

# Understanding China's Afghanistan Policy: From Calculated Indifference to Strategic Engagement

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**ABSTRACT** In recent years, China has been expanding its diplomatic and economic profile in Afghanistan, with its policy evolving from being premised on 'calculated indifference', to strategic engagement. Although China's actions may be predicated on domestic compulsions, Afghanistan could also benefit in the process, especially in relation to China's transcontinental connectivity ventures. Other considerations like China's geographical proximity to the war-weary country, a track record of refraining from intervening in the domestic affairs of the Afghans, and distinct strategic leverage over Pakistan, could be used by Beijing to help Afghanistan break out of the longstanding security quagmire. This brief explores the geo-strategic motivations behind growing Chinese engagement in Afghanistan, despite western opprobrium regarding the "free-loading" nature of the same.

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## INTRODUCTION

Historically, China has regarded Afghanistan as a neighbour wielding little diplomatic significance.<sup>1</sup> In 1950 the then Kingdom of Afghanistan was one of the first countries to recognise the Communist regime of Mao Zedong, and five years later established diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>2</sup> However, up until 2001, political and economic cooperation between the two countries remained inconsequential. It was only after the establishment of the provisional government led by President Hamid Karzai in 2001, that bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan began to grow.

Even then, as China began exploring commercial opportunities in resource-rich Afghanistan, it refrained from getting involved in its politics nor the brewing security situation in the country. This, despite China having provided covert assistance to the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the 1980s in arming the Afghan Mujahideen to wage jihad against the Soviets.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, China expressed no interest in joining the post-2001, US-led war effort in Afghanistan either, wanting to remain disengaged from the realms of military effort, political reconciliation and economic reconstruction, purportedly to avoid being labelled as the “subordinate partner” of the western coalition.<sup>4</sup> Given China's lack of commitment to the cause of managing conflict in Afghanistan by military means, it has been widely criticised for free-riding on the stabilisation efforts of the US-led forces while it expanded its resource exploration ventures in the country.<sup>5</sup>

The US now appears to be on the cusp of finally withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, five years since the start of the drawdown. The strategic community is widely anticipating who would fill the security vacuum once the US-led military forces leave.<sup>6</sup> China is increasingly being touted as a credible way out of the quagmire,<sup>7</sup> given that the coalition of Afghanistan and US forces is failing to contain the violence engineered primarily by the Taliban, humanitarian aid organisations are becoming the target of cold-blooded attacks, and peace negotiations seem to have plateaued.

Along with the economic dividends that China's transcontinental connectivity ventures may yield for Afghanistan, China's geographical proximity to the war-torn country, and a track record of not intervening in the domestic matters of the Afghans, China also possesses distinct strategic leverage over Pakistan. China could potentially use this influence to induce some semblance of stability in the country. Since its establishment in 2014, the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan, led by President Ashraf Ghani, has been advocating for greater Chinese involvement in the country, not only to drive peace negotiations towards a sustainable deal, but also to promote regional connectivity and economic growth.<sup>8</sup> Setting the Afghan foreign policy agenda based on the premise of the five concentric circles in 2014, Ghani accorded immense importance to China, among other neighbouring countries, by placing it in the first circle of engagement.<sup>9</sup>

Most importantly, Kabul hopes to utilise the “China card” against Pakistan, their

aggressive neighbour which has systematically strengthened the ideological foundations and operational cadres of the Taliban. Having said that, it is noteworthy that China's foreign policy has been characterised by some analysts as “unpredictable”, and premised on “diversionary aggression”—that it creates international conflicts to sustain the domestic mass appeal of the ruling party.<sup>10</sup> China's approach to foreign policy, therefore, is largely understood as being inconsistent, and entirely predicated on domestic compulsions. In the case of Afghanistan, however, China seems to be expanding its diplomatic and economic profile, with its policy visibly moving over time from calculated indifference to increasing engagement.<sup>11</sup>

China's contribution to Afghanistan has largely been in the domain of pledging increasing amounts of development aid, setting up large-scale investment projects, and more recently, in backing the peace efforts pioneered by the US Special Representative for Afghan Reconstruction Zalmay Khalilzad.<sup>12</sup> Today China is the biggest foreign investor in Afghanistan, having acquired the US\$4.4-billion extraction contract to develop the Mes Aynak copper field located in the province of Logar, winning the bid for oil exploration in the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan, and developing extensive railway infrastructure in the country.<sup>13,14,15</sup> China has also established the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project and the Five Nations Railway Project connecting China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> An assessment of these investments in Afghanistan, however, shows that China continues to lack the will to see the projects through and deliver on its promises.

