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Impact of Factional Differences within the Afghan Taliban on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

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Abstract: In August 2021, the Afghan Taliban made a comeback and regained power in Afghanistan. The Atta organization has always shown a united image to the outside world, but since the Atta regained power so far, the differences between the factions within the Atta have gradually emerged, and the factions have fallen out with each other due to power struggles and resource grabbing, which has seriously impeded the development of Afghanistan and caused the spillover of the terrorist organization's power. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), promotes the common development of China and Pakistan and witnesses the establishment of friendship between the two countries. As a neighboring country of Afghanistan, the internal factional differences of Atta organization will affect Pakistan's internal security and stability, meanwhile, these will hinder the construction and development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; Afghanistan; Taliban; factional differences;

1. Introduction:

Since August 15, 2021, the Afghan Taliban (hereinafter referred to as “Atta”) has returned to power for three years. Relying on the support of different tribes and different organizations, Atta has successfully occupied Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and become the new ruling government of Afghanistan. Since the Taliban is composed of ethnic groups from different tribes with different socio-cultural ideologies, the various policies implemented during Atta's rule will always generate disagreements within the Taliban. In May 2023, the relevant heads of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan held the Fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Tripartite Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Islamabad, reaffirming that the three countries will cooperate under the framework of the Belt and Road, and pushed forward planning for the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan. The extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan faces different obstacles and difficulties, among which the internal factional struggle of the Taliban is one of the hindering factors. There are more studies on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) at home and abroad, but they are mainly from the perspective of Pakistan's domestic security, politics and economy, and the impact of the CPEC project on Pakistan's domestic affairs, while there are few studies on Afghanistan's relationship with the CPEC and the challenges and risks faced by the extension of the CPEC to Afghanistan. This paper will start from the perspective of the internal factional struggle of the Afghan Taliban, analyzing what factions and disagreements currently exist in the internal factions of the Atta, and analyze those factional disagreements from those aspects that impede the development and construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, in order to make up for the lack of academic research on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Afghanistan.

2. Ten years of achievements in building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project has entered its 11th anniversary this year. Over the past 10 years, the construction of the corridor has made great construction achievements, and at the same time, it has also promoted closer exchanges and cooperation between China and Pakistan. The construction of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched in 2013, which is mainly divided into three phases of construction and has now entered a new phase of development. Looking back at the 10th anniversary of the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, a brief overview of the impact of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project on the two countries can be made at two levels.

First of all, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project has promoted the development of Pakistan's domestic economy and society. In 2015, the Chinese and Pakistani governments signed more than 50 cooperation agreements, identifying the “1+4” and cooperation layout centered on the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, with the Gwadar port, energy, infrastructure construction, and industrial cooperation as the four main focuses, and

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putting the construction of the corridor and the development of Pakistan on a fast track.^[1] Corridor construction and Pakistan's development into the fast lane. In the first phase of construction, it has promoted the rise of domestic employment level in Pakistan, in which the largest infrastructure project under the Corridor Project, Peshawar-Karachi Expressway (Sukkur-Multan section), has absorbed the employment of 9,800 Pakistani workers, and the Karakorum Highway Upgrading Phase II has created 2,071 local jobs. In addition to direct employment, the corridor projects have created thousands of indirect jobs, bringing prosperity to local industries such as construction and services.^[2] The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project also promotes the development of education in China and Pakistan. China and Pakistan have established vocational training centers in Balochistan. About 50 professional colleges are known to have been established in Balochistan alone. Students from Balochistan have also been given scholarships to study in China. Today, nearly 28,000 Pakistani students are enrolled in Chinese colleges and universities, making it the third largest group of international students in Chinese colleges and universities after South Korean (50,600 students) and Thai students (28,603 students).^[3]

Second, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has promoted the establishment of an all-weather strategic cooperative relationship between China and Pakistan and is a flagship project for building a community of destiny between China and Pakistan. On July 31, 2023, President Xi Jinping sent a letter to congratulate the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the launching of the CPEC, which was held in Islamabad, Pakistan. Xi pointed out that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is an important pilot project of the Belt and Road Initiative. Since its launch in 2013, the two countries have adhered to the principle of joint construction and sharing to promote the construction of the corridor, resulting in a number of early harvests, adding new impetus to Pakistan's economic and social development, and laying a good foundation for regional connectivity and integration. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has become a vivid interpretation of the all-weather friendship between China and Pakistan, and has provided important support for the two countries to build a closer China-Pakistan community of destiny in the new era.^[4]

