

CHINA'S ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN POST US-NATO WITHDRAWAL

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA



PRIYANKA SINGH

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AND PAKISTAN POST US-NATO
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For Adi, my lil' universe

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Post United States (US)–North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the strategic situation in the region has remained fluid and shaky. The turmoil in Afghanistan has also impacted South Asian geopolitics given that both India and Pakistan have high stakes in the country. Fabled as a graveyard of empires, Afghanistan has undergone unprecedented levels of violence and prolonged turbulence. In the post-US Afghanistan under the Taliban, it is China that has emerged as a pivotal force and actor. Initially, Pakistan, a key tactical ally of China, presided over the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and, despite the fluidity, seemed to have a hold on the state of affairs in Afghanistan, with China proactively featuring in Afghanistan's geopolitical developments.

While China's bonhomie with Pakistan is decades-old, its engagement with Afghanistan is an evolving one. China has claimed a successful niched out pacifying role in Afghanistan, in conjunction with Russia, Pakistan and Iran. For instance, recently, it acted as an arbiter between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹ Further, China has been a part of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US and China), the trilateral talks led by Russia and the 'Afghan-inclusive,

¹ In the most recent China–Pakistan–Afghanistan trilateral meeting in May 2025, there were explicit references as to how China played a key role in scaling down tensions between Pakistan–Afghanistan, after which Pakistan agreed to station its envoy in Kabul. For details, see Abid Hussain, “Pakistan, Afghanistan Move towards ‘Restoring Ties’ in Talks with China”, *Al Jazeera*, 23 May 2025, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/23/pakistan-afghanistan-move-towards-restoring-ties-in-talks-with-china> (Accessed 24 August 2025).

Afghan-owned' Kabul peace process. Pakistan has remained inevitable in any talk concerning Afghanistan's settlement. In 2012, China hosted a trilateral between China–Afghanistan–Pakistan, the first of its kind, to discuss "security issues and trilateral cooperation".² Thus, over time, China's approach towards Afghanistan has transcended from "cultivated disinterest to growing engagement".³

Currently, Afghanistan is considered critical in the context of China's major connectivity projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that is foreseeing extension beyond Pakistan. The same holds true with regard to China's oft-debated penchant to further its outreach to the Islamic world beyond Pakistan. Both China and Pakistan (including Pakistan-occupied Kashmir [PoK]) sit across the strategic Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan's Badakhshan province. Therefore, a potential possibility of fundamentalist inroads is fraught with security implications for China. In broader geopolitical terms, as the US's Cold War 'tilt' towards Pakistan has fluctuated, the emerging alignment of varied forces—namely, Russia, Iran, China and Pakistan—and their dynamics vis-à-vis the US have altered the course of regional equations.

Against this backdrop, the monograph broadly analyses the intricacies of China's engagement with Af-Pak (a term used interchangeably with Afghanistan–Pakistan) and how it will further roll out in a fluid geopolitical ecosystem, surcharged by an array of turbid formations, before listing out implications and options for India.

The study surveys the inception of China's geostrategic/geo-economic turn towards Pakistan, and now Afghanistan, before gauging the trajectory and quantum of its role in the Af-Pak region. It assesses the viability of the evolving geopolitical formation comprising China–Pakistan–Afghanistan before evaluating possible Chinese strategy behind

² Zhao Hong, "China's Afghan Policy: The Forming of the 'March West' Strategy?", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2013, p. 11.

³ Ibid., p. 9.

getting immersed in an inherently volatile region. It also gauges the significance of China's strategic interests in Afghanistan and discusses Pakistan's centrality in China's engagement in Afghanistan.

The monograph further deliberates whether the return of the Taliban and China's prominence in the region will see the evolution, maturing and fruition of China's Af-Pak strategy. It determines parallels *in Afghanistan–Pakistan's ties with China, and brings out divergences as they exist, to explore whether a hyphenated approach is emerging. In addition, it evaluates whether China can use the Pakistan template of managing interests amidst volatility in Afghanistan as well. If so, can China use the engagement in Af-Pak to showcase its ability (juxtaposed against the US) to transform conflict-ridden countries? Simultaneously, the monograph captures perceptions, aspects and debates concerning China's risk-averse behaviour.

Apart from this, the study touches upon the broad current trends and geopolitical formations that centre on Afghanistan. It attempts to ascertain the objectives of the more contemporary actors like China that have shown purported resolve to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, while analysing whether their geopolitical objectives cohere or contradict each other. It reflects on whether the newly struck combine led by China, with the support of like-minded Russia and Iran, can edge out the US influence from the Af-Pak region? Similarly, what needs more reflection is whether China pursued a quiet policy of using the US presence to promote its economic interests in Afghanistan during the years of the War on Terror. While contemplating the potential scenarios, it is also important to acknowledge the inevitability of the US–Pakistan factor in Afghanistan. So, while the 1980s resistance against the Soviet Union was a proxy war—indeed with elements of national resistance—the 2021 return of the Taliban was the result of lack of strategic vision by Washington, particularly failing to neutralise the support system of the insurgency in Pakistan.

The monograph concludes by drawing inferences on the nature, scope and impact that a combined involvement of China–Pakistan will have on the overall situation in Afghanistan and draws out implications for India's security interests. Whether or not some budding alignments could impede the US's interests in Afghanistan, and the region beyond, is passingly dwelt upon.

THE GAP

There is enough literature on China's relation with Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, the particular domain concerning the supposed triumvirate/troika/triangle comprising China–Pakistan–Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban, remains fertile for indepth research, especially in the Indian context and from an Indian perspective. Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are crucial to India's strategic interests and it is important to keep a constant guard on what the Chinese are doing or could do in future.

THE PROBLEM

The Taliban's takeover of Kabul has thrown things into a tizzy in India's western neighbourhood. The US's presence, albeit progressively thinned, was a semblance of order in Afghanistan; also it somewhat constrained Pakistan's free play. With the withdrawal of US forces, India's strategy on Afghanistan and against Pakistan stood at a point of inflection. Adversarial equation with China over lingering belligerence on the periphery, and now its newfound prominence in the Af-Pak theatre, is a reality that India has to contend with. India's strategy is attuned to the decades-old Sino-Pakistan collusion. It is the extension of this collusion to Afghanistan that India's policy must now prepare to accustom, adapt and deal with.

THE DISCOURSE

The Comrades and the Mullahs: China, Afghanistan and the New Asian Geopolitics (Harper Collins India, New Delhi, 2022), authored by Ananth Krishnan and Stanly Johnny, is a volume that directly deals with the domain of the study. This book looks at evolving Asian geopolitics through the prism of China's engagement with Afghanistan. Filippo Boni's *Sino-Pakistani Relations: Politics, Military and Regional Dynamics* (Contemporary Asia Series, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2021), contains a chapter on China–Pakistan's twin approach towards Afghanistan. Boni's inclusion of Afghanistan in the Sino-Pak ambit reflects upon the evolution of what is looking like a stark reality today. The literature on China's role in the Afghanistan–Pakistan region as a holistic concept is an evolving domain,

likely to be populated through more comprehensive contributions in the next few years.

Andrew Small's book, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (Hurst & Company, United Kingdom, 2015), a seminal work on China's relations with its foremost ally, Pakistan, is much referred and cited in contemporary discourses. *The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment* (Contemporary South Asian Studies, Springer, Switzerland, 2020) by Siegfried O. Wolf, published in 2020, provides perspectives on the conceptual framework of the CPEC. *Reconfiguring the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Geo-economic Pipe Dreams Versus Geopolitical Realities* (Frontiers of Political Economy series, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2022) by Jeremy Garlick, gives a sneak peek into various aspects concerning the upcoming corridor. Other important works on the CPEC *per se* include: *China's Great Leap Forward-II: The China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Strategic Reshaping of Indian Neighbourhood* (Lancer, New Delhi, 2019) by Gautam Banerjee; and *China's One Belt One Road Initiative: Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan* (LAP Lambert Academic, United Kingdom, 2020) by Shujahat Ali.

THE PUZZLE

Some of the central questions the monograph deliberates upon are as follows:

1. What motivates China's role in Pakistan and Afghanistan—strategic content, economics or a latent confluence of the two?
2. How pivotal is Pakistan in China's Afghan strategy?
3. How sustainable is the present China-led geopolitical arrangement in the Af-Pak region? How far will China intertwine its priorities in the region?
4. Will Afghanistan will be a force multiplier for China's regional strategy embedded in the BRI-helmed expansive infrastructure drive, especially the CPEC?
5. Is the new constellation of actors—China, Pakistan and the resurgent Taliban—working at cross purposes with India's security interests?

STATEMENT

India's strategic interests have been adversely impacted with Pakistan's growing prominence in Afghanistan: first, as a promoter of the Taliban regime; and second, as a facilitator of China's influence. Even in the recently changed scenario where Pakistan and the Taliban regime are baying for each other's blood, India core interests in Afghanistan must be shielded against the trilateral equation and what happens between Pakistan–China–Afghanistan.

METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

The monograph is conceptualised as a comprehensive account covering a wide ground comprising history, diplomacy and geopolitics concerning China–Pakistan and China–Afghanistan equations and the three in combination. It covers important bilateral/trilateral developments and brings out various aspects to determine the geopolitical course of the engagement. The study, carried out from an Indian perspective, seeks options and suggestive measures to redraft strategies that are conversant with future potentialities. It uses primary and secondary sources, based on survey of existing literature, and is descriptive and analytical in approach.

In addition, the monograph touches upon frameworks that fit China's enhanced engagement with Pakistan and now, Afghanistan. Amongst other things, the infrastructure development push in Pakistan, especially the CPEC, has been debated through the prism of geopolitics versus geo-economics.⁴ It also tries to situate China's combined strategic incline towards Pakistan and Afghanistan in a similar framework.

⁴ Geo-economics, according to Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, refers to: “the use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of another nation's economic actions on a country's geopolitical goals.” See Jane Golley, Yun Jiang, Darren Lim and Anthea Roberts, “Geoconomic Brief #1—Context and Concepts”, p. 2, at <http://ciwanu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Geoconomic%20Brief%20%231%20FINAL.pdf> (Accessed 27 September 2024).

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

Security developments in the Af-Pak region, an expansive foray of external actors and the possibility of augmented Chinese influence, both at the strategic and economic level, will impact prevailing strategic equilibrium in the subcontinent. Contemporary developments in India's proximate geography necessitate a close watch on the emerging strands in a regional matrix that squarely reflects upon China's proliferating prominence. Some of the widespread apprehensions concerning Afghanistan, post-US withdrawal, have turned out to be real. Countries—including India, which has maintained its position as a stakeholder in Afghanistan despite Pakistan's innate resistance—are still reassessing options on Afghanistan under the Taliban. With Pakistan attaining enhanced focus in the regional matrix on its western flank, India needs to reset its approach—one that commensurates with the trajectory of potential Afghanistan–Pakistan–China triangle, so to say.

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Seth G. Jones and Jude Blanchette, “China’s Afghanistan Dilemma”, *Foreign Affairs*, 13 September 2021.

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Chapter 2

PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN: THE CAUSES, NATURE AND HISTORY OF CHINESE ENGAGEMENT

China's relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan, first and foremost, need to be analysed through the prism of its foreign policy principles. The security policy framework which China seeks to pursue has been perceived as part of concentric circles that centrifuge in order of priorities while setting foreign policy goals.¹ It is argued that in this set of circles, Afghanistan and Pakistan are countries that are situated in the second and third ring, given that they are immediate neighbours and have a shared border with China (in case of Pakistan, the only land link between the two is claimed by India as part of PoK).² The first ring is the territory that China currently controls, including the farthest ones, like the Xinjiang autonomous region; the second one comprises its near periphery straddling all the adjacent areas; third is the proximate neighbourhood regions—South Asia, Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific; and the fourth is the “rest of the globe”.³

¹ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing’s Fears”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2012, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2012-08-16/how-china-sees-america> (Accessed 29 January 2025).

² Andrew Scobell, “China Ponders Post-2014 Afghanistan: Neither ‘All in’ nor Bystander”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 55, No. 2, March–April 2015, p. 326.

³ Ibid.

DECIPHERING CHINA'S LOGIC: ECONOMIC RATIONALE OR STRATEGIC OUTREACH (GEOPOLITICS VERSUS GEO-ECONOMICS)

Since the unveiling, there has been a debate and much concern regarding the BRI and its potential implications in the regions it proposes to traverse. One of the fundamentals of the BRI is to revive the spirit of the Silk Route paradigm—since China has at least tried to remodel it in that fashion. In this context, for China, the Afghanistan and Pakistan region (pre-partition from India), from ancient times, “constitutes an indispensable link between the Far East and the Middle and Near East”. Besides, it has been noted that rise of China’s “influence in the Pamirs”, Afghanistan particularly, witnessed a fundamental transition in its “buffer status”, hence “giving it a watching brief in frontier politics at the crossroads of Asia”.⁴

There has remained a perennial debate on China’s purported risk aversion, particularly in the arena of its external pursuits. More contemporaneously, this principle of “risk aversion or gradualism” has been applied at times to explain China’s suboptimal security engagement with Afghanistan.⁵ This was especially so when China was able to develop robust ties with all neighbours, including a special one with Afghanistan’s next-door neighbour, Pakistan. During the 1990s, after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces and the disintegration of the Soviet confederation, China was “scarcely present” in Afghanistan.⁶

Even with regard to Pakistan, the strategic partnership in the initial decades stuck to broad overarching pillars, such as diplomatic and psychological backing at the international forums and geopolitical

⁴ Shen-Yu Dai, “China and Afghanistan”, *The China Quarterly*, No. 25, January–March 1966, p. 221.

⁵ Stina Torjesen and Tatjana Stankovic, “Regional Change: How will the Rise of China and India Shape Afghanistan Stabilization Process?”, Norwegian Institute for Foreign Affairs, 2010, p. 2.

⁶ Ibid.

goodwill in terms of being of some use to each other in times of crises. China's focus was on two layers in the initial years: to safeguard its own strategic security interests, in which Pakistan had a role; and to use Pakistan as a balancer against India. Responding to Pakistan's friendly overtures even as it became a member of the anti-communist bloc and other military alliances, like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), China made headway in finalising a provisional border agreement with the country in March 1963; and it was able to seal a favourable agreement despite India challenging the very basis of the settlement. China further cemented the gains of the border agreement by building the Karakoram Highway on a territory that was claimed by India as part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

China's purposes with regard to both Afghanistan and Pakistan were rooted in security compulsions. However, while on the path of ensuring this, China probably began to think of diversifying its involvement with both these countries in terms of sourcing raw material and precious resources. In this regard, Pakistan and Afghanistan were apt "sources of minerals, metals and rare earth metals" to "exploit and channel" for China's web of manufacturing industries.⁷ Also, they were both in China's close vicinity, making Balochistan in Pakistan and Afghanistan "perfect candidate sites" to cater to putting China's "significant liquid capital and industrial prowess to good use".⁸

If one looks at China's contemporary behaviour towards both these countries—Pakistan and Afghanistan—it seems to be gradually moving beyond the realm of risk aversion. The mammoth US\$ 62 billion CPEC, unveiled in April 2015, is hard to explain as a risk-free project.⁹

⁷ Adam Saud and Azhar Ahmad, "China's Engagement in Afghanistan: Implications for the Region", *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2018, p. 133.

⁸ Ibid., p. 134.

⁹ Madiha Afzal, "'At all costs': How Pakistan and China control the narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor", Brookings, June 2020, at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/at-all-costs-how-pakistan-and-china-control-the-narrative-on-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/>.

There are inherent risks in investing such a huge amount in the precarious security landscape of Pakistan; some of which has already been unravelling in the form of attacks on Chinese personnel and CPEC assets, and the inability of Pakistan's security apparatus to prevent these, and much more. Similarly, in Afghanistan, currently run by a group associated with violence and extremism—where the Chinese steadily developed interests and stakes in the presence of the NATO forces—the environment is hardly risk free, especially in the wake of the withdrawal of international forces.

So, what has led to a change in the Chinese approach in dealing a bit daringly with this uncertain, volatile region? While the actuals in terms of the scale of Chinese investments in Pakistan and Afghanistan are still a matter of prudent calculations, it must be acknowledged that China's economic heft has grown multi-fold. It is throwing its strategic weight in the global order and harbours widespread global and regional ambitions. It also feels threatened from other quarters in the world. Therefore, in a competitive scenario, does China have an option to carry on with its conservative tenets of foreign engagements embodying risk-free pursuits- be it in its critical neighbourhood or distant countries- is something that needs closer analysis.

With regard to trade between China and Pakistan, the latest figures reveal that “China–Pakistan trade continued its upward trajectory in 2024, further solidifying China’s position as Pakistan’s largest trading partner. China’s exports to Pakistan surged from \$16.67 billion in 2023 to \$19.62 billion in 2024, marking a 17.7% increase.”¹⁰ Much of the growth in bilateral trade is attributed to the signing of the China–Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (CPFTA) in 2006, during former Chinese President Hu Jintao’s visit to Pakistan, which was implemented in July 2007.¹¹ The free trade agreement (FTA) with Pakistan was merged with an Early Harvest Scheme—already in place since January

¹⁰ “Economic Relations: Trade”, Pakistan Embassy Beijing, at <https://www.pakbj.org/trade/index.htm> (Accessed 21 January 2025).

¹¹ Ibid.

2006—aimed at enhancement of bilateral trade.¹² According to the State Bank of Pakistan, “Pakistan’s exports to China totalled USD 1481.499 million from July to December 2023, compared to USD 1058.088 million the previous year.”¹³ These figures emerged after Gohar Ejaz, as caretaker Federal Minister for Commerce and Industries, undertook a visit to China in December 2023, along with a business delegation.¹⁴

On the other side, it is claimed that with Afghanistan, China’s trade has grown in overall volume in the year 2024—a 19 percent increase—to the tune of US\$ 1.59 billion.¹⁵

EVOLUTION OF STRATEGIC PURSUITS IN PAKISTAN: MARCH TOWARDS ECONOMIC INTERESTS

Today, China–Pakistan’s relationship has become so intertwined with the multi-billion CPEC that is it rather difficult to delve into their association beyond this geopolitically attractive paradigm. However, it is important to see how the economic variable in the bilateral relationship remained weak for decades before the CPEC was announced.

The Sino-Pak relationship is perceived as one that has not been very open and rather discreet, as has been witnessed in the case of CPEC

¹² “Pak-China Free Trade Agreement in Goods & Investment”, Ministry of Commerce, Government of Pakistan, at <https://www.commerce.gov.pk/about-us/trade-agreements/pak-china-free-trade-agreement-in-goods-investment/> (Accessed 2 February 2025).

¹³ “First half of FY 2023–24 Reflects a Strong Trade Relationship between Pakistan and China”, Pakistan Reader, GP Short Notes # 809, NIAS Area Studies, 7 February 2024, at <https://globalpolitics.in/pakistan/pakistan-short-notes.php?recordNo=852&url=First%20half%20of%20FY%202023-24%20reflects%20a%20strong%20trade%20relationship%20between%20Pakistan%20and%20China> (Accessed 12 January 2025).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “China and Afghanistan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China (PRC), at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2676_663356/ (Accessed 17 January 2025).

projects and the transparency of their specific details.¹⁶ For reasons of mutual understanding on maintaining opacity, it is possible that the Sino-Pakistan economic dealings were not as highlighted as they are today. As per the available discourses, it is evident that it was only when Pervez Musharraf came to power and the economy of Pakistan was in a weak state that there was a thought to reorient the China–Pakistan ties from purely strategic ones to economic ones. During his April 2008 visit to China, Musharraf looked forward to “transforming” ties with China from “purely defensive and strategic in nature to one of deep economic engagement”.¹⁷ A couple of years earlier in February 2006, at the Pak-China Business Forum, he had referred to the bilateral friendship as one that is “deeper than the ocean and higher than the mountain”.¹⁸ This was also the time that a bus service was launched between Gilgit in PoK and Kashgar in Xinjiang autonomous region.¹⁹

It is important to also contextualise the CPEC paradigm—the project per se—in the ambit of wider China–Pakistan relations. The decades-old relations between the two countries have been unique in more than one way. Even as Pakistan participated in the Western camp through formal alliances, like CENTO and SEATO, it simultaneously was found hobnobbing with the communist regimes, such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Pakistan’s no-qualm policy in making and crossing alignments, its ingenious zeal to transform/adjust its state policy and the unequivocal patronage it enjoyed from countries in the West emboldened the country to be more experimental and risk-taking in

¹⁶ Pascal Abb, “All Geopolitics is Local: The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor amidst Overlapping Centre–Periphery Relations”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2023, p. 86.

¹⁷ Raviprasad Narayanan, “Musharraf in China: Economic Benefits of an ‘All Weather Friendship’”, MP-IDSA Strategic Comment, 22 April 2008, at <https://idsa.demosl-03.rvsolutions.in/publisher/musharraf-in-china-economic-benefits-of-an-all-weather-friendship/> (Accessed 10 January 2025).

¹⁸ Md. Nazmul Islam and Esra Eymen Cansu, “BRI, CPEC, and Pakistan”, *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 37, No. 3, September 2020, p. 44.

¹⁹ Ibid.

its pursuits; and it was this zeal that gravitated it towards China in what then seemed to be a distinctive, exceptional pursuit.²⁰

In fact, despite being a newly created state itself, Pakistan was one of the first countries to recognise the PRC. It also positioned itself against the United Nations (UN) resolutions that labelled China as an aggressor in the Korean War. Further, both the countries took the stance to respect each other's decisions and choices—China's aggression in Tibet and Pakistan becoming part of the Western camp did not rupture the equations.²¹ The proposal to demarcate the border between China and PoK, put forward by Pakistan, was formalised as a provisional border agreement in March 1963 despite India's resistance. The agreement handed over a large chunk of 5,000 square miles of strategically positioned territory of PoK, that is, the Trans-Karakoram Tract, to China. Pakistan, in turn, received control over some land from China as part of territory swap under the provisional border settlement.²²

The India–Pakistan War of 1965 saw some implicit moves (in terms of propagating India as the aggressor) by China against India and in favour of Pakistan; this was also as China was seething under the after-effects of its border confrontation with India. China simultaneously opened up another front at the Tibet–Sikkim border, but the two countries were far from presenting India with a dual challenge.²³ During the 1971 India–Pakistan crisis and the Bangladesh Liberation War, China did not come out in support of Pakistan as much because the US was

²⁰ Also discussed in Priyanka Singh, *Sino-Pakistan Ties and Kashmir: History and Geopolitics*, MP-IDSA Monograph, 22 August 2022, at <https://www.idsain/publisher/monograph/china-pakistan-ties-and-kashmir-history-and-geopolitics/> (Accessed 4 February 2025).

²¹ Atul Kumar, “China–Pakistan Economic Relations”, IPCS Special Report, September 2006, at https://www.ipcs.org/issue_briefs/issue_brief_pdf/683644508IPCS-Special-Report-30.pdf (Accessed 14 February 2025).

²² For details on the Sino-Pak Provisional Border Agreement of March 1963, see Sisir Gupta, *Kashmir: A Study in India–Pakistan Relations*, New York: Asia Publishing House, 1966.

²³ B.R. Deepak, “Sino-Pak ‘Entente Cordiale’ and India: A Look into the Past and Future”, *China Report*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2006, p. 131.

already by Pakistan's side and by then, the US–China rapprochement was complete, thanks to Pakistan's facilitation.²⁴ However, China expressed its displeasure with India and refused to recognise the newly created state of Bangladesh.²⁵

In terms of economic relationship, the two countries had established trade ties in the 1950s itself. However, not much economic aid was given to Pakistan by China for a considerable number of years after this—only a grant of around US\$ 106.4 million was given to Pakistan till the 1970s, which paved the way for some economic boost in the form of loans and credit. The year 1965—when India–Pakistan hostilities also occurred—saw China giving Pakistan some interest-free loan of about US\$ 60 million.²⁶ Even their trade was suboptimal till the 1980s. A China–Pakistan Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT), signed in 1989, offered some institutional framework of economic engagement,²⁷ with the balance of payment remaining favourable to China all these years.

The beginning of the twenty-first century heralded a change in the China–Pakistan relationship. A joint statement issued in 2007, at the end of Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz's official visit to China, hinted majorly that the two countries intended to enhance their decades-old

²⁴ For details, see: Sanjaya Baru and Rahul Sharma (eds), *A New Cold War: Henry Kissinger and the Rise of China*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2021.

²⁵ Anwar A. Khan, "China and the Bangladesh War of Liberation", *International Affairs Review*, 11 July 2024, at <https://internationalaffairsreview.com/2024/07/11/china-and-the-bangladesh-war-of-liberation/> (Accessed 4 January 2025); For further details, see L. Yasmin, "Understanding Bangladesh–China Relations: Bangladesh's Rising Geopolitical Agency and China's Regional and Global Ambitions", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2023, 87–109.

²⁶ "Pak-China Free Trade Agreement in Goods & Investment", n. 12.

²⁷ "China–Pakistan BIT (1989): Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Reciprocal Encouragement and Protection of Investments", Electronic Database of Investment Treaties (EDIT) , World Trade Institute, at <https://edit.wti.org/document/show/f494781b-33d2-48d4-bc12-e2fe5745f11d> (Accessed 18 February 2025).

partnership by improving the “economic content” or dimension of the relationship.²⁸ The statement noted, amongst other things: “Pakistan and China, expressing determination to further elevate their all-weather friendship and strategic partnership, have decided to further deepen and broaden the strategic economic engagement for achieving common development and welfare of their peoples.”²⁹ This eventually culminated in the CPEC, a major economic cooperation project between China and Pakistan that officially began in 2015.

CHINA-PAKISTAN FRIENDSHIP: EMBELLISHMENTS, REALITY, OUTCOMES

The China–Pakistan relationship has been adorned with several peculiar adjectives and annotations over the past several decades. This is quite rightly so, as it is a unique and special relationship by basic standards of geopolitical alignments. China and Pakistan have stood by each other for more than seven decades. China has consistently provided diplomatic support to Pakistan in various arenas, including abetment of terrorism: for instance, the UN resolutions on Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief, Masood Azhar, have been consistently blocked by China. Pakistan, on its part, has chosen to overlook the atrocities on minority Muslims in Xinjiang, and has also supported China’s sovereignty on restive autonomous regions, like Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, this partnership—forged to hedge a common adversary, India—has not seen China overtly and actively supporting Pakistan in its three wars with India in 1965, 1971 and 1999. Pakistan, too, has not taken an exception to China’s official hands-off during its wars with India.

John Garver, an eminent sinologist, notes that China’s ties with Pakistan are unique by the country’s own history of bilateral relations with other

²⁸ Sumita Kumar, “The China-Pakistan Strategic Relationship: Trade, Investment, Energy and Infrastructure”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 5, 2007, p. 757.

²⁹ “Pakistan, China to Further Deepen Strategic Ties: Joint Statement”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 20 April 2007, at http://pk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zbgx/200704/t20070420_1131692.htm (Accessed 11 February 2025).

states, which have not been as steady as this one and feature elements of intermittence. He argues:

China's cooperative relationship with Pakistan is arguably the most stable and durable element of China's foreign relations. China's partnerships with other countries, both large (the USSR and the United States) and small (Albania, Vietnam, Algeria, and North Korea) have waxed and then waned into coldly correct relations at best. China's partnership with Pakistan, however, emerged during the mid-1950s, when China was trying to make friends with all developing countries, deepened during the radical anti-imperialist phase of Chinese foreign policy in the early 1960s, persisted unmolested under the direct protection of Mao Zedong during the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, proved useful during the anti-Soviet hegemony phase of Chinese policy in the 1970s and 1980s and continued with vitality after the dissolution of the USSR and the end of Cold War. The Sino-Pakistan entente can be traced back to the heyday of Sino-Indian hostility and continued as China and India restored a level of comity during the 1990s. It is indeed, a remarkably durable relationship.³⁰

What Binds?

