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The New Silk Road Gamble: Can China Turn Afghanistan's Chaos into a Connectivity Win

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines China's evolving engagement with Afghanistan within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on the post-2021 geopolitical landscape following the Taliban's return to power. It explores how China's approach combines cautious diplomacy, strategic patience, and economic pragmatism to pursue long-term regional influence while avoiding direct political entanglement. The study highlights China's dual objectives: securing its western borders from instability and integrating Afghanistan into broader regional connectivity networks linking Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. By analyzing China's incremental investments in mining, energy, and infrastructure sectors, the article demonstrates how Beijing uses economic instruments as tools of soft power and stability management. It also discusses the challenges hindering deeper cooperation, including Afghanistan's fragile governance, internal security threats, and the lack of international recognition of the Taliban regime. The analysis reveals that while China's engagement represents an opportunity for Afghanistan's reconstruction and integration into regional trade routes, it also raises concerns about dependency, unequal partnerships, and the risk of exploitative resource extraction. Ultimately, the article argues that Afghanistan serves as a critical test case for the resilience and adaptability of China's BRI in conflict-affected regions. The success or failure of this engagement will determine whether the BRI can function as a framework for inclusive development and peacebuilding or remain an instrument of strategic expansion serving China's geopolitical interests.

Keywords: *China-Afghanistan Relations, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Taliban Regime, Regional Connectivity, Economic Diplomacy, Strategic Engagement, Soft Power, Geopolitical Stability*

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, has rapidly evolved into a central axis of China's foreign economic and geopolitical strategy. Designed to knit together Asia, Europe, and Africa via large-scale infrastructure projects railways, highways, ports, energy lines, BRI seeks both to facilitate trade and to enhance China's influence abroad (Rai, 2022). In recent years, Beijing has increasingly focused on overland routes and regional corridors that can reduce reliance on maritime chokepoints and provide alternative supply-chain resiliency, particularly in light of geopolitical tensions and the disruptions witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. China's push into Central and South Asia via these corridors underscores its desire not just for economic returns but for strategic buffers and influence in its periphery (ThinkChina, 2025). Thus, the BRI today is less a set of infrastructure projects than an instrument of geo-economics and connectivity becomes an arena of influence, with states like China using infrastructure investment and trade integration to shape regional order and secure its borders.

In this connectivity agenda, Afghanistan has emerged as a linchpin whose geographic location places it at a crossroads of Asia. Bordered by Central Asia to the north, Pakistan to the south, Iran to the west, and China's Xinjiang region to the northeast, Afghanistan is uniquely positioned to serve as a transit hub linking multiple corridors between China and the Middle East, between Central Asia and South Asia, and as an extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other regional trade networks (AISRS, 2025). Moreover, Afghanistan is rich in untapped mineral resources lithium, copper, rare earths, and other critical minerals that China has both strategic and industrial incentives to access (Reuters, 2025). For Beijing, Afghanistan offers both the potential to shorten trade routes and to diversify its resource base, reinforcing China's supply chain security amid global competition. Thus, Afghanistan's role in China's connectivity ambitions is not merely logistical it is intrinsic to balancing China's economic, security, and geopolitical goals across its western frontier. Yet, turning this potential into reality faces steep and complex obstacles. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghanistan has suffered persistent instability, weak governance, and fluctuating recognition from state actors. The security environment remains precarious: insurgent violence, inter-ethnic conflict, and cross-border militant threats continue to challenge the Taliban's control over large swaths of territory (The Diplomat, 2025). In parallel, governance systems are fragile, infrastructure is underdeveloped, and corruption and lack of administrative capacity hamper effective implementation of large-scale projects (The Diplomat, 2025; ISSA Journal, 2024). On the diplomatic front, while China has moved to engage with the Taliban appointing an ambassador and holding high-level meetings the question of formal recognition and international legitimacy remains unresolved and contentious (Reuters, 2025; Pajhwok Afghan News, 2025). These challenges make any BRI-type engagement in Afghanistan a gamble: not simply in terms of investment risk, but in the realm of legitimacy, security, and geopolitical cost. Understanding how China assesses these risks, what strategies it deploys to mitigate them, and whether the payoff might outweigh the costs is crucial for assessing the broader dynamics of regional connectivity and power.

