group?* Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2016 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/talibans-double-act-will-new-leadership-strategy-end-infighting-group/>

²³ SIDDIQUE Abubakar, *Our Kind of Warlord: Afghanistan's Deal With Gulbuddin Hekmatyar*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2016 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/kind-warlord-afghanistans-deal-gulbuddin-hekmatyar/>

²⁴ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, "Are We Seeing the Beginning of ISIS-Taliban Collaboration in Afghanistan?", *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacionalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13482-are-we-seeing-the-beginning-of-isis-taliban-collaboration-in-afghanistan?.html>

²⁵ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, "Taliban and ISKP Attacks Foreshadows Violent Year in Afghanistan", *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in: <https://www.cacionalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13502-suds-ramachandran.html>

²⁶ BARR Nathaniel, *Wilayat Khorasan Stumbles in Afghanistan*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2016 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/wilayat-khorasan-stumbles-in-afghanistan/>

²⁷ SORUSH Shahrayar, *Resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan's North*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2016 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/resurgent-taliban-in-afghanistans-north/>

²⁸ JOSHI Nirmala et SHARMA Raj Kumar, "India-Russian Relations in a Changing Eurasian Perspective India-Russian Relations in a Changing Eurasian Perspective", *India Quarterly*, 73 (1), 2017, p. 42 in: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0974928416683056>

Russia was going to negotiate with the Taliban, who therefore were not the number 1 enemies of Moscow anymore²⁹. In order to understand Moscow's change of mind, one has to take into account the huge funds raised by the ISKP (\$271 million in 2016³⁰) and the agreement between China, Pakistan and Russia about the need for action against ISKP at a tripartite summit in December 2016. In April 2016, U.S. officials accused Russia of secretly arming the Taliban³¹. Russia shares the intelligence collected by its security services with the Taliban since 2013³². The general offensive by the Taliban against ISKP forces in Darzab District in November 2018 has been linked to Russian support³³.

Russia, China and Pakistan agree on the fact that there are “*good terrorists*” and “*bad terrorists*”. Islamabad has been and still is Beijing's entry point in Afghanistan to counter India³⁴. In return, Beijing is silent about the issue of FATA's borders porosity, letting Taliban fighters have sanctuary in Pakistan slip to Afghanistan to fight Afghan security forces. ³⁵ Tehran and Moscow are heavily committed in Afghan affairs. In 2010, testimonies from low-level Taliban commanders shed a light on the training of Taliban fighters to the use of IEDs by Iran³⁶. Since November 2013, Iran holds a lot of talks with the Taliban in order to counter Pakistani and Saudi influence in Afghanistan. ³⁷ Iran is accused by Afghan military officials of arming the Taliban operating in Western Afghanistan against ISKP, which is explanatory of the low presence of ISKP in this area³⁸. At the end, Moscow's and Tehran's support to the Taliban could backfire as they offer

²⁹ LEFEUVRE George in: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/culturesmonde>, 36:05

³⁰ PALIWAL Avinash, *New Alignments, Old Battlefield: Revisiting India's Role in Afghanistan*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, p. 3 in: <https://carnegieindia.org/2017/06/15/new-alignments-old-battlefield-revisiting-india-s-role-in-afghanistan-pub-71272>

³¹ PALIWAL Avinash, *New Alignments, Old Battlefield: Revisiting India's Role in Afghanistan*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, p. 4 in: <https://carnegieindia.org/2017/06/15/new-alignments-old-battlefield-revisiting-india-s-role-in-afghanistan-pub-71272>

³² BLANK Stephen, “What Drives Russo-Pakistan Relations and Where Are They Going?”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13463-what-drives-russo-pakistan-relations-and-where-are-they-going?.html>

³³ RAHMANI Waliullah, *The Taliban Takes On Islamic State: Insurgents Vie for Control of Northern Afghanistan*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2018 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-taliban-takes-on-islamic-state-insurgents-vie-for-control-of-northern-afghanistan/>

³⁴ DANJOU François, «Diplomatie chinoise et méfiances indiennes», *QuestionChine*, 2013 in: <https://www.questionchine.net/diplomatie-chinoise-et-mefiances-indiennes>