Finally, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project has promoted exchanges and cooperation among the three countries. On May 9, 2023, the foreign ministers of China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan held the fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Islamabad, which the three sides agreed to promote China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral cooperation under the framework of the "One Belt, One Road", and to push forward the extension of the CPEC to Afghanistan.^[5] The extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan will promote the development of Afghanistan's domestic economy and the cooperation between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, the current contradictions of Atta's internal organization and the insecurity of Afghanistan's social situation will hinder the construction and development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

3. Main factions within the Afghan Taliban

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban made a comeback and became the interim government of Afghanistan. Since seizing power, there have been attempts within Atta to create a highly centralized system of government by directly appointing local chiefs from Kabul, who are predominantly from the Pashtun population, a decision that has upset the existing balance of power between local commanders and the top leadership of the country.^[6] On the surface, the political situation in Afghanistan has stabilized since Atta's return to power. However, there are heavy internal contradictions within Atta, and the Taliban is not a homogenous organization, but a broad coalition of sometimes competing tribal, ethnic, political, commercial, and ideological rivalries.^[7] Due to these reasons, different factions have split within Atta. Currently, there are five main factions within Atta: the Kandahar Taliban, the Kabul Taliban, the Haqqani Network, the Uzbek Taliban and the Tajik Taliban.

(i) Kandahar Taliban led by Ahunzada

The term "Kandahar Taliban" refers to factions whose leaders are from Kandahar or whose organizational base is in Kandahar. During the Taliban insurgency of 2001-2021, the Kandahar Taliban operated primarily from Quetta, Pakistan, and are therefore sometimes referred to as the "Quetta Taliban".^[7] Decisions within the Quetta Taliban are usually made through the Quetta Council, which is considered the ultimate decision-making body within the Taliban organization. In essence, the Quetta Council is the fulcrum of power within the Afghan Taliban. The supreme leader of the Afghan Taliban, Shibaratu Ahunzada, is the head of the Quetta Council. He holds the highest authority and is responsible for directing the overall goals of the Taliban.^[8] In addition, important figures in the Quetta Council include Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Mullah Yakub, the son of the late Taliban founder. Baradar was a founding member of the Afghan Taliban movement and served as Prime Minister of the Afghan Transitional Government. After the Afghan Taliban regained power in the country, Baradar served as Deputy Prime Minister of the Afghan Interim Government. Yakub was involved in military leadership.^[8] Although both Baradar and Yakub were part of the Kandahar faction, they would also oppose Ahunzada's policies.

(ii) Haqqani Network headed by Sirajuddin

The Haqqani Network is a Sunni Islamist militant organization, The Haqqani Network operates throughout the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of southeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan,^[9] and its founder is Jalaluddin Haqqani, In 1995, he pledged allegiance to the Taliban, which had been born a year earlier out of a network of madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The network became an integral part of the Taliban and helped it with the capture of the capital Kabul in 1996.^[10] Jalaluddin was appointed minister of tribal affairs, a post he held until

2001. Since then, the Haqqani network has been integrated under the larger Taliban organization, although the Haqqani network organization retains unique command and control. ^[11] Sirajuddin Haqqani became the leader of the Haqqani Network after Jalaluddin Haqqani's death was announced in 2018. In 2021, with the return of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Haqqani Network returned to the forefront of political and military leadership. The organization's current leader, Sirajuddin, was appointed Minister of the Interior with responsibility for internal security. ^[12] Sirajuddin's relatives also play a key role in the Haqqani network, including important Taliban leaders such as Minister of Refugees Haqqani and Chief of Army Staff Haji Mali Khan. ^[7]

(iii) Kabul Taliban

The "Kabul Taliban" includes the majority of Kabul-based Taliban cabinet members. The "Kabul Taliban" may also refer to local Taliban networks based in and around Kabul, including neighboring provinces such as Wardak, Nangarhar or Parwan. ^[7] The Haqqani network currently occupies the eastern part of Afghanistan, including the Afghan capital, Kabul. In fact, the Taliban organizations located in the capital city of Kabul are controlled by the Haqqani network. Although the Taliban is primarily composed of Pashtuns, they are divided along ethnic, regional and tribal lines. ^[13] The differences between the Kandahar Taliban and the Kabul Taliban are mainly due to ideological differences, distribution of resources and power struggles.

