

## **New Dimensions of Cooperation Between China and Afghanistan: Implications for Pakistan**

**Safia Nawab<sup>1</sup>, Maria Bibi<sup>1</sup>, Mairaj ul Hamid<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> BS Political Science, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Corresponding Author, Email: [mairajulhamid717@gmail.com](mailto:mairajulhamid717@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

In August 2021, after the withdrawal of American and NATO forces from Afghanistan; a vacuum for investments and reconstruction was created. As immediate neighbor of Afghanistan: China having historical links with Afghanistan, there began a new era of cooperation between them. This cooperation is multifaceted which led to the development of Afghanistan. However, it also brought some long and short-term implications for Pakistan. This research study examines and explains that how the Sino-Afghan cooperation became strong especially after controlling of Afghan state of affairs by Emarat e Islami Afghanistan popularly known as Taliban in 2021 and how this cooperation will have implications for Pakistan. The study finds that Pakistan will be having opportunities of cooperation with both the nations in the current scenario, but the challenges faced in this backdrop will also be enormous due to the game spoilers and proxies there. In recommendations the study suggests some measures that what strategy Pakistan needs to mitigate the potential risks and avail the opportunities in the future.

### **Introduction**

In the grand chessboard of geopolitics, Central Asia and South Asia are the delicate areas of Asia where every small move brings impactful consequences. Afghanistan: the “Heart of Asia” connects Eurasia, Central Asia and bustling market of South Asia. It has a subtle strategic position in Asia and after withdrawal of US and NATO forces in 2021, it has attracted the focus of world toward itself. China, the Dragon of East Asia which is the rising power of present world is now recognized by Afghanistan being beneficial for its economic strengthen and especially for its wonderful Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] project. China which was then a passive observer shifted from passive observer to an active participant to resolve regional conflicts and promote progress. Dr. Rubin [Senior research fellow at Stimson Center] pointed that China has made trilateral relation with Afghanistan and Pakistan and also quadrilateral relation including Tajikistan, aimed at addressing regional security concerns and maintaining stability in the Wakhan Corridor. He stressed that China such relation and investment in both countries are inextricably linked to its Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] and especially China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [CPEC] to establish a Corridor linking Central Asia to the Indian Ocean, facilitating trade and access to vital resources. However, the evolving security landscape in the region poses significant challenges to the success of these initiatives. Now, Pakistan the sentinel of south Asia has such wonderful relations

with China which is Tall like Himalaya, deep like Pacific and Sweet like Honey. Ambassador Durrani [Pakistan former special envoy to Afghanistan] reiterated that Pakistan's alliance with China remains steadfast. He highlighted CPEC's infrastructure projects and energy initiatives vital for boosting economic growth. However, On Pakistan-China relationship, Dr. Burnett Rubin [Senior research fellow at Stimson Centre] acknowledged growing security concerns over threats to Chinese personnel, particularly from groups such as the Baloch insurgency and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan [TTP]. He also noted the rise of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement [PTM] as a nationalist voice presenting an alternative narrative. He said that despite developments, the persistence of instability leaves China and other stakeholders increasingly wary regarding the future of the region. In contrast of Pak-China relations the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is complex and often tense like currently. The Ambassador Asif Durrani [Pakistan former special envoy to Afghanistan] noted that the ongoing instability in Afghanistan, aggravated by insurgent groups like the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan [TTP], directly threatens Pakistan's security. This situation complicates Pakistan's efforts to maintain a stable relationship with Afghanistan, as both countries share deep cultural, ethnic and political ties that influence their diplomatic interactions. Durrani raised the unresolved issue of the Durand Line, which remains a contentious matter for many Afghans, viewed as a national grievance. He said that while the border issue is political, but it has a cultural dimension also with Pashtun communities on both sides as they share strong familial and tribal ties. Additionally, the former envoy said that Pakistan's support to Afghanistan, especially in fields like education and humanitarian aspects remains vital for displaced persons and refugee communities despite political differences. However, despite the differences in political and other perspectives the trilateral relations between the three countries are developing amazingly. Wang Yi [Chinese FM] in his meeting convened in China said that he was eager to revive trilateral for the three countries to continue comprehensive enhanced political and economic cooperation among three countries. Mr. Amir Khan Muttaqi [Afghanistan Foreign Minister] said that Afghan government has good relations with China and Pakistan. He said a good opportunity has opened up for regional economic cooperation that calls for enhanced cooperation among the three countries. He further said Afghanistan wants economic cooperation instead of donation, adding that Afghan government wants to connect South Asia to Central Asia via transit route as well as to export Afghan products to China, Pakistan and India via Pakistan. He also mentioned that Afghanistan supports Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] and is eager to play beneficial role in the region. Shah Mahmood Qureshi [Pakistani Foreign Minister] stressed the need of talks and supporting the economic connectivity among the regions. He said Pakistan in tandem with China would embark on joint effort to support Afghanistan. Furthermore, in the light of everything above mentioned there is a strong cooperation going on between China and Afghanistan on different aspects especially Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]. This evolving partnership between China and Afghanistan under Taliban rule sets profound and multifaceted implications for Pakistan such as it will provide economic cooperation for Pakistan, helps in roads initiative, provides job and a lot of stuff. But, in contrary it can bring disastrous situation for Pakistan such as the militant attacks from TTP will increase, the security issues will be raised for Pakistan and if China directly connects BRI to Central Asia through Afghanistan, then Pakistan progress will be declined, and the significance of Pakistan will be stained.

