

## From Economic Cooperation to Political Intervention: China`s Role in Afghanistan

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### **Abstract**

*Sino-Afghan relationships date back to the era of the ancient Silk Road. Their formal diplomatic relationships were established in 1955. Since then Afghanistan remains an important component in Beijing`s regional policy. Over the past two decades, China`s economic and political role in Afghanistan has increased. For Beijing, Afghanistan has become an important aspect of its geo-economic and geo-political calculations. This article identifies security, energy, connectivity, and geopolitics as the main interests of China in Afghanistan. Afghanistan`s important geostrategic location combined with its connectivity features provides Beijing an opportunity to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Peace and stability in Afghanistan are key to Chinese interests. China`s Central Asian Strategy, the BRI and CPEC, and the security of its Xinjian region are important factors in China Afghan policy. From its role in the Doha peace dialogue, economic aid, and investment, China has emerged as a proactive regional player in the Afghan affair. This article attempts to recount China's political and economic role in Afghanistan. Also, the paper discusses future prospects of China role in Afghanistan and provides policy recommendations.*

**Key Words:** China, Afghanistan, geostrategic, political, economic, Central Asia.

## Introduction

China and Afghanistan have political, economic, and trade linkages that date back to the era of the Silk Road. Beijing and Kabul established their formal diplomatic relations in 1955. (Lanteigne, 2013) China and Afghanistan share a short border of 76 km, but that is an important geographical link. Historically, China did not engage in Afghan affairs. However, China's political and economic involvement in Afghanistan has grown since the turn of the century. Afghanistan has emerged as an important country for China, as Beijing aims to expand its overseas investments, play greater role in global governance, and tightens its national security. China played constructive role in the peace and reconciliation process of Afghanistan. It remained a proactive regional player on the conflict resolution front. Furthermore, China has emerged as the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan. It has enhanced its stake in the war-torn country based on a two-step process; economic cooperation and political engagements.

The year 2013 witnessed the first visit of a senior Chinese official to Kabul since 1996. In October 2014, Beijing hosted the Istanbul Process in an effort for reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban, marking the first meeting hosted by China regarding the Afghan affair. Following this, China continued its mediatory efforts between the two warring parties through bilateral and multilateral channels ( Hirono, 2019).

Afghanistan has become China`s important partner under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Also, it has an observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These two frameworks have provided an allied facilitation for the development (Global Times, 2021). China sees Afghanistan is an important variable in its economic interest in the region. For China, to safeguard its interests through BRI projects, stability in Afghanistan is critical. (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021)

In July 2021, the United States and its NATO allies withdrew from Afghanistan after twenty-year war. Taliban are now back in power after their ouster as result of US invasion back in 2001. This geopolitical shift has created power vacuum, presenting China both opportunities and challenges. The post-withdrawal period has seen China`s active engagement with the Taliban-administered Afghanistan. China has kept its

diplomatic mission open in Kabul, finding ways for a desirable environment in Afghanistan to work closely with the Islamic Emirate and achieve its foreign policy objectives. Beijing is seeking stability to expand its BRI projects, ensure stability of its Xinjiang region, Central Asian strategy, and geopolitical goals in the region. This article discusses China-Afghanistan relations, focusing China's key interests in Afghanistan.

### **Literature Review**

This research focuses China's diplomatic and economic role in Afghanistan.

Feifer (2010) explains that Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a grueling event that has significant lessons for the twenty-first century. The author has analyzed the Soviet war from the perspective of the soldiers on the ground. He explains that has ever successful in conquering Afghanistan (Feifer, 2010).

Malkasian (2021) has focused the US invasion of Afghanistan which happened in back in 2001. The US war in Afghanistan is the longest war in the history of the United States. He further explains the withdrawal of US and its NATO allies from Afghanistan after ending the 20-year long war (Malkasian, 2001).

Zhao (2021) in his study focuses China's interest and policy towards Afghanistan. He is of the opinion that China's national interest in Afghanistan is mainly based on the interest to prevent the destabilization of its Xinjiang Province. According to the author, China is making efforts for peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Small (2015) focuses on the China-Pakistan partnership and Asia's New Geopolitics. Author small explains that China and Pakistan, two immediate neighbors of India, share an all-weather relation. The author has put together the story of China and Pakistan's increasing friendship. The author believes that the China-Pakistan partnership is essential to understand the economic, political, and security map of Asia, particularly India's neighborhood. He examines China's extraordinary support to Pakistan's nuclear program and defense planning, their strategic cooperation, the United States and Afghanistan, and the implications for counter-terrorism efforts and China's role in the Taliban talks (Small, 2015).

