

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54418/ca-96.253>

# CHINA'S POST-UNITED STATES WITHDRAWAL STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN: CPEC EXPANSION, BALANCING INTERESTS AND CHALLENGES

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## Abstract

*The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021, following the abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, marked a critical shift in the region's geopolitical landscape. While many global actors distanced themselves from the new regime, China adopted a pragmatic and interest-driven approach. This paper examines China's evolving strategy toward Taliban-led Afghanistan, emphasizing how China balances its regional ambitions with calculated restraint. Rather than offering formal recognition, China has engaged through economic diplomacy i.e. expanding trade, maintaining a diplomatic presence, and integrating Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative framework. A major turning point came in 2023 with the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghan territory, signalling China's intent to solidify its regional influence through infrastructure and connectivity. Grounded in the realist theory of international relations, this study analyses trade data from 2021 to 2024 to assess how China has pursued its interests under Taliban rule. The findings show a sharp increase in China's exports and total trade volume, indicating a strategy that leverages economic tools while avoiding political entanglement. At the same time, China's caution particularly in security cooperation and formal recognition-reveals the limits of engagement with a regime lacking international legitimacy. Ultimately, the paper argues that China's approach is defined by selective engagement: expanding influence without overcommitting in an unpredictable environment.*

**Keyword:** China, Afghanistan, China's interests, Security concerns, Post United States withdrawal

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## I. Introduction

In international politics, the absence of a dominant power rarely goes unnoticed. As Aristotle observed, "Nature abhors a vacuum"—a concept that applies just as well to global power dynamics. The sudden withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, as part of the Doha Agreement, marked the end of a 20-year intervention and created a power vacuum that reshaped regional geopolitics.<sup>1</sup> The government under President Ashraf Ghani fell rapidly as Taliban forces advanced, with the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) offering minimal resistance reflecting a lack of preparedness and deep structural weaknesses within the security apparatus.<sup>2</sup> Taliban exploited this opportunity to their advantage who regrouped, re-emerged and took power swiftly, and put many in shocks about the future direction of Afghan policies.

Though China was not directly involved in Afghan conflict, post withdrawal scenario created a space for it to fill. China shares a border of around 100 kilometres with Afghanistan, and views Afghanistan as strategically important region due to its location near Xinjiang province and its potential role in regional connectivity.<sup>3</sup> During the US presence in Afghanistan China maintained low but consistent ties with Afghanistan that were primarily been driven by its security concerns posed by groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).<sup>4</sup>

Since the Taliban assumption of power in 2021, China moved from low profile partnership to increased economic partnership through trade, infrastructure, and energy.<sup>5</sup> However, refraining from formal recognition reflects China's cautious approach towards Afghanistan. It also signifies that China's leaders have weighed the risk and complexities of granting the recognition to the Taliban government of Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Taliban have earned

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<sup>1</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "US Watchdog Blames Washington, Ghani for the Fall of Kabul," (November 17, 2022), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/17/us-auditor-washington-ghani-to-blame-for-afghanistans-fall>.

<sup>2</sup> Nilofar Sakhi, "The Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan and Security Paradox," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 9(3), (2022): 383–401.

<sup>3</sup> Huasheng Zhao, *China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Raj Verma, "Taliban 2.0 and China's Counterterrorism Diplomacy in Afghanistan," *Middle East Policy* 30(1), (2023): 83–97.

<sup>5</sup> Saqalain Egbal, "Resuming Issuance of Visas to Afghan Nationals, China Allows Afghan Goods to Enter Tax-Free," *The Khaama Press*, July 30, 2022. <https://www.khaama.com/resuming-issuance-of-visas-to-afghan-nationals-china-allows-afghan-goods-to-enter-tax-free-478393/>.

<sup>6</sup> Liza Umami and Bambang Cipto, "China's Afghan Policy: De Facto Recognition of The Taliban Regime," *Intermestic: Journal of International Studies* 8(1), (2023): 57–79.

bad reputations internationally due to human rights violations, gender discriminatory policies and governance issues during their rule.

All the prescribed actions of China confirm to the basic assumptions of Realism. This study has been built upon the investigation of China's geopolitical, economic and security interests in post US withdrawal of Afghanistan. It further spells out an analysis of CPEC's expansion to Afghanistan. Then, it proceeds to explore the trade trends between the two countries to investigate the real motivations behind different moves and to anticipate the future of China-Afghan partnership.

## **1. Research Questions**

1. How has China shaped its ties with Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, and what strategies has it used to pursue its interests on the ground?
2. How CPEC extension to Afghanistan will further China-Afghan partnership?
3. How has China uprising trade diplomacy advances its interests in Taliban led Afghanistan?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theory of political realism fits well with this research as China is advancing its interest in Afghanistan though it is wary of Taliban leadership. Realism as being the prominent theory of IR which states that states operate in an anarchic international system, where there is no central authority which is capable enough to regulate state behaviours so the states have to guard their interests through their strong military build up and offensive policies.

