



Center for
Research &
Security
Studies

Rule of Law - Security - Governance

CHINA — IN — AFGHANISTAN THE DRAGON RISES



By Imtiaz Gul & Elsa Imdad

CONTENTS

Abstract	5
Introduction	7
Historical Overview	8
2014 – 2021: Difficult Balancing Act.....	9
Post- August 2021	12
Diplomacy	12
Trade, Economy, and Infrastructure.....	17
Security	21
Epilogue	23
What Future Looks Like	26
One Final Thought: For Taliban and International Community	27

Abstract

This report tracks China's engagement with Afghanistan in recent years, both pre- and post-Taliban rule in August 2021. Guided by principles of non-interference and sovereignty, China's Afghan policy has adapted to address assertive geo-economic endeavours and security concerns, notably with groups like the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), now known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). Since August 2021, China has pursued a pragmatic approach, emphasizing diplomatic engagement, economic development, and regional stability without giving up its insistence on the need to counter terrorist groups that shelter in Afghanistan and represent a threat to various neighbouring countries. This is evident through multiple Chinese interactions with Taliban officials, economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Forum, and security cooperation agreements. While cautious about overt recognition of the Taliban regime, China prioritizes stability and economic integration, guided by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's involvement underscores pragmatic geopolitical considerations and economic aspirations while carefully navigating the complexities of Afghanistan's political landscape.

Introduction

China's involvement in Afghanistan has been persistent but understated. It is anchored in the principles established during the early years of the Afghan Republic (2004-2021). These principles include respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations, non-interference in their internal affairs, and avoidance of pursuing a so-called sphere of influence.

But its rise as the world's second-largest economy and a predominant political force in Asia, China's foundational principles face mounting pressures. The nation's growing economic prowess fuels expectations of assertiveness in geopolitical matters, albeit without overt display of military strength, except concerning the South China Sea and Taiwan. China's focus primarily centres on geo-economics but it sees security, particularly terrorism, and extremism, as an upsetting variable in the way of regional connectivity, especially for the lasting westward expansion of the BRI. The secessionist Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) (also known as the East Turkestan Islamic Party – ETIM) remains a primary focus because of its stated aspirations for the independence of the western Xinjiang province. To address this, Beijing has maintained close ties with Afghan leaders in the last two decades through political, diplomatic, and economic support to successive governments in Kabul. Of late, this engagement has spiked, albeit largely through private investors and businesses keen to exploit Afghanistan's rich mineral wealth. This underscores China's pursuit of peace in Afghanistan as crucial for regional stability and economic connectivity. While abundant data exists on the topic, much of the information, analysis, and deductions presented in this report stem from the author's (Gul's) first-hand interactions with Chinese and Afghan officials, academics, and journalists since 2008, spanning various locations including Beijing, Urumqi, Shanghai, Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e- Sharif, and Pakistan.

Historical Overview

Historically, China's relationship with Afghanistan has largely been positive, except during the Soviet occupation of the country between 1979 -1989 and the brief Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001. Tensions marked this period, primarily because of the Chinese concerns about the Uyghur insurgency in Xinjiang that drew manpower and inspiration from safe havens in Afghanistan.

Following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US intervention in Afghanistan in December 2001, China viewed the US presence near its western border as a potential threat. It positioned itself as a peace mediator, supporting the Islamic Republic in Kabul while acknowledging the Taliban as a potential bulwark against terrorist outfits, including the Islamic State of Khorasan and the TIP (historically known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, ETIM).

China also played a key role in establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Contact Group on Afghanistan in 2005, which included China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and India. Beijing initiated this group in an apparent bid to push and coordinate multilateral cooperation on Afghanistan – an idea that also drove UN Secretary-General António Guterres' concept of a regional contact group on Afghanistan after a two-day conference of special representatives from 25 countries at Doha in February 2024.

The SCO contact group essentially replicated a similar mechanism that the United States and some of its key allies had used to align their approaches to the country after an SCO summit at Beijing had granted Afghanistan observer status in the organisation, coinciding with President Karzai's visit in 2012.

By 2013, China had adopted the “Look West” policy and launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The co-option of Afghanistan into the SCO helped China explore possibilities of connecting with the country economically, and this aligned its Afghan policy with the broader BRI goals, i.e. regional connectivity through trade and economic cooperation.

2014 – 2021: Difficult Balancing Act

Despite maintaining formal diplomatic ties with successive Afghan governments since 2001, China never completely severed contacts with the Taliban militia. This interaction intensified following the December 2014 draw-down announcement of the US-ISAF troops by the Obama administration. Beijing became increasingly concerned that a withdrawal of U.S. forces could result in a resurgence of violence and Islamic extremism in Afghanistan, potentially affecting the entire neighbourhood. Amidst the raging Taliban insurgency and relatively diminished US-ISAF engagement, Chinese leaders found themselves under increasing pressure to take a more active role in the peace process that had long been stalled.

