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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**China's Policy Towards Afghanistan in the Aftermath of the U.S. Withdrawal****Sadia Iqbal**

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This paper investigates China's expanded involvement in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces in 2021. The U.S. withdrawal profoundly changed the regional security landscape, providing China with an opportunity to enhance its strategic and economic engagement with Afghanistan. This research explores how China's economic, security, and strategic engagement in Afghanistan enhances its regional clout, especially regarding counterterrorism initiatives, infrastructure development, and regional connectivity. It also discusses the difficulties China faces in negotiating Afghanistan's complicated political environment, including the instability brought on by the Taliban's rule and the involvement of other regional and international actors. Using the theoretical framework of geoeconomics and geopolitics, this study analyzes the evolving relationship between China and Afghanistan from a broader contextual perspective. Through the study of key primary documents and qualitative interviews with the policymakers and scholars, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the changing dynamics of China-Afghanistan interactions.

Keywords: Geo-Economics, Geopolitics, BRI, China-Afghanistan Relations.

Introduction

The departure of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2021 left a vacuum that China tried to fill, shifting its geopolitical objectives in Afghanistan. China began its involvement in Afghanistan long before America pulled out. China has been involved in a wider approach in strengthening regional connection by signing agreements with Afghanistan in 2016 to develop road networks, railway and energy infrastructure. (Saeed Shah, 2019) These initiatives are crucial for linking Afghanistan to China's growing trade routes, which could provide Afghanistan with much-needed economic development and stability. This investment is directly related to China's broader vision of integrating Afghanistan into its regional economic framework. Additionally, following the Taliban's 2021 resurgence, China emphasized worries over the possibility of extremist activities and terrorism, particularly those that threaten its Xinjiang province. (Maizland, 2023) This research investigates both economic and security related developments, focusing on the complications and opportunities that emerge from the expanding ties between China and Afghanistan. In other words, its main focus is to assess how China's involvement in Afghanistan is strengthening its strategic and economic influence in the region and helping it to deal with the security problems related to instability in Afghanistan.

This study uses the geo-economic theory to analyze the relations between China and Afghanistan. The geo-economic approach emphasizes that, instead of using only military or political means, states use economic tools to achieve strategic influence. In this regard, the involvement of China in Afghanistan is an indication of a strategic decision to extend its influence in the region by means of economic cooperation, infrastructural development, and integration within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This theoretical framework describes how China is pursuing regional stability and increased access to markets in Central and South Asia using economic statecraft.

The methodology of the study is qualitative because it is based on exploring the key dynamics through semi-structured interviews and analysis of the documents. Regional experts, policy-makers and scholars with specialization in South and Central Asian geopolitics were interviewed in order to gather informed opinion regarding the steadily growing role of China in Afghanistan. Moreover, government documents, policy papers, official statements, and academic literature also gave a detailed insight into the political and economic policies that are fueling these relationships.

The results show that the activities of China in Afghanistan are rather economic, in order to stabilize the situation along the western borders and ensure the flow of the Belt and Road Initiative. Geographical location of Afghanistan presents it as a potential transit center between Central and South Asia. Moreover, the rise of China in Afghanistan is slowly rebalancing the region and forcing it to review its diplomatic and economic policies according to the emerging regional dynamics. The study overall concludes that geo-economic dynamics are transforming political and economic environment in South and Central Asia. The approach to Afghanistan by China is a shift in traditional geopolitical hegemony to economic statecraft whereby it employs the financial and infrastructural instruments to achieve strategic goals.

The Dynamics of China-Afghanistan Relations

Afghanistan is known as the "Heart of Asia" due to its geostrategic importance, which has long been a focus of regional and international actors. Due to its location between South Asia, Central Asia, and Middle East, Afghanistan has played a significant geopolitical role in Eurasia. Its distinct geographic location has influenced not only its history but also the strategic objectives of surrounding nations and powerful regional and international actors. Afghanistan is crucial to controlling the Eurasian landmass, which is frequently referred to as the "pivot area" of world power, according to traditional geopolitical theories like Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory. Due to its advantageous location, Afghanistan has become a battlefield for conflicting interests, and its instability frequently draws outside threats. (Khan, Daniyal, & Tariq, 2023)

