

CHINA'S GEOSTRATEGIC RELATIONS WITH AFGHANISTAN: CHANGING ORDER AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The changing order at the regional and global levels has paved the way for China to increase its strategic capability to counter regional and global rivals. The contemporary geopolitics of the world have dramatically changed the power dynamics and developed friendly relations between China and the Taliban regime. In this paper, we have provided an analysis of China's strategic ties and challenges in Afghanistan. We have analyzed Afghanistan's challenges and prospects that may increase obstacles to achieving China's strategic interests vis-à-vis (Belt and Road Initiative) BRI and (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) CPEC. We have employed the theories of neo-classical realism and geopolitics. This paper attempts to glean the past and present context between China and Afghanistan. The main objective of this paper is to explore and examine China's policy towards Afghanistan and the Taliban's response and strategy towards China. This paper has employed neo-classical and geopolitical theories to understand China-Afghanistan geostrategic relations.

Keywords: China, Afghanistan, strategy, interest, Taliban, in-security, BRI, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan provides a gateway to the most important regions of the world: Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. Its location has been extremely important for the superpowers throughout history. The South Asian region was under British rule in the nineteenth century, when the rivalry between the British Empire and Russia was prominent. The Second World War paved the way for the United States (US) and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) to expand their geo-strategic interests and influence in all peripheries of the world. Their international policies developed a rivalry—a cold war—to curtail each other's dominance. The Cold War theatrically ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the past,

superpowers struggled to control Afghanistan but never succeeded, owing to Afghanistan's indigenous attempt to liberate their land from external interveners. But all old and modern empires (British and USSR) struggled to control Afghanistan for their geo-strategic interests (Johny, 2022) to dominate world politics. This Great Game¹, however, always ended with the eviction of the great power of the time and was replaced with another power. The post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan provides China with an opportunity to secure its geo-strategic interests. China is taking its roots to achieve its worldwide goals via the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) to increase its economic capability to compete with its rivals in the world.

¹ The term "great game" was applied to as a new contest between the USSR and US and struggle for control of oil resources in region of Caspian Sea. For

detail see Ahmad Rashid, (2000), Taliban: Islam, Oil and the new great game in Central Asia,

In the 21st century, the US and China's rivalry has upset the global geo-strategic and worldwide order. China, however, is struggling with its imperial status and has introduced a worldwide economic project. To achieve economic strength, China is exploring new zones, including the most disturbing country, Afghanistan. Though China and Afghanistan have enjoyed mutual relationships on religious, diplomatic, political, security, and economic matters, Afghanistan's Bamiyan province has monumental Buddha statues, which have had great importance and attraction for Chinese people. They used to travel through the ancient Silk Road to enter Afghanistan (Khan, 2013). Archaeologists have found that multiple sites in Afghanistan have a cultural heritage of not only Afghanistan but also China (Khan, 2015). Historians and archaeologists have often highlighted these cross-border cultural links via the Silk Road (Dai, 1966).

China-Afghan relations can be traced back to the era of Chinese dynasties. These dynasties had strong trade ties with different tribes in Afghanistan, and the trade was mostly done on the traditional Silk Road. Before China's revolution of 1911, the Han dynasty was more focused on trade, culture, and knowledge development as they were linked with different regions of the world. The Tan dynasty also prioritized the Silk Road by resolving all the trade route issues and maintaining trade with different parts of the world. Similarly, the Qing dynasty also tried to maintain trade relations with Afghanistan despite their sore relations with the Durrani Empire of Afghanistan (Singh, 2022). However, the role of these trade links has been vital to the economic development of China through the traditional Silk Road. Afghanistan was the first neighboring state to recognize China in the early 1950s, but China established formal relations in 1955, and diplomatic relations between both countries operated (Rahimi, 2008) because the Afghanistan and China leadership visited each other's capitals and signed a "treaty of friendship" in 1960.

