

Afghanistan and China : A Perspective on Geopolitical Relations and Strategic Interests

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Abstract: The geopolitical relations between China and Afghanistan have undergone significant transformations in recent years, shaped by regional dynamics, security imperatives, economic cooperation, and strategic interests. As a neighboring country with extensive global influence, China has adopted a pragmatic approach toward Afghanistan, seeking to balance its economic investments with security considerations. This study explores the historical trajectory of Sino-Afghan relations, identifies the key factors influencing their bilateral interactions, and examines Afghanistan's strategic importance within the broader regional ambitions of China—particularly in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It also briefly investigates China's role in Afghanistan's political landscape following 2001 and analyzes its evolving stance after the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Furthermore, the research highlights the economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions of the two countries' relationship and evaluates how Beijing's strategic calculations in Afghanistan align with its broader regional objectives—especially concerning security stability (counterterrorism) and economic expansion. From a geopolitical standpoint, this paper offers insights into the long-term implications of China's engagement with Afghanistan and its broader impact on the regional power dynamics, using a descriptive-analytical methodology.

Keywords: Afghanistan, BRI, China, Geopolitics, Strategic Interests.

1. Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of Central and South Asia has been profoundly shaped by the evolving relationship between Afghanistan and China. Positioned at the strategic crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Afghanistan plays a decisive role in regional security and economic development. As a rising power with increasing economic and political influence, China has expanded its engagement with Afghanistan through economic investments, infrastructure development, and diplomatic initiatives. While China has traditionally pursued a cautious and non-interventionist policy toward Afghanistan, shifts in the country's security and political environment—particularly following the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the Taliban's return to power in 2021—have prompted Beijing to reassess its strategy.

This paper examines the geopolitical and strategic dimensions of Afghanistan–China relations, with a focus on key factors such as security cooperation, economic interests, and regional connectivity. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, presents significant implications for regional trade and stability through the potential integration of Afghanistan. Moreover, China's concerns about extremism, particularly in its Xinjiang region, have influenced its security engagements with Afghan authorities.

By analyzing historical patterns, contemporary developments, and strategic considerations, this study aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on Afghanistan's significance in China's regional calculations. With the resurgence of the Taliban and the absence of a U.S. military presence, the nature of China's engagement with Afghanistan has shifted from “calculated indifference” toward a form of “cautious and strategic partnership.” This partnership is rooted not only in security and economic interests but also in China's efforts to manage potential threats and capitalize on geopolitical opportunities within the framework of a new regional order.

This article seeks to analyze the emerging partnership by exploring China's shifting approach toward Afghanistan and offers a clear picture of China's role in the country—a role that may carry long-term implications for the regional geopolitical architecture and the future of Afghanistan's international relations.

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The study is organized as follows: The first section reviews the historical evolution of Afghanistan–China relations, highlighting major diplomatic and economic milestones. The second section addresses China’s strategic interests in Afghanistan, particularly in the realms of security and economic development. The third section evaluates Afghanistan’s role in China’s broader regional strategy, with special emphasis on the Belt and Road Initiative and counterterrorism efforts. Finally, the article concludes with an analysis of possible future trajectories of the bilateral relationship and their broader implications for regional geopolitics, using a descriptive-analytical method that first outlines the strategic relations and then interprets them through diverse theoretical frameworks.

2. Review of Previous Literature

The field of Afghan studies, particularly in the context of analyzing bilateral relations with other countries, has consistently faced a shortage of original academic resources—especially those available in Persian. Among these, the relationship between the People’s Republic of China and Afghanistan, especially following the 2021 developments and the return of the Taliban to power, has attracted increasing attention from scholars and academic institutions. This research focuses on China–Afghanistan relations and analyzes political and economic trends over recent decades by reviewing two main categories of sources:

First, sources that broadly address Afghanistan’s political and security developments; and second, those specifically analyzing China’s foreign policy toward Afghanistan. Below is an overview of some of the most significant works in this area:

Hushang Zhao, in his article “China and Afghanistan: Interests, Positions, and China’s Perspectives”, examines Beijing’s security-oriented approach to Afghanistan, emphasizing the presence of foreign powers such as the Soviet Union and the United States. He highlights that China’s policy has consistently aimed at maintaining stability in its border regions, especially Xinjiang (Zhao, 2021).