The importance of Afghanistan is discussed by Tahiri, who addresses the country as the "crossroads of the ancient world," meaning that Afghanistan is a nexus linking the current-day South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and East Asia. Both China and Afghanistan have common border and share cordial political relations. After the demise of Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001, China redeveloped official political relations with the newly-elected government of Hamid Karzai. Since then, China has been developing its business relations with Afghanistan to protect its commercial interests. (Tahiri, 2017). China has also made an effort to act as a mediator in Afghanistan, using its diplomatic clout to promote stability and support peace negotiations. In stark contrast to Western countries' attitudes towards the current Taliban regime, China has engaged with it, recognizing it as a major political player in Afghanistan's future. This shows that China has maintained a practical engagement with the group. China has been able to establish ties between the Taliban and other Afghan groups

through this strategy, establishing itself as an impartial and helpful actor in the region. To strengthen its soft power and promote goodwill among Afghans, China has also given Afghanistan development and humanitarian assistance. (Zhou J. , 2020) In another article, Claustre mentioned US withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in violence and chaos. For China, it is important to maintain peace for the BRI's stability and implement projects of BRI. This withdrawal is helping China to become more dominant in the region.(Claustre, 2023)

Saud explains the controversial exit of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan. He delves into the politics of Afghanistan after the capture of Kabul by the Taliban. Saud underscores the environment of relative peace that has followed the chaotic US/NATO exit, citing Taliban's commitments to the international community. He summarizes these commitments as: safeguarding human rights, imparting women education, freedom for media and no use of Afghan soil by the terrorists for activities against any other country. It is important to note that Taliban have used their own parameters on these issues and do not comply with internationally accepted understandings of these commitments. That has been the major cause of friction between Taliban and the international Community following Doha Agreement. From the perspective of regional integration, the author argues that Afghanistan can serve as a bridge between Central and South Asia for China and the Gulf. (Saud, 2022)

Jiang and Andersen argue that as China's economic and military power has grown in size, it has become almost inevitable for China to act within the recognized rules-based order. Under these considerations, China seeks to keep a low profile and not interfere in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. They cite that during the Darfur crisis in Sudan, China cooperated with the local government and the international community under immense international pressure. In Sudan, China underwent a significant policy shift away from non-interference, from the beginning to the end, and rapidly improved the humanitarian situation there. Hence China is being pushed to participate in international affairs beyond its stated policy of non-interference. Crises in Libya and Sudan also made China think about getting its boots dirty in the form of military interventions to protect its citizens and businesses in different regions of the world. (Jiang & Andersen, 2018)

To achieve its "Chinese Dream" of global influence, China looks to extend its Afghanistan base for a variety of reasons. The most apparent objective seems to be the long-term vision of establishing an economic corridor with Pakistan, and eventually Iran, thereby fostering a regional economic environment from which it could tap into untapped resources while simultaneously achieving geostrategic influence over the region. China's border security, along with its battle against terrorism and extreme violence, presents another plausible justification for engagement with the Taliban. The focus of Helstynova's thesis is to identify the reasons why China is adamant in strengthening ties with the Taliban despite the latter's use of coercive force in its own country. Based on her analysis, she concludes that the probable factors driving China's behavior are confined to the two dominant issues: economics and national security. (Helstynova, 2023)

China has serious concerns about Afghanistan's stability, especially as it relates to the unrest-plagued province of Xinjiang, a hotbed of Uyghur separatist activity. Xinjiang is adjacent to Afghanistan via the Wakhan Corridor. China worries that extremist organizations like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which is causing turmoil in Xinjiang, may find refuge in Afghanistan due to its instability. China has worked with the Taliban and other Afghan groups to reduce this risk by promoting an inclusive and stable government that can stop extremism from spreading. China's overarching objective of preserving internal stability and defending its territorial integrity is highlighted by this security-driven strategy. (Clarke, 2013)

