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The China-Russia Relations with Afghan Taliban: Opportunities and Challenges, 2021-2025
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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging relationship and engagement of Afghan government, under Taliban by China and Russia following Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. The relationship is paradoxical, as both the states converge on security, political, and economic interests, however, they diverge as well. China places greater emphasis on economic collaboration (the Belt and Road Initiative), whereas Russia focuses on security to prevent the spread of radical ideologies in Central Asia. This paper highlights both the convergence as opportunity and divergence as challenges, and how they reconcile. This study is qualitative in nature, using both primary and secondary data, mainly text based.

Key Words: *China-Russia Strategic Partnership, Afghan Taliban Governance, Regional Security Dynamics, Economic Cooperation and Belt and Road Initiative, Geopolitical Challenges in Central Asia*

INTRODUCTION

The research paper argues that Afghanistan is important, as a potential source of security, political reasons, and as a source of transit trade, both for China and Russia. Both states, however, approach the Taliban differently because their priorities are different. China prefers economic engagement, through BRI, such as building of economic infrastructure, whereas Russia focuses on security and counterterrorism (Azizi, 2024). This research seeks to understand how the future of Chinese-Russian relations in Afghanistan is shaped, based on their divergent agenda and approaches and how the two nations reconcile their respective approaches, especially the divergences.

When the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in August 2021, it became a major shift in the region, particularly in Central Asia (Imranullah, & Hakimuddin, 2024). The two countries have a common interest in stabilization of the region even though their respective methods of addressing the issues and the situation in Afghanistan as a whole are different (Aliyev, 2022). China aims at securing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments and keeping the region religious extremism-free, while Russia is more

apprehensive, due to her historical relationships with Afghanistan that tilts more toward threats to its interests (Yawar, 2024). However, in case of convergence of their interests in Afghanistan would open opportunities of regional stability, economic development and political leverage. Taliban are left alone, isolated by the western world and international community, therefore, opportunities for China and Russia are greater in Afghanistan. For China, Afghanistan is the strategic component of its Belt and Road initiative that aims at establishing a wide network of trade routes between Asia and Europe (Verma, 2023). The potential of exploiting the huge resources of minerals in Afghanistan and exploiting its position as a gateway to Central Asia is significant for China (Safi, Chauhan, & Sharma, 2024). While goal of the pragmatic Chinese policy is also focused on economic collaboration and possible infrastructural projects. (Hussain, Abbas, Islam, Ullah, Asim, Aslam, & Ullah, 2025). In addition, China needs to make sure that religious extremism is kept at a distance especially its spill over into its restive Xinjiang province where Uighur separatist movements have been a thorn in its flesh (Safi, Chauhan, & Sharma, 2024). Russia, however, would be eager not to allow the spread of the radical ideology of the Taliban to its southern borders, the Central Asia. A stable Afghanistan would restrict the number of refugees, terrorism, and the emergence of the Islamist groups that pose a threat to the influence that Russia has on the region (Stepanova, 2022).

Divergence:

There is also divergence of policies and strategies between China and Russia while handling the Taliban regarding a few subjects, as briefly discussed below:

- **Legitimacy of the Taliban Regime:**

Both states have divergent views on the question of whether the Taliban is a legitimate regime, or not. China has been careful to take an open stand yet it has been keeping communication open with the Taliban by saying that it is an essential for peace and stability in Afghanistan (Huasheng, 2016). Moscow is also doubtful regarding the Taliban especially their effective governance and addressing the problems such as economic meltdown of the country and governance. (Carlson, 2021).

- **Different Philosophies:** Moreover, the differences in the ideologies of both the China and Russia is another reason for divergence of policies. Chinese pragmatic, economic dominated strategy and the Russian concern regarding security is a source of divergence between the two states. China focuses on trade and development of infrastructure, Russia focuses more on counterterrorism and security, especially in Central Asia (Ong, 2005).
- **International System:** Furthermore, both Russia and China have to work in the larger international environment. The Western world does not formally recognize the Taliban regime which poses a major diplomatic problem (Faheem, & Khan, 2022). Thus, both the states, Russia and China, fears reputational risks being perceived as too close to a regime that is controversial to the rest of the world. Nonetheless, the same issue is an opportunity as well can be manipulated by both the states to their advantage as they can be more realistic players who can interact with the Taliban without the burden of Western interventionism. This would enable China and Russia to increase their influence not only in Afghanistan but also in the region, Central Asia, helping both the states to increase their strategic range (Joshi, 2017).