John Calabrese, in his article “China’s Taliban Conundrum” (2021), explores the new geopolitical outlook emerging in China after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul. He underlines Pakistan’s central role in China’s regional strategy and argues that Afghanistan remains a missing link in China’s grand “Belt and Road Initiative”, where instability in Afghanistan poses significant challenges to China’s regional interests (Calabrese, 2021).

Angela Stanzel, in her article “China’s Strategic Interests in Afghanistan” (2018), discusses China’s instrumental approach toward Afghanistan, arguing that the country has never been a top priority for Beijing. Rather, Afghanistan has often served as a means to achieve China’s broader strategic objectives. By focusing on Afghanistan’s potential connection to regional projects such as CPEC, she assesses the possibility of upgrading Afghanistan’s status to that of a strategic partner for China (Stanzel, 2018).

In the same vein, Sanyan (2020), in his article “China’s Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan”, outlines Beijing’s concerns about the spread of extremism along its western borders, the rising costs of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, and the security threats posed by instability in Afghanistan to China’s economic and geopolitical interests in the region. Based on these premises, he analyzes China’s overall approach to Afghanistan (Sanyan, 2020).

In addition to these sources, the 2021 report by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a key document for understanding the post-U.S. withdrawal context. The report offers valuable insight into the security, political, and economic ramifications of the troop withdrawal and serves as a foundation for more detailed analyses of China’s potential role in Afghanistan’s future (UNAMA, 2021). Furthermore, trade data provided by the OECD’s online statistics center offers useful tools for tracking economic trends and drawing a more comprehensive picture of bilateral trade relations between the two countries (OECD, 2021).

Taken together, these sources suggest that China’s approach to Afghanistan is driven more by geopolitical calculations, border security concerns, and economic interests than by ideological or traditional ties. These studies provide a solid foundation for analyzing new developments in bilateral relations.

It is worth noting that the distinction of this article, compared to the aforementioned works, lies in its broader analytical scope. While previous studies have primarily emphasized economic or security-related aspects, this article takes a more holistic approach by integrating geopolitical dimensions and China’s long-term strategic interests, aiming to offer a forward-looking perspective on the future of China–Afghanistan relations. The following sections will provide a historical overview of Afghanistan–China relations, analyze China’s economic and commercial motivations, and explore China’s geopolitical perspective and security concerns in greater detail.

3. A Historical Overview of Afghanistan–China Relations

To understand the Afghanistan–China relationship from a geopolitical and strategic perspective, it is essential to first examine the historical background of the bilateral ties between the two nations. This section aims to provide an overarching view of their historical relations, highlighting not only the security dimensions but also the significance of trade throughout history.

The relations between China and Afghanistan date back to ancient times, particularly during the Han Dynasty in China and the flourishing period of the Silk Road (Iranica, n.d.). At that time, the territory now known as Afghanistan held immense significance due to its adherence to Buddhism and its strategic location along the Silk Road. Moreover, religious movements such as Nestorian Christianity and later Islam made their way to China through Afghanistan.

Although formal, institutionalized diplomatic relations did not exist at that time, historical evidence indicates significant cultural and political contacts between the two regions. The Han Dynasty's victory over the Dayuan enabled China to exert control over parts of northern Afghanistan. Chinese historical texts refer to Kabul as “Kao-Fu,” a prominent and wealthy city on the trade routes connecting Central Asia to India (Shen-Yu, 1966, pp. 31–35).

A pivotal moment in these early relations was the dispatch of Afghan delegations to the Chinese capital Luoyang during the Tang Dynasty. These envoys aimed to strengthen commercial ties and engage in dialogue concerning the Silk Road, offering homage to the Chinese emperor. The Chinese interpreted these actions as signs of Afghanistan's loyalty to the Tang Empire.

During this period, China also deployed military forces to secure its western frontiers, making Chinese military presence in the eastern and northern parts of Afghanistan commonplace. By 659 AD, cities such as Sogdiana, Ferghana, Tashkent, Samarkand, Balkh, Herat, and Kabul were under the rule of Emperor Gaozong. Consequently, Herat (in modern-day Afghanistan) along with Bukhara and Samarkand (in today's Uzbekistan) were incorporated into the Tang Empire's domain (Haywood, 1998, p. 19).