Opin (2014) has analyzed China's role in Afghanistan. He has focused on China's economic cooperation as well as its role in Afghanistan's stability. The author is of the view that China is an important player in the region and its role in Afghanistan would bring peace and stability in Afghanistan as well as in the region (Opin, 2014).

Brown (2013) discusses the USSR invasion of Afghanistan that took place in December 1979. He is of the view that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a deeply puzzling event. He believes that the event was uncharacteristic of USSR's Third World policy and self-destructive. The author further explains that the invasion resulted in the disintegration of the Soviet Union as well as it engendered comprehensive international complications (Brown, 2013).

The reviewed literature mainly covers role of big powers in Afghanistan. There is inadequate literature that analyzes Sino-Afghanistan relations. In this light, this research is an attempt to fill the void.

### **China's Key Interests in Afghanistan**

In order to understand China's role and interests in Afghanistan, a background of Sino-Afghan relations is helpful. China and Afghanistan share historical ties that exist even before the establishment of People's Republic of China. The territory that forms present day's Afghanistan had trade linkages with areas presently comprising China through the ancient Silk Routes. (Haywood, 2000). In 1950, Afghanistan was one of those nations that recognized PRC. Soon after this, in 1950, the two countries established their diplomatic relationships. Historically, China did not attempt to expand its political and economic engagements in Afghanistan. However, after the fall of the Taliban regime as a result of US invasion of Afghanistan back in 2001, China emerged as a proactive player in the Afghan affair. Since then, the bilateral relationships between Kabul and Beijing began to grow (Hong, 2013). China and Afghanistan share a short mountainous border.

In 1996, when the Taliban took over Kabul, China cut off diplomatic ties with Afghanistan and closed its embassy in Kabul. Taliban's fundamentalist nature, their connections with Al-Qaeda, and their relations with Uyghur militants are factors due to which Taliban remained at distance from Taliban-administered Afghanistan.

China has than taking significant steps to contribute in the reconstruction of the war-torn country. In February 2002, it reopened its embassy in Kabul that was closed as a result of Taliban takeover of Kabul in 1996. Followed by this, in December 2002, the than President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai and Chinese President Hu Jintao took the initiative of Declaration on `Good Neighborly` relationships and the treaty of Friendship Cooperation in June 2006. Moreover, in June 2012 their relationships were elevated from an extensive cooperative partnership to a “strategic and cooperative partnership”, confirming cooperation in the five pillars of politics, economy, humanities, security, and international and regional affairs (Chia, Kalachelvam, & Haiqi, 2021). In post-2014 period when the US announced to exit from Afghanistan, it is indeed the catalyst that Pushed China to expand its diplomatic engagements in Afghanistan. the US withdrawal and the emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have led to a shift in Beijing`s policy on Afghanistan “from calculated indifference to strategic engagement” (Pandey, 2019).

After the event of September 11, 2001, the United States established its military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, thus becoming China`s next door neighbor. Yet, China remained cautious in getting involved in Afghan affairs. Around 2010, Beijing begun to develop active engagement in Afghanistan politically and economically. The following years witnessed Beijing`s deepened engagement in Afghanistan. Zhou Yongkang, the member of Politburo Standing Committee, visited Kabul in 2012, marking the first visit of a senior Chinese official to Afghanistan since 1996 when the Taliban took over Kabul. Followed by this, Beijing hosted the Istanbul Process (Heart of Asia) in effort to reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban in October 2014. It was indeed the first time that China hosted any meeting on Afghan affair. China played crucial mediatory role in bringing the two warring parties on the table of negotiations through bilateral and multilateral channels. After the Istanbul process, China made first-ever invitation to the Taliban delegation. Following the signing of peace agreement in Doha in 2021, the Taliban delegates have so far made several visits to China. Following this, China enhanced its engagement with the Taliban and in June 2020 in the fourth China-Pakistan Afghanistan trilateral dialogue, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi

officially welcomed the Taliban's return to "mainstream" politics (CGTN, 2021). Thus, China's political role has increased in the Afghan affairs in recent years.