### **Research Problem**

In recent years, China has significantly enhanced interest in Afghanistan particularly after the withdrawal of U.S and NATO forces in 2021. China has showed cooperation

in security, economic and political domain. China investing in projects under Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] would stabilize Afghanistan and protect its regional interest. On the other hand, there is Pakistan the neighbor country of both having deep cultural, historical, social and strategic roots with Afghanistan, despite all the development the Sino-Afghan relations have significant implications for Pakistan. The enhanced cooperation between China and Afghanistan though bring opportunities for regional connectivity and development but it also raises issues for Pakistan. The extent to which this partnership will create implications for Pakistan is underexplored. This research seeks to explain the growing Sino-Afghanistan cooperation and what could be its implications or impacts for Pakistan of all sorts.

### **Literature review**

The evolving relations between China and Afghanistan has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly in context of China Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]. China has steadily increased its involvement in Afghanistan in recent years after U.S withdrawal. As the war in Afghanistan winds down, China looks to make Afghanistan a bigger part of its regional ambitions [Stone, 2019]. This shift is based on expansion of BRI to Afghanistan. Scholars like Garvar [2021] argue that China involvement in Afghanistan is driven by its Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]. Looking at the BRI map, it seemed that it was bypassing Afghanistan [Safi, 2019]. According to China, Afghanistan should fit well into the BRI. It has a serious infrastructure deficit, making it ideal candidate for Chinese investment. It has also the shortest route between Central Asia and South Asia, and between China and Middle East, while also serving as a gateway to the Arabian Sea. Beside this, China economic footprint in Afghanistan is also expanded and is now Afghanistan's largest business investor, it has pledged increasing amount of aid to the country and Chinese companies have been involved in construction projects. Studied by Siddique [2022] suggest China aims to fill the power vacuum, positioning itself as a mediator and investor in Afghanistan reconstruction. However, according to Pantucci we still don't see large projects going forward that quickly on the ground. China has generally eschewed a leadership role in Afghanistan, preferring to work with foreign partners. Some projects, including the Five Nations Railway and Lapis Lazuli Corridor, are jointly financed by China and multilateral lending institutions. There has been a lot of cooperative activity on the ground and Beijing seems to view Afghanistan as a place where it can test out difficult relationships [Pantucci, 2019]. These cooperation between China and Afghanistan sets some implications for Pakistan. The relations of Kabul with Islamabad have soured in recent years, Kabul has diversified its trade away from Pakistan to Iran. The investment of China in Afghanistan may take its attention away from CPEC but still Afghanistan needs Pakistan because it provides the quickest route to the sea, and vice versa Pakistan hopes that Afghanistan may eventually provide access to central Asian markets, there is the realization that both countries need each other [Safi, 2019]. At the same time China is keen to involve India, a country which has a broadly positive image among Afghans in it strive to secure its interests and influence in Afghanistan. Also, the training of 10 Afghan diplomats by India and China at the Indian Foreign Service Institute in New Delhi on October 10-26 is a sign of improving relations between the two powers. Islamabad showed fear that that New Delhi wants to trap Pakistan. Pakistan frequently levels allegation that an Indo-Afghan nexus is stoking separatist movements in Pakistan. China has also started counter terrorism program, and it was pressure from Beijing that forced the Pakistani military to launch a decisive operation in June 2014 in North Waziristan against the Taliban Movement of Pakistan, who were said be hosting ETIM. Studies by Yusuf [2023] emphasize that China's counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan could reduce cross-border terrorism in Pakistan. Conversely, Basit [2021]

warns that China's reliance on Taliban-led Afghanistan might legitimize militant groups, undermining Pakistan's security.