To conclude, the China-Russia relationship with the Taliban carry both opportunities and challenges. Their convergence, on economic, security and political interests might be mutually beneficial for both the states and the region, the Central Asia, at large. However, if their strategies are different regarding the subjects such legitimacy of the Taliban regime, different philosophies and international system, may make it difficult to engage in a smooth working relationship. Thus, success is associated to how they reconcile their differences regarding the three issues of legitimacy of the Taliban regime, different

philosophies and international system, to bring greater dividends for their security, politics and economic interests as well as to stabilize the region.

Objectives

1. To analyze the strategic interests, security, political and economics of China and Russia in Afghanistan
2. To examine the challenges and limitations faced by China and Russia in their engagement with the Taliban
3. To evaluate the potential for China-Russia cooperation in promoting regional stability and economic development in Central Asia

Theoretical Framework

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 and China and Russia's relations with their regime are examined through the lens of Realism. The main argument of the realist perspective is that states act primarily to protect their national interests, security, and power in an anarchic international system (Dornan, 2011). The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan, both China and Russia, in a realist perspective, view Afghanistan strategically rather than ideologically. Their engagement with the Taliban is driven by security, politics, economic concerns and regional stability. China's primary interests include preventing extremism from spreading into Xinjiang, protecting its Belt and Road Initiative investments, and expanding economic influence in Central and South Asia. Russia, similarly, seeks to maintain security in Central Asia, prevent instability near its sphere of influence, and counter Western influence in the region. Both countries have adopted pragmatic diplomatic approaches toward the Taliban, prioritizing security, economic interest and strategic cooperation over concerns about governance or human rights. Their relations with the Taliban can therefore be understood as interest-based, security-driven, and shaped by broader great-power competition.

Methods

The nature of this study research is exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. The research design entail a qualitative approach, wherein data sources, primary and secondary, mainly text-based, are identified, collected, organized and analyzed to address the research objectives, the strategic interests of China and Russia in Afghanistan. The challenges faced by China and Russia and to evaluate how they reconcile their differences in promoting security, politics and economic interests as well as regional stability, in Central Asia

Data Sources, secondary sources include: Peer-reviewed journal articles and books on China and Russia's relations with the Taliban, Government and semi-official documents both from China and Russia, Media reports and think-tank briefs from institutions in both countries and internationally and the official speeches and statements of the Chinese and Russian governments, to get the official positions and goals of the two countries towards the Taliban regime.

Data Collection Procedures, the researcher will systematically search academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) and institutional repositories using keywords such as, Russia and China interest in the Taliban regime, Taliban and BRI, Religious extremism, limited to 2021–2025. The most relevant documents will be downloaded and catalogued.

Data Analysis, using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), which is widely used in qualitative research for identifying and interpreting patterns (themes) within textual data.

Discussion and Analysis

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan is both an opportunity and a challenge for both China and Russia. Given the persistent Taliban impact, the two governments had already established contacts with this group over the last several years and could now shift towards the admittance of the Taliban as the

legitimate authority in Afghanistan to safeguard their own interests. (Makhmudov, 2025). Beijing and Moscow take the U.S withdrawal and the Taliban takeover as an opportunity to weaken the U.S., position by eliminating the possibility of a permanent American military presence in the heart of the Eurasian continent and increasing their own influence in the region (Seyidbayli, 2025). Simultaneously, they also feel an acute interest based the fear of new instability and the revival of extremist violence, in the region. These mutual views allow establishing a certain space of closer coordination and more profound cooperation between China and Russia (Malle, 2017). Nevertheless, with a new balance in the region formed following the U.S. withdrawal, the tensions that have remained relatively easy to handle to date by both the states. Afghanistan being the crossroad to both Central and South Asia implies that its course will determine the China-Russia relations in the region. Handling the potential areas of tension, with most of them associated with the growing Chinese presence in the region, can become a crucial test of the sustainability of the relationship between Beijing and Moscow.

