

## Exploring China's Afghanistan Policy

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### Summary

*The imminent withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan has put the spotlight on regional powers to determine how to navigate new complexities in the region as Kabul deals with an impending security vacuum. Regional actors such as China, Pakistan and Russia have stepped forward to exert their diplomatic influence over the negotiations to ensure a political settlement and smooth transition. China has affirmed its commitment to supporting “Afghan-led and Afghan-owned” peace talks while calling other countries “to play a constructive role” in Afghanistan.*

*This paper looks at China's policy in Afghanistan post-9/11, the geopolitical influences impacting China's position there and the opportunities for its involvement in Afghanistan moving forward.*

### Broad Contours of China's Policy on Afghanistan

The United States (US)-Soviet fighting in Afghanistan and the US counter-insurgency campaign against the Taliban has plagued China-Afghanistan relations. For a long time, China did not engage much with Afghanistan and kept itself largely out of the fray. However, after the fall of the Taliban following the US intervention in 2001, China began taking substantial steps to participate in the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan. In February 2002, it reopened its embassy in Kabul after seven years. Subsequently, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai and Chinese President Hu Jintao inked the Declaration on Good Neighbourly Relations in December 2002 and the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations in June 2006. In June 2012, China-Afghanistan relations were elevated from a comprehensive cooperative partnership to a “strategic and cooperative partnership”, confirming cooperation in the five pillars of politics, economy, humanities, security, and international and regional affairs.<sup>1</sup>

China's most significant interest in Afghanistan is to ensure security and stability. The western Chinese province of Xinjiang shares a short border of 76 kilometres with Afghanistan. This narrow strip border has generated many security concerns for China. For many years, the leading insurgent organisation – the Taliban – and global terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State have threatened regional stability, as their operations have spilled over to neighbouring states. Additionally, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, led by Uyghur Islamic extremists, has launched several attacks in Chinese cities like Beijing and Kunming from its Afghan bases, severely undermining China's domestic security. China defined “three evils” – terrorism, separatism and religious

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Declaration between The People's Republic of China and The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 8 June 2012 [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/t939517.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t939517.shtml).

extremism – as its primary concerns in talks and meetings with Afghan officials. Unless Afghanistan stabilises, China’s interest in Afghanistan will continue to prioritise security and self-protection.

The beginning of the withdrawal of US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization combat forces in 2014 was probably the catalyst that propelled China to expand its diplomatic influence in Afghanistan and mediate in the Afghan conflict. The US shift away from Afghanistan and the emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have caused China’s policy on Afghanistan to change “from calculated indifference to strategic engagement”.<sup>2</sup>

Further, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated in his address to the Central Conference on Foreign Affairs in November 2014 that “China should develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of a major country” and “conduct diplomacy with a salient Chinese feature and a Chinese vision.”<sup>3</sup> His statement underscores Beijing’s realisation that it needs to play a more prominent role in world affairs and carve out its own unique path. Since then, the country has started to engage with warring factions in conflict mediation in various places like Afghanistan, Myanmar and South Sudan.

## **China as a Mediator**

As early as 2005, China worked on the sides with Russia and the Central Asian states through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation-Afghanistan Contact Group to cope with Afghan instability. In October 2014, China made its first attempt to host a meeting on Afghanistan by organising the Istanbul Process (also known as Heart of Asia). The meeting, which was attended by various international parties and the Afghan political factions, marked China’s entry as a stakeholder into Afghan affairs. China has also worked on Afghan issues in various multilateral formats like China-Russia-Afghanistan, China-Pakistan-Afghanistan, China-Russia-US-Afghanistan and China-Russia-Iran-Pakistan. Beijing’s neutral stance and lack of involvement in the fighting in Afghanistan prove to be an advantage in cementing its role and efficacy as a credible mediator which both the Afghan government and the Taliban could trust.

On the bilateral front, China has frequently met with the Taliban representatives and Afghan government separately. With Pakistan’s facilitation, it has been able to establish contacts with the Taliban. The meeting between Taliban’s Mullah Mohammad Omar and Beijing’s Ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, in December 2000 was often observed to be the first official diplomatic exchange. Beijing sought guarantees from the Taliban that insurgencies and terrorism would not spill over into Chinese territory.<sup>4</sup> According to some reports, Taliban representatives have visited China several times to discuss Afghan problems. Taliban

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<sup>2</sup> Shubhangi Pandey, “Understanding China’s Afghanistan policy: From calculated indifference to strategic engagement”, Observer Research Foundation, 6 August 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-chinas-afghanistan-policy-from-calculated-indifference-strategic-engagement-54126/#edn7>.

<sup>3</sup> The Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs was Held in Beijing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 29 November 2014, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1215680.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1215680.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> Ghulam Ali, “China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies”, *The Pacific Review* (2020): 11-12.

deputy leader Abdul Ghani Baradar led the latest visit to Beijing in June 2019.<sup>5</sup> The official line from Beijing continues to voice commitment to facilitating intra-Afghan negotiations and encourage international parties to engage the Taliban in dialogue.

