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China's Role In Confidence-Building Measures: Transforming the Pakistan–Afghanistan Security Dilemma into Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

This research examines China's role as a facilitator and mediator in Pak–Afghan relations through the lens of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), particularly in addressing historical grievances, territorial disagreements, border violence, and mutual mistrust. The study explores the potential of China's non-intervening approach, which balances economic interests with diplomatic engagement, to transform the security paradigm of Pak–Afghan rivalry into one of cooperation. Employing an analytical classification method, the research addresses the effectiveness of China-mediated CBMs in shifting bilateral relations from antagonism to partnership. The analysis considers political negotiations, integrated infrastructure projects, disarmament and reintegration programs, Taliban power constraints, sanctuaries, and security risks linked to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Drawing on an extensive literature review, the paper traces seventy years of Pakistan–Afghanistan relations, highlighting persistent issues such as the Durand Line dispute, transnational terrorism, transit trade, and water sharing. China's mediation approach is framed around the concept of "developmental peace," prioritizing bilateral economic fundamentals over political leverage, with megaprojects like CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) acting as facilitators. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study utilizes purposive sampling of 15 experts from China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, with semi-structured interviews providing primary data to capture thematic insights into the effectiveness of Chinese mediation and its role in fostering sustainable peace-building mechanisms.

Keywords: China's Role, Confidence-Building Measures, Pakistan–Afghanistan Security Dilemma, Cooperation.

Introduction

Relationship at three levels: Pak-Afghan Relations, China's Mediating Role, and Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), are the three key factors identified in the research topic *China's Role in Confidence-Building: Transforming the Pakistan–Afghanistan Security Dilemma into Cooperation*. Pakistan and Afghanistan are separated from each other by the Durand Line, some 2,670 km, which lies as a border between the two torn and conflicted neighbors, their relationship being marred by past enmity, ongoing conflicts, security concerns, economic interdependence, and allegations of cross-border terrorism. Yet even though both countries are geographically, ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and culturally comparable, especially within Pashtun communities, political distrust and territorial disputes have for the most part strained

relations between both sides. Moreover, Afghanistan's long-time reluctance to recognize the Durand Line as a physical border, and Pakistan's apprehensions of Afghan soil being used as the platform for anti-Pakistan propaganda, have prolonged tensions. Consequently, cooperation between the two countries is important for building local and regional peace, economic interdependence, and addressing terrorism, and they have both realized the importance of this collaboration for a better relationship.

China, being a major and independent regional power, can perform the vital role of facilitating Pakistan and Afghanistan's dialogue and building trust and confidence. With its strategically different relationships and growing influence in the region under the form of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), by getting close to Afghanistan, China can become the strategic arbitrator. Compared with traditional Western facilitators, China adopts a non-intrusive stance, treating economic incentives with primacy as compared to political leverage. The neutrality of its services and the significant investments made in both countries make it a credible agency for dialogue. Thus, if China becomes the mediator and supports CBMs such as strengthening diplomatic ties, security cooperation, and joint economic cooperation, it can aid in reducing aggression and lead to the creation of peace and cooperation between the two countries. This research evaluates the role Beijing can play in building a stronger and more cooperative Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship, subsequently resulting in sustainable peace and growth in the region. In the case of Afghanistan, India enjoyed cordial relations with the country before its exclusion from CPEC, in order to counter China's economic scheme in the region. Nevertheless, in 2018, China began a process for creating warm ties with Afghanistan and strengthening Pakistan-Afghanistan relations (Khan, 2019). The practice is that China is using its financial influence on Afghanistan to strengthen bilateral relations with Pakistan and solve political problems (Mofa 2018).