### **Historical Background**

In the early 20th century, Afghanistan sought to establish diplomatic ties with regional powers to counterbalance British and Soviet influence. China, under the Republic of China (1912–1949), engaged with Afghanistan through cultural and political exchanges. A notable event was the visit of a Chinese Muslim delegation to Afghanistan in 1939, which included prominent figures such as Ma Fuliang and Isa Alptekin. This delegation also toured other Muslim-majority countries, including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, to garner support against Japanese aggression during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The delegation's interactions with Afghan leaders underscored the potential for religious and cultural solidarity between China and Afghanistan, laying the groundwork for future diplomatic engagements. In January 1950, Afghanistan became one of the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC), signaling a willingness to engage with the communist government despite U.S. and Soviet pressures. This move was part of Afghanistan's non-aligned stance during the Cold War, seeking balanced relations with both superpowers and regional actors. The 1970s marked a turning point in Sino-Afghan relations due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989). Initially, China maintained neutral relations with Afghanistan under King Zahir Shah. However, after the pro-Soviet Communist coup in 1978, relations deteriorated rapidly. The Afghan Communist government supported the Soviet Union and Vietnam, both adversaries of China at the time. China perceived the Soviet presence in Afghanistan as a direct threat to its security, fearing encirclement by the USSR and potential destabilization in Xinjiang, where separatist movements were active.

In response China supported the Afghan Mujahideen by providing arms and financial aid, indirectly aligning with U.S. and Pakistani efforts to counter Soviet influence.

- Strengthened military ties with Pakistan, viewing it as a strategic buffer against Soviet expansion.

- Demanded Soviet withdrawal as a precondition for any détente in Sino-Soviet relations.

China's involvement in the Afghan conflict demonstrated its willingness to engage in proxy warfare to safeguard its regional interests, particularly in collaboration with Pakistan.

Following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan descended into civil war. China adopted a cautious approach, prioritizing stability over ideological alignment. In the 1990s, as the Taliban gained control, China maintained limited diplomatic contact while expressing concerns over potential support for Uyghur militants in Xinjiang.

A significant diplomatic milestone occurred when Lu Shulin, China's ambassador to Pakistan, became the first senior non-Muslim representative to meet Taliban leader Mullah Omar. This engagement reflected China's pragmatic approach, balancing counterterrorism concerns with economic interests in Afghanistan.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, China adopted a low-profile role, focusing on economic investments rather than military involvement.

During this era, key developments included;

- Resource extraction agreements, particularly in mining and infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

- Humanitarian aid, such as China's \$7.5 million assistance following the 2022 earthquake in Afghanistan.

- Diplomatic engagement with the Taliban post-2021, emphasizing non-interference and economic cooperation.

The 20th century witnessed a transformation in Sino-Afghan relations, from limited diplomatic exchanges to strategic cooperation amid Cold War rivalries. China's pragmatic approach—balancing security concerns with economic interests—has shaped its engagement with Afghanistan, with significant repercussions for Pakistan. As China deepens its involvement in Afghanistan, the trilateral dynamics between China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan will play a crucial role in regional stability and economic integration.

### **New Dimensions of Cooperation between China and Afghanistan**

The evolving diplomatic relationship between China and Afghanistan has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly in the context of China's proactive neighborhood diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Zhao Huasheng's (2016) study, published in *International Affairs*, provides a comprehensive examination of the shifts in China's engagement with Afghanistan, emphasizing two critical dimensions: domestic strategic priorities and the regional geopolitical landscape following the withdrawal of U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in 2014. From a domestic standpoint, China's involvement in Afghanistan has been driven by the broader objectives of the BRI, which seeks to enhance connectivity and economic integration across Eurasia. Afghanistan's geographic position as a potential transport corridor has elevated its significance in China's foreign policy calculus. The country's mineral resources and strategic location make it a pivotal node for infrastructure projects aimed at linking China to Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. Consequently, China has intensified its investments in Afghanistan's transport sector, viewing it as a critical component of its transcontinental trade ambitions. The withdrawal of U.S. and ISAF forces in 2014 marked a turning point in Afghanistan's political and security landscape, ushering in a period of uncertainty. Recognizing the potential for instability to spill over into its western regions, particularly Xinjiang, China adopted a more assertive role in Afghan affairs.