China and Afghanistan had strong cordial relations until the war of 1979–89, owing to the USSR's intervention and the government's support for the Soviets's agenda in Afghanistan. This intervention was not acceptable to China. After the USSR withdrawal, China did not recognize the Taliban's first regime in 1996–2001. However, the Chinese government had indirect links with them through its close ally, Pakistan, to get information

regarding Afghanistan's internal matters (Weitz, 2010). Afterward, when the Taliban regime was toppled and Hamid Karzai established an interim government in Afghanistan in 2002, China openly supported it. In 2004, Hamid Karzai won the presidential elections, and then the Afghanistan government established strong ties with the Chinese government. During Karzai's government, both states tried to cooperate on diverse matters, including security, economics, counter-terrorism, drug trafficking, and infrastructure development (Qayum, 2018). China has developed considerable interests while also assisting in uplifting Afghanistan's economic and security stability. After the 9/11 attacks, the US and foreign forces invaded the country to eradicate the terrorist sanctuaries in the country and support peacebuilding efforts. China also played a role in Afghanistan's stability. China did not send its forces but assisted them by providing humanitarian and financial aid. China decided to re-launch its traditional Silk Road in 2013, 'One Belt and One Road' (OBOR), and it was renamed the Belt and Road Initiative in 2016. Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed this idea in Kazakhstan and Indonesia during his official visit. It is a massive infrastructural project that links East Asia to Europe, and there are a number of states that are participating in this project (McBride, 2023). Initially, Afghanistan was not a part of this project, but the geographical proximity of Afghanistan makes it an important state in the region. Afghanistan is a gateway to three different continents. Due to its geographical importance, Afghanistan has been an important country to link with the rest of the world. In 2016, China's government signed a Memorandum of Understanding to make the Afghan government part of the BRI project. The Afghanistan inclusion was actually in China's interests in Afghanistan.

Post-war Afghanistan needs perpetual peace and stability, and it is of great importance to China and the South Asian region. The political decision to withdraw from Afghanistan has provided an opportunity for China to achieve strategic interests in Afghanistan. To make the BRI project successful in Afghanistan, China needs to have friendly and productive relations with the Afghan Taliban.

Afghanistan has been a volatile state for a long time. There are various challenges that different countries have to face with their involvement in Afghanistan. Likewise, China has to also face hurdles in the pursuit of its strategic interest in

Afghanistan. These challenges can be from within Afghanistan's or China's territory, or they can be from external factors as well that are creating hindrances for China's BRI project in Afghanistan. There are multiple challenges that China has to face in Afghanistan about its strategic interest in BRI. Among them, terrorism has been of great concern, as there are multiple terrorist organizations posing threats to China's internal security matters in the Xinjiang region. There are about 12 million Uyghurs, mainly Muslims. This region has been specifically affected due to its Wakhan Corridor between Afghanistan's province and China's region of Uyghur. Challenging China is the presence of foreign forces. Muslims of Uyghur are instigated by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) for a separate state. This terrorist faction has its safe havens in Afghanistan. Another challenge for China is the presence of foreign forces. Other impediments in Afghanistan, and certain challenges from external factors as well for the BRI project in China. Due to the deteriorating internal matters of Afghanistan, including weak governance, differences of opinion between the Taliban faction and the Afghan government, the incapability of the Afghan security forces to handle security matters, and infrastructure non-development (Kley, 2014). There are certain challenges from external factors, such as the BRI project in China. The India-Pakistan rivalry has also created hindrances for the project in such a way that India is not in the (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) CPEC project as both of the states, China and Pakistan, are its rivals.

China has tried to address all these challenges diplomatically; the internal political and security instability of Afghanistan was handled by initiating the Afghan peace process to materialize its worldwide project and CPEC. The new Afghan government's Taliban government got recognition from China so that they could normalize relations with the Taliban government to halt the activities of ETIM in Afghanistan.

China's strategic interests in Afghanistan for the BRI project have seen a boost after the US announced its withdrawal. Though China has been investing in mining and infrastructural building projects in Afghanistan for many years (Downs, 2012), the US announcement of withdrawal increased the chances of productive outcomes from Chinese investments, but still, there are multiple barriers to achieving China's interest. China has been

struggling to pursue its strategic interest in Afghanistan owing to its geostrategic location and natural resources. However, the realization of these interests on the part of China has met with several challenges, ranging from terrorism, instability, poor governance in Afghanistan, and regional and extra-regional rivalry. All these obstacles in the way of the BRI project halt its progress and also impact the power politics of China. This paper will attempt to answer these questions: why and how did China develop its strategic interests to proceed with BRI-CPEC in Afghanistan? What were the major challenges that created obstacles for China's strategic interests in Afghanistan? What strategy has China opted to use to achieve its worldwide geostrategic interests via Afghanistan? How did China address the challenges in Afghanistan?