³⁵ DANJOU François, «Quel rôle pour la Chine en Afghanistan?», *QuestionChine*, 2010 in: <https://www.questionchine.net/quel-role-pour-la-chine-en-afghanistan?artpage=3-3>

³⁶ BAKIER Abdul Hameed, *Taliban Spokesman Discusses Relations with al-Qaeda and Opium Production in Afghanistan*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2010 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-spokesman-discusses-relations-with-al-qaeda-and-opium-production-in-afghanistan/>

³⁷ ZAMBELIS Chris, *The Day After: Iran's Quiet Taliban Diplomacy Reflects Preparations for a Post-U.S. Afghanistan*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2013 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-day-after-irans-quiet-taliban-diplomacy-reflects-preparations-for-a-post-u-s-afghanistan/>

³⁸ SIDDIQUE Abubakar, *Iran Ramps Up Support to Taliban in Western Afghanistan*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2018 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-ramps-up-support-to-taliban-in-western-afghanistan/>

more options for dialogue to the Taliban³⁹. Moscow ensures by helping the Taliban that the Afghan government remains weak, in order to keep a voice on the Afghan political scene. Kabulov openly admitted during the tripartite conference of December 2016 that Russia has no peace plan for Afghanistan⁴⁰. The fact that Russia props up the Taliban shows that president Putin has a policy for gaining ground in South Asia. This is partly encouraged by the fact that Moscow is at the same time seeing new opportunities in Central Asia⁴¹. The OCS brings together 25% of the world's oil reserves, 50% of the world's gas reserves, 35% of the world's coal reserves and 50% of the world's uranium reserves⁴². Moreover, the OSC, having Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, India and Pakistan as members, brings together 40% of the world's population, 20% of the world's GDP and 4 nuclear-weapon states. But there is no unifying status between its members and the OSC faces the challenge of the emerging U.S. / India bloc⁴³. The intentions of the members of this so-called security organization are diverging. Russia and the Central Asian Republics are aligned on the security level while Pakistan uses the SCO to increase its weak trade relations with the member states. The sole exception is China who already enjoys privileged access to Pakistani markets. With the continuing support on the part of Beijing (holding a vote in the Security Council) to the subversive actions of Pakistan into India as long as they have no consequences on Chinese interests, Central Asia is more and more an area of competition between Chinese, Pakistani and Indian interests. This has consequences inside the OSC. ⁴⁴ India is pursuing in the OSC a

³⁹ PALIWAL Avinash, *New Alignments, Old Battlefield: Revisiting India's Role in Afghanistan*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, p. 5 in: <https://carnegieindia.org/2017/06/15/new-alignments-old-battlefield-revisiting-india-s-role-in-afghanistan-pub-71272>

⁴⁰ BLANK Stephen, "Moscow's Double Game in Afghanistan", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2016 in: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2016.1174114>

⁴¹ MINZARARI Dumitru, *US Retreat from Afghanistan Opens New Strategic Opportunities for Russia in Central Asia*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2019 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/us-retreat-from-afghanistan-opens-new-strategic-opportunities-for-russia-in-central-asia/>

⁴² QUESTIONCHINE (LA RÉDACTION), *Le « Grand Jeu » global. Inversion des normes stratégiques. Réalités économiques et incertitudes*, 2016 in: <https://www.questionchine.net/le-grand-jeu-global-inversion-des-normes-strategiques-realites-economiques-et?artpage=2-2>

⁴³ AHMAD Naveed, "India's and Pakistan's Memberships Diminishes SCO's Ability to Compete with NATO", *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13457-india-s-and-pakistan-s-memberships-diminishes-sco-s-ability-to-compete-with-nato.html>