China's Interests

The non-recognition of the Taliban regime by the international community creates an opportunity for China to take advantage of this vulnerability, increase its presence in Afghanistan and the region. China's first and foremost priority, a prerequisite to any greater ambitions, is the prevention of regional unrest and preventing any chance of religious extremism reached to her western region. Beijing foresee that Afghanistan does not become a haven of Uyghur communities and other groups of Muslims who are against Chinese domination in Xinjiang. Although there is a world-wide criticism of Chinese policies toward the Muslim population in Xinjiang. May, 2025 is understood as a source of relief for the Chinese. (Fazli, Habib, Moaz, & Ayoubi, 2025). The delegation promised not to allow any misuse of power on Afghan soil to conduct any activity that is detrimental to China, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (Fazli et al., 2025). A Taliban spokesperson also promised to interfere with the internal affairs of China. Even though China never acknowledged the Taliban when it was in power between 1996 and 2001, it is now willing to do so, possibly coupled with economic rewards to get the favor of the group. China also perceives economic benefits in Afghanistan. In 2008, a group of Chinese companies secured the rights to the copper extraction in Afghanistan, but extraction is yet to be started. It is estimated that Afghanistan has mineral deposits worth almost one trillion U.S dollars including some rare earth reserves (Dawar et al., 2025). Beijing has also included Afghanistan under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A highway between Peshawar and Kabul is one potential project that will connect Afghanistan with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China is already building a large road via the Wakhan Corridor to connect Xinjiang and Pakistan (May b Afghanistan?) and Central Asia, and it may one day seek access routes further through Afghanistan to Iran and Southwest Asia. Taliban has shown readiness to encourage investment of Chinese infrastructure (Ali, 2022). Such economic engagement however is subject to a stable security environment in Afghanistan which is very uncertain. Chinese interests in Pakistan are under attack, such as a terrorist attack in Pakistan in July (**years**) that claimed the lives of nine Chinese nationals. Although Beijing has tried to defend its foreign interests, it has always been conservative in using military power outside of its land. Though it is important to ensure that the borders are secured, getting a significant presence of security to protect the foreign investment is a more sensitive issue in China. After all, the continued security concerns can restrict it, or rather considerably reduce the readiness of China to invest in Afghanistan.

To conclude that China's interests in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021 are shaped by a pragmatic blend of security, economic, and strategic considerations. Foremost, China seeks to prevent the spread of extremism into its Xinjiang region by ensuring that Afghan territory is not used by militant groups hostile to Chinese interests. Economically, Afghanistan presents opportunities through its vast

untapped mineral resources and its potential role in extending the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. However, China has adopted a cautious approach, avoiding formal recognition of the Taliban while maintaining diplomatic engagement to safeguard its investments and citizens. Stability in Afghanistan is crucial for China's broader regional connectivity and trade ambitions. Overall, China's policy reflects calculated engagement, prioritizing security and economic prospects while minimizing risks in a fragile and uncertain political environment.

Russia's Interests

The aims of Russia is to stabilize the northern borders of Afghanistan against Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to protect the southern borders of Russia against instability including the occurrence of the activities of the ISK (Islamic State of Khurasan), religious extremism and smuggling of narcotics. Russia uses the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan (near Bishkek) and the 201 st Military Base in and around Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The latter is a complex of several facilities and accommodates about 7,000 Russian military, and is the largest Russian military base in the country (Sakhi, 2023). Russia in August (years?), when the Taliban was advancing in the north of Afghanistan, held joint military exercises with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on Tajik territory about 20 kilometers away from the border with Afghanistan, which indicated the three states were determined to maintain the security in the region. Moscow is also interested in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) that includes the Tajikistan because it is a way of establishing itself as the most influential security guarantor in the area.

Russia still has bitter recollections of the Soviet occupation that lasted between 1979 and 1989 and ended on an expensive and embarrassing retreat (Baker, & Glasser, 2005). Consequently, Moscow is not very concerned about intervening into the internal security matters of Afghanistan and does not find it strategic to intervene. However, over the past several years, Russia has progressively increased its diplomatic presence with the Taliban, which culminated in a parallel that featured Taliban officials even though that group has remained a prohibited one in Russia (Klyszcz, 2021). It is now the hope of Moscow that close relationships with the Taliban will serve to protect its interests in the region. Russia has no financial ability to make massive investments in Afghanistan or even the region as compared to China. Moreover, due to historical influence in Pakistan and possible leverage over the Taliban, the efforts of Russia in the region can be based more on the strict coordination with Beijing.

Prospects for Cooperation

There are reasons to reflect such cooperation. At the political rhetoric level, both China and Russia have taken advantage of the recent happenings in a bid to tone down the presence of the United States. When the Taliban got close to their victory and eventually managed to do so, the two nations blamed the United States due to its failures in Afghanistan over the last two decades. Even though both China and Russia realized the contribution of the US intervention in the regional stability and counterterrorism, both nations were interested in avoiding the open-ended US military presence in the region (Monshipouri, 2019). To a great extent, they have accomplished this goal back in 2005, following the US bases were shut down in Uzbekistan in 2005 and in Kyrgyzstan in 2014. The same year, 2014, June 16, at a summit between the US President Joe Biden, at Geneva, Russian President Vladimir Putin informed him that Russia would not agree to the creation of US military bases in Central Asia and that China would not either (Biden, 2014).

With the US out of Afghanistan, there may be a renewed support to the regional instability, dominated by Russia and China. In August, with the Taliban on the verge of victory, Russian troops were involved in domestic Chinese military activities the first time in history (Joint West -2021). The following exercises were held in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region is of China. And were aimed at counterterrorism. In September 2021, Russia and China held common military drills (Peace Mission 2021) on Russian soil, on

the border with Kazakhstan, within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Counterterrorism exercises were also included in these exercises. Russia and China have been conducting joint military exercises in the SCO format as early as 2005, most of which have been counterterrorism oriented. China and Russia could also use this experience to establish a combined military intervention in Central Asia in case of regional instability that may also include terrorist threats exerted by Afghanistan.