### **Afghanistan in China's Central Asian Strategy**

Central Asia is critical to Chinese interests mainly for three reasons: Security, Development and Energy. China is pursuing a comprehensive strategy in Central Asian Region that is based on its goals of achieving its national interests which includes security of Xinjiang, economic development. These goals are also behind Beijing's recent approach to Afghanistan. The Chinese growing interests in Afghanistan can be accounted by its response to the US policy of a "Greater Central Asia Partnership". (Clarke, 2013)

The significant geostrategic location of Afghanistan that lies between Central and South Asia holds great geo-strategic importance for the landlocked countries of Central Asia and its prosperity is intricately linked to the security situation in Central and South Asia. Immense energy resources and strategic location on China's western frontier have led to Central Asia being referred to as China's Dingwei. (Ashraf, 2008)

Afghanistan is bordered with China in the western province of Xinjiang. The Ethnic Uighur group in Xinjiang pose security threat to China that pursue the goal of separate country from Western China. Moreover, these terrorists and separatists threatens sovereignty of China and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its grip on power. The absence of lawlessness and instability in Afghanistan create favorable environment for these groups to take refuge, receive aid, and training. In an effort to maintain peace and stability in Xinjiang, China has is pursuing security and economic policy.

Xinjiang is central to Beijing's development plans. Xinjiang, Xinjiang, Central Asia, and Afghanistan are linked by geography, ethnicity, religion, and history. Since the fall of former Soviet Union, there has been a renewed geopolitical competition in Central Asia for security, leading to strategic factors that motivates China's interest in Afghanistan.

At the same time, China has cemented its foothold in the Central Asia Region, furthering its economic and political ambitions. Afghanistan is the most unstable area of Central Asia. Hence, a stable Afghanistan is critical to China's greater regional interest. China is

pursuing the goal to bring peace in Afghanistan, making efforts to enhance economy and security of the war-ravaged country. If Afghanistan remains unstable, it would directly threaten Chinese investment in Central Asia, and more importantly, pose threats to domestic stability in China. (James, 2013).

Over the past two decades, Afghanistan and Central Asia have become more attached to China's policy. China's policy in the post-Cold War Asia period towards Central Asia and Afghanistan is mainly based on its national interests—security, development and energy that begun to develop in response the disintegration of Soviet Union and China's ambitions to fully integrate Xinjiang into the People's Republic of China.

Xinjiang shares is bordered by Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India). Strategically, the region is of great importance for China for its border security and transnational trade. Besides, the region's huge reserves of oil, gas, and other natural resources enhance its significance for China. The region has been a region of security concern for China for decades. China has encountered sporadic resistance from Xinjiang in since its formation in 1949. The disintegration of Soviet Union in 1990 and the independence of Central Asian Republics (CARs), inspired the political violence in the region. Uyghur separatist group has been seeking an independent Islamic country, "East Turkestan." The East Turkistan terrorist groups were responsible for over 200 terrorist attacks in Xinjiang region between 1990 and 2001. China has listed several groups as terrorist organization that also includes "East Turkestan Islamic Movement" (ETIM). The group has also been listed as terrorist organization by UN, US, and UK. (Zhou, 2019)

### **Minerals**

China's national energy security needs and resource adequacy is another critical factor in Beijing's growing interest in Afghanistan. China's inclusive economic growth needs a significant amount of energy resources. In this light, China sees the region of Central Asia and Afghanistan is crucial for its growing energy needs. For China, Afghanistan is a new source of resources. China's energy needs is growing gradually and it is becoming

more dependent on external energy supplies. In 2013, China imported 57% of its oil and it was predicted to grow up to 66% by 2020 and 72% in 2040 (Umarov, 2017).

China is the only big power that has direct geographical access to energy and mineral resources of Afghanistan. (Dhaka, 2014). In Afghanistan, there is huge unexploited reserves of copper, coal, cobalt, mercury estimated at US\$1 trillion. This huge mineral potential of Afghanistan attracts China's interest. The rare-earth metal is estimated to be of more worth. Additionally, Afghanistan is home to the world's second-largest copper mine, which has estimated value of US\$1.2 billion in annual output.

### **BRI & CPEC**

Geographically, Afghanistan is located between South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, linking all these regions. Historically, it served as a crossroad connecting civilizations through ancient Silk Road. In the context of BRI, Afghanistan's geostrategic location is of great relevance.