As argued in a majority of discourses on China–Pakistan, India is the prime and foremost point of adhesion in the forging of their strategic relationship. In this regard, the crucial turn in India–China ties in the latter half of the 1950s is a cause to reckon. It has been argued that “the very closeness between Beijing and Islamabad has its root in the 1959 Lhasa uprising that hastened the death of good relations between India and China.”³¹ Robert Wirsing notes: “The apparent closeness of strategic fit between them, hailed unreservedly in public pronouncements” made by China–Pakistan, has been perceived as

³⁰ John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-India Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001, pp. 187-188.

³¹ Daniel Markey, “The Strange Tale of Sino-Pakistani Friendship”, in Book Review Roundtable of Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, *Asia Policy*, No. 21, January 2016, p. 153.

“unashamedly inflated”. Repeated propagandistic statements have been mirroring the “rhapsodic language” to show the “total unanimity of views on all global and regional issues”, reflecting on the debated template of calling China treating Pakistan as its “Israel”, achieving near-complete “complementarity and overlap of strategic interests”.³² The bilateral bonhomie has been optimised due to vested interests: “Pakistan’s principal stakeholders in an enduring China connection are its armed forces and their civilian allies both in the federal bureaucracy” and also manifested through the “country’s sprawling defence community”.³³

Likewise, as per Hussain Haqqani: “For China, Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India”, while “[f]or Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India.”³⁴ According to K. Alan Kronstadt, a specialist on South Asia, observers within India view “Chinese support for Pakistan as a key aspect of Beijing’s perceived policy of ‘encirclement’ or constraint of India as a means of preventing or delaying New Delhi’s ability to challenge Beijing’s region-wide influence.”³⁵

China’s Value Addition to the Partnership

China has been effectively the wind behind Pakistan’s wings in terms of helping it fulfil its ambitions, especially those that sought to address its parity quotient with India. For instance, when Pakistan struggled to achieve nuclear technology after India’s first test in 1974, it

³² Robert G. Wirsing, “The Enemy of My Enemy: Pakistan’s China Debate”, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Special Assessment, December 2003, pp. 3-10-4-10, at https://dkiacss.edu/Publications/SAS/ChinaDebate/ChinaDebate_Wirsing.pdf (Accessed 30 December 2024).

³³ Ibid., p. 10-1.

³⁴ Quoted in Jamal Afridi and Jayshree Bajoria, “China–Pakistan Relations”, Council for Foreign Relations, Backgrounder, 6 July 2010, at <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-pakistan-relations> (Accessed 7 February 2025).

³⁵ K. Alan Kronstadt, “Pakistan–U.S. Relations”, CRS Report, 6 February 2009, p. 48, at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL33498.pdf> (Accessed 24 November 2024).

was China that supplied the country the wherewithal to build a nuclear arsenal during the 1980s. A report by the Heritage Foundation (1998) noted that: “China’s deep involvement with Pakistan’s nuclear program contributed to the new Indian government’s decision to test nuclear weapons.”³⁶ In this regard, between “1990 and 1992, China provided Pakistan with nuclear capable M-11 [DF-11] missiles, the technology to build a missile that could strike targets within a 360-mile range”³⁷, in addition to “5,000 ring magnets” being sold to the A.Q. Khan network.³⁸

Besides, in the earlier years, China was rather forthcoming in signing agreements with Pakistan. An aviation agreement was signed in August 1963, whereas agreements on cultural exchange and cooperation, economic issues and technology were signed in February–March 1965.³⁹ Also, after the India–China War of 1962, the two countries moved swiftly on the border agreement (though provisional in nature).⁴⁰ This was a precursor to the building of the Karakoram Highway for next decade or so, when it was finally opened to the public in 1978.

Apart from this, China has been of immense nuisance value in India–Pakistan relations. The pattern started in the 1965 India–Pakistan War when the former called India an “aggressor”⁴¹ and “accused India of ‘open interference’ in the internal matters of Pakistan”.⁴² More contemporarily, China has been behind blocking the UN resolutions aimed at labelling JeM chief, Masood Azhar, an international terrorist.⁴³

³⁶ John Dori and Richard Fisher, “The Strategic Implications of China’s Nuclear Aid to Pakistan”, The Heritage Foundation, 16 June 1998, at <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-strategic-implications-chinas-nuclear-aid-pakistan> (Accessed 8 February 2025).

³⁷ Deepak, “Sino-Pak ‘Entente Cordiale’ and India”, n. 23, p. 137.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 133.

⁴³ “Pakistan’s Masood Azhar: China Blocks Bid to Call Militant Terrorist”, BBC, 14 March 2019, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47565132> (Accessed 28 October 2024).

China, in fact, has had no qualms in defending a dreaded group and terrorist for the simple reason that it seeks to hurt India's security interests, as well as benefit Pakistan with regard to its age-old nexus with such groups who have targeted India.

What Pakistan Brings to the Table?

Pakistan, on its part, is an unwavering cheerleader for China. It is a country that unequivocally supports the “one-China” policy. In the February 2022 Winter Olympics hosted by China—boycotted by the US, its allies and many countries in the West owing to human rights violations in Xinjiang—Prime Minister Imran Khan was in Beijing to express solidarity with the Chinese leadership. This was also the time that Hong Kong, another autonomous unit under China, was witnessing widespread protests undeterred by the massive clampdown by Chinese security forces. Khan, while in Beijing, not only upheld China's position on curbing internal discontent but also criticised the West's approach, accusing it of “double standards” with partisan focus on Uighurs atrocities and “selective silence” on developments in J&K.⁴⁴

On Afghanistan

It is a given that, in Afghanistan, China could not have come this far without the means and modes that came through Pakistan. For China, “the road to Kabul ran through Islamabad”.⁴⁵ Though China has been alert to potential implications of the US's exit for long—ever since the first talks of a drawdown began around 2009–11—it is less likely that it could have fared as efficaciously in dealing with the Taliban and Afghan government, simultaneously, were it not for Pakistan's deft hand and experience in doing so, for decades almost. Days before the meeting between Mullah Baradar and Wang Yi in July 2021, Shah

⁴⁴ “PM Imran Calls Out West's 'Double Standards' on Xinjiang and IoK”, *Dawn*, 29 January 2022, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1672118> (Accessed 8 September 2024).

⁴⁵ Ananth Krishnan and Stanly Johny, *The Comrades and the Mullabs: China, Afghanistan and the New Asian Geopolitics*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2022, p. 175.

Mahmood Qureshi, as Pakistan's Foreign Minister, was on a visit to Chengdu (China), supposedly to discuss the third round of the annual Foreign Ministers' Dialogue. At the press meet post their meeting, Wang Yi acknowledged that Afghanistan was on their agenda and the two sides discussed how to "respond to changes" there.⁴⁶ The two sides also resolved to "launch joint actions" based on "five pillars of a shared Afghan Strategy":⁴⁷

...make every effort to pursue peace, give top priority to avoiding the spread of war, and prevent Afghanistan from spiralling into a full-scale civil war.

...actively promote peace through talks, advance effective intra-Afghan talks, and take substantive steps towards political reconciliation and building a broad-based and inclusive political framework.

...work together to combat terrorism and push all major forces in Afghanistan to draw a clear line against terrorism, firmly combat the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and other terrorist forces, and resolutely stop Afghanistan from becoming a hotbed of terrorism.

...promote coordination and cooperation among Afghanistan's neighboring countries, explore the building of Afghanistan-related cooperation platforms, and help Afghanistan achieve peaceful reconstruction and live in amity with all its neighbors.

...pool the strengths of the international community, urge the United States to earnestly fulfill its responsibilities for the peace and reconstruction of Afghanistan, promote the coordination of all Afghanistan-related regional and multilateral mechanisms, and work together for lasting peace and stability of Afghanistan.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 173.

⁴⁷ "China and Pakistan Decide to Launch Joint Actions on Afghan Issue", Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 25 July 2021, at http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202107/t20210725_8926847.htm (Accessed 16 February 2025).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

At the Fourth China–Afghanistan–Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Guiyang in June 2021, Wang Yi, presiding over the dialogue, noted: “the accelerated unilateral withdrawal of troops by the United States and some Western countries from Afghanistan poses a challenge to and also offers an opportunity for Afghanistan and other countries in the region.”⁴⁹ The three countries also pledged cooperation on the following five actions under joint strategy:

...adhere to the fundamental “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” principle. Afghanistan belongs to the Afghan people.

...maintain the momentum of intra-Afghan talks.

...bring the Taliban back into the political mainstream.

...the international community and the countries in the region should provide full support.

...strengthen sincere cooperation among China, Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵⁰

Even today, as Pakistan seems to be losing some its influence over the Taliban government, its know-how of the group's preferences and modalities is consequential for China to proceed and manage its affairs in Afghanistan.

Re-storying of CPEC: The Changing Discourse (CPEC's Fate)

By far, the CPEC is the single-largest project that China has announced for any country in the world. The project aimed to transcend Pakistan–China relationship from “traditional geo-strategic” to “emerging

⁴⁹ “Wang Yi Talks about the Five Propositions for Advancing Peace and Reconciliation in Afghanistan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 4 June 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2757_663518/2759_663522/202406/t20240607_11412119.html (Accessed 29 January 2025).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

economic relationship".⁵¹ The “game changer” project sought to connect China’s western periphery to the Pakistan economy, traversing through the “populous Punjab province”, before crossing through other provinces and culminating at Gwadar in Balochistan.⁵² However, this journey towards Pakistan–China geo-economic partnership is argued to have become complex owing to the advent of terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the domain of regional security existing in subsets of two: “i. China–India and India–Pakistan rivalries, essentially, the South Asian security framework... [and] ii. Conflict in Afghanistan and instability in Pakistan’s border regions”.⁵³

Years after its inception, the CPEC is now embroiled in pessimism. The “slowdown” debate that rolled out a few years ago is steadily gaining prominence.⁵⁴ This is especially so in the face of Pakistan’s economic woes. The juxtaposition of Pakistan’s economic stress with the CPEC’s game-changing prospects has brought popular anticipations to a grinding halt. It is true that both Chinese entities and workers are present in Pakistan in large numbers. Further, the CPEC, when viewed from its decadal window, has not brought about a categorical, fundamental or meaningful change in Pakistan’s economic and social status.⁵⁵ The situation does not seem to be becoming better even after 10 years have passed—a time span considered fairly long term by standard fiscal definition.

The viability of the recently inaugurated international airport at the Gwadar Port city, known as the New Gwadar International Airport

⁵¹ Muhammad Faisal, “Impact of Geo-economics on Pak-China Strategic Relations”, *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Spring 2018, p. 67.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 75–76.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 79.

⁵⁴ Andrew Small, “Returning to the Shadows: China, Pakistan, and the Fate of CPEC”, Report No. 16, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, September 2020, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Farooq Tirmizi, “CPEC is Dead. Somebody Tell Beijing”, *Medium*, 30 May 2019, at <https://medium.com/@farooqtirmizi/cpec-is-dead-somebody-tell-beijing-9e18a891ff0b> (Accessed 28 January 2025).

(NGIA), is also being questioned. Indeed, it is being referred as: “A Chinese-funded white elephant [that] relies on hope rather than reality.” Some of the shortfalls have been attributed to: lack of significant passenger demand; internal security problems of Pakistan; and absence of “required infrastructure to make Gwadar successful”. Notably, Gwadar in Balochistan has been projected as the centrepiece of the CPEC—a project “oversold in Pakistan as a ‘game changer’”.⁵⁶

Aside from financial pragmatism, the targeting of the CPEC from within Pakistan has augmented its fragility. From here on, a lot will depend on Pakistan–China’s grit to see through the project as envisaged, ebbing out periodic obstructions. At the moment, Pakistan is distracted, mired in security, economic and political woes, and it may be not easy to solely focus on preserving the CPEC. It has a long-standing bilateral logjam with India. A stand-off with Afghanistan’s Taliban government and problems with Iran are additional challenges on the horizon. China, on its part, has been cautious of venturing into self-securing its infrastructure projects and workers, leaving it to Pakistan. With myriad ongoing projects in Pakistan, China’s hands are seemingly full. Therefore, so far, there are few signs to suggest that China will deviate from what it has pursued so far by attempting to further spread itself thin in Pakistan.

CONSOLIDATING A NICHE IN AFGHANISTAN

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and the birth of the PRC in 1949 were events separated by a couple of years. Needless to reiterate, the region, at the time, was in a state of flux. However, given the geographical proximity, diplomatic relations between the PRC and Afghanistan were established early on, in 1955, after which the country remained on China’s “low diplomatic priority” for several years.⁵⁷ A

⁵⁶ Adnan Aamir, “Flight to Nowhere: The Curious New Gwadar International Airport”, *The Interpreter*, 14 February 2025, at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/flight-nowhere-curious-new-gwadar-international-airport> (Accessed 12 February 2025).

⁵⁷ Zhao Hong, “China’s Afghan Policy: The Forming of the ‘March West’ Strategy?”, *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall/Winter 2013, p. 6.

Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1960 and a Mutual Non-Aggression Pact was signed in 1963, which was a border agreement that paved the way for China to give up its territorial claim on the strategic Wakhan Corridor—a buffer created by the British rulers in India and the czarist Russia defining their respective spheres of influence. This border agreement coincided with another, perhaps more critical, border agreement that China signed with Pakistan in the same year. An economic and technical cooperation agreement was also signed in 1963 between Afghanistan and China; and by 1965, China was already offering Afghanistan “interest-free loans” worth US\$ 28.5 million.⁵⁸ The China–Afghanistan ties got a fillip due to deterioration in Sino-Soviet Union ties over some “domestic and foreign policy differences”.⁵⁹ In this context, Shen-Yu Dai observes that there was natural affinity between the two sides: “Both Nationalist and Communist Chinese governments have claimed that a natural sympathy joins China and Afghanistan since both suffered from Western imperialism in the form of wars imposed by Britain in 1839–1842.”⁶⁰

In view of the ancient trade routes in the region—the Silk Route being one of them—there are arguments that establish that relations were there between China and Afghanistan even before the PRC came into existence. These were mainly trade ties in terms of exchange of gems, silk and fruits.⁶¹ It is believed that, for a long time, China–Afghanistan border was one of the few peripheries of China that was conflict free. This was more due to the area’s “relative insignificance” than China’s “pacific tendency”.⁶² China was less reciprocal towards Afghanistan despite the latter making all the positive moves in China’s favour, including endorsing a permanent seat at the UN. Yet, overall, there was bilateral peace that led to a series of agreements and treaties, including the border agreement initiated in November 1963 and finalised in 1964.

⁵⁸ Aileen Qaiser, “China’s Interest in Afghanistan: In the Context of Sino-Soviet Rivalry”, *Strategic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Winter 1987, p. 56.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Dai, “China and Afghanistan”, n. 4, p. 215.

⁶¹ Saud and Ahmed, “China’s Engagement in Afghanistan”, n. 7.

⁶² Gerald Segal, “China and Afghanistan”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 11, November 1981, p. 1161.

Afghanistan, on its part, tried to maintain harmony by not getting trapped in the collective security initiative against China, initiated by Soviet Union despite its cordial ties with the latter. Notably, it is argued that the “Chinese threat to the Afghan regime” was one of the key rationales, amongst those projected and put forth by the Soviet Union when it intervened in Afghanistan.⁶³

Over a period, China's equation with Afghanistan has evolved, but in phases that have been primarily determined by surrounding geopolitical environment at that particular point of time. Following are some of the aspects that are important while analysing the overall path and meaning behind China's greater interest in Afghanistan and the adjoining region.

Geographical Bind

The overarching reason behind China's interest in Afghanistan emanates from geography. The Wakhan Pass, located in the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan, is the point of connection that forms a link between the two countries that share a border measuring about 92 kilometres (kms). It touches Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County in the Xinjiang autonomous region. The border came into existence when, in 1895, the British rule in India negotiated an agreement with its then arch-rival Russia, under the czar, to delineate the respective spheres of influence. The agreement was finalised by a joint coordination body consisting of representatives from both sides—the defined spheres of influence were to be thence pursued and honoured.

Significantly, the buffer thus created, that is, the Wakhan Corridor, was agreed to be administered by the emir of Afghanistan. A boundary settlement agreement was finalised between the two countries during Vice Premier Chen Yi's visit to Afghanistan in 1964. It is noted in this regard: “The boundary protocol defined in detailed maps the short border of some 45 mountainous miles between Sinkiang and the Wakhan corridor.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Dai, “China and Afghanistan”, n. 4, p. 220.

Soviet Union-centred Threat Perceptions

The Soviet Union was the chief determinant of China's Afghanistan policy in the Cold War years. Though both the countries were torch bearers of communism, their divergences in terms of immediate security interests and strategic choices led to steep insecurities. The PRC, post its liberation in 1949, remained obsessed with holding together what is considered its own territory; and the Soviet Union, as the hefty neighbour, made China perennially insecure.

More crucially, the Soviet Union's choice to patronise India did not go down too well with Peking. In fact, China's receptivity towards Pakistan can be partially explained using the same rationale. While Pakistan drew closer to the US in the years after its creation, Afghanistan chose to draw closer to the Soviet Union and India due to its unresolved territorial claims and insecurities with respect to Pakistan. Therefore, in the matrix of strategic preferences, China became wary of Afghanistan, a country in its critical and proximate neighbourhood. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan towards the end of 1979 was the tipping point for China. For it, the Russian threat became imminent and a major source of strategic anxiety.

After the collapse of the communist bloc and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) disintegration, "the long-feared threat to China's continental border" was "removed", making the "central element of its strategic calculus of balancing between two superpowers obsolete".⁶⁵ This was also the period that followed close on heels of internal unrest in China, namely, Tiananmen Square and developments in Xinjiang.⁶⁶ Infinite changes in global order that followed the end of the Cold War further impacted how China began to perceive countries in its immediate and near neighbourhood, including Afghanistan, where Soviet Union had exercised immense influence for decades.

⁶⁵ Michael Clarke, "China's Strategy in 'Greater Central Asia': Is Afghanistan the Missing Link?", *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1, January–March 2013, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The ‘International’ Wars in Afghanistan

Amongst the numerous wars in Afghanistan, significant (from standpoint of China’s approach towards Afghanistan) are the wars unleashed by the US, both during the Cold War and the post-9/11 War on Terror.

The Cold War rift between the West and the communist bloc saw its widespread manifestation in the Soviet–Afghanistan war that unfolded as soon as the Soviet forces marched into Afghanistan in December 1979. This was soon after a communist protégée set-up (inclined towards the Soviet Union) was dislodged as part of the intense power battles pursuing in Afghan political scene. In the covert operation engineered mainly by Pakistani military at the behest of the US, China worked “hand in glove” to supply “rocket launchers and other weapons” to the mujahideen warriors in Afghanistan.⁶⁷ In 1985, the guerrilla forces received the very “effective surface-to-surface weapons, 107-millimeter multiple rocket launchers” that were made in China.⁶⁸

The War on Terror witnessed China’s change in approach towards Afghanistan. At the cusp of the new century, China was situated rather precariously, especially after the “accidental” bombing of its embassy in Belgrade, the then capital of Yugoslavia.⁶⁹ At least three Chinese nationals were killed in guided bomb attacks unleashed by the NATO, for which the then US President Bill Clinton later issued an apology.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Robert Pear, “Arming Afghan Guerrillas: A Huge Effort Led by U.S.”, *The New York Times*, 18 April 1988, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/18/world/arming-afghan-guerrillas-a-huge-effort-led-by-us.html> (Accessed 12 November 2024).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Thomas Pickering, “Oral Presentation to the Chinese Government regarding the Accidental Bombing of the P.R.C. Embassy in Belgrade June 17, 1999”, US Department of State, 6 July 1999, at https://1997-2001.state.gov/policy_remarks/1999/990617_pickering_emb.html (Accessed 27 November 2024).

⁷⁰ Andrew Glass, “Bill Clinton Apologizes to Jiang Zemin for NATO Bombing”, *Politico*, 14 May 1999, at <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/05/this-day-in-politics-091279> (Accessed 7 October 2024).

The deceased were journalists working for the state-owned media in China.⁷¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC called the bombings “a gross encroachment upon China’s sovereignty and flagrant violation of the Vienna Convention”.⁷² There was substantial popular uproar in the aftermath of the incident, and the Chinese were not pleased with the course of events at that point of time.

Despite this, when the War on Terror unfolded in October 2001, the Chinese seemed to support the “American intervention” in Afghanistan.⁷³ This was mainly due to the purported presence of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Afghanistan and its potential to feed recruits into these movement, adding much to China’s paranoia.⁷⁴

At the time, the Chinese government was also quite wary of the “potential effects” of what has been described as the “Taliban syndrome”.⁷⁵ The penchant to bring about an Islamic order in Afghanistan—against the reality that these Taliban fighters had been trained in radicalised madrasas of Pakistan and had their capital on “Islam” and “need for Jihad”—posed a quandary for the Chinese state as far as its fragile western Muslim-inhabited territory of Xinjiang was concerned.⁷⁶ This was because the Taliban had the potential to be a “catalyst of an Islamic Revolution in Xinjiang”, and promote its cause,

⁷¹ Kevin Ponniah and Lazara Marinkovic, “The Night the US Bombed a Chinese Embassy”, *BBC*, 7 May 2019, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48134881> (Accessed 2 September 2024).

⁷² “Strong Protest by the Chinese Government against the Bombing by the US-led NATO of the Chinese Embassy in the Federal Yugoslavia”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367575.html (Accessed 27 December 2024).

⁷³ Saud and Ahmad, “China’s Engagement in Afghanistan”, n. 7, p. 131.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ M. Ehsan Ahrari, “China, Pakistan, and the “Taliban Syndrome”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 40, No. 4, August 2000, p. 658.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

as an independent Muslim state next to China.⁷⁷ The Chinese were well versed with inter-state linkages amongst the radical secessionist groups, like the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) in Tajikistan, the IMU in Uzbekistan and the Taliban.⁷⁸

Hence, the Chinese opted for a balancing strategy in the initial stages of the War on Terror- broadly, not seen as anti-west and, at the same time, also trying to explore leverages amongst multiple groups and outfits in order to minimize its own security-related risks.

Post 9/11: The Multilateral Way

Although China had an array of strategic apprehensions, post 9/11 it was not as tepid towards Afghanistan as it had previously been. China was much more empowered and emphatic with the economic heft and the political influence that came along with it. It was now beginning to flex its presence, especially at multilateral forums, like the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which in 2001, evolved from the Shanghai Five group into a much bigger grouping. Within the SCO, an Afghan Contact Group was established. The Shanghai Five group—predecessor of the SCO—had been formed in the context of the civil war in Afghanistan; it was the coming together of Central Asian Republics that were likely to be affected being adjacent to Afghanistan, with China and Russia at the helm. The war in Afghanistan also served as a force multiplier for transnational militants and terrorist groups providing a conducive volatile environment for radicalised forces to emanate.

China gradually engaged with war-ridden Afghanistan by seeking a conciliatory role in facilitating and hosting talks between the Taliban and the Afghanistan government on its soil. In 2015, the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue between Pakistan–Afghanistan–China took place in Kabul for fostering “practical cooperation projects to promote

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 668.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

bilateral interactions and cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan”.⁷⁹

An Alternative to the US?

In the few years before the US forces exited the Afghanistan quagmire, there were growing efforts by China to paint the US presence in Afghanistan as not only inefficient but also as interference in the internal affairs of a state (which contradicted the Chinese oft-propagated foreign policy principle of not fiddling around with the internal affairs of a state). China consistently positioned itself as opposed to getting directly involved in Afghanistan. In addition, it criticised the US-led NATO intervention in Afghanistan, portraying them as “transformational actors”, as opposed to its projected stance on non-interference, and “an anathema to China’s regional and global outlook”.⁸⁰ The Chinese also cast aspersions on the US’s role in Pakistan, claiming that the “U.S. presence in Pakistan and Afghanistan might threaten China’s border security and weaken the strategic relationship between China and Pakistan”.⁸¹

The China–Afghanistan joint statement, issued in the middle of the War on Terror in 2010, reiterated and affirmed “the principle of non-interference into other countries’ internal affairs, its respect for Afghanistan’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, its respect for the Afghan people’s choice of a development road suited to their national condition.”⁸² Statements such as these were used over time by Beijing to prove the US wrong, and also assuage its feeling of not taking tangible responsibility for bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan.

⁷⁹ Saud and Ahmad, “China’s Engagement in Afghanistan”, n. 7, p. 132.

⁸⁰ Hong, “China’s Afghan Policy”, n. 57, p. 7.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Richard Weitz, “Karzai’s State Visit Highlights Beijing’s Afghan Priorities”, *China Brief*, Vol. 10, No. 8, 16 April 2010, at <https://jamestown.org/program/karzais-state-visit-highlights-beijings-afghan-priorities/> (Accessed 27 December 2024).

China had some foresight in sensing the possible return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but its reaction to this was a “mix of caution, ambivalence and hedging”.⁸³ It even appointed a new special envoy to Afghanistan weeks before the Taliban takeover⁸⁴ (akin to the US’s envoys in the past, China has been appointing special envoys to Afghanistan since 2014, the original timetable for the return of the US forces).⁸⁵ The Chinese apprehensions were twofold. One, they were sceptical that the return of the Taliban could refuel the terror sanctuaries/infestations in Afghanistan akin to Taliban 1.0 time, especially those belonging to the ETIM stable and those that China perceived to be direct threat to its own security. Second, China was wary of a “US victory” in Afghanistan that ran “the risk of a long-term military presence on China’s borders and a staunchly pro-Western government in Kabul”.⁸⁶

Investing in Afghanistan’s Violent Landscape

China, for long, has been able to maintain the face of a “neutral arbiter” on Afghanistan. Nonetheless, as a measure to tide over threat perceptions regarding its periphery, it has initiated economic engagement with Kabul, becoming one of the “most significant donors and investors”. China’s economic interests in Afghanistan range from “infrastructure, to developmental and social uplift projects, further extending to raw business concerns with keen interest in Afghanistan’s large untapped mineral and fuel deposits.”⁸⁷ A significant concern for Beijing has been

⁸³ Andrew Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics*, London: Hurst & Company, 2015, p. 133.

⁸⁴ “China Appoints New Special Envoy to Afghanistan amid Deepening Afghan Crisis”, *The Economic Times*, 21 July 2021, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-appoints-new-special-envoy-to-afghanistan-amid-deepening-afghan-crisis/articleshow/84616017.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 22 December 2024).

⁸⁵ “China Appoints Special Envoy for Afghanistan”, Swissinfo.ch, 18 July 2014, at <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/china-appoints-special-envoy-for-afghanistan/40511394> (Accessed 17 December 2024).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Saud and Ahmad, “China’s Engagement in Afghanistan”, n. 7, p. 133.

the potential percolation of drugs, mainly opium, from Afghanistan into its peripheral regions, especially bordering Xinjiang, which has witnessed substantial amounts of drugs coming in.⁸⁸

Another significant flagship project that China has in Afghanistan is the Mes Aynak Copper Project, initially worth US\$ 3.5 billion, “making it the single largest infrastructure project” in Afghanistan. As part of the deal, in a 30-year lease period, China is supposed to provide machinery, set up the requisite infrastructure and build a reservoir for coal and a power plant to reduce the project’s reliance on Afghanistan’s national grid.⁸⁹ Besides, the Amu Darya Oil River Basin project has been awarded to China National Petroleum Corporation, a state-owned enterprise of China, with initial estimates suggesting that the basin could be a purveyor of 87 million barrels of oil in future.⁹⁰

SUMMING UP

China’s twin engagements in Afghanistan and Pakistan are an important arc in its South and Central Asia strategy plan. There are fundamental contingencies that both countries pose on China. China feels insecure about its restive periphery straddled by both Afghanistan and Pakistan’s volatility and, therefore, there are serious security compulsions for Beijing to remain prompt on its borders with both. That said, there are seemingly few conspicuous dissimilarities/open-ended propositions as well- especially with regard to China’s strategy against India and its equations with the Taliban regime.

Will China be able to ever use Afghanistan against India as it has done with Pakistan (and which Pakistan has most readily obliged to)? There are no concrete instances from the past. However, with the Taliban at the helm, India must not only be cautious and keep a tab on possible manipulations of the regime to target its strategic interests, but it must also be prepared to deal with unforeseeable contingencies. This is

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 134.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

important as India has just started recalibrating its approach towards the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The small headway in bilateral warming up must be retained for further India-Afghanistan engagement.