(iv) Uzbek Taliban

The Taliban initially consisted of the Pashtun ethnic group. However, as time goes by, the Taliban gradually began to recruit ethnic minorities in large numbers, including the Uzbeks, in order to expand their territory in the north. ^[14] Uzbek Taliban refers to ethnic Uzbek commanders who joined the Taliban. Makhdoom Aleem served as the chairman of the Taliban's military council in Nafaria province and commanded Taliban forces in Faryab, Jawzjan and Sari Pul provinces. Alem, an ethnic Uzbek, was instrumental in working with local leaders and elders of the ethnic groups in northern Afghanistan and securing loyalty to the Taliban in these areas. ^[15] In August 2021, after the collapse of the previous Afghan government, Mahram Alem briefly served as the deputy governor of Sari Pul province. ^[7] Alem led his fighters to capture three northern provinces in 2021, paving the way for the Taliban to take over the country. ^[16] The predominantly Pashtun Taliban did not want the Uzbeks to gain too much power in the Taliban. As a result, the Pashtun-dominated Taliban gradually weakened the importance of the Uzbek Tatars within the Taliban.

(v) Tajik Taliban

Tajik Taliban refers to the Tajik commanders who joined the Taliban and played an important role for the Taliban to be able to control the northern part of Afghanistan better. Many of these Tajik Taliban commanders are from the northern regions of Afghanistan, particularly Badakhshan Province. Some of the Tajik commanders joined the Taliban before the insurgency, and after the Taliban seized power, the Tajik commanders held important positions within the Taliban. Because of the anti-Taliban organizations are still present in large numbers in Afghanistan, it is likely that the political influence of Tajik commanders within the Taliban has increased. As a result, Tajik commanders were not weakened their rights in the same way as Uzbek commanders.

4. Factional Differences Within the Afghan Taliban

In the early days of Atta's rise to power, its internal divisions and contradictions were revealed. The Afghan Taliban is not as united and well-organized as it appears to be; Atta is composed of different factions, and the pursuit of power by the leaders of the different factions is sometimes at odds. Afghanistan is a traditionally tribal country, and communities from different tribes can be divided by ideology. Although most of the members and leaders within Atta are Pashtuns, they will also have differences because they come from different tribes, which will directly affect the implementation of Atta's policies and the distribution of power. This year is the third year of the Afghan Taliban in power, but the Afghan society is still unstable, and the differences between different factions within Atta are gradually expanding.

(i) Differences in power struggle

Afghanistan is mainly divided into five factions within Afghanistan: the Kandahar Taliban, the Haqqani network, the Kabul Taliban, the Uzbek Taliban and the Tajik Taliban. Of these five factions, the Kandahar Taliban and the Haqqani Network hold the most power, but at the same time are the two factions with the most prominent conflicts and disagreements. In early September 2021, during a cabinet formation meeting in Kabul, forces loyal to Taliban co-founder and Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Badalar clashed with forces loyal to Minister of Refugee Affairs Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani Network. ^[17] Ahunzada is the current supreme leader of the Taliban, a leader with a Kandahar background whose sphere of influence is roughly in the western part of Afghanistan, with Kandahar being the default Afghan capital of the Kandahar Taliban. After assuming the position of top leader of the Afghan Taliban, Ahunzada has gradually tightened his power within the Taliban, which has caused resentment among other Taliban factions. At the same time, this tightening of power by Ahunzada has also caused resentment amongst powerful leaders within the Taliban faction in Kandahar. Ahunzada is shifting policy decisions from Kabul to Kandahar in an attempt to create a parallel management system and shift decision-making power away from the Taliban leaders in Kabul. ^[7] This approach has drawn public criticism from Sirajuddin, the leader of the Haqqani network, whose sphere of influence includes Kabul and controls the Kabul Taliban. By doing so, Ahunzada seriously undermined the Haqqani network's power in policy decisions.