In such a situation, to ensure survival states have to become more powerful otherwise idealist and ethical considerations will not protect them and they have to rationally assess the situation and decide about their moves to safeguard their territorial integrity, sovereignty and national interests abroad.<sup>7</sup>

After the exit of US from Afghanistan, China got a conducive field to play and forward its interest as it was facing security threats in Xinjiang along its western border. It also enabled China to fill the vacuum created by US hasty withdrawal in a strategically important location which has remained under

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<sup>7</sup> Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations."

power and competition of super powers.<sup>8</sup> This situation can be treated as an opportunity as well as a challenge for China. As on one side China can successfully take a lead in power void however, resurgence of Taliban and rising concerns terrorism, security and instability in the region, and probability of Afghanistan to once again become a safe haven for terrorist and extremists continue to raise doubts about their role.<sup>9</sup>

As per realism states, being the rational actors, assess the situation and develop policy response that satisfies their national interests. In this case though China has expanded its economic footprint in the region, however, it has avoided according recognition to the Taliban rule of Afghanistan. It shows the caution of China and its wait and see approach to decide about the de jure recognition of Taliban rule of Afghanistan. It confirms the realist principle of self-help, where states rely on their own capabilities and alliances to pursue security and influence.<sup>10</sup>

Further, China's Afghan policy is part of its geopolitical balancing agenda, its projects like BRI, and CPEC expansion is not solidifying China's economic footprints in the region but also enhancing its regional leadership role at a time when US power and presence is declining in the region.<sup>11</sup> China's increasing economic but cautious political approach towards Taliban is going well to counter US and India influence without getting so much involved in Afghan's domestic issues.<sup>12</sup>

## II. Historical Background

### China-Afghanistan Relationship (1955-2020)

China and Afghanistan first established diplomatic relations in January 1955, making Afghanistan one of the earliest countries to recognize the newly founded People's Republic of China. However, these ties suffered from flip flops during the cold war era. As China began to break away from the Soviet orbit in the late 1970s, its relationship with Afghanistan then closely aligned with Soviet Union grew increasingly strained. In a rare alignment with the United States and Pakistan, China supported the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s as part of a broader strategy to counter Soviet

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<sup>8</sup> Verma, "Taliban 2.0 and China's Counterterrorism," 83–97.

<sup>9</sup> Sakhi, "Taliban Takeover and Security Paradox."

<sup>10</sup> Mohsen Shariatnia, "China-US Rivalry: The Afghanistan Factor," *Middle East and North Africa Affairs*, (2021), <https://menaaffairs.com/china-us-rivalry-the-afghanistan-factor>.

<sup>11</sup> Umami and Cipto, "China's Afghan Policy," 64.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (London: Hurst & Co., 2015).

regional expansion. However, there was a decline in this rivalry in post-cold war period.<sup>13</sup>

During the first Taliban administration (1996-2001), China maintained ties with the Taliban mostly to protect its interests in light of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). In the 1990s, the ETIM aspired to establish a separate Uighur state in western China. After being expelled from Xinjiang, the organization established a base in Afghanistan in 1998 with the help of the Taliban administration. While giving the ETIM safe haven, the Taliban's founder and leader Mullah Omar purportedly gave China assurances that no organization would use Afghan soil to carry out strikes against it. China avoided provoking the Taliban and generally took a hands-off approach to the developments in Afghanistan, even though it did not accord the Taliban formal recognition.<sup>14</sup>

During the Taliban's first rule (1996-2001), Beijing adopted a cautious posture, driven primarily by concerns over the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a separatist group with alleged training bases in Afghanistan. Despite non recognizing Taliban rule of Afghanistan, China

Continued its back-channel communications with Taliban leadership to control security issues. Taliban leadership reportedly assured China that Afghan soil would not be used against Chinese interests, yet China continues to view Taliban's ties with extremist networks with suspicion. The Taliban government has requested China for its help in relaxing the UN Security Council sanctions against Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> Pakistan will chair the UNSC's 1988 Taliban Sanctions Committee in 2025<sup>16</sup>. Being the closest ally Pakistan and China could help Afghanistan in getting relaxations from UNSC in sanctions over travels bans and frozen assets.

With the fall of Taliban administration in December 2001, China diplomatically recognized the US stalled Interim set up led by Hamid Karzai. It also participated in the signing of the Kabul Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations in 2002, and reaffirmed its commitment to Afghanistan's sovereignty and stability. It marked the beginning of a new relationship on a strong basis and resulted in the signing of Treaty of

<sup>13</sup> John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*, (Oxford Academic, 2016), <https://academic.oup.com/book/12799>.

<sup>14</sup> 'Abd al-Salām Z̧a'īf, Alex Strick van Linschoten, and Felix Kuehn, *My Life with the Taliban*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Mohan Malik, "Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses Post-September 11" (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, October 1, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA409339>.

<sup>16</sup> News Desk. "Pakistan Becomes Co-Chair of UNSC Counter-Terrorism Committee." *The Express Tribune*, (June 4, 2025). <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2549484/pakistan-becomes-co-chair-of-unscc-counter-terrorism-committee>.