Indian historian K.P.S. Menon notes that China dispatched an army of 100,000 troops through the Pamir Mountains and Afghanistan en route to the Hunza Valley near Kashgar. The Tang Dynasty was one of the most prosperous eras in Chinese history in terms of economic development and improved living conditions. Due to its strategic position on the Silk Road, Afghanistan benefited greatly from this prosperity. Much of the historical relationship between China and Afghanistan was shaped by threats to China's western borders and the need to secure overland trade routes from Central Asia through Afghanistan to South Asia and present-day Iran.

This trajectory of relations continued until World War II and the Japanese attacks on Muslim-populated areas of China. At that time, in an effort to garner support from other nations, China sent delegations abroad. In 1939, Ma Fuliang, a Hui Muslim, and Isa Yusuf Alptekin, a Uyghur Muslim, traveled with a delegation to Egypt, Syria, and Turkey (Hsiao, 2010, p. 17). Prominent figures such as Tagore and Gandhi from India, along with Pakistani leaders, met with the Chinese delegation. Following Japanese aerial bombings of Muslim areas in China, Islamic countries—including Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Afghanistan, and Iraq—intensified their support for Chinese Muslims.

However, formal diplomatic relations between the two countries officially began on January 20, 1955. Afghanistan was among the first nations to recognize the People's Republic of China, and Abdul Samad was appointed as the first Afghan ambassador to Beijing (Iranica, n.d.). Subsequently, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, accompanied by his deputy Wu Lan, visited Afghanistan in January 1957—marking the first official visit by a senior Chinese official to the country.

During the visit, Zhou Enlai met with King Zahir Shah, Prime Minister Daoud Khan, Deputy Prime Minister Ali Mohammad, and Foreign Minister Mohammad Naem. This visit laid the foundation for a new phase of bilateral engagement and mutual understanding between the two nations, paving the way for future friendly relations.

Later that year in October, Daoud Khan visited China on an official invitation and met with Mao Zedong, Vice President Zhu De, and Liu Shaoqi, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (Synovitz, 2013). Formal political relations between the two countries were strengthened further during the Cold War, with China providing millions of dollars in aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction. Ultimately, on November 22, 1963, both countries signed a border agreement resolving territorial disputes over the Wakhan Corridor between Badakhshan and China's Xinjiang province.

Having reviewed the historical backdrop, the discussion now turns to Afghanistan's geostrategic importance, the theory of the Heartland, and the role of the Wakhan Corridor, all of which intertwine Afghanistan's strategic interests with those of China.

3.1. Geopolitical Importance

Afghanistan's strategic geographical location has made it a key player in the dynamics of great power politics, particularly in the context of its relationship with China and broader regional prospects. Historically referred to as the “Graveyard of Empires,” Afghanistan has consistently served as a critical buffer zone and crossroads for competing powers such as China, Russia, and—most notably—the United States (Clarke, M., 2018). Given this historical context, it is both relevant and necessary to

conduct research that reveals how Afghanistan's strategic importance is evolving in the aftermath of U.S.–Russia rivalry and in light of China's growing interest in fostering stronger relations with Kabul. This study, therefore, seeks to address the question: What strategic significance does Afghanistan hold for China?

3.2. The Heartland Theory and Afghanistan's Role

The concept of the "Heartland," first introduced by geopolitical theorist Halford Mackinder, emphasizes the central role of Eurasia in global strategic competition. Mackinder argued that whoever controls the Heartland controls the world. In contemporary geopolitical discourse, Afghanistan's position within this theoretical framework has become increasingly relevant, particularly with the resurgence of great power rivalry among Russia, the United States, and China. This evolving geopolitical reality forces the U.S., even after its military withdrawal from Afghanistan, to reassess its strategic priorities in the region. Afghanistan's location thus remains a focal point of interest for American policies concerning Central and South Asia (Brzezinski, Z., 1997).