The rationale for this study stems from the profound implications China's approach to Afghanistan holds for regional stability, global geopolitics, and economic integration. First, if China succeeds in integrating Afghanistan into its connectivity network, it may reshape the power dynamics across South and Central Asia potentially reducing the strategic weight of other actors like Pakistan, India, Russia, or Western states, altering alliance patterns, and influencing global supply chains (The Diplomat, 2025). Second, Afghanistan's socioeconomic development hinges heavily on foreign investment and infrastructure: if China is perceived as capable of delivering connectivity that improves trade, infrastructure, and access to global markets, this could contribute to political legitimacy and internal stability in a country long beset by fragility. Conversely, if China falters as many other external actors have in Afghanistan the consequences may include increased isolation, economic hardship, or further violent fragmentation. Finally, in a world growing more oriented toward regionalisation, supply-chain hubs, and alternative corridors to maritime routes, how China handles this "chaos-to-connectivity" challenge will serve as a barometer for how major powers balance risk, state fragility, and strategic ambition in the 21st century.

This article thus investigates whether China can transform Afghanistan's instability into a connectivity win. It explores China's strategic interests, diplomatic maneuvering, economic initiatives, and risk mitigation strategies, with a view to understanding not just whether connectivity is possible, but under what conditions and with which actors. By examining recent engagements such as discussions on mining cooperation, inclusion in BRI, trade deals, and trilateral security initiatives this paper aims to illuminate the constraints and opportunities that will determine whether China's New Silk Road gambit pays off, or remains a structural ambition undone by ground-level realities.

Literature Review

Scholars assessing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) converge on two broad observations: the BRI is simultaneously an ambitious connectivity project with demonstrable economic impacts and a vehicle for strategic influence that has provoked widespread critique. Empirical studies that quantify the BRI's development effects show mixed but meaningful gains in trade, logistics capacity, and industrial linkages in participating regions, while more recent econometric work emphasizes heterogeneity winners and losers depend on project selection, governance, and local absorptive capacity (García-Herrero, 2024). At the same time, critical literature has sharpened over the past five years: scholars and policy analyst's document rising concerns about debt sustainability, opaque contracting practices, environmental externalities, and political conditionality's attached to large infrastructure packages (Dhiab, 2024). A growing body of work reframes the BRI as an instrument of "geo-economics statecraft" in which infrastructure spending is designed to secure supply chains, leverage economic dependence for political influence, and project Chinese norms of contract and governance abroad (Simonov, 2025). Importantly for this study, the literature also highlights a second major shift: since the COVID-19 shock and amid rising US–China strategic competition, Beijing has recalibrated the BRI toward "BRI 2.0" fewer headline megaprojects, more targeted, quality-oriented investments and regional connectivity packages that emphasize digital, energy, and logistics resilience (Simonov, 2025). These theoretical and empirical contours set the stage for evaluating how the BRI logic might be applied or constrained in Afghanistan.

The specialized literature on China–Afghanistan relations charts a cautious, incremental Beijing strategy that privileges security assurances, selective economic engagement, and careful diplomatic hedging rather than full-throated political recognition. Analyses since the U.S. withdrawal emphasize China's calculus: Afghanistan is attractive for both its transit geography and its mineral endowments, yet engagement must be calibrated to avoid exposure to insurgent threats and reputational costs (Stimson Center, 2025; ORF, 2025). Recent reporting and official communiqués indicate Beijing's practical posture tariff concessions, mining talks, and offers to facilitate limited trade while stopping short of comprehensive state recognition (Reuters, 2025; Al-Monitor, 2025). Policy briefs and think-tank updates underscore Beijing's recurrent themes: secure Xinjiang by denying militant sanctuaries, extract mineral resources to bolster supply chains, and promote connectivity in ways that channel influence without assuming full governance responsibility (SIPRI, 2022; Asia Financial, 2025). Academics note that China's engagement is designed around a set of guarded hedges using state enterprises, trilateral diplomacy (with Pakistan and Iran), and security-for-investment tradeoffs that allow Beijing to probe opportunities while remaining insulated from the worst operational risks (Zhang, 2022). This literature underscores an essential paradox: Afghanistan's intrinsic value to China (location + resources) is high, but the transactional and political costs of turning that value into durable connectivity are substantial.