Further, the Taliban–Pakistan rift is a grim reminder that China, even with its deep pockets, cannot be complacent about the Taliban's loyalties towards Beijing. The Taliban–China bonhomie is functioning in the vacuum of a Western, especially the US's, hands-off interregnum. What if the Taliban and the US strike an understanding—they have negotiated in the past during the Doha Peace talks. What if those channels are revived? The Taliban are cash-strapped and the US could partially address that deficit. However, a lot depends on which side the new Trump administration sits, particularly with regard to these pressing issues concerning the Taliban regime. If in case the US re-emerges on the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan scene, it is less likely that the gravity of China's present goodwill and effectiveness will stay insulated. China's role in Afghanistan may be impacted by some, if not all, after effects of the US comeback.

AT WAKHAN CONFLUENCE: COHESION OR CONFLICT?

In May 2015, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, made an indiscrete reference to the Wakhan Corridor, which acts as the border between Afghanistan and Gilgit-Baltistan (part of PoK):

We have to plan and prepare for the future. We have got seven countries with which we share our border. We have six with which we directly share a contiguous border. But we also have a 106-km-long non-contiguous border with Afghanistan that we need to factor in. With all these seven countries, we have very special and peculiar relationships and peculiar problems.¹

The non-contiguous border mentioned here refers to Gilgit-Baltistan's periphery that touches the Wakhan Corridor, which is located at the strategically key confluence of China, Tajikistan and Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Recently, India's equation with the Taliban has changed and there has been a concerted effort to resurrect India–Afghanistan relations that were scarred at the time of the US withdrawal in August 2021.

As mentioned earlier, China has become involved prominently in Afghanistan's strategic landscape post the withdrawal of the American forces. The trade between the two sides has seen considerable momentum following the withdrawal: for instance, between 2022–

¹ Deeptiman Tiwary, "Need to Factor in Our 106 Km Border with Afghanistan: NSA", *The Times of India*, 23 May 2015, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/need-to-factor-in-our-106km-border-with-afghanistan-nsa/articleshow/47391553.cms> (Accessed 18 May 2025).

23, the bilateral trade doubled from US\$ 595 million to US\$ 1.3 billion.² China has also been advocating greater engagement with the Taliban regime to the international community and at international platforms. China has, in fact, taken the diplomatic lead by allowing a Taliban envoy in Beijing and posting its envoy in Afghanistan.³

In August 2024, Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development announced the completion of preliminary work on Wakhan road. The 50 km road will connect Yarkand in Xinjiang autonomous province (China) with Badakhshan province of Afghanistan.⁴ The Wakhan road is situated along the Wakhan Corridor and is considered part of the ancient Silk Road. The discussion on building a road through Wakhan was in the offing for long. An MoU was signed in 2009 between the two sides- that found its construction “infeasible”.⁵

THE CONFLUENCE AT WAKHAN

Often called the ‘roof of the world’, the Wakhan Corridor is also known by its Persian name, Bam-e-Dunya. The area is populated by the Wakhi people who are members of a nomadic tribe in the region. Created in the nineteenth century as a Great Game buffer zone between tsarist Russia and British India, the corridor has since remained untouched by any kind of government. It can be reached from

² Sarah Godek, “China’s Cautious Quest to Draw Afghanistan Back into the Fold”, *9DashLine*, 23 August 2024, at <https://www.9dashline.com/article/chinas-cautious-quest-to-draw-afghanistan-back-into-the-fold> (Accessed 28 November 2024).

³ Mohammad Yunus Yawar and Charlotte Greenfield, “China becomes first to name new Afghan ambassador under Taliban”, *Reuters*, 13 September 2023, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-say-chinese-envoy-appointed-kabul-first-ambassadorial-appointment-since-2023-09-13/> (Accessed 24 December 2024).

⁴ Bibi Amina Hakimi, “Preliminary Work on Wakhan Road to China Completed”, *Tolo News*, 21 August 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-190341> (Accessed 29 December 2024).

⁵ Kendrick Foster, “The New Road to Conflict: Geopolitics of the Wakhan Corridor”, *Harvard International Review*, 5 December 2019, at <https://hir.harvard.edu/wakhancorridor/> (Accessed 1 February 2025).

surrounding countries through the Pamir Knot, where three of the highest mountain ranges in the world converge.

The territory—a coveted piece of land—has remained at the centre of the Silk Road, the Great Game, the Cold War and, now, the new Cold War, given that China is closely watching it and perhaps more minutely than ever before. The corridor has been referred to variously as the Corridor of Power, the Corridor of Conflict, the new road to conflict, etc. In every way, it is the Wakhan Corridor that somewhat “exemplifies” Afghanistan’s “strategic geopolitical location”.⁶ Several conflicts have been woven around this corridor: the new great game between Russia and China for influence in Central Asia; the tug of war between the West, especially the US, and China over the proliferation of the BRI; and so on. Of course, it also reflects hugely on the bilateral dynamics between India and Pakistan with regard to contestation over Kashmir.⁷

The remote Wakhan Corridor, named after the Wakhan River in Badakhshan province (north-east Afghanistan between the Hindu Kush and the Amu Darya), separates Afghanistan from Gilgit-Baltistan. The corridor is approximately 225 km long and is between 16–22 km wide. Besides Gilgit-Baltistan, it borders Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan, China and Tajikistan and is, therefore, of immense strategic significance. The thin strip of territory was awarded to Afghanistan by the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission in 1895–96 (known as the Pamir Boundary Commission—a joint Russia–British entity)⁸ to constitute a buffer zone between the two competing empires, Russian and British (actually to separate present-day Tajikistan from touching present-day Pakistan). It was then “nominally administered by the emir of Kabul”.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sam Dunning, “China is Protecting its Thin Corridor to the Afghan Heartland: The Wakhan Corridor is a Fiercely Contested Imperial Hangover”, *Foreign Policy*, 14 August 2021, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/14/china-afghanistan-wakhan-corridor-imperial-ambitions/> (Accessed 12 January 2025).

Today, the Wakhan Corridor's population is stated to be around 12,000 inhabitants across 110 villages.¹⁰ It shares approximately 47 miles of border with the Chinese province of Xinjiang.¹¹ Much before the US exit from Afghanistan, the Chinese have been involved in developing infrastructure near the Wakhan area on their side. This included a road measuring 75 km situated up to 10 km from China-Afghanistan border in the Wakhan Corridor- a project funded by the Chinese Ministry of Defense. Apart from this, they also established lines of mobile communication; and a supply depot.¹² Afghanistan's previous government had taken up the issue with China to open the Wakhan route. This could enable the corridor to serve as an alternate supply route for NATO during War on Terror. During former Afghan Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta's visit to Beijing in June 2009, the issue concerning the opening of the route was discussed with the Chinese side.¹³

It is noteworthy that this extremely strategic corridor was, more or less, insulated from the worst effects of the protracted war in Afghanistan: no minefields were reported but there were Red Army's garrisons in the area.¹⁴

¹⁰ Fidel Rahmati, "Wakhan Corridor Officially Connects Afghanistan to China: Taliban", *Khaama Press*, 16 January 2024, at <https://www.khaama.com/badakhshan-province-officially-connects-afghanistan-to-china-via-wakhan-corridor-official/> (Accessed 15 May 2025).

¹¹ Sam Dunning, "China is Protecting its Thin Corridor to the Afghan Heartland: The Wakhan Corridor is a Fiercely Contested Imperial Hangover", n. 9.

¹² Russell Hsiao and Glen E. Howard, "China Builds Closer Ties to Afghanistan through Wakhan Corridor", *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, 10(1), January 7, 2010, at <https://jamestown.org/program/china-builds-closer-ties-to-afghanistan-through-wakhan-corridor/> (Accessed 24 December 2024).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "FACTBOX—Key Facts about the Wakhan Corridor", *Reuters*, 12 June 2009, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/economy-factbox-key-facts-about-the-wakhan-corridor-idUSSP389507/> (Accessed 21 April 2025).

THE WAKHAN ROAD: OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHINA–AFGHANISTAN ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT

In January 2024, Moizuddin Ahmadi, the head of Information and Culture in Badakhshan, noted that “the construction of the Pamir Highway has been completed up to the Chinese border. Now, the project’s plan and budget for the road’s development will begin.”¹⁵ There had been preparations for asphalting process to be undertaken soon after. In the same period, Mullah Baradar, Afghanistan’s Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, announced that the Wakhan road was progressing, hailing it as a “direct link” between China and Afghanistan, with the potential of “enhancing bilateral opportunities”.¹⁶ In August 2024, a spokesperson of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development stated that the “50-kilometre dirt road at a cost of 369 million Afghani [US\$ 5.07 million] has been completed”.¹⁷ The project was funded by the ministry’s road construction budget and being supervised by the development councils.¹⁸

From the beginning, the Taliban dispensation has “underscored the geopolitical significance of the corridor, as it is positioned at a pivotal intersection of regional interests, potentially influencing broader dynamics in Central and South Asia.”¹⁹ It is seen as a “crucial economic

¹⁵ Rahmati, “Wakhan Corridor Officially Connects Afghanistan to China: Taliban”, n. 10.

¹⁶ “The Wakhan Corridor: China’s Inroad to Afghanistan”, *CACI Analyst*, 6 November 2024, at <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13827-the-wakhan-corridor-chinas-inroad-to-afghanistan.html> (Accessed 30 March 2025).

¹⁷ “Preliminary Work on Wakhan Road to China Completed”, *Tolo News*, August 2024, at <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-190341> (Accessed 19 June 2025).

¹⁸ “Wakhan Corridor Officially Connects Afghanistan to China: Taliban”, *Mymind.net.com*, 18 January 2024, at https://mymind.net/Home/viewArticle/wakhan-corridor-officially-connects-afghanistan-to-china-taliban#google_vignette (Accessed 9 January 2025).

¹⁹ “The Wakhan Corridor: China’s Inroad to Afghanistan”, n. 16.

artery for Afghanistan” and a bridge to enhance economic interaction between East Asia and South Asia.²⁰

This road (whose construction began from Buzai Gumbad) aims to develop “a direct link with China, reducing the distance and lowering the cost for the import and export of commercial goods between the two countries.”²¹ This is also considered beneficial in terms of the comparative advantage of forging a shorter route—from Faizabad in Badakhshan to Urumqi in Xinjiang, via the Karakoram Highway, is about 1,500 km, while the Little Pamir Highway will reduce the distance to 600–800 km.²²

The construction of the Wakhan road is seen as pivotal with regard to economic ties between China and Afghanistan. As such, the road project was inaugurated in September 2023 in the presence of Malamohammad Yunus Akhonzada, the acting head of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. With the focus on bringing down the cost of trade by allowing transit access and open traffic, the “shortest distance and the lowest cost” was expected to lead to greater integration in terms of enhanced scales of import and export, usher in development and create infrastructure opportunities for locals, such as building hotels and other such economic avenues to enhance earnings.²³

Originally, the idea of the road was conceived much earlier, with some form of construction beginning in May 2021, months before the US exit. The former government in Afghanistan, like the Taliban, also pinned great expectations on how the road could “link up with China’s vast

²⁰ “Silk Road Highway Reaches China–Afghanistan Border, Facilitating Historic Trade Routes”, *Bakhtar News*, 6 July 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/silk-road-highway-reaches-china-afghanistan-border-facilitating-historic-trade-routes/> (Accessed 11 May 2025).

²¹ “Wakhan Corridor: Vital for CPEC and BRI”, *Pakistan Today*, 25 April 2024, at <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2024/04/25/wakhan-corridor-vital-for-cpec-and-bri/> (Accessed 10 May 2025).

²² Ibid.

²³ Rahmati, “Wakhan Corridor Officially Connects Afghanistan to China: Taliban”, n. 10.

network and boost commerce, imports and exports as well as cross-border transit.”²⁴ However, the work was suspended once the Taliban took over. Then, in September 2023, initial discussions on utilising the road for commencement of traffic and trade began between the Taliban ambassador in Beijing and the Chinese authorities. This was followed by the Taliban taking up the issue with the Chinese foreign minister on the side-lines of a forum in Tibet in October 2023,²⁵ and probably, also during the BRI forum in the same month.

Presently, the road has fanned local aspirations in the development-starved country and people are seeing it as a panacea for their problems. They are hoping that the road will boost trade between the two countries: Afghanistan could trade its produce to China, including raw minerals- this would also induce more mineral extraction with China’s involvement in the mineral sector. More importantly, it is anticipated that the road will provide a fillip to job opportunities and help transform the problems of people at large. There is, thus, a certain euphoria surrounding the construction of what is being referred to as the Little Pamir Highway, which traverses 50 kms but has the potential to link landlocked Afghanistan to a crucial trade route. As of now, the Taliban government has communicated that the road till the border is complete and put it forward for China’s consideration.

THE CONTENTIONS: POTENTIAL, HYPE, EXPECTATIONS AND BOTTLENECKS

The potential conflicts concerning the road and the corridor’s inherent potential as a well-oiled economic gateway are multi-fold and involve various actors, namely, China, Afghanistan and, most importantly, Pakistan. This is due to the Taliban’s current friend-turned-foe equation with Pakistan—the perennial bilateral tension concerning border

²⁴ Zhao Ziwen, “Why China is Wary of Opening Up Afghanistan’s New Road to Xinjiang”, *South China Morning Post*, 26 January 2024, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3249931/why-china-wary-opening-afghanistans-new-road-xinjiang> (Accessed 12 February 2025).

²⁵ Ibid.

demarcations along the Durand Line, which Afghanistan has consistently called “a unilateral attempt to create a hard border”.²⁶

In the year 2022, the Taliban is believed to have captured Pakistan's border post in Wakhan, situated near Karambar Lake.²⁷ Before this, there were reports that Pakistan too captured some territory 400 metres inside Afghanistan, including a river (later denied by the Taliban). Border markings made by the Pakistan were said to have been brought down and pillars carrying “Pakistani signs” were also destroyed.²⁸

China's Own Insecurities?

There is no doubt that the Wakhan strip is of immense strategic significance to China. However, China has prioritised to “utilise” the corridor strip “not as a bridge to connect with Afghanistan, but as a strategic buffer against regional instability”.²⁹ Given deep-seated multifarious objectives, there have been speculations on the possibility of Chinese presence in the corridor region, especially on the Afghan side of it. There have also been stray reports about purported presence of Chinese pickets in the region, including those that indicate that “China is negotiating with Taliban officials to control this sparsely populated, rugged territory”, also referred, at times, as Afghanistan's “chicken neck”.³⁰

²⁶ “Taliban Captures Strategic Wakhan Corridor from Pakistan”, *The Print*, 1 August 2022, at <https://theprint.in/world/taliban-captures-strategic-wakhan-corridor-from-pakistan/1064769/> (Accessed 30 December 2024).

²⁷ “Taliban captures strategic Wakhan Corridor from Pakistan”, *ANI*, 1 August 2022, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/taliban-captures-strategic-wakhan-corridor-from-pakistan20220801213011> (Accessed 8 December 2024).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ayjaz Wani, “China and Afghanistan's Jousting Over the Wakhan Corridor”, ORF Issue Brief, No. 796, April 2025, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-and-afghanistan-s-jousting-over-the-wakhan-corridor> (Accessed 18 May 2025).

³⁰ Sumit Ahlawat, “China Keen to Seize Afghanistan's 'Chicken Neck'; Here's What Makes Wakhan Corridor Desirable for PLA”, *The Eurasian Times*, 21 January 2025, at <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/wakhan-corridor-was-part-of-silk-road-great/> (Accessed 30 March 2025).

China is set to achieve some benefit from the road across Wakhan: (i) enhanced commerce and trade with Central Asia; and (ii) bolstering of connectivity network with regard to Gwadar Port built by China in Pakistan.³¹ Overall, the road via Wakhan has the potential to cohere both military and economic goals for China.³² It not only proffers shorter routes for pipelines via Central Asia, thereby increasing China's energy security, but is also expected to advance trade between China and Afghanistan. However, even though the economic dimension of the bilateral relationship may not materialise wholesomely or too soon via this route, China will now have better choices to sit back and reflect on possibilities of using it for "troop movements" besides pipelines or fibre optic.³³

However, there are some long-standing concerns: "[t]he roads location on the Chinese counterterrorism front line and dubious economic case suggest it will be treated with caution." Security and cross-border terrorism are growing Chinese concerns regarding radicalisation in the Uighur population spread in its peripheral regions; and both issues weigh in on whether the road is "economically worthwhile" and what "security risks" it augurs.³⁴

China still does not have a direct land link with Afghanistan: it trades with Afghanistan through Tajikistan and Pakistan. It guards its borders with Afghanistan, and the border guards patrol the Wakhan Pass situated on the eastern flank of the corridor, where the said road is likely to culminate. There are no custom facilities and therefore, no formal crossing points. In the past, China has experimented with alternative trade routes towards Afghanistan: the Kashgar–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan route in September 2022; and the newly created CPEC route in August 2023.³⁵ Otherwise, most of the trade (mostly tilted in China's favour)

³¹ Foster, "The New Road to Conflict", n. 5.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ziwen, "Why China is Wary of Opening Up Afghanistan's New Road to Xinjiang", n. 24.

³⁵ Aarish U. Khan, "The Reality of Afghanistan's Land Link with China", *The Diplomat*, 9 October 2024, at <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/the-reality-of-afghanistans-land-link-with-china/> (Accessed 20 November 2024).

between China and Afghanistan is routed through Pakistan's Karachi Port.³⁶

China's approach towards Afghanistan is hugely dependent on Pakistan and Tajikistan, both of whose ties with Kabul are fraught with uncertainty and some long-lingering disputes. China, through Pakistan, seeks to safeguard its ongoing projects in Afghanistan and bolster its strategic niche by cashing in on Pakistan's dominance over the Taliban to contain penetration of fundamentalism and radicalism from Afghanistan into its fragile western periphery. With Tajikistan, China hopes to achieve similar ambitions of ebbing the flow of extremist elements and groups from Central Asia, and thereby insulate its borders from all such threats.³⁷ An example is the military base that China established in Tajikistan a few years ago; which, initially, was clouded by several surreptitious explanations as to its purpose- supposedly an attempt to insulate its periphery from the scourge of Islamic fundamentalism. Ultimately, China claimed security compulsions as the motive for establishing the base. However, the reason behind Tajikistan's acquiescence, of course, may have been its inability to repay debts.

China's fears have also been accentuated by the array of attacks targeting Chinese nationals in Pakistan—CPEC workers or otherwise. While instances of threat to the Chinese in Afghanistan per se are less, there is still a feeling of fear due to the overall instability and violence in the country. Additionally, the Chinese have the impression that the attacks against them have increased after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. This fear on the Chinese side is rather pervasive given that Afghanistan has been a sanctuary for dreaded terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Al-Qaeda and, last but not least,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Alireza Miryousefi, "Afghanistan: Confrontation between a Determined China and a Hesitant America and Duties of Neighbours", Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), 22 November 2021, at <https://www.ipis.ir/en/subjectview/661885/afghanistan-confrontation-between-a-determined-china-and-a-hesitant-america-and-duties-of-neighbors> (Accessed 17 February 2025).

the ETIM. These are tangible “barriers to progress in economic cooperation including through the Wakhan Corridor.”³⁸

In October 2024, China announced that it will “offer Afghanistan zero-tariff treatment for 100% tariff lines”.³⁹ This was mentioned by the Chinese envoy to Afghanistan, Zhao Xing, after meeting Abdul Kabir, acting Deputy Prime Minister of Afghanistan. The move can be seen in the context of how the “impoverished country could offer a wealth of mineral resources to boost Beijing’s supply chain security”.⁴⁰ If one looks at the time frame after Taliban’s takeover, the emerging picture of Chinese economic engagement with Afghanistan is rather underwhelming. China’s investments have not shown a steady jump, apart from a temporary “short-lived \$12 million increase in 2022”.⁴¹ These figures are argued to be much higher about a decade ago. In terms of new agreements between China and Afghanistan, the following few agreements have seen the light of the day: “a \$310–350 million investment for gold mining in Takhar, 3 additional mining deals of unknown amounts, US \$13.1 million to expand pine nut processing, and a cement factory agreement for \$145 million over 30 years.”⁴²

Pakistan: The Pros and Cons

With regard to Pakistan’s view on the Wakhan route, it is important to note that the road is part of the BRI and its completion could give

³⁸ Sarah Godek, “China’s Cautious Quest to Draw Afghanistan Back into the Fold”, n. 2.

³⁹ Joe Cash, “China to Offer Taliban Tariff-free Trade as it Inches Closer to Isolated Resource-rich Regime”, *Reuters*, 25 October 2024, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-offer-taliban-tariff-free-trade-inches-closer-isolated-resource-rich-2024-10-25/> (Accessed 28 December 2024).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sarah Godek, “China’s Unenthusiastic Economic Engagement with Taliban-led Afghanistan”, *Stimson Centre*, 9 April 2025, at <https://www.stimson.org/2025/chinas-unenthusiastic-economic-engagement-with-taliban-led-afghanistan/> (Accessed 17 June 2025).

⁴² Ibid.

some boost to perceptions on the CPEC. The flagship project under the BRI has been surrounded by pessimism for a long time, even as it completes a decade after its formal announcement. Pakistan's stance is likely to be shaped by a blend of some important pros and cons on the future development of the vital route.

Not long ago, there was furore over Pakistan purportedly challenging Afghanistan's sovereignty over the Wakhan Corridor. This was around the same time that the Taliban–Pakistan crisis deepened following air strikes by Pakistan on Afghanistan. However, the speculations were put to rest after Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesperson conceded: "Wakhan is part of Afghan territory. Afghanistan is a neighboring country. We recognize its sovereignty and territorial integrity."⁴³

Pros

1. **Connection with Tajikistan:** The highway linkage through the so-called "Azad Jammu and Kashmir" would enhance trade and connectivity. Earlier, Pakistan had even requested a transit road through Wakhan. In response, the Taliban spokesperson noted that no such discussion had taken place and "there will no compromise even on an inch of Afghanistan's territory".⁴⁴ This was in the backdrop of a controversial tweet from Abdul Karim Khurram (the Chief of Staff for former Afghan President Hamid Karzai), in July 2022, that Pakistan intends to "impose a new Wakhan Corridor Policy".⁴⁵

⁴³ Riyaz ul Khaliq, "'Wakhan is Part of Afghan Territory': Pakistan Ends Speculation Over Wakhan Corridor", *Anadolu Agency*, 16 January 2025, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/wakhan-is-part-of-afghan-territory-pakistan-ends-speculation-over-wakhan-corridor/3452702> (Accessed 7 February 2025).

⁴⁴ Sai Kiran Kannan, "Wakhan: The Corridor of Complication between Taliban, Pakistan and China", *India Today*, 1 August 2022, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/wakhan-the-corridor-of-complication-between-taliban-pakistan-and-china-1982403-2022-08-01> (Accessed 11 January 2025).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

2. **Extend the CPEC to Tajikistan:** The road would broaden vistas vis-à-vis landlocked Central Asian countries. It is anticipated that connecting Chitral through the Broghil Pass will help Pakistan gain access to the Central Asian Republics, and their markets, for trade purposes. Chitral district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa straddles the Wakhan Corridor and it is believed that the untapped potential of the route may benefit Pakistan's economic and strategic objectives.⁴⁶ Besides, there are potential ideas to connect Gilgit-Baltistan to the Wakhan Corridor to promote greater avenues of trade and economic exchange for Pakistan via Afghanistan to the adjacent region and beyond. In addition, it is thought that the Central Asian Republics could benefit, via connectivity through the Wakhan Corridor, from direct access to the Gwadar Port, the centrepiece of the multi-billion CPEC.⁴⁷
3. It would help the trade in mineral resources, textile, agricultural produce and other goods to flourish.
4. With Pakistan's lasting logistical USP (unique selling proposition), the country foresees having some kind of a pivotal role once the connectivity web takes shape.
5. Access to Gwadar could see some kind of a transformation as an alternative route for the Central Asian Republics, that is, a “shorter” and “more efficient route” for trading goods with the international markets via the strategic deep-water port on the Arabian Sea.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Bashira Omeed, “Harnessing Chitral and the Wakhan Corridor for Regional Connectivity”, Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research (CSCR), 14 April 2025, at <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/trade-economics/harnessing-chitral-and-the-wakhan-corridor-for-regional-connectivity/#:~:text=pivotal%20economic%20hub.-,The%20northern%20highlands%20of%20Pakistan's%20Chitral%20region%20offer%20a%20strategic,between%2016%20and%2070%20km> (Accessed 1 May 2025).

⁴⁷ Farzana Shah, “Wakhan: A Strategic Gambit”, *The Nation*, 28 January 2025, at <https://www.nation.com.pk/28-Jan-2025/wakhan-a-strategic-gambit> (Accessed 2 February 2025).

⁴⁸ “Wakhan might Turn Things Upside Down”, *Dawn*, 19 May 2024, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1834396> (Accessed 20 December 2024).

Cons

1. Bilaterally, the road is likely to give landlocked Afghanistan an edge, thereby reducing Pakistan's "geopolitical advantage and security leverage" with Kabul. All goods that were earlier transported through the Karakoram Highway, and the sea, to China will now transit through the newly constructed road, depriving Pakistan of its "significant" source of "transit fees, levies, and custom duties".⁴⁹
2. A major dilemma for Pakistan is whether larger long-term benefits outweigh the tangible drawbacks and whether the new road via Wakhan Corridor will reduce the centrality of the Karakoram Highway in the China-Pakistan economic exchanges.

It is important to note that the capacity of the Karakoram Highway was recently upgraded by making it an all-weather trade route instead of one limited to eight months. The decision, made towards the end of 2024, was hailed as "a giant step...taken in respect to the Khunjerab Pass".⁵⁰ Citing the Khunjerab customs facilities, it was noted: "over 50,000 passengers, 11,000 vehicles, and 40,900 metric tons of cargo were handled at the border port", alongside significant progress in terms of "trade volume up 72.7 percent year-on-year".⁵¹

By the year 2019 (between January–November 2019), the total volume of trade across the Karakoram Highway was approximately, "\$ 856.3 million with an increase of up to 47 percent." This quantum leap comprised "cargo shipment approximately 66,600 tonnes", with "the estimated value of 6 billion Yuan".⁵² At the same time, the balance of

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Xu Weiwei, "Khunjerab Pass Set for Enhanced Trade Flows", *China Daily*, 5 December 2024, at <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/599503> (Accessed 27 December 2024).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "China Pakistan Economic Corridor", at <https://cpecinfo.com/china-pakistan-border-trade-via-khunjerab-pass-mounts-to-47-percent/> (Accessed 22 December 2024).

trade through the Karakoram Highway is hugely tilted in China's favour, accounting for 96 per cent of exports of China and only a minuscule 4 percent for Pakistan.⁵³

Afghanistan's Shortfalls

- 1. International Indifference:** Afghanistan has been under the Taliban rule for almost four years now. However, it still is far from being treated normally by the world. Meanwhile, it is China that is at the forefront to help Afghanistan get accepted by the world community, so that its dealings with the country are legitimised. In return, the cash and resource-strapped Taliban have stuck to praising the Chinese engagement consistently. Such public pronouncements by the Taliban are perhaps not only an attempt to paper over growing Chinese apprehensions against tangible lack of conducive investment environment at the ground inside Afghanistan but also aim towards boosting China's confidence. The Taliban government wants to leverage the "optics" of engagement with China, especially against the West as it continues to treat it as a pariah.⁵⁴

The Wakhan road is also about the Taliban "showing its neighbours that it could govern the country", despite the project being "devoid of practical access and economic value".⁵⁵ Hence, it is of great symbolic value for Afghanistan.

- 2. Falling out with Pakistan:** The Taliban have decided to adopt some practices- including fundamental tenets on territoriality and

⁵³ Neeraj Naithani and Prashant Agarwal, "Overview of Karakoram Highway/ CPEC Connectivity to Xinjiang and Gilgit Baltistan", *Journal of Mountain Research*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2023, p. 168, at https://jmr.sharadpauri.org/papers/18_1_2023/17_JMR_2023_Naithani.pdf (Accessed 19 December 2024).