Contending Review on China and Afghanistan

There are multiple factors, such as the role of leadership, technological advancement, economic changes, and domestic and international pressures, that encourage the states to compete to increase their power and influence. The Silk Road trade at the time of dynasties proved to be extremely beneficial for the expansion of the Chinese Empire concerning its influence, and China became a rising nation. On the other hand, other nations gain technological and economic opportunities and become more influential (Kennedy, 1987). Kennedy highlighted the fact that the rise of nations is not constant in the international arena as their hold gets weakened due to different domestic and external factors. On the other hand, other nations gain technological, political, and economic opportunities and become more influential (Kennedy, 1987). In China, the Silk Road was weakening, and it lost its strength due to the leadership or internal political turmoil (Walters, 2023). In China, the Silk Road was weakening, and the Silk Route trade was stopped due to technological advancement in the region.

Afghanistan has been a significant country for China. During and after the US-Afghan war, China's main focus has been Afghanistan's peace and stability. China supported the Afghan peace process and peace-building efforts for a long time. The involvement of China in the Afghan peace process had also been encouraged by the Afghan government, and Zalmay Khalilzad, the special representative of the US for the Afghan peace process, appreciated and recognized China's vital

role in the peace process in Afghanistan (Qayum, 2018). Then the Afghan government also appreciated China's efforts in the Afghan peace process, as China has always tried to maintain a positive relationship with Afghanistan. On the other hand, China also kept the Taliban faction on board for the Afghan peace process and stability (Seerat, 2015). The diplomatic efforts of China have played a vital role in developing peace and stability in Afghanistan (Wang, 2018). According to the former Chinese Ambassador to Kabul, Wang Yu, the Afghan peace process should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and a reconciliation process. The state should decide its internal matters according to its will (Yu, 2021). None of the states has the right to interfere with and pressurise the Afghan government in its internal affairs. The Chinese government has always adopted a non-interference policy, and this goes both ways. Thus, it preferred the Afghan peace process to be Afghan-led.

China-Afghanistan relations have been sound for a long time. China has been supportive of Afghanistan on different fronts at various times. China has not shown any interest in military intervention in Afghanistan, as it is not on the agenda of its foreign policy. Afghanistan has been supported on humanitarian, economic, and technical grounds. Multiple agreements took place between both states (Ng, 2010). The Afghan peace process has great support from China for Afghan peace and stability. China has been quite active in Afghanistan for a long time, but the graph of Chinese involvement has dropped or risen according to Afghanistan's internal situation and international scenarios. Furthermore, China's interest in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attack has been added to the literature review. There have been certain economic, security, and political interests of China in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. The Chinese government was not in favour of military involvement, but bilateral cooperation has been its priority. China has always wanted a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, for which it has played a vital role in the Afghan peace talks since 2014. China raised the issue of Afghan instability in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and has granted Afghanistan the status of an observer state (Yousafzai, 2020). The interests of China depend on a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. China's involvement in Afghanistan is strengthening its geostrategic motivations, for which China is playing its role by involving the Taliban government in its

BRI project. Geo-strategic interests have been the main element of China's geostrategic engagement with Afghanistan (Pandey, 2019). Afghanistan has been in a state of instability due to terrorism. The internal chaotic factors have a great impact on China's internal security matters, as evidenced by the Chinese government's influx of terrorists from the Wakhan border, creating instability in the Xinjiang region. China has also launched a Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism to handle the issue of terrorism with the alliance of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan (Siraj, 2021).

After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China has reset its strategic engagement in Afghanistan to achieve worldwide objectives. Afghanistan is part of CPEC, an important flagship project of BRI. On May 9, 2023, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan reaffirmed their commitment to increasing trilateral cooperation under BRI and jointly extended CPEC to Afghanistan. Three countries also decided to prevent individuals and groups—TTP and ETIM—from using their areas to threaten security and regional connectivity (Khan, 2023). This intra-state pledge has aided the China-Afghan tie. Afghanistan's richness in natural resources and mines is a great advantage for China. China's economic view of Afghanistan is directly linked to the peace and stability of the country.