Afghanistan offers several geo-economic incentives to China. The country's untapped mineral resources include lithium, copper, rare earth elements, and gold. A Chinese consortium was contracted in 2007 to manage the Mes Aynak copper mine, one of the largest in the world, but has had significant delays because of security risks and regulatory constraints. (Christina Lu, 2024) However, China appears to be interested in reviving stalled projects now that the U.S. forces have left the country and Taliban is in control. The Taliban government promises security, allowing China to make pragmatic geo-economic calculations, suggesting that cooperation would be more beneficial than ideological or normative frameworks. Afghanistan also holds significant value for China's continental ambitions as part of regional transit and trade networks. Afghanistan is also critical for the success of the BRI as it creates roadways, railways, and fiber-optic networks that connect China with Central Asia and the Middle East. Investments in Afghanistan's logistics hubs and trade corridors could provide China with a stable alternative to the high-risk maritime routes, giving China more strategic dominance.

Based on the review of the literature above, we believe that there is a need to explore China-Afghanistan relations in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. To achieve this objective, we suggest two research question. The primary research question guiding this research states: *What are the main contours of China's engagement with Afghanistan?* To further clarify this question and narrow down our research, we can suggest a supplementary research question: *How dose China's engagement post-US withdrawal affect its security and economic interests?* Through these questions, we intended to determine the effects of changes in China-Afghanistan relations following the U.S. withdrawal from the region. These questions also intend to explain long-term strategic and structural goals that underpin Chinese foreign policy towards Afghanistan. We believe that this objective can be achieved by using theory of geo-economics.

Geo-Economics in Theory and Practice

Edward Luttwak (1990) coined the term "geo-economics" to characterize the post-Cold War system in which governments would compete in the economic rather than the military sphere. He saw no imminent conflict because the Soviet menace to the United States and Europe had virtually vanished. He argued that, in the wake of the end of the Cold War, the significance of military might would be replaced by geo-economic power. (Schneider-Petsinger, 2020) However, Luttwak's theories soon became outdated as the Washington Consensus and President George H. Bush's "new global order" appeared to have solidified a more cooperative international system in which all major powers embraced globalization and the prospect of sustained economic growth, generating reciprocal advantages that would reduce the likelihood of significant conflict. In this liberal age, where economic integration and cooperation, rather than war, have taken center stage in international relations, the realist presumptions that characterized the early geo-economics paradigm do not seem helpful. (Babic, 2021)

The emergence of China, which is rapidly projecting influence through economic means, is one factor contributing to the term's current widespread usage. Two additional aspects are equally important: states now have more economic resources at their disposal due to the resurgence of state capitalism and the expansion of state-owned businesses, and geo-economic tools have become more potent due to the profound integration of international trade and financial systems. This trend is further highlighted by the Trump administration, whose 2017 National Security Strategy places a greater focus on economic statecraft than its predecessors, asserting that "economic security is national security." (Jim Garamone, 2017)

When approached cautiously, the geo-economic approach is a model of attaining regional unity and growth. It restructures the story as being trade rather than conflict in that there are vested

interests in growth and stability. A comprehensive but practical way of examining the China-Afghanistan relationship is through geo-economics. It takes into account the transformative use of economic instruments to achieve geopolitical goals and provides the insight of the challenges and opportunities that China has in a shifting regional environment.

The geo-economic theory is significant in the analysis of the complex network of strategic and economic interests that Afghanistan and China have. Geo-economics which explores the use of economic instruments to meet geo-political goals can provide a lens through which the convergence and conflict between these two nations in the resource management, infrastructure, and trade spheres can be understood. The geostrategic location and mineral wealth in Afghanistan, and the BRI of China, determine their bilateral relations. Besides being affected by the more general geopolitical factors, such as security challenges, power balance and alliances, these relationships are motivated by common goals of connectivity, economic integration and stability in the region.

Geo-economics theory is very much applicable in the bilateral relations between China and Pakistan since it explains how economic instruments like trade, investment, and infrastructure development affect the geopolitical strategy. The BRI and especially the CPEC of China are a form of geo-economic statecraft whereby economic investments are leveraged to increase influence and ensure strategic interests. Afghanistan's strategic location and abundant natural resources are crucial to China's regional connectivity initiatives. China aims to safeguard its trade routes, secure access to vital resources, and stabilize its Western border by investing in Afghanistan's economic development. These objectives align with its broader geo-economic objectives. Based on the review of existing literature and the theory of geo-economics, we suggest following questions:

1. What are the primary motives behind China's engagement in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal?
2. What role does China play in Afghanistan's economic development, particularly regarding infrastructure and mining projects?
3. In what ways Afghanistan affects China's geoeconomics objectives, especially with reference to its Belt and Road Initiative?
4. How does China balance its economic interests in Afghanistan with its security concerns?

