



A ROAD UNTRAVELED

Sino–Afghan security relations beyond 2021

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This policy brief examines the security relationship between China and Afghanistan as well as the prospects for future cooperation in light of the recent changes in Afghanistan, notably the fragmentation of the security sector. It investigates whether China and Afghanistan will be able to establish common ground for military cooperation and the security problems that both nations will face. The brief concludes with ideas for how China and Afghanistan could continue to cooperate with one another.¹

A history of China's engagement in Afghanistan

Even though diplomatic relations between China and Afghanistan date to the early 1950s, Beijing's interest in Afghanistan was confined to economic involvement up to the late 1980s.² Until the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 onwards, China mainly invested in Afghanistan's substantial natural resources.

In contrast, its political engagement in Afghanistan has been modest.³ During the 1980s, China considered the Soviet presence in Afghanistan a regional threat to itself and its ally Pakistan, fearing encirclement by the USSR. That is why, with US backing, China supplied weaponry to Afghan militants fighting the Soviet-backed Afghan regime. In 2001, during the American war in Afghanistan and the formation of the interim Afghan government, China and Afghanistan tried to expand their political relationship.⁴ However, as Beijing began looking at business prospects in resource-rich Afghanistan, it became more interested in the economic opportunities and stayed out of politics and the escalating insecurity situation.⁵

Beijing has been ambivalent about the significant American military presence in Afghanistan for much of the past two decades. China did not show any interest in participating in the post-2001 American war in Afghanistan as it did not want to be seen as subordinate to the United States.⁶ However, Chinese authorities viewed the NATO presence favourably for largely quelling the terrorist threats along its western border.⁷

The fundamental concept driving Beijing's engagement with its western neighbour has been Afghanistan's economic growth as a means to stabilisation.

Afghanistan has suffered from decades of violence, lack of investment, drought, corruption and the illicit drug trade—all of which have contributed to its ongoing economic misery. Amid these issues, achieving export-led development has proven to be particularly difficult, one that China has expressed interest to help Afghanistan overcome.⁸

China is the largest source of foreign investment in Afghanistan, having won a \$4.4 billion extraction contract in 2008 to develop the Mes Aynak copper deposit, Afghanistan's most well-known mine located approximately 40 kilometres south of Kabul in Logar Province. Beijing has won bids for oil exploration in the Amu Darya basin in northern Afghanistan and to build substantial railway infrastructure.⁹ The voracious desire of Chinese companies for minerals has fuelled the fast development of its overseas mining holdings in all key metals, including copper, essential to the automotive, power generation and consumer electronics sectors.¹⁰

China initiated the Sino–Afghan Special Railway Transportation Project and the Five Nations Railway Project, connecting China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.¹¹ Given Beijing's lack of commitment to resolving the conflict in Afghanistan by military means, however, it has been severely chastised for profiting off the United States-led attempt to stabilise the nation while expanding its resource-exploitation operations there.¹²

1 The project "A Road untraveled? Options, Scenarios, and Recommendations for Future International and Regional Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Institute of War and Peace Studies (IWPS). This brief is part of a series discussing the implications of the US withdrawal for bilateral relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

2 Shubhangi Pandey, "Can China drive the Afghan peace process?", *The Diplomat*, 18 May 2019.

3 Hong Zhao, "China's Afghan policy: the forming of the 'March West' strategy", *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Fall 2013.

4 China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Conclusion of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance" n.d.

5 Shubhangi Pandey, "Understanding China's Afghanistan policy: from calculated indifference to strategic engagement", *Issue Brief*, No. 305, August 2019 (Observer Research Foundation).

6 *ibid.*

7 Janis Mackey Frayer, "For China, Taliban rule in Afghanistan brings both opportunity and risk", *NBC News*, 6 September 2021.

8 Barbara Kelemen, *China's Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan: A New Party to the Table?* (The Middle East Institute, 2020).

9 "Afghanistan: foreign investment", *Santandar Trade Portal*, August 2019.

10 Marty Franz, "Project to exploit Afghanistan's giant copper deposit", *China Dialogue*, 25 April 2018.

11 *Why Russia and China Are Expanding Their Roles in Afghanistan* (StratforWideview, 2018).