⁵⁴ "Why the Wakhan Corridor can Boost Afghanistan's Trade with China", *TRT World*, 26 January 2024, at <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-the-wakhan-corridor-can-boost-afghanistans-trade-with-china-16779064> (Accessed 17 February 2025).

⁵⁵ Ziwen, "Why China is Wary of Opening Up Afghanistan's New Road to Xinjiang", n. 24.

ethnic contiguities- of the previous government in conducting foreign relations. As a result, their relationship with Pakistan has deteriorated in recent months. For instance, the Taliban have refused to grant concessions to Pakistan that the latter expected, especially resisting Pakistan's unilateral measures to demarcate borders on the Durand Line. An Afghan national has been blamed by Pakistan for a suicide attack on the Chinese engineers in Bisham in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in March 2024; but this was denied by Afghanistan.⁵⁶ The Taliban has also refused to blindly obey Pakistani diktats on curbing the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the wake of the group's increased attacks inside Pakistan.⁵⁷

With regard to the Wakhan road, the Taliban have often stated that they desire to reduce reliance on Pakistani ports; the recent stand-off where Pakistan sealed borders had a damaging effect on Afghan trade, with the country losing millions of dollars. Afghanistan under the Taliban have some ambitions to break free from Pakistani constraints and be able to function independently. However, such prospects look fanciful and unless current conflict dynamics transform, it is clear, Pakistan will create as many hurdles in the Taliban designs-especially that have to do with making Pakistan logistically redundant.

3. **Other Neighbourhood Hangovers:** The Taliban have been vocal about their desire to be a part of the international network of connectivity, especially those helmed by China. However, the extension of CPEC or the China–Afghanistan–Tajikistan corridor has been met with a rather subdued response.

⁵⁶ “Pakistan's military says recent suicide attack that killed 5 Chinese was planned in Afghanistan”, *The Hindu*, 7 May 2024, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistans-military-says-recent-suicide-attack-that-killed-5-chinese-was-planned-in-afghanistan/article68150411.ece> (Accessed 23 December 2024).

⁵⁷ “Pakistan is furious with the Afghan Taliban”, *The Economist*, 6 February 2025, at <https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/02/06/pakistan-is-furious-with-the-afghan-taliban> (Accessed 17 June 2025).

BROAD STATE OF CHINA-AFGHANISTAN BILATERAL ENGAGEMENT, SINCE THE US EXIT

The site of Mes Aynak, in the Logar province in Afghanistan, is known to house the second-largest copper reserve in the world—11.5 million tonnes of copper.⁵⁸ In 2008, a consortium of Chinese companies, Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper, signed a 30-year mining contract during the Karzai administration. China paid US\$ 3 billion for the mining rights. However, the Taliban insurgency, the NATO troops stationed there and the discovery of important Buddhist sites in the area made it difficult to start mining. Recently, the project has been restarted, but the actual mining work may not start till later. The construction is now underway for a 9 km-long road connecting the capital, Kabul, to Logar province and then, to the Aynak mining area.⁵⁹

Apart from this, China is involved in the following projects or activities in Afghanistan:

1. In November 2022, the Pine Nut Air Corridor that was established in 2018 was revived. As a result, Afghanistan “imported more than 1,000 tons of pine nuts” to China.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ “Mes Aynak: World’s Second-largest Exploitable Copper Depos”, *The Kabul Times*, 25 July 2024, at <https://thekabultimes.com/mes-aynak-worlds-second-largest-exploitable-copper-depos/> (Accessed 17 January 2025).

⁶⁰ Rustam Ali Seerat, "China Navigates a New Afghanistan with the Taliban as its Rulers", Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 5 July 2024, at <https://www.freiheit.org/south-asia/china-navigates-new-afghanistan-taliban-its-rulers>; Also see: "Promoting the high-quality development of the BRI Ensuring China-Afghanistan friendship sails steadily", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 15

2. In August 2023, seven contracts were signed covering the extraction and processing of gold, copper, iron, lead and zinc in four Afghan provinces, namely, Takhar, Ghor, Herat and Logar.⁶¹
3. According to the Taliban's Ministry of Mine and Petroleum, in 2023, a Chinese company, Gochin, expressed willingness to invest US\$ 10 billion on Afghanistan's lithium deposits.⁶² Currently, China is exploring minerals in several Afghan provinces: gold and gemstones in Badakhshan; copper reserves in Balkh; rare earth minerals in Helmand; iron ore in Herat; and iron, copper and precious stones in Kandahar.⁶³
4. In July 2024, Mawlawi Ataullah Omari, the acting Minister of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock of Afghanistan, highlighted the country's natural and high-quality agricultural products in a meeting with Chinese traders. He emphasised that China represents a significant market for Afghan fruits and agricultural products.⁶⁴
5. A Chinese investor, in 2024, in a meeting with the Deputy Minister of Industry and Commerce, Mawlawi Ahmadullah Zahid, said

November 2022, at http://af.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202211/t20221115_10975719.htm; "Afghans crack open opportunity from China-bound pine nut trade", *Xinhua*, 23 June 2024, at <https://english.news.cn/20240623/82475443b2974cdcbaab6492aa878e7e/c.html> (all accessed 23 December 2024).

⁶¹ Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Sign Multibillion-dollar Afghan Mining Deals", *Voice of America*, 31 August 2023, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-sign-multibillion-dollar-afghan-mining-deals/7249135.html> (Accessed 9 December 2024).

⁶² "Chinese Company Offers \$10 Billion to the Taliban for Access to Lithium Deposits", *Kabul Now*, 13 April 2023, at <https://kabulnow.com/2023/04/chinese-company-offers-10-billion-to-the-taliban-for-access-to-lithium-deposits/> (Accessed 29 December 2024).

⁶³ "Wakhan Corridor: Vital for CPEC and BRI", *Pakistan Today*, n. 21.

⁶⁴ "Agriculture Minister Highlights Agricultural Trade Opportunities with Chinese Investors", *Bakhtar News*, 17 July 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/agriculture-minister-highlights-agricultural-trade-opportunities-with-chinese-investors/> (Accessed 7 December 2024).

that he was ready to invest US\$ 40 million for establishing a solar panel producing and installing factory in Afghanistan.⁶⁵

6. Afghanistan and China reached another agreement on export of 10,000 tons of cotton. The agreement was finalised in the presence of representatives of Afghan and Chinese companies- Afghan White Gold and Shanghai Chuban Textile respectively. The meeting was held on the side-lines of the National Export Day celebration in 2024 and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund (Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) and Nooruddin Azizi (acting Minister of Industry and Commerce) were present during the signing of the agreement.⁶⁶
7. In October 2024, a direct freight train link between Afghanistan and China was inaugurated, as part of the BRI. According to Bilal Karimi, the Taliban government's ambassador to Beijing, the train would connect Jiangsu province of China with Afghanistan's Hairatan in Balkh province. Responding to concerns about high import duties, China announced zero tariff on exports from Afghanistan, to bolster trade and “support Afghanistan’s economy”.⁶⁷

International Handholding

China has also made numerous attempts to internationally prop up the Taliban government by: pushing for greater engagement using the SCO platform; criticising the UN Security Council travel bans on Taliban officials as “counterproductive”; and applauding the third UN-

⁶⁵ “Chinese Investor to Establish Solar Producing Factory in Afghanistan”, *The Kabul Times*, 28 July 2024, at <https://thekabultimes.com/chinese-investor-to-establish-solar-producing-factory-in-afghanistan/> (Accessed 27 December 2024).

⁶⁶ “Afghanistan and China Ink \$25 Million USD Cotton Export Agreement”, *Bakhtar News Agency*, 11 July 2024, at <https://www.bakhtarnews.af/en/afghanistan-and-china-ink-25-million-usd-cotton-export-agreement/> (Accessed 20 December 2024).

⁶⁷ “Afghanistan–China Freight Train Inaugurated”, *Amu TV*, 31 October 2024, at <https://amu.tv/134191/> (Accessed 26 December 2024).

organised Doha meeting on Afghanistan for securing Taliban participation.

An important argument in this regard is as follows:

Taliban officials have praised China's engagement stance and called on China to continue to be a friend internationally. On the one hand, reincorporating Afghanistan into the international community could allow for adjusting international sanctions, facilitating greater ease of access for Chinese businesses to Afghanistan. At the same time, it would also be a win for China's model of bilateral relations, which frequently advocates non-interference in what its government considers countries' "internal affairs".⁶⁸

GOING FORWARD: AT GEOPOLITICAL CROSSROADS

Some years ago, there was a debate whether the Wakhan Corridor via western China could be used as an alternate logistics supply route for the NATO forces in Afghanistan. The issue gained significance due to the deteriorating equation between the US and Pakistan, especially as the latter briefly debarred the transit of NATO supply trucks through its territory. The Pakistan government stopped land transit facilities for trucks and containers carrying supplies to NATO forces in Afghanistan from Karachi after a drone attack on Pakistan Army's Salala checkpost, in Mohmond agency, on 26 November 2011.⁶⁹ The NATO trucks were also subject to recurring attacks by the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda; they were either torched or seized by militants on these routes. However, at that point of time, China excused itself on the pretext that it was not in favour of opening up its Muslim-dominated province (read Xinjiang) to a radicalised and unstable Af-Pak region.

⁶⁸ Godek, "China's Cautious Quest to Draw Afghanistan Back into the Fold", n. 2.

⁶⁹ Ahmad Rashid Malik, "The Salala Incident: Implications for the Pakistan-United States ties", *Strategic Studies*, 32 (4), Winter 2012 & Spring, 2013, at https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/48527624.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A5bfa8197233e6891130bb064465c22b5&ab_segments=&initiator=&acceptTC=1 (Accessed 24 December 2024).

There was a point in recent history when some fleeting discussions were taking place as to whether the US had solicited China to facilitate a base in the Wakhan area. At that point of time, the discussion was mainly around how that could impact China's image especially given the fact that by then it was started to being seen as an adversary of the Americans. The dilemma for the Chinese was largely whether to straight away avoid being embroiled in the US's messy interventions in the region or seek options on bargaining the handover of Uighurs held in Guantanamo Bay and Taiwan.⁷⁰ Much before all this, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had investigated the potentiality of Wakhan Corridor acting as a link between China and Afghanistan. The agency concluded that the reports that the Chinese were arming the insurgents in Afghanistan directly through the Wakhan, or that they had a presence in the corridor, could not be established.⁷¹

All said and done, China's eye on Afghanistan is not new. However, after the withdrawal of the allied Western forces, it has been showing more interest in Afghanistan. The withdrawal has ushered in new synergies in China's engagement as it looks to develop multidimensional relations with Kabul. Still, China is considered far from real, tangible strategic partner of the Taliban-led Afghanistan. This is despite the departure of the West from Afghanistan's strategic landscape, as least for the time being.

It is evident that China has been rather eager to portray itself “as the most determined foreign player” in Afghanistan. So, what is keeping it from going full throttle? China may have gone to great lengths to criticise the West's approach towards Afghanistan, but the truth remains it seems to have been aspiring to undermine the US without its skin in the game. It is (over) cautious and risk averse, probably in view of all that has been happening in Pakistan with its workers and resources.

⁷⁰ “China: Xinjiang's Wakhan Corridor as US Base?”, Chennai Centre for China Studies, 31 December 2009, at <https://www.c3sindia.org/post/china-xinjiang-s-wakhan-corridor-as-us-base> (Accessed 23 December 2024).

⁷¹ “The Wakhan Corridor: An Unlikely Afghan–China Link”, CIA, Research Paper, 21 February 2006, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP81B00401R000600120001-5.pdf> (Accessed 5 December 2024).

Otherwise, what could explain restoring diplomatic ties and posting ambassador without a formal recognition of the Taliban regime? There is certain half-heartedness. This is probably because it fears completely breaking ranks with the general attitude of the international community.⁷²

China's four-part plan, which was presented at the Group of Twenty (G20) summit in November 2021, was pitched against the US and the West's attempt, in general, to isolate the Taliban regime.⁷³ Ever since the exit in 2021 the US-led west had adopted a punitive approach to strangle the Taliban government regime by pressure of frozen accounts and assets.

After the withdrawal of the US, Beijing has taken a pro-engagement stance vis-à-vis the Taliban. This is obvious from the recent statement of Ambassador Zhao Xing that “economic trade and personal exchanges are becoming frequent”.⁷⁴ Of course, in order to manage risk and due to their strategic foresightedness, the Chinese have been in touch with the Taliban even before they assumed power in August 2021. In fact, China was consistently engaging the Taliban since 2015 onwards; and by 2020, it was providing the Taliban some assurance of investment in Afghanistan if they promised stability and order once the US exited.⁷⁵

However, there are limits to what the Chinese can do. There are tangible “hesitations on ground” that have kept the bilateral dealings far from maximum benefit or even optimal level. China is moving at a “measured

⁷² “China Quietly Expanding Influence in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan”, *The Hindu*, 1 February 2024, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-quietly-expanding-influence-in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/article67796809.ece> (Accessed 28 December 2024).

⁷³ “Wang Yi Attends the G20 Extraordinary Leaders’ Meeting on Afghanistan”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, 12 October 2021, at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/jj/2020zt/kjgzbdfyyq/202406/t20240606_11380205.html (Accessed 20 December 2024).

⁷⁴ Godek, “China’s Cautious Quest to Draw Afghanistan Back into the Fold”, n. 2.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

pace”, and exercising its option with “great caution”.⁷⁶ The focus is on long-term projects: agriculture; regional connectivity; and critical materials, like copper and lithium. Meanwhile, China projects that it is indeed serious about its objectives in Afghanistan and has the potential to fill the vacuum left behind by the withdrawal of the US.

The challenge for China now is to cohere its broader aspirational goals of establishing itself as a benevolent superpower that—unlike the West, especially the US—projects itself as not interfering in the internal affairs of countries it is involved with, while also maximising its niche by investing in lucrative avenues in those places, that gel with its global objectives, strategic needs and aspirations.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

EXTENSION OF THE CPEC TO AFGHANISTAN: A BRIDGE OR A BARRIER?

BACKDROP

A fortnight after India–Pakistan hostilities in the aftermath of the Pahalgam massacre, a China–Pakistan–Afghanistan trilateral meeting was held on 21 May 2025 in Beijing. The meeting, amongst other things, re-endorsed the idea of extending the CPEC to Afghanistan.¹ The trilateral format/mechanism, in place since 2017, has been used as a platform for enunciation of coordination and cooperation between the three countries, particularly with regard to the CPEC’s extension. Before this, a trilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan was held in Islamabad on 9 May 2023. The joint statement issued at the end had a key announcement concerning the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan. It stated: “The three sides reaffirmed their resolve to fully harness Afghanistan’s potential as a hub for regional connectivity...Reaffirming their commitment to further the trilateral cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and to jointly extend the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan.”²

¹ “China, Pakistan, Afghanistan Meet in Beijing, Decide to Expand CPEC”, *The Hindu*, 21 May 2025, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-pak-afghanistan-meet-in-beijing-decide-to-expand-cpec/article69601718.ece> (Accessed 11 January 2025).

² “Joint Statement of the 5th China–Afghanistan–Pakistan Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in India, 9 May 2023, at http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202305/t20230509_11073522.htm (Accessed 14 January 2025).

Similarly, the joint statement after the fourth round of Pakistan–China Foreign Ministers’ Strategic Dialogue noted:

Stressing that peace and stability in Afghanistan is vital for socio-economic development, connectivity and prosperity in the region, the two sides agreed to continue their humanitarian and economic assistance for the Afghan people and enhance development cooperation in Afghanistan, including through extension of CPEC to Afghanistan.³

The two sides used the occasion to showcase the CPEC “as a shining example of Belt and Road cooperation which has accelerated socio-economic development, job creation and improvement of people’s livelihoods in Pakistan.”⁴

This was not the first time that the CPEC’s extension to Afghanistan had been discussed by the two countries. The above-mentioned was a mere reiteration of the previously expressed intent of China and Pakistan—one that had unequivocal acceptance of Afghanistan even before the Taliban seized control in Kabul.⁵ Not long ago, on 24 March 2022, the Taliban foreign ministry spokesperson, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, had tweeted after a meeting between the Taliban interim Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, and the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, that the two sides had discussed “Afghanistan’s role in CPEC”.⁶

³ “4th Round of Pakistan–China Foreign Ministers’ Strategic Dialogue”, Joint Press Release, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Antigua and Barbuda, 7 May 2023, at http://ag.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202305/t20230507_11071904.htm (Accessed 30 December 2024).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Xie Jun and Chu Daye, “Extension of CPEC into Afghanistan to Boost Local Exports, Journey of Peace: Analysts”, *Global Times*, 13 July 2021, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228518.shtml> (Accessed 1 February 2025).

⁶ R.H. Laskar, “What Extending CPEC to Afghanistan will Mean for China, Pakistan and India”, *Hindustan Times*, 29 March 2022, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/what-extending-cpec-to-afghanistan-will-mean-for-china-pakistan-and-india-101648543672456.html> (Accessed 19 February 2025).

With the CPEC unfolding in parts of Pakistan and PoK for almost a decade now, references to extending the corridor to Afghanistan have popped up at intervals. Amidst the degenerating situation in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the US forces, it has been China, in partnership with its foremost ally, Pakistan, that clinched its centrality in determining Afghanistan's geopolitics.⁷

THE RUN-UP

Before, the proposed extension of CPEC to Afghanistan was formally announced at the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral meeting on 9 May 2023, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs came out with the comprehensive position paper on Afghanistan on 12 April 2023—a day before it attended the Fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighboring States at Samarkand in Uzbekistan.⁸ In the document, China posited:

Adhering to the “Three Respects” and “Three Nevers”. China respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, respects the independent choices made by the Afghan people, and respects the religious beliefs and national customs of Afghanistan. China never interferes in Afghanistan’s internal affairs, never seeks selfish interests in Afghanistan, and never pursues so-called sphere of influence.⁹

⁷ For details, see Feng Zhang, “China’s New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal”, *LSE Public Policy Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2022, at <https://ppr.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/lseppr.52> (Accessed 19 December 2024).

⁸ “Samarkand Declaration of the Fourth Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan’s Neighboring States”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 14 April 2023, at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367494.htm#:>:text=2023%2010%3A44-%20Fourth%20Meeting%20of%20Foreign%20Ministers%20of%20Afghanistan's%20Neighboring%20States, and%20Uzbekistan%20attended%20the%20meeting (Accessed 11 November 2024).

⁹ “China’s Position on the Afghan Issue”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 12 April 2023, at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/xwlb_663352/202304/t20230412_11057785.html (Accessed 20 February 2025).

Though the paper did not directly name the CPEC's spread into Afghanistan, it did so tangentially, observing: "China welcomes Afghanistan's participation in Belt and Road cooperation and supports Afghanistan's integration into regional economic cooperation and connectivity that will transform Afghanistan from a 'land-locked country' to a 'land-linked country'."¹⁰

The position paper, a lash-out against West's approach in Afghanistan suggested alternative models for the same. In general, it expressed Beijing's broader contempt for Western intervention in Afghanistan, particularly disparaging the gross failure of the US.¹¹ It also emphasised China's resolve to fight the three evils, that is, the spectres of terrorism, extremism and separatism. While urging countries to refrain from intervening in Afghanistan, it noted: "Relevant countries should not attempt to re-deploy military facilities in Afghanistan and its neighbourhood, practice double standards on counter-terrorism, or advance their geopolitical agenda by supporting or conniving at terrorism."¹²

The issue of extending CPEC into Afghanistan was also discussed and reiterated at the Strategic Dialogue between China and Pakistan on 6 May 2023.¹³ Before this, it was also taken up at the meeting between the foreign ministers of China and Afghanistan in March 2023.¹⁴

It is interesting to take note of certain developments that occurred around the same time as of the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "4th round of Pakistan-China Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue Joint Press Release", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 7 May 2023 , at http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202305/t20230507_11071904.htm (Accessed 23 September 2024).

¹⁴ Rezaul H Laskar, "What extending CPEC to Afghanistan will mean for China, Pakistan, and India", n. 6.

meeting. Some of it could geopolitically resonate with the announcement regarding CPEC's proposed extension. On 4–5 May 2023, the SCO Foreign Ministers Summit was hosted in Goa. On New Delhi's invitation, the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto, also participated. However, his unsavoury remarks in the media ratcheted up the bilateral acrimony with India, the summit's host that year.¹⁵ In addition, in May 2023 itself, India successfully hosted the G20 Tourism Summit in Srinagar towards the end of May. Both Pakistan and China expressed reservations on the choice of venue in J&K for this summit. China, in fact, refused to send delegates to the summit despite being a G20 member.¹⁶

Besides, quite intriguingly, by the time of the announcement concerning the proposed extension, on the security front, the Taliban–Pakistan wedge widened in the wake of augmented TTP attacks inside Pakistan. The Taliban's refusal to comply with Pakistan's diktat on reining in the group led to an unsettling furore in the bilateral equations across the Durand Line.

THE GROUNDWORK: DESIGN, DIRECTION, RATIONALES

The drivers for the proposition concerning CPEC's branching out may look geopolitically mundane or ordinary. Nonetheless, it is important to discern individual intentions as well as combined interests and preferences of the parties involved, namely, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan (before one can draw conclusions and give a few projections based on those). Here, it is also important to gauge whether the individual intentions converge and if yes, to what extent?

¹⁵ “Bilawal Bhutto on what strained India-Pakistan ties: ‘Ending J&K. . .’”, *Mint*, 5 May 2023, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/bilawal-bhutto-zardari-on-what-strained-india-pakistan-ties-ending-special-status-of-kashmir-in-2019-11683288032816.html> (Accessed 25 November 2024).

¹⁶ Alka Jain, “Explained: Why China and Turkey won't attend the G20 meet in Srinagar”, *Mint*, 22 May 2023, at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/explained-why-china-and-turkey-wont-attend-the-g20-meet-in-srinagar-11684727064702.html> (Accessed 25 October 2024).

Let us, first and foremost, consider China. What is it that brings China to Afghanistan, a volatile, unstable and divided country, infamously called the ‘graveyard of empires’? The most important factor, of course, is the geography China shares with Afghanistan. Both China and Pakistan (courtesy PoK) sit across the strategic Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province.

China has a history of engagement with Kabul, also described as an “ambiguous, transactional relationship” with whichever government held power.¹⁷ However, in the post US-NATO Afghanistan under the Taliban, China is seen punching its strategic weight emerging as a key player in influencing Afghanistan’s geopolitical trajectory.

Other more rudimentary—geopolitical or geo-economic—interests that China is likely to have in Afghanistan could be centred on trillions of dollars of (worth anything between US\$ 1–3 trillion) mineral wealth—especially lithium.¹⁸ China’s investment in the Aynak copper mines is an indicator of its eyes on Afghanistan’s minerals. There is a budding discourse on China’s interests in Afghanistan’s mineral wealth, especially rare earth (mineral extraction).

Last but not least, China’s approach towards Pakistan and Afghanistan is niched in its South Asia strategy, with India—Pakistan hostility as the pivotal parameter. By raking up the CPEC in Afghanistan—a sore point between India and “adversity-tested” allies, Pakistan and China—

¹⁷ Betsy Joles, “Too Big to Fail: China Eyes Afghanistan Investment amid Fears of State Collapse”, *Nikkei Asia*, 12 January 2022, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Too-big-to-fail-China-eyes-Afghanistan-investment-amid-fears-of-state-collapse> (Accessed 13 February 2025).

¹⁸ Iain Marlow and Enda Curran, “As US exits Afghanistan, China eyes \$1 trillion in minerals”, *Al Jazeera* (Bloomberg), 24 August 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/24/as-us-exits-afghanistan-china-eyes-1-trillion-in-minerals>; Devrat Pandey, “China inches closer to Afghanistan’s rare Earth reserves with new oil deal”, *India Today*, 23 January 2023, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/china-inches-closer-to-afghanistan-rare-earth-reserves-with-new-oil-deal-2325439-2023-01-23> (Both accessed 11 September 2024).

China may be re-touching what has remained a raw nerve between the South Asian neighbours.¹⁹

With regard to Afghanistan, Pakistan has retained its centrality through the decades. Aided by the vast geography straddled between the two countries, successive establishments in Pakistan have readily peddled the agenda of external powers—be it the US and now, China.

Post US withdrawal in August 2021, Pakistan presided over the Taliban takeover as the Afghans broke the shackles of “slavery”; and in the mayhem that followed, Pakistan showed up at the helm.²⁰ Indeed, the country was visibly elated after the overthrow of Ashraf Ghani-led democratic set-up, which it despised for its pro-India approach.²¹ Khalil Haqqani (an uncle of Haqqani Network chief, Sirajuddin Haqqani—once referred as “veritable arm of the ISI” by Admiral Mike Mullen 2011²²), a US-designated terrorist with a bounty of US\$ 5 million, emerged as a key figure in the 2021 Afghan mayhem. After the fall of Kabul, he was put in charge of security. Khalil Haqqani had close links with Pakistan; and his visits to Rawalpindi have been acknowledged.²³ He also served as a link between the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda. His prominence after the Kabul takeover was a striking indication of Pakistan’s hold over the state of affairs.

¹⁹ Michael D. Swaine, “China and the ‘AfPak’ Issue”, *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 31, p. 2, 23 February 2010, at <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/CLM31MS.pdf> (Accessed 11 May 2025).

²⁰ “PM Imran talks about overpowering ‘shackles of slavery’ at Single National Curriculum launch”, *Dawn*, 16 August 2021, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1640988> (Accessed 16 December 2024).

²¹ For details: Zahid Ullah, “Contextualising the Taliban redux (2021): is the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan a Pyrrhic Victory for Pakistan?”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33, (7), 2022, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2022.2118417#d1e131> (Accessed 18 June 2025).

²² Pat Frost, “Adm. Mike Mullen Speaks out on Pakistan’s ISI’s Duplicity”, *Foreign Policy Association*, 23 September 2011, at <https://fpa.org/adm-mike-mullen-speaks-out-on-pakistans-isis-duplicity/> (Accessed 24 July 2024).

²³ Jeff M. Smith, “The Haqqani Network: The New Kingmakers in Kabul”, *War on the Rocks*, 12 November 2021, at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-haqqani-network-afghanistans-new-power-players/> (Accessed 22 December 2024).

In the current scenario, by promoting the idea of CPEC's extension into Afghanistan, Pakistan seeks to reinforce the 'broker role' it once offered to the US. In that capacity, Pakistan made billions through reimbursements and other forms of US military assistance. It remains to be seen how generous the Chinese side will be in terms of actual investments and how they choose to channel it. Pakistan seemingly hopes to maintain the role of a facilitator for China, exercise leverages on Afghan government via the Chinese and educate the Chinese in handling the Taliban given decades of Pakistan–Taliban consort.

Sandwiched between the two geopolitical aspirations is the recognition-starved Taliban government in Afghanistan, which is struggling without cash and resources to run the country. Soon after the withdrawal, the US froze its assets and financial resources that were available to the previous government in Kabul. Despite the unfolding humanitarian crisis, the increased pressure to unfreeze the assets did not fructify. The previous Taliban government had survived on narcotics wealth. However, this time around, the challenges for the new Taliban government were umpteen given the intense scanner they found themselves under.

Afghanistan, which had been on board the BRI for some time, attended the 2017 BRI Summit under the Ghani dispensation. Even the Taliban, whose engagement with China is old, opened up to the BRI, particularly the CPEC, early on in September 2021.²⁴ It was only after assuming power that they were able to tangibly locate themselves in the spectrum of a rather aggressive geopolitical and geo-economic agenda fostered by Beijing—a geopolitical cult that germinated while they were fighting the US-led NATO forces inside Afghanistan. Earlier too, the Taliban forces, though distracted, were not away from the hype involving the CPEC next door. The Chinese maintained a rapport with the Taliban even as the rest of the world ostracised them as primitive, barbaric perpetrators of violence.

²⁴ “Taliban Led Afghanistan Joins China's 60 Billion CPEC Project”, *Asia.net*, 6 September 2021, at <https://newsable.asianetnews.com/world/taliban-led-afghanistan-joins-china-s-60-billion-cpec-project-vpn-qz0csy> (Accessed 14 February 2025).