Methods

To address the above-mentioned questions, we use a mixed-methods approach, including the study of key documents and interviews from policymakers and scholars. The document study approach employed in this research involves a comprehensive examination of both primary and secondary documents regarding the evolving relationship between China and Afghanistan. The research is based on policy documents and government reports from China and Afghanistan. These include publications and statements issued by major foreign offices and Commerce Ministries, as well as strategic white papers like the BRI policy papers released by China. Additionally, the documents from The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) were also studied. Most important among these documents are the 2022 Samarkand Declaration, The 2015 Ufa Declaration, the 2017 white paper "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," and Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). Overall, this research is strengthened by the inclusion of documentation that provides a more realistic perspective on Afghanistan's relations with China, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of state behavior.

These publications are particularly valuable for tracking recent events, official positions, and China's discourse on Afghanistan within the context of its regional and global objectives.

In addition to consulting the key documents, seventeen (17) interviews were conducted from professionals from renowned think tanks, ex-diplomats, regional security specialists, and academic practitioners specializing in China's foreign policy and economic strategy in the region. All interviews follow the same basic format and are therefore less rigid, giving the researcher room to navigate specific areas of interest such as Afghanistan's diplomacy and economic ties with China and the Chinese infrastructure and mining investments within the framework of geopolitical competition in the region. Through this approach, participants were able to express their thoughts, descriptions, and opinions in their own words, resulting in rich responses. Allowing participants to form their own answers, rather than fitting into a mold, ensures a more accurate understanding of the nuances under investigation. This is particularly important for geopolitical studies.

Some interviews provided broad insights into regional geopolitics. In contrast, others were much narrower in focus, such as the BRI's expansion into Afghanistan, security issues related to the CPEC, and the shifting position of the Taliban regime in China's regional agenda. These differences, although at first challenging to balance, enriched the study by avoiding a singular perspective and facilitating cross and comparative analyses. Engaging in interviews was intellectually challenging and methodologically rewarding. It supplemented my literature review and desk research by emphasizing lived experience and expert perspectives. While the logistical and scheduling hurdles, especially securing interviews with senior individuals, were significant, the process added credibility, depth, and nuance to the research.

Documentary Evidence of Afghanistan's Role in China's Geo-Economic Strategy

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) supported Afghanistan-centric dialogues in the backdrop of geopolitical stability. Despite not being an official member, Afghanistan has been a concern for the SCO due to its strategic location and impact on regional geopolitics. As one of the organization's founding members, China's approach to the same, especially after NATO's withdrawal and the Taliban's assumption of rule in 2021, has significantly shaped this policy. Afghanistan has remained a focal point due to the persistent issues of terrorism, extremism, transnational crime, smuggling, and the narcotics trade. The 2015 Ufa Declaration aimed for a "peaceful, independent, neutral, united and prosperous Afghanistan". Furthermore, in the 2022 Samarkand Declaration, Afghanistan's role as a vital component for regional inclusivity and security was acknowledged, advocating for the construction of a participatory government and rejection of terrorism in all its manifestations. (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2022)

China's concerns are clearly articulated in repeated SCO documents, which outline danger from the "Three Evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. These concerns, which are directly linked to China's domestic security issues, are significant regarding the possibility of Uyghur militants using Afghanistan as a staging ground. In this regard, China has sought to use the SCO for collective counterterrorism initiatives, such as in the regular sessions of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which has flagged Afghan-origin threats in several of its reports. (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2021)