Friendship, Cooperation, and Neighbourly Relations in 2006. Both sides reiterated to cooperate on security and economic domains on the basis mutual respect and non-interference in each other’s internal matters.<sup>17</sup>

During the US military presence in Afghanistan, China became cautious and relied on selective investments. Though China was keen to tap the untapped minerals, rare earth metals like copper, oil and other earth elements. However, security concerns and weak governance structures hindered the implementation of large-scale projects. Notable initiatives included the \$3.5 billion Mes Aynak copper mine and a petroleum agreement for the Amu Darya Basin, though both faced delays. China also took incremental steps to increase its security footprint, providing military equipment, engaging in joint patrols near the border, and launching trilateral and quadrilateral dialogues with Afghanistan and regional partners. These included the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan foreign ministers’ dialogue and the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), reflecting China's evolving interest in regional stability and counterterrorism cooperation.<sup>18</sup>

**China Afghanistan Trade Volume (\$ Millions)**

| Year | Total   | China’s Exports | China’s Imports |
|------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2002 | 19.991  | 19.91           | 0.08            |
| 2003 | 27.06   | 26.45           | 0.61            |
| 2004 | 57.92   | 56.97           | 0.95            |
| 2005 | 49697   | 2,693           | 1,512           |
| 2006 | 100,301 | 100,487         | 186             |
| 2007 | 167,157 | 169,533         | 2,376           |
| 2008 | 148,934 | 151,627         | 2,693           |
| 2009 | 367.99  | 360.00          | 7.99            |
| 2010 | 171,585 | 704.00          | 11.70           |
| 2011 | 225,607 | 230,010         | 4,403           |
| 2012 | 458,847 | 464,034         | 5,187           |
| 2013 | 318,664 | 328,259         | 9,595           |
| 2014 | 376,187 | 393,559         | 17,372          |
| 2015 | 352,323 | 364,319         | 11,996          |
| 2016 | 427,405 | 431,894         | 4,489           |
| 2017 | 537,839 | 541,094         | 3,255           |

<sup>17</sup> Huasheng Zhao, *China and Afghanistan: China’s Interests, Stances, and Perspectives*, CSIS, Russia and Eurasia Program (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> “*Treading Lightly: China’s Footprint In a Taliban Led Afghanistan*,” (May 14, 2023), [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/sipriinsights\\_2208\\_china\\_and\\_afghanistan\\_2.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/sipriinsights_2208_china_and_afghanistan_2.pdf).

|      |           |           |        |
|------|-----------|-----------|--------|
| 2018 | 643,759   | 667,868   | 24,109 |
| 2019 | 570,520   | 599,799   | 29,279 |
| 2020 | 446,168   | 500,680   | 54,512 |
| 2021 | 424,924   | 474,451   | 49,527 |
| 2022 | 511,067   | 553,083   | 42,016 |
| 2023 | 1,205,785 | 1,269,784 | 63,999 |
| 2024 | 1,501,799 | 1,543,971 | 42,172 |

**Source:** Data sourced from the International Trade Centre. *Trade Map*. Accessed May 28, 2025. <https://www.trademap.org>. The table has been compiled and organized by the author for analytical purposes.

### **China's Interest in the Taliban led Afghanistan Post 2021: A Transition from Chaos to Order**

Wang Yu, China's ambassador to Afghanistan assumed his role in 2019 when the United States-backed Ashraf Ghani's administration was still in power. He completed his tenure in August 2023 and was replaced by a new ambassador Zhao Sheng. It was nothing more than a normal rotation of ambassadors. In December 2023, Bilal Karimi became the first officially accredited representative appointed by the Taliban to any foreign nation since their return to power in 2021.<sup>19</sup> Karimi presented his credentials to China's Foreign Ministry, marking a significant step in diplomatic engagement. While China has not officially recognized the Taliban government, the acceptance of Karimi's credentials indicates a deepening of ties. However, unlike China "Other governments appointed charge d'affaires after the expiry of the terms of their ambassadors".<sup>20</sup> Since the U.S. departure in 2021, China has taken a measured yet steady approach to its trade relationship with Afghanistan. China is making calculated moves, avoiding political entanglements and increasing its exports to Afghanistan in a steady manner. This strategy seems to serve well its long-term interest of greater regional integration and completion of BRI.

### **China's Diplomatic Recognition of Taliban Government swinging in b/w Engagement and Legitimacy**

Since 2021, the Taliban have been the de facto rulers of Afghanistan. However, their international legitimacy is still questioned. China has resorted to a different path and has deepened its practical linkages with the Taliban while not having accorded formal recognition. However,

<sup>19</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Taliban's New Ambassador to China Arrives in Beijing," *DW*, (December 1, 2023), <https://www.dw.com/en/talibans-new-ambassador-to-china-arrives-in-beijing/a-67607433>.

<sup>20</sup> "Taliban Gives a Warm Welcome to China's New Ambassador to Afghanistan," *Al-Jazeera*, (August 25, 2024), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/taliban-gives-a-warm-welcome-to-chinas-new-ambassador-to-afghanistan>.