Conscious of its growing economic muscle and the need for staying politically relevant, China made several attempts “to mediate Afghanistan’s conflicts at various stages, as its global status and roles changed over the decades”, says Barnett Rubin of the Stimson Center.

Beijing’s active Afghan diplomacy began in July 2014, when it named Sun Yuxi as the special envoy for Afghan affairs. Yuxi immediately embarked on a mission which involved high-profile mediation efforts both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The same month, the Senior Officials Meeting of the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan was held in Beijing, co-chaired by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Ershad Ahmadi, and the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of China, Liu Zhenmin. The meeting drew participants from the region and beyond, including representatives of 12 Governments.¹

In October 2014, President Ghani took advantage of the opportunity presented by the Istanbul Process’s fourth Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference to visit China, with a few bilateral meetings on the sidelines.²

China's diplomatic efforts went beyond symbolic gestures. In July 2015, with the help of its long-term regional ally Islamabad, Beijing facilitated a meeting at Urumqi – the capital of the Muslim majority Xinjiang province between the Taliban representatives and Afghanistan’s

¹ https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2014_656.pdf

² <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/12/31/how-china-and-regional-forums-can-help-afghanistan-recover-pub-62386>

High Peace Council's Masoom Stanakzai to de-escalate conflict in Afghanistan.³ These efforts demonstrated that China, without taking explicit sides, was increasingly interested in mediating peace in Afghanistan. Holding the meeting at Urumqi itself carried great symbolism; it underscored to the radical Muslim militia the Chinese "respect" for its area-wise largest Muslim majority region.

Keen to carve out a role for itself as a regional mediator, China also aided in creating the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US, and itself to address Afghanistan's security.⁴ However, the process stalled due to the US's disinterest as well as its fixation on the "ascendent challenge" that China posed to the US's global interests, articulated on several occasions also by former President Joe Biden. The US's reluctance to go along with the QCG eventually prompted Beijing to create the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) in 2016, excluding the US. Its primary focus was counter-terrorism coordination among China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.

Concurrently, China hosted Afghan Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani in January 2016. Getting the Taliban to peace talks topped the agenda of all bilateral and multilateral meetings.

In March 2017, senior Taliban leaders landed in Beijing to the charming Chinese hospitality. It was the first public admission of China's contacts with the Afghan Taliban. The Qatar office chief, Sher Abbas Stanakzai, led the five-member delegation for these rare talks with the Chinese officials. The delegation comprised Shahabuddin Dilawar, Jan Muhammad Madani, Salam Hanafi, and Dr. Saleh.

Days after the Taliban trip, the special envoy for Afghanistan, Deng Xijun, arrived in Kabul for meetings with senior Afghan leaders, including President Ashraf Ghani. The Chinese envoy told the Afghan president that his country has "encouraged the Taliban during our contacts with them to join the peace process," Ghani's office said after the meeting. These efforts were made in support of a 'comprehensive and inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned reconciliation process'.⁵

³ <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2015/05/secret-meeting-brings-taliban-to-china?lang=en>

⁴ <https://www.stimson.org/2024/chinese-peacemaking-efforts-in-afghanistan/>

⁵ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367329.html



In July 2021, China convened yet another important meeting in Tianjin with a delegation of nine Taliban representatives, led by the head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission. On the occasion, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, acknowledged the Taliban's pivotal role as a military and political force in Afghanistan, emphasizing their anticipated contribution to the country's peace.⁶

Following this, in August, shortly before the meltdown of the Ghani government, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson in Beijing expressed China's readiness to maintain good-neighbourly relations and friendly cooperation with Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

Jiayi Zhou, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), posits that China's approach prioritises security over ideological differences, recognising that fostering a stable relationship with the Taliban was essential for mitigating regional threats, including terrorism. Also, simultaneous engagement with the Afghan government and the Taliban reflected a pre-emptive as well as futuristic approach to a volatile region. The inherent intention was to steer

⁶ http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202107/t20210729_9039025.htm

all stakeholders into an inclusive Afghan-led reconciliation process, without playing favourites.⁷

While Afghanistan remained a hub of competing interests during this period, China adeptly forged its own path forward, identifying a crucial opportunity to assert its influence. That is why the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 was neither a surprise for China nor did it cause any break in engagement with the country's de facto leaders.

Post- August 2021

The Taliban's return to Kabul marked a turning point as much for China as for so many others. While China didn't formally recognise the Taliban government, it maintained its embassy in Kabul in a clear signal of openness to the new power equation in Kabul, while upholding the Afghan people's right to self-determination. Beijing followed it up with several critical economic and political initiatives, including about 350 million RMB worth of humanitarian aid to support Afghanistan's immediate needs.⁸

Diplomacy

China views Afghanistan as a sovereign state rather than merely a ruling regime, as often portrayed in Western narratives. This view is anchored in the old principle that it maintains relations with states, not just governments. Through diplomatic engagement, Beijing has since tried to help Afghanistan shape its aspirations and integrate into the broader regional framework.

