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AFGHANISTAN'S PLACE IN CHINA'S REGIONAL PLANS



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.

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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)

AFGHANISTAN'S PLACE IN CHINA'S REGIONAL PLANS

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the bipolar structure of the international system can be considered a turning point in the study of international relations. In the international system after the Cold War, a unipolar structure formed, in which the United States of America was considered an unrivaled power. During this period, the United States of America made vigorous efforts in diplomatic, security, and political fields to create the groundwork for the presence of its forces in different regions, aiming to establish global hegemony. Although a decade after the Cold War, the United States was not a formidable competitor, the past two decades have witnessed the direct and open challenge from China, which has risen as a great power, to the global hegemony of the United States. Consequently, the primary goal of America's grand strategy is to hinder China's rise to power and to contain the country. On the other hand, China has managed to solidify its position in the region and the world through well-calculated foreign policy measures and the pursuit of economic diplomacy. To demonstrate its international influence, China must cultivate comprehensive relations with regional countries, neighboring nations, and bolster its regional cooperation efforts.

With its Geo-economic position, Afghanistan holds a crucial role for China within the region due to its status as its western neighbor, sharing a border of approximately 92 kilometers. The historical Silk Road connected these two lands nearly two thousand years before Christ. Beyond facilitating commercial transactions, this historic pathway played a significant role in cultural and linguistic exchanges, fostering closeness between the people of these two regions. This historical connection remains embedded in the collective memory of both nations.

China is actively working to cultivate and enhance its relationship with Afghanistan within the framework of regional cooperation. This effort involves the adaptation and implementation of various projects aimed at deepening and broadening the scope of their relations. In today's diplomatic landscape, regional cooperation stands out as an essential element in the foreign policy strategies of many countries.

This article delves into China's regional initiatives and examines Afghanistan's position within these initiatives. Furthermore, it explores how Afghanistan can effectively leverage these Chinese regional programs to its advantage.

CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE COLD WAR AND THE FUTURE THREAT TO AMERICA

China's foreign policy has undergone significant changes since the Cold War era. While the Cold War period saw the ideological emphasis on Marxism-Leninism and distinct interpretations influenced by Maoist thought, often leading to opposition against international norms and regulations, China's foreign policy has evolved. It not only entailed engagement with the United States but also aimed to establish an independent identity. By the late 1960s, China found itself in a definitive conflict not only with the United States but also with the Soviet Union. However, a new trajectory emerged in China's foreign policy starting from the late 1970s. This



shift was driven by an understanding of international necessities and domestic imperatives, influenced by reformist thinkers like Deng.

Undoubtedly, China's ascent within the existing international system stands as one of the most pivotal changes in global relations at the onset of the new century. Alongside this remarkable emergence and growth, extensive discussions have arisen, often centering on the "emergence" or "rise" of China. This transformation has shifted China from a passive and isolationist state to a regional and international powerhouse, capable of exerting influence not solely within Asia but also throughout the global system. The implications of this growth and influence span various domains of international relations, encompassing security, economy, environment, and culture. These far-reaching effects are poised to wield substantial significance in the immediate future.

The development of this growth and influence across diverse domains has necessitated the effective management of various factors and stakeholders within China's foreign policy. While in the past, during the bipolar system, the propagation of revolutionary ideology and the support for anti-imperialist movements held utmost significance and served as a priority for Chinese foreign policy practitioners, the present day is marked by globalization and the expanding interdependence between governments and other international entities. These dynamics have compelled Chinese decision-makers to comprehend the pivotal components influencing international relations, aligning them with domestic priorities, particularly China's policy of modernization.

The distinct attention of Chinese authorities and leaders towards managing imminent challenges, coupled with endeavors to reinstate China's unique position on the international stage since the early 1970s, along with intensifying the reform process and engagement with the global system, have been pursued with a paramount emphasis on national interests, while diminishing the role of communist ideology. This concerted effort has yielded a situation where, over a span of more than three decades, China has not only gradually fortified its influential stance but has also sparked concerns within the decision-making circles of the Western nations, particularly the United States.

The Western countries, including the United States of America, have actively pursued strategies and devised scenarios to preemptively mitigate potential future challenges posed by China on a global scale. These efforts aim to constrain China's advancement at the international level. These strategies encompass tactics such as imposing military constraints, achieved through significant military presence within the region. Additional measures include the intensification of arms embargoes, increased pressure on matters pertaining to human rights, and bolstering the military and political capabilities of Taiwan and Japan. The objective behind these actions is to curtail China's ascendancy, thereby impeding the solidification of their national power. By channeling Chinese attention towards peripheral issues, these approaches are designed to hinder China's progression.