⁴⁴ BLANK Stephen, "The India-China Clash and the Expanded SCO", *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13476-the-india-china-clash-and-the-expanded-sco.html>

policy of isolating Pakistan⁴⁵. This with the utmost support of Afghan President Ghani.⁴⁶ At last, in a context where Moscow has means only to project its military forces in Central Asia, and not anywhere in the world like the U.S. Army (Russia has only 1 aircraft carrier⁴⁷), and where Moscow is threatened both by NATO military exercises in Europe and elsewhere by the U.S. (risks of escalation in Venezuela and Iran⁴⁸), it is more likely that President Putin will use the Russia-China-Pakistan forum than the OSC in a region that he considers to be its **“backyard”** (cf. Soviet legacy).⁴⁹ After Trump’s harsh words against Pakistan in August 2017, we witness regional balancing games with the intervention of Kabulov to defend Islamabad. Kabulov argued that putting too much pressure on Pakistan would have consequences for the stability of the region and for Afghanistan.⁵⁰ With the withholding of \$255 million in aid from Pakistan (2 January 2018) and the suspension of U.S. security assistance to Pakistan for **“failure to combat terrorism”** (4 January 2018)⁵¹, Pakistan will likely make more diplomatic openings to Russia. This would be a unique opportunity for Moscow that would also find here a way to repair its difficult relationship with China, for example on the topic of Central Asia. China is already continuing its **“one step at a time”** policy towards Pakistan. Farhan Zahid noted that China’s participation in Muree’s peace negotiations (Chinese-led Afghanistan peace process) in July 2015 was a key initiative that, if continued, would deal a heavy blow to U.S. influence in Pakistan⁵². Since the end of 2014, China acts as an honest broker in the negotiations between the

⁴⁵ ZEB Rizwan, “Pakistan in the SCO: Challenges and Prospects”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13496-pakistan-in-the-sco-challenges-and-prospects.html>

⁴⁶ ZEB Rizwan, *Why Isolating Pakistan Will Not Solve Kabul’s Problems*, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13461-why-isolating-pakistan-will-not-solve-kabuls-problems.html>

⁴⁷ GOBLE Paul, *Will Moscow Open New Military Bases Beyond the Borders of the Former Soviet Union?*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2019 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/will-moscow-open-new-military-bases-beyond-the-borders-of-the-former-soviet-union/>

⁴⁸ See Bolton’s message for the 40th anniversary of the revolution, BENARI Ali, *Bolton to Khamenei: You won’t have many more anniversaries*, Arutz Sheva, 2019 in: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/258922>

⁴⁹ FELGENHAUER Pavel, *Moscow Sees Threat Multiplying Everywhere*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2019, in : <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-sees-threats-multiplying-everywhere/>

⁵⁰ KAURA Vinay, *Russia’s Changing Relations with Pakistan and Taliban: Implications for India*, *Jadavpur Journal of IR*, 22 (1), 2018, p. 69 in: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0973598418761727?journalCode=jnra>

⁵¹ BALLOTPEDIA, *Federal Policy on Afghanistan, 2017-2020*, in: https://ballotpedia.org/Federal_policy_on_Afghanistan_2017-2020#Trump_administration_on_Afghanistan

⁵² ZAHID Farhan, *Pakistan: Should New U.S. Afghanistan Strategy Concern Militant Leaders?*, Jamestown Foundation, Militant Leadership Monitor, 2017 in: <https://jamestown.org/brief/pakistan-should-new-u-s-afghanistan-strategy-concern-militant-leaders/>

Taliban and the Kabul regime by trying to bring them to the negotiating table. Taliban delegations are said to have made trips to Beijing⁵³.

Global struggle for economic influence and China's rising number of « soft targets »

By financing multiple infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, New Delhi aims at the establishment of an economic corridor going through Afghanistan and Iran until Chabahar Port. This port is funded by India to compete with the deep-sea port of Gwadar in Pakistan backed by Chinese loans in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)⁵⁴. In January 2018, the transit agreement signed between India, Afghanistan and Iran is implemented. Afghanistan decreased its economic dependency to Pakistan thanks to this initiative, with a fall from 60% of its imports going through Pakistan (2008-2009) to 30% of its imports going through Pakistan (2016)⁵⁵. In February 2013, Beijing launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with the beginning of a vast project of infrastructure building split in 9 panels and amounting to \$1,8 billion in Chinese investments to develop the Gwadar port. The corridor as a whole amounts to \$18 billion, with an aim of connecting the city of Kashgar in North-western China to the Gwadar port with a vast network of roads and railroads going through the restive provinces of Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan. Here it should be noted that CPEC is not only the expression of the “*all-weather relationship*” between Pakistan and China but that India was also approached for this project by Beijing with an offer of funding for 30% of the Indian five-year plan for the refurbishing of infrastructure⁵⁶. China definitely has the upper hand on the economic field because it also has important trade relations with Iran. China is the first trade partner of Iran and continued to exchange with this country during international sanctions. Iran's Chabahar Port may be less modern, but Iran has to offer