While recognition of the de facto rulers remains subject to the fulfilment of international demands, China has been urging the global community to engage with the Taliban, even if they don't accord recognition to the regime. Following the Taliban takeover, then-Foreign Minister Wang Yi told U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a phone call that the international community should engage with Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers and "positively guide" them.⁹

⁷ https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/sipriinsights_2208_china_and_afghanistan_2.pdf

⁸ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2676_663356/

⁹ *Reuters.com*. (2021, August). *reuters.com*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-foreign-minister-us-sec-state-discuss-afghanistan-amid-tense-ties-2021-08-29>

Yi also urged his counterparts during talks with G20 ministers in September 2021 to unfreeze Afghanistan's foreign assets and stop exerting "political pressure" on the Taliban.

As regional countries grappled with the new political reality of Afghanistan, President Xi Jinping, too, stepped forward in calling for the implementation of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group recommendations and facilitating a smooth transition in Afghanistan.

China Appoints Ambassador to Kabul

In September 2023, China became the first country to appoint an ambassador to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). The appointment of Zhao Xing, however, was made without extending formal recognition to IEA - the preferred official branding of the Taliban government. While Beijing has not explicitly stated whether this move signals official recognition, it has demonstrated a clear interest in strengthening ties with Afghanistan.¹⁰ "This is the normal rotation of China's ambassador to Afghanistan and is intended to continue advancing dialogue and cooperation between China and Afghanistan," the Chinese foreign ministry said in a statement, apparently meant to underplay the initiative. It also reiterated that "China's policy towards Afghanistan is clear and consistent."

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2023/9/13/taliban-gives-a-warm-welcome-to-chinas-new-ambassador-to-afghanistan>



Zhao Xing was warmly received at the Presidential Palace by acting Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund and Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. In an official statement, China emphasized that Xing's appointment "reflects its commitment to deepening diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan."

On his 'X' account, Zhao Xing highlighted "China's desire to build strong political and economic relations with Afghanistan" projecting it as mutually beneficial cooperation. He underlining Beijing's strategic interest in engaging with Afghanistan for both security and economic reasons. China's growing presence in the country is largely driven by its aim to curb militant groups that threaten its interests, including Uyghur factions and the Pakistani Taliban.¹¹

Additionally, Zhao Xing noted that Afghanistan's current government had successfully neutralised the ISIS threat, a heightened source for security concerns -both for China and other regional players. He described the Taliban-led administration as a "responsible governing entity capable of managing regional security challenges, which, in turn, provides a foundation for closer political and economic cooperation between China and Afghanistan."

¹¹ <https://thegeopolitics.com/from-historical-bonds-to-modern-alliances-decoding-chinas-relations-with-afghanistan/>

Another event, a month later, underscored the vigorous Chinese policy of building ties with Kabul; a Taliban delegation was formally invited to the global Belt and Road Forum in October 2023. It marked the first high-profile multilateral gathering that the de facto Afghan rulers had attended since their return to power.

Equally surprising for the rest of the world was the formal acceptance of a Taliban ambassador to Beijing on December 1, 2023. Illustrating its deepening engagement with Afghanistan.¹² A jubilant Afghan foreign ministry shared the news via social media, announcing that Ambassador Asadullah Bilal Karimi had presented his credentials to Mr. Hong Lei, the Director General of Protocol at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



“Beijing respects the sovereignty of Afghanistan and the decisions of the Afghan people. It does not interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs, nor has it done so in the past,” said Lei. The Chinese official reiterated China’s commitment to assist Afghanistan with economic and infrastructure projects within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid praised China’s decision, stating that Beijing “has

¹²<https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-says-china-becomes-first-nation-to-accept-its-ambassador/7380438.html>

understood what the rest of the world has not.” Subsequently, in January 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping accepted the credentials of the Taliban's ambassador in a formal ceremony at the Great Hall of the People, alongside envoys from Cuba, Iran, Pakistan, and 38 other nations.¹³

At China's urging, the Taliban delegation participated in the third round of the “Doha process”¹⁴ held in May 2024. Representatives of 25 countries and regional organisations, including the European Union, the United States, and Russia, were among the attendees. On the occasion, the Chinese representative termed the U.S. seizure of Afghanistan's \$7 billion in central bank reserves tantamount to “robbery” by a “bandit”¹⁵ and called for unfreezing the Afghan people's funds. Chinese state-controlled media's positive coverage of Afghanistan reflects Beijing's favourable attitude.¹⁶

While China seeks to stabilise Afghanistan through diplomatic, economic, and infrastructure initiatives, it remains shy – and justifiably so - of fully endorsing the regime for concerns over women's rights and ties to terrorist entities such as TIP. Beijing has also supported Pakistan's grievances with Kabul over the Tehrik- e - Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP's top leadership resides in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan as state guests and has so far refused to rein in the group's terrorist activities in Pakistan. Although some criticise China for not taking a stronger stance on human rights, its approach aligns with that of several other countries - such as Pakistan, Russia, and the Central Asian nations -which favour dialogue and engagement without compromising principles or disregarding international norms.