The economic development of Afghanistan is affected by internal security issues. The transition government of the Taliban has pressure from non-state actors; these actors may have international links. However, China's main concern is to make sure that these non-state actors or militant groups do not disrupt the peace in the Xinjiang region. There are high expectations from the Taliban government that they will cope with the internal security threats posed by different terrorist organizations (Stone, 2021). In return, the Chinese government ensured its economic investment in the country. Due to security issues, the economic development of Afghanistan, particularly China's economic investment by different Chinese companies in various fields, has been affected (Sharifli, 2021).

The geographical location of Afghanistan is equally important for the regional as well as the international competitors, though it is a landlocked state but is equally significant for the world. Afghanistan is extremely important because of its natural resources and its connectivity with regional and global actors. It also shares borders with

Pakistan, Iran, China, and the Central Asian States—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Afghanistan has been a battleground for many superpowers for a longer time due to its location and reserves of natural resources (Johny, 2022). In the 21st century, the rivalry between the US and China involves them in Afghanistan for their strategic interests. Though the US left Afghanistan in 2021, it has not surrendered its geo-strategic interests.

The role of regional powers also matters. China, India, and Pakistan have security and political interests. Although Pakistan is not a regional power, its significance remains vital due to its geographical location (Rajagopalan, 2017).

The contributions of external powers in the South Asian region have a great role in stability and disturbance in the region. Daniel Markry (2022) emphasized the China-US rivalry; these two are specifically struggling for their dominance in the Eurasian region. Their struggle is also having an impact on the South Asian and Middle Eastern states, as they are competing with each other for their interests and supremacy to dominate world politics.

China has formed a new, five-pronged engagement policy towards Afghanistan that includes pragmatically and cautiously accepting the Taliban's dominance in Afghanistan, preventing the re-emergence of Afghanistan as a haven for terrorists, facilitating an inclusive politics in the country, demonstrating a greater degree of humanitarian concern, and shaming the US and the West for forfeiting their responsibility (Zhang, 2022).

China's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan: BRI Factor

China has multiple strategic interests in Afghanistan, such as security, economic, social, and cultural. All these interests have varied importance for any state, but for China, the most important are security and economic interests. The importance of security and economic interests cannot be undermined. China is eager to achieve its strategic interest in Afghanistan for the BRI project after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. China has always prioritized its strategic interests according to its geopolitical situation, and Afghanistan has become the main state to achieve its long-term interests in accomplishing BRI. China's strategic interests are directly linked to Afghanistan's internal security situation. Both of the states share a border of 92 km known as the Wakhan

border, and the internal disturbance in Afghanistan endangers the security situation in China as well. Afghanistan is a gateway for China to the Central Asian and Eurasian regions through its BRI project. Many analysts and scholars view the BRI project as China's changing foreign policy; it will facilitate China at a massive level, and other regional states will also get opportunities to develop their economies and infrastructure.

China has not hesitated in recognizing the neo-Taliban's interim government, and Ambassador Zhao Xing reached Kabul on September 12, 2023. The Chinese foreign ministry openly stated that "China's policy towards Afghanistan is clear and consistent" (Yawar & Greenfield, 2023). China was the only major power that established diplomatic relations with the Afghan Taliban and funded the development of Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure.

Global China Initiative and BRI

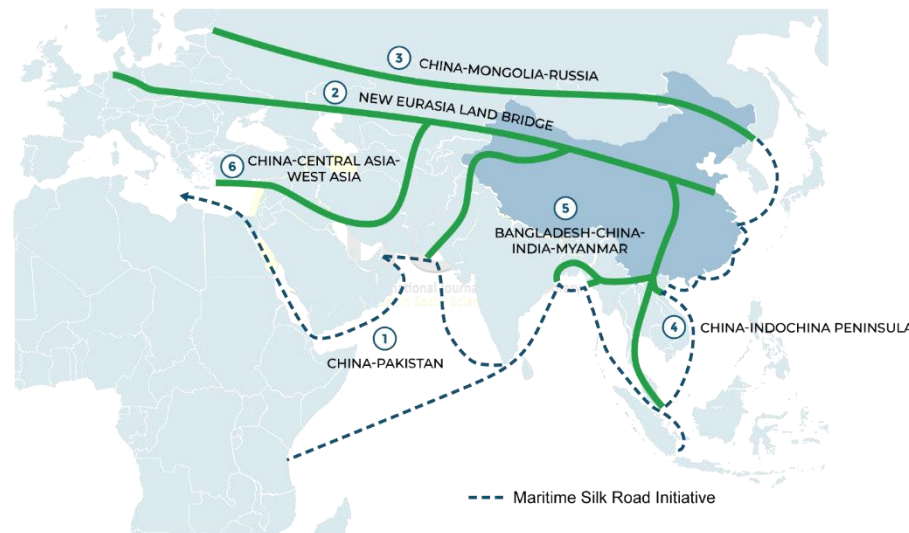
The Chinese Dream, or Global China 2049 Initiative, is essential to understanding the foundation of the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese Dream is an idea proposed at different times with emphasis on different agendas over time. It was presented when Xi Jinping, the present Chinese head of state, was appointed the secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. At that time, this slogan got attention as it represented the whole nation. This initiative aims to make Chinese society moderately well off and modernize China to have strong democratic values and culture, a modern socialist country, and a strong military. All this happened on the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. According to President Xi, this "dream is not just an empty slogan; it's the voice of every single Chinese" (Lon, 2021). The Chinese dream is the inner voice of the Chinese people: "BRI provides the framework for China's political and geo-economic relations with all countries" (Yeh, 2023).