In 2014, the \$900 billion Belt & Road Initiative that aims to physically and economically link China to the diverse markets such as Central Asia, Southwest Asia, Europe, and the Middle East through maritime and terrestrial transport corridors. It is indeed the revitalization of the ancient Silk Road trade routes that once served as the heart of the greater Eurasian economy. Initially, BRI seemed pass around Afghanistan, however in 2016 China and Afghanistan signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Afghanistan emerged an important partner for China to promote cooperation under the BRI.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the largest and most ambitious connectivity project in the world. It aims to establish multiple projects along its economic land belt and maritime road, connecting China with some of its significant markets across Europe, Asia, and beyond. Afghanistan can provide an important link to China in reaching these major markets. To this end, China is making efforts to push Afghanistan to take up a position as a central player in Central and South Asia. At the beginning, China excluded Afghanistan from the BRI due to its conflict-ridden condition. However, China has

shown greater interest in making Afghanistan part of the project due to its vital role in connecting Chinese markets to the rest of Asia, Europe, and East Africa. (Elapata, 2020)

Another factor that has led to a shift in China's Afghan policy is the country's growing economic participation in South Asia. Beijing recognizes the link between regional security and its economic ambitions. At present, the BRI does not pass via Afghanistan, but China and Pakistan are considering expanding the main corridor of the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, to Afghanistan. Peace and stability are critical to the successful implementation of these projects. Less violence in Afghanistan will lessen the threat and spillover into existing BRI project areas. China's foreign policy evolution, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the critical factors that have led to a shift in China's Afghan policy and, eventually, increased involvement in Afghanistan. (Morgus, 2019).

Lying at the juncture of South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, Afghanistan is key to China's BRI projects. Afghanistan has great potential to develop into a key regional trade hub. Moreover, Afghanistan is a strategic geographic position that offers a potential short-cut for imports of oil and gas from the Middle East, along with its neighbor Pakistan. Hence, China is interested to expand cooperation under the BRI and build trade and transport routes involving Afghanistan. Despite undesirable security situation in Afghanistan, China has initiated some infrastructure projects that also includes a \$5 million road, connecting Kabul with China via the Wakhan Corridor. (China Briefing, 2021)

Out of six corridors being developed under BRI, two are (China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor; and CPEC) are in close proximity to Afghanistan. Besides, China has made substantial investments in neighboring countries of Afghanistan. For instance, China has announced a huge amount of \$400 investment in Iran for the next 25 years which reflects Beijing's deep interest in the country. Iran's strategic locations coupled with huge energy resources and its role in regional geopolitics gives it a significant position in China's regional strategy. China played crucial role in Iran nuclear deal and Iran, in return, endorsed China's BRI and showed its interest joining CPEC. China is engaged in efforts to increase its investment in the region. China's security concerns has led China to

engage itself in Afghanistan. China's concerns about the instability in Afghanistan which is the linchpin of many grandiose BRI related projects. In this light, Beijing is increasing its foreign policy involvement in Afghanistan. (Ali, 2020)

Afghanistan provides an easy access to China to the Middle East and Africa. In recent years, Chinese interests have grown in reaching the Middle East. In February 2016, the first Chinese train reached Tehran but through deviation from Central Asia traversing Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. China has agreed to invest in the Five Nations Railway to reach Iran and the Middle East through Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, which is a much shorter route in comparison with the one through Central Asia. In addition, Afghanistan offers South Asia the shortest transit route to Central Asia, the Russian Federation and to Europe (through the Caucasus). (Safi & Alizada , 2018)

China has emerged as Afghanistan's important trading partner. In 2017, the bilateral trade China and Afghanistan reached new high with US\$544 million. In 2006, the Sino-Afghan economic Committee was established followed by the signing of the Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership Agreement in 2010, and a custom-free trade agreement. These are important developments in Sino-Afghan trade ties during the post-9/11 period. In addition to these, the opening of the China-Afghanistan Air Corridor is initiative to export pine nuts, saffron, and various gemstones to China. In 2015, a bilateral economic and trade committee was established followed by the opening of direct cargo flights between Afghanistan and China in 2018. In 2019, a cargo train corridor was inaugurated in 2018 between China and Afghanistan via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan doubled from \$338 million in 2013 to \$629 million in 2019 ( Yau & Pantucci, 2021).

### **China role as Rising Power**

As a rising power is pursuing great power status. To this end, it is playing active role in regional affairs. China is now second largest economy in the world after surpassing Japan in 2011. Since 2013, Beijing's regional policy has witnessed a shift, pursuing an assertive foreign policy for its status at global level as a great power. China perceives that its increased role in Afghanistan would help building its image as a responsible rising power

that put efforts in maintaining regional peace and stability which has become important component of China's Afghan policy.