It is clear that China views the chronic instability in Afghanistan as an opportunity to make strategic inroads in the war-ravaged country, possibly to expand their market, due to domestic compulsions such as industrial overcapacity.<sup>17</sup> This brief explores the geo-strategic motivations behind growing Chinese engagement in Afghanistan, despite western opprobrium regarding the “free-loading” nature of the same. It analyses the ways in which increasing Chinese involvement in Afghan affairs may positively influence the security logjam in the latter.

## **STRATEGIC MOTIVATIONS FOR GROWING ENGAGEMENT**

### **Security Concerns**

The progressively deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, and the potential risks that it could pose to Beijing's long-term economic endeavours, is an unsettling prospect for China. However, the first and perhaps most compelling motivation for China in pursuing greater engagement with Afghanistan is its unease regarding the geographical proximity between Afghanistan, and its own Uighur Muslim-dominated Xinjiang Province. Afghanistan is home to the Taliban and a number of other transnational terrorist outfits, and the restive Xinjiang region is claimed by Chinese authorities to be the breeding ground for the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, plaguing their country.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, there exists the dangerous possibility of radical elements hailing from foreign lands, using Afghanistan as a launch pad to establish links with the already vulnerable Uighur-inhabited areas of China.

There is also the fear that the ideological influence of pan-Islamic groups operating in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan could spill over into China, exacerbating separatism in Xinjiang.<sup>19</sup>

Adding to the growing trepidation among Chinese authorities, is the fact that many of the exiled Uighur fighters are said to have found sanctuary in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Many of those fighters are believed to have become affiliated with other transnational outfits, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which itself factionalised into two groups: one pledging allegiance to the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda, and another remaining committed to the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). Still, many Uighur fighters remain focused on devising attacks targeting China in particular, like the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) or East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which seek to establish an Islamic state of East Turkestan in Xinjiang.<sup>21,22</sup> In other words, the first motivation behind stepping up activity in and around Afghanistan is China's domestic security concern regarding the restive Xinjiang Province.

Various regional analysts and scholars have argued that since China's Afghanistan policy is anchored primarily on the need to contain extremism at home, it has deferred the task of political reconciliation and military efforts to the United States and ISAF.<sup>23</sup> While it may explain, albeit partly, the lack of Chinese presence in security operations in Afghanistan, China seems to be recalibrating its policy of calculated restraint as it has

recently shown willingness to engage in the security sector as well, although discreetly.

In September 2018, the Afghan Ambassador to Beijing said in an interview with *Reuters*, that China was prepared to train Afghan soldiers on Chinese soil, in an effort to counter Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda militants attempting to infiltrate Xinjiang through the northeastern border of Afghanistan, the mountainous Wakhan Corridor. Moreover, international media and intelligence agencies worldwide have for some time now been circulating reports about the setting up of a Chinese military base in the Wakhan Corridor of the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan. Although China has frequently denied these reports, there are accounts of the presence of Chinese military vehicles in the area—they are said to be facilitating the building of the training camp, with the intention of stationing at least one battalion of troops at the base, accompanied with requisite weaponry and military equipment.<sup>24,25</sup>

A history of intermittent but violent militant attacks has heightened Beijing's concerns about instability in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other Central Asian states leading to an increase in religious extremism in Xinjiang, which in return could bolster the Uighur separatist efforts and undermine Chinese territorial integrity.<sup>26</sup> These incidents include the riots that took place in the capital of Xinjiang Province, Urumqi, in July 2009, killing about 200 people.<sup>27</sup> China's purported military presence in Afghanistan, therefore, however nefarious it may seem to others in the region, is likely to be justified in the name of safeguarding national security. By increasing

Map 1: Reported Site of China's training base in Afghanistan



Source: South China Morning Post, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161745/china-building-training-camp-afghanistan-fight>

participation in the issues pertaining to Afghanistan, China aims to counter the militant activities of the exiled Uighur fighters of ETIM operating out of Afghanistan, install a system of checks along their Western border, and strengthen the Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism (QCCM) with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, to guard against cross-border militant infiltration. Moreover, greater “military cooperation” along the Wakhan can be explained by the newly adopted Chinese technique of leveraging the economic influence they enjoy in Afghanistan, to further their strategic objectives, and vice versa.<sup>28</sup>