3.3. The Wakhan Corridor

The Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of land in northeastern Afghanistan, stands as a vivid illustration of the country's geopolitical value. Historically a vital artery along the Silk Road, the corridor now plays a crucial role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), linking it directly to Central and South Asia. The region is situated at the intersection of multiple geopolitical flashpoints—including the "New Great Game" between Russia and China, and the persistent conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. China's increasing involvement in infrastructure development in the Wakhan region is actively reshaping the geopolitical landscape and could potentially shift the regional balance of power in Beijing's favor (Frankopan, 2015).

4. China's Commercial and Economic Motivations Regarding Afghanistan

The trade relations between Afghanistan and China date back to ancient times, with the Silk Road serving as a vital conduit for caravans and merchants. This historical connection has persisted into the modern era, albeit with fluctuations. However, unlike the past—when Buddhist pilgrims traveled to Afghanistan and India—contemporary attention has shifted to the movement of extremist forces across the borders of the two nations.

A cursory review of the bilateral relationship, particularly during periods dominated by economic considerations, inevitably highlights their commercial and economic interactions. Over the past few decades—especially following the entry of U.S. forces into Afghanistan—China–Afghanistan economic relations have developed gradually but steadily.

The U.S. withdrawal and the current state of uncertainty in Afghanistan have prompted China to adjust its approach toward the country. To safeguard its interests in Afghanistan and to ensure regional security, China has found it necessary to recalibrate both the level and nature of its engagement. From China's perspective, the stalling or rising costs of implementing the "New Silk Road" initiative is viewed as a strategic maneuver by the United States aimed at undermining China's economic power and diminishing its strategic depth. The utilization of extremist groups to destabilize the project and the incitement of the Uyghur minority have been among the primary tools used in this strategy. Consequently, China's economic dimension in relation to Afghanistan is also approached with a security-oriented lens.

Afghanistan's geopolitical potential—as a bridge connecting the markets of South, Central, and West Asia—combined with its abundance of rare mineral resources such as silver, gold, lithium, rubidium, cesium, beryllium, copper, and iron ore, holds significant appeal for China (Independent, 2018). On one hand, these resources could reduce Afghanistan's dependence on foreign aid. On the other hand, they may provoke corruption, instability, and illicit exploitation, potentially delaying infrastructure and development projects.

Based on these dynamics, China–Afghanistan trade and economic relations can be categorized into two main domains:

The New Silk Road

Economic Cooperation

These two aspects are closely interlinked and mutually reinforcing across various domains.

4.1. The New Silk Road

In 2013, Xi Jinping unveiled China's grand economic initiative. The aim is to establish an extensive network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and border corridors. As he articulated, strengthening regional connectivity would resolve Asia's transit bottlenecks (Chatzky & McBride, 2019).

An analysis of the operational and contractual roadmap of the New Silk Road initially raised concerns that Afghanistan was excluded, with the primary focus on Pakistan and Central Asian states. In response, China signed a memorandum of understanding in 2015 to enhance bilateral cooperation and integrate Afghanistan into this infrastructural network (Alizada & Safi, 2019).

Under this agreement, projects such as the Kashgar–Kabul railway, the Five Nations Railway linking Iran, China, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, and the Afghanistan–Pakistan rail connection were initiated (Railway Pro, 2019). Notably, in September 2019, the first direct train from China arrived in Hairatan, Balkh province. Linking Afghanistan to regional and global markets, and securing economic benefits through transit, could potentially contribute to the country's stability (Iranica, 2019).

In the past, China justified its limited security role in Afghanistan by emphasizing that the success of its grand economic vision largely depends on regional security and stability. Any instability spilling over into China's periphery—especially Central Asia—is viewed as a security threat (Ghiasy, 2019). Afghanistan may thus serve several strategic objectives for China:

Utilizing Afghanistan's geographic position in realizing the “Westward March” strategy to extend China's corridors beyond its western borders (Yun Sun, 2013);

Connecting Afghanistan to open waters through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and, by extension, linking Central Asia to South Asia via Afghanistan and Pakistan;

Reducing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan through economic convergence;

Tying regional economic interests to China's grand economic initiative, transforming them into shared interests, thereby lowering China's security costs in case of disruption.

To improve economic engagement and integrate Afghan traders into the benefits of collaboration with China, a Joint Economic Committee was established in 2006. Further, two comprehensive cooperation agreements were signed in 2010, followed by a preferential trade agreement in 2017 that eliminated customs tariffs (Asia Dialogue, 2020).