CHINA'S PLANS IN THE REGION

China's strategy in the Middle East encompasses the development of multifaceted economic, political, and security ties with nations across the region. This comprehensive approach involves



fostering commercial collaboration, investing in critical infrastructure, energy initiatives, transportation networks, and trade partnerships. Given China's pursuit of energy resources to fuel its economic growth, the Middle East holds paramount significance as a vital source of oil and gas supply.

In addition to economic interests, China seeks to cultivate strong political relationships with countries in the Middle East, aiming to exert influence over regional and international matters. Core elements of China's regional strategy include promoting enduring stability, countering separatist movements, curbing arms smuggling, safeguarding economic stakes within the energy sector, and vying with regional powers in the pursuit of regional influence.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China has emerged as a significant player in the Central Asian region, alongside Russia, India, Pakistan, and Turkey. This prominence can be attributed to the region's substantial energy reserves and expansive consumer markets, providing a compelling incentive for China's active engagement.

China's endeavors in the Central Asian arena revolve around broadening and fortifying relations with regional nations to facilitate the transfer of critical energy resources—coal, oil, gas, and precious metals—while also fostering extensive trade interests and essential infrastructure development. This pursuit can be viewed as an attempt by China to not only amplify and solidify its security presence but also to leverage its economic might into military influence.

Consequently, China aims to counterbalance the sway of major powers such as the United States, Russia, and India through the reinforcement and expansion of its influence via strategic investments in the region. The United States' endeavors to bolster its presence and involvement in the area post-Soviet Union collapse, countered by China's efforts to curb this expansion, have evolved into defining aspects of China's rapport with regional countries. This dynamic has even led to a degree of tacit understanding between Russia and China as they navigate these complexities.

The motive behind China's engagement in the region is primarily based on four factors: gaining access to energy resources; expanding market access for trade and investment, particularly in sectors such as infrastructure, manufacturing, and communications; initiating infrastructure projects aligned with its Belt and Road initiative; and showcasing its elevated geopolitical influence and power position.

A) Access to regional energy resources

The countries within this region hold immense significance for China due to their abundant energy resources. This geographical area boasts substantial reserves of oil and gas, which are of paramount importance for China, given its status as a growing and industrialized nation with substantial energy needs. Over the past quarter-century, China's imports of oil from this region have shown consistent growth, not just in absolute terms, but also in terms of China's proportion of total Persian Gulf crude oil exports. In 1996, China's imports of oil from the Persian Gulf amounted to 1.2 billion dollars, representing 34.6% of its total crude oil imports. By 2019, this figure had surged to 16.5 billion dollars from countries within the region, accounting for 43.9% of its total crude oil imports. Over the period from 2010 to 2019, countries in the region contributed an average of 48% of China's total oil imports. Currently, China sources approximately 40% of its oil from these regional nations, with Saudi Arabia serving as a



significant supplier, providing over a third of China's oil imports. In 2019, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Oman held the distinction of being the top three exporters of oil from the region to China. Furthermore, given their stature as major oil and gas producers in the Middle East, Iran and Qatar also hold considerable importance in exporting their energy resources to China. In addition, countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan play a role in supplying oil and gas to China. In essence, the energy-rich nations within this region hold substantial strategic importance for China in terms of securing access to vital energy resources.

B) Expanding Regional Market Access through Participation in Regional Organizations

The Chinese hold the belief that the expansion of access to regional markets can be effectively achieved through the strategic implementation of appropriate foreign policies and meticulous planning. In line with this perspective, China has adeptly utilized bilateral relations with countries within the region, forging trade and economic agreements with them. Furthermore, China has become an active member of diverse regional organizations and associations. Among the many affiliations, notable ones include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Organization, the East Asian Cooperation Organization, and the East Asian Economic Cooperation Organization. These memberships have facilitated China's access to regional markets and have facilitated the expansion of its commercial footprint.