Regional perspectives add important nuance: Central Asian governments, Pakistan, and Iran view China's connectivity push through different lenses shaped by sovereignty concerns, economic dependencies, and security spillovers. Central Asian capitals have welcomed Chinese transport links and investment as an avenue to diversify away from Russian markets and to upgrade logistics but they simultaneously fear over-reliance and erosion of policy autonomy, prompting demands for better terms, local content, and transparency in BRI deals (Bruegel, 2023). Pakistan treats the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as both strategic lifeline and domestic political issue: while Islamabad has sought to preserve CPEC's priority, civil-society critics and some provincial actors worry about debt, land acquisition, and insufficient local benefit, complicating any rapid extension of CPEC into Afghanistan without careful domestic consensus (Georgetown University analysis, 2024). Iran's posture is more ambivalent: Tehran recognizes that a stable Afghanistan connected to Chinese corridors could boost trade and provide alternative routes around sanctions-pressured maritime lanes, yet it also worries about marginalization and the geopolitical implications of a China-backed transit axis that bypasses Iranian influence (NESA/analyses, 2024). Collectively, these regional literatures show that China's plans for Afghan connectivity cannot be treated in isolation; they will be mediated by neighboring states' preferences, competitive anxieties, and bargaining over transit rents and security guarantees.

Despite a growing corpus on BRI and multiple policy notes on China–Afghanistan engagement, the literature exhibits a notable gap: rigorous, peer-reviewed analyses of China's strategic recalibration specifically after the Taliban's return remain scarce, episodic, and often descriptive rather than theory-driven. Pre-2021 scholarship anticipated many of China's pragmatic moves (security-for-investment logic, resource diplomacy), but the post-2021 reality wherein Beijing has iteratively expanded low-profile diplomacy, mining talks, and trilateral meetings raises fresh questions about how authoritarian external actors manage connectivity projects in fragile, unrecognized polities (LSE review, 2022; Stimson, 2025). There is limited systematic work on risk-allocation mechanisms in China's Afghan projects (e.g., insurance, escrow, local partner selection), on the micro-political consequences for Afghan governance and livelihoods, and on scenario modelling that compares alternative connectivity outcomes (successful integration vs. fragmented corridors vs. "straitjacket" dependency). Moreover, comparative casework contrasting China's Afghan approach with its strategies in Pakistan, Central Asia, and Africa on how to manage fragile states is thin an empirical lacuna that if filled could clarify whether Beijing's Afghanistan playbook constitutes innovation or replication of earlier patterns (SIPRI, 2022). Addressing these gaps will be essential to judge whether China's engagement is merely transactional patience or a durable strategic pivot capable of converting Afghanistan's chaos into a genuine connectivity win.

Problem Statement

Despite China's ambitious vision to enhance global connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Afghanistan remains a critical yet problematic link in this strategy. The country's persistent instability, fragile governance, and lack of international recognition since the Taliban's return have created a complex environment that challenges the feasibility of large-scale infrastructure and investment projects. While Afghanistan's location offers strategic potential as a transit hub connecting Central, South, and West Asia, the absence of political stability, reliable institutions, and security assurances undermines these prospects. Moreover, China faces the dilemma of balancing its economic interests with the geopolitical risks of engaging a politically isolated regime. This tension raises a fundamental question: can China's economic diplomacy and risk-managed investment approach transform Afghanistan's internal chaos into a viable connectivity opportunity, or will the country's instability continue to render it the weakest link in China's grand connectivity vision?