In the past, tensions have prevailed between Pakistan and Afghanistan with regard to borders, territories, cross-border militancy, and trust-mistrust dynamics between the two countries (Johnson & Mason, 2008). During this time, China has emerged as a key middleman, leveraging its economic power through the structuration of a Chinese model of world development (Basing) and its diplomatic relationship with both Islamabad and Kabul (Small, 2022). However, the effectiveness of such diplomatic endeavors is limited, especially in terms of long-term and sustainable dispute resolution as opposed to the management of short-term, time-limited crises (crisis management). This research examines China's evolution from an economic cooperation partner to a conflict-mediating actor in South Asia. It extends prior research and literature on third-party mediation and CBMs in imbalanced disputes, bridging gaps in our understanding of China's unique model that combines economic incentives with diplomacy (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006). Beijing has brokered many three-way discussions since 2017 on the basis of joint infrastructure cooperation and intelligence-sharing agreements to advance Pakistan-Afghanistan cooperation (Pantucci & Liao, 2021). China has also held the fourth trilateral meeting of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to increase cooperation in the fields of security, counter-terrorism, and diplomatic exchanges (Embassy PRC Opinion, March/June 2021). This study examines how China is beginning to develop a supporting role as a peace facilitator in the Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict, and whether it can instill long-term stability through its financial-political approach or merely achieve short-term stabilization (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006). Delays in slow judicial processes challenge belief in authority and conflict management systems.

It argues that delayed official response undermines faith in rule-of-law and erodes prospects for peaceful dispute resolution (Chitralli, 2025). Considering that Chinese interests in mediation are geopolitical, the Chinese objective is to protect the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and curb the export of militancy to Xinjiang (Garver, 2022).

Moreover, China's style of mediation bears substantial differences from traditional Western powers. It does not impose political requirements but instead offers development incentives to foster peace (referred to in public affairs as "developmental peace") (Callahan, 2016). However, there is skepticism about the ability and sustainability of China's mediation role. Criticism centers on the belief that Beijing is motivated not so much by a desire for a balanced political settlement or improvement of human rights issues, but rather by economic security. Nevertheless, because China maintains a hands-off policy towards the internal political issues of other nations, it arguably becomes more sustainable as a facilitator in volatile, sovereignty-sensitive contexts such as Pakistan and Afghanistan (Rolland, 2017).

Literature Review

Early Foundation and Territorial Disputes (1947-1979) the history of Pakistan since its creation has been described as being marked by mistrust between Pakistan and its neighbour Afghanistan. According to Ali and Safdar (2020), Afghanistan refused to accept the emergent state of Pakistan and failed to cast its vote to approve the membership of Pakistan in the UN because of the territorial claims that engulfed Pashtun majorities in NWFP and Balochistan. This issue of boundary was based on Durand Line, a colonial boundary between Afghanistan and India developed by the Britishers in 1893, which Afghanistan declared invalid in 1949 (Omran & Ledwidge, 2009). From 1947-1979, Afghanistan's alliance with Soviet Union and India further intensified bilateral tensions. The Sardar Daud era (1973-1978) was mainly marked by anti-Pakistan rhetoric, border clashes, and Kabul's support for separatist movements within Pakistan (Ali & Safdar, 2020).

Soviet Invasion and Proxy Conflicts (1979-2001) when Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union in 1979, it deeply changed the regional dynamics. It caused a huge spill of refugees into Pakistan and led Islamabad to help the U.S backed Mujahideen, leading to decades of proxy battles and security problems. During this prolonged conflict, Afghanistan constantly accused Pakistan of exploiting its internal matters of politics. (Rubin & Rashid, 2008).

Post-9/11 Security Dilemma and Strategic Complexities (2001-2021) the era after 9/11 exaggerated tensions within the region, Pakistan formed an alliance with U.S. while supposedly maintaining relations with the Taliban (Rashid, 2020). This dual policy strengthened Afghan doubts of Pakistan's strategic depth doctrine, while Pakistan viewed Kabul's relations with India as tactical encirclement (Fair, 2014). Applying security dilemma theory (Jervis, 1978), defensive actions by both countries - such as Pakistan's backing for militant proxies or Afghanistan's border policies - were observed as dangers, intensifying bilateral strains. Cross-border terrorism allegations and proxy conflict created a cycle of mutual blame and distrust.

The most strong-willed source of tension is the Durand Line. Afghanistan still insists on not recognizing this boundary as a real one but rather an imposed colonial boundary (Omran & Ledwidge, 2009). The leakiness of the frontier has aggravated security matters, supporting cross-border militancy, unlawful trafficking, and refugee movements (Rubin & Rashid, 2008). Pakistan has always tried to manage the border, be it through joint patrols or fencing, but have met with continuous resistance through Afghanistan's side, dreading further separation of Pashtun tribes.