Further, China has stepped up to play a constructive role in improving Kabul-Islamabad relations. Pakistan's close partnership with China and its experience in Afghan matters are valuable instruments for Beijing to expand ties with Kabul. In December 2017, Beijing sponsored a trilateral dialogue with Afghanistan and Pakistan at the foreign ministers' level to resolve political tensions and improve relations. The fourth dialogue took place virtually in June 2021.

## **The Emergence of the BRI**

Apart from preventing the spill-over of terrorism into Xinjiang, China looks at Afghanistan through the prism of securing its investments in Central Asia and Pakistan. Since Xi announced the BRI in 2013, Beijing has made substantial investments in Central Asian states and Pakistan – Afghanistan's neighbours – through China-Central Asia-West Asia and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Some observers have highlighted the BRI as Beijing's effort to "march west" by proposing cross-border and inter-continental connectivity in its historically neglected western frontiers.<sup>6</sup> These BRI investments around Afghanistan have significantly increased Beijing's vulnerability to conflict in the region.

Beijing has recognised that it needs a favourable security paradigm in Afghanistan and Central Asia to secure regional stability and protect its economic imperatives. Hence, in August 2016, China led the initiative to create a Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in Counter Terrorism by Afghanistan-China-Pakistan-Tajikistan Armed Forces. Since then, varying reports have indicated that the Chinese security forces are involved in patrols along the Wakhan Corridor.<sup>7</sup>

In 2016, China and Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding to promote cooperation in the BRI. Subsequently, Afghanistan became a member of the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, bringing the country closer to Beijing's economic folds. The inauguration of the Afghanistan-China Air Corridor in November 2018 opened more avenues for trade connectivity between the two countries. As a result, Beijing-Kabul bilateral trade rose from US\$27.1 million (S\$36.4 million) in 2003 to US\$1.1 billion (S\$1.4 billion) in 2019.<sup>8</sup> In addition, meetings among China, Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2017 have publicly indicated their intentions to integrate the CPEC into Afghanistan. However, no integration proposals or plans have been confirmed, leading many to doubt if China intends to do so.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Wang Jisi, "'Marching Westwards': The Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy", *International and Strategic Studies Report 73*, Peking University: Center for International and Strategic Studies, October 2012.

<sup>7</sup> C M Branco, "Afghanistan and the Belt and Road Initiative", in *The Belt and Road Initiative: An Old Archetype of a New Development Model*, eds by Francisco José B S Leandro and Paulo Afonso B Duarte (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 509-510.

<sup>8</sup> Ghulam Ali, 15.

While China has achieved much success in winning deals in the Afghanistan oil and mining sector, the precarious security situation in Afghanistan poses a significant deterrence from sustaining projects to completion. For example, China's state-owned miner, China Metallurgical Group, acquired the contract to develop the Mes Aynak copper mine in 2008 but the project has been stalled due to security concerns, and it is currently undergoing new negotiations.<sup>9</sup> As a result, China has a limited number of working projects in Afghanistan, the main one being the Nila Bagh housing project Beijing funded.

## Chinese Aid

Since 2001, China has helped Afghanistan in its reconstruction efforts. With Chinese aid, the Jamhuriat hospital, Kabul's largest hospital, was built in 2004. From 2001 to 2013, Beijing provided a modest US\$240 million (S\$323 million) in financial aid to Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> The inking of a China-Afghan security accord to fight terrorism and Afghan support for the "One-China Policy" after Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited Beijing in October 2014 witnessed China pledging US\$327 million (S\$440 million) of aid.<sup>11</sup> Over the next four years, Chinese support helped in construction projects in Afghanistan, such as the expansion of Kabul University and solar power plants. With improving bilateral relations, Beijing pledged another US\$100 million (S\$134 million) of aid to Kabul in 2016 and provided humanitarian assistance to disaster victims across Afghanistan.

China's combined economic, diplomatic and humanitarian efforts have been viewed positively by Afghanistan. Moreover, as Kabul actively seeks foreign assistance to help its weak economy, Beijing's economic clout makes it a preferred partner to work with.

## Critical Areas of Beijing's Involvement in Afghanistan Moving Forward

One of the key areas where China is expected to expand in Afghanistan will be economic assistance. A 2019 report by the World Bank posited that Afghanistan requires US\$6-8 billion (S\$8.07-10.77 billion) a year in international grants from 2020 to 2024 to fund essential services and support economic growth.<sup>12</sup> China's continued increment of aid to Afghanistan over the last decade indicates that China is most likely to continue its financial assistance and humanitarian efforts.

The Digital Silk Road initiative could be a promising avenue for collaboration between China and Afghanistan. Chinese telecom giants, ZTE and Huawei, have been operating in Afghanistan since the early 2000s. Both companies are also involved in laying a 4,800-

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<sup>9</sup> Lynne O'Donnell, "China's MCC turns back on US\$3b Mes Aynak Afghanistan mine deal", *South China Morning Post*, 20 March 2014, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1453375/chinas-mcc-turns-back-us3b-mes-aynak-afghanistan-mine-deal>.