Most members of the Afghan Taliban are Pashtuns, and although they come from different provinces and different tribes, they have been able to show a strong unity in the face of other minorities. During the first seizure of power by the Atta, the internal organization of the Atta consisted only of Pashtuns, and there were no members of other minorities. During the second seizure of power, learning from the lessons of the first administration, Atta began to recruit large numbers of minorities from northern Afghanistan. These minorities played an important role in Atta's capture of northern Afghanistan in the summer. However, after successfully seizing power, the Pashtun Taliban began to gradually weaken the power of minority commanders within the Taliban. On January 12, 2023, the Taliban's Deputy Defense Minister, Mullah Fazel, summoned Aleem, a commander of the Uzbek Taliban, to Mazar-e-Sharif in the province of Balkh and arrested him on suspicion of being involved in kidnappings,^[15] which exacerbated the ethnic minorities in northern Afghanistan's conflict with the Pashtun ethnic groups. The Pashtuns took this behavior with the aim of weakening the power of minorities within Atta so as to increase their own power, and this behavior exacerbated the division within the Afghan Taliban.

(ii) Differences in Policy

Atta's internal policy implementation is divided into conservatives and moderates, who have different views on women's policy and economic policy. Conservatives are more inclined to stick to the old rules, unwilling to accept new ideas and insisting on isolating Afghanistan from the rest of the world. The moderates, on the other hand, want Atta to learn from the lessons of his first administration and hope that Atta can improve his policies to promote economic development.

Atta's conservatives advocated restricting women's rights and banning women from education and work. Before successfully seizing power for the second time, Atta claimed to treat women and children kindly, but it has been proven that after taking power, Atta gradually increased restrictions on women's rights. Leaders of the Taliban based in Kandahar, who seemed eager to isolate themselves and the Afghan people as a whole. Conservatives led by Ahunzada advocated banning girls and women from most schools and universities, prohibiting women from working in government jobs, and assigning rules restricting women's participation in public life.^[18] Afghan moderates, on the other hand, hoped that Atta, when he returned to power, would do something for the nation and not treat women and children harshly. Haqqani and Afghan Defense Minister Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob have told contacted foreign diplomats, "They want greater rights for women to help their isolated government connect with the world."^[19] The United Nations has called on Atta to treat women well, but Atta has not kept the promises it made before coming to power, and Atta's conservatives continue to carry out the same rule they did when they first came to power, which leading to Afghanistan's current isolation from the world.

There are also differences on economic policy in Atta organization. After the war, Afghanistan's domestic economic situation is in a difficult state, and economic development is struggling. The former Afghan government had economic assistance from abroad, which was frozen after Atta came to power. After Atta came back to power, the most important task is to develop the economy. However, Afghanistan's current supreme leader, Ahunzada, believes that international support will affect Afghanistan's domestic national ideology and jeopardize Afghanistan's independence. Ahunzada's conservative policy has hindered the recovery of Afghanistan's domestic economy and cut off the international community's economic assistance to Afghanistan. However, Sirajuddin, the leader of the Haqqani network, and Baradar and Yakub, key leaders of the Kandahar Taliban, have expressed pragmatic views that are contrary to Ahunzada's policies. As head of the Economic Commission, Baradar has often encouraged foreign investment into Afghanistan. Yakub also seeks to strengthen military and trade ties with Qatar, the UAE and India between mid-2022 and early 2023.^[7]

5. Impact of internal factional differences on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a framework of cooperation linking Asia and Europe, and its construction has strengthened geographic ties and facilitated trade in goods and movement of people along the route. Now in its 11th year, the project has promoted the economic development of China and Pakistan and deepened their friendship, hence the name "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor". However, in the process of the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, there are many unstable factors that hinder the development of the Corridor. Differences between factions within Atta will expand the unstable factors hindering the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which will affect the construction process of the corridor.