Afghanistan was awarded observer status at the SCO in 2012, and the Afghanistan Contact Group (re-established in 2017) advocated cooperation between Kabul and other SCO countries. Looking at official minutes and press releases from the meetings of this Contact Group from 2017 to 2021, one can see the emphasis from China on encouraging dialogue, political reconciliation, and subsequent socio-economic development as a continuum. In these meetings, China has advocated "soft security" strategies focusing on capacity-building, reliance

on reconstruction aid, and infrastructural integration through projects linked the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The emphasis placed on Afghanistan in the SCO's policy papers reveals shared apprehensions regarding Afghanistan's geopolitical role within South Asia, focusing primarily on counter-terrorism and inclusion-fostering politics. China's influence is evident in the push for regionally connected infrastructure and non-interventionist policies. Notwithstanding the affirmative statements, Afghanistan's influence on the SCO remains negligible due to decision-making culture, the multifaceted Afghan conundrum, and conflicting priorities amongst member states. Still, China persistently leverages the SCO framework to promote a middle-ground framework of development-funded peacebuilding.

Besides SCO, CPEC and BRI are other important forums for China to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan. The CPEC was created in 2013 as the centerpiece project of China's BRI. It is purportedly a game-changing development project that seeks to promote connectivity, cooperation, and infrastructure integration among the region's countries. Although CPEC's core route has historically been confined to China and Pakistan, recent policy pronouncements from both China and Pakistan show increased willingness to extend CPEC into Afghanistan.

China's 2015 and 2019 White Papers on the Belt and Road Initiative reiterate "peaceful development" and "shared growth" through economic corridors, including South and Central Asia as areas of interest. Chinese policy documents perpetually describe it as a neighbor with "potential for regional cooperation" under the BRI. The 2017 white paper *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* indirectly references improving relations with "neighboring countries in post-conflict reconstruction," suggesting a policy alignment toward integrating Afghanistan into BRI plans. (Government of Pakistan, 2015)

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, especially in its briefing sessions after 2021, has been adamant that regional peace and development under BRI is impossible without a "stable and inclusive" Afghanistan. The policy discourse surrounding the BRI aligns with China's particular geopolitical vision, which views development as a means to combat terrorism and volatility. In this regard, Afghanistan is seen as both a prospective collaborator and a risk to the efficacy of China's investments in the region. CPEC's expansion has been an essential part of Afghanistan's integration into the BRI.

Geo-Economic Dimensions of China-Afghanistan Relations: Perspectives of Scholars and Policymakers

In their interviews, Professor Salma Malik (Assistant Professor, Department of Defense and Strategic Studies, QAU), Shareh Qaiz (Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Punjab University), and Hassan Daud (Assistant Professor, Department of International Relation, Bahria University) outline the strategic interests of China in South Asia. The security of Afghanistan is closely linked to that of Central Asia and China's Western regions, especially the volatile Xinjiang region which has experienced unrest tied to Uyghur nationalist movements. Most importantly for China, its strategic interest in Afghanistan seeks to maintain regional tranquility and counteract fundamentalism from encroaching into Chinese territory. From Beijing's perspective, stable governance in Afghanistan, even if it is provided by the Taliban, is more favorable than an unstable situation that could descend into fragmented warlordism or become a sanctuary for terrorism. Professor Salma adds that Beijing has viewed Afghanistan's instability as detrimental not only to regional stability but also to jeopardize the success of the BRI, particularly for the routes branching off towards Central Asia, Pakistan, and Iran.