### **China's needs for Pakistan to promote its interest in Afghanistan**

The firm strategic ties between China and Pakistan allows Beijing to coordinate its Afghan policies with Pakistan. Pakistan's important geostrategic location combined with its precious experience in dealing with the Afghan affairs provides China a huge advantage to further its political and economic ambitions in Afghanistan and Central Asia. As China turned its focus towards Afghanistan and Central Asia, Pakistan came forward to coordinate regional policies. Though Pakistan remained US regional ally, their partnerships is characterized by mistrust and suspicion of each other's reliability and motives. Conversely, the greater coincidence between Beijing and Islamabad has led to facilitating their collaboration in Afghanistan.

After 9/11, when China experienced a difficult period due to the spillover effects of Afghan war on its Xinjiang region, Pakistan helped China to overcome terrorists and militant's challenge. In addition, Pakistan played significant role to facilitate between China and the Taliban. For China, Pakistan is the only country that can contribute in facilitating Chinese ambitions in the region, particularly the successful implementation of BRI and resource extraction from Afghanistan. As China and Afghanistan share an inhospitable mountainous border, the best alternative route for China is through Pakistan. Connectivity through Pakistan is advantageous for China in many ways; the relatively short distance, easy access to Pakistan's infrastructure, and the trustworthy strategic ties between Islamabad and Beijing. (KAURA, 2021)

### **Way Forward and Recommendations**

In July 2021, the US withdrew from Afghanistan, ending its twenty-year-long war. The shock exit of the United States was followed by the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power after a two-decade absence. A new chapter has been opened in Afghanistan's political history. While the world has adopted a wait-and-see approach towards Afghanistan, China has kept its diplomatic mission open in Kabul. Beijing has adopted a new approach to dealing with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

While the Taliban has reiterated its commitment to preventing the use of Afghan soil against Afghanistan, China is likely to continue its positive posture towards the Taliban-administrated Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's significant geo-economic location China's substantial investments in the country represents a willingness of the two countries to strengthen bilateral ties and promote economic cooperation. Peaceful Afghanistan is crucial to Chinese interest which includes its economic ambitions and making CPEC an important trade route for connecting the Central Asia and European markets with China. Furthermore, Afghanistan's strategic location offers opportunity to benefit from BRI.

The evolving situation has pushed Afghanistan toward a worsening situation. A collapsing economy and wide-spread poverty have led to a serious humanitarian crisis in the country. The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that 14 million people, including 2m children, are dependent on food aid (World Food Programme, 2021). It is high time that the world should extend helping hand toward the Afghan people.

Regional countries should play a role in reviving peace and stability in Afghanistan. To this end, they should play a neutral role in Afghanistan through a regional cooperative mechanism, respecting the territorial veracity and sovereignty of Afghanistan.

The ideal situation in Afghanistan is peace and stability. A mixed government can bring peace in Afghanistan, and in this way, regional countries (where Chinese investments are huge and interests are immense) can enjoy peace. China would like to assert itself politically and economically with the help of Pakistan in order to protect its investments, secure the Belt and Road Initiative, and eventually successfully compete with the United States on a global scale. Peace and stability in Afghanistan are important for Chinese ambitions.

## **Conclusion**

This article focused on China's political and economic role in Afghanistan. The last two decades have seen Beijing's increased role in Afghanistan. It has emerged as a proactive player in the war-torn country. China provided Afghanistan with economic assistance and also played an effective diplomatic role in a peaceful solution to the Afghan conflict and

restoring peace and stability in the war-ravaged country. Previously, Beijing attached low diplomatic significance to Afghanistan. However, at the turn of this century, Afghanistan emerged as an important country for China's national interests, which mainly include economic and national security. China is interested in Afghanistan's vast natural resources, is attempting to prevent spillover effects from the Afghanistan-Central Asia connection, and is attempting to create a favorable environment in which to expand its BRI and CPEC in the region. In the light of these interests, China increased its mediatory efforts in Afghanistan at bilateral and multilateral levels.

Last year, the United States abruptly exited Afghanistan after a twenty-year war. With the departure of the US and its NATO allies and the evolving security paradigm in Afghanistan, the significance of Afghanistan is thus increasing for China. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is critical to Chinese interests in the region. Hence, Beijing has the political will to open a diplomatic mission in Kabul. It is willing to work with whoever rules Kabul. It is obvious from its position in the newly established Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.

The absence of adequate international support for stabilizing Afghanistan has raised serious concerns in countries in the region. China has continued its effort to facilitate stability and economic revival of the war-torn country. Afghanistan's geographical position, natural resources, and connectivity features are identified as a key interest of China in the country. Hence, China is making efforts to strengthen its interest in Afghanistan since a stable Afghanistan is crucial to China's foreign policy objectives.

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