The Chinese Dream, or Global China 2049 Initiative, highlights the geo-economic strategy by 2049 in different sectors as China is working on modernization and national rejuvenation targets. The initiative gives a different vision to the Chinese nation and the world. The Chinese authorities see China beyond the perspective of a rising superpower, energy producer, and great economic performer. They aim to develop an idea of how China sees the world, not how the world sees it (ODI, 2020). In the

new era, China's Belt and Road Initiative is also considered to be intertwined with this concept. The BRI project is a major contributor to this idea as it is a mega-infrastructure project that links 155 countries, and up to 85 percent of the projects are financed by China's banks, of which 85% are Chinese loans and 15% by the local government (Valchev, 2021).

The BRI project aims to connect Asia with Africa and Europe through land as well as sea routes and to accomplish these objectives, China needs a peaceful Afghanistan that may help China achieve its worldwide geoeconomic goals. The project has six main corridors that connect the countries in different regions. This project promotes economic development, regional integration, opportunities for trade, stability, and harmony in different regions

(Lon, 2021). The Global China 2049 Initiative or Chinese Dream is a main contributor to the revival of its traditional Silk Road route, with a new name of BRI, as this project has the potential to build linkages to the different continents of the world; furthermore, it can facilitate them in enhancing its influence in different regions, "BRI has directly shaped six main economic corridors extending from different points or parts inside China out into its neighbouring Asian territories to reach Europe and the Middle East -The New Eurasia Land Bridge Corridor, The China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor, The China-Indochina Peninsular Corridor, The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor and The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor", (Eurasian Rail Alliance Index, 2023).



Source: <https://www.sc.com/en/news/one-masterplan-six-corridors/>

Belt and Road Initiative: How Afghanistan is Significant

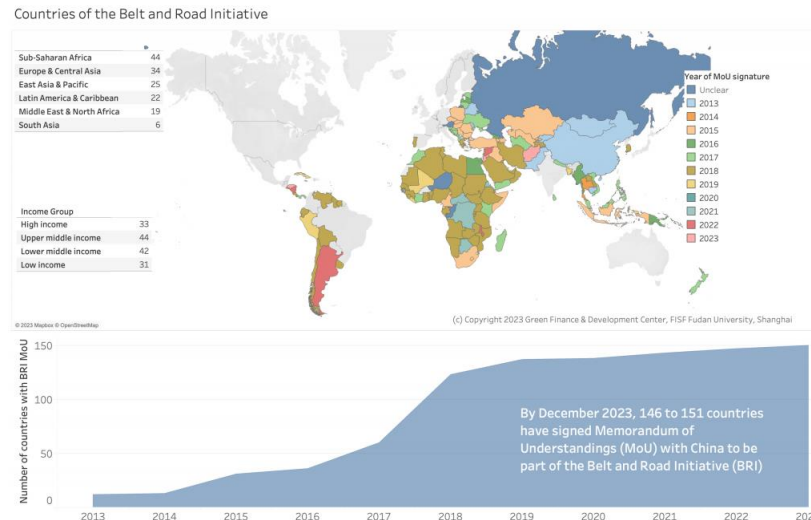
The interest of China has been different since the launch of the BRI project in 2013. The Chinese approach was to counter the terrorism issue. Afghanistan has been, consequently, an enhancement in the interest of China after the launch of the BRI project; the US forces' withdrawal provided a smooth course for China's connectivity with Afghanistan. Likewise, it has encouraged Afghanistan to change its approach to not depending completely on the Western states' aid and to revamp its state institutions for an independent decision-making process. On the other hand, for China, the

BRI project is the most important initiative that will be beneficial not only for China but also for all the states and regions that are part of it and are linked through it.