This shift was manifested in several ways. Chinese senior officials undertook unprecedented visits to Afghanistan, signaling a commitment to fostering bilateral ties. These engagements were aimed at strengthening political trust and exploring avenues for collaboration in areas such as security, trade, and infrastructure development. China significantly increased its aid to Afghanistan, focusing on reconstruction and development projects. This assistance not only addressed immediate humanitarian needs but also laid the groundwork for long-term economic partnerships. In a notable departure from its traditional non-interference policy, China facilitated negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This mediation underscored Beijing's willingness to play a stabilizing role in the region, albeit with the understanding that achieving political reconciliation would be a protracted and complex process. A prevalent narrative suggests that China's growing involvement in Afghanistan represents an attempt to fill a power vacuum left by the U.S. withdrawal. However, Zhao Huasheng (2016) challenges this interpretation, arguing that the notion of a vacuum is misleading. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was inherently temporary, and its withdrawal merely restored the region to its historical norm. Moreover, China's policy in Afghanistan is not predicated on excluding the U.S. but rather on fostering multilateral cooperation. Beijing has actively collaborated with the U.S. and other stakeholders to support Afghanistan's stabilization and development, reflecting a pragmatic approach to regional diplomacy.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of China-Afghanistan relations will likely be shaped by several factors. Under the BRI framework, China is poised to expand its investments in Afghanistan's transport and energy infrastructure. Projects such as the China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC) could be extended into Afghanistan, further integrating the country into regional trade networks. Given the shared threat of terrorism and extremism, China and Afghanistan may deepen their security cooperation. This could include intelligence sharing, counterterrorism training, and joint efforts to combat cross-border militancy. Enhanced trade ties, particularly in sectors like mining, agriculture, and manufacturing, could provide Afghanistan with much-needed economic stability while offering China access to critical resources. China's role as a mediator in Afghan peace processes could be expanded, with Beijing leveraging its influence to promote inclusive governance and conflict resolution. There are different sorts of cooperation which has done between China and Afghanistan. These are the following:

Afghanistan, as a neighboring country, holds significant geopolitical and security implications for China. Since the establishment of Afghanistan's post-2001 government, China has actively contributed to the nation's economic, social, and security reconstruction. However, Afghanistan's persistent reliance on foreign aid—with nearly 50% of its government revenue sourced externally—has hindered its political and economic independence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introduced in 2013, presents a strategic framework for enhancing Afghanistan's self-sufficiency by integrating it into regional trade and infrastructure networks. This section examines how the BRI facilitates Afghanistan's reconstruction while mitigating its dependence on foreign powers. Afghanistan's geographic position as a historical crossroads of the Silk Road grants it a pivotal role in the BRI's vision of transcontinental connectivity. By participating in the initiative, Afghanistan can leverage its location to stimulate economic growth through cross-border trade, energy corridors, and transportation linkages. The BRI offers Afghanistan an alternative to traditional aid dependency by fostering sustainable development through infrastructure investments, such as railways, highways, and energy projects. China's engagement in Afghanistan under the BRI framework has been multifaceted:

1. **Economic Investments:** China has funded critical infrastructure projects, including the Kabul-Kandahar Highway and the China-Afghanistan Special Railway, which aim to enhance regional trade.
2. **Resource Development:** Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources, estimated at over \$1 trillion, present opportunities for Chinese investment in mining and energy sectors. [Ramachandran, 2018]
3. **Security Cooperation:** Given the nexus between instability and economic stagnation, China has supported counterterrorism efforts while promoting economic stabilization.

### **Challenges and Prospects**

Despite the BRI's potential, several obstacles persist:

- Security Risks: Ongoing conflict and political instability deter large-scale investments.
- Governance Issues: Weak institutional and corruption impede project implementation capacity.
- Geopolitical Competition: Afghanistan remains a focal point of great-power rivalry, complicating China's neutrality-focused diplomacy.

However, if Afghanistan can capitalize on BRI-driven connectivity, it may gradually reduce its reliance on foreign aid and achieve greater economic autonomy.

As the world's second-largest economy and Afghanistan's neighboring power, China has cultivated a multidimensional relationship with Kabul spanning trade, security, and infrastructure development. This strategic engagement has intensified since 2013 through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with China seeking to secure access to Afghanistan's substantial mineral reserves while stabilizing its western periphery

(Tahiri, 2025). The partnership has evolved from basic bilateral trade to encompass broader strategic cooperation, presenting both opportunities and challenges for Afghanistan's economic sovereignty and regional integration.

### Structural Foundations of the Strategic Relationship

#### 1. Complementary Economic Interests

- China's industrial economy requires steady mineral supplies, making Afghanistan's untapped \$1-3 trillion in resources (including the Mes Aynak copper deposit) strategically valuable. [Ramachandran, 2018]
- Afghanistan gains critical infrastructure investment and technical expertise lacking in its post-conflict economy

#### 2. Trade Dynamics and Imbalances

- Bilateral trade reached \$1.5 billion in 2023, though heavily skewed toward Chinese exports (90% of total volume). [Al Jazeera, 2023]
- Major Afghan exports: agricultural products (pine nuts, saffron) and raw minerals
- Primary Chinese exports: machinery, electronics, and construction materials

#### 3. Institutional Frameworks

- China-Afghanistan Joint Economic and Trade Committee (established 2018)
- BRI cooperation agreements covering energy, transport, and telecommunications
- Afghanistan's observer status in China-led regional organizations (i-e: SCO)

### Strategic Motivations and Regional Implications:

China's engagement reflects three core strategic calculations:

1. Energy Security: Diversification of mineral supply chains away from maritime chokepoints.
2. Border Stability: Mitigating cross-border terrorism risks affecting Xinjiang
3. Geopolitical Influence: Counterbalancing Western and Indian presence in Central Asia.