China derives numerous advantages from its endeavors to expand into regional markets, encompassing the following aspects:

1. **Access to Expansive Markets:** Incorporation into regional organizations affords China access to vast and burgeoning markets within the region. This positioning enables China to effectively present its products and services to a larger audience of potential customers, thereby augmenting its revenue stream.
2. **Amplified Exports:** Inclusion within regional organizations equips China with favorable trade facilities and export mechanisms. Consequently, China can escalate its exports to member nations of these organizations, subsequently heightening its export earnings.
3. **Attraction of Foreign Investment:** Active participation in regional organizations establishes China as an attractive destination for foreign investment. This facilitates the inflow of foreign capital into the country, concurrently bestowing China with access to foreign technology and investment.
4. **Enhanced Bilateral Trade:** Membership in regional organizations fosters a conducive environment for the facilitation of bilateral trade with fellow member nations. This framework serves to fortify China's trade relationships with these member countries, thereby generating mutual economic benefits.
5. **Stimulated Industry and Employment:** Engagement in regional organizations provides China with valuable opportunities for industry and employment development within the region. Consequently, China can expand its industrial landscape, thereby generating more employment opportunities for its populace.

C) Development of the "Belt and Road" Initiative

The historical Silk Road, an ancient trade route that spanned from China to the West, extending to Europe, facilitated the movement of traders, travelers, and an array of goods, including silk, spices, if precious metals, and toys. The Silk Road played a profound role in shaping the



economic, cultural, and political landscapes of the region, fostering the exchange of knowledge, culture, and various technologies.

Presently, China, holding its status as one of the world's largest economic entities, is orchestrating new regional strategies to rejuvenate the spirit of the Silk Road. Termed the "Economic Silk Road," this comprehensive plan entails the construction of contemporary transportation infrastructure connecting China to Europe and other global regions. This expansive network encompasses roadways, railways, pipelines, and port installations, all designed to facilitate seamless trade and transportation links across different nations. The core focus of this initiative is to establish an international transportation network spanning Central Asia, Africa, and Europe. This concerted endeavor aims to stimulate inter-country trade and investment, foster robust economic and cultural cooperation, catalyze export and import activities, and facilitate the exchange of culture and technology among participating nations.

The inception of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, championed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, marked a significant milestone. Since its introduction, China has channeled substantial resources, totaling hundreds of billions of dollars, through loans and financing, to propel the Belt and Road project forward. Notably, China has also established new multilateral financial institutions tasked with overseeing and directing these financial endeavors, with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank being a prominent example. Evidencing China's commitment, substantial diplomatic efforts have been dedicated to the promotion and advancement of this visionary project.

D) Asserting High Power Status

China's endeavors to uphold its military influence in the region encompass a range of strategies, including:

1. **Naval Advancement:** China is vigorously developing a formidable navy to safeguard its influence and strategic interests within the region.
2. **Heightened Military Expenditure:** To fortify its military capabilities within the region, China has demonstrated a notable increase in its military budget over recent years.
3. **Establishment of Military Bases:** China has strategically constructed military bases in the Central Asian region, strategically enhancing its presence and exerting influence. For instance, a notable example is the establishment of a military base in Tajikistan.
4. **Military Collaboration with Regional States:** China reinforces its military cooperation by cultivating military alliances and relations with countries in the region, particularly those rich in oil and gas resources.
5. **Advancement of Military Technology:** China is actively investing in the development of cutting-edge military technology, with the aim of producing sophisticated weaponry and equipment to augment its military prowess within the region.

AFGHANISTAN'S SIGNIFICANCE IN CHINA'S REGIONAL PLANS

Afghanistan holds a pivotal strategic position within China's regional agenda. This nation is situated as one of China's neighboring countries within the Central Asian region, effectively serving as a bridge that connects China with the broader region. Furthermore, Afghanistan



boasts invaluable natural resources, encompassing coal, gold, copper, iron, and more, making it a compelling proposition for China.

In addition to its resource wealth, Afghanistan occupies a central role within international shipping routes, thereby forging essential transportation links connecting China with various global destinations. Capitalizing on its geographical location, Afghanistan offers China an avenue to realize its political and security objectives within the region. Given Afghanistan's strategic geographic position and abundant natural resources, it has the potential to significantly contribute to the region's industrial and trade development. This aligns with China's aspirations, fostering a keen interest in collaborating with Afghanistan to secure vital mineral and energy resources, promote the expansion of transportation and communication infrastructure, and cultivate robust trade relationships with neighboring countries.

Functioning as a prominent geo-economic entity in the region, Afghanistan assumes a crucial role in enhancing China's access to energy resources. Moreover, Afghanistan's strategic placement along the Turkmenistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline offers a distinct advantage for China, facilitating both energy exports and imports.