(i) Security situation hinders the development of the corridor

Before coming to power, Atta conducted many negotiations with the United States to ensure that they had cleared the way with Al-Qaida and guaranteed that Afghan territory would not be used to threaten other countries. Terrorist organizations in Afghanistan fall into two categories: those allied with Atta and those opposed to Atta. Atta's allies include al-Qaeda, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and some Central Asian jihadists.^[20] The post-U.S. withdrawal environment in Afghanistan offers a range of new opportunities for terrorist organizations to reorganize, hatch plots, and collaborate with each other. Pakistan has borne the brunt of the resurgence of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which threatens the security of the South Asian region.

Terrorist groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Baloch separatist forces, and others have used the weak Pak-Afghan border to launch attacks on Pakistan from an Afghan base.^[21] In June 2023, the Pakistani newspaper

Dawn published a report stating that the number of attacks had increased by 73 percent in the first 21 months since August 15, 2021, when Atta came to power. According to an information sheet report released in January 2023, in the following year, 2022, TTP carried out 367 terrorist attacks, killing and injuring 1,015 members of the Pakistani security forces. This means that TTP attacks in Pakistan increased from 282 in 2021 to 367 in 2022. [22] On March 20, 2024, the Gwadar port in Pakistan was attacked by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). The Gwadar port is the centerpiece of the multibillion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan's most ambitious infrastructure and investment project in recent years. [23] On March 26, 2024, a terrorist attack on a vehicle en route to the Dasu Hydropower Project in Cape Province, which is being built by a Chinese company, killed five Chinese and one Pakistani personnel. [24] The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack.

After Atta returned to power, terrorist organizations in South Asia began to reorganize their forces. Afghanistan has become their hidden hideout, and it is precisely because of Atta's patronage that the number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan is increasing, posing a serious threat to social stability in the country. Atta's internal factional differences will lead to more and more rampant terrorist organizations in Afghanistan, so that the Pakistani government needs to spend more money on combating terrorist organizations, so that Pakistan's domestic economic burden is increased, hindering the China-Pakistan Corridor to follow up on the further development. Attacks by terrorist organizations also threaten the lives of the Chinese people in Pakistan, which will slow down the construction process of the corridor.

(ii) Social instability hinders the development of the corridor

Afghanistan is an important neighboring country of Pakistan, and the social situation in Afghanistan will have a chain reaction on Pakistan. Atta is currently the interim government of Afghanistan, and its internal factional differences will affect the stability of the Afghan region. Atta's internal factional differences will lead to the country's social instability, warlords because of the grabbing of resources and mutual rivalry, may make Afghanistan once again plunged into a state of war.

Atta's internal divisions could exacerbate social unrest and cause a spillover of terrorist forces into neighboring countries. In addition to previous terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State and Khorasan within Afghanistan, there is still the existence of the former governmental organizations in the north that are opposed to the Atta government. [7] The factional differences within Atta are becoming more and more prominent, which may cause the country to fall into a state of chaos again, resulting in social instability. Social instability has caused an increase in the number of refugees in Afghanistan, and a large number of refugees have gathered at the Arab-Pakistani borderline, seriously threatening Pakistan's domestic social security and stability, increasing the pressure on the Pakistani government to manage the border refugees, and intensifying the economic pressure for the subsequent development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. In addition, the social instability in Afghanistan has created an opportunity for terrorists to take advantage of the situation in Afghanistan, seriously affecting the peace and stability of the South Asian region. Social instability in Afghanistan also hinders the plan to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan, which will be a major blow to Afghanistan's economic recovery.

6. Conclusion

This is Atta's third year in power, and as it continues, Atta's internal divisions are coming to the fore. The divisions within Atta's internal factions are gradually showing cracks due to different tribal organizational ideologies, different ethnicities, and power struggles. The internal factional divisions are a time bomb for the entire Atta organization, which could lead to another war in Afghanistan and affect the stability of the South Asian region. As an important neighboring country of Pakistan, the security and social instability caused by Atta's internal factionalism will intensify the pressure on Pakistan to defend itself against terrorist attacks and deal with the refugee problem, which will seriously hinder the construction and development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan and the extension of the CPEC to Afghanistan. In the face of such a situation, Atta should take positive action to eliminate contradictions and differences within the organization, establish an inclusive government, treat vulnerable groups well, focus on restoring Afghanistan's economy, and manage its relations with neighboring countries.

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