The recent talks of billions of dollars of investment in connectivity and infrastructure in Pakistan have generated even greater aspirations in Afghanistan. The Taliban know that not only do the Chinese have deep pockets but they also have been far more receptive to them than the rest of the world. At the moment, however, the Taliban may not be interested in the magnitude or extent of spread of the CPEC, or its net tangibility for Afghanistan. In other words, improved connectivity, better roads and infrastructure may be passive on their priorities right now. What they seem to welcome is the inflow of funds that the CPEC's extension may accrue.

Significantly, though the CPEC's extension in Afghanistan has been announced and the idea has been on the anvil for a while, details available on its course and manifestations are rather scant. This is not peculiar in view of the overall prevalent opacity concerning the CPEC. It is possible that just like Pakistan, where existing Chinese projects were subsumed under the CPEC once it was unveiled in 2015, in Afghanistan, too, the ongoing China-aided projects will be absorbed under the CPEC umbrella. To begin with, the Chinese side has expressed its plan to build a road between Peshawar and Kabul.²⁵ Some of the potential projects that could additionally be in store also need to be taken into account. With Afghanistan's USP as the intersection of South, Central and West Asia, some initial projects CPEC's extension may entail could be those amongst: Rail Line between Peshawar-Jalalabad (Extension of ML-1 by 154 Kms); Possibilities of Joint management of common rivers- especially like works-in-progress under CPEC in Pakistan i.e. Kunar River over which a hydro power project is underway; and Oil and mineral extraction exercises- in this however, few have made headways despite involvement of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) like the Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company & China Metallurgical Group Corp.

²⁵ "Afghanistan: China in Talks with Taliban to Expand CPEC to Kabul", *Business Standard*, 25 August 2021, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/afghanistan-china-in-talks-with-taliban-to-expand-cpec-to-kabul-121082501257_1.html (Accessed 7 January 2025).

THE MEETING GROUND: CHINA-PAKISTAN- AFGHANISTAN TRIPARTITE—ADHESION OR CONUNDRUM?

Given CPEC's geopolitical capital, it can serve to string together, for a while, the three countries geographically adjoined towards strategic and economic interests. In the extant geopolitical setting, while it can be safely assumed that “no bonds of affection or trust bind China and the Taliban”, all three are in need of each other to legitimise their role and actions.²⁶

China's post-US withdrawal exuberance, coupled with its pointed critique of the West's missteps in Afghanistan—particularly the imposition of rigid democratic models—has thrust upon Beijing some semblance of the very global leadership role it has long aspired to acquire. The onus is now on China to succeed where the West faltered, and to offer an alternative vision for stability and governance. The American aspirations of transforming an intrinsically “tribal, ethnically divided, illiberal, and undemocratic society”²⁷ provoked “the rapid emergence of resistance, insurgency, and anarchy, and to the resultant collapse of American plans for the transformation of Afghanistan into a functioning democracy.”²⁸

China has bolstered its position through years of engagement with the Taliban. For the time being, therefore, it will want to be seen as proactive in that capacity, as long as the Taliban keep their promise to rein in the

²⁶ “China is Happy to see America Humbled in Afghanistan”, *The Economist*, 21 August 2021, at <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/08/21/china-is-happy-to-see-america-humbled-in-afghanistan> (Accessed 20 January 2025).

²⁷ Cora Sol Goldstein, “The Afghanistan Experience: Democratization by Force”, *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, Vol. 42, No. 3, Autumn 2012, p. 26, at <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3054&context=parameters> (Accessed 19 June 2025).

²⁸ Ibid., p. 30. Also see: Sabine Fischer and Angela Stanzel, “Afghanistan: The West Fails—A Win for China and Russia?: The Views from Beijing and Moscow”, SWP Comment 2021/C 50, 22 September 2021, at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C50/> (Accessed 18 October 2024).

Uighur networks in Afghanistan; safeguard Chinese interests on their soil; continue high praise for China; and endorse China's global role and, more importantly, contrast it to the previous incumbent, the US. There is some risk management in place as well. In Afghanistan, China is mostly doing it the multilateral way—mitigating potential risks of infamy—making it unlikely that it will be held solely responsible if things go wrong.

What the cash-strapped Taliban are perhaps looking for is an immediate flow of fund, one that could diversify their sources of income. They do not have much choice on the issue.²⁹ For years, the Taliban survived on illegal narcotics trade to the tune of millions: “Estimates of the Taliban’s annual earnings from the illicit drug economy range from \$100m–\$400m.”³⁰ Besides, the Taliban indulged in extorting taxes from infrastructure activities that landed the US dollars in their hands as these projects were funded by the US. They also extracted money from truckers ferrying the NATO supplies, taxed Afghan nationals/traders for fuel and constructions material and coerced taxes from legal and illegal mining activities to the tune of millions of dollars. Essentially, instead of the usual practice of plunder, loot and extortion, the Taliban, who now run the state, perhaps aspire to usher in/metamorphise into ‘clean’ sources of fund generation and circulation. In the quest for recognition by the world, the Taliban understand that the group must undergo confidence-inspiring image makeover that can attract big powers, including/inspired by China, to invest in the country.

While the three sides seem to be charting a common course via the CPEC, Pakistan will remain central as the facilitator of the troika. Thus, despite the recent decline in Islamabad–Kabul ties, Pakistan is the factor to reckon with. For instance, it was Pakistan that hosted the trilateral

²⁹ “Why did China Include Cash-strapped & ‘Friendless’ Afghanistan in CPEC?”, *Mint*, 10 May 2023, at <https://www.livemint.com/videos/why-did-china-include-cash-strapped-friendless-afghanistan-in-cpec-11683719616512.html> (Accessed 11 December 2024).

³⁰ “Afghanistan: How do the Taliban Make Money?”, *BBC*, 28 August 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-46554097> (Accessed 30 November 2024).

where the CPEC's extension was promulgated. It was also Pakistan that persuaded the UN to lift the travel ban on acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Amir Khan Muttaqi, to allow him to travel to Islamabad. In a letter to the 15-member Security Council Taliban sanctions committee, Pakistan's UN mission requested an exemption for Muttaqi, allowing him to travel between 6–9 May 2023, "for a meeting with the foreign ministers of Pakistan and China." The letter did not say what the ministers would discuss, but stated that Pakistan would cover all costs associated with Muttaqi's trip.³¹ Muttaqi's impending arrival was announced even before the Security Council clearance came through.³² Hence, irrespective of the conflictual contours in the Taliban–Pakistan relationship—which surface from time to time, especially with regard to the TTP—the fact remains that Pakistan is unavoidable for Afghanistan. Also, good or bad, Afghanistan is strategically too precious for Pakistan in its conflict matrix with India.

Still, there are potential setbacks. The ghastly attack on a Kabul hotel frequented by Chinese, in December 2022, is a grim reminder of the perils deeply embedded in the war-ravaged, violence-ridden region of Afghanistan–Pakistan.³³ Thus, security factor remains a challenge and the key denominator of how high-sounding promises of development and prosperity are materialised by countries such as China undertaking those big initiatives. Whether Chinese investments will find structural support in Afghanistan—socially tattered and economically dysfunctional—remains to be seen. "Domestic stability, effective

³¹ "U.N. Says Taliban Envoy can Meet Pakistan, China Ministers Next Week", *The Hindu*, 2 May 2023, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/un-says-taliban-envoy-can-meet-pakistan-china-ministers-next-week/article66801526.ece> (Accessed 5 January 2025).

³² "Taliban FM to Meet Pakistan, China Foreign Ministers: Media", *Al Jazeera*, 2 May 2023, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/2/taliban-fm-to-meet-pakistan-china-foreign-ministers-media> (Accessed 30 December 2024).

³³ Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai, "After the Kabul Hotel Attack: The Taliban and China Confront Security Challenges in Afghanistan", *China Brief*, 23 (1), 19 January 2023, at <https://jamestown.org/program/after-the-kabul-hotel-attack-the-taliban-and-china-confront-security-challenges-in-afghanistan/> (Accessed 31 May 2025).

governance and international recognition” are some of the prerequisite fundamentals.³⁴ Besides, the US presence in Afghanistan was a default security cover for all external players, including China, which now may have to “devote significant resources to securing any future projects”.³⁵

However, by taking the Taliban on board CPEC, China and Pakistan must be anticipating leverages accruing from the Taliban’s hold over the TTP—the group responsible for targeting CPEC projects in past.

WHAT THUS AUGURS?

The pronouncement on CPEC’s Afghanistan extension in 2023 elicited less than usual frenzy compared to developments on anything pertaining to the corridor, partly because this is not the first time such intentions were expressed. The CPEC, for many years now, has remained mired in controversies, including being considered a white elephant and probably one of the prime reasons for the collapse of Pakistan’s economy. The juxtaposition of CPEC’s shining projections with the reality of Pakistan’s economic woes has greatly tarnished the reputation of the project. Once the blue-eyed project of the BRI, the downturn theories and managing of expectations, especially since the onset of Pakistan’s economic crisis (coupled with China’s own recession), as well as the dents showing in China’s BRI campaign and the unravelling of financial liabilities in participant countries, have all significantly impacted regional perceptions.

With the CPEC’s downturn and questions on the overall dwindling fortunes of the BRI (credibility crisis), China definitely needed to say something that could rejuvenate the discourse, particularly on CPEC, to recapture/restore fading geopolitical attention. Hence, the

³⁴ Yun Sun, “Why China Hesitates to Invest in Afghanistan or Recognise the Taliban”, *South China Morning Post*, 7 October 2022, at <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3194817/why-china-hesitates-invest-afghanistan-or-recognise-taliban> (Accessed 11 February 2025).

³⁵ David Sacks, “Why Major Belt and Road Investments are not Coming to Afghanistan”, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), 24 August 2021, at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-major-belt-and-road-investments-are-not-coming-afghanistan> (Accessed 11 September 2024).

announcement on the CPEC's extension into Afghanistan came about. More particularly, a quick, formal unveiling of the CPEC extension plan may have come as both China and Pakistan realised that its potency as a strategic irritant to India has reduced.

At a more macro level, the moves regarding CPEC's future plans must be viewed in the spectrum of China's intensive western periphery strategy. China has its own compulsions of selling growth and connectivity via CPEC to development-deficit societies. Its expansive development strategy can also be seen as one of the chief propellants to safeguard its own domestic security interests. Hence, in this regard, Afghanistan's "securitisation" is also perceived as Beijing's "westward" march into Central Asia.³⁶

INDIA'S WAY FORWARD: A PROACTIVE WAIT AND WATCH—'STRATEGIC PATIENCE'

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar noted that India, like several other nations, was pursuing a "wait and watch" policy on Kabul.³⁷ India's approach was further elucidated by Harsh Vardhan Shringla, former Foreign Secretary, after his visit to the US in September 2021. He noted: "It doesn't mean you don't do anything, it means that situation is very fluid on ground, you've to see how it evolves. You've to see whether assurances that have been made publicly are actually maintained on the ground."³⁸

³⁶ Aadil Brar, "China is Overcoming Security Fears to Connect with Taliban. It will Keep LAC Dispute Alive", *The Print*, 10 May 2023, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/eye-on-china/china-is-overcoming-security-fears-to-connect-with-taliban-it-will-keep-lac-dispute-alive/1564582/> (Accessed 12 November 2024).

³⁷ "India Adopting 'Wait and Watch' Policy on Afghanistan, Says Government", *The Hindu*, 26 August 2021, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jaishankar-briefs-political-leaders-on-afghanistan-situation/article36112751.ece> (Accessed 11 May 2025).

³⁸ "India and US to Adopt a Wait and Watch Approach with Afghanistan", *The Economic Times*, 5 September 2021, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-and-us-to-adopt-a-wait-and-watch-approach-with-afghanistan/articleshow/85944043.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 25 April 2024).

Thus far, India's approach with regard to CPEC's potential on branching out to Afghanistan have been obtained from the prudence and efficiency of wait and watch. Its future options must also resonate with a similar thought-out stance or strategy.

The CPEC runs through a territory that is claimed by India as its integral part. In addition, New Delhi's stakes in Afghanistan run deep and it has remained hugely invested in the country for a prolonged duration. On both these planks, the CPEC's extension is of strategic concern to India. However, the reality that the CPEC traverses through PoK remains the core concern. CPEC's extension into Afghanistan as a strategic setback is unlikely to weigh on or reduce the centrality of PoK in India's broader opposition strategy towards the contentious corridor.

However, given India's long-standing role in Afghanistan, it is naïve to argue that the implications of CPEC's westward extension are immaterial. As noted earlier, the Sino-Pak quest to extend the CPEC into one of India's friendliest countries, irrespective of its present political reality, appears to be a brazen effort to breach India's strategic interests in the region. It is argued that Afghanistan's inclusion in the CPEC will undermine India-helmed Chabahar Port's utility/value, through which Afghanistan was hoping to obtain sea access. It is also feared that the development may lead to the "securitisation of the Khunjerab Pass—and the rest of the Pamir Knot...under the behest of bringing BRI to Afghanistan", thereby keeping the "India–China border dispute alive".³⁹ India needs to continue to patiently watch the developments on the front, while simultaneously devising a road map, cogently projecting its responses that suit exigencies as they surface on the geopolitical chessboard.

India has adroitly pitched its opposition to the CPEC by entwining it gracefully to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. If need be, India's response to the prospects of CPEC's extension into Afghanistan must be woven in a way that does not dilute its existing

³⁹ Brar, "China is Overcoming Security Fears to Connect with Taliban", n. 26.

position on the one hand, and carved with dexterity to show that while India remains committed to upholding territorial rights and sovereignty, it is not seen as regional spoiler/actor that is constraining/restraining Afghanistan's development prospects, on the other. Notwithstanding, India must not miss out on re-conveying its stated position on the CPEC during forthcoming interfaces it may have with the stakeholders and representatives of Afghan government.

CHINA'S ROLE IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN POST US-NATO WITHDRAWAL: TOWARDS HYPHENATION?

China ventured into the twenty-first century as an economic power house, with strategic weight in the region and much beyond. When 9/11 happened, China was already in a good position, barring some perennial concerns it had over securing its periphery better. The 20 years of the War on Terror coincided with China's powerful transformation, pitching it against the superpower, the US. The new Cold War, so to say, between the US and China, panned out alongside the War on Terror. While the War on Terror kept draining the resources of both the US and its NATO allies, China was engrossed in bolstering its economic and military capabilities and investing in its global power aspirations.

STARING AT THE HORIZON

China began preparations to deal with a post-US neighbourhood reality at least a decade ago. If one looks at the discourse on China's approach towards Afghanistan particularly, it is replete with evidence that China remained mindful of the exigencies that may occur, and those that China may have to put up with, once the US left the region. The initial 2014 deadline of the withdrawal was the fulcrum around which the Chinese approach was evolving in the years before the actual withdrawal in 2021. It reflected somewhat on how China was recalibrating its policy towards the region in the long term.

By the time of the US withdrawal in August 2021—preceded by chaos—China seemed to have an edge. It had already made some headway in establishing ties with the Taliban leaders. Only weeks before the 15 August takeover, Mullah Baradar, who then headed the Taliban's Doha office, was in Beijing, where he met the then Chinese Foreign

Minister, Wang Yi.¹ That image of the two leaders has been one of the defining images showcasing the extent of geopolitical churn that was being witnessed.

The term 'hyphenation' saw widespread use in the discourse surrounding the War on Terror, especially with regard to the US policy on Afghanistan–Pakistan, abbreviated as Af-Pak.² Pakistan, with its supply routes, remained at the core of US-led NATO operations in Afghanistan. It was the vehicle of US arms supplies into Afghanistan, and its critical supply routes were no less than lifeblood for the US operations. However, while doing this, when did Pakistan become a part of the problem, instead of a solution, remains to be determined. Once the US realised the complexities of Pakistan's double dealing, it tried to evolve a cohesive approach that would bring some semblance of order into Afghanistan—while extracting the best suitable actions from Pakistan and overcoming its dodges and double games, thereby minimising the damage.

China's approach towards Afghanistan and Pakistan was NOT as entwined as that of the US. However, it is beyond doubt that in the 20 years of the War on Terror, Pakistan would have been one of the chief facilitators of China's growing imprint inside Afghanistan. Pakistan knew Afghanistan like the back of its hand. This was also Pakistan's second war in Afghanistan, after the prolonged covert operations against the Soviet during the Cold War years. Pakistan's decades-old familiarity with the Taliban would, thus, have been a determining factor in easing the Taliban–China interface.

COALESCING CONGRUENCIES

In the contemporary geopolitical scenario, looking at China's priority stance towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is important to see how

¹ For concise details of the meeting, refer Ananth Krishnan and Stanley Johny, *The Comrades and the Mullahs: China, Afghanistan and the New Asian Geopolitics*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2022.

² The term 'hyphenation' has, occasionally, also been used to refer to the US's approach towards India and Pakistan. De-hyphenation and re-hyphenation are related terms that have some usage depending upon the nature and course of relevant policy approaches.

far and whether there are elements of consonance in twin-dealing i.e., dealing with both the countries in the same way. Of course, the two are situated next to each other, share a rather long border and, despite historical rivalry and territorial contestation, have much in common. Some of the key features of China's regional strategy, where there is lot of common ground between Afghanistan and Pakistan and where China seems to collectively accommodate the two, are enumerated next.

- 1. Uighur Containment Sentiment/Strategy:** The Xinjiang factor: Both Pakistan and Afghanistan straddle China's western periphery that is in turmoil, seething under secessionist sentiments. In addition, there are anti-state, anti-China—a raw nerve—undercurrents that the country is facing on the eastern front, with unrest in Hong Kong and Taiwanese assertions. Historically, taking over the Shaksgam Valley (also known as the Trans-Karakoram Tract), and later developing stakes in Gilgit-Baltistan (given its salience as the only land link between the two extremely close strategic partners), must be understood in the context of China's attempt to secure its borders. Lately, however, the problem of Uighur assertions has only become more acute. This could be due to the excesses committed by the Chinese state on Uighur Muslims. China is well versed that Pakistan and Afghanistan are fertile breeding grounds for what is considered Uighur militants, and both possess training camps and sanctuaries for them.³
- 2. Inevitable as Gateways of Connectivity:** China unveiled the One Belt One Road initiative (OBOR) in 2013, which was later renamed the BRI. This was a grand connectivity plan that aimed to connect Asia with Europe and Africa through land and water. In this westward/west-bound strategy, both Afghanistan and Pakistan are logically relevant, given that they straddle China's

³ “China Urges Pakistan to Expel Uighur Islamic Militants”, *BBC*, 31 May 2012, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18276864> (Accessed 24 March 2024).

western borders. China's extensive overtures to expand the CPEC into Afghanistan must be understood in this regard. Connectively corridors cannot be confined to a country; more so, a country like Pakistan which is struggling to rescue its economy. For economic corridors, China needs access to markets and, much more than Pakistan, it is Afghanistan's location, touching several Central Asian markets, that is key. However, Pakistan cannot be overlooked while working on Afghanistan's economic engagement as it is through Pakistan and Tajikistan that China does trade with Afghanistan. The Wakhan border between China and Afghanistan has not yet been opened for trade or travel despite Afghanistan building a road till Wakhjir Pass last year.⁴ The road has heightened China's concerns on percolation of fundamentalist jihadi elements.

3. **Harbinger of Regional Aspirations:** Pakistan is central to China's South Asia strategy where India is in a structurally dominant position. India has lingering territorial issues with China, such as un-demarcated borders, territorial claims and counterclaims. Aksai Chin, which is controlled by China, is claimed by India as a part of the former princely state of J&K. Over the years, China, which has been perennially insecure about its periphery and borders, has prioritised border settlements with many of its neighbours. The border agreements with Pakistan (a provisional one) and Afghanistan are relevant examples in this case. The border issue with India, however, is a thorn in the bilateral ties: the two fought a full-fledged war in 1962 over the same; and several skirmishes have occurred at intermittent gaps. Therefore, in India–China conflictual matrix, Pakistan is a useful partner for China, given a history of its own problems with New Delhi.

Similarly, Afghanistan is significant for China's Central Asia strategy. This is so especially after the end of Cold War, when China's threat

⁴ “A Taliban Highway could Lead to the Future. But it is Stuck in the Past”, *The Washington Post*, 1 February 2025, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/01/wakhan-corridor-highway-afghanistan-china/> (Accessed 19 February 2025).

perceptions regarding the Soviet Union were greatly reduced. The three newly independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—formed after the dissolution of the USSR in the year 1991—had the potential of serving as China's gateway for future energy, oil and gas supplies.⁵ Looking westwards post the dissolution of USSR in 1991, is often described as China's “manifest destiny”, something the US also practised in the previous nineteenth century.⁶

MANAGING INCONGRUITIES

Though Afghanistan and Pakistan, as next-door neighbours, share much in common, historically, there is a perceptible difference in China's approach towards each of them. China shares a long-standing strategic partnership with Pakistan that is based on clear-cut strategic choices shared by them, especially with regard to their adverse equations with India and the strategic necessity to keep the latter boxed on the northern periphery. The animosity towards India has kept their strategic partnership alive and strong despite fundamental incongruities in terms of culture and approach towards religion and religious groups.⁷ Pakistan has also been able to engage in a parallel partnership with the US—which has mostly sustained despite its closeness to China. Over the years, Pakistan has been able to balance its communist and Western allies/friends with élan. This was illustrated in 1970–71, when Pakistan forged a rapprochement between the Chinese side and the Nixon administration, acting as the ice-breaker to bring together the two estranged powers.⁸

⁵ Lars Erslev Anderson and Yang Jiang, “China's Engagement in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Xinjian: Will China's Root Cause Model Provide Regional Stability and Security?”, DIIS Report No. 2018:06, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2018.

⁶ Ibid., p. 14

⁷ For a detailed discussion on this subject, refer John W. Garver, “Sino-Indian Rapprochement and the Sino-Pakistan Entente”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 2, Summer, 1996, pp. 323–47.

⁸ Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan Attempts to Balance Ties with China, US”, *Voice of America*, 27 August 2020, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia-pakistan-attempts-balance-ties-china-us/6195071.html> (Accessed 29 January 2025).

Afghanistan, on the contrary, has been traditionally anti-US as the latter courted Pakistan early on. In addition, Afghanistan developed ties with India and the Soviet Union, both friends turned adversaries for China at varying points in history. In case of Afghanistan, it was more of China's immediate security interest that constantly kept it hooked to Kabul. The Wakhan Corridor was a crucial artery that worried China and kept it on its toes to prevent potential inflow/penetration of violent extremist elements/forces from a country perpetually plagued by war, violence, instability and external intervention.

ENTWINING OBJECTIVES?

Already a continental giant, China's ties/equations with Afghanistan and Pakistan are important from a regional perspective, particularly as it competes with the US for the top slot in the world order.

- 1. Critical to Regional Footing:** The Af-Pak region is a critical theatre for the great powers, many of whom have tried their fortunes in this region. With the virtual absence of any other power as of now in the region, the time is ripe for China to further strengthen its hold on it. This is not to say that China was not doing so while the US was in Afghanistan. In fact, it was quite active in the region: for instance, the 2007 Mes Aynak agreement with Afghanistan and the launch of CPEC in 2015 happened while the US-NATO forces were around. However, with a power vacuum in the Af-Pak region post US exit, it is to be seen whether China would diversify its approach on Af-Pak, particularly Afghanistan, as it has already been going full strength in Pakistan.
- 2. Counter India:** Though India–China have resumed some kind of a dialogue in recent months, both are still far from overcoming the dents in their bilateral relationship after the Galwan Valley (2020) and the Doklam plateau (2017) confrontations.⁹ India has

⁹ For details, see Vinay Kaura, "India's Relations with China from the Doklam Crisis to the Galwan Tragedy", *India Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4, December 2020, pp. 501–18.

sensitivities vis-à-vis Afghanistan given its long-held friendship and cultural linkages. With Pakistan, however, India has a bitter history of rivalry, war and state-perpetrated terrorism and violence. From China's standpoint, irrespective of the respective asymmetries in each set of India ties—with Afghanistan and Pakistan—it has a lever against India. Whatever China does in Afghanistan and Pakistan will have an impact on India's strategic interests, in a greater or a lesser proportion. Therefore, China's role in Afghanistan and Pakistan is critical in its power matrix with India.

- 3. Secure the Fragile Periphery:** Without Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is impossible to ensure the security of Xinjiang autonomous region. The extremist forces exist on both sides of the Durand Line, and only a comprehensive strategy can work in this regard. It is impossible to avert the threat by engaging one and not the other. Indeed, Kabul and Islamabad are of equal importance in China's quest to bring stability in its otherwise restive periphery region.
- 4. Maintain Semblance of Cordiality with Adjacent Countries in Proximate Neighbourhood:** China's doling out of agreements and deals in the Af-Pak region can be analysed in the light of its great power ambitions—where one is respected/revered in the immediate neighbourhood. The equanimity and steadiness in the US–Canada ties is a case in point. China's ties with Af-Pak are critical to its relations with Central Asia, where it has friends. Some of the post-1991 republics (as developing economies) for instance—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have shown active interests in Chinese projects, the BRI in particular. Afghanistan and Pakistan are, thus, critical links in that chain of Chinese interests.
- 5. Proving the US Inefficient and Interventionist (as part of the New Cold War):** As noted earlier, throughout the War on Terror, China worked towards creating and strengthening its niche in the Af-Pak region. The decades-spanning process coincided with the brewing of US–China contestations on several fronts: geopolitics of South China Sea, trade and tariffs issues, amongst others. Indeed, as the War on Terror progressed, there seemed to be a concerted attempt by China to highlight the shortfalls of US's approach towards Af-Pak.

Even after the withdrawal, China's has consistently tried to project the US presence in Afghanistan in a negative light. While doing so, it has emphasised how interfering in a country's internal affairs has never been a part of China's approach. China has invested substantially towards proving that the US presence has impaired rather than improved the situation in Af-Pak region.

What remains to be seen, in the medium to long term, is whether China, with its hands-off approach on internal affairs, is able to bring about development and a positive transformation in the Af-Pak region—one that is in stark contrast to what the US had done. The Af-Pak, with all its problems, is a befitting turf where China can think in terms of winning its great power status by proving itself more efficient than the US or other international actors.

AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN: HEADING TOWARDS CHINESE HYPHENATION?

Before assessing the plausible Chinese hyphenation of Afghanistan and Pakistan, a fundamental aspect to consider is whether, post the US August 2021 exit, the earlier dependencies of both these countries have reduced, particularly on the US. Subsequently, it is important to also gauge whether China has been able to achieve those objectives where the US presence posed a hurdle.

Looking at the first dimension, it is important to acknowledge that both the Taliban government and Pakistan are in need of money/funds; and for that, they are still looking westwards. Recently, it was the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout worth US\$ 7 billion that helped Pakistan avert an imminent default. After hectic parleys, Pakistan reached a staff-level agreement on a 37-month Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement with the international donor in July 2024.¹⁰ This would not have been possible without the approval of the US.

¹⁰ Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam and Asif Shahzad, "IMF's \$7 Billion Bailout Sends Pakistan Stocks to New Peak", *Reuters*, 26 September 2024, at <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/imfs-7-billion-bailout-sends-pakistan-stocks-new-peak-2024-09-26/> (Accessed 11 February 2025).

Additionally, Pakistan could not have warded off the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) albatross hanging on it since 2018 without the US's will. Pakistan was taken off the grey list in 2022.¹¹

Where the Taliban are concerned, they have been engaging with China for long. However, they are still cash-strapped and in frantic search of funds. The US froze assets worth US\$ 7 billion that had been deposited in the country by Afghanistan's central bank. Half of this was siphoned off to an Afghan Fund created in Switzerland, in 2022, mainly for humanitarian assistance. The rest of the amount was reserved for compensating the kin of the victims of 9/11 who had cases pending against the Taliban. Recently, the Taliban has warned against the seizure of the assets by the US,¹² but no headway has been made on the front so far.

Against this reality, it seems that China still has a far way to go to replace the heft and stature of the US and the kind of influence the Americans exercised (perhaps continue to exercise) in the Af-Pak region. While the US was around, it was able to assuage the demands of both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Whether and how the Chinese approach towards the region is going to be as profound to be able to match the Americans, remains to be seen. Managing the Af-Pak region is likely a tough road to travel and the Chinese are yet to face the real test in this regard.