The interplay between militancy and authorities unfolds how weak state bodies fuel insurgent influence. Militant groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Afghan Taliban exploit administrative lapses by providing conflict resolution, sharia enforcement, and minimal services, though their governance remains unsuccessful and coercive (CSIS, 2012). Pakistan's FATA and Afghanistan's rural districts characterize how weak institutions create space for militancy. Cross-border militancy spreads mutual allegations - Pakistan blames Afghanistan for sheltering TTP militants, while Kabul accuses Islamabad of shielding the Afghan Taliban. The paper highlights how colonial governance reform was intended at handling peripheral threats, including transnational Pashtun identity and rebellion Chitrali et al. (2012). The constant militancy in Swat region has stalled education of many young girls, it underlines the wider social and economic consequences, which in turn impedes long-term peace and stability Habib & Chitrali (2016).

The transit trade relationship has changed through key agreements: ATTA (1965) and APTTA (2010). While ATTA approved Afghanistan entree to Karachi Port, it limited Afghan-India trade and deprived Pakistan of accessing Central Asian markets. The 2010 APTTA reconsideration extended transit rights, allowing Afghanistan to export via Wagah border to India and permitting Pakistan theoretical access to Central Asian markets. However, implementation challenges continue: smuggling weakens both agreements as Afghan imports often unlawfully re-enter Pakistan, misleading local markets and causing revenue losses. Safety mechanisms introduced in APTTA - bank guarantees, bonded carriers, and GPS tracking - remain weakly imposed.

The water dispute centers on the Kabul River basin, which emerges from Afghanistan and streams into Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The issue occurred after 1947 when Afghanistan began proclaiming rights over Trans Boundary Rivers, escalating in the 1970s when Afghanistan, with Soviet assistance, built irrigation ventures without consulting Pakistan. Despite several resolution efforts - including the 1921 British-Afghan treaty, a 2003 technical committee, and discussions during the 2010 APTTA dialogues - no inclusive agreement occurs. Current tensions continue as Afghanistan plans new dams like Shahtoot on the Kabul River, possibly reducing Pakistan's water supply in an already water-stressed region.

Taliban Resurgence and Contemporary Challenges (2021-Present) the return of Taliban to power in 2021 further complexes bilateral relations. Pakistan anticipated strategic gains but instead faced ever-increasing cross-border militancy through increased TTP attacks and refugee influxes, weakening predicted benefits (Rubin, 2021). Afghanistan's continued opposition to Durand Line recognition underpins historical tensions. Regional powers like China and India continue to impact this dynamic, with Pakistan remaining cautious of India's Afghan presence while China balances economic benefits through BRI investments with safety concerns (Kugelman, 2020).

Research Question

1. How effective have China-mediated Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) been in transforming Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict from a security dilemma into a cooperative framework?

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of China-mediated CBMs in transitioning Pakistan-Afghanistan relations from a security dilemma to cooperative frameworks, with particular focus on diplomatic engagement, security coordination measures and economic collaboration.

Research Methodology

This approach of this research is qualitative with purposive, non-probability sampling technique. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. In total, 14 stakeholders were interviewed: 5 Afghan experts (including political analysts, journalists, NGO practitioners, diplomats, embassy officials, and academics), 5 Pakistani experts (comprising diplomats, policy specialists, academics, and security analysts), and 4 Chinese experts. The number of interviews was determined until the point of saturation was reached.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Initially, themes were identified through systematic coding of the interview transcripts, followed by an in-depth analysis of the emerging patterns.

Discussion and Analysis:

Discussion:

One expert with significant institutional knowledge of Pakistan explained:

"I have over twenty years of professional experience of working in regional affairs, as the former Executive Director of CPEC for three years, working on industrial development, supply chains, and cross-border economic cooperation."

One Afghan stakeholder looked back on a career in state institutions as well as international projects:

In the past two decades I have held senior roles in Afghanistan as an Analyst in External Relations (China and South Asia desk), the Director of World Bank funded hydro projects and Deputy Head of the CASA-1000 initiative.

Another expert stressed on grass root conflict and humanitarian action:

"Over the past fifteen years, I have devoted my professional life to humanitarian assistance, community resilience and conflict mediation, largely with an international NGO that operates cross-border with the most volatile communities living on both sides of the Durand Line."