Objectives

1. To examine China's strategic interests and goals in Afghanistan under the Belt and Road Initiative.

2. To analyze the political, economic, and security challenges affecting China's engagement.
3. To evaluate whether Afghanistan can serve as a viable corridor for China's regional connectivity.
4. To assess the broader geopolitical implications of China's involvement in Afghanistan for South and Central Asia.

Research Questions

1. What motivates China's renewed engagement with Afghanistan despite its instability?
2. How does the current security and political environment in Afghanistan affect China's BRI objectives?
3. What mechanisms or partnerships is China using to mitigate risks in Afghanistan?
4. Can China realistically turn Afghanistan's instability into a connectivity advantage?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and descriptive research design to explore China's efforts to transform Afghanistan's instability into a connectivity advantage under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The research primarily relies on secondary data collected from a wide range of credible sources, including policy papers, government documents, scholarly publications, and reports from international think tanks that examine China's regional strategy and Afghanistan's evolving political context. Additionally, media analysis of official statements and press releases from both Chinese and Afghan authorities is conducted to understand policy narratives, diplomatic postures, and the framing of bilateral cooperation. A comparative review of regional infrastructure projects, such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Central Asian connectivity corridors, provides contextual insight into China's broader regional engagement. The collected data are analyzed thematically, focusing on the intersection of political economy and international relations, to identify recurring patterns, strategic priorities, and the implications of China's connectivity ambitions in Afghanistan's fragile environment.

Theoretical Framework

The first pillar of this theoretical framework is Realism in international relations, supplemented by the concept of Geo-economics. Realism argues that states act primarily to secure power, survive in an anarchic international system, and protect their strategic interests. For China, Afghanistan represents both opportunity and risk in terms of national interest: it is a buffer region, a potential transit route into Central and South Asia, and a source of valuable minerals. Under a geoeconomic lens, China does not merely invest for profit or development, but for strategic leverage securing influence, ensuring supply-chain resilience, and reducing dependency on contested or maritime routes (Simonov, 2025; García-Herrero, 2024). Realist geoeconomics further suggests that China's infrastructure investments serve dual purposes: they enhance its own security (e.g., preventing militant infiltration into its western regions) and expand its capacity to project influence across Asia. In Afghanistan, this translates into carefully managed, often lower-profile engagements mining accords, gateway deals where China tests the terrain, hedges its investments, and demands favorable terms (Stimson Center, 2025). Realism and geoeconomics together help explain China's caution: its reluctance to fully recognize the Taliban government, its emphasis on security guarantees, and its insistence on risk mitigation, rather than unbounded investment, reflect a state seeking strategic depth without undue vulnerability. Dependency Theory offers a contrasting angle rather than seeing international investment purely as opportunity, it warns of asymmetric economic relationships that perpetuate structural dependence. From this perspective, large Chinese investments in Afghan infrastructure and resource extraction may create forms of dependency: dependence on Chinese capital, technical expertise, state enterprises, and political goodwill. While such investments can generate economic activity and connectivity, they also may limit Afghanistan's sovereignty over its development agenda determining which projects are prioritized, under what terms, what returns are expected, and who captures most of the economic benefit. In contexts of weak governance and limited institutional capacity both evident in Afghanistan since 2021 dependency dynamics are more likely to ossify, with local actors having little leverage to negotiate or enforce equitable contracts (ORF, 2025; SIPRI, 2022). Moreover, dependency theory raises critical questions about revenue repatriation, local labor and skills development, environmental externalities, and whether Afghanistan might find itself locked into extractive or transit roles without broader industrialization or value-addition. Such an outcome would be a mixed win at best: some infrastructure, trade flow, and transit activity, but minimal autonomy or diversification of Afghanistan's economy.