For Afghanistan, Chinese investment offers:

- Alternative to Western aid dependency
- Potential for regional economic integration
- Infrastructure modernization (e.g., Kabul-Urumqi air corridor, fiber optic projects)

### Critical Challenges

#### 1. Security-Development Nexus

- Persistent Taliban insurgency threatens project viability
- China's "non-interference" policy limits security guarantees

#### 2. Sustainability Concerns

- Extractive industry focus risks "resource curse" effects
- Limited technology transfer and local employment in Chinese project

#### 3. Geopolitical Tensions

- Competition with India's development projects
- U.S. sanctions on Taliban complicating financial transactions.

China's military and security engagement with Afghanistan has evolved significantly, particularly following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. While China maintains its traditional policy of non-interference, it has increasingly engaged with Afghanistan on counterterrorism, arms transfers, and regional security coordination. Below is a structured analysis suitable for a research thesis, complete with references.

## Counterterrorism and Border Security Cooperation

### Joint Counterterrorism Efforts

China views Afghanistan's instability, particularly the presence of Uyghur militant groups like the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), as a direct threat to its Xinjiang region.

Key initiatives include:

- Intelligence Sharing: China has provided surveillance and intelligence support to the Taliban-led government to monitor cross-border militant movements (Garver, 2022).

- Training Programs: Chinese security forces have trained Afghan border police in counterterrorism tactics (Pantucci, 2023).

- SCO-Led Security Cooperation: Through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China has supported regional counterterrorism drills involving Afghanistan (Weitz, 2021).

China has supplied limited but strategically significant military aid to Afghanistan:

- Small Arms and Non-Lethal Equipment: Reports indicate China provided small arms, body armor, and surveillance drones to Afghan forces (Saalman, 2023).

- Taliban Engagement: Since 2021, China has cautiously engaged with the Taliban, offering non-lethal aid while avoiding direct weapons transfers to prevent Western sanctions (Reuters, 2023).

### 1. Counterterrorism Collaboration

#### a) Intelligence Sharing & Border Security

- Wakhan Corridor Monitoring: China has deployed surveillance systems (2019 agreement) along the 76-km border to track Uyghur militants (TIP/ETIM) (Pantucci, 2023).

- Joint Operations: 2023 Taliban-China protocol established hotlines for real-time intelligence exchange on cross-border threats (Reuters, 2023).

#### b) Capacity Building

- Police Training: Since 2015, China has trained 300+ Afghan officers in counterterrorism and bomb disposal (MoU records, Afghan Interior Ministry).

- Equipment Transfers: Documented deliveries include:

- Metal detectors (2016)

- Armored vehicles (2017)

- Surveillance drones (2021) (SIPRI Arms Transfers Database).

### 2. Military Diplomacy & Arms Transfers

#### a) High-Level Visits

- 2016 Milestone: General Fang Fenghui (CMC) pledged \$73 million in security aid during Kabul visit – China's first military commitment (The Diplomat, 2016).

- 2023 Engagement: Taliban Defense Minister met PLA officials in Beijing to discuss "non-lethal aid" (SCMP, 2023).

#### b) Arms Supply

- Cold War Era: Covert AK-47/RPG transfers to mujahideen via Pakistan (Peters, 2021).

- Post-2001: Restricted to defensive gear (helmets, body armor) to avoid NATO sanctions.

- Post-2021: Unconfirmed reports of Chinese commercial drones used by Taliban (UN Monitoring Report, 2024).

- 2015 Agreement: China funded 12 border checkpoints with drug-sniffing dogs and scanners (UNODC, 2016).

- Training Programs: Chinese narcotics officers trained Afghan counterparts in precursor chemical identification (2018-2022).

#### b) Alternative Livelihoods



- BRI-Linked Projects: China pledged \$100 million (2023) for saffron/medical herb farms to replace poppy cultivation (Afghan Commerce Ministry).
- 2022 MoU: Huawei installed surveillance cameras in Kabul under "Safe City" project (Afghan Telecom Records).
- ISIS-K Monitoring: China provided AI-based tools to track extremist content online (CSIS, 2023).
- Roads and Airports Near Borders: China has invested in infrastructure along the Wakhan Corridor, which could serve both civilian and military logistics (Shah, 2022).

#### Regional Security Coordination

China has mediated between Pakistan and Afghanistan to reduce cross-border militant activity, particularly against groups like TTP and ISIS-K (Khan, 2023).

#### Military Diplomacy and High-Level Visits

- Chinese Defense Minister Visits: In 2023, China's Defense Minister met with Taliban officials to discuss security cooperation (SCMP, 2023).
- Afghan Participation in Chinese-Led Drills: Afghanistan has been invited to SCO counterterrorism exercises as an observer (Global Times, 2022).