<sup>10</sup> Zhao Huasheng, "What is behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?", Carnegie Middle East Center, 8 March 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/08/what-is-behind-china-s-growing-attention-to-afghanistan>.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Martina, "China says Afghan president vows to help China fight militants", *Reuters*, 29 October 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-afghanistan-idUSKBN0IH1D420141029>.

<sup>12</sup> "Afghanistan will Need Continued International Support after Political Settlement", The World Bank, 5 December 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/12/05/afghanistan-will-need-continued-international-support-after-political-settlement>.

kilometre-long fibre line from Kashgar city of China to Faizabad in Afghanistan. In addition, the second Afghan satellite, known as Afghansat 2, was developed with Beijing's help.

Despite facing upheavals and the halting of projects, Afghanistan's vast amount of minerals and hydrocarbons remain attractive to Chinese investors and companies. In May 2021, a group of Chinese investors met President Ghani in Kabul to explore investments of US\$400 million (S\$538 million) in generating electricity using coal. The unexploited reserves have an estimated value of over US\$1 trillion (S\$1.34 trillion).<sup>13</sup> Thus, Afghanistan is an attractive partner to supply China with natural resources and meet Beijing's increasing energy needs.

However, China may face challenges in Afghanistan due to its lack of understanding of the Afghan culture and society.<sup>14</sup> While China's economic prowess and infrastructure capabilities have been recognised, its BRI projects are criticised by the international community, which is wary that it ensnares countries in 'debt traps'. Therefore, it would be imperative for China to identify key areas of economic cooperation with Afghanistan and develop flexible strategies to finance projects.

Next, China is looking at enhanced security cooperation with Afghanistan, especially in counter-terrorism efforts and border control. In 2016, Beijing and Kabul established a Military Dialogue, leading to the former stepping up its direct military assistance and supply of military equipment to Afghanistan. A potential area of deepening security ties for Beijing is to offer training to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Currently, there are doubts about the ANSF's capability to meet the security challenges after the withdrawal of foreign troops.<sup>15</sup> However, the ANSF may be able to succeed if it receives sufficient external support and training. Having previously trained Afghan diplomats in collaboration with India and US, China's experience and assistance could prove to be very useful in training the ANSF. In a 2018 interview with *Reuters*, Janan Mosazai, Afghanistan's Ambassador to Beijing, stated that China will provide training to Afghan forces on Chinese territory.<sup>16</sup>

Many commentators have highlighted the possibility of China deploying a peacekeeping force into Afghanistan to cope with the possible deterioration of security.<sup>17</sup> China's involvement in Afghanistan military and security affairs will appear controversial, but for the sake of domestic and regional security, it will be needed.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Choi, "\$1 Trillion Trove of Rare Minerals Revealed Under Afghanistan", *Live Science*, 4 September 2014, <https://www.livescience.com/47682-rare-earth-minerals-found-under-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Zhang, "China seeks to expand belt and road to Afghanistan in name of security as US withdraws troops", *South China Morning Post*, 4 June 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3136112/china-seeks-expand-belt-and-road-afghanistan-name-security-us>.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony H Cordesman, "Shaping the ANSF to meet the Challenges of Transition", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 17 April 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/shaping-ansf-meet-challenges-transition>.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Martina, "Afghan troops to train in China, ambassador says", *Reuters*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-afghanistan-idINKCN1LM1N1>.

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Zhang, "China may send peacekeeping force to Afghanistan after US troops leave, observers say", *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3129707/china-may-send-peacekeeping-force-afghanistan-after-us-troops>.

Lastly, China should pay attention to its relations with regional powers and the overall interdependence of the region. Afghanistan's stability is not achieved solely by single state assistance but continued diplomatic interactions with its neighbours, aiding a peaceful reconstruction. As China, Russia, Central Asian states, Iran, India and Pakistan share similar security concerns over the impending security vacuum, they are all propelled to cooperate to advance peace and stability in Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

With diminishing US presence and the evolving security paradigm in Afghanistan, the importance of Afghanistan in Beijing's foreign policy thinking has thus increased. The stability of Afghanistan would aid China in its long-term economic plans in the region; therefore, Beijing has the political will to continue expanding its relations with Afghanistan. While it has attained diplomatic success as a mediator and an aid provider, the overall Chinese economic engagement and investment in Afghanistan remain limited. The goal of securing financial gains by using Afghanistan's strategic position as a regional connector in the CPEC remains elusive. Moving forward, it is likely that China will continue to mediate in the intra-Afghan negotiations and participate in consultations with varying levels of multilateral and international parties. As the Afghan problem becomes a significant security challenge to the region, China will have to continue cooperating with other regional powers to see its efforts in Afghanistan to fruition.

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