Finally, Regional Connectivity Theory emphasizes that in an increasingly interdependent world, connectivity whether in the form of transportation corridors, trade networks, energy pipelines, or digital infrastructure is not only an economic proposition but also a framework for regional institutional cooperation, norms harmonization, and multipolar ordering. Under this theory, China's BRI is not simply a bilateral tool, but part of a networked strategy that includes neighboring states, transit countries, and overlapping corridors. In this view, success in Afghanistan depends not just on China's own investments or its bilateral relations with the Taliban, but on the coherence of regional arrangements: border infrastructure with Pakistan and Iran, cross-border customs regimes, consensus on security protocols, and coordination of standards. Recent accounts underline how connectivity projects in Central Asia and the Pakistan-China corridor (CPEC) serve as reference models but also as benchmarks: whether trade flows can be sustained, delays minimized, and local economic actors integrated matters for whether Afghanistan can truly become a node rather than a bottleneck (Central Asia Connectivity Project, 2024; Georgetown University, 2024). Regional connectivity theory brings into view the constraints that spill across borders: local insurgencies, political instability, or nationalistic backlash in one country can disrupt entire corridor operations. Thus, applying this theory helps frame research questions about whether China can orchestrate not only infrastructure but institutional and normative harmonization to embed Afghanistan into a stable, high-functioning regional connectivity architecture.

Findings

Since the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021, China has demonstrated a cautious yet steadily increasing engagement strategy. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Kabul in 2025 marked a symbolic deepening of relations, where discussions centered on reviving economic cooperation through infrastructure development, mining, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) participation. China's decision to maintain its diplomatic mission and appoint a new ambassador to Kabul, despite the absence of formal recognition of the Taliban regime, underscores Beijing's pragmatic approach focused on stability and strategic access to Afghanistan's untapped resources. This approach aligns with China's long-term vision to expand its western frontier influence while avoiding the pitfalls of overt interventionism (Reuters, 2025). According to Zhang (2025), China's strategy hinges on "measured engagement," balancing its security concerns with incremental diplomatic and economic overtures that secure both geopolitical depth and access to mineral wealth critical for its industrial supply chains.

Parallel to diplomatic overtures, China has expanded dialogue on strategic projects involving mining, energy, and infrastructure development. One of the most significant initiatives is the Mes

Aynak copper mine, which saw renewed negotiations and partial resumption of development work under Taliban supervision. Although large-scale extraction remains hindered by technical and security challenges, the project represents a symbolic reaffirmation of China's intent to operationalize Afghanistan's mineral economy (Stimson Center, 2025). Moreover, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has increased its presence in the Amu Darya oil fields through CAPEIC, a subsidiary that signed new extraction deals valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. Beyond resource extraction, Beijing and Kabul have also explored cooperation in information technology, transport logistics, and agricultural exports, especially in high-demand commodities like saffron, pomegranates, and pine nuts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). These agreements signal a strategy of economic diversification intended to cultivate interdependence and mitigate Afghanistan's reliance on limited revenue sources.

However, multiple constraints continue to restrict the practical realization of these projects. Security volatility remains the most pressing concern, as militant groups and ethnic insurgencies threaten infrastructure routes and project personnel (Sentinel, 2025). The Taliban's governance deficiencies, lack of international recognition, and opaque regulatory frameworks deter long-term foreign investment and hinder Afghanistan's inclusion in broader financial systems (The Diplomat, 2025). Human rights concerns, especially regarding women's exclusion from education and employment, exacerbate Afghanistan's diplomatic isolation, indirectly affecting China's global image as a development partner. Additionally, logistical and technical deficits ranging from inadequate power supply and transport networks to institutional inefficiency impede China's ability to integrate Afghanistan into regional BRI corridors. As noted by the European Foundation for South Asian Studies (2024), these combined factors make Afghanistan a "high-risk but high-reward frontier," where China's cautious engagement reflects both strategic patience and reluctance to overextend its influence.