International institutional engagement was pointed out by an expert from Pakistan:

Currently, I am working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as reporting and information management officer, thus I am exposed to the issues of migration and displacements that are influenced by Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

From the point of view of an economic planner, the industrial-development dimension was mentioned:

"Currently I am working in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Economic Zones Development and Management Company to handle some industrial projects such as the Rashakai Special Economic Zone (RSEZ), a flagship CPEC project."

3.2 Sense of China's Importance for Pakistan and Afghanistan's Peace and Cooperation:

One respondent who had experience of doing industrial planning stated:

China's contribution is principally economic in nature. China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other initiatives, implemented within the context of China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation (CPEC), offer Pakistan a development framework that indirectly might help stabilize the borders with Afghanistan.

One of the Afghans stressed the careful optimism:

Since China's viewpoint is distinctive from other external actors because it has been inclined to maintain a neutral stand. Its infrastructure and energy investments, extended to Afghanistan,

can help bring welcome stability. However, the political will both in Kabul and Islamabad is often weak, and prevents exploiting these possibilities.

Another expert in conflict mediation focused on illustrations for China's limited political engagement:

My impression is that China does not have a very strong commitment to the political reconciliation process among Pakistan and Afghanistan. Stakeholder Analysis It is dependent on its economic incentives, more than on direct mediation of the dispute.

An expert in the field of migration and humanitarian affairs commented:

China could play a confidence enhancing role by investing in projects that involve the masses in the region. Second, Beijing's engagement is still viewed as Pakistan-centric, thereby raising suspicion among the Afghan communities.

3.3 China as Role Model, or Strategic Player in the Region?

A Pakistani participant of the CPEC projects commented:

China is not a neutral player in the traditional sense; it has a more direct role attached to it in Pakistan and to CPEC. Beijing's mediation efforts are invariably determined by its long-term vision on the economy and security in its region of interest.

As a senior expert from the energy sector in Afghanistan, he stressed the following:

China presents itself as a neutral power with respect to powers such as the U.S. or India. But Afghans generally are well aware that its relationship with Pakistan and its fears of the economic and ethnic suppression of Uighurs influence its policies towards China.

An expert representing an international NGO on two sides of the border noted:

Although China has not volunteered to work as a mediator, Afghanistan's people do not view it as a mediator. Mainly, it is regarded as an ally of Pakistan, thus making it difficult for Beijing to be perceived as a mediator.

One migration and humanitarian expert commented:

"China cooperates just so long as its projects are involved." It is therefore tied to its economic interests and feels neutral conditionally.

3.4 Major Obstacles to China's Peace Building in the Pakistan-Afghanistan Equation

A Pakistani stakeholder commented:

Instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is the great challenge. Regardless of how many projects China implements, they're unable to operate if trade corridors are affected by war.

An Afghan energy-policy expert said:

China's exigence in Afghanistan lies in trustworthiness. According to many Afghans, Beijing is too close with Pakistan, thus limiting its acceptability as a mediator.

A humanitarian worker put forward the emphasis on community level issues:

Reduced legitimacy, non-inclusiveness and deficient governance on the Afghan side make overtaking of China's schemes undesirable.

A development and migration specialist said:

Cash-flow risks: Risks to Chinese workers and investments are ongoing issues. Unless these are solved, China will be reluctant to intensify its involvement.

3.5 Uncovering perennial interests of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China in Trilateral Cooperation

One Pakistani expert development specialist commented:

"Pakistan looks forward to the strengthening of trade and investment with CPEC and with Trilateral cooperation, especially through special economic zones for job creation and industrialization."

On the importance of women's supportive role, an Afghani underscored:

"Afghanistan encourages China as a potential investor but also as a neutral player to mitigate the tensions with Pakistan." Stability is larger than economic benefit.

A humanitarian worker added:

"For Afghans at the community level, the demand is the most simple: peace and security." Without it, local realities will not be changed by any investment.

A migration expert operating in Islamabad said:

China above all wants security guarantees for its projects and its people involved in these projects. Its co-operation is based on strategic consideration and inhabiting geographical stability which is conducive to safeguarding its investments.