Despite Afghanistan's geo-strategic location and resource richness, it was initially not part of the BRI project when it was introduced in 2013. However, the significance increased when the US and foreign forces announced their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014. Furthermore, it is also quite evident from the land route proposed by the Chinese authorities that evading Afghanistan, the BRI's major target to reach Central Asia and Eurasia, will be difficult to accomplish. For that reason, in 2016, a

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the states, which proved both states' willingness to cooperate for the success of the BRI

project (Keleman, 2020). In December 2013, 151 states joined BRI by signing MOUs (see map 2).



Map2-Source: Green Finance and Development Center , <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

This project extension ensured Afghanistan's economic progress and stability. The BRI project links Afghanistan to China from two sides; northern Afghanistan is linked through the Sino-Afghan Special Railway Transportation Project (Pandey, 2019).

The Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi ensured that China is willing to help Afghanistan through BRI. According to him, "China ensures Afghanistan will work with them for the joint construction of its BRI project, and there will be bilateral benefits for both of them. The Chinese government wants to steadily promote practical cooperation in economic and trade aspects through BRI" (Grossman, 2020). Afghanistan has always been important for its geostrategic location for China, but the reason for not including it in BRI at the time of its launch was the instability in Afghanistan and the foreign forces' presence. Furthermore, there was also low Chinese investment, and in 2014, foreign forces started to pave the way for withdrawal from the country. This situation created an opportunity for China to extend its BRI project in the country. In 2016, the former ambassador to Afghanistan, Yao Jing, stated that "without Afghan connectivity, there is no way for China to connect to the rest of the world." (Li, 2021).

The CPEC, a flagship program under the BRI project, is also important for Afghanistan, and Afghanistan is being considered the gateway to connectivity with the extra-regional markets. This step will not only connect Afghanistan to China but will also ensure its access to the Central Asian region. Being a landlocked state, it will facilitate trade through the Gwadar port (Khetran, 2022). After the US and foreign forces' hustle withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban took charge of the country in 2021. The Taliban's interim government is keen on developing relations with China.

Taliban Regime in Afghanistan: A Paradigm Shift in Policy

The Taliban regime of 2021 has come up with a different approach as compared to the Taliban regime of the 1990s. The present regime visibly comprehends that without support from the regional states, they may not progress and develop their country. The Taliban have shown their interest in cooperating with China for the economic development of their country and other regional states. The Taliban spokesperson, Suhail Shaheen, stated about the relations between the new Taliban government and China that "they "welcome" China's assistance in the reconstruction and development of

Afghanistan with the departure of the US troops, calling China a friend to Afghanistan” (Xie Jun, 2021). In March 2022, there was a visit conducted by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to meet the Taliban representative to discuss the matter of CPEC extension. He called CPEC the “crown jewel” of BRI (Anees, 2022). The Taliban government has shown its reliance on the developmental opportunities initiated by the Chinese as the US has confiscated \$7 billion of Afghan assets; therefore, they are in favor of CPEC extension to Afghanistan. According to Afghan Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, “China is our most important partner and represents a fundamental and extraordinary opportunity for us because it is ready to invest and rebuild our country” (Business Standard, 2021). This opportunity will not only facilitate Afghanistan's economic situation but will also improve its relations with other states such as Pakistan, Iran, and Russia (Khetran, 2022). The extension of CPEC to Afghanistan will be beneficial for China and Pakistan as well; both countries will increase their economic gateways.

Afghanistan is a mineral-rich state, and most of the mining areas are still undiscovered due to a lack of political stability and equipment (Anees, 2022). Afghanistan is also a huge source of lithium. According to the US Department of Defence, Afghanistan could be the “Saudi Arabia of Lithium,” and potentially it has huge significance (Risen, 2010). The amount of lithium is worth \$1 trillion, and it can be used as a replacement for oil in the science and technology era (Khetran, 2022). There are other natural resources such as gold mines, coal, copper, cobalt, gas, mercury, iron core, thorium, etc. Most of these mines and resources are untapped (Paliwal, 2011).