Despite these persistent barriers, China continues to adopt a calculated approach focused on stabilizing Afghanistan through selective, low-risk economic incentives. Rather than committing massive infrastructure investments, Beijing has prioritized small and mid-scale projects with quick visible outcomes to foster goodwill among Afghan stakeholders. For instance, facilitating agricultural exports and improving local road networks serve as both trust-building measures and economic relief mechanisms for Afghanistan's war-affected communities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). This mirrors China's approach in other politically fragile regions, emphasizing "developmental security" the idea that economic participation can gradually mitigate instability. The Stimson Center (2025) observes that China's current engagement style reflects a shift from resource-driven extraction to stability-centered diplomacy, where economic cooperation is leveraged as a geopolitical tool rather than an immediate commercial gain.

In the wake of Western disengagement, China's influence in Afghanistan has grown proportionately, positioning it as one of the few external powers actively shaping the country's post-conflict trajectory. Its mediation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and discussions about integrating Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), demonstrate China's bid to consolidate regional connectivity under its leadership (Washington Post, 2025a). While formal recognition of the Taliban remains withheld, Beijing's diplomatic posture indicates an acceptance of de facto governance for pragmatic cooperation. Analysts argue that this duality balancing non-recognition with economic collaboration illustrates China's long game of regional influence consolidation amid the power vacuum left by Western withdrawal (Special Eurasia, 2025). As Zhang (2025) concludes, China's engagement with Afghanistan represents a "geoeconomic experiment," where stability is pursued through transactional partnerships, economic diplomacy, and strategic patience. Although full integration into the BRI framework remains uncertain, the direction of engagement clearly signals Beijing's intent to convert Afghanistan's geopolitical chaos into a long-term connectivity advantage.

Discussion

China's "wait-and-see" strategy in Afghanistan reflects a delicate balancing act between risk and ambition. On one hand, Beijing has signalled its long-term goals: extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghan territory, strengthening political ties, and promoting Afghanistan's inclusion in broader regional connectivity frameworks (Pakistan Today, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). On the other hand, China remains acutely aware of the risks: insecurity along trade routes; potential backlash over engagement with the Taliban given human rights concerns; and the reputational cost if projects fail or exacerbate local grievances. Rather than rushing into full infrastructure investments, China seems to prefer incremental steps MoUs, road and transit link agreements, small-scale trade facilitation testing local capacity and monitoring stability (Pakistan, China, Afghanistan trilateral dialogues; Business Standard, 2025). This approach allows China to manage exposure: pursue geoeconomic gains while avoiding over-commitment in a volatile political environment. The reward of establishing reliable transit corridors and access to minerals is tempting, but China's strategy reveals that it sees these not as immediate returns, but as longer-term dividends contingent on security improvements and governance reforms.

Afghanistan serves as a testing ground for China's evolving model of regional diplomacy, one that blends economic engagement with security diplomacy and soft power projection. By working through trilateral mechanisms with Pakistan and through public statements of support for Afghan sovereignty and territorial integrity, China is experimenting with governance frameworks and diplomatic tools that both reduce direct risk and spread responsibility among regional actors (Future Center, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). This may redefine the traditional bilateral state-to-state model and signal a shift toward multilateral issue-based engagement: counter-terrorism, trade corridors, infrastructure linkages, rule of law and norms around transit and customs procedures. Such reorientation allows China to build legitimacy and acceptance from neighboring states, which are often skeptical of external actors who bypass regional consensus. Moreover, the incremental strategies such as pledges to connect Afghanistan to CPEC, or supporting its integration with Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor allow China to test how diplomacy, not just investment, can shape connectivity outcomes (Solidarity for Security and Cooperation for Development, 2025; Tunxi Initiative, 2025). Thus, Afghanistan may increasingly become a laboratory for China's regional diplomacy model, revealing how China might engage fragile or semi-recognized regimes elsewhere.