12 Zhao, 2013.

However, China may have previously aimed at engaging with Afghanistan's security sector. In 2018, some sources reported that the Chinese government was ready to train Afghan soldiers on its territory to combat the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda terrorists seeking to infiltrate Xinjiang Province through Afghanistan's mountainous Wakhan Corridor.¹³ Despite Chinese authorities denying these allegations, there were signs of such a troop presence, such as military vehicles, in the area.¹⁴ Also, according to reports from Afghanistan's then Ministry of Defence, a Chinese expert group visited Kabul in 2018 to negotiate a base location.¹⁵

In June 2021, China initiated a trilateral dialogue between its foreign minister and his counterparts in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶ The dialogue was started to address fresh concerns raised by the withdrawal of the United States and NATO troops at a key juncture in the Afghan peace process.¹⁷ All three foreign ministers emphasised the importance of a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan.¹⁸ They insisted on a "responsible" departure of US troops from Afghanistan.¹⁹ During the dialogue, China underlined its solid support for the peaceful rebuilding of the country as well as its willingness to enhance economic and commercial links with Kabul and assist in strengthening the potential for self-development.²⁰

China's interests in Afghanistan

The steadily deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan and the potential threat to China's long-term economic goals are unpleasant prospects for Beijing. The main and probably most convincing reason for increased engagement with Afghanistan is the geographical closeness to the Uyghur Muslim-dominated Xinjiang Province.²¹ There are tensions between the Chinese government and the Uyghur Muslims of the Xinjiang area, particularly with the Turkistan Islamic Party, which Beijing considers an extremist group. Thus, the triumph of the Taliban in Afghanistan may alarm the Chinese government about a moral empowering of the Uyghurs, which may lead to an escalation of the conflict and increased repression, which then threatens the stability of Xinjiang Province.²²

Afghanistan is a strategically important area for China's investment initiatives. It is located at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, giving it a competitive advantage over other neighbours in terms of being a regional commerce and transportation centre.²³ Afghanistan has enormous potential to connect with the markets of South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia and to use its strategic

location to boost domestic development and economic progress. The unstable security conditions in Afghanistan could potentially threaten China's regional projects, including the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims at connecting China to Southeast the Gulf States and Europe.²⁴ The Belt and Road Initiative, often referred to as the New Silk Road, is one of the most enormous infrastructure projects ever devised. The massive collection of development and investment programmes launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping would span from East Asia to Europe, boosting China's economic and political power.²⁵

A central part of the Belt and Road Initiative is the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. Under this initiative, China has invested more than \$60 billion for infrastructure projects in Pakistan.²⁶ Islamabad recently discussed with the Taliban-led administration of Kabul the possibility of expanding that corridor to Afghanistan.²⁷ This would have several benefits for Beijing, among them a connection with Central Asia via Afghanistan. In this regard, China seems to be pursuing a joint Afghanistan–Pakistan policy.

For centuries, the Wakhan Corridor was an important route for traders traveling along the Silk Road, which connected China with the Mediterranean.²⁸ Beijing has long been undertaking security and diplomatic activities in and around that corridor for decades.²⁹ Chinese security officers have often been spotted in the area since the late 2000s, sometimes in close cooperation with Afghan troops.³⁰ The Chinese securitised and guarded the Wakhjir Valley at the end of the corridor, mainly to keep Uyghurs from fleeing Xinjiang Province.³¹

The Chinese government has not formally recognised the Taliban administration in Kabul but congratulated on the takeover, likely because it intends to start mining copper at Mes Aynak.³²

Prospects for China's future engagement in Afghanistan

Except for some regional summits and dialogues, China's previous relationship with Afghanistan was mostly economic until 2018. With the heavy presence of the United States in Afghanistan, China did not interfere much in the political situation there. Beijing increased its cooperation with the Taliban when the US de facto recognised them as a political party after signing the Doha Agreement with the United States in February 2020.³³ China began strengthening diplomatic connections with the Taliban and officially received a Taliban delegation in July 2021. Since then, Chinese authorities have stated that they support

13 Minne Chan, "China is helping Afghanistan set up mountain brigade to fight terrorism", South China Morning Post, 28 August 2018.

14 "China denies having troops in Afghanistan's Wakhan corridor", Military Times, 1 March 2019.