TRIPARTITE GEOPOLITICAL CONVERGENCES: IN THE OFFING OR A DISTANT DREAM?

Andrew Scobell has analysed the role/position/potential postures of Pakistan in China's approach towards Afghanistan, whom he considers

¹¹ Suhasini Haider, "Explained: Why is Pakistan Off FATF 'Grey List?'", *The Hindu*, 23 October 2022, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/explained-why-is-pakistan-off-fatf-grey-list/article66044684.ece> (Accessed 1 February 2025).

¹² Ayaz Gul, "Taliban Decry US Claims about Frozen Afghan Assets", *Voice of America*, 1 February 2025, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-decrys-claims-about-frozen-afghan-assets/7959576.html> (Accessed 10 February 2025).

the “greatest card” and “an additional instrument of engagement” for the latter. Scobell bases his argument on three planks: “Islamabad’s goals and intentions, its capabilities, and the nature of its relationship with Beijing.”¹³ First, he argues that Pakistan considers Afghanistan a critical “appendage”, where a pro-Pakistan regime is favoured in view of what is quintessentially “strategic depth” principle. “Close ties” with the Taliban have always remained an important spoke in the wheel of Pakistan’s Afghanistan priorities. Pakistan’s preference for “a significant role for Beijing” in post-US Afghanistan against “other external powers” playing “little if any role in Afghanistan” is incumbent on consensus within different levels amongst apparatuses of state.¹⁴ However, Pakistan’s approach on Afghanistan has always seemed to have more political consensus and less or minuscule dissent at the domestic front.

Second, Scobell also weighs in the Pakistan government’s actual “capacity to implement any agreed-upon plan” on Afghanistan. He not only brings in instances of Pakistan’s inability to protect its own citizens from violence but also Chinese nationals. Third, Scobell brings forth the principle of trust and faith in Beijing–Islamabad ties. China has concerns about Pakistan as a “terrorist pipeline”, potentially impacting the order and stability of Xinjiang, with instances of trouble makers in Xinjiang being traced back to terrorist sanctuaries in North Waziristan.¹⁵ The siege at the Red Mosque, in 2007, was a grim reminder of the fragility of security ties between Pakistan–China.¹⁶ However, the two countries have come a long way, having negotiated such exigencies in their bilateral trajectory.

The aforementioned propositions by Scobell were made in the light of the original exit plan dated 2014. However, each of these are as relevant today as then—the only dynamics that has altered is Pakistan–

¹³ Andrew Scobell, “China Ponders Post-2014 Afghanistan: Neither ‘All in’ nor Bystander”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 55, No. 2, March–April 2015, pp. 340–41.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Andrew Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia’s new Geopolitics*, 2015, Hurst & Company London, UK, pp. ix–xvi.

Taliban bonhomie. As far as the safety of Chinese in Pakistan and Afghanistan is concerned, the situation has worsened, particularly in Pakistan, where Baloch rebel groups have targeted Chinese citizens, workers and engineers—working on the CPEC projects and otherwise.

Notwithstanding, Afghanistan has been one of the many issues that commands Pakistan–China's “convergence of Interests”.¹⁷ The joint statement issued at the end of Nawaz Sharif and Le Keqiang meeting in July 2013—which was also one of the building blocks for the CPEC—noted, amongst other things: “The two sides believe that the evolving situation in Afghanistan has great implications for regional security and stability.” Both China and Pakistan “reaffirmed their support for the ‘Afghan owned and Afghan-led’ peace and reconciliation process” and pledged to “work with the regional countries and the international community to help Afghanistan achieve peace, stability, and security”.¹⁸

WILL CHINA'S SECURITY ROLE RETICENCE STILL WORK IN THE FUTURE?

It is intriguing that China has offered to station its own security forces in Pakistan to safeguard its nationals, that is, the CPEC workers, engineers, civilians, etc. However, despite some prominent attacks against the Chinese in Afghanistan, including the bombings at the Mes Aynak project site, they have not yet made such an offer to Afghanistan.

Until now, China has kept its security goals separate from those of others, especially the US, in view of their growing problems as “strategic rivals”.¹⁹ China has also overlooked Pakistan's duplicity/double

¹⁷ Scobell, “China Ponders Post-2014 Afghanistan”, n. 13, p. 341.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 342. Also see “Common Vision for Deepening China–Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 5 July 2013, at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367272.html (Accessed 2 December 2024).

¹⁹ Jae H. Ku, Drew Thompson and Daniel Wertz, “Northeast Asia in Afghanistan: Whose Silk Road?”, US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 1 March 2011, p. 17.

standards against terror groups that target India and the US. In fact, the Chinese have never used the leverage they have to coax Pakistan to act against terrorist sanctuaries, so long as those groups seem to target others and not China. On this front, China has opted for a policy that has so far ensured that it “avoid[s] conflating its hostility to Uighur separatists with hostility to Islamic extremists in general,” with preference to “deal with Pakistan on a bilateral basis rather than through the lens of Afghanistan”.²⁰ How much will this work in the changed circumstances in Af-Pak, and how far China is prepared to bite the bullet in terms of taking on the mantle of securing its assets and interest in both these countries, remains to be seen.

²⁰ Ibid.

CHALLENGES: CONTEXTUAL VOLATILITY, SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS

After the US forces departed from Afghanistan, the geopolitics of the region around Af-Pak, and the near broad region, underwent a sea change. More specifically, only months after the US withdrawal, in February 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, given the latter's affinity towards the NATO and West, in general. The geopolitical climate turned highly polarised. US-China economic and strategic contest was unfolding at varied fronts. As Russia-Ukraine hostilities broke out, China was seen to be behind Russia, even though not too explicitly.¹ Pakistan, which was rather unambiguous in showing its anger with the way the US had treated it at the time of exit, also seemed to be indulging in another balancing game as Prime Minister Imran Khan was seen besides President Vladimir Putin in Moscow only a day prior to the attack on Ukraine. Then, in October 2023, the Arab-Israeli conflict was ignited, yet again, after the Hamas fighters launched a grisly attack on Israel.² The geopolitical developments that have enveloped the global politics as of now are not unprecedented. However, it is important to understand that despite all available mechanisms to avoid war, hostilities, and that too major ones, are occurring in critical regions of the world; more so, they are major because the so-called superpowers or great powers are involved.

¹ Kelly Ng and Yi Ma, "How is China Supporting Russia after it was Sanctioned for Ukraine War?", *BBC*, 17 May 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253> (Accessed 17 June 2025).

² For a detailed analysis, see: "Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", Center for Preventive Action, CFR, 22 January 2025, at <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/israeli-palestinian-conflict> (Accessed 1 June 2025).

China's role in Afghanistan and Pakistan is less likely to be directly affected due to the overall global volatility. However, collateral effect, that is, long-term impacts, cannot be ruled out. What is of more immediate concern is the fact that both Afghanistan and Pakistan do not have the stability that is needed for continuing uninterrupted constructive forms of development and infrastructure building. Afghanistan is now under a Taliban regime that is not accepted or recognised by the larger world community. The regime is frantically looking for friends and support from all across the board, but has found limited success so far. The quasi form of diplomatic ties between China and Afghanistan will not resolve the Taliban's political and economic apartheid/ostracisation. It is argued: "By investing in large infrastructure projects and expanding military...diplomacy in Afghanistan, China aims are twofold: connecting the mainland of China with Central Asia to facilitate trade, thus shortening energy transport routes, and promoting stability in the entire region."³ Despite perceived differences in the respective approaches of the US and China, "given the troubled history of the region, it is less obvious whether China will succeed in its initiative or whether, like some empires before it, it will be dragged into endless conflicts" without achieving "conclusive result".⁴ Further, in spite of years and decades of NATO presence, the Af-Pak region remains "tormented by conflicts, insurgencies, terrorism and extremism", still playing "host" to "various networks of jihadists, including the Haqqani Network, al-Qaida and Islamic State, all of which have been able to attract foreign fighters, including Uyghurs from Xinjiang."⁵

Afghanistan and Pakistan are fundamentally states where violence has been normalised owing to protracted periods of turmoil and civil

³ Lars Erslev Andersen and Yang Jiang, "China's Engagement in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Xinjiang: Will China's Root Cause Model Provide Regional Stability and Security?", DIIS Report No. 2018:06, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2018, p. 15, at <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/197624/1/1040984339.pdf> (Accessed 12 January 2025).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

strife. This is also because both countries (Afghanistan under the Taliban regimes) have a tendency to house terrorist sanctuaries as a matter of state policy. Meanwhile, China's approach on terrorism is notably self-centred. If a group is not directly affecting the security interests of China, then it could choose to look the other way. However, the infrastructure and so-called connectivity and growth model that China seems to be pushing in both these countries (or at least seems to be pursuing) requires physical presence of Chinese workers and engineers in both the places. This is where China could face the biggest stumbling block in the projection and design of carrying out its made-to-look-impressive agenda in Af-Pak. Further, China's paradigm of infrastructure and development activities in other countries is modelled on using its own machinery, through imports, and its own labour, that is, skilled engineers and other workers. This can also create numerous issues, evidenced by the attacks on the Chinese in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Xinjiang factor, concerning China's fragile western periphery, is the centrepiece of security discourses that propound why China is taking a keen interest in the Af-Pak region. Both Pakistan, by virtue of its illegal occupation of Gilgit-Baltistan, and Afghanistan sit across this critical region. China's perspective regarding securitising its periphery against the turbulence of Af-Pak region is not totally ill-founded. There is history to it: for instance, in July 2011, the individuals who carried out attacks in Xinjiang were traced back to training camps in Pakistan.⁶

China's trepidations about Pakistan hosting the Uighur militants goes back to 1990s, when it cracked the whip to urge the Pakistani establishment to close markets frequented by Uighurs, as well as terminate them from its madrasas.⁷ This was after the Hub town tragedy

⁶ “Xinjiang Attacks Masterminded by Overseas-trained Terrorists: Government”, *Xinhua*, 1 August 2011, at http://zw.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/201108/t20110802_6420517.htm (Accessed 27 November 2024).

⁷ Samra Sarfaraz Khan, “Xinjiang, Tibet and the Pakistan–China Strategic Partnership”, *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 64, No. 4, October 2011, p. 74.

in Balochistan, in the year 2006, when three Chinese engineers were killed. There was great deal of uproar over the killing of Chinese nationals and aid to Pakistan was reportedly curtailed in the aftermath, mainly to satiate nationalistic sentiments and anger in China.⁸ In 2008, Pervez Musharraf, as President of Pakistan, urged the Uighur community in Xinjiang to uphold “China’s sovereignty” and “promised Pakistan’s unrelenting support for the same” during his state visit to China.⁹

MOST RECENT ATTACKS AGAINST CHINA IN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

In October 2024, two Chinese workers were killed and another injured near the Jinnah International Airport, in Pakistan, when their convoy was attacked with explosives. At least 10 more people were injured in the incident.¹⁰ These workers were involved in the Port Qasim coal-fired power plant project. The Chinese foreign ministry expressed shock and strongly condemned the incident. In addition, the Chinese consulate general and embassy in Pakistan, along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, swung into action and “activated the emergency response mechanism right away and quickly started handling the incident.”¹¹ Before this, in March 2024, a convoy of Chinese workers was attacked using an explosive-laden vehicle, near Dasu hydropower project in

⁸ Ibid; Also see: Saleem Shahid, “3 Chinese engineers killed in ambush”, *Dawn*, 16 February 2006, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/178957/3-chinese-engineers-killed-in-ambush> (Accessed 30 November 2024).

⁹ Samra Sarfaraz Khan, “Xinjiang, Tibet and the Pakistan–China Strategic Partnership”, n. 7.

¹⁰ Caroline Davis and Kelly Ng, “Blast Kills Two Chinese Near Pakistan’s Karachi Airport”, *BBC*, 7 October 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0r84p0dp1jo> (Accessed 2 December 2025).

¹¹ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on the Terrorist Attack on a Chinese Convoy of the Coal-fired Power Plant at Port Qasim”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 7 October 2024, at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202410/t20241007_11503249.html (Accessed 27 November 2024).

Shangla, in Besham district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.¹² The incident was part of a series of attacks that occurred in Pakistan in a mere span of a week. The first one happened at a naval base in Turbat in Balochistan and another one at the Chinese-built port city of Gwadar, also situated in Balochistan.¹³

In Afghanistan, too, the Chinese have faced similar threats from militant groups, though not as intense as that in Pakistan. This could have been due to the extensive presence of international forces in Afghanistan, which inadvertently or inadvertently proved to be a security cover for the Chinese (discussed in detail later in the chapter). The fact remains that the Taliban's return has not effectively curtailed the scale of violence in Afghanistan. Close to their capture of power, the violence levels had reduced, but this was a temporary phase. Indeed, in the aftermath of the US exit, the Taliban seem to have spread themselves too thin, leaving their security check posts vacant. They also do not have the resources to raise skilled security forces, which could guard areas where their writ does not work, or the regions where the support base is less or negligible. As a result, there has been an increase in attacks in certain regions.

Further, Afghanistan's landscape has remained a fertile ground for breeding fundamentalism and terrorism. Militant camps have existed there for decades. So, to transform the land and society into a peaceful, orderly one will take years or probably decades.¹⁴ Notably, the Al-Qaeda chief, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was targeted and killed in Afghanistan by the US forces in July 2022, probably with Pakistan's help, with the

¹² For details, see Abid Hussain, "March of 'Terror': Pakistan Grapples with Deadly Attacks on China Interests", *Al Jazeera*, 29 March 2024, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/29/march-of-terror-pakistan-grapples-with-deadly-attacks-on-china-interests> (Accessed 7 December 2024).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For details, refer: "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban", Report No. 326, International Crisis Group, 12 August 2022, at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban> (Accessed 19 December 2024).

Taliban at the helm of affairs. More recently, in another notable incident of violence in Afghanistan's capital, the Taliban Refugee Minister, Khalil Haqqani, was killed in a suicide bomb attack in December 2024. There was a reward of US\$ 5 million on his head by the US government.¹⁵

In January 2025, a Chinese national was killed in Afghanistan's northern Takhar province, bordering Tajikistan. The deceased was a mine worker. His killing induced "solemn representations" by the Chinese to the Taliban government, given the extreme gravity of the situation as the attack was claimed by the dreaded Islamic State.¹⁶ China's foreign ministry spokeswoman, Mao Ning, noted: "The Chinese side urgently lodged solemn representations with the Afghan side, demanding that (they) thoroughly investigate and punish the perpetrators."¹⁷ In November 2024, a Chinese national was killed and at least four more were injured in what was described as a "cross-border attack" in Zarbuzi Gorge in Tajikistan. The assailants had crossed over from restive Afghanistan, but the actual motive of the attack was not clear.¹⁸

Another major attack against the Chinese nationals was carried out purportedly by the ISKP at a hotel in Kabul in 2022. Three Chinese nationals were injured and 18 others were also victims of the ghastly

¹⁵ Simon Fraser and Caroline Davies, "Suicide Bomb Kills Taliban Minister in Kabul", *BBC*, 12 December 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg952q81x80> (Accessed 7 January 2025).

¹⁶ "China Condemns Killing of National in Afghanistan Attack Claimed by ISIS", *South China Morning Post*, 23 January 2025, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/russia-central-asia/article/3295871/chinese-mine-worker-killed-isis-claimed-attack-afghanistan>. Also see Ayaz Gul, "Islamic State Claims Killing of Chinese National in Afghanistan", *Voice of America*, 22 January 2025, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-claims-killing-of-chinese-national-in-afghanistan/7946312.html> (Both accessed 17 February 2025).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Attack from Afghanistan Kills Chinese National in Tajikistan, Sources Say", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (Tajik Service), 18 November 2024, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/attack-afghan-tajik-border-death-chinese-national-taliban/33206367.html> (Accessed 21 December 2024).

attack. The hotel, run by the Chinese, was reportedly frequented by both Chinese officials and businessmen.¹⁹ In the aftermath of the attack, Wang Wenbin, China's foreign ministry spokesperson, stated: "China is deeply shocked at the attack, which is highly egregious, and firmly opposes terrorism in any form."²⁰

STRING OF ATTACKS AGAINST CHINESE NATIONALS AND CPEC ASSETS IN PAKISTAN (UP TO 2023)²¹

Looking at the spectrum of violence against Chinese nationals, assets and projects in the Af-Pak region, it is discernible that these attacks are more recurrent, more direct and probably way more lethal in Pakistan. The continuity and consistency of violence against the Chinese workers reflects the gravity of the situation regarding China's security interests, which it has always been very paranoid about. It also reflects the scale of angst against the Chinese amongst the Pakistani outfits, which, in turn, motivates them to carry out audacious acts of violence. These outfits do not fear the consequences, which have an inherent overarching danger of challenging/upsetting China–Pakistan strategic equation/equilibrium. Following are some of the conspicuous attacks that have previously taken place in Pakistan within the last handful of years.

¹⁹ Zhao Jia and Chen Yingqun, "Kabul Terrorist Attack Condemned", *China Daily*, 14 December 2022, at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202212/14/WS63990695a31057c47eba43c7.html> (Accessed 11 October 2024).

²⁰ "China 'Deeply Shocked' at Kabul Hotel Attack Injuring Five Chinese Nationals, Firmly Opposes Any Terrorism", *Global Times*, 13 December 2022, at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202212/1281784.shtml>. Also see: Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai, "After the Kabul Hotel Attack: The Taliban and China Confront Security Challenges in Afghanistan", *China Brief*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 19 January 2023, at <https://jamestown.org/program/after-the-kabul-hotel-attack-the-taliban-and-china-confront-security-challenges-in-afghanistan/> (Both accessed 11 January 2025).

²¹ The section has been partially taken from an earlier published work by the author, "Security Threats to the Chinese Nationals in Pakistan", MP-IDSA Issue Brief, 19 April 2024, at <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/security-threats-to-the-chinese-nationals-in-pakistan/> (Accessed 23 January 2025).

1. In August 2023, an attack on Chinese workers was foiled and casualties were prevented by the timely action of Pakistani security forces, killing two militants.²²
2. In April 2022, three Chinese educators were killed in a suicide bomb attack by a female member of the Majeed Brigade of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).²³ The Majeed Brigade is the group's elite Special Forces comprising commando teams and suicide bombers.²⁴ The Chinese nationals were associated with the Confucius Institute at the Karachi University.²⁵ The BLA later justified the attack on the institute by stating that it stood as a “symbol of Chinese economic, cultural and political expansionism”.²⁶
3. In August 2021, a suicide bomb attack against the Chinese, resulted in death of 2 children and injured 3 others. The Chinese workers in the police-army-escorted convoy survived with minor injuries.²⁷

²² Asim Khan and Sophia Saifi, “Pakistani Militants Attack Convoy of Chinese Engineers”, *CNN*, 14 August 2023, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/08/13/asia/militant-attack-chinese-engineers-pakistan-intl/index.html> (Accessed 25 March 2024).

²³ “Anti-China Militancy Sharpens in Pakistan”, *The Economic Times*, 28 April 2022, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/anti-china-militancy-sharpens-in-pakistan/articleshow/91148719.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed 29 March 2024).

²⁴ Riccardo Valle and Lucas Webber, “Rising Anti-China Sentiment in Balochistan Threatens Increased Attacks on Chinese Interests in Pakistan”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 12 January 2024, at <https://jamestown.org/program/rising-anti-china-sentiment-in-balochistan-threatens-increased-attacks-on-chinese-interests-in-pakistan/> (Accessed 20 March 2024).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sophia Saifi, Saleem Mehsud and Azaz Syed, “Female Suicide Bomber behind Karachi Attack that Killed 3 Chinese Citizens: Police”, *CNN*, 27 April 2022, at <https://jamestown.org/program/rising-anti-china-sentiment-in-balochistan-threatens-increased-attacks-on-chinese-interests-in-pakistan/> (Accessed 30 March 2024).

²⁷ Gul Yousafzai, “Two Killed in Suicide Bombing Targeting Chinese Nationals in Pakistan”, *Reuters*, 20 August 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/two-killed-suicide-bombing-targeting-chinese-nationals-southwest-pakistan-2021-08-20/> (Accessed 8 February 2025).

The attempted suicide attack occurred in the East Bay Road in Gwadar, where Chinese were involved in multiple construction and infrastructure projects. The BLA claimed responsibility for the attack.²⁸

4. In July 2021, a bomb blast in a bus carrying workers claimed lives of nine Chinese nationals and two Pakistani soldiers.²⁹ While Islamabad initially called it “vehicle failure”, the Chinese acknowledged that there was a bomb explosion.³⁰ There was an attempted cover-up as Pakistan’s foreign office blamed “a mechanical failure” leading to “gas leak” causing an “explosion”³¹. The *Global Times* editorial called for “plugging loopholes” in Pakistan’s security apparatus and also, “resolutely curbing the increasing momentum” of attacks on Chinese within Pakistan.³²
5. The luxury Serena Hotel in Quetta, Balochistan’s capital, was ambushed by militants in April 2021, killing five people and injuring a dozen.³³ There were reports speculating that the target was Chinese Ambassador Nong Rong who was travelling to Quetta. However, at the time of the attack, the envoy was noted to be not present in the hotel premises.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Pakistan Bus Blast Kills 13, Including 9 Chinese”, *Tolo News*, 14 July 2021, at <https://tolonews.com/index.php/world-173503> (Accessed 17 March 2024).

³⁰ Jibran Ahmad and Yew Lun Tian, “Pakistan Bus Blast Kills 13 Including Chinese; Beijing Blames Bomb”, *Reuters*, 13 July 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/blast-hits-bus-northern-pakistan-killing-8-including-4-chinese-nationals-sources-2021-07-14/> (Accessed 21 March 2024).

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Those Who Terrorize Our Compatriots will Pay: Global Times Editorial”, *Global Times*, 16 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228865.shtml> (Accessed 23 March 2024).

³³ “Pakistan Hotel Bomb: Deadly Blast Hits Luxury Venue in Quetta”, *BBC*, 22 April 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48245353> (Accessed 12 March 2024).

6. The BLA's 2020 attack on the Karachi Stock Exchange was a "retaliation" against China's "exploitative plans in Balochistan".³⁴
6. In May 2019, there was an attack on the Zaver Pearl-Continental Hotel in the port city of Gwadar, in which four hotel staff and a security personnel were killed.³⁵ Though no Chinese were actually killed, the hotel was said to be frequented by Chinese working on several projects in Gwadar, particularly the CPEC.³⁶ The BLA, claiming responsibility for the attack, threatened "expect more attacks China and Pakistan".³⁷ The Chinese Embassy in Islamabad condemned the attack even as the Imran Khan government called it "sabotage".³⁸
7. The BLA ambushed the Chinese consulate in Karachi in 2018 in which four persons died. Soon after, the group referred to China as an "oppressor".³⁹ It further reiterated the group's aversion to "Chinese military expansionist endeavours".⁴⁰

³⁴ Sophia Saifi, "Multiple People Dead after Attack on Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi", *CNN*, 29 June 2020, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/29/asia/karachi-pakistan-stock-exchange-attack-intl-hnk/index.html> (Accessed 11 March 2024).

³⁵ "Pakistan Attack: Gunmen Killed Five in Balochistan Hotel", *BBC*, 12 May 2019, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48245353> (Accessed 11 February 2025).

³⁶ "Gunmen Attack Pakistani Hotel used by Chinese and Vow further Violence", *The New York Times*, 11 May 2019, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/11/world/asia/pakistan-hotel-attack-gwadar.html> (Accessed 15 February 2025).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "PM Imran Slams Gwadar Hotel Attack as Bid to Damage Economy", *Dawn*, 12 May 2019, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1481827> (Accessed 24 January 2025).

³⁹ "Attack on Pearl Continental Hotel in Belt and Road Port was Bid to Damage Economy, Says Pakistan PM Imran Khan", *South China Morning Post*, 12 May 2019, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3009894/attack-pearl-continental-hotel-belt-and-road-port-was-bid> (Accessed 4 January 2025).

⁴⁰ Saifi et al., "Female Suicide Bomber behind Karachi Attack that Killed 3 Chinese Citizens: Police", n. 26.

8. A group of workers, including three Chinese engineers, was injured in a suicide bombing in Dalbandin in August 2018. The site of attack was located more than 300 km from Balochistan capital, Quetta. The Chinese engineers, working on a mineral project, were attacked while being ferried to the site.⁴¹

PAKISTAN-TALIBAN STAND-OFF

The ongoing stand-off between the Taliban government and Pakistan is a contingency that is likely to have a substantial bearing on China's stance/intentions regarding the Af-Pak region. This is a factor to reckon as during the two decades of the War on Terror, while the US forces had upped the ante against the Taliban forces, Pakistan was negotiating with them: first, to serve its own strategic interests; and later, to bring them to the negotiating table with the Trump administration. China was also negotiating with the Taliban for a long time, but became proactive in engaging it at the time of the US exit. In this, China's experience of dealing with the Taliban 1.0 may have been rather useful. However, till the US exit, equations were interim and intentions were rather hazy. Most importantly, China's chief conduit to Afghanistan (and elsewhere as well), that is, Pakistan, seemed to be happily on the same page as the Taliban. Pakistan was apparently elated to bring Afghanistan out of the "shackles of slavery" under the US security presence.⁴²

However, only a few years down the line, the equations have transformed; and they have changed for the worse, especially from China's standpoint. The Taliban and Pakistan are literally up in arms

⁴¹ Wendy Wu, "Beijing Condemns Suicide Attack on Bus Carrying Chinese Engineers in Pakistan", *South China Morning Post*, 11 August 2018, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2159291/bus-carrying-chinese-engineers-targeted-pakistan?module=inline&pgtype=article> (Accessed 12 February 2025).

⁴² Maroosha Muzaffar, "Taliban have Broken 'the Shackles of Slavery,' Says Pakistan PM Imran Khan", *The Independent*, 17 August 2021, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/taliban-pakistan-imran-khan-afghanistan-b1903821.htm> (Accessed 20 February 2025).

against each other. There is great deal of discontent on both sides, mostly due to territorial assertions and reiteration of long-lingering ethnic sentiments across the Durand Line. The Taliban refer to the Durand line as the “hypothetical line”, refusing to accept and call the area “beyond” it as Pakistan’s territory.⁴³

In December 2024, incidents of heavy firing were reported between the Taliban and Pakistan. The Taliban conducted these firings allegedly against Pakistani security forces on the border. They defended their action by stating that it was a response to Pakistani air strikes on a refugee camp in Barmal district in Paktia province, which claimed 46 lives, including those of women and children. In contrast, Pakistan’s version was that the firing was carried out to mask an infiltration attempt into the country, abetted by “Afghan Taliban elements”, which the country foiled.⁴⁴ A day before this firing, the Taliban had “pledged retaliation” against the aerial bombings carried out by Pakistan inside Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Pakistan had carried out these bombings in Afghanistan on the pretext of targeting the TTP outfits housed there. Intriguingly, the attack was carried out while Muhammad Sadiq Khan, Pakistan’s Special Representative for Afghanistan, was on a visit to Kabul to sort out matters with the Taliban government.⁴⁶

Earlier in the year, similar attacks were carried out against Afghanistan as Pakistan was anxious about the Taliban government not honouring

⁴³ “Afghan Taliban Hit ‘Several Points’ in Pakistan in Retaliation for Attacks”, *Al Jazeera*, 28 December 2024, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/28/afghan-taliban-hit-several-points-in-pakistan-in-retaliation-for-attacks> (Accessed 11 January 2025).

⁴⁴ Siyar Sirat, “Pakistan Confirms Taliban Attack on Border Outposts”, *Amu TV*, 28 December 2024, at <https://amu.tv/146902/#:~:text=The%20Pakistani%20military%20reported%20that,its%20outposts%20near%20the%20border> (Accessed 19 June 2025).

⁴⁵ “Afghan Taliban Hit ‘Several Points’ in Pakistan in Retaliation for Attacks”, n. 43.