The mining sector requires roads and rail for the transportation of extracted minerals, and from China to Pakistan, most of the road and railway tracks are constructed. So, the plan is to develop the road and railway link to Afghanistan's mining area by linking it to CPEC. The mineral resources will be transported from Afghanistan to Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to China (Anees, 2022). China already has an investment in the mining sector of Afghanistan. The Amu Darya, oil fields, and Mes Aynak mine project are for many years under the Chinese company for exploration. However, the unstable situation of the country does not benefit any of them, and most of the mining areas are located in those provinces where the Taliban had strong

control, and it was difficult to get access to that area. In 2016, they were permitted to have access to mining land for the well-being of their country (Hatef, 2017), but due to internal security and the lack of governance and competency, this has worried China (Souza, 2023) and other countries in the region.

Security Challenges and Implications for BRI in Afghanistan

Security concerns are one of the most important issues of all time for states. China's security concern in Afghanistan has always existed. Before the US and foreign forces' withdrawal, the security issue related to the different militant groups was not that troublesome for China, as these had already been handled by the foreign forces. During that time, the US and Western-allied forces were a matter of concern for China. Therefore, during foreign forces' presence, the strategic interests of China in Afghanistan couldn't be properly achieved.

The BRI project was also extended to Afghanistan in 2016, and, during this time, foreign forces' decided to withdraw from the country gradually while keeping a minimal presence at the embassy level. In this winding-up situation, China was trying its best to settle down the unstable situation in Afghanistan. The BRI project is considered one of the most important projects for Afghanistan as it provides mega-infrastructure development and regional connectivity. The security concerns of China in Afghanistan have slowed down the progress of the BRI project. The peace and stability of Afghanistan are two of the top factors contributing to the success of the BRI project.

China wants Afghanistan to be a stable state for its progress and prosperity. The stability of the region is directly linked to regional stability and prosperity. For China's strategic interests, security is the most prioritized factor, without which its interest in Afghanistan cannot be achieved. Afghanistan has been a haven for different militant organizations for many years. Over time, some of them lost their strength and merged with other militant groups. Most militant groups are offshoots of Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. These groups not only disturb the peace and stability of Afghanistan but also generate pressures and threats for neighboring and regional countries such as China, Pakistan, and India. In this situation, after the Afghan Taliban took over the territory, China tried to convince the Taliban government to

initiate dialogues with the different Afghan factions and ethnic groups so that there could be a better ground for understanding internal state matters and they could collectively formulate a political structure that suits the national realities (Miller, 2021).

There have been different militant groups that have been activated in Afghanistan. These terrorist organizations have been transformed into strong threat-posing groups such as ETIM, ISKP, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Therefore, these militant groups have been exploiting Afghanistan's territory in different ways, and all of them want easy access to power in Afghanistan. According to China, it is extremely important for the Taliban to put some pressure on these militant groups or to keep them under control to limit their activities across the country and the region. The foreign minister of China, Wang Yi, stated, "Beijing expects the Taliban to have a break with ETIM, as Beijing considers it a threat and they should effectively combat with them" (Miller, 2021).

China's Security Concern and Xinjiang Region

China's Xinjiang region has been disturbed for many years. It is an autonomous region known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). This region has had huge importance since the time of dynastic rule, and it has a long history. In 1949, the region was annexed to the People's Republic of China (PCR). It is certainly known as an annexed region, and China has an objection to the claim of declaring it an annexed region. According to China, it became its province during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Due to its disputed status, this region is also known as the land of Chinese Turkestan or East Turkestan. The East Turkestan name refers to the Uyghur people, who are from Central Asia and Mongolia and have a Turkish dialect. The Uyghur community became Muslim in the tenth century (Jiang, 2018). The Xinjiang region is inhabited by two communities; one is Uyghur (Muslims), and the other is Han Chinese. The population of Uyghur Muslims is higher than that of fact also adds up to calming a separate state for the Uyghur community. the Chinese Han community. This fact also adds up to calming a separate state for the Uyghur community.