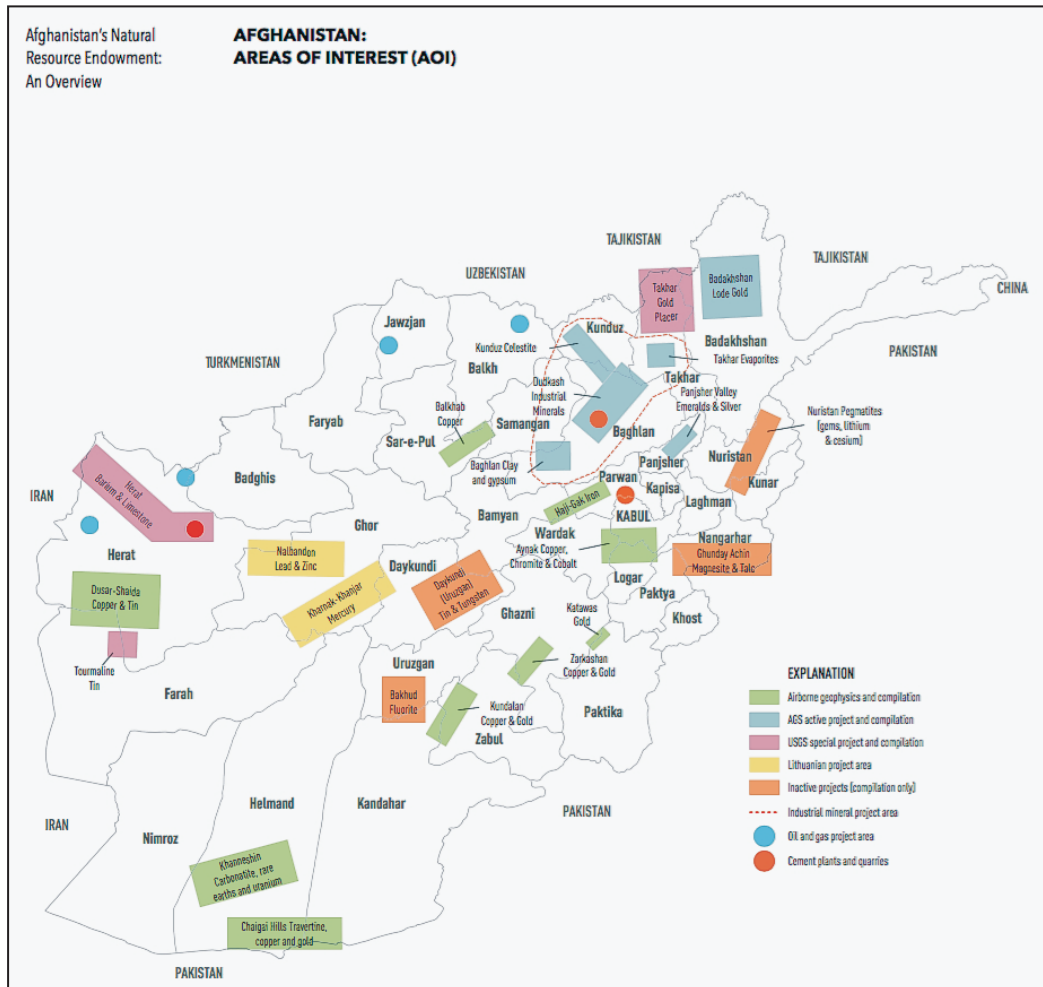
### Economic Interests

Aside from national security concerns, China's deepening involvement in Afghanistan can also be attributed to the country's economic ambitions. Afghanistan lies at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, and its geographically strategic location gives it a

competitive advantage over others, in terms of being a regional hub for trade and transit. It has immense potential to link the markets of South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia and China, and leverage its central position to drive development and economic growth at home. Afghanistan is also home to a vast natural resource repository, from rare earth elements to copper deposits, iron ore, gold, lithium and more.<sup>29</sup> Afghanistan's rich mineral resource base, if managed adeptly, has the potential to be a substitute for foreign aid, and reduce Afghanistan's dependence on donor countries. On the other hand, if not managed properly, the same natural wealth and strategic location may push the country deeper into chaos, exacerbating corruption, fueling insurgency by way of illegal mining, and delaying economic development. One may therefore argue, that ‘geography’ alone can either make or break Afghanistan.