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recent developments signal geopolitical considerations of China towards Taliban led Afghanistan.

In a landmark development in December 2023, China became the first major power to receive an officially appointed ambassador from the Taliban. Bilal Karimi, a former deputy spokesperson for the Taliban, presented his diplomatic credentials to China's President Xi Jinping in Beijing. This step was quite encouraging; however, it was not followed by any assurance or announcement regarding full recognition. Akmal Dawi declared it a diplomatic milestone as it marked the first-ever ambassadorial appointment since the Taliban takeover.<sup>21</sup> Notably, the presentation and reception of credentials by President Xi Jinping signifies a deeper form of *de facto* recognition, though he avoided making any statements regarding *de jure* recognition.

China's engagement with the Taliban is rooted in its core priorities of deepening regional integration, safeguarding its western borders from terrorism, and promoting its long-term economic interests. By maintaining cautious ties with the Taliban, China has attempted to pursue and promote its strategic projects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) without offering full political recognition to the Taliban rule of Afghanistan. This position of China was further endorsed by the May 2025 trilateral talks between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China to extend CPEC to Afghanistan to boost regional connectivity, accelerate economic growth, and conduct joint efforts against terrorism in South Asia. This meeting took place on May 21, 2025, in Beijing and was attended by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Pakistan's Foreign/Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, and Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. The next meeting of this series is scheduled to take place in Kabul on a mutually agreed date to elevate Afghanistan's role and position. According to the Washington Post, it is viewed as an attempt to take advantage of the Afghanistan corridor's potential to attract investment in the post-US withdrawal period of Afghanistan. Though this agreement looks ambitious, its success depends on Afghanistan's ability to offer sustained cooperation on counterterrorism, regional stability, and getting international recognition. A momentous development took place in this regard on July 3, 2025, with the Russian Federation's official recognition of the Taliban government of Afghanistan. This bold move by Russia may attract other states, including China, to formally recognize the Taliban government of Afghanistan, as China often moves in tandem with Moscow on regional issues. All these regional developments will open more opportunities to let Afghanistan stand on its own feet and play its role in regional integration. However, concerns over

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<sup>21</sup> Akmal Dawi, "China's President Accepts Credentials From Afghan Representative," *VOA News*, (January 30, 2024), <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-president-receives-afghan-ambassador-taliban-seek-recognition-from-russia-iran-/7463837.html>.

counter-terrorism efforts and Taliban governance standards may still delay full recognition.

This two-pronged strategy of China will expand China's influence in the region while preventing it from getting international backlash, due to Taliban gender-discriminatory policies, human rights violations, and limited international legitimacy of Taliban rule. Though now, the Taliban are actively engaging with regional powers including China, Iran, and Russia, this signals a drive for international recognition beyond ideological allies. Yet among these, it is China's quiet but active engagement through official meetings and symbolic diplomatic gestures that carries particular weight.

### **Geopolitical Objectives**

In the post-US withdrawal period in Afghanistan, China obviously wants to fill the power vacuum to its advantage. Historically, China's relations with Afghanistan have remained neutral. The US departure has brought in a double opportunity for China to play an instrumental role in addressing security concerns along its western border and to assume a leading role in the emerging multipolar regional architecture.<sup>22</sup> For China, Afghanistan's significance lies in its geostrategic location. Located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Afghanistan offers a critical transit corridor that supports China's broader vision of regional connectivity, especially through the expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>23</sup> By integrating Afghanistan into CPEC's second phase, China aims to extend its infrastructure networks westward, enhancing trade routes while cementing its geopolitical footprint in a region long contested by global powers.

China's outreach to the Taliban in the pre-2021 era highlights the fact that it wants to maintain influence on Afghanistan's political forces. Before the fall of Kabul in 2021, China hosted a Taliban delegation in Tianjin, signaling not only diplomatic foresight but also a willingness to deal pragmatically with non-traditional actors.<sup>24</sup> Though China has avoided granting *de jure* recognition to the Taliban administration, the formation of diplomatic channels and its acceptance of a Taliban ambassador in 2023 reflect a policy

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<sup>22</sup> Mohsen Shariatnia, "China-US Rivalry: The Afghanistan Factor," *Middle East and North Africa Affairs*, (2021), <https://menaaffairs.com/china-us-rivalry-the-afghanistan-factor>.

<sup>23</sup> "China, Afghanistan, Pakistan Can Jointly Build BRI, Extend China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan: Wang Yi," *Global Times*, (March 31, 2022), <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1257282.shtml>.

<sup>24</sup> Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis*.

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of cautious engagement based on national interest rather than ideological alignment.<sup>25</sup>

It is essential to note that China perceives the security and stability of Afghanistan not through the prism of its internal matters, but from a regional security perspective. An unstable and politically fragmented Afghanistan could become a breeding ground for terrorists that could directly and indirectly threaten China's security interests, particularly in Xinjiang and across the China-Central Asia borderlands.<sup>26</sup> By heavily investing in Afghanistan's rebuilding and reformation and its integration into regional initiatives like CPEC, China attempts to manage the hazards and, at the same time, present itself as a stabilizing force to fill the void created by the US departure. In this way, it offers a Chinese-led world order as an alternative to replace Western-led models of intervention.