The Uyghur community has been demanding a sovereign state named East Turkestan State since the time of its annexation to China. The Uyghur diaspora living in different states—Turkey and Central Asian states—has been working for the

establishment of a separate state for the Uyghur community. During the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and the Afghanistan Civil War, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the US increased the jihadist network, which increased militant group activities in the Xinjiang region (Jiang, 2018). Furthermore, the Uyghur Muslims are supported by the ETIM, which was listed as a terrorist organization by the US Treasury Department in 2002.

The East Turkestan Islamic Movement is a separatist group formulated by Uyghur militants in the Xinjiang province. This organization has ties with Muslim fundamentalists, threatens China's security, and increases the chances of terrorism in the country. The terrorist organization claims to formulate an independent state by including areas of Turkey, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and the Xinjiang region (Xu, 2014). The ETIM has its safe havens in Afghanistan's territory, closer to the Afghan-China Wakhan Corridor, and there is also an influx of militants from the border that further destabilizes the situation in China's autonomous region. However, its position in Afghanistan has been strong due to support from other militant groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Potter, 2013). These factors have compelled China once again to settle this issue by engaging the new Afghan Taliban government and to have the situation under control in the Xinjiang region. Furthermore, the Taliban government has also ensured to cooperate on this matter for their country as well as for strengthening their relations with the regional states.

However, the threats from external sources have not been settled yet. The threat from across the border is still hampering the internal security and peace of China. The ETIM is the only terrorist organization active in the region, but still, other terrorist organizations are active in Afghanistan and have their support for them. This diverts China's attention from its strategic interest in BRI. The Wakhan corridor has also been used as a China-Afghan trade route; in that case, the instability on both sides has an impact on economic relations. In 2019, there was clear evidence that ETIM and other terrorist organizations had installed their training camps in northern Afghanistan, posing threats to China (Kelemen, 2020). Therefore, the Chinese authority, after the US forces withdrew in 2021, tried to negotiate with the new Afghan Taliban government to "take resolute measures to crackdown

against all the terrorist factions, including ETIM.” (Noorzai, 2022). However, the Taliban government assured China that they would not allow anyone to use Afghan soil against any of the countries. Despite these assurances, the Taliban regime has failed to stop the TTP, which attacked Chinese workers in Pakistan and disrupted BRI and CPEC. The attack on Chinese workers of the Dasu Hydropower project in KP by the TPP made it evident that Afghanistan is not a secure place and that there is increasing insecurity in the region. This is alarming for both China and Pakistan. China is a major investor in Pakistan. But Chinese companies also signed multiple business deals with the Taliban regime; the most important is a 25-year-long multimillion-dollar oil extraction contract with an estimated investment value of \$150 in the first year (Kumar, 2024). Long-term strategic interests pushed China to recognise the Taliban’s regime in February 2024 to achieve its objectives.

Conclusion

The world order has changed since the rise of China. China has historical relations with Afghanistan and has never followed in the footsteps of the Western states, helping the new Taliban regime in relatively socio-economic, political, and security terms. Assistance in all these aspects will facilitate China’s geostrategic interests in Afghanistan for BRI. China now does not want any obstacles in the way of the BRI project. China is analyzing all the regional and international happenings and trying to make the situations beneficial for itself by increasing its economic and security capabilities. As we know, China and Pakistan are close partners in the CPEC, and both need a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Without peace in Afghanistan, both China and Pakistan may not enjoy the fruits of CPEC, which is a mega project of BRI. Keeping in view the implementation of China’s grand strategy and Chinese Order, China has recognised Afghanistan’s Taliban and developed economic relations to curb its anti-China policies. Mutual interests, security, and economy have developed strong relations between China and Afghanistan.

The current regime of the Afghan Taliban has also realized that getting recognition and acceptance as an independent government of Afghanistan in the international community to develop relations with the regional state is in the best interest of Afghanistan. However, it has to address

the concerns of China and the other states about stopping terrorism in Afghanistan’s territory. Without peace in Afghanistan, the Taliban will also not develop healthy relations with regional and global actors. China, however, is helping the Taliban regime understand world politics, which requires cooperation, peace, and respect. Indeed, China’s grand strategy relies on a peaceful Afghanistan that provides direct connectivity with Central Asian States and from Central Asia to Europe and the Middle East. Afghanistan is a gateway to opening the global window for China in the future.

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