In January 2025, China and Afghanistan celebrated 70 years of diplomatic ties, reaffirming mutual respect and cooperation. Chinese Ambassador Zhao Xing emphasised China's “Three Respects” and “Three Nevers” policy, pledging support for Afghanistan's sovereignty, economic development, and regional stability. Trade between the two nations was expected to exceed \$1.5 billion in 2025, with China's private investments in Afghanistan growing rapidly. Afghan Deputy FM Stanikzai reciprocated by praising Beijing's role in supporting

¹³ <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-president-receives-afghan-ambassador-taliban-seek-recognition-from-russia-iran-/7463837.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/30/world/middleeast/afghanistan-un-taliban-talks-women.html>

¹⁵ <https://english.news.cn/20220215/d8a121c6cb77426a880689fa46d2ffeb/c.html>

¹⁶ <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/china-deepens-its-engagement-with-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/>

Afghanistan's independence and economic recovery.¹⁷

It would be apt to infer that by accepting a Taliban ambassador and integrating Afghanistan into key diplomatic and economic frameworks, Beijing has positioned itself as the most influential external actor while maintaining strategic ambiguity on formal recognition. This approach allows China to advance BRI investments and secure its western frontier without becoming entangled in Afghanistan's internal challenges. At the same time, Beijing's diplomatic overtures challenge Western efforts to isolate the Taliban, reinforcing China's broader push for a multipolar world order and multilateralism. While Beijing's strategy offers short-term stability, its long-term success hinges on whether the Taliban can deliver a functional and cooperative governance model—something China remains sceptical of, despite its public endorsements.¹⁸

Trade, Economy, and Infrastructure

BRI is a means to expand China's footprint in Africa and Asia through economic collaboration – both through government-to-government and business-to-business ventures through strategic investments in infrastructure and communication networks. This also is the obvious driver of Beijing's direct and indirect overtures to Kabul.

By leveraging Afghanistan's historical significance as a trading hub, situated at the crossroads of empires, China seeks to enhance trade connectivity across the region, extending from Central Asia to the Middle East and Europe. As per July 2023, China was among the top ten contributors to humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, and one of the only and the largest economic investors in the country.¹⁹

In April 2022, China initiated the Tunxi Initiative, rallying Afghanistan's neighbours and Russia to support the country's reconstruction and economic rehabilitation. Under the initiative, tariffs on 98 per cent of Afghanistan's imports were lifted and air cargo services resumed, enabling the export of Afghanistan's main product -pine nuts - to China, generating \$800 million yearly

¹⁷ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202501/22/WS67904485a310a2ab06ea873f.html>

¹⁸ KII

¹⁹ https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20230731_ACAPS_Thematic_report_Afghanistan_China_s_humanitarian_aid_and_economic_investments.pdf

for Kabul.²⁰ In 2023, Afghanistan exported \$64 million worth of goods to China, nearly 90% of which were pine nuts, highlighting the potential for expanded trade under the new policy.

In January 2023, the Taliban administration signed a 25-year contract with China's Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co. (CAPEIC) to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan. Chinese Ambassador Wang Yu described the project as a significant milestone in China-Afghanistan cooperation.²¹



In April 2023, the Taliban announced a potential \$10 billion investment from a Chinese firm for lithium extraction in Afghanistan, aiming to employ over 120,000 Afghans. Despite criticism of Chinese infrastructure projects, the Taliban actively seeks Chinese investment to tap into Afghanistan's mineral reserves valued at US\$1-3 trillion.

Such undertakings also raised eyebrows in the West and rejuvenated the discussion on foreign powers' quest to exploit Afghanistan's rich mineral resources.

²⁰ <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-11-17/china-interest-afghanistan-trade-economics-stabilization>

²¹ <https://www.reuters.com/business/afghanistans-taliban-administration-oil-extraction-deal-with-chinese-company-2023-01-05>

Subsequently, in May 2023, during the fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Islamabad, the three nations agreed to extend the CPEC into Afghanistan. This initiative aims to enhance regional connectivity under the BRI, with projects like the development of the Wakhan Corridor, providing direct access between Afghanistan and China's Xinjiang province.²² BRI has made China ever more interested in the peace settlement and stability in Afghanistan to protect its investment across the entire region that BRI spans. The basis of Afghanistan and Pakistan coming together to cooperate under the umbrella of CPEC and BRI, regardless of the bitter state of affairs and trust deficit in the bilateral domain, is mainly the presence of a trustworthy actor like China, which enables cooperation and trust among them.