In essence, Afghanistan represents the missing link in China's grand design—a gap created by the presence of U.S. forces and extremist groups. China's reluctance to expand its role in Afghanistan can be better understood within the context of its strategy to confront the U.S. and accept the accompanying costs.

However, escalating tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan have severely undermined prospects for Afghanistan's inclusion in the CPEC framework, making sustained cooperation between the two actors increasingly unlikely.

Furthermore:

The weakness of Afghan state institutions, persistent power struggles, and the presence of transnational extremist groups have made Chinese infrastructural involvement limited or infeasible;

In recent years, the Taliban have demanded large sums to permit the implementation of infrastructure projects and the passage of trade convoys. Continued insecurity could force China to “purchase” protection from the Taliban, raising concerns that this revenue could incentivize Taliban expansion toward China's borders and sustain this financial stream.

4.2. Economic Cooperation

According to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, Afghanistan's estimated mineral wealth—including gold, copper, iron, rare metals, and uranium—exceeds one trillion USD. However, the lack of security and fragile governance structures have hindered proper exploitation of these resources (IMF, 2019).

China has become Afghanistan's largest foreign investor, particularly active in the mining sector. A consortium of Chinese state-owned companies secured a \$3.5 billion contract in 2008 to extract copper from the Mes Aynak mine, Afghanistan's largest copper deposit (Sun, 2020).

China hopes that economic cooperation with Afghanistan, alongside strategic ties with Pakistan, will help reshape the regional political landscape in its favor. Mega-projects provide China with leverage to persuade other actors to collaborate on resolving security issues. Beyond Pakistan, China also shares interests with the European Union in fostering stability in Afghanistan. In this context, joint initiatives have emerged, such as China–EU efforts to strengthen regional connectivity. Notably, the European Investment Bank allocated \$70 million to the CASA-1000 project, which aims to transmit electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (European Investment Bank, 2021).

Nonetheless, despite its economic strength, China remains reluctant to assume a security role in Afghanistan in the absence of the United States. Multiple considerations deter China from engaging in a geopolitical or security game in the region. However, evolving developments will likely compel a reassessment of China's approach.

Trade data offer insights into the economic relationship. In 2019, Chinese exports to Afghanistan amounted to \$500 million, with \$127 million comprising various types of rubber. In the same year, Afghanistan exported \$129 million to China, with \$119.7 million consisting of dried fruits (OEC, 2021).

According to China's Ministry of Finance, the country's exports to Afghanistan reached \$741.48 million in April 2021, up from \$644.02 million in March. On average, between January 2001 and April 2021, China exported \$918.13 million worth of goods to Afghanistan each month. The highest monthly export figure was recorded in August 2018 (\$975.03 million), and the lowest in February 2002 (OEC, 2021).

In 2020, China's top exports to Afghanistan included electronic equipment (\$85.3 million), rubber (\$53.8 million), and industrial/agricultural machinery (\$59.3 million) (Trading Economics, 2020).

Afghanistan is committed to improving its trade balance through export diversification and import substitution. According to the IMF's 2018 report, exports accounted for approximately 4.5% of the country's GDP, with agricultural products comprising three-quarters of those exports...

5. Strategic Interests and Motivations for Increasing China's Engagement in Afghanistan

Xinjiang Province of China, which borders the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, has consistently raised security concerns for China due to its connections with extremist groups such as the Taliban and other international terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. According to Chinese officials, Xinjiang faces three significant security challenges: terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism (Stone, 2019). The increasing security threats in Afghanistan could lead to a link between separatist groups in Afghanistan and the Uyghurs in China. Furthermore, it threatens China's economic projects in Central Asian countries. Afghanistan could serve as a nexus for Uyghur groups to connect with other extremist factions in Central and South Asia, potentially paving the way for terrorist organizations to enter China (Stratfor.com, 2020).

China views scenarios where Xinjiang becomes a base for terrorist groups after Afghanistan as a potential strategy by the West to undermine its economic progress. The activities of extremist groups in Xinjiang are often linked to both overt and covert support from the United States and even Russia. This concern stems from the fact that many Uyghur militants have taken refuge in tribal areas of Pakistan and southern and eastern Afghan provinces (Small, 2015). Additionally, groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have collaborated with the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and ISIS. If this scenario materializes, it is expected that extremist groups would join the East Turkestan Islamic Party to establish and free an Islamic state in Xinjiang, which would threaten China's territorial integrity and increase security risks within the country (Hong, 2020).