METHODS FOR AFGHANISTAN TO LEVERAGE CHINA'S REGIONAL INITIATIVES

To maximize the advantages offered by China's regional initiatives, Afghanistan can implement the following strategies:

1. **Enhancing Bilateral Collaboration:** Afghanistan should intensify its bilateral ties with China, prioritizing cooperation across various economic, security, and cultural domains. This entails the establishment of joint commissions, fostering the exchange of official meetings, and the creation of specialized gatherings.
2. **Attracting Foreign Investment:** Afghanistan should formulate requisite policies and provisions aimed at attracting foreign investment, particularly from China. This encompasses the provision of financial incentives, favorable tax frameworks, safeguarding intellectual property rights, and streamlining administrative processes for investors.
3. **Infrastructure Development:** To entice investment and facilitate trade, Afghanistan must bolster its infrastructure. This includes the construction and enhancement of key infrastructure elements like ports, airfields, roads, and railways.
4. **Strengthening Soft Power:** Afghanistan should allocate resources to enhance its soft power, cultivating a favorable position for negotiations with China. This necessitates nurturing cultural and artistic endeavors, bolstering advertising and media initiatives, and promoting Afghan language and culture.
5. **Human Resource Advancement:** Prioritizing the development of its human resources, Afghanistan should focus on enhancing the necessary knowledge and skills required to effectively harness Chinese programs. This encompasses initiatives such as technical and vocational training, higher education enhancements, and university exchanges.
6. **Energy Collaboration:** Afghanistan can capitalize on its cooperation with China in the realm of energy development. This encompasses collaborative efforts in constructing power plants, harnessing and exploiting renewable energy sources like wind and solar power, and the advancement of the power grid for efficient energy transmission.



By diligently pursuing these strategies, Afghanistan can effectively tap into the benefits of China's regional programs, fostering economic and social development, while concurrently fostering the augmentation of bilateral relations with China.

CONCLUSION

China's expansion of trade within the region has been accomplished through a multifaceted approach, underpinned by distinct strategies. The pivotal elements contributing to its success include:

A) Investment in Infrastructure: China's strategic investments in extensive infrastructure, encompassing pivotal components like ports, railways, and roads, have facilitated seamless exportation of its goods to the region.

B) Collaboration with Regional Organizations: China's active participation in numerous regional organizations has enabled it to effectively access regional markets and further its strategic interests. This collaboration includes the formation of trade agreements, such as those established with nations like Afghanistan, which have translated into enhanced trade facilities and reduced tariffs for Chinese exports.

C) Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Regional Advancement: China's formidable penetration of regional markets has been significantly bolstered by the implementation of substantial projects like the Belt and Road Initiative. This visionary endeavor has not only promoted extensive development but has also facilitated China's access to diverse regional markets.

Collectively, these strategic pursuits have fortified China's foothold within the region, fostering economic growth, expanding trade opportunities, and solidifying its influence.

Afghanistan, as a constituent of this regional landscape, stands poised to capitalize on China's initiatives and foster collaboration across various domains such as extractive industries, transportation, energy, and trade. In essence, aligning with China's regional agenda holds the potential to propel Afghanistan's economic and trade progress while simultaneously nurturing enhanced bilateral relations between the two nations.

Given Afghanistan's strategic geographical location at the crossroads of Asia and its role as a vital bridge linking China with neighboring countries, the nation stands primed to fully harness the benefits of China's regional programs. Additionally, the favorable trajectory of China-Afghanistan relations subsequent to the triumph of the Islamic Emirate government underscores Afghanistan's judicious utilization of China's regional strategies.

SUGGESTION

1. Strategic Diplomacy Formulation: The Islamic Emirate should strategically design effective diplomacy strategies to cultivate relations with nations, including China. These strategies must underscore national interests and prioritize the preservation of the nation's independence and sovereignty.
2. Sustained Neighboring Relationships: The Islamic Emirate should sustain its relationships with neighboring countries, including China. These bonds should be forged upon mutual respect, non-interference in internal affairs, and active facilitation of trade and economic cooperation.



3. **Robust Diplomatic Ties with China:** Afghanistan should diligently establish robust diplomatic connections with China, thereby unlocking the economic and security dividends intrinsic to this collaborative partnership.
4. **Economic Collaborations:** Afghanistan can capitalize on its economic interests by fostering cooperative ventures with China in various economic sectors, most notably in the realms of oil, gas, and trade.
5. **Streamlined Chinese Investment:** Facilitating Chinese investment across diverse sectors can provide Afghanistan with the advantage of China's experience and financial prowess. This expedited infusion of investment can significantly accelerate the nation's overall economic development.

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