May 2023 also marked the resumption of direct flights between Kabul and Urumqi, the capital of the Muslim-majority western Chinese province of Xinjiang, after a gap of three years. Moreover, China opened rail routes to Afghanistan to facilitate the transit of goods back and forth, including aid to Afghanistan, and Pakistan Railways and China Railway Eryuan Engineering Group sealed an agreement to build a rail line between Karachi and Mazar-e-Sharif.²³

On July 6, 2023, Fan China Afghan Mining Processing and Trading Company (FAMPTC) announced a \$350 million investment in Afghanistan's power, cement, and health sectors. The company, a joint venture between China's CAPEIC and Afghanistan's Watan Group, shared its plans with IEA's acting prime minister, Mawlawi Abdul Kabir.²⁴

The landmark development in this entire scenario is that of the Wakhan Corridor. On January 2, 2024, Mullah Baradar announced the ongoing construction of the Wakhan Corridor, a strategic route connecting Afghanistan to China, aimed at boosting bilateral trade. Once a historic Silk Road passage, this corridor, long hindered by geopolitical tensions and security threats, now represents China's deepening footprint in Afghanistan's economic and security landscape. With Taliban cooperation, Beijing is leveraging the corridor to integrate Afghanistan into BRI, securing vital trade routes while reinforcing stability in its sensitive Xinjiang region.

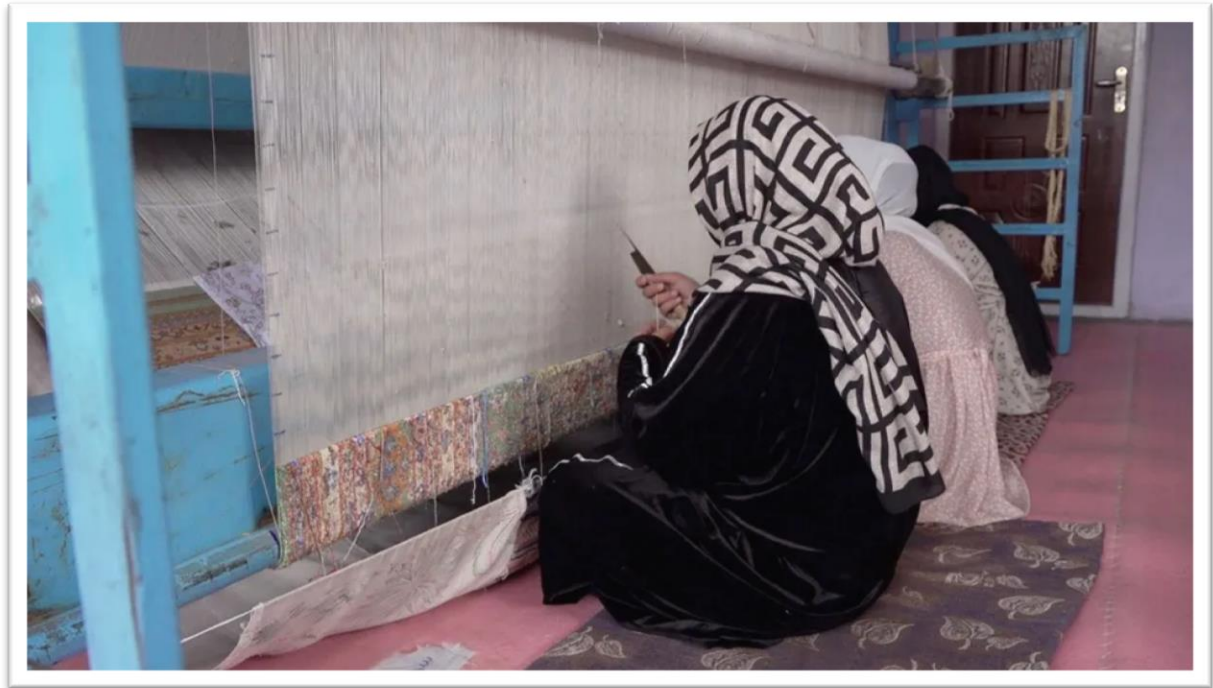
²² <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1290253.shtml>

²³ <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40239653>

²⁴ <https://www.ariananews.af/chinese-mining-firm-to-invest-350-million-in-afghanistan/>

Pakistan, too, sees an opportunity to bolster its trade links with Central Asia, sidelining India's regional influence.²⁵

In October 2024, China announced tariff-free access for 100% of Afghan exports, aiming to boost trade ties with the IEA.²⁶



Aside from mega economic and infrastructural deals, Afghanistan's carpet industry has witnessed significant growth, with China emerging as a key market. In 2022, Afghanistan exported carpets worth \$20 million, employing over 1 million people across 18 provinces. Women, who constitute a significant portion of the workforce, have particularly benefited from this expansion, as carpet weaving remains one of the few income-generating opportunities available to them under Taliban rule. To meet rising demand, particularly from China, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce announced plans in July 2023 to expand production, aiming to employ 1.5 million individuals in the sector.²⁷ The resumption of Chinese visas for Afghan traders has facilitated this surge, with exports to China increasing from approximately 1,000 square meters annually to 30,000 - 40,000 square meters in 2024.²⁸

²⁵ <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13827-the-wakhan-corridor-chinas-inroad-to-afghanistan.html>

²⁶ <https://www.ariananews.af/china-to-offer-afghanistan-tariff-free-trade/>

²⁷ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2339926/world>

²⁸ <https://english.news.cn/20240721/5ef719d1bb514bc28e9c86d06aeb1ccf/c.html>

Security

One of China's significant concerns in Afghanistan revolves around security, primarily driven by the threats that Beijing says the Uyghur separatist groups, such as TIP and East Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), pose to the internal stability of Xinjiang province.