The trilateral cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan bolstered in 2025 through agreements to extend CPEC and explore joint counterterrorism strategies further endorse China's strategic posture. These efforts are less about short-term economic gains and more about cultivating long-term influence through infrastructure, diplomacy, and regional security frameworks.<sup>27</sup> By positioning itself as an indispensable partner in Afghanistan's post-conflict transition, China is not merely filling a power vacuum but actively shaping a new regional order where it holds greater sway.

### A. Security Interests

The first and foremost security interest of China in Afghanistan stems from its western border i.e. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which is considered a source of terrorism and extremism. China considers Afghanistan a breeding ground for militants, most notably the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which Beijing accuses of inciting separatism and violence within Xinjiang.<sup>28</sup>

China's foremost concern in post-withdrawal Afghanistan lies in the realm of security. Beijing's engagement with the Taliban-led regime is shaped by its desire to shield its western border, particularly the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, from the destabilizing effects of terrorism and extremism. Though the Taliban have made claims that they will not allow

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<sup>25</sup> Umami and Cipto, "China's Afghan Policy," 64.

<sup>26</sup> Verma, "Taliban 2.0 and China's Counterterrorism," 88.83–97.

<sup>27</sup> Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "Will the China-Pakistan Corridor Get a Boost with a New Government in Islamabad?" *Jamestown Foundation*, (July 15, 2022), <https://jamestown.org/program/will-the-china-pakistan-corridor-get-a-boost-with-a-new-government-in-islamabad/>.

<sup>28</sup> Verma, "Taliban 2.0 and China's Counterterrorism," 88.

their territory to be used for terrorism, even though China, like other countries, has stayed cautious due to past incidents where similar guarantees produced limited results.<sup>29</sup>

The fear is not abstract. During previous periods of instability in Afghanistan, militant actors, including Uyghur fighters, found refuge in ungoverned spaces and operated with relative impunity. This explains China's early and ongoing communication with the Taliban, even before their 2021 return to power. China's preference is for a government in Kabul that can exercise control over its territory and curtail the influence of transnational extremist organizations. However, Beijing remains skeptical of the Taliban's ability and in some cases, willingness to do so effectively.

China has remained concerned about its internal security, yet it cannot ignore the external security along the border region where lie its strategic interests, particularly the areas of CPEC. Pakistan, its closest ally, has been a victim of terrorist activities conducted by the TTP. The 2022 suicide bombing targeting Chinese nationals in Karachi underscored the vulnerability of Chinese assets abroad, particularly in volatile regions.<sup>30</sup> A politically stable Afghanistan will not only address the Chinese internal security issues but also safeguard Chinese infrastructure investments and its citizens in Pakistan and Central Asia. force in

In order to effectively deal with its security concerns in Afghanistan, China has relied upon multilateral frameworks like the SCO and trilateral dialogues with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Beijing has called for collective action against what it terms the "three evils": terrorism, separatism, and extremism.<sup>31</sup>

China believes in cooperation; its security posture is marked by strategic restraint, prefers counterterrorism commitments over military presence or intervention. It reflects China's preference for dialogue and diplomacy rather than the use of force.

## **B. Economic Interests**

China is pursuing long-term economic interests in Afghanistan based on a strategic calculus, rather than immediate gains. Afghanistan possesses abundant tapped and untapped mineral resources, viewed by China as a strategic opportunity to fulfill its resource security and industrial

<sup>29</sup> Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis*, 112.

<sup>30</sup> Kiyva Baloch and Akbar Notezai, "The Female Suicide Bombing at Karachi's Chinese Confucius Institute and the Paradigm Shift in Baluch Rebels' Strategy," *Jamestown Foundation*, (May 20, 2022), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-female-suicide-bombing-at-karachis-chinese-confucius-institute>.

<sup>31</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference. (September 17, 2021)," *FMPRC*, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202109/t20210917\\_9721338.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202109/t20210917_9721338.html).

supply chains.<sup>32</sup> Afghanistan abundantly holds rare earth elements, including Copper, Lithium, and hydrocarbons that complement China's industrial needs, particularly in high-tech manufacturing and renewable energy.<sup>33</sup> It is noteworthy here that despite the resources, China did not rush into huge commitments under the Taliban 2.0 rule.

Though Chinese companies are taking the lead as its investment Mes Aynak copper mine is awarded to a Chinese consortium under a 30-year lease. However, the project has also faced delays due to legal, logistical, and security issues.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the 2022 oil exploration agreement in the Amu Darya Basin, signed between the Taliban and a Chinese state-owned firm, reflects China's continued interest in Afghanistan's resource sector, but also its hesitancy to commit without stability.<sup>35</sup>

China's strategy has revolved around regional integration. The extension of CPEC to Afghanistan is a testament to its commitment and signals China's treatment of Afghanistan not just as a resource producer but as a transit state within the BRI.<sup>36</sup> The proposed railway links to connect Peshawar to Kabul and to Central Asia are part of this project. These projects not only enhance regional integration but also bring Afghanistan to a China-led economic order.