15 Sohrab Azad, "China's stake in the Afghan peace process", The Diplomatic, 22 September 2020.

16 Ananth Krishnan, "China, Pakistan, Afghanistan foreign ministers to hold talks amid U.S. withdrawal 'uncertainty'", The Hindu, 2 June 2021.

17 *ibid.*

18 "China, Afghanistan, Pakistan urge orderly withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan", China Global Television Network, 4 June 2021.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*

21 Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012).

22 Janka Oertel and Andrew Small "After the withdrawal: China's interests in Afghanistan", European Council on Foreign Relations, 5 August 2021; and Pandey, 2019.

23 *ibid.*

24 Military Times, 2018.

25 Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, *China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

26 Charlotte Greenfield, "Pakistan discussing expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan", Reuters, 27 September 2021.

27 *ibid.*

28 Kinling Lo, "What is the Wakhan Corridor and why is China worried about it?", South China Morning Post, 2021.

29 Sam Dunning, "China is protecting its thin corridor to the Afghan heartland", Foreign Policy, 27 August 2021.

30 *ibid.*

31 *ibid.*

32 Dipjanja Chaudhury, "China moves fast to engage Taliban govt eyeing Aynak copper mines", The Economic Times, 15 September 2021.

33 *ibid.*

Afghans' freedom to choose their own destiny, indicating that the Taliban's triumph reflects the people's desire.³⁴

China's amicable relationship with the Taliban will be contingent upon neither party intervening in the other's domestic affairs. As compensation for China's backing of the Taliban's inclusion in the Afghan government, the Taliban should ensure that the Uyghur separatist organisations from Xinjiang Province do not cross the border and establish bases in Afghanistan.³⁵ At the same time, China is hesitant to recognise the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan as it could create an odd image for China: battling Islamists at home while supporting them abroad.³⁶ Clearly, Beijing has to engage with whoever is in charge in Afghanistan to garner the security guarantees it requires.³⁷

However, to secure its commercial projects in Afghanistan and the region, China must ensure that the Taliban will work towards the required stability.³⁸ Investments are still risky because the Taliban faces their own security challenges by competing extremist organisations. China is not expected to take too prominent of a role in Afghanistan's internal affairs, however.³⁹ It does not have as

much knowledge of Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutional structure as the United States did.⁴⁰ Also, the institutional structure of Afghanistan is in transformation after 15 August, creating additional uncertainty.

China is expected to restart its commercial initiatives in Afghanistan, which the Taliban is likely to embrace as investments bring in much-needed funds. The Afghan economy is weak and heavily reliant on foreign funding from Western donors, which is unlikely to return to pre-August levels even in a best-case scenario. Any investment will be welcome.⁴¹

34 How Will China Deal with the Taliban? (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

35 Azad, 2020.

36 *ibid.*

37 Expert on Sino-Afghanistan relations, in discussion with Maryam Jami, October 2021.

38 Pantucci, 2021.

39 Johnson, 2021.

40 *ibid.*

41 Johnson, 2021.

Recommendations

- China should continue its economic engagement in Afghanistan and re-affirm previous economic initiatives in Afghanistan, including the Mes Aynak and Amu Darya projects in the post-2021 context.⁴² To improve the Sino-Afghanistan economic relations, China may also consider a possible role for Afghanistan in the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴³
- To secure the North-eastern border of Afghanistan with China, China should offer security assistance to the Taliban's government through bilateral intelligence-sharing agreements.
- There appears to be a lack of on-the-ground knowledge about Afghanistan in China. If Beijing wants to develop multifaceted relations with Afghanistan beyond 2021, China and Afghanistan should develop their cultural and diplomatic interactions between the two nations.
- China should develop an independent policy towards Afghanistan. The Sino–Afghan relations should not be part of China's geopolitical competitions with India and the United States in the region.
- In the post-2021 context, the two neighbours should speed up this collaboration to enhance Afghanistan's economics and trade relations with China. China has been a donor to Afghanistan's counternarcotic projects and should continue to do so.
- China should continue the China–Pakistan–Afghanistan foreign ministers dialogue to encourage and accelerate stability and peace in the region. Ongoing interaction between the actors would help clarify Beijing and Islamabad's positions and policies on Afghanistan and contribute to trust-building.

42 *ibid.*

43 Expert on Sino-Afghanistan relations, in discussion with Maryam Jami, October 2021.

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