Interestingly, Chinese officials and experts don't distinguish between TIP, ETLO or similar outfits. For them, these entities are various shades of the same colour, and their primary objective is to hurt and destabilise Xinjiang.

Xinjiang, China's mineral-rich largest province, shares borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and several Central Asian nations, making it vulnerable to potential Uyghur terrorist activities. Afghanistan, in particular, is viewed as a significant risk due to its historical tolerance of Uyghur militants, including groups like the TIP, who have been involved in terrorist activities linked to Al-Qaeda.²⁹

Foreign Minister Wang secured Taliban guarantees at the July 2021 Tianjin meeting to prevent any actions harmful to China in Afghanistan.

“Security is the foundation and prerequisite of development [...]. The TIP forces in Afghanistan pose a severe threat to the security of China, Afghanistan, and the region. China hopes that Afghanistan will fulfil its commitment in earnest and take more effective measures to crack down on all terrorist forces”, illustrates a Chinese official policy statement on Afghanistan, issued in April 2023.³⁰

TIP militants' relocation from Badakhshan province along the China-Afghanistan border indicated an acknowledgement of Chinese concerns.

A significant decline in activities by Uyghur groups - propaganda, open advocacy against China, and violence – suggests the Afghan Taliban may have prevailed upon Uyghur militants, at least those based in Afghanistan, to ramp down their anti-China campaign.

However, the efficacy of Beijing's strategy will largely hinge – in the medium term - on whether tangible economic, humanitarian, and diplomatic benefits accrue to Afghanistan from this relationship. Much will remain as to what extent and for how long can the Afghan Taliban serve

²⁹ <https://ppr.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/lseppr.52>

³⁰ http://sb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw_12/202304/t20230412_11057785.html

as a bulwark – not only against TIP and ETLO but also against terrorist outfits such as ISKP because almost all of these groups radiate are publicly avowed enemies of respective governments and are hence seen by China, Pakistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan as proxy terror groups.

This also raises the question as to how long Kabul will be able to contain these groups and keep them away from their stated agendas. A UN Security Council report issued in June 2023 estimated the TIP's strength at anywhere from 300 to 1,200 members, who have reportedly established new operational bases apart from obtaining weapons while retaining their presence in Afghanistan's northeast provinces bordering Xinjiang.³¹

ISKP presents a gigantic challenge despite the Taliban's multipronged offensive against the group. A Chinese mine worker was killed in an attack in Afghanistan's Takhar province on January 21, 2025, while travelling without a security escort. ISKP later claimed responsibility for the attack, marking its resurgence in the region after last being active there in 2022.³²

Hence, a lot of ire comes from the security-related situation and stance of Kabul – not just from China but other regional countries, especially Pakistan. The Taliban actively seek diplomatic relations with regional countries, while harbouring groups that want to overthrow the same governments. As a regional diplomat put it: "Afghanistan continues to remain a safe haven for terror groups; now, it is just not as blatant as in the 1990s".³³ The Taliban's lack of transparency on security matters has fueled regional distrust, particularly after the killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul. His presence in a house linked to the acting interior minister raised suspicions about the Taliban's ties to militants, with accusations that they were granting Afghan residency and citizenship to foreign fighters. In response, neighbouring countries issued warnings, often exaggerating the number of militants in Afghanistan. Despite this, the Taliban have pursued their own strategy—weakening, relocating, and reintegrating jihadists rather than eliminating or extraditing them.³⁴ Their approach prioritises domestic stability over external concerns, but it remains unclear whether China will find this sufficient for its security interests.

³¹ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/125/36/pdf/n2312536.pdf>

³² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1887004>

³³ Crisis Group interview, regional diplomat, October 2022.

³⁴ <https://www.afintl.com/en/202210196971>

It is a delicate landscape, for sure, but China is willing to take risks where other major international actors like the US are reluctant to invest. As evident by its own rise, China can be trusted with the fact that its presence in Afghanistan will, in fact, make something formidable out of the country, ultimately changing the region's overall visage, so it is expected.

Wakhan Corridor, for instance, is the most recent development. Besides economic development, the growing presence of China in the Wakhan Corridor also addresses Beijing's security concerns. There are fears that groups such as the ETIM and ISKP could exploit the region to destabilise China's western borders.³⁵ On January 8, 2025, three Chinese military intelligence officers arrived in the Wakhan Corridor under the escort of Taliban militia, staying until January 12. Their visit indicated Beijing's deepening engagement with the Taliban, particularly in military and intelligence cooperation. According to sources within the Taliban's Ministry of Defence and Intelligence Department, a joint commission has been established to enhance collaboration with China, highlighting Beijing's strategic push for greater security influence in the region.³⁶ China has firmly instructed the Taliban to halt any activity near the border, citing security concerns.