Mr. Hassan Daud noted that China has a specific interest in counterterrorism due to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which has previously found sanctuary in Afghan territory. China has accused ETIM of planning attacks in Xinjiang and fostering an independent “East Turkestan.” Although the Taliban promised in the Doha Agreement and later bilateral declarations that they would not permit the use of Afghan territory for terrorism against third countries, Beijing remains skeptical of these undertakings. The Afghanistan branch of the Islamic State, ISIS-Khorasan, poses a threat because of its anti-China propaganda and China-bashing policies. ISIS-K condemned China’s handling of Uyghur Muslims and claimed responsibility for a July 2021 attack on Chinese engineers in Pakistan. These issues are the basis of China’s discomfort with the lack of control over this region, which could evolve into a conduit for smuggling, militant infiltration, or even an inadvertent center for hostile intelligence operations. Asad Abbas (Director Afghanistan, MOFA, from 2019-2022 and Counsellor, embassy of Pakistan in Kabul) noted that Beijing has had both opportunities and challenges following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 due to the geopolitical vacuum. China has maintained a low profile in Afghan politics, preferring to engage through Pakistan or multilateral frameworks. Now, however, it is one of the few major powers with active diplomatic and economic ties with the Taliban government. This increasing void has strategic implications for China’s ambitions to secure its continental flanks and expand its influence toward the West. Professor Mehmood Hassan (Assistant Professor, department of Political Science, Punjab University) and Haris Malik (Research Associate from China-Pakistan Study Center, ISSI) stated that it is China’s perceived obligation to assume a leadership role that is driving this intervention. China feels compelled to intervene not out of ambition, but to prevent chaos after the U.S. withdrawal. Overall, China’s view towards Afghanistan has been cautious, yet deeply strategic, balancing significant political and security challenges against prospective economic opportunities, including new markets and access to rare earth materials. Professor Asif Amin (Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Lahore) argues that Afghanistan possesses considerable mineral resources, such as copper, lithium, gold, and rare earth elements. Its anticipated potential as a global provider of vital industrial raw materials is assessed to exceed \$1 trillion in untapped mineral wealth. These minerals are largely unexploited because of a lack of infrastructure and skill, which provides an opportunity for foreign investment. Afghanistan holds a uniquely important position in the global economy with respect to mining and resources, especially given China’s increasing interest in its mining resources. After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Mansoor Khan (Former Ambassador to Afghanistan), claims that China has intensified negotiating deals for mineral extraction with the Taliban. Chinese companies like the Metallurgical Corporation of China have long sought to control Afghan copper deposits, including the Mes Aynak mine which is one of the world’s largest untapped copper reserves. Beijing considers Afghanistan’s minerals, particularly lithium, to be vital for its industrial objectives in developed manufacturing sectors and in the production of electric vehicle batteries.

Regardless of the potential economic benefits, investment in Afghanistan poses significant risks due to the country’s volatile politics, persistent violence, and governance challenges. Since the Taliban regained control of the country, external investment has been all but non-existent due to the combination of economic sanctions and political isolation. Furthermore, large-scale projects increasingly face the threat of active insurgent groups targeting infrastructure development, especially in remote regions.

Professor Mahmood Hussain and Rana Ajaiz Ahmed (HOD, Department of Political Science, University of Punjab) remarked that Afghanistan has always been considered an important yet

underdeveloped node in China's plans for transcontinental connectivity via the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the Taliban regained power, Beijing has been cautiously looking for ways to include Afghanistan in the BRI, primarily via mining and infrastructure investments.

As noted by Professors Salma Malik and Mohammad Sadiq Khan (Special Representation to Afghanistan), China's growing investment in Afghanistan's infrastructure seems to form an integral part of the country's broader BRI. Countries which extend subsidized construction to Afghanistan focus on its further integration into international exchange. One of the most ambitious projects under discussion is the Trans-Afghan railway that seeks to link Uzbekistan with Pakistan's Gwadar Port, through Afghanistan. Moreover, Chinese investments in industrial zones, telecommunications, and power generation are likely to enhance Afghanistan's economic outlook, even if investors remain apprehensive about the country's volatile security landscape.

Afghanistan's involvement in the BRI initiatives alters the idea of regional connectivity. The political stability of Afghanistan and the Taliban's ability to secure these routes will be critical to the development of these pathways. Professor Salman Naz (Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Punjab, Lahore) and Hamayoun Khan (Educational Consultant at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) contend that the CPEC extension into Afghanistan presents opportunities. It could transform Afghanistan into a key transit economy that enhances trade through Pakistani ports and generates new streams of income. China's growing foothold in Afghanistan significantly shifts the power dynamics of the region. China's engagement with the Taliban could evoke responses from other regional players, notably India, which has historically supported rival Afghan factions.