However, this is not a one-sided game. Its successful execution depends on Taliban will and capability to provide security guarantees to foreign officials and assets. The legitimacy crisis of the Taliban government, ongoing international sanctions, and lack of banking infrastructure further complicate investment prospects.<sup>37</sup> China does not provide liquid finances but supports through reduced tariffs, ease of visa restrictions, and offers conditional infrastructure cooperation. This is unlike the strategy of Western powers. This policy involves low risk with maximum output and will facilitate China to maintain and sustain its influence without getting entangled in Afghanistan's political instability.

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<sup>32</sup> Iain Marlow and Enda Curran, "China Eyes \$1 Trillion of Minerals With Risky Bet on Taliban," *Bloomberg*, (August 24, 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-08-24/china-s-eyes-1-trillion-of-minerals-with-risky-bet-on-taliban>.

<sup>33</sup> Plummer and Murphy, "*Al-Qaeda Leader Killed*."

<sup>34</sup> Syed Waqas Haider Bukhari, "*The Role of China in Economic Stabilization and Reconstruction of Afghanistan*," (2012).

<sup>35</sup> "Taliban Gives a Warm Welcome to China's New Ambassador to Afghanistan," *Al Jazeera*, (August 25, 2024), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/taliban-gives-a-warm-welcome-to-chinas-new-ambassador-to-afghanistan>.

<sup>36</sup> *Global Times*, "China, Afghanistan, Pakistan Can Jointly Build BRI," (March 31, 2022), <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1257282.shtml>.

<sup>37</sup> Jens Vesterlund Mathiesen and David Vestenskov, "Understanding the New Shift in China's Strategy towards Afghanistan," *Forsvaret*, (May 12, 2019),

Ultimately, China's economic policy toward Afghanistan is defined by strategic patience. While the potential for profit exists, Beijing is aware that sustainable engagement depends on political order and regional stability. For now, China appears content to lay the groundwork for future expansion while testing the limits of Taliban cooperation.

| Type of Engagement         | China's Core Objectives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Geopolitical Goals</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offset and reduce U.S. influence in Afghanistan and the broader region</li> <li>- Strengthen China's strategic footprint in South and Central Asia</li> <li>- Prevent external threats from spilling across its western border, especially Xinjiang</li> </ul>                                        |
| <b>Security Priorities</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for transnational terrorist groups (e.g., ETIM, ISKP)</li> <li>- Promote regional stability through dialogue and limited cooperation</li> <li>- Engage the Taliban pragmatically to moderate their behavior and secure anti-terrorism assurances</li> </ul> |
| <b>Economic Interests</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gain access to Afghanistan's untapped natural resources (minerals, energy)</li> <li>- Expand Chinese exports and market influence through infrastructure investments</li> <li>- Integrate Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly via CPEC expansion</li> </ul>             |

Source: Developed by the author.

### **Post 2021 China-Afghanistan Trade Trends:**

Under the Taliban 2.0 rule of Afghanistan, China -Afghan trade relations have recorded a surprising trend in the form of expansion of China's exports towards Afghanistan. It further endorses the claim of the paper that China has recalibrated its approach towards Afghanistan in the light of its broader national interests.

In 2021 total bilateral trade recorded at approximately \$424.9 million, with China's exports stood at \$474.5 million and imports from Afghanistan reaching \$49.5 million. Despite the power transition from state to Taliban the non -state actors alongside the absence of de jure recognition trade volumes remained relatively stable. This indicates of China's priority of continuity of policy rather than disengagement. The year 2022 saw an upside

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spike and stood at \$511.1 million in total volume while the exports recorded to be at \$553.1 million. However, this year saw a slight decline in China's imports from Afghanistan and stood at \$42 million owing to weak domestic Afghan capability to export under the new rulers. It also reflects the fact that China not only continued its exports but also expanded the volume of its exports to Afghanistan.

The remarkable shift came in 2023, where the Trade marked an increase of 130 % over 2022. China's exports surged to \$1.27 billion, while imports rose modestly to \$64 million. This dramatic rise coincides with the Taliban's increasing alignment with Chinese economic priorities, particularly the formal inclusion of Afghanistan in the CPEC and the BRI framework. Tariff exemptions, reactivation of visa issuance, and improved trade facilitation mechanisms likely contributed to this spike.

In 2024, the upward trend continued, with total trade reaching \$1.5 billion. China's exports rose further to \$1.54 billion, though imports declined to \$42.2 million. This slight drop may reflect logistical or licensing constraints within Afghanistan, but the overarching pattern is clear: China's export-led engagement has intensified under Taliban 2.0.