SCO leaders conducted a hybrid summit in Dushanbe, during which they made headlines by giving a thumbs up towards the application of Iran as a full-fledged member. The declaration issued at the summit demanded that there should be stability in Afghanistan and the establishment of a government that would represent all the ethnic, religious and political groups in Afghanistan. The SCO will have a tough time developing a unified strategy towards Afghanistan, after admission of the opponents India and Pakistan as member of the SCO with full-member-status in 2017.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021 are primarily driven by security and regional stability. Moscow aims to prevent the spread of extremism into Central Asia, it considers its strategic sphere of influence. It is particularly concerned about terrorist groups such as ISIS-K and their potential to destabilize neighboring states. Russia has strengthened security cooperation with Central Asian republics and conducted military exercises to deter threats. At the same time, it has maintained diplomatic engagement with the Taliban to ensure dialogue and protect its interests. Russia also seeks to limit the influence of rival powers and preserve its geopolitical role in the region. Economic interests exist but remain secondary due to security concerns. Overall, Russia follows a cautious and pragmatic approach, focusing on stability, counterterrorism, and maintaining regional influence while avoiding direct involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

Influence in Central Asia

Central Asia has always been a sensitive point in the relationship between Beijing and Moscow despite both being close friends during the Cold War. (Wilson, 2021). Historically, Russia has been considering itself the main force in the region, and the growing economic, political, and strategic presence of China is becoming an increasing threat to such role. To date, this imbalance has been managed fairly carefully and realistically on both sides. One was reached in 2015, when they signed an accord to align the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union with the Silk Road Economic Belt of China, the overland part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing has repeatedly pointed out to both Russia and the governments of Central Asian nations that the country has no other agendas other than economic development, infrastructure and connection with the region and not political domination.

Nevertheless as the commercial interests of China in Central Asia grew, it was only natural that Beijing would receive more political power and generate the motivation to become a more active participant in security. China started to collaborate with Pakistan, Tajikistan, and the former government in Afghanistan on the issues of regional security as early as 2016. It was said that the Chinese policy analysts held a dialogue with the Russian analysts to explain the intentions of Beijing in this context. China has been interested for some time in securing its relatively short but sensitive frontier with Afghanistan at the eastern end of the Wakhan Corridor, and its much longer frontier with Tajikistan, which may become a route of transit of militants going out of Afghanistan (Fischer, & Stanzel, 2021).

Over the last few years, China has helped in the modernization of and strengthening of Tajik border guards on the Afghan border, as well as increasing the capacity of the Pakistani security forces, and building an Afghan mountain troops base in Badakhshan along the Wakhan Corridor. It has also constructed a police camp in Tajikistan and is strongly rumored to have set up a presence within Afghanistan though this has never been admitted.

This can lead to the possibility of creating tension with Russia. Instead of keeping a strict line between the role of economics and security, China and Russia might shift to a more subtle security-oriented division of roles with each of them interested in a particular geographical or functional region. In this arrangement Russia may afford China to have minimal security operations that are directed at the protection of the border. However, China is expanding its overseas interests and over time, it might lead to the expansion of a security presence thus overtaking Russia. It is unclear how Moscow would react to such a large Chinese security presence that is meant to safeguard the outlying investments, and not just the borders of China.

Conclusion

To conclude, both for China and Russia Afghanistan is a strategically and geo-economically important country within the wider Central Asian region. To China, Afghanistan is a vital connection to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and it will provide it with opportunities to engage in economic cooperation, trade, and find untapped natural resources. Russia, however, considers Afghanistan in the perspective of regional security. Extremism and instability in Afghanistan can have a major implication on Russia and its allies in Central Asia. In the case of Russia, the key agenda is to ensure that the ideology of the Taliban does not touch the region, and that to make sure that issues of security are resolved by working together. Although there is this similarity of interests, the two countries experience quite a number of challenges in managing the Taliban. This exclusion of the Taliban government by international communities and uncertainty about whether it can govern the country effectively complicates diplomatic participation. The Chinese strategy has been more realist, as it was concentrated on economical and infrastructural projects, whereas the Russian strategy has been more reserved and concentrated on the security and anti-terrorist operations. These differences will have to be well controlled by both countries and they will be required to find a way of cooperating as they pursue their respective interests.

The future of the Chinese-Russian relations in Afghanistan will be based on how they manage to overcome the issues of Taliban rule, compromise their respective interests, and cooperate to see the region become stable. Although it is a complex partnership, it provides growth opportunities and risks that should be well controlled to achieve success in the long term.

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