Analysis:

The experts' diversity has been noted on the basis that while the flows between Pakistan, Afghanistan and China can be primarily analyzed through different layers, each one depending on the thematic focus. From the Pakistan end, CPEC and industrial areas' experts have put stress on connectivity as a catalyst to include business opportunities in the region and integration of the supply chains. However, Afghan experts share insurgent as well as state-level priorities - from energy development to transnational trade - as well as grassroots challenges, especially in the realms of conflict resolution and humanitarian resilience. This dual framing captures how Afghanistan, while continuing to focus on heavy infrastructure-based state-building approaches, nonetheless persistently faces problems of displacement and insecurity from within its grievances (Ali and Safdar, 2020).

This form of transnational knowledge production also shows how cross-cutting experience of the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan troika is not just structured by governments and international organizations but also lived through local experiments with cooperation and conflict. This emphasizes that regional cooperation is shaped by strategic designs such as the Belt and Road Initiative but also by more mundane and day-to-day socio-political institutional contact points that mediate out trust and legitimacy across borders (Akberzadeh and Ibrahim, 2020).

Most importantly, respondents indicate that the stability of Afghanistan is seen not only in the context of security but as an essential economic and developmental condition. An unstable Afghanistan curbs Pakistan's ambitions of becoming a regional trade center and impedes China's westward expansion of its economy. Such instability has also been contended to damage connectivity corridors such as CPEC and limit the overall BRI, thereby making a middle path in Afghanistan essential to sustainable regional integration (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2015).

Throughout the interviews, experts explicitly stressed the fact that the Chinese presence in the Pakistan-Afghanistan strategic theater is mainly economic and not political. From a broader academic standpoint regarding the BRI and its advocacy in China, the CPEC has been considered as a tool of connectivity and investment, not ostensibly a way of political engineering (Wolf, 2016).

Afghans spoke to possibilities and limitations. On the one hand, they saw Chinese energy, trade, and infrastructure projects as having the potential to strengthen Afghanistan's fragile economy and as providing steps toward the development of long-term stability. On the other hand, they

warned that weak governance and a lack of international legitimacy of the Taliban government continue to be key impediments to the transformation of these investments into lasting peace (Akberzadeh & Ibrahimi, 2020).

In the Pakistani context, experts highlighted CPEC-related infrastructure and SEZs as ways for job creation, local access to markets and regional connectivity. They suggested that these developments resulted in indirect borderlands stabilisation: by alleviating economic grievances, they produced alternatives to conflict, an argument that also aligns with the smaller literature on economic cooperation as a peace promoting factor (Ali & Safdar, 2020).

Meanwhile, grass-root and humanitarian discourses presented a concern that even as China occupies a significant position in the larger world, its perceived role with respect to the Afghans is sometimes seen as Pakistan-centric, which raises a concern of suspicion and lack of trust. This reinforces the assertions in the literature that regionalism initiatives, if perceived unilaterally, may do more to create mistrust than to generate actual cooperation (Ahmed and Bhatnagar 2015).

For the most part, the interviewees' reflections substantiate the discussion that such action does not take a traditional diplomatic form that involves China as a mediator, but rather a stabilization of a country's economy. While its initiatives hold the promise to lessen vulnerabilities and build interdependence, their ultimate success in contributing to peace lies in complementary political conversation and trust-building between Islamabad and Kabul (Safi, 2022).

The roles assigned to China in these answers are always presented in context the former is perceived as strategic whereas the latter is seen as neutral, but the former is always emphasized more than the latter. Pakistani respondents broadly supported the role of China's engagement as it brought to mind economic development and border security in the region (Wolf, 2019), via projects like CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative. This is consistent with the overall view of China as a partner whose level of engagement is mainly through trade and connectivity and not so much through direct political engagement.

Afghan respondents however expressed greater levels of skepticism. They also questioned China's close relation with Pakistan, and its security interests in the region undermining its image as an objective mediator. This dimness reflects the fact that distrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan ultimately interferes with external actors who aim to encourage cooperation (Barakat & Larson, 2014).

Civil society respondents stressed the transactional nature of the Chinese engagement, which is seen to be geared towards defending infrastructure dispensations rather than addressing controversial political issues. This comes in line with Andrew Small's (2020) argument that Beijing wisely avoids embroiling itself with Afghanistan's domestic politics and opts to protect its investment.