These trades reflect not only the deepening of economic ties but also the conducive political scenario that let the China-Afghan partnership to grow further despite absence of de jure recognition. While the majority of states remained apprehensive of Taliban rule and stay cautious in according formal recognition to the de facto rulers of Afghanistan, China maintained a pragmatic posture. This highlights China's two-pronged strategy towards Afghanistan as on one side it is engaging and deepening security and trade ties with Afghanistan but conversely withholding full political commitment in the form of de jure recognition until the conditions align. On the other side for Afghanistan China has appeared as a life line and a ray of hope out of uncertainty, dismay, despair as western aid has already dried up.

The 2023–2024 surge clearly ties back to infrastructure integration under CPEC. As roads, border crossings, and tariff agreements materialized, Chinese businesses ramped up exports, and a trickle of Afghan imports followed. If security conditions remain stable and CPEC projects progress on schedule, we can expect exports to grow further, potentially diversifying into mining machinery, telecommunications equipment, and more consumer goods. Afghan exports will likely remain modest but could expand if mineral extraction projects advance under Chinese partnerships.

## **D-Irritants in Strong China-Afghan Partnership**

### **De Jure recognition of the Taliban**

China has opted for a de-facto recognition of the Taliban keeping in view its larger interests. It is because if it withholds recognition to Taliban leadership or grants de jure recognition will be highly risky for greater Chinese interest. The Taliban guarantees China that, even in the absence of de jure recognition, keep its borders safe from extremist organizations, particularly ETIM. But the drawback only resides in the Taliban's unwillingness to comply with China's call to crack down on foreign fighters completely. Furthermore, China's proactive stance enabled it to launch initiatives and investigate the natural resources of Afghanistan. China can show up as long as the Taliban are isolated in contrast to the United States, which prefers to leave turmoil, as a responsible global power.<sup>38</sup>

### **Geopolitical Complexities:**

The fragmented political landscape in Afghanistan, the Taliban's tenuous hold on power, and the ongoing threat posed by militant groups such as Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) are bound to create difficulties for China's greater role in Afghanistan. Then China's limited influence and understanding of Afghanistan's local politics further complicates its effective engagement strategy, making it hard to navigate the intricate political landscape.<sup>39</sup> The instability in Afghanistan also raises doubts about the Taliban's capacity to maintain order, which is essential for fostering a secure environment for Chinese investments.

### **Intensified US-China Rivalry**

Though Afghanistan is not the center stage of the US-China rivalry however in the words of it will remain one of the major venues of the US-China rivalry.<sup>40</sup> Afghanistan has emerged as a new arena for Sino-United States competition, with both powers vying for influence in a region where the United States presence has diminished<sup>41</sup> while China wants to capitalize on perceived United States failures.<sup>42</sup> This rivalry complicates the geopolitical landscape, as regional players navigate their positions amidst

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<sup>38</sup> Umami and Cipto, "China's Afghan Policy," 64.

<sup>39</sup> Wang Jian, "China's Policies and Challenges in the Taliban's Afghanistan," *East Asian Policy*, (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1142/s1793930522000083>.

<sup>40</sup> Mohsen Shariatnia, "China-US Rivalry: The Afghanistan Factor," (2021), <https://menaaffairs.com/china-us-rivalry-the-afghanistan-factor>.

<sup>41</sup> She Gangzheng, "Asymmetric Competition on a New Battleground? Middle Eastern Perspectives on Sino-US Rivalry," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/CJIP/POAB003>.

<sup>42</sup> Prashant Manish and Kaushik, "China's Interests in Afghanistan: An Assessment Post US Withdrawal," *China Report*, (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00094455231152902>.

great power competition. The evolving situation accentuates the complexity of Sino-United States relations in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Conversely, the US perceives that an unattended Taliban government and its complete isolation would compel it to enter into the Chinese sphere of influence.

### **Loss of support of International Community**

By deepening its ties with the Taliban-led government, China risks straining its relations with Western countries and potentially undermining its broader international standing. Western states largely support democratic governance, resist and oppose the Taliban's government, and raise serious concerns regarding human rights issues prevalent in Afghanistan. Because many states are reluctant to cooperate with a regime that has not met international standards.<sup>43</sup> It will not only heighten the tensions between the US and China but also with other regional states such as India. India perceives the Taliban and increased Chinese ties with the Taliban could lead to a deterioration of Sino-Indian relations.<sup>44</sup> It could embolden militant groups in Kashmir, leading to heightened tensions.<sup>45</sup> Central Asian republics (CARs) like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan view the Taliban's potential to destabilize the region, making them cautious of China's support to the Taliban.<sup>46</sup> They are wary of the Taliban's probable support to extremist groups that threaten their borders.

### **Legitimacy of the Weak Taliban Government**

Taliban have very restricted mobility due to travel restrictions under the UNSC Resolution 1267 that hamper its interactions with the world community. China's continued engagement with the Taliban-led administration could jeopardize its relations with Western nations, potentially drawing criticism and diminishing its credibility on the global stage. The international community is showing restraint in recognizing the Taliban government of Afghanistan. Even though China will have full access to higher levels of economic cooperation upon official recognition of Afghanistan, the losses China might incur will surpass the benefits. It has to cope with the legitimacy of the weak Taliban government<sup>47</sup> and the Taliban's

<sup>43</sup> Oxford Analytica, "Afghan Foreign Relations Reach a Crossroads," *Emerald Expert Briefings*, (January 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB278959>.