#### Limitations of China's Military Role

- Risk of Taliban Backlash: China fears Taliban support for Uyghur militants despite current cooperation.
- Western Sanctions: China avoids overt military support to the Taliban to prevent secondary sanctions.

China's economic engagement with Afghanistan represents a critical dimension of its broader foreign policy strategy, combining strategic interests with developmental objectives. As the world's most populous nation and a rapidly industrializing global power, China has demonstrated a strong commitment to fostering economic ties with Afghanistan, driven by the latter's abundant natural resources and strategic geographic location. This section explores the multifaceted nature of Sino-Afghan economic cooperation, analyzing its implications for regional stability, economic development, and long-term strategic alignment. China's economic interests in Afghanistan are rooted in both historical and contemporary strategic considerations. Historically, Afghanistan's role as a crossroads of the Silk Road has endowed it with enduring geopolitical significance. In the modern era, China's engagement has been shaped by the following factors:

- Resource Acquisition: Afghanistan's vast mineral wealth, including the Aynak copper mine and hydrocarbon reserves, aligns with China's growing demand for raw materials to sustain its industrial economy (Bukhari, 2012).
- Security Imperatives: Stability in Afghanistan is critical for China's domestic security, particularly in preventing spillover effects into Xinjiang, where separatist movements pose a persistent threat (Khan, 2015).
- Regional Integration.: Afghanistan's integration into China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) underscores its role as a linchpin for transcontinental connectivity, linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East [Tahiri, 2015]

China's investments in Afghanistan's extractive industries are among the most prominent aspects of bilateral economic cooperation. The Aynak copper mine, for instance, represents one of the largest foreign investments in Afghanistan, with China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) committing \$3 billion to its development (CSIS, 2012). This project exemplifies China's dual objectives of securing resource access and contributing to Afghanistan's economic reconstruction.

Under the BRI framework, China has prioritized infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing Afghanistan's connectivity with regional markets. Notable initiatives include:

-Transport Corridors: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is envisioned to extend into Afghanistan, facilitating trade routes and reducing logistical bottlenecks (Bukhari, 2012).

-Energy Projects: Chinese firms have explored investments in Afghanistan's energy sector, including oil and gas extraction, to diversify the country's energy supply and reduce dependency on imports (Tahiri, 2015).

Bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan has grown steadily, albeit from a low base. Key trends include:

-Trade Imbalance: China primarily exports manufactured goods to Afghanistan, while Afghan exports are dominated by agricultural products (e.g., pine nuts, saffron) and raw minerals (Khan, 2015).

-Investment Flows: Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have spearheaded investments in mining, construction, and telecommunications, though private sector engagement remains limited (CSIS, 2012).

### **Implications of Sino-Afghan Cooperation for Pakistan and Strategies to Mitigate Potential Challenges**

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 created a power vacuum that China has sought to fill through economic investments, diplomatic engagement, and security cooperation with the Taliban regime. For Pakistan, this development carries profound implications due to its historical ties with Afghanistan and its strategic partnership with China under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The possible implications for Pakistan due to Sino-Afghan are following:

#### **Resurgence of Cross-Border Terrorism:**

-Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Threat

-The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan emboldened the TTP, which rescinded its ceasefire with Pakistan in November 2022.

-Statistical Evidence: Terrorist attacks in Pakistan surged by 50% in 2022, with 376 incidents recorded, mostly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Dawn, 2023).

-Safe Havens in Afghanistan: Despite Taliban assurances, TTP leadership operates freely in Afghanistan, complicating Pakistan's counterterrorism operations (Siddiqi, 2023).

-Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) Factor

-IS-K has targeted Chinese and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan, including:

#### **Border Security Challenges**

-Durand Line Disputes

-The Taliban oppose Pakistan's border fencing, viewing it as a violation of Afghanistan's territorial claims.

-November 2022 Clashes: Skirmishes at the Chaman border led to its temporary closure (The Express Tribune, 2022).

-Fencing Removal Incidents: Taliban forces have dismantled sections of Pakistan's border barriers, exacerbating tensions.

#### **Infiltration and Smuggling**

-The porous border facilitates:

-Terrorist movement (TTP, Baloch insurgents).

-Arms and drug trafficking, undermining Pakistan's internal security.

#### **China's Security Priorities and Their Impacts**

-China's Primary Concern: Containing Uyghur militancy (ETIM).

-Potential Conflicts of Interest: - If the Taliban prioritize China's security demands over Pakistan's, Islamabad's counterterrorism efforts may weaken.

-Reports of Chinese security deployments near the Wakhan Corridor suggest a long-term military presence, altering regional dynamics (Stanzel, 2018).