China has consciously avoided physically cooperating in military operations, and even diplomatically, has maintained a low profile on

## Map 2: Afghanistan's Natural Resource Endowment



Source: Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Afghanistan, [https://momp.gov.af/sites/default/files/2019-06/02%20-%20MoMP%20Roadmap%20%2B%20Reform%20Strategy\\_reduce\\_0.pdf](https://momp.gov.af/sites/default/files/2019-06/02%20-%20MoMP%20Roadmap%20%2B%20Reform%20Strategy_reduce_0.pdf)

issues related to the country. With the withdrawal of the US troops now being projected as imminent, however, China is increasingly becoming aware of the uncertainty that may prevail thereafter, potentially jeopardising the scope for greater development cooperation between the two countries, and subverting Chinese interests in the region. Having said that, China has maintained that only limited security can be achieved in the absence of economic progress, and for the war-ravaged country to develop that economic robustness, a prerequisite is infrastructure to facilitate seamless trade and transit.<sup>30</sup>

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the launch of the most ambitious infrastructure development project ever conceived, in the form of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the Maritime Silk Road, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often referred to as the New Silk Road. With the BRI, China aims to create a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, and effectively “break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity”, as pitched by President Xi.<sup>31</sup> Although initially, the BRI seemed to bypass Afghanistan, focusing more on traversing through Pakistan and Central Asia instead, the signing of the

2016 memorandum of understanding (MoU) between China and Afghanistan served as an expression of commitment to jointly promote cooperation under the BRI, and marked an important development in the eventual integration of Afghanistan in the transcontinental infrastructure, in line with Afghan expectations.<sup>32</sup> China is linked to northern Afghanistan through the Sino-Afghanistan Special Railway Transportation Project and the Five Nations Railway Project, and intends to connect with southern Afghanistan via the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), in a mutually beneficial arrangement. China and Afghanistan have also initiated a fibre optic link via the Wakhan Corridor in the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan.

A number of challenges exist to that end. To begin with, although linking with the CPEC may be one of the most feasible routes for Afghanistan to get integrated with the BRI, prevailing tensions with Pakistan reduce the likelihood of such an arrangement materialising. It is clear that China does not want to miss the opportunity to utilise the prime geographical location of Afghanistan, and its treasury of untapped natural resources estimated to be worth US\$1 trillion, to fuel its own economic ambitions. However, it does not seem to consider Afghanistan as an integral component of the BRI, especially when compared to the importance it accords the other participating countries.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the worsening security situation in Afghanistan, huge domestic infrastructure deficit, and politically fragile relations with Pakistan, impede Afghanistan from pursuing, and thereafter sustaining potentially lucrative connectivity projects.

Economic and trade relations between Afghanistan and China, however, have improved considerably in the past two decades, and reflect an upward trend. Since the beginning of the war in 2001, China has emerged as one of the most significant trading partners for Afghanistan, and as per the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the bilateral trade volume between the two countries reached US\$544 million in 2017.<sup>34</sup> Many developments in this regard indicate a mutual willingness to strengthen economic cooperation: the establishment of the Sino-Afghan Economic Committee in 2006, the signing of the Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership Agreement in 2010, and a customs free trade agreement in 2017. Further, with the opening of the China Afghanistan Air Corridor, Afghanistan is expected to export 23,000 tonnes of pine nuts, saffron and various gemstones to China annually, catering to the huge demand of those commodities in Chinese markets.<sup>35</sup>

## **SECURING PREDOMINANCE IN THE EVOLVING GEOSTRATEGIC REALITY**

China realises that an unstable Afghanistan will have dire consequences for the security of western Chinese provinces, and become a roadblock for its economic ambitions, as the success of the BRI and other projects, hinges on a peaceful neighbourhood. If foreign troops are indeed withdrawn from Afghanistan, especially in the absence of a sustainable political settlement amongst the various Afghan stakeholders, it will only aggravate instability in the country. Although China, like most other neighbouring states, has historically adopted a reticent approach in

responding to issues related to Afghanistan's security, it has grown to be heavily invested in the outcome of the conflict, due to reasons discussed earlier. It is not surprising, therefore, to see China explicitly supporting the actualisation of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process.<sup>36</sup>