This is not to say that some voices made the point that Chinese-led infrastructure and energy projects can indirectly contribute to peace through reducing structural economic fragilities, especially through employment and development possibilities (Safi, 2022). Yet, others warned that these benefits are concentrated and are perceived to be Pakistan-centric, which makes it susceptible to a distrust among Afghan stakeholders (Hussain & Jamal, 2021).

Together these views imply that while China is posturing as a development partner, regional players perceive it as opportunistic and Pakistan-centric and therefore limit its prospects for credibility as a viable mediator in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

The main challenges raised by the cited participants were security concerns, lack of trust, and governance gaps, which are further undermining the peace-building role of China. Instability along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is another recurrent result, reflecting the scholarly view that territorial disputes and transboundary militancy hamper regional connectivity efforts (Rashid 2012; Saikal 2019). This points toward the traditional dilemma of the external actor: external projects cannot succeed in the absence of stability, yet external development projects are likely to be suggested as ways to achieve stability.

The Afghan outlook reinforces the credibility gap of China due to its apparent proximity to Pakistan. Such assertions are backed by relevance to the importance of Afghans' reading of Beijing's role, delineated by Pakistani influence, which complicates its acceptance as a neutral chaotic provider (Pant and Haidar, 2016). This is interesting in comparison with the analysis of Andrew Small (2020) who found that China does not engage in any political entanglement in Afghanistan, but its close strategic partnership with Pakistan impacts perceptions.

As in the community, operational concern with mistrust and governance aligns with what Barakat and Larson (2014) assert, that international interventions more likely to fail if they do not take account of legitimacy. China's "elite diplomacy" or "state-to-state" approach may bring significant infrastructure projects to Afghans, however, its narrative of peace fails in reaching the common Afghans and connecting with them (Wolf, 2019).

The ongoing theme correlated to security threats for Chinese workers and assets opens a broader comparison to China's overall engagement in Afghanistan being risk-averse, with Beijing limiting its willingness to initiate beyond its ability to protect its interests (Callahan 2016; Hussain & Jamal, 2021).

Together, they indicate that China's peace efforts are bounded by a triad of obstacles that remain notwithstanding: unresolved security and boundary issues, perceived bias towards Pakistan, and marginalization issues including the lack of grassroots legitimacy.

The responses show that the three states pursue trilateral cooperation with different emphases. Economic growth, trade and industrial development, especially via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) linked projects like special economic zones are the main driving focus areas for Pakistan (Rafiq 2017). This is a testimony of the hope of Islamabad that regional integration has the potential of solving its perennial economic problems.

Afghanistan, by contrast, seems less interested in short-term economic returns than in security and political stability. Scholars describe that Afghanistan sees Chinese engagement positively, as it reduces Pakistan's influence and helps to obtain international legitimacy (Shah, 2020). For example, there is sometimes a disconnect between the development-related economic priorities of Pakistan and the security-related priorities of Afghanistan, which highlights why trilateral cooperation frequently falters (Ibrahimi 2017).

As experts noted, China's interests, thus, center on the security of its strategic investments and the stability of the western border. This is consistent with Callahan's observation that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has as much to do with the management of risk than opportunity. China views Pakistan as being a reliable partner, yet maintains a vigilant attitude regarding Afghanistan, where the absence of governance and insecurity surround the Chinese interests at all times (Wolf, 2019).

On a community level, however, the humanitarian perspective underscores how ordinary Afghans value peace above all else, which supports Barakat and Larson's (2014) argument that

economic projects are not important at all if they are not introduced after political settlement and security.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to examine the role of Pakistan, Afghanistan and China in trilateral cooperation with special reference to peace, stability and development. In so doing, the research aimed to explore the ways in which economic projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) frameworks can form a foundation for regional connectivity and shared economic growth (Wolf 2019). At the same time, the study highlighted that cooperation is not restricted to only economic integration but also to security, political trust building, and people-to-people exchanges that result in sustainable peace (Shah, 2020). Thus, the research set out to determine both opportunities and challenges in the forging of a trilateral partnership that might transcend historical mistrust to a common vision for stability and prosperity.

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