⁴⁶ Vinay Kaura, “The Rebounding of Pakistan’s Afghan Strategy”, *The Hindu*, 8 January 2025, at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-rebounding-of-pakistans-afghan-strategy/article69073511.ece> (Accessed 20 February 2025).

its wishes to target the TTP sanctuaries in Afghanistan. In July 2024, Pakistan's Defence Minister, Khawaja Asif, issued a stern warning: "It's correct that we have been carrying out operations in Afghanistan, and we will continue to do so. We won't serve them with cake and pastries."⁴⁷ Khawaja also dismissed questions on the legality of such strikes, arguing that informing Afghanistan beforehand on Pakistani actions would "eliminate the element of surprise".⁴⁸

In August 2022, there was reportedly a confrontation between the Taliban and Pakistani security forces. According to reports, Pakistan, taking advantage of the turmoil that was taking place in Afghanistan, had installed a pillar and some signposts in an area of Wakhan Corridor which Afghanistan—including the Taliban—considered its own. The Taliban forces ambushed the Pakistani post, dislodged the signage and pulled down the marking pillars.⁴⁹ There has been some speculation regarding a plausible Pakistani attempt to recapture the post by launching an offensive against the Taliban.

Moreover, Pakistan is relentlessly pursuing the strategy of deporting Afghan refugees from its soil. The issue of refugee reversal was noted by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which sought clarity from Pakistan on "the modality and timeframe of this relocation".⁵⁰ This happened after Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif approved a "multistage plan targeting nearly 3 million Afghan citizens residing in Pakistan". The cohort to be targeted in the second phase

⁴⁷ Farhat Javed, "Pakistan will Continue Attacks in Afghanistan—Minister", *BBC*, 2 July 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c7289yvl84po> (Accessed 12 December 2024).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Taliban Captures Strategic Wakhan Corridor from Pakistan", *ANI*, 1 August 2022, at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/taliban-captures-strategic-wakhan-corridor-from-pakistan20220801213011/> (Accessed 18 June 2025).

⁵⁰ Ayaz Gul, "UN Sounds Alarm Over Pakistan's New Afghan Deportation Plans", *Voice of America*, 5 February 2025, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-sounds-alarm-over-pakistan-s-new-afghan-deportation-plans/7964352.html> (Accessed 29 May 2025).

“include[s] legally declared refugees, documented as well as undocumented migrants, and those who are awaiting promised relocation to the United States and other Western countries.”⁵¹

WITHOUT THE US’S SECURITY AEGIS: WHEREWITHAL, WILL, HESITATION

The US exit from Afghanistan, in August 2021, was a watershed moment by all geopolitical standards, given that it brought to an end two decades of the US and its allies’ active combat presence in a faraway land. Due to its duration, the War on Terror was referred to by several adjectives: the longest war, the protracted war and so on and so forth. The prolonged US presence was a default security umbrella for all the countries that were engaging in Afghanistan, including India, China and Pakistan.

For all the paranoia that China may have exhibited over this extended stay of international troops in Afghanistan—particularly, the US—it is apparent that the country only benefitted by the US presence. China could not only concentrate on deepening its strategic interests but also explore avenues of economic opportunities. Robert Kaplan makes a compelling argument in this regard. In an article published in *The New York Times*, he posits: “while America is sacrificing its blood and treasure, the Chinese will reap the benefits.” Kaplan’s premise is based on the reality that it was the US forces that were giving security cover to the Chinese at Mes Aynak copper mine project worth billions of dollars. Further, Kaplan goes on to claim that the US effort in Afghanistan is akin to “ancient Rome and 19th-century Britain struggling in a far-off corner of the world to exact revenge, to put down the fires of rebellion and to restore civilised order. Meanwhile, the other rising and resurgent powers wait patiently in the wings, free-riding on the public good we offer.”⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Robert D. Kaplan, “Beijing’s Afghan Gamble”, *The New York Times*, 6 October 2009, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/07/opinion/07kaplan.html> (Accessed 16 June 2025).

CHINA'S DILEMMA ON SECURITY COVER

As mentioned in the previous section, for the years that the US-led NATO forces were present in Afghanistan, the Chinese seemed to benefit from their security cover. The “mutual dilemma” manifested into something akin to: “We do not want American troops in Afghanistan, but we do not want you to leave either.”⁵³ China was also able to move against those it considered a direct threat to its interests (vis-à-vis terrorism) under the overarching cover of US operations against terrorists in Afghanistan. With the US around, China could keep its individual, specific operations insulated from the wrath of other terrorist outfits (whom the US forces were fighting against). This ensured that China did not “incite” other miscellaneous extremists groups, who might then train their focus on China and its borders.⁵⁴

However, at the same time, it is not to deny that there indeed could be some hesitations on China’s part regarding increased and prolonged US presence in Afghanistan. China shares a significant border with Afghanistan and the presence of Americans had the danger to bring them too close to China’s sensitive western periphery- a region that has remained Beijing’s strategic priority given widespread longstanding undercurrents of unrest in Xinjiang.

THE ROAD AHEAD: OBSTACLES, SECURITY-RETHINK

Till the time the US forces were stationed in Afghanistan, China’s approach towards maintaining security was skewed and rather self-centred. China also ignored the US overtures for security-driven participation under the aegis of the UN. Hence, for long, the Chinese preferred to safeguard only the areas and locales where they were undertaking some development or infrastructure work in Afghanistan—

⁵³ Jae H. Ku, Drew Thompson and Daniel Wertz, “Northeast Asia in Afghanistan: Whose Silk Road?”, US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 1 March 2011, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

the focus being on merely what was “its own”, rather than serving what could be part of “regional interests”.⁵⁵

The earlier “noncommittal strategy” of China in Afghanistan may have to undergo an accommodation to be flexible enough as the US forces have left and the default security cover is not there anymore.⁵⁶ Also, the steep escalation in attacks against the Chinese in Pakistan needs to be accounted for while outlining the limits of what the Chinese could aspire to achieve. Pakistan’s military has not been able to effectively curb attacks against the Chinese. Indeed, after the Taliban takeover in 2021, the TTP has augmented its operations in Pakistan and the security establishment in the country has remained consumed by anti-terror operations. Despite Pakistan’s intentions to protect the Chinese, in view of the close strategic partnership and overwhelming goodwill between the two governments, attacks on Chinese nationals and CPEC workers and assets have continued unabated. For a long period now, “[m]ultiple suicide bombings and assassinations against Chinese workers” have occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.⁵⁷

In sum, the declining state of security in Pakistan is least assuring for the Chinese side to continue to unabatedly function with their development and infrastructural activities inside the country. The Taliban-Pakistan ties have become shaky as compared to the bonhomie of 2021 and have added fuel to the fire on the security front. However, given high bilateral strategic stakes shared between the two, they would rather not make a hue and cry over it at least for the time being. Both sides- China and Pakistan- would likely prefer to resolve their security complications mutually without letting much out in the public domain. By doing this, they would likely try to preserve the sanctity of their proverbial “iron- clad” relationship status.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Abdul Haq, “Iron-Clad Solidarity: The Expanding Defence Axis of China and Pakistan”, *Global Connectivities*, 21 May 2025, at <https://globalconnectivities.com/2025/05/defence-china-pakistan/> (Accessed 20 June 2025).

PORTENTS FOR FUTURE: IMPLICATIONS AND OPTIONS FOR INDIA

India's post-independence history, particularly its geopolitical history, is replete with challenges it has faced from China and Pakistan, both individually and in tandem. It has fought three full wars (1947, 1965, 1971) and two limited wars (1999 and 2025) with Pakistan; and a major one with China in 1962. India's policy of non-alignment or strategic autonomy has thrown up umpteen challenges, which the country has had to negotiate continuously. These challenges have augmented multi-fold with the coinciding geopolitical alignment between China and Pakistan. Furthermore, the US has shown a decided tilt towards Pakistan—seen more on its side in case of a division between India and Pakistan. In this regard, it has been India's proximity to the Soviet Union that has provided some respite, though in a limited way.

Meanwhile, India's ties with Afghanistan have remained cordial since 1947. This is partially because Afghanistan–Pakistan ties were quite discordant in the early decades after independence. There were mutual suspicions concerning contradictory territorial claims and bilateral acrimony on the validity of the Durand Line.

WHAT INDIA MEANS FOR AFGHANISTAN?

Currently, with respect to Afghanistan, there are rising security concerns not only in Washington but also in many European capitals, as well as in Russia, to some extent. There are growing interrelated security interests—some of which may also concern countries like India and China. Unfortunately, Pakistan's pursuits in Afghanistan in the last 40 years contradict those interests altogether. So, while India's engagement in Afghanistan supports stability and economic development, Pakistan's interference causes instability, with serious local and regional security consequences.

India's bond with Afghanistan is eternal, that is, steady and concrete in nature. However, there is a need to distinguish between India's relationship with the Taliban (as a de facto authority and not a state) and Delhi's objectives in Afghanistan, as a country. India–Afghanistan ties are historical and both share cultural bonds that are much deeper and broader than those with Pakistan. What is perceived as shared Islamist (political Islam) characteristics between Pakistan and Afghanistan, under the Taliban regime, can be traced to the Islamisation process during the 1980s (under Zia-ul-Haq), while the cultural, religious and historical relationship with India goes back for centuries.

A SETBACK?

With the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, India's strategic interests sustained a transient setback. The haste and chaos surrounding the withdrawal of the international forces seemed to thrust the regional power equations into a disarray. There was panic all around, with Indian diplomats and citizens being evacuated in the bloody aftermath. At that moment, it looked as if India's decadal efforts in Afghanistan, focused on people and post-war reconstruction, had been in vain.

This was mainly due to two reasons. First, given the extensive US presence in Afghanistan for all these years, India had some kind (even if not fool proof) of guarantee that Pakistan will not be able to inflict consequential damage to its presence and interests in Afghanistan. Second, and perhaps more critical, was the fact that Pakistan seemed to be ruling the roost in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Besides this, China's overbearing presence in Afghanistan's strategic outlook, especially around the years that the exit actually culminated, was another key area of concern. India, in the summer of 2020—only about a year before the final US exit—had had a border stand-off with China in the Galwan Valley, with causalities on both sides. The Doklam crisis of 2017 also contributed a great deal towards India–China discord. Therefore, on the eve of the departure of the US from Afghanistan, India was quite uncertain and unsettled about its strategic interests.

However, over the course of the next three years or so—the time period this monograph seeks to encapsulate—there was quite a reversal

in the dynamics, especially with regard to the Taliban–Pakistan and the Taliban–India equations. Pakistan's gratification in bringing the Taliban back to power in Kabul—and in the process, aiding the exit of the democratically elected Ashraf Ghani government—proved short-lived. Its ambition of maintaining the Taliban government on a leash and extracting concessions, such as elimination/eradication of the TTP outfit and uprooting of its bases, remained a distant dream. The Taliban refused to buckle under Islamabad's pressure, and ultimately revolted. They not only ignored Pakistani diktats on the TTP but also put their foot down on conventional irritants associated with Afghanistan–Pakistan bilateral history. This was especially with regard to the sanctity of the Durand Line as the international border, which Afghanistan never accepted as legitimate. The Taliban also endorsed the conservative Afghan stance and not the one aligned with Pakistan. Pakistan, in turn, expelled Afghan refugees from its territory and conducted retaliatory strikes against Afghanistan in the name of targeting TTP sanctuaries there. The Taliban, so far, have refused to relent.

On the other hand, there has been some thaw in India–Taliban relations. India's Foreign Secretary, Vikram Misri, met with Afghanistan's acting Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, in Dubai, in the beginning of January 2025.¹ The talks between Muttaqi and India's foreign secretary fructified after sustained engagement between the two sides at a preceding level. An Indian interlocutor, J.P. Singh, Joint Secretary Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran, visited Kabul, where he held talks with the Taliban's acting Defence Minister, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar.² Soon after this, the Taliban

¹ Kallol Bhattacherjee, "In a First, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri meets Taliban's 'Foreign Minister' in Dubai", *The Hindu*, 8 January 2025, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/foreign-secretary-misri-meets-acting-afghan-foreign-minister-in-dubai/article69077126.ece> (Accessed 21 January 2025).

² Rezaul H. Laskar, "In a First, India's Point Person for Afghanistan Meets Taliban Defence Minister", *Hindustan Times*, 6 November 2024, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-a-first-india-s-point-person-for-afghanistan-meets-taliban-defence-minister-101730912792150.html> (Accessed 27 December 2024).

appointed an “acting consul” at the Afghan mission in Mumbai, which was accepted by India.³ This came about despite India, like the rest of the world, not recognising the Taliban regime. It was the Taliban government’s continued insistence that India must not stop its reconstruction and development projects in Afghanistan that contributed towards the breakthrough.

Today, India and the Taliban are poised towards engaging positively, while Pakistan–Afghanistan are in an extremely confrontational state. The Taliban have very few options at hand for constructive partners, such as India, who have the ability and intent to bring about a transformational change in Afghanistan—both state and society. They have even fewer incentives to rely on surreptitious ties, akin to their transactions with Pakistan—its military and intelligence—that may have aided the group’s return to power. The Taliban need money to run the government and the country—a responsibility they took on after the US forces withdrew. As Pakistan is a cash-strapped nation and its economy is in doldrums, it does not have anything concrete to offer for Afghanistan’s economic uplift. The Taliban have seemingly taken account of Pakistan’s deficit in this regard.

Where China is concerned, its strategy on Afghanistan as well as Pakistan is at a crossroad. In Afghanistan, China is making concerted efforts to be seen by the Taliban’s side. For instance, it has restored diplomatic ties with the Taliban government, when no one else has, and the two countries have also exchanged envoys. However, an official recognition of the Taliban regime by Beijing is yet to come. This shows that even the Chinese are not very sure of how to proceed, especially as Pakistan—its chief facilitator in post-9/11 Afghanistan—and the Taliban ties are currently strained. Nonetheless, China is making attempts to strengthen its presence and role in Afghanistan, albeit in a measured way.

³ Kallol Bhattacherjee, “Taliban Appoint ‘Acting Consul’ at the Afghan Consulate General in Mumbai”, *The Hindu*, 12 November 2024, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/taliban-appoint-acting-consul-at-the-afghan-consulate-general-in-mumbai/article68860500.ece> (Accessed 27 December 2024).

Looking at some of the aforementioned ground realities, there seems to be a geopolitical fluidity. The contours of the future will possibly be determined by the interplay of each of the external actors—how they behave and the way the Taliban responds to each. The Taliban have ruled Afghanistan only briefly during the late 1990s; and images and impressions of those years are not reassuring. The hijacking of India's IC-814 aircraft in December 1999, where the Taliban fighters and vehicles surrounded the hostage plane, is a memory that has haunted India's perception of the Taliban and will probably continue to do so. However, the fact that India and the Taliban have shown the grit to overcome past perceptions of each other, is a positive sign.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

As noted, the situation in the Af-Pak region is still too fluid to put forth a vital conclusive analysis. However, some preliminary prescription or a prognosis from India's standpoint could be based on the following thoughts/suggestions:

1. For now, India–Taliban engagement is panning out positively, but gradually. Both sides are trying to understand each other's expectations and how to restore trust and partnership of the past decades under different governments of Afghanistan. There is some attempt to overcome mistrust of past, especially on India's part. However, both sides need to proceed in a measured, cautious way, with prudence. This path will be fraught with hesitations. From New Delhi's standpoint, this is significant as the world community has not yet formally accepted the Taliban as the legitimate government in Afghanistan, post the US departure.
2. India and Afghanistan (under the Taliban) have to be prepared to put up/contend with Pakistan's nuisance value at every step. This is not new for India as its stakes in Afghanistan have been constantly under threat from Pakistan. However, for the Taliban, there is some dearth of experience in dealing with an adversarial Pakistan, with whom their relations have generally been on the cordial side.
3. India needs to be keenly attentive towards the growing Chinese footprint in Afghanistan. Though the country has been dealing with the Pakistan–China axis for a long time, in Afghanistan, India's

attention has been mostly consumed by Pakistan's perpetual gambits. Therefore, even as China was active in establishing a foothold in Afghanistan post 9/11, the quantum and depth of India's worries vis-à-vis Chinese forays was of limited impact. This was because the US presence neutralised some of the concerns. However, the US has left and now India needs to be watchful that the Chinese are not able to use Afghanistan—that is, manipulate their concessions/handouts to the Taliban to India's strategic disadvantage.

4. China's *modus operandi* in Pakistan and Afghanistan is alike as far as advertising its efforts and contributions is concerned, particularly with regard to the BRI and the CPEC. So, there have been a series of big-ticket project announcements amidst local fanfare in both the countries. However, on the ground, not much impact is seen in terms of tangibles outcomes affecting the growth and development of the state and society. In contrast, India's has followed a low-key approach regarding its large contribution to Afghanistan in terms of development aid, training, cooperation, etc., but these efforts have led to tangible changes. The aspect that requires some pondering is whether India should switch, if not in totality, to partial mode of publicising/propagating its works on and in Afghanistan.
5. While spreading/elaborating its interests/stakes in Afghanistan, India must also be mindful that this is one country that has, over decades of conflict, turned tables, that is, converted friends into enemies and foes into friends. For instance, in Afghanistan, the Russian role gradually transcended from belligerence to peace-making. Russia was eager to engage with the descendants of the mujahedeen (the Taliban), the instrumental force that once rooted them out of Afghanistan. This was as the mujahedeen were at loggerheads with the US post 9/11. Whether the newly struck bonhomie was an effort to push the US out of Afghanistan or a bid to pull it back/keep it fastened in the quagmire is a matter of debate.
6. On India's ties with Afghanistan, it is also important to take into account the reality that the shared periphery between Gilgit-Baltistan and Afghanistan has implications for India's long-standing claim

on PoK. As noted earlier, in May 2025, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, made a tangible, explicit reference to what could have been India's border with Afghanistan. Doval's observations have added relevance in view of the fact that, of late, India's pitch on PoK has become more pronounced and its standing claim on the region under Pakistani occupation is now steadfastly pinned to its broader strategy on Kashmir.

7. Lastly, given the fluidity of regional equations—where change seems to be the only constant as of now—India needs to be fully conscious and prepared for future contingencies. What if the Taliban and Pakistan patch up? How will India manage and safeguard its strategic interests in that scenario is something that needs to be road mapped as a priority. Pakistan—Afghanistan have deep interlinkages, in terms of ethnicities, culture, people and religion. In that case, will Afghanistan, particularly the Taliban, who too have their roots in Pakistan, be able to sustain/assert its individuality vis-à-vis Pakistan—once its prime benefactor—remains to be seen in the years ahead.

ANNEXURES AND MAPS

AFGHANISTAN – CHINA BOUNDARY

I. BACKGROUND

The international boundary between Afghanistan and China extends for 47 miles along the water divide between the Aksu (Agsu) River to the west and the Karachukur Su to the east. The former stream is a tributary of the Amu Darya (Oxus) while the latter belongs to the Yarkand (Yeh-ehr Ch'iang Ho) system. Both principal rivers flow into the Central Asian region of internal drainage. The boundary traverses a high ridge of the Mustagh Range (elevations range between 16,000 and 18,500 feet) to the west of the Taghdumbash Pamir. The extremely isolated frontier serves as a wild and mountainous buffer between Central and Southern Asia. Sparsely populated, the frontier possesses limited economic potential although it continues to have a great strategic value. In the late 19th century, British authorities in India feared the encroachment of an expansionist Czarist Russia into Central Asia, Sinkiang, and Tibet. The British sought and obtained a buffer between Russia and India by the extension of Afghan sovereignty over the narrow Wakhan valley. This east–west corridor effectively served to mark the limits of British and Russian political expansion. While the boundary between the Wakhan Corridor and Russia was carefully delimited and eventually demarcated, the eastern limit of Afghan sovereignty—the boundary with China—remained an undelimited, “conventional” line on maps. The Chinese in the early 20th century, however, advanced claims to much of the Pamir Region including most of the Afghan corridor as well as a sizable portion of adjacent Russian Tadzhikistan; the Sino–Russian boundary had not been delimited south of the Kizil Jik Dawan.¹ Within the last decade, the Chinese communist regime has

¹ See International Boundary Study No. 64, February 14, 1966: China–U.S.S.R. Boundary.

undertaken a program of boundary delimitation and rectification with its smaller neighboring states. Treaties have been negotiated with Nepal, Burma, Pakistan, and Mongolia.² The Afghanistan–China boundary agreement, signed on November 22, 1963, was the fifth of these boundaries treaties initiated by the Chinese communists.

II. TREATY AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ACTS

Afghanistan and China announced on March 2, 1963, their intention to negotiate the formal delimitation of “the boundary existing between the two countries.” Without ever stating it, the two countries considered only the alignment of the “conventional” line between them.

Following negotiations begun in Kabul in late 1963, the present boundary treaty was signed.

A. Boundary Agreement between the Royal Afghan Government and the Peoples Republic of China signed on November 22, 1963, in Peking (Official Gazette of Afghanistan, No. 4, May 7, 1966.)

The full text of the treaty is as follows:

The Chairman of the CPR and His Majesty the King of Afghanistan;

With a view of insuring the further development of the friendly and good neighborly relations which happily exist between the two independent and sovereign states, China and Afghanistan;

Resolving to delimit and demarcate formally the boundary existing between China and Afghanistan in the Pamirs in accordance with the principles of respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and mutual nonaggression and the Ten Principles of the Bandung Conference, and in the spirit of friendship, cooperation, and mutual understanding;

² See International Boundary Study No. 42, November 30, 1964: Burma–China Boundary; No. 50, May 30, 1965: China–Nepal Boundary; and No. 85, November 15, 1968: China–Pakistan Boundary.

Firmly believing that the formal delimitation and demarcation of the boundary between the two countries will further strengthen the peace and security of this region;

Have decided for this purpose to conclude the present treaty, and appointed as their respective plenipotentiaries;

For the Chairman of the CPR: Chen I, Minister of Foreign Affairs;

For His Majesty the King of Afghanistan: Al-Qayyum, Minister of the Interior;

Who, having examined each other's full powers and found them to be in good and due form, have agreed upon the following:

Article 1. The contracting parties agree that starting from a peak with a height of 5,630 meters—the reference coordinates of which are approximately 37 degrees 03 minutes north, 74 degrees 36 minutes east—in the southern extremity, the boundary line between the two countries runs along the Mustagh Range water divide between the Karachukur Su River, a tributary of Tashkurghan River, on the one hand, and the sources of the Aksu River and the Wakhjir River, the upper reaches of the Wakhan River, on the other hand, passing through South Wakhjir Daban (called Wakhjir Pass on the Afghan map) at the elevation of 4,923 meters, North Wakhjir Daban (named on the Chinese map only), West Koktorok Daban (named on the Chinese map only), East Koktorok Daban (called Kara Jilga Pass on the Afghan map), Tok Man Su Daban called Mihman Yoli Pass on the Afghan map), Sirik Tash Daban (named on the Chinese map only), Kokrash Kol Daban (called Tigarmen Su Pass on the Afghan map) and reaches Peak Kokrash Kol (called Peak Povalo Shveikovski on the Afghan map) with a height of 5,698 meters.

The entire boundary line as described in the present article is shown on the 1:200,000 scale map of the Chinese side in Chinese and the 1:253,440 scale map of the Afghan side in Persian, which are attached to the present treaty. Both of the above-mentioned maps have English words as an auxiliary.

Article 2. The contracting parties agree that wherever the boundary between the two countries follows a water divide, the ridge thereof

shall be the boundary line, and wherever it passes through a dabān—pass—the water-parting line thereof shall be the boundary line.

Article 3. The contracting parties agree that:

1—As soon as the present treaty comes into force a Chinese–Afghan joint boundary demarcation commission composed of an equal number of representatives and several advisers from each side shall be set up to carry out on location concrete surveys of the boundary between the two countries and to erect boundary markers in accordance with the provisions of Article 1 of the present treaty and then draft a protocol relating to the boundary between the two countries and prepare boundary maps setting forth in detail the alignment of the boundary line and the location of the boundary markers on the ground.

2—The protocol and the boundary maps mentioned in paragraph one of the present article, upon coming into force after being signed by the representatives of the two governments, shall become annexes to the present treaty, and the boundary maps prepared by the joint boundary demarcation commission shall replace the maps attached to the present treaty.

3—Upon the signing of the above-mentioned protocol and boundary maps, the tasks of the Chinese–Afghan joint boundary demarcation commission shall be terminated.

Article 4. The contracting parties agree that any dispute concerning the boundary which may arise after the formal delimitation of the boundary between the two countries shall be settled by the two parties through friendly consultation.

Article 5. The present treaty shall come into force on the day of its signature. Done in duplicate in Peking on 22 November 1963, in the Chinese, Persian, and English languages, all three texts being equally authentic.

(Signed) Chen I, plenipotentiary of the CPR.

(Signed) Al-Qayyūm, plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Afghanistan.

The attaching to the treaty by Afghanistan and China of differing maps has been typical of the boundary treaties negotiated by the Chinese

communists. Most of the boundary areas are isolated and poorly mapped and problems developed over precise positioning of features. The commission for the demarcation of the boundary, established by Article 3, was directed to prepare a new map. This map, or series of maps, has been annexed to the detailed demarcation Protocol of the treaty signed in Kabul on March 24, 1965. These maps, however, have not been published.

III. SUMMARY

The precise positioning of the boundary remains in question although it obviously has been established to the satisfaction of both governments. As a result, the Afghanistan–China boundary should be shown on official U.S. maps as an established international boundary. Because of the lack of specific detail, however, the disclaimer³ should be used on all maps showing the specific boundary. The problem also exists that the geographic coordinates given in the treaty for the initial point of the boundary—37°03' North, 74°36' East—do not conform with the same point in the China–Pakistan agreement. The problem obviously is related directly to the poor quality of mapping in the frontier.

Source: Boundary Agreement between the Royal Afghan Government and the Peoples Republic of China signed on November 22, 1963, in Peking (Official Gazette Afghanistan, No. 4, May 7, 1966), The Geographer, Office of the Geographer, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, No. 89- 1 May 1969, at <https://library.law.fsu.edu/Digital-Collections/LimitsinSeas/pdf/ibs089.pdf>

³ Representation of international boundaries is not necessarily authoritative.

Annexure 2

**JOINT COMMUNIQUE ON THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE
KINGDOM OF AFGHANISTAN**

Draft of the Communique to be Issued in Peking, Capital of the People's Republic of China:

?The Governments of the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Afghanistan, based on the common desire to promote mutual relations between their two countries, agree to establish normal diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors between the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Afghanistan.?

Draft of the Communique to be Issued in Kabul, Capital of the Dingdom of Afghanistan:

?The Governments of the Kingdom of Afghanistan and the People's Republic of China, based on the common desire to promote mutual relations between their two countries, agree to establish normal diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors between the kingdom of Afghanistan and the People's Republic of China.?

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 15 November 2000, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2676_663356/2677_663358/202406/t20240607_11406256.html

**JOINT STATEMENT OF EXTENDED “TROIKA” ON
PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN,
DOHA, 30 APRIL, 2021**

On April 30, representatives of the extended “Troika,” comprising the People’s Republic of China, the United States, the Russian Federation, and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, met in Doha, Qatar to discuss ways to support intra-Afghan negotiations and help the parties reach a negotiated settlement and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. The extended “Troika” met with representatives of the Islamic Republic negotiating team and of the Taliban, as well as Qatar, who graciously hosted the participants.

In the spirit of the discussions, as well as provisions of joint statements on the outcomes of previous “Troika” meetings and discussions held on March 22, April 25, July 11, and October 25, 2019; June 3 and November 30, 2020; and March 18, 2021; the four states participating in the extended “Troika” have affirmed as follows:

1. We acknowledge the widespread and sincere demand of the Afghan people for a lasting and just peace and an end to the war.
2. We reiterate that there is no military solution in Afghanistan and a negotiated political settlement through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process is the only way forward for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan.
3. We take note of the April 14 announcement by the United States and NATO that U.S./NATO forces will begin a responsible withdrawal from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021 that concludes by September 11, 2021. We reiterate that the withdrawal of foreign troops should ensure a steady transition of the situation in Afghanistan. We stress that, during the withdrawal period, the peace process should not be disrupted, no fights or turbulence shall occur

in Afghanistan, and the safety of international troops should be ensured.