⁵³ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, “China's Peacemaking Between Pakistan and Afghanistan”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13468-chinas-peacemaking-between-pakistan-and-afghanistan.html>

⁵⁴ KENDERLINE Tristan, “Afghanistan-Iran Trade Corridors to Bear Fruit for Both India and China”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13527-afghanistan-iran-trade-corridors-to-bear-fruit-for-both-india-and-china.html>

⁵⁵ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, “Iran's Chabahar Port Empowers India-Afghanistan Trade at Pakistan's Expense”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13492-irans-chabahar-port-empowers-india-afghanistan-trade-at-pakistans-expense.html>

⁵⁶ DALY John C.K., *India Unsettled by Proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Through Kashmir*, Jamestown Foundation, 2014 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/india-unsettled-by-proposed-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-through-kashmir/>

less steep and more secure regions for an economic corridor⁵⁷. CPEC is going through Kashmir, a region that could be the new starting point for a war between India and Pakistan, and terrorist groups are under control but not wiped out from the region⁵⁸. In May 2017, during the BRI summit, China and Pakistan signed a **“Memorandum of Understanding”** adding to the already pledged by Beijing \$46 billion a network of roads, railroads and energy plants. In April 2018, China has pledged a total of \$57 billion in the CPEC⁵⁹. Islamabad and Beijing interests are coming together with the aim of Islamabad to construct a South-North economic corridor to Central Asia going through an Afghanistan that would be a buffer state against India. China can bring a much-needed help to Islamabad as it is responsible for the important increase in connectivity in the Central Asian Republics with the building of the Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtam, Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart (Kyrgyzstan) and Dushanbe-Chanak (Tajikistan) axis⁶⁰. India is keeping a close look on the BRI, seen as a means for China to exclude India from Central Asia⁶¹. The Chinese railroad-building campaign in Central Asia is modifying a key historical legacy of Soviet rule in Central Asia, that is to say the interlocking aspects of Russian and Central Asian economies. At the time of Soviet rule, all the main roads, railroads and pipelines began in the Central Asian Republics to reach Russia, a situation that is slowly but surely changing due to China’s ambitious BRI⁶². The vulnerability of the BRI to terrorist attacks emerged without delay⁶³. On August 30, 2016, the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan was targeted by a suicide attack. In June 2017, the CPEC also proved to be highly sensitive with the beheading of two Chinese workers in Pakistan by members of **“Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-almi”** (ISIS-affiliated group). In June 2017, during the peace and

⁵⁷ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, “China eyes Iran’s potential as a trade corridor”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2016 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13364-china-eyes-irans-potential-as-a-trade-corridor.html>

⁵⁸ KAW Mushtaq A., “The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Between Hope and Fear”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13440-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-between-hope-and-fear.html>

⁵⁹ BLANK Stephen, “A Chinese Base in Central Asia”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13440-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-between-hope-and-fear.html>

⁶⁰ SHAHBAZOV Fuad, “China – Pakistan Economic Corridor : An Opportunity for Central Asia”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13450-china---pakistan-economic-corridor-an-opportunity-for-central-asia?.html>

⁶¹ IDAN Avinoam, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative : Relieving Landlocked Central Asia”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13510-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-relieving-landlocked-central-asia.html>

⁶² WEITZ Richard, *Afghanistan in China’s Emerging Eurasian Transport Corridor*, Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, 2010 in: <https://jamestown.org/program/afghanistan-in-chinas-emerging-eurasian-transport-corridor/>

⁶³ CLARKE Michael, “The Belt and Road Initiative and China’s Xinjiang Dilemma : « Connectivity » Versus Control ?”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2017, in: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13458-the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-china’s-xinjiang-dilemma-“connectivity”-versus-control?.html>

security conference in Kabul, Beijing reasserted its will to cooperate with all actors in the region to find a solution to the Afghan conflict. But, and that is new, China does not rule out the possibility of a military action in Afghanistan anymore. This is a direct message to Pakistan, India and the U.S. and indicates a clear break-up with the principle of non-interference from the Maoist era⁶⁴.