Given the recent developments between the Taliban forces and Chinese extremists, and the strengthening of the threat scenario, China's approach has shifted from cautious detachment to an increased security involvement. For example, in September 2018, the Afghan Ambassador to China announced that Beijing was willing to train Afghan soldiers on Chinese soil to counter threats from ISIS and al-Qaeda. This move was aimed at safeguarding the borders of both countries. At the same time, China established a military base in the Wakhan Corridor in Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. China stated that its military forces were stationed in the base solely for the purpose of training Afghan military personnel, and this presence would not be permanent (MilitaryTimes.com, 2019).

China has established significant influence in eastern Afghanistan through its relations with Pakistan, and it is one of the few countries that has maintained specific relations with the Taliban over the past two decades. It appears that China acts with great caution, refraining from entering any areas—especially in security matters—before ensuring that the conditions are right. This cautious approach could impact the fight against the Taliban. Failure in this regard may lead to hostility from the Taliban and increase the likelihood of support for the East Turkestan Movement from the Taliban and other extremist groups (Bokhari, 2019).

China's primary security concern regarding Afghanistan is the establishment of a safe base for the Uyghurs in Afghanistan, with the aim of undermining China. For this reason, China has taken multiple measures over the past years to protect its border with Afghanistan. The border between China and Afghanistan in the Wakhan Corridor is one of the most secure borders in China. One of these measures was China's pledge of \$85 million in assistance to the Afghan military to establish a "Mountain Brigade" for border protection in December 2017 (ArianaNews.af, 2017). Additionally, China established a base in Badakhshan and launched a four-party cooperation mechanism with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. To strengthen anti-terrorism cooperation with Afghanistan, China constructed a joint military base in Badakhshan. The construction of this base began in 2018 and intensified following speculations about the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The agreement for the base was made after a visit by an Afghan delegation, led by Afghan Defense Minister Tariq Shah Bahrami, to China (Toktomushev, 2018).

One of China's main objectives in building this base is to counter the East Turkestan Independence Movement, which has bases in Afghanistan. China is concerned about the possible alliance between this group and the Uyghurs. Chinese officials believe that the Taliban and al-Qaeda provide military and ideological training to the Uyghurs (Toktomushev, 2018).

6. China's Security Concerns Regarding the U.S. Troop Withdrawal

In accordance with the previously announced plan, the process of U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan was completed by September. As observed from the developments since mid-July, this withdrawal has minimized the Taliban's demand for cooperation in the peace process. Signs of this

shift were evident in advance. For instance, a report by the United Nations highlighted a 30% increase in civilian casualties during the first quarter of 2021 (UNAMA, 2021). In this context, the perspectives of regional actors who are influenced by the developments in Afghanistan are of great importance. Considering the focus of this paper, attention can be drawn to the views of Afghanistan's eastern neighbor, which, until now, has not actively responded to Afghanistan's developments. However, from various perspectives, this issue warrants closer attention.

According to China's official approach, its priorities regarding Afghanistan are as follows:

The primary priority is to achieve peace in Afghanistan, which would create the conditions for infrastructure development and security.

With the withdrawal of foreign forces, Afghanistan's future must be determined by all Afghan forces through a comprehensive political structure, with maximum and peaceful participation.

Development that strengthens and guarantees the end of the conflict in Afghanistan is crucial. To establish lasting peace, priority must be given to reconstruction and development, under which poverty, drug trade, the export of insecurity, and migration will be eradicated.

The responsible withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan should be conducted in such a way that the existing order in Afghanistan and the region is not disrupted (Foreign Policy, 2021).