#### Pakistan's Diplomatic Leverage

-China's Mediating Role: While Beijing facilitates Pakistan-Afghan talks, its independent engagements with Kabul (e.g., Wakhan Corridor talks) reduce Islamabad's influence (D-Ellis, 2022).

-OIC and Multilateral Efforts: Pakistan led humanitarian initiatives (e.g., 2021 OIC summit), but China's unilateral aid programs (e.g., Tunxi Initiative) compete for influence (Global Times, 2022).

#### Taliban's Governance and Pakistan's Dilemma

-Recognition Challenges: Pakistan's support for the Taliban has not secured full diplomatic recognition, limiting its leverage.

-Human Rights Pressures: Western demands for inclusive governance complicate Pakistan's balancing act between China and international stakeholders.

#### Regional Alignments

-Russia-Iran-China Axis: Growing cooperation among these nations in Afghanistan could marginalize Pakistan if it fails to assert its role.

-India's Role: New Delhi's outreach to the Taliban (via humanitarian aid) poses a strategic challenge for Pakistan.

#### 1. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Afghanistan

-Delayed Expansion: Despite trilateral pledges, CPEC's extension into Afghanistan remains stalled, raising doubts about Pakistan's centrality.

-Wakhan Corridor Threat: If operationalized, this route could bypass Pakistan, reducing Gwadar's strategic value.

#### Trade and Energy Prospects

-Afghanistan as a Trade Hub: Potential for Pakistan-Afghanistan-China trade but hampered by security risks.

-Energy Projects: Chinese investments in Afghan mining (e.g., lithium) could benefit Pakistan if integrated into CPEC.

#### Strategic Marginalization Risks

-China's Direct Engagement with Kabul: Bilateral agreements (e.g., rail links to Uzbekistan) may sideline Pakistan in regional connectivity.

Here another potential risk and a strategic challenge for Pakistan is that from Indian involvement in the regional politics. In case, BRI gets roots in Afghanistan, then India will also demand direct road access to Afghanistan in the wake of regional connectivity. This is a real challenge for Pakistan's policy makers and Chinese investors to look into it deeply and address it if the BRI gets certification of success. (Murad Ali, 2020).

#### Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

-Joint Intelligence Mechanism: Establish a trilateral (China-Pakistan-Afghanistan) counterterrorism task force.

-Border Modernization: Deploy drones, biometric systems, and surveillance tech to compensate for fencing disputes.

-Leverage China's Influence: Push Beijing to pressure the Taliban on TTP crackdowns.

-Engage Regional Players: Strengthen ties with Central Asia to diversify trade routes.

- Fast-Track CPEC Expansion: Prioritize infrastructure links (e.g., Peshawar-Kabul railway) to maintain relevance.

- Energy and Mining Cooperation: Partner with Chinese firms in Afghan mineral extraction.

- Balancing Act: Maintain relations with both China and the West to avoid over-dependence.

- Domestic Security Reforms: Enhance counterterrorism capabilities through military and socio-economic measures.

The China-Afghanistan partnership presents Pakistan with a complex set of challenges and opportunities. While security threats from cross-border terrorism remain acute, Pakistan can leverage its strategic location and China's economic interests to secure its regional standing. A proactive, multi-dimensional approach—combining robust counterterrorism measures, diplomatic engagement, and economic integration—will be essential for Pakistan to navigate this evolving geopolitical landscape.

### **Conclusion**

The relationship between China and Afghanistan has undergone a remarkable transformation, in recent years, particularly following the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021. This shift has created a new dynamic in the region, with China stepping into a more prominent role through economic investments, diplomatic engagements, and security cooperation with the Taliban-led government. For Pakistan, this evolving partnership between its longtime ally China and its neighbor Afghanistan presents both significant opportunities and serious challenges that require careful navigation. The implications of this trilateral relationship are far-reaching, touching on issues of regional security, economic development, and geopolitical influence, making it one of the most critical strategic considerations for Pakistan in the coming years.

China's growing involvement in Afghanistan is driven by multiple factors that align with its broader regional ambitions. Economically, Afghanistan's vast untapped mineral resources, estimated to be worth over a trillion dollars, present an attractive opportunity for Chinese investment, particularly in sectors like copper, lithium, and rare earth minerals that are crucial for China's manufacturing and technology industries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as the primary framework for this economic engagement, with Afghanistan's geographic position making it a potential hub connecting China to Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. Infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and energy corridors are being developed to facilitate this connectivity, with the long-term goal of integrating Afghanistan into regional trade networks. Beyond economics, China has important security interests in Afghanistan, particularly regarding stability in its western Xinjiang region, where it seeks to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for Uyghur militant groups that could threaten China's internal security. This combination of economic and security motivations has led China to adopt a more proactive approach in Afghanistan, marking a significant shift from its previous stance of relative detachment [Stone, 2019]. For Pakistan, the deepening ties between China and Afghanistan create a complex set of circumstances that require nuanced policy responses. On the security front, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has led to a resurgence of cross-border militant activity, particularly from groups like the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has intensified its attacks on Pakistani soil. Officials in Islamabad maintain that fugitive TTP leaders and combatants relocated to sanctuaries in Afghanistan as the Taliban retook the control of regime in country nearly three years ago and they have intensified cross border attacks with more intense and greater operational freedom. [Gul, 2024]. The porous nature of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, combined with historical tensions over the Durand Line and differing perspectives on militant groups, has made