The problem of terrorism is extremely intricate. The JeKH, a group led by ISIS and a wanted member of the “*Indian Mujahideen*” (Pakistani proxy) named Shafi Amar is active in the Southwestern Indian states: Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra⁶⁵. In May 2006, ISI officials said they had proofs of India’s implication in the arming and funding of the « *Balochistan Liberation Army* » (BLA, ethno-nationalist group) and of the « *Balochistan Liberation Front* » (BLF, another ethno-nationalist group).⁶⁶ On May 18, 2008, Pakistan accused India of training and arming BLA insurgents in order to organize sabotage actions in Balochistan. Pakistan also accuses Afghanistan of funnelling money and military supplies sent by India to the BLA in Pakistan⁶⁷. On April 4, 2008, Pervez Musharraf was certain that Indian embassies in Afghanistan served as intelligence collecting centres on Pakistan and supported rebels in Balochistan province⁶⁸. In 2010, troubles were so intense in the Gilgit region that analysts supposed China announced it could choose it as a passage for the IPI pipeline only to get leverage for the Siberia-China pipeline, and not out of interest for the region⁶⁹. In January and February 2013, then in March and October 2014, terrorist groups linked to Al-Qaeda launched attacks against Shia civilians and security forces in Balochistan⁷⁰. In 2016, Pakistani officials accused Indian secret services (RAW) and Afghan secret services (NDS) of helping the insurgents plan their attacks in Balochistan. As it often unfolds in Pakistan, this announcement

⁶⁴ DANJOU François, « Chine – États-Unis, la variable indienne, la stratégie de l’esclandre et les risques de riposte chinoise », *QuestionChine*, 2017 in: <https://www.questionchine.net/chine-etats-unis-la-variable-indienne-la-strategie-de-l-esclandre-et-les-risques-de>

⁶⁵ ROUL Animesh, *Islamic State-Inspired Extremist Threat Looms Large in India*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2019 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-inspired-extremist-threat-looms-large-in-india/>

⁶⁶ NIAZI Tarique, *Afghanistan and Pakistan Face Threat of Talibanization*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2006 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/afghanistan-and-pakistan-face-threat-of-talibanization/>

⁶⁷ NIAZI Tarique, *The Geostrategic Implications of the Baloch Insurgency*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, 2006 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/the-geostrategic-implications-of-the-baloch-insurgency/>

⁶⁸ SCHEUER Michael, *India’s Strategic Challenge in Pakistan’s Afghan Hinterland*, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Focus, 2008 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/indias-strategic-challenge-in-pakistans-afghan-hinterland/>

⁶⁹ BLANK Stephen, *Will China Join the Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline ?*, Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, 2010 in : <https://jamestown.org/program/will-china-join-the-iran-pakistan-india-pipeline/>

⁷⁰ DANJOU François, « Le Pakistan, premier souci stratégique de Pékin. Les faces cachées de l’alliance », *QuestionChine*, 2015 in: <https://www.questionchine.net/le-pakistan-premier-souci-strategique-de-pek-in-les-faces-cachees-de-l-alliance>