4. We expect the Taliban to fulfill its counterterrorism commitments, including preventing terrorist groups and individuals from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of any other country; not hosting these groups and preventing them from recruiting, training, and fundraising. We expect the Afghan government to continue counterterrorism cooperation with the international community.
5. We reiterate our call on all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan to reduce the level of violence in the country and on the Taliban not to pursue a Spring offensive. We condemn in the strongest terms any attacks deliberately targeting civilians in Afghanistan and call on all parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law in all circumstances, including those related to protection of civilians.
6. We reiterate that diplomatic personnel and property shall be inviolable, and the perpetrators of any attack or threat on foreign diplomatic personnel and properties in Kabul will be held accountable.
7. We urge the Government of the Islamic Republic and the High Council for National Reconciliation to engage openly with their Taliban counterparts regarding a negotiated settlement. We do not support the establishment in Afghanistan of any government imposed by force, consistent with the Joint Statement of the March 18 Expanded Troika.
8. We support a review of the status of designations of Taliban individuals and entities on the UN 1988 sanctions, as stated in the UNSC resolution 2513 (2020). Practical measures to reduce violence and sustained efforts to advance intra-Afghan negotiations by the Taliban will positively affect this review process.
9. We note the preparations by Turkey to host a conference of senior leaders of both Afghan parties in order to accelerate the intra-Afghan negotiations, and we also welcome the United Nations and Qatar's roles as co-conveners of this dialogue. We call upon

- the negotiating parties to make progress toward an inclusive political settlement and a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire.
10. We appreciate the long-standing support of the State of Qatar to facilitate the peace process, and we support the continuation of discussions between the parties' negotiating teams in Doha.
 11. We welcome an expanded role for the United Nations in contributing to the Afghan peace and reconciliation process, including by leveraging its considerable experience and expertise in supporting other peace processes.
 12. We strongly advocate a durable and just political resolution that will result in the formation of an independent, sovereign, unified, peaceful, democratic, neutral and self-sufficient Afghanistan, free of terrorism and an illicit drug industry, which contributes to a safe environment for the voluntary, expeditious and sustainable return of Afghan refugees through a well-resourced plan; stability; and global security.
 13. We call on all Afghans including the Government of the Islamic Republic and the Taliban to ensure that terrorist groups and individuals do not use Afghan soil to threaten the security of any other country.
 14. We reaffirm that any peace agreement must include protections for the rights of all Afghans, including women, men, children, victims of war, and minorities, and should respond to the strong desire of all Afghans for economic, social and political development including the rule of law.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 7 May 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3376_665447/3432_664920/3433_664922/202406/t20240612_11425984.html

Annexure 4

WANG YI TALKS ABOUT THE FIVE PROPOSITIONS FOR ADVANCING PEACE AND RECONCILIATION IN AFGHANISTAN

On June 3, 2021, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi presided over the 4th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Guiyang. Afghan Foreign Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi attended the dialogue.

Wang Yi said, the accelerated unilateral withdrawal of troops by the United States and some Western countries from Afghanistan poses a challenge to and also offers an opportunity for Afghanistan and other countries in the region. The challenge lies in whether the withdrawal will lead to changes in the talks among Afghans, wars and strife. The opportunity is that the pull-out of external military forces from Afghanistan will create conditions and open up prospects for the Afghan people to truly take control of their own future and destiny. China believes that the fundamental way to overcome the challenge and seize the opportunity is to unswervingly promote the peace and reconciliation process within Afghanistan. To this end, China puts forth five ideas and propositions:

First, adhere to the fundamental "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" principle. Afghanistan belongs to the Afghan people. We hope that all parties to the Afghan peace talks will put the interests of the country and its people in the first place and jointly explore a governance model and development path that suit to the national conditions of Afghanistan. We support all parties in Afghanistan to jointly build an extensive and inclusive political structure for the future, which pursues a moderate Muslim policy and continues to firmly combat terrorism internally, and promotes peace diplomacy on all fronts externally, especially being in friendly terms with neighboring countries.

Second, maintain the momentum of intra-Afghan talks. China is pleased to see the recent resumption of talks between the Afghan government's peace negotiating team and the Taliban negotiators in Doha, and hopes that this situation will be consolidated and continue. The peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan is at a critical moment, the opportunity for peace talks should not be missed, and the reconciliation process should not be reversed. China hopes that all parties to the peace talks in Afghanistan will steer clear of disruptions, show each other goodwill, focus on consensus, clarify the roadmap and timetable for reconciliation as soon as possible, and work out realistic and feasible short-, medium- and long-term programs. China is willing to hold an intra-Afghan dialogue at an appropriate time and will provide all convenience and support for this.

Third, bring the Taliban back into the political mainstream. The international community has reached an important consensus that all parties in Afghanistan should strictly abide by the UN Security Council Resolution 2513. China is ready to work with all stakeholders of Afghanistan, including Pakistan, to make more efforts to promote peace talks and mediation, creating necessary environment for intra-Afghan negotiations and Afghanistan peace and reconstruction. China hopes that the Afghan government will strengthen its confidence in peace talks and put forward a more attractive plan for peace talks to encourage the Taliban to abandon past differences and meet each other halfway.

Fourth, the international community and the countries in the region should provide full support. For some time to come, the United States will remain the biggest external factor affecting the Afghan issue. China, Afghanistan and Pakistan should work together to push for the orderly withdrawal of the U.S. troops and the fulfillment of its due obligations, so as to prevent the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan and avoid the return of terrorist forces. China suggested that Afghan should strengthen communication and cooperation with its friendly neighboring countries in a timely manner so as to form greater synergy for ceasefire, cessation of war and restoration of peace in Afghanistan. Not long ago, China hosted "China + Central Asia" (C+C5) Foreign Ministers' Meeting, which encouraged all parties to release the Joint Statement on the Afghan Issue. Going forward, we will support the

Shanghai Cooperation Organization in playing a bigger role in the peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Fifth, strengthen sincere cooperation among China, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since last year, Pakistan has played a unique role in facilitating the signing of the peace agreement between the United States and Taliban and the initiating of intra-Afghan negotiations. China hopes that Pakistan will continue to make good use of its own advantages and make new and constructive efforts. China also hopes that the Afghan side will take a positive view of Pakistan's sincerity and contributions. China proposes to explore the establishment of a trilateral special envoy dialogue mechanism for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan within the framework of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral foreign ministers' dialogue to maintain close communication on the situation of the Afghan peace talks and specific steps for their advancement. China can also expand cooperation under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan to raise the level of economic and trade cooperation and connectivity between Afghanistan and the countries in the region, helping Afghanistan enhance its capacity for independent development and gradually realize a virtuous circle of peace and development.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 4 June 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2757_663518/2759_663522/202406/t20240607_11412119.html

CHINA'S POSITION ON THE AFGHAN ISSUE

China and Afghanistan are close neighbors with longstanding friendship between the two peoples. Under the current situation, China's position on the Afghan issue is as follows:

1. Adhering to the “Three Respects” and “Three Nevers”. China respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan, respects the independent choices made by the Afghan people, and respects the religious beliefs and national customs of Afghanistan. China never interferes in Afghanistan's internal affairs, never seeks selfish interests in Afghanistan, and never pursues so-called sphere of influence.
2. Supporting moderate and prudent governance in Afghanistan. China sincerely hopes that Afghanistan could build an open and inclusive political structure, adopt moderate and prudent domestic and foreign policies, and engage in friendly exchanges with all countries especially neighboring countries. We hope the Afghan Interim Government will protect the basic rights and interests of all Afghan people, including women, children and all ethnic groups, and continue working actively to meet Afghan people's interests and the international community's expectations.
3. Supporting peace and reconstruction of Afghanistan. China will continue to do its best to help Afghanistan with reconstruction and development, make plans with Afghanistan and fulfill its assistance pledges, promote steady progress in economic, trade and investment cooperation, and actively carry out cooperation in such fields as medical care, poverty alleviation, agriculture, and disaster prevention and mitigation, so as to help Afghanistan realize independent and sustainable development at an early date. China welcomes Afghanistan's participation in Belt and Road cooperation and supports Afghanistan's integration into regional economic

- cooperation and connectivity that will transform Afghanistan from a “land-locked country” to a “land-linked country”.
4. Supporting Afghanistan in countering terrorism resolutely and forcefully. Security is the foundation and prerequisite of development. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is a terrorist organization listed by the UN Security Council and designated by the Chinese government in accordance with law. The ETIM forces in Afghanistan pose a severe threat to the security of China, Afghanistan and the region. China hopes that Afghanistan will fulfill its commitment in earnest and take more effective measures to crack down on all terrorist forces including the ETIM with greater determination, and earnestly ensure the safety and security of citizens, institutions and projects of China and other countries in Afghanistan.
 5. Calling for greater bilateral and multilateral counter-terrorism cooperation. As Afghanistan faces pronounced terrorism-related security issues, it is necessary for the international community to strengthen counter-terrorism security cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels and provide Afghanistan with much-needed supplies, equipment and technical assistance. Afghanistan should be supported in taking comprehensive measures to address both the symptoms and root causes of terrorism and prevent the country from again becoming a safe haven, breeding ground and source of terrorism.
 6. Working together to fight terrorism, separatism and extremism in Afghanistan. Terrorism, separatism and extremism in Afghanistan remain a major security threat to the region and the world. China calls on the international community to firmly support Afghanistan’s fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism and its active measures to cut off the channels of terrorist financing, to counter recruitment and cross-border movement of terrorists and the spread of violent terrorist audio and video materials, to contain extremism, youth radicalization and the spread of terrorist ideologies, and to eliminate sleeper cells and terrorist safe havens.
 7. Urging the US to live up to its commitments and responsibilities to Afghanistan. It is a widely-held view in the international

community that, by seizing Afghanistan's overseas assets and imposing unilateral sanctions, the US, which created the Afghan issue in the first place, is the biggest external factor that hinders substantive improvement in the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. The US should draw lessons from what happened in Afghanistan, face squarely the grave humanitarian, economic and security risks and challenges in Afghanistan, immediately lift its sanctions, return the Afghan overseas assets, and deliver its pledged humanitarian aid to meet the emergency needs of the Afghan people.

8. Opposing external interference and infiltration in Afghanistan. It is a shared view of regional countries that the military interference and “democratic transformation” by external forces in Afghanistan over the past 20-odd years have inflicted enormous losses and pain on Afghanistan. It will be difficult to eliminate the negative impacts for many years to come. To help Afghanistan achieve sustained peace and stability, relevant countries should not attempt to re-deploy military facilities in Afghanistan and its neighbourhood, practice double standards on counter-terrorism, or advance their geopolitical agenda by supporting or conniving at terrorism.
9. Strengthening international and regional coordination on the Afghan issue. Under the new circumstances, Afghanistan should be a platform for cooperation among various parties rather than geopolitical games. China supports all plans and measures that are conducive to political settlement of the Afghan issue, and will actively engage in multilateral coordination through such mechanisms and platforms as the Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Afghan Issue among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)-Afghanistan Contact Group, the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, the Informal Meeting of China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Foreign Ministers on Afghanistan, the Troika Plus Meeting and the United Nations, in an effort to build consensus and synergy for stability in and assistance to Afghanistan at regional and international levels.

10. Facilitating solution to Afghanistan's humanitarian and refugee issues. China is concerned about the situation of Afghan refugees and will continue to provide assistance through bilateral and multilateral channels. China supports relevant UN agencies in playing a positive role in this regard, applauds the efforts by regional countries, and calls on the international community to provide continuous humanitarian and development assistance to jointly help Afghanistan rebuild its economy and create favorable conditions for the final settlement of the refugee issue.
11. Supporting Afghanistan's fight against narcotics. China looks forward to and supports more concrete actions by Afghanistan to counter narcotics cultivation, production and illicit trafficking, and will work with the international community to help Afghanistan with alternative development and crackdown on cross-border drug-related crimes, so as to eliminate the source of narcotics in the region.

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 12 April 2023, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2676_663356/2677_663358/202304/t20230412_11057785.html

Annexure 6

**JOINT STATEMENT OF THE 5TH CHINA-
AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN FOREIGN MINISTERS'
DIALOGUE**

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari of Pakistan, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang of China and the Acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi of Afghanistan held the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in Islamabad, Pakistan on 6th May 2023.

Stressing that a peaceful, stable and prosperous Afghanistan serves the common interest of the region, the Foreign Ministers underscored the critical importance of trilateral cooperation in promoting this objective. The three sides resolved to further deepen and expand their cooperation in the security, development and political domains based on the principles of mutual respect, equal-footed consultation and mutual benefit.

The three sides underscored the need to tackle security challenges posing a serious threat to regional and global security, and directly impacting the stability and economic prosperity of the entire region.

The three sides agreed to coordinate and cooperate on security, organized crimes, drugs smuggling etc. and called on the international community to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and provide necessary supplies, equipment and technical assistance in this regard to the relevant countries.

The three sides stressed on the need of not allowing any individual, group or party, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) etc., to use their territories to harm and threaten regional security and interests, or conduct terrorist actions and activities. All three sides underscored the need to refrain from intervening into internal affairs of Afghanistan, and to promote Afghan peace, stability and reconstruction.

Underscoring the imperative to generate economic activity within Afghanistan, the Ministers stressed the importance of exploring realistic pathways towards the revival of the Afghan economy. To this end, the Ministers agreed to consider further supporting the reconstruction of Afghanistan and exploring trilateral investment possibilities aimed at industrialization and job creation.

Expressing solidarity with the people of Afghanistan, the three sides stressed the importance of sustained and urgent humanitarian support to the people of Afghanistan including the imperative to bridge funding gaps for humanitarian operations. The Ministers underlined that humanitarian support to the people of Afghanistan must remain delinked from any political considerations.

The three sides reaffirmed their resolve to fully harness Afghanistan's potential as a hub for regional connectivity. Reaffirming their commitment to further the trilateral cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and to jointly extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan. Stressed that the importance of existing projects including CASA-1000, TAPI, Trans-Afghan Railways etc. would enhance regional connectivity as well as ensure economic uplift and prosperity for the peoples of this region.

The three sides emphasized to push forward the "hard connectivity" in infrastructure and "soft connectivity" in norms and standards, further explore the facilitating measures for the movement of people and trade activities between the three countries. The three sides agreed to enhance transit trade through Gwadar Port.

Expressing satisfaction at the existing trilateral cooperation, the three sides agreed to carry out exchange and training programs and to strengthen people-to-people exchanges by conducting the trilateral programs in line with the List of China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Practical Cooperation Projects, adopted by Foreign Ministers in this dialogue.

The three sides reaffirmed to continue cooperation in areas of mutual interest like economic development, capacity building, and improving livelihoods. The Ministers agreed to strengthen cooperation in the fields such as agriculture, trade, energy, capacity building, border management etc.

The Ministers called upon the international community to engage constructively with the Afghan side. In this regard, they acknowledged the efforts made under the aegis of various mechanisms and formats, including in particular, the Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan, to promote dialogue and constructive engagement with the Interim Afghan Government. The three sides also urged the international community to assist Afghanistan in countering narcotics effectively and develop alternative crops to enhance its capacity for independent and sustainable development.

The three sides urged the relevant countries lift their unilateral sanctions against Afghanistan and return the assets overseas for the benefit of the Afghan people, and create opportunities for economic development and prosperity in Afghanistan.

Taking note of the Afghan Interim Government's repeated assurances to respect and protect women's rights and interests, the three sides called on the international community to support the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, and help Afghanistan to improve governance and strengthen the capacity building, so as to effectively protect the basic rights and interests of all segments of the Afghan society, including women and children.

The Ministers expressed appreciation to the neighbouring countries, in particular, Pakistan, for the generous hospitality in hosting millions of Afghan refugees, and called on the international community to provide necessary support and assistance to these countries and Afghanistan for the dignified return and reintegration of refugees into the Afghan society.

The three sides resolved to continue with the trilateral cooperation mechanism, including the Director-General Level Practical Cooperation Dialogue, and forge closer-good neighborly relations and partnership.

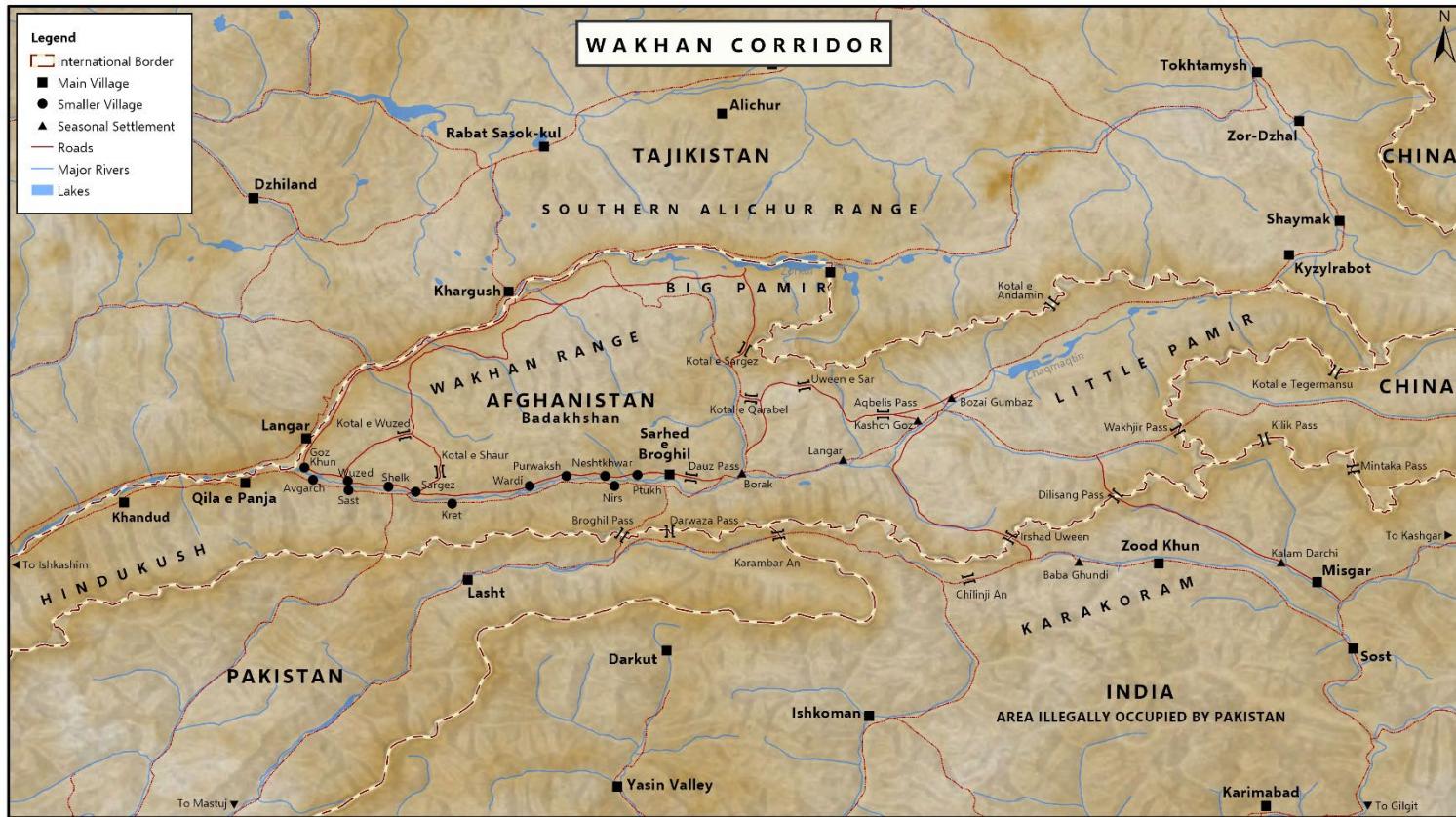
China and Afghanistan thanked Pakistan for the successful organization of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue and its warm hospitality.

Source: Embassy of the People's Republic of China in India, 9 May 2023, at https://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202305/t20230509_11073522.htm

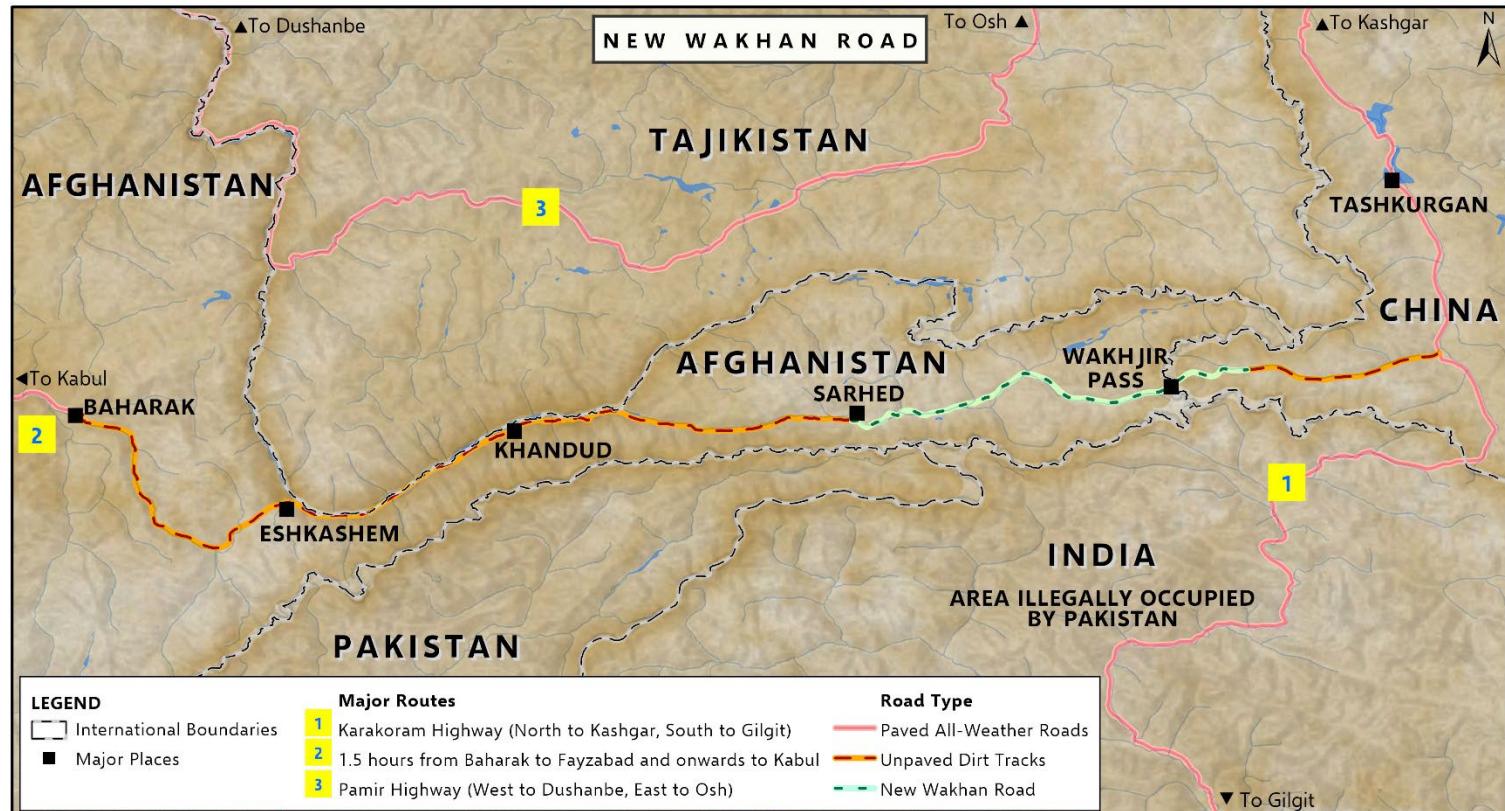


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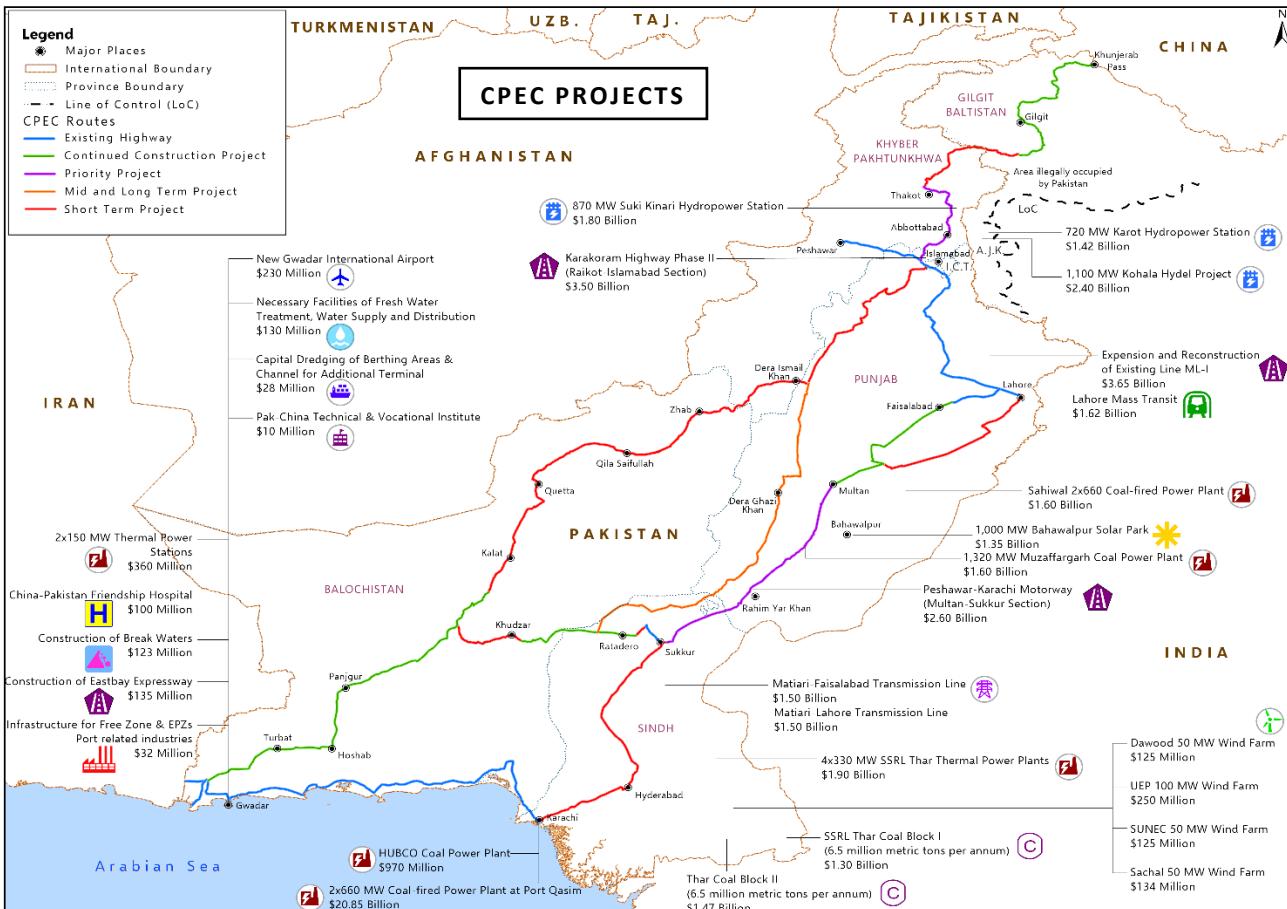




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The monograph examines the inception of China's geostrategic/geoeconomic pivot towards Pakistan— and more recently, Afghanistan— before charting the trajectory of its expanding role in the Af-Pak region. It assesses the viability of the evolving geopolitical triangle comprising China, Pakistan and Afghanistan, before evaluating possible Chinese strategy behind deepening engagement with a region marked by chronic volatility. The study, in particular, assesses China's strategic interests in Afghanistan and how Pakistan remains central to its Afghan policy. The monograph also seeks to explore whether the return of the Taliban and China's rising profile in the region would signal the evolution and fruition of China's Af-Pak strategy. By examining both convergences and divergences in Afghanistan and Pakistan's bilateral ties with China, the study investigates the contours of a potentially hyphenated approach. It concludes by outlining prominent security paradigms in the region and the inherent dilemmas that shape China's strategic calculus in this complex geopolitical theatre.

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