

Can China Bring Peace To South Asia?

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By Ahmed Rashid

During the past two months, the leaders of India, Pakistan and [Afghanistan](#) have met with China's powerful president [Xi Jinping](#). All three south Asian states wanted and achieved with mixed results the promise of greater economic investment from China.

In addition, they want Beijing to leverage its position of economic authority to help end the decades-old [India-Pakistan-Afghanistan rivalry](#) that is allowing a plethora of terrorist groups including the Taliban to flourish. The [danger of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Isis](#), gaining a foothold in the region, in addition to the hundreds of fighters it has already recruited from central and south Asia, has increased concern.

In return, according to Asian and western diplomats who work closely with China, Mr Xi has demanded a harsh crackdown on the Uighur Muslim militants from the western Xinjiang province who receive training and battle experience in Pakistan and Afghanistan. China's repressive [campaign against the Uighurs](#) as it tries to make its culture more Han Chinese than Muslim has bred resentment, leading hundreds of Uighurs to travel south in search of militant groups. In fact, the Uighurs' own [East Turkestan Islamic Movement](#) is largely based in Afghanistan and often crosses the border into that country.

In the past, while [China](#) has shown interest in investing in the extraction of raw materials for its own use, it has always made clear it [does not interfere](#) in nation building, peace keeping or mediation between warring groups, whether in North Korea or Afghanistan. Now that may be about to change.

In broad terms, China pledged long-term projects worth [\\$20bn in India](#), promised investments of \$42bn over the next decade in [Pakistan](#) and offered grants of just over \$100m a year until 2017 to [Afghanistan](#) with the promise of more aid if peace is established. However the question everyone is asking is whether China will take up the slack in this volatile region after the vacuum left behind by the US and Nato as [western armed forces continue to withdraw](#) from Afghanistan?

Both the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani and the Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif hope China will play a larger political role. The Afghans want China to persuade the Pakistanis to reign in the support offered by the Pakistani military to the Afghan Taliban, a task former president Hamid Karzai often [accused America of failing](#) to do. Mr Ghani reckons that China - Pakistan's closest ally and [major arms supplier](#) - could exert greater influence on Islamabad, particularly since Beijing itself is threatened by militancy. Meanwhile, Pakistan denies responsibility.

Islamabad wants a comprehensive agreement with Kabul that returns those Pakistani Taliban it wants to prosecute but who the Afghans are clandestinely supporting, [recognises the Durand Line](#) - the border between the two countries - and minimises any future role that India will play in Afghanistan. The Pakistani army continues to calibrate its neighbourhood relations not through trade or investment but by trying to counter India's foreign policy in the region, and is convinced that New Delhi is trying to undermine Pakistan through its presence in Afghanistan.

For the first time, China has offered to help the peace process in Afghanistan if Kabul and Islamabad crackdown on the Uighurs. Beijing now wants to create a [regional forum that will support peace talks](#) between Kabul and the Taliban. Speaking at the Istanbul Process conference in Beijing at the end of October, the Chinese premier Li Keqiang said all Afghan groups should, "lay aside former enmity and join the political reconciliation process".

Perhaps most challenging for China will be persuading [India](#) and [Pakistan](#) to become partners rather than rivals in Afghanistan. Here too China can call on its promises of investments in [infrastructure projects to link China with Asia](#). China belongs to this part of the world while the US does not. The Americans could leave after a decade of engagement but the Chinese cannot go anywhere.

The writer is best-selling author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, most recently 'Pakistan on the Brink'