embodies power games between the government and the officials in the provinces that are often detrimental to the counter-insurgency effort. The “**National Counter Terrorism Authority**” (NACTA) established as an agency to crush the armed groups exists only by name and half of its funds were cut in 2016⁷¹. In Balochistan, the isolation of a port with bad connectivity to the rest of the country which is itself barren and not populous (6 million inhabitants), a remoteness from Pakistani power centres (Punjab and Sindh provinces) and various insurgent movements concurs to make the CPEC fail⁷². Islamist groups and the BLA are active in the centre and South Baluchistan to derail the CPEC⁷³. In September 2016, Pakistan started to train a special unit to protect Chinese citizens working in the region, the « **Special Security Division** » (SSD) amounting to 9000 soldiers and 6000 paramilitaries⁷⁴. Gilgit-Baltistan, the second hotspot through which the CPEC is going through, is claimed by India and the scene of suicide bombings committed by the Sunni minority against the Shia majority. In March 2018, Afghan President Ghani said 21 international terrorist groups are active in his country. This is not without links to the unrest in FATA, in Gilgit-Baltistan, and in Balochistan⁷⁵. In March 2019 at the UN, China blocked for the fourth time a resolution from the Security Council supported by the U.S., the United Kingdom and France⁷⁶ to place Masood Azhar (JeM leader) on the list of international terrorists having links with ISIS. Masood Azhar is the author of the attack that brought the escalation between New Delhi and Islamabad in February 2019. This action undertaken by China materialize the approval of the Pakistani typology of Islamist armed groups divided between “**good terrorists**” and “**bad terrorists**”. China also develops its cooperation with Saudi Arabia that is funding Gwadar Port. Tehran fears that the Saudi presence in the region is aimed at supporting Iran’s Balochistan separatists, who find sanctuary in the Pakistani part of Balochistan. The ambiguous relationship between

⁷¹ ZEB Rizwan, “Balochistan attacked again : what is Islamabad thinking ?”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2016 in : <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13411-balochistan-attacked-again-what-is-islamabad-thinking.html>

⁷² YACINE Jean-Paul, « Ambiguïtés sino-pakistanaïses », *QuestionChine*, 2011 in : <https://www.questionchine.net/ambiguites-sino-pakistanaïses>

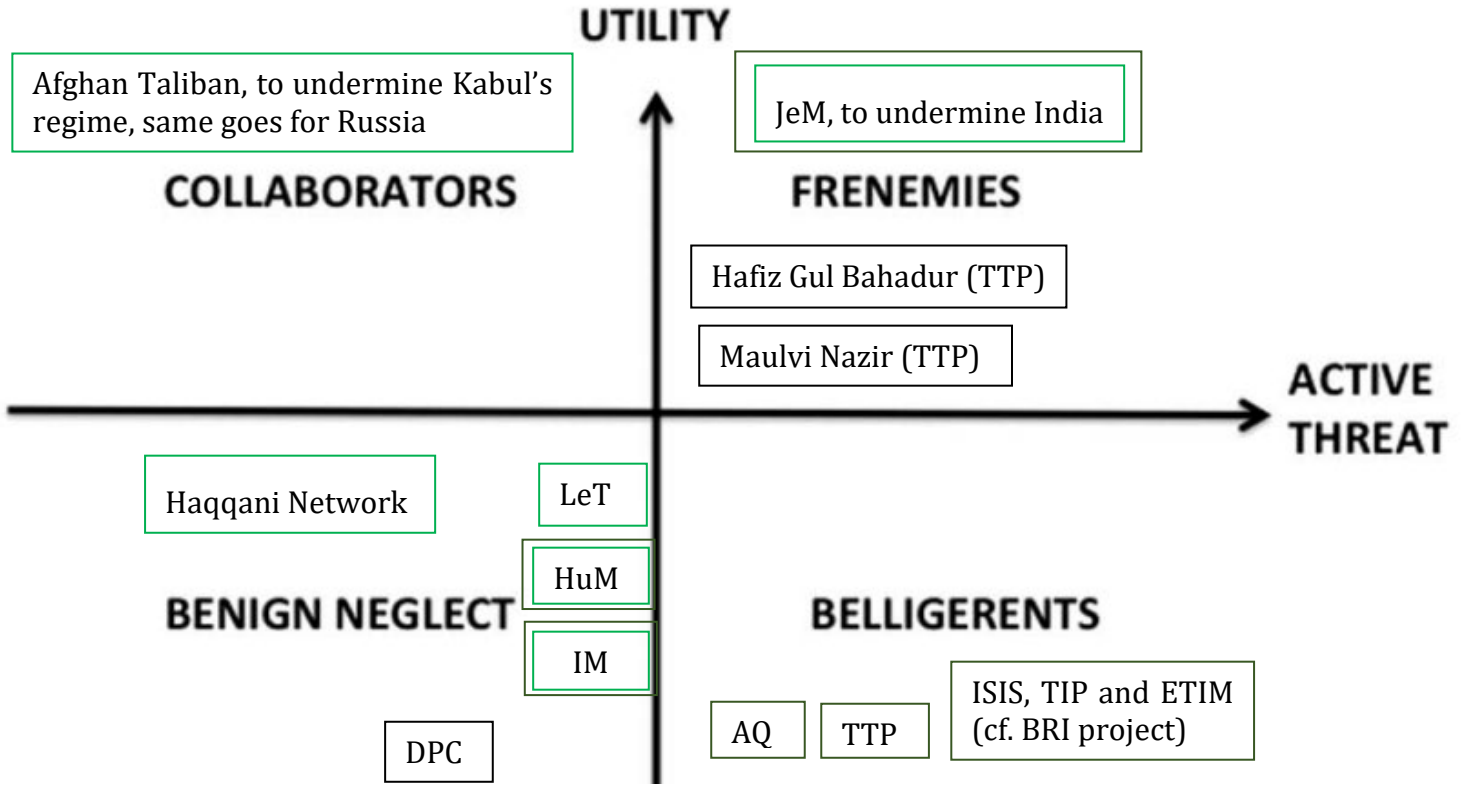
⁷³ YACINE Jean-Paul, « Fan Changlong n°1 de l’APL au Pakistan », *QuestionChine*, 2015 in : <https://www.questionchine.net/fan-changlong-no1-de-l-apl-au-pakistan>