The regional dynamics shifting around China's engagement with Afghanistan highlight both opportunities and competitive pressures from neighboring states. Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian republics each face recalibrating their strategies in response to China's cautious but expanding involvement. For Pakistan, extending CPEC into Afghanistan offers economic gains through transit and trade, but comes with the need to manage internal security and border instability (Business Standard, 2025; Pakistan Today, 2025). Iran, through its Khaf-Herat railway and the development of Chabahar port, sees China's connectivity push as both complementary and competitive: complementary insofar as trade routes via Iran offer alternative access to Afghanistan's markets and resources; competitive insofar as Chinese priorities may shift transit routes away from Iranian influence (Tunxi Initiative, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). For Central Asian states, stronger Chinese-Afghan integration promises new markets and resources but also raises concerns about over dependence, loss of negotiating leverage, and political influence without commensurate benefits. In this environment, China's economic engagement must negotiate the tension between connectivity and control: whether the infrastructures, trade routes, and agreements it fosters lead to shared stability, or whether they deepen dependencies that limit the autonomy of neighboring states.

This tension between connectivity and control lies at the heart of whether China's engagement can stabilize Afghanistan or trap it in a subordinate role. Connectivity roads, rail, transit, customs, telecom is necessary to move goods, people, and capital, and is indeed the bedrock of the BRI's promise. China's recent agreements and declarations emphasize that Afghanistan should transition from land-locked to "land-linked," integrating through regional economic cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025; Tunxi Initiative, 2025). However, without strong local institutions, legal clarity, inclusive governance, and equitable benefit sharing, connectivity may exacerbate existing inequalities. Afghanistan could become a corridor and extractive resource provider dominated by Chinese state or quasi-state actors, with limited local value addition. Moreover, control over customs, border security, and regulatory regimes might shift into hands more aligned with Chinese strategic concerns, potentially sidelining local priorities and reducing Afghan sovereignty over its infrastructure and resources. The question then is not whether China can build roads or rail, but whether those physical connections come with political agency and whether economic integration under Chinese auspices becomes a vehicle for Afghan development or a new face of dependency.

Conclusion

China's engagement with Afghanistan under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a calculated gamble one that blends strategic patience with long-term ambition. The post-2021 period has placed Beijing in a unique position as one of the few global powers maintaining diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban-led regime, despite widespread international isolation. China's approach has been defined by a cautious "wait-and-see" policy, rooted in realism and geoeconomic pragmatism, where incremental economic cooperation is employed as a soft-power mechanism to secure influence and regional access. Rather than seeking rapid integration, Beijing has focused on small-scale yet symbolically significant investments in mining, energy, and trade connectivity, positioning itself as both a mediator and a stabilizer in a turbulent environment. This demonstrates China's preference for economic diplomacy over ideological confrontation leveraging development as a tool to advance its national interests while mitigating direct security risks. Afghanistan's strategic location nestled between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East offers China immense geostrategic advantages, providing both overland connectivity potential and access to untapped mineral wealth critical for its industrial future. Yet, this engagement also underscores the limits of China's influence: progress depends not only on investment but on Afghanistan's governance capacity, regional cooperation, and the international community's willingness to re-engage.

Ultimately, whether China can transform Afghanistan's instability into a connectivity success will depend on its ability to balance control with collaboration. Afghanistan may become a test case for the sustainability of the BRI's global vision whether it can thrive in fragile states where governance, legitimacy, and stability remain uncertain. If China succeeds, it will redefine regional diplomacy by demonstrating how economic interdependence can substitute for traditional security alliances, creating a new model of influence grounded in infrastructure and trade rather than military intervention. However, the risk remains that Afghanistan's economic dependency on Chinese capital could reproduce structural inequalities, with benefits disproportionately flowing to external actors rather than local communities. In this sense, the BRI's promise of "shared development" faces its greatest trial in Afghanistan, where connectivity may either foster self-reliance or deepen vulnerability. The future trajectory of China-Afghanistan relations will therefore serve as a barometer for China's ability to manage complex geopolitical environments testing not only the resilience of its foreign policy but also the credibility of its global development narrative.

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