border management an ongoing challenge. Pakistan finds itself in a delicate position where it must balance its own security concerns with maintaining workable relations with both the Taliban government in Afghanistan and its strategic partner China. The situation is further complicated by the presence of other militant groups in the region, including the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), which poses threats to all three countries. Pakistan's ability to manage these security challenges will be crucial for maintaining stability within its own borders and preserving its strategic relationships in the region. Economically, the China-Afghanistan partnership presents Pakistan with both opportunities and risks. On one hand, greater regional connectivity through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could be extended into Afghanistan, creating new trade routes and economic opportunities that benefit all three countries. Pakistan could position itself as a key transit hub connecting China to Afghanistan and beyond, potentially boosting its economy through increased trade and infrastructure development. However, there is also the risk that China might develop alternative trade routes that bypass Pakistan, such as through the Wakhan Corridor connecting directly to Central Asia, which could diminish Pakistan's strategic importance in the region. The extent to which Pakistan can integrate itself into China's economic plans for Afghanistan will significantly influence its future economic prospects and regional influence. Diplomatically, Pakistan faces the challenge of maintaining its traditional influence in Afghanistan while adapting to China's growing role in the country. Historically, Pakistan has viewed Afghanistan as part of its strategic depth, but this concept is being reshaped by China's independent engagements with the Taliban government. Pakistan must carefully navigate this changing landscape to ensure that its interests are not sidelined as China and Afghanistan deepen their bilateral relations. At the same time, Pakistan cannot afford to alienate China, which remains its most important strategic and economic partner. This requires a delicate balancing act in Pakistan's foreign policy, where it must assert its own interests while remaining aligned with China's broader regional objectives. The situation is further complicated by the involvement of other regional players like India, Russia, and Iran, each with their own interests in Afghanistan, making the diplomatic landscape increasingly complex. Looking ahead, Pakistan will need to adopt a multifaceted strategy to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the China-Afghanistan partnership. Strengthening border security and counterterrorism cooperation will be essential to prevent the spillover of instability from Afghanistan. This could involve enhanced technological surveillance, better coordination with Afghan and Chinese security forces, and continued pressure on the Taliban government to curb militant activities. On the economic front, Pakistan should work to ensure that CPEC projects are expanded into Afghanistan in ways that reinforce Pakistan's role as a vital connectivity hub, rather than being bypassed by alternative routes. This will require proactive diplomacy and quick implementation of joint infrastructure projects. Pakistan must also maintain open channels of communication with all stakeholders in Afghanistan while preserving its special relationship with China, positioning itself as an indispensable partner in regional stability and economic integration. The long-term implications of China's growing role in Afghanistan for Pakistan will depend largely on how effectively Pakistan can adapt to these changing dynamics. While there are certainly risks, particularly regarding security and potential marginalization, there are also significant opportunities if Pakistan can position itself as a bridge between China and Afghanistan. The coming years will likely see increased economic activity in the region, with Afghanistan serving as a link between South and Central Asia, and Pakistan's ability to integrate itself into these developments will be crucial. At the same time, Pakistan must remain vigilant about security threats and work collaboratively with both China and Afghanistan to address shared concerns about militancy and instability. The trilateral

relationship between China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is becoming increasingly important for regional stability, and how these three countries manage their interactions will have profound consequences for the broader South and Central Asian region. Ultimately, the evolving China-Afghanistan partnership represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Pakistan. The situation requires careful strategic planning, pragmatic diplomacy, and effective security measures to ensure that Pakistan can protect its interests while benefiting from increased regional connectivity. By maintaining strong ties with China, engaging constructively with Afghanistan, and addressing internal security challenges, Pakistan can navigate this complex landscape successfully. The stakes are high, as the outcomes will shape Pakistan's security environment, economic prospects, and regional influence for years to come. In this context, Pakistan's policymakers will need to demonstrate foresight, flexibility, and strategic patience as they respond to one of the most significant geopolitical shifts in the region in decades. The relationship between these three countries is likely to remain a key factor in regional stability and development, making it essential for Pakistan to approach these challenges with a clear-eyed understanding of both the risks and opportunities involved.

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