⁷⁴ RAMACHANDRAN Sudha, “Unrest in Gilgit-Baltistan and the China-Pakistan economic corridor”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2016 in : <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13396-unrest-in-gilgit-baltistan-and-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor.html>

⁷⁵ DALY John C.K., “China to Provide Military Assistance to Afghanistan’s Badakhshan Province”, *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 2018 in : <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13501-china-to-provide-military-assistance-to-afghanistans-badakhshan-province.html>

⁷⁶ CNN-NEWS 18, *Diplomatic Win For India: US, UK & France Ask UN To Blacklist JeM Leader Masood Azhar*, 2019 in : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOMver6RYEE>

Masood Azhar and China is thus a threat to New Delhi. But it is also a threat to Islamabad in the long run because it is likely that Azhar will turn his weapons against Islamabad and that China will ask more concessions for its vote in the Security Council⁷⁷. Below, the utility/threat matrix is used to assess the status of each group towards China (and Russia if specified)⁷⁸.



Graph Legend.

- NAME OF THE ARMED GROUP
- NAME(S) OF THE ARMED GROUP(S)
- Armed groups benefiting from ISI support
- Armed groups following «Salafist-Takfiri» jihadism, committed to «global jihad»

⁷⁷ DANJOU François, « Mohammed Ben Salman, la Chine, l'ONU, Masood Azhar, l'Asie du Sud et l'Iran », *QuestionChine*, 2019 in: <https://www.questionchine.net/mohammed-ben-salman-la-chine-l-onu-masood-azhar-l-asie-du-sud-et-l-iran>

⁷⁸ TANKEL Stephen, *Beyond...*, 2016, p. 15 in: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2016.1174114>

ASIA FOCUS #115

THE BEAR, THE DRAGON AND THE ISLAMISTS : RUSSIA AND CHINA AMBIGUOUS STANCES WITH REGARD TO THE ISLAMIST MILITANCY THREAT AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR SOUTH ASIA

BY NATHAN BAILLEUX / ANALYST AT THE INSTITUT VAUGIRARD, PARIS

JUNE 2019

ASIA FOCUS

Collection supervised by Barthélémy COURMONT, research director at IRIS, lecturer at the Université Catholique de Lille, and Emmanuel LINCOT, professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris – UR “Religion, culture and society” (EA 7403) and Sinologist.

courmont@iris-france.org – emmanuel.lincot@gmail.com

ASIA PROGRAM

Supervised by Barthélémy COURMONT, research director at IRIS, lecturer at the Université Catholique de Lille.

courmont@iris-france.org

© IRIS

All rights reserved

THE FRENCH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC AFFAIRS

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

@InstitutIRIS

www.iris-france.org