As Ambassador Ubaid ur Rehman stated that China's involvement with Afghanistan under the Taliban leadership is an example of political diplomacy focused on trade, where investments are exchanged for security guarantees and political calm. Unlike Western nations that give aid with the expectation of upholding democratic values and human rights, China has taken an approach that seeks to protect its strategic and economic interests. Since the regime change in 2021, Beijing has slowly moved forward with energy agreements, mining contracts, and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan's resource-rich regions such as the Amu Darya Basin (oil) and Mes Aynak (copper). In return, the Taliban have guaranteed security for Chinese workers and projects, understanding that some form of economic growth is required to bolster their credibility. With this arrangement, the Taliban receive desperate foreign investment to help revive their wrecked economy, while China increases its foothold in Afghanistan without needing political changes due to the lack of a reform demand because of this 'quid-pro-quo' agreement. China's relationship with the Taliban exemplifies a low-risk, high-reward investment strategy. China has limited political strife and positioned itself as a trusted partner to Taliban rule by framing its support solely in economic terms.

China primarily focuses on engagement strategies in Afghanistan by fostering economic development and infrastructure-building while avoiding political liberalization. This focus on economic relations over governance improvements is seen in the foreign policy strategies China employs towards Africa and Southeast Asia. Rather than interfering with the internal governance systems, China has focused on state-capacity enhancing projects such as constructing power plants, roads, and mining in Afghanistan. This allows the Taliban to maintain their grip on power because there is no outside pressure to democratize, which is why the Taliban support this strategy.

Conclusion

China is planning to strengthen its commercial relations with Afghanistan, whereby the country's long-term stability issues and short-term economic benefits come in to play. The West's failure in building a democratic Afghanistan along with China's non-involvement policies creates a new paradigm in geo-economics where political change gives way to economic practicality. The Taliban's discriminatory policies, stagnant development, and failure to provide effective governance heighten the risk of repeating Afghanistan's past instability cycles. China must consider the security costs of having a politically volatile neighbor that depends economically on extractive industries.

This research paper argued that economic realities and security considerations are intertwined in explaining China's involvement in Afghanistan. That policy is described as cautious, pragmatic, and fundamentally non-interventionist. Overall, economic diplomacy becomes the key tool for China through which grander geopolitical ambitions are sought via the BRI. The strategic interests of China in Afghanistan are closely tied up to country's critical geostrategic location at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, as well as its rich natural resources that remain largely unexploited. At the same time, the stabilization of the Western border of the country and the destruction of extremist terrorist groups like the ETIM have become crucial security concerns of Beijing.

The study's key arguments emphasize that China's engagement with Afghanistan is primarily driven by geo-economic motives rather than traditional geopolitical strategies. Applying the geo-economic framework reveals that China seeks regional stability and market access through economic instruments such as trade, infrastructure investment, and development partnerships under the Belt and Road Initiative. The evidence gathered from interviews and document analysis supports this claim, showing that China's investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure and resource sectors are intended to create interdependence and secure its Western borders. This holistic approach to economic participation as a tool of security pursuits played out in the context of providing development aid to achieve improved state stability, access to vital resources, and consolidation of security in border zones. Hence, this research confirms that geo-economics was a well-suited framework for this research.

Recommendations

As the interactions between China and Afghanistan continues to grow, multiple complex issues need to be researched. Scholars, for example, can analyze whether China's approach of putting the economy first leads to sustainable stability, or merely postpones more serious governance challenges. Cross-comparative studies involving other fragile states covered by China's Belt and Road Initiative could illuminate the critical long-term consequences of economic growth and debt dependency. Along these lines, there is a pressing need to investigate whether in the current shifting landscape of regionally fueled militancy, especially with the Taliban's role as both a security guarantor to China, could curb cross-border terrorism in China.

China should advocate for a more comprehensive form of economic engagement with Afghanistan that goes beyond its focus on physical infrastructure and extractive industries. China should seek participation in agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and vocational training which are less capital-intensive and more job-generating. These initiatives will allow Beijing to maintain its policy of non-interference as well. This approach would help address some of the instability while simultaneously providing alternate livelihoods to those susceptible to radical recruitment. Agro-industrial zones established near borders could serve as pilot projects demonstrating the benefits of more socially inclusive economic models. Such a mechanism could support infrastructure investments while financing programs focused on

disaster resilience, conflict mitigation, and cross-border community development. This approach will help China exert greater control over destabilizing spillover effects.

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