Epilogue

Since August 2021, China has prioritised engagement with Afghanistan, evident in diplomatic overtures and receptions for Afghan officials. Two underpinning factors emerge out of the past decade of the Chinese engagement with Afghanistan; firstly, concerns over the TIP and ETLO's destabilising impact on Xinjiang, and secondly, China's economic interests inherent in the BRI. underscore the importance of stability in Afghanistan for successful infrastructure projects and economic cooperation.

These two elements stand out as far as the post-August 2021 Chinese diplomacy around Afghanistan is concerned. Official Chinese humanitarian assistance, facilitation of Afghan exports to China (removal of tariffs), and encouragement of the Chinese private sector to go for direct oil, gas, and mineral extraction deals with Kabul have all placed China ahead of other nations as far as the perusal of peace, trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan is concerned.

³⁵ <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2025/01/23/china-wakhan-corridor/>

³⁶ <https://x.com/AGTAfghanistan/status/1879075446664331724>

To reinforce that it is pursuing economic objectives very much in tandem with its long-standing principle of non-interference, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an eleven-point policy statement in April 2023 outlining China's approach to Afghanistan. The statement emphasises “respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in its internal affairs, and cooperation against terrorist groups like the TIP.” China's commitment to supporting Afghanistan's development is contingent upon the Afghan government's efforts to combat terrorism and ensure the security of Chinese citizens and projects in the country. The paper also indicated Beijing’s interest in transforming Afghanistan from a “land-locked” to a “land-linked” country – something commendable to come from a major player like China.³⁷

For Western democracies, the “Chinese pragmatism” comes across as self-serving or skewed, conveniently glossing over the consequences of the choices the US-led NATO nations have made in cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, or even Israel. Quite sad and paradoxical that it is not the Chinese but the American and British bombs and rockets that have killed tens of thousands, if not millions, in the aforementioned countries. A report estimates that 3.6-3.8 million indirect deaths occurred in post-9/11 war zones, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The total death toll in these war zones could be at least 4.5-4.7 million and counting, though the precise mortality figure remains unknown.³⁸

China’s role in Afghanistan cannot be fully deciphered unless we look at the actors who had the reins prior to the Taliban takeover. “The US’ was a transformational project. China is about stabilisation,” said Jennifer Murtazashvili, an expert on Central Asia at the University of Pittsburgh.³⁹

Zhou Bo, a senior fellow at Tsinghua University’s Center for International Security and Strategy in Beijing explains the difference between the US-China approach to Afghanistan post August 2021. “The Chinese approach is that this is reality: The Taliban are in power. Let’s just get in touch, and hope through this process they can become inclusive and open.”⁴⁰

³⁷ <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-04-12/China-releases-11-point-statement-on-its-stance-on-Afghanistan-issue-1iWpcpYTbe8/index.html>

³⁸ <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/2023/IndirectDeaths>

³⁹ <https://www.pressherald.com/2022/11/20/with-the-u-s-out-of-afghanistan-china-comes-calling/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-11-17/china-interest-afghanistan-trade-economics-stabilization>

The propensity to suspect and denigrate any step or decision that Beijing takes – particularly on external conflicts – is a sad reflection of geopolitics.

At the same time, China advises against coercing the Taliban regime into accepting demands by outsiders, which it deems as interference in the country's internal matters. "When engaging with the Afghan authorities, the international community needs to demonstrate good faith, set no preconditions, communicate with the Afghan Taliban in ways easily acceptable to it, and strive for its understanding and cooperation," stressed Geng Shuang, the Chinese representative, while speaking at the U.N. Security Council meeting on December 21, 2023.

Beijing has tried to tread a cautious path in Afghanistan while standing firm on the issue of recognition, largely pegged to several steps spelt out in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy paper. Had it not been for the obstinacy of Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, China, along with Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, would have accorded recognition to the Taliban regime by now.

China's decision-making process historically involves seeking support and consensus from its neighbouring countries. While maintaining relations with Kabul, China is cautious not to relinquish strategic influence. It balances geopolitical considerations with deference to Afghanistan's conservative, religious, and tribal society. Unlike the US-led NATO, China consciously avoided indulging in nation-building endeavours in Afghanistan, viewing the prolonged US-NATO presence there as a cautionary example.

Its primary emphasis is likely to stay on cultivating the Afghan leadership present in the country while carving space for public and private business activities. Lastly, an overriding consideration is to expand BRI westwards because China relies more on its economic muscle than its military prowess. It also believes it can thrive economically only if its neighbouring countries are in peace.

What Future Looks Like

China's approach to Afghanistan is expected to focus on security, economic expansion, and regional connectivity, as it seeks to expand its influence in the region.⁴¹ Experts identified several key factors shaping China's strategy moving forward:

1. **Deeper Engagement**

China will continue shifting away from its historically limited engagement, forging long-term partnerships with Afghanistan and its neighbors. Ensuring Afghanistan's stability is paramount for China's regional projects, including the BRI. Strengthening political and economic ties with Afghanistan is expected, as China views stability in Afghanistan as crucial for regional prosperity.