Further, China's growing involvement in Afghan issues exemplifies its aspiration to alter global perception of itself: It aims to be seen as a powerful regional, and perhaps even a global, player, which has the potential to resolve the problem of the longest-standing insurgency South Asia has ever witnessed.<sup>37</sup> China is undoubtedly one of the most well-placed states to drive the Afghan peace process toward progress, given its strategic leverage over Pakistan—the country that often hosts and provides material and ideological patronage to the Taliban. China provides Islamabad with much-needed economic assistance, lately in the form of the US\$62-billion CPEC that will help stabilise a flailing economy, reduce poverty, and contribute to the overall development of Pakistan's economy.<sup>38</sup> Whether or not such leverage over Pakistan yields positive results for Afghanistan, depends on the intensity with which it may be exerted by China in the future. China, in essence, seems to be striving to achieve a diplomatic equilibrium of sorts, by retaining Islamabad as an “all-weather” ally, by consistently allaying Pakistani insecurities regarding growing Sino-Afghan closeness, while simultaneously integrating Kabul in its strategic calculus.<sup>39</sup>

Undoubtedly, China has been unable to fully integrate Afghanistan as a member state into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

(SCO) to cultivate regional consensus to drive the Afghan peace process, or even utilise existing multilateral forums such as the Quadrilateral Group Cooperation (QGC) with the aim of providing diplomatic heft to the will of the Afghan government, and thereby a push toward reconciliation. However, if China were to successfully mobilise support on multilateral forums to drive the peace process, it will begin to be viewed as a regional leader or “super partner” that could potentially facilitate growth and prosperity in Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> If China is able to secure a position of preponderance in Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of American forces from the country, where it is accorded considerable diplomatic significance by the Afghans, it will become even better placed than others in terms of tapping into the wealth of natural resources, and capitalise on Afghanistan's geography. Moreover, Afghanistan will serve as the perfect platform for China to advance westward in terms of securing strategic depth.<sup>41</sup>

While China has shown little interest in addressing the underlying causes of insecurity in Afghanistan—beyond securing its own borders from jihadist threats or creating conditions for the operationalisation of the BRI—many argue that it is capable of positively influencing the current security situation. Given that China is one of the few countries that have maintained cordial relations with the Afghan Taliban, and at the same time, is believed to be building a mountain brigade in Wakhan to contribute to the counterinsurgency efforts of the Afghan forces, China seems to be willingly walking a tight rope.<sup>42</sup> In fact, despite having been criticised by the international community for



pursuing a “selective approach” to combatting terrorism, it has been requested by the “Father of the Taliban” Maulana Samiul Haq, to participate as an arbitrator in the Afghan peace process, and not “leave matters of such a great importance solely to the US.”<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

China is only likely to continue increasing its engagement with Afghanistan. Given that its vision for greater regional integration, meant to drive economic growth in all partnering states, is shared by Afghanistan, and it is successful in containing the security situation that seems to be spiraling out of hand as of now, China may be able to realise its economic ambitions. For India, however, increased Chinese presence in Afghanistan has the potential to undermine its fundamental objectives vis-à-vis Afghanistan: to strike a strategic balance between Islamabad and Kabul, in order to curtail the influence Pakistan exercises over terrorist outfits in Afghanistan, and utilise Afghanistan's strategic location to connect with energy markets in Central Asia.<sup>44</sup> Although India has lent support to the campaign of an “Afghan-

led, Afghan-owned” peace process, and at the same time is not averse to engaging more substantively with the Taliban as a political player, it remains wary of the possibility of Pakistan assuming a significant role in negotiating the political future of Afghanistan.<sup>45</sup> Even as India has little diplomatic influence in Afghan affairs, it cannot afford to distance itself from the fast-changing strategic reality in Afghanistan, and must prepare for all eventualities in case of a US withdrawal.

At the end of the day, peace must prevail for Afghanistan to be configured in the larger economic discourse in the region, and for China to be able to optimise its investment projects in Afghanistan, some of which are already underway. If the US withdraws from Afghanistan, its dynamic with China in the region is likely to become competitive, rather than cooperative. To stop Afghanistan from being used as an instrument to thwart its geostrategic ambitions, therefore, China is likely to intensify its participation in Afghan affairs, with careful diplomacy at every step to avoid disturbing any of its existing associations in the region. ©RF

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## ENDNOTES

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