The transformation of Afghanistan into a safe haven for Uyghurs and the connection between extremism on both sides of the border is the most undesirable scenario for Chinese officials. Therefore, China has taken on the responsibility of training and equipping Afghanistan's border forces along the border of the two countries. From a diplomatic standpoint, China supports the reconciliation process in Afghanistan; however, it does not leave its future to chance and has accepted the role and position of the Taliban in Afghanistan's future. China has hosted informal meetings between the Taliban and representatives of the Afghan government and has welcomed public meetings with senior Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the head of the Taliban's Doha office. In June 2019, Liu Kang, the spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, announced the visit of a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar to China. The discovery of a Chinese spy network in Kabul revealed that, on one hand, China does not trust Afghan politicians, particularly Tajiks, and on the other hand, it has doubts about Pakistan's capacity and will to control the connection between the Uyghurs and the Taliban. According to reports from Afghanistan's security forces in late 2020, a Chinese network was discovered in the country conducting intelligence and operational activities. After the news of the arrest of 10 to 13 Chinese nationals in Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani attempted to manage the media space to prevent further escalation in bilateral relations. It was reported that these individuals had infiltrated the Haqqani network with the support of Pakistan's intelligence services and had been gathering information regarding the influence and cooperation between Uyghurs and extremists in Afghanistan (Shishir Gupta, 2021).

If the scenario is accepted that China, based on a clear plan, has established relations with the Haqqani network and the Taliban, the hypothesis put forward by various Afghan sources regarding China's extensive relations with the Taliban can be considered plausible. A decade after the massacre of Chinese road workers, China hosted the Taliban in Beijing and proposed a trilateral group consisting of China, Pakistan, and the Taliban (Labrese, 2021). The security approach towards Afghanistan's developments is an acceptable option for all regional actors, but Beijing's silent investment strategy in Afghanistan is not welcomed by many actors, particularly the United States. In November 2020, Alice Wells, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, sharply criticized China's role in Afghanistan. She stated that China does not make significant financial contributions to infrastructure development and security in Afghanistan, while it benefits greatly from participating in mining projects in the country.

7. Current Developments and the Geopolitical Outlook of Afghanistan After the U.S. Withdrawal in 2021

After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021, significant changes occurred in the geopolitical landscape of the region. China, with its increasing role in Afghanistan, emphasized the necessity of a sustainable transition in the country and criticized the United States for the negative consequences of its withdrawal. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has urged the United States to take responsibility for Afghanistan's reconstruction (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Due to its strategic location, Afghanistan plays a crucial role in enhancing connectivity among neighboring countries, including Pakistan, China, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. China views Afghanistan as a key hub in its development plans for Central Asia (Kaplan, 2012).

7.1 China's Role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), one of China's main foreign policy tools, has identified Afghanistan as a key point in this vast economic framework. Experts believe that China's investments in Afghanistan could contribute to the country's economic stability and increase economic interdependencies in a region that has been mired in war and conflict for years (Belt and Road Initiative Report, 2021).

Furthermore, in recent years, the BRI has shifted towards sustainable development, with the "Green Silk Road" path being pursued to enhance the environmental sustainability of its projects. In 2023, China invested approximately \$7.9 billion in green energy projects, including wind and solar power plants, marking the year as the "greenest year" since the inception of the BRI (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021).

7.2 Western Countermeasures

In response to China's growing influence through the BRI, Western countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia have designed alternative plans, such as the "Blue Dot Network" and the "Build Back Better World" initiative. These initiatives emphasize transparency, sustainability, and strengthening resilient economies in an attempt to balance China's commercial influence (South China Morning Post, 2022).

7.3. Humanitarian and Economic Challenges

The Taliban government in Afghanistan faces significant challenges in managing the country, particularly in the areas of humanitarian needs and economic stability. The international community is working to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, while China and other powers seek to influence the situation through investment and diplomatic engagements (World Bank, 2021).

7.4. Western Alternative Projects Against China's Influence

As China expands its influence through the BRI, Western countries have introduced alternative plans to counter China's economic hegemony. These include:

The "Blue Dot Network," introduced by the United States, Japan, and Australia, which emphasizes transparency, sustainability, and strengthening the economies of developing countries.

The "Build Back Better World" initiative by the G7, aiming to provide a transparent and stable alternative to China's projects in developing countries.

The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy by the United States, which emphasizes security, economic cooperation, and the rule of law in the region and is aimed at balancing China's influence in Afghanistan and beyond.

These initiatives attempt to offer more credible alternatives to developing countries' economic dependency on China and strengthen the multipolar trade order.