2. **Pragmatic Diplomacy**

China will likely maintain its pragmatic approach of engaging with any ruling authority in Afghanistan. Its willingness to engage with the Taliban, despite international criticism, suggests that Beijing will prioritize stability and security over political concerns, ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a base for extremist activities that threaten China's security interests, particularly in the restive Xinjiang region.

3. **Regional Shift**

China aims to deepen its engagement with Afghanistan while also strengthening connectivity with regional partners, including Pakistan and Iran. Discussions on developing the Wakhan Corridor and improving infrastructure like roads and railways highlight China's interest in Afghanistan as a crucial transit point for trade and energy routes. Although security and infrastructure challenges remain, China has the resources and experience to advance these projects if conditions improve.

4. **Diplomatic Backing**

China will continue its diplomatic support for the Taliban while urging moderation in governance and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for extremism. Beijing will advocate for the release of frozen Afghan assets and international economic assistance to stabilize the country.

⁴¹ KII

A key aspect of China's diplomatic ambitions to support Afghanistan is its recent bid to become the penholder on Afghanistan at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). As penholder, China would have significant influence over the drafting of UNSC resolutions on Afghanistan.⁴² While Pakistan and South Korea have also expressed interest in the role, China has indicated a willingness to collaborate with these countries as co-penholders – a move reflective of China's increasing assertiveness and its intent to play a leading role in shaping Afghanistan's future at the global stage.

One Final Thought: For Taliban and International Community

Afghanistan's fractious relations with its neighbours have long disrupted trade, mobility, and economic lifelines across South and Central Asia. The region's stability hinges on Kabul's ability to engage in pragmatic diplomacy—negotiating water rights, expanding trade corridors, and addressing transnational militancy with something more than rhetorical assurances. Left unchecked, these fault lines will deepen, fuelling instability that extends well beyond Afghanistan's borders.

The Taliban's ideological rigidity, particularly on gender policies, has only compounded its isolation. Its refusal to compromise has not just alienated the West but has also tested the patience of regional actors who see Afghanistan as a potential security liability rather than an economic partner. While the regime seeks recognition, it has offered little in return—no credible roadmap for governance, no shift toward inclusion, no reassurances on security beyond its own narrow calculus.

For the international community, Afghanistan presents an enduring dilemma. Total disengagement risks ceding ground to militant groups and illicit economies, yet unconditional engagement risks legitimising a government that governs by exclusion. A middle path—leveraging economic pressure, diplomatic engagement, and regional alliances—may offer the best chance at nudging the Taliban toward pragmatic governance. But history suggests that ideological movements rarely change unless faced with existential pressure. For now,

⁴² <https://www.justsecurity.org/107832/us-china-standoff-afghanistan-un/>

Afghanistan's trajectory remains trapped in an uneasy balance between geopolitical necessity and the Taliban's own unwillingness to adapt.

One lesson, however, may lie in China's approach. While Beijing's growing footprint in Afghanistan is often framed as an extension of its sphere of influence, it has done so with an awareness of Afghan dignity and economic necessity. Unlike the West's episodic engagement—tied to military intervention and political conditions—China is investing in infrastructure, trade, and resource extraction in ways that are designed to outlast any single government. It is **building** something that cannot simply be reversed with the next political upheaval. For Afghanistan's former Western allies, this should serve as a sobering reflection: influence that endures is not just imposed through power but embedded through tangible, lasting economic transformation.

The Center

CRSS Background

The Center for Research and Security Studies (CRSS) is a think tank/advocacy center launched in September, 2007. Founded by noted security expert and media personality Imtiaz Gul, it is committed to the cause of independent research, nonpartisan analysis, and informed advocacy. The goal is to help people inside and outside Pakistan understand this nation of 212 million people.

As an advocacy center, CRSS is dedicated to trigger critical thinking through discourse anchored in global democratic values such as socio-political diversity, rule of law, equal citizenry, and acceptance of diversity, fundamental human rights, all at the intersection of empirical research in security studies.

Core Values

CRSS strives to embed the national conversation in constitutionalism, and rationalize it over extremism and sectarianism. CRSS believes the path to peace is through embodying fundamental human rights, specifically:

- strict adherence to the rule of law, and stringent implementation
- informing the public on civic education, especially good governance and public accountability
- promoting equal rights for all citizens of Pakistan
- championing women empowerment
- providing training and opportunities to youth to veer them away from radicalization through critical thinking

CRSS' programming reflects its core values, which CRSS believes can, along with time-tested methodologies in strategic communications, impactful message development, research and advocacy result in a more tolerant and cohesive Pakistan.

Center For Research & Security Studies
14-M, Ali Plaza, Second Floor, F-8 Markaz, Islamabad
Tel: +92-51-831-4801-03 Fax: +92-51-831-4804
E-mail: mail@crss.pk, web: www.crss.pk