<sup>44</sup> Luke Encarnation and C. Christine Fair, "China and the Taliban: Past as Prologue?," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (2023), 1–24.

<sup>45</sup> Ishrat Afshan Abbasi and Mukesh Kumar Khatwani, "China's Strategy towards Taliban-Led Afghanistan," *Asia Pacific* 39 (2022): 29–41, [https://www.academia.edu/79636573/China\\_s\\_Strategy\\_Towards\\_Taliban\\_Led\\_Afghanistan](https://www.academia.edu/79636573/China_s_Strategy_Towards_Taliban_Led_Afghanistan).

<sup>46</sup> Verma, "Taliban 2.0 and China's Counterterrorism Diplomacy in Afghanistan.", 88.

<sup>47</sup> Umami and Cipto, "China's Afghan Policy: De Facto Recognition of The Taliban Regime."

cooperation with China's Afghanistan policy are not worth it. While China's interaction with Afghanistan offers prospects, it also puts forth serious challenges, particularly regarding the Taliban's governance and international legitimacy.

### **China-Afghanistan Relations: Future Challenges**

1. As other regional players such as Pakistan, Russia, and Iran, also have substantial interests in Afghanistan, so, China will need to manage its relations with them. It may be difficult and needs to be dealt with prudence to balance its interests with all other states present in the region.
2. China's partnership with a government that has a track record of oppression and abuse of human rights may have an impact on its standing and ties abroad. Regarding its backing of the Taliban and its effects on human rights in Afghanistan, China may come in for criticism and scrutiny from the international community.
3. Relations between China and Afghanistan will be greatly influenced by the interactions between China, the US, and other major powers. Tensions and difficulties in the partnership could be caused by competing interests and different perspectives about Afghanistan's future.
4. The US role will remain instrumental in determining the future of China-Afghan relations, Though the United States would like to enter into talks with the Taliban however meeting their demands and conditions, particularly removing sanctions seems less likely.

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. China sees Afghanistan as an opportunity to expand its BRI. With Afghanistan's rich mineral resources and strategic location, China aims to invest in infrastructure and agriculture to benefit economically while helping Afghanistan rebuild. This expansion is part of China's broader plan to increase its economic influence in the region.
2. Stability in Afghanistan is crucial for China, especially because it borders the Xinjiang region, where China is wary of extremism and separatist movements. The stability in Afghanistan will help in addressing China's security concerns.
3. Geopolitically, through Afghanistan China wants to solidify its presence and influence in Central Asia, which ultimately will reduce western influence. China also actively taking initiatives for regional integration which will further strengthens its position in the region.
4. China's is dealing with Taliban in a cautious manner. It is engaging with the but has set the clear expectations from them regarding counter-terrorism and uplifting of human rights. It has drawn a line of what can

be negotiated and what is non-negotiable. It seems like through enhanced economic activities and cooperation China and Taliban can create a ground for more political coordination.

### **Conclusion**

China's interaction with Afghanistan highlights its interest-based approach that it wants to bring stability in the region that will protect its internal security needs and further its long-term economic and geopolitical desires. China has recalibrated its approach and has preferred economic outreach and political consultations rather than opting for hasty recognition or direct presence in Afghanistan. This is because China attaches so much importance to security. The treat of cross-border terrorism i.e. Uyghur militants is the main driving factor of its cautious approach towards the region.

China remains seriously concerned about the instability and insecurity in Afghanistan that can have a spillover effect on Chinese adjoining areas and can threaten the completion of key projects like BRI and CPEC. In this spirit, China sets its expectation from Taliban that they will take measures to control and suppress terrorism and will play their role to maintain international order. Afghanistan's rich natural, mineral and untapped resources are of significant importance, which can bring huge benefits to China in the long run. However, it will require stability, political certainty and governance in Afghanistan. May 2025 agreement of CPEC expansion to Afghanistan reflects China's intent of including Afghanistan into broader BRI. However, the international stature of Taliban led government of Afghanistan continue to resist.

Geopolitically, China is attempting to stabilize the region which has remained under US military rule for more than a decade. Its policy is shaped by a realist calculus as it is neither distancing itself completely not according de jure recognition but dealing selectively to secure its strategic long-term benefits. These actions cannot be termed as like China is becoming a regional hegemon but shows that China is dealing with post-US Afghanistan in its own ways. To sum up, China's policy towards Afghanistan is characterized pragmatism over ideology, security over emotions, and caution over haste. This is a long journey and it is likely that China will continue to play its steady and gradual role through trade, development, infrastructure, cooperation but without making risky commitments. The success of this approach lies on Taliban's capability to align well with China's moves to create a win win situation for both.

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