8. Conclusion

As Afghanistan's eastern neighbor, China views itself as a facilitator in the country's developments and seeks to remain in a secure periphery. Despite clear differences and conflicting interests with the United States, Beijing has consistently supported Washington's policies regarding Afghanistan and has adopted a calculated indifference policy. This policy raises speculations about China's overt and covert approaches, which we have attempted to illustrate in this study. China's strategy toward Afghanistan is based on both security and economic concerns. At the same time, China sees the Taliban as a "political force" that cannot be ignored. As an economy-driven actor, China requires stability and the cessation of conflict in Afghanistan to achieve its economic interests.

In the absence of the United States, the region seems poised for a critical moment, with China's geopolitical dominance over South and Central Asia reaching a sensitive point through the connection of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with Afghanistan. This development could lead Beijing to strengthen regional connectivity while diminishing Russia's geopolitical advantage. If peace is achieved in Afghanistan, or a new and comprehensive framework is established, several potential scenarios could unfold for China: 1) Reduced concerns about the link between Chinese extremism and the Taliban; 2) Afghanistan's integration into China's grand plan. In this case, the success of the strategic agreement between Iran and China, along with Afghanistan's involvement in China's regional projects, would present a positive outlook. This could facilitate a railway route from China through Afghanistan to Iran, and then to Turkey and Europe, marking the realization of one of China's most significant dreams in strategic terms—what this research aimed to address, and ultimately concluding that this can lead to a beneficial result for China.

It appears that China's economic and security motivations push it toward increasing its engagement and presence in Afghanistan. China's motivations regarding Afghanistan can be analyzed at two levels: Afghanistan itself and Afghanistan as part of a larger puzzle. Afghanistan is a missing piece in China's grand economic plan, and if China succeeds in connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia and Pakistan, and linking it to Iran and thus to the Middle East and Europe, a significant portion of China's dream of leading regional trade routes and further solidifying its geopolitical dominance will be realized. Additionally, instability in Afghanistan poses a security threat to China, preventing its economic ambitions from advancing. The success of the "Belt and Road" initiative depends on regional stability, particularly in Central Asia, where an extended crisis in Afghanistan could potentially spread insecurity to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

For this reason, China's involvement in Afghanistan's infrastructure and stabilization projects aims to change the global image of the country and display its responsibility in surrounding developments, transitioning from a policy of calculated indifference to strategic participation. China's strategic cooperation with Pakistan creates special challenges for Beijing in strengthening relations with Afghanistan: 1) Pakistan hosts extremist groups; 2) Tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan; 3) Pakistan's desire to join Central Asia and its potential threat from Afghanistan, which places China in a delicate position between Afghanistan and Pakistan, ultimately impacting Beijing's interests in both countries.

The presence of Uyghur militants in Pakistan's tribal areas and southern and eastern Afghanistan, and the potential for collaboration with groups such as the Taliban, raises two significant possibilities: 1) If the conflict in Afghanistan ends (regardless of the outcome), could Uyghur militants forge alliances with these groups against the Chinese government to free Islamic regions in western China? 2) Could extremist groups offer material and moral support to the Uyghurs, leading to a return of Uyghur forces equipped and trained to China?

China has not been able to integrate Afghanistan as a central member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Thus, building regional consensus to solve Afghanistan's crisis under China's leadership has become increasingly difficult. Moreover, China has failed to create a four-party mechanism for regional collaboration on resolving Afghanistan's issues. The question arises: If the crisis in Afghanistan worsens, how will Chinese military and security forces enter the country? Given the regional developments and China's overarching strategies, it seems that this could happen in two scenarios: 1) The linkage of extremism across both sides of the China-Afghanistan border; 2) The expansion of the crisis and instability into South and Central Asia.

In terms of how Chinese military forces might extend beyond its borders, multiple hypotheses have been proposed, with the most plausible being collaboration with the United Nations to establish a regional mechanism openly, while also utilizing Pakistan's military and intelligence capabilities in a more indirect and covert manner. Given the fear of ISIS extremism aligning with Uyghur dissenters and the potential impact on China's grand economic plan and its strategic relations with Pakistan, it seems Beijing supports creating regional hubs centered on Pakistan to address and manage Afghanistan's issues. These could include: China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; China, Russia, and Pakistan; China, the United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; and China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan.

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