

From Challenge to Opportunity: Pakistan-China Collaboration in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

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Abstract

Pakistan and China's relationship on Afghanistan is critical to the region's stability and security. This examination explores their shared concerns, differing approaches, and strategies in the evolving landscape. Their cooperation is driven by security interests, economic potential, and the desire to enhance their influence. Despite historical ties with the Taliban, Pakistan shares China's concerns about its resurgence and Afghanistan becoming a haven for extremism. Both countries are committed to preventing destabilization from spilling over into their own territories. Beyond security, Pakistan and China eagerly capitalize on Afghanistan's economic potential, particularly regarding natural resource investment and infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Both nations also seek to enhance their influence in Afghanistan and the broader region. This research aims to investigate the significance of Pakistan-China cooperation on Afghanistan, examine the challenges posed by the evolving situation in Afghanistan, find out the strategies employed by Pakistan and China to safeguard their interests in Afghanistan, and analyze the impact of the changing dynamics in Afghanistan on the broader regional balance of power, considering the roles of Pakistan, China, and other regional actors.

Key words: Pakistan-China Cooperation, Afghanistan, Challenges, Opportunities, Strategies, Taliban, Terrorism, and BRI.

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Research Context

Despite extensive research on Pakistan-China relations and bilateral ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan and China and Afghanistan, there is a dearth of research on Pakistan-China joint strategies in Afghanistan. This is a significant lacuna, given Pakistan and China's pivotal role as Afghanistan's neighbors. Ghulam Ali, an expert on Sino-Pakistan relations, laments this gap "in spite of its [Pakistan-Afghanistan, and China] significance, very little work has been done in this area. The existing literature has looked at the roles played by Pakistan and by China [in Afghanistan] separately."¹ Ali has identified a previously unexplored area of research. While some studies have examined Pakistan's and China's interests in Afghanistan separately, they have done so in a less systematic way.

This study addresses this gap by considering the changing situation in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal and its implications for Pakistan and China, both individually and collectively. Akram Umarov argues that China has traditionally maintained a neutral stance and followed a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. However, in recent years, China has become more involved in Afghanistan due to its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. Umarov refutes the claim that China's increased engagement in Afghanistan is solely motivated by concerns about Uighur separatism, arguing that Afghanistan's strategic location is a more factor.² Michael Clarke, a researcher at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, argues that China's efforts to integrate its restive Xinjiang region with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) are primarily aimed at two goals: stabilizing Xinjiang and expanding Chinese influence in the region. This strategy is aligned with China's broader objective of rising peacefully.³

Chinese foreign policy scholar Muhammad Daim Fazil identifies three main strategic objectives for China in Afghanistan: to protect its Xinjiang region from instability, to safeguard its economic interests and investments in Afghanistan, and to counterbalance Indian and Western

¹ Ali, Ghulam. 2022. "China–Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies." *The Pacific Review* 35 (3): 506-28

² Umarov, Akram. 2017. "Assessing China's New Policy in Afghanistan." *Central Asian Affairs* 4 (4): 384-406.

³ Clarke, Michael. 2008. "China's Integration of Xinjiang with Central Asia: Securing a 'Silk Road' to Great Power Status?" *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 6 (2): 89-111

influence in Afghanistan.⁴ Both Niklas Swanström and Julian Tucker concur, asserting that China's foremost objective in Afghanistan is safeguarding its potentially turbulent Xinjiang region. Nevertheless, they posit that China's stance toward Kabul has evolved over time due to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the presence of the Islamic State (IS) or Daesh in Afghanistan, broadening China's strategic considerations.⁵

Ghulam Ali stresses that Pakistan and China share an interest in Afghanistan and have cooperated on this interest, which has contributed to peace in Afghanistan. China's lack of cooperation in Afghanistan has hampered US efforts to combat extremism and terrorism in the region. Experts argue that China and the US have an opportunity to cooperate on these issues, given China's significant influence over Pakistan. However, Beijing has shown little interest in either Pakistan or Afghanistan, making it difficult for the US to achieve its goals in Afghanistan.⁶ Despite being overblown, these claims ignore the reality on the ground. Many of Afghanistan's problems and challenges can be traced back to US policies in the country.⁷

Pakistani and international scholars have extensively studied the Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship, focusing on bilateral issues such as the Durand Line and Pashtunistan, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Pakistan's role in Afghanistan.⁸ Other studies have examined how India's engagement with Afghanistan has affected relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. These studies have found that India's increasing influence in Afghanistan has caused tension between the two countries.⁹ Siegfried Wolf's paper on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides a valuable contribution to the growing body of research on the project. Wolf

⁴ Fazil, Muhammad Daim. "China in Afghanistan: Contemporary Engagements and Challenges Ahead." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 19, No. 1 (2014).

⁵ Swanström, N. and Tucker, J., 2019. China in Afghanistan—a new force in the war in Afghanistan? In *Rebuilding Afghanistan in Times of Crisis* (pp. 156-173). Routledge.

⁶ Small, A. (2010). China's caution on Afghanistan–Pakistan. *The Washington Quarterly*, 33(3), 81-97..

⁷ Steve Coll and Adam Entous. "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan." *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2021. [URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>]

⁸ Hussain, S., Bukhari, S. S. H., & Safdar, S. (2020). "Pakistan's Afghan Conundrum: A study of Pakistan's Security Objectives and Strategies in Afghanistan." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 40(2), 1207-1220.; Hussain, S., & Latif, D. M. I. (2012). "Issues and challenges in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations after 9/11." *South Asian Studies*, 27(1)

⁹ Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, and Siddharth Bhatnagar. 2007. "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations and the Indian Factor." *Pakistan Horizon* 60 (2): 159-74.

examines the potential and challenges of CPEC, considering Pakistan's government capacity and the regional security situation. He also discusses the Pakistan-China strategy in Afghanistan, but notes that CPEC is the main focus of his paper.¹⁰

Therefore, this research aims to address the lack of research on the trilateral relationship between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. The research will provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of Pakistan-China cooperation on Afghanistan and its implications for the region and the world.

Pakistan-China cooperation on Afghanistan is an important topic for a number of reasons. First, Pakistan and China are both major regional powers with a vested interest in the stability and security of Afghanistan. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has raised concerns about the potential for the country to become a safe haven for terrorist groups and a source of instability in the region. Pakistan and China are therefore working together to address the security challenges posed by the Taliban and other terrorist groups. Second, Pakistan and China are also interested in investing in Afghanistan's natural resources and developing infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Afghanistan has significant potential for economic development, and Pakistan and China are eager to play a role in this development. Third, Pakistan and China are also interested in expanding their influence in Afghanistan and the region as a whole. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a vacuum that Pakistan and China are seeking to fill.

This research used a comprehensive literature review to analyze existing research on Pakistan-China collaboration in Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power. Scholarly articles, news reports, and online resources from credible sources were critically evaluated for relevance and objectivity. The focus was on identifying how the collaboration might change, new opportunities for cooperation, and potential challenges not fully explored in previous research. This approach aims to contribute fresh insights into this complex topic.

¹⁰ Wolf, Siegfried O. 2020. *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment*. Springer.

Evolution of China-Pakistan Relations on the Issue of the Taliban: A Historical and Security Dynamics Perspective

During the 1990s, Pakistan and China, despite their strong alliance, had divergent views on the Taliban. The Taliban's support for Uighur separatists, a Muslim minority in China's Xinjiang province, raised alarm in Beijing about Xinjiang's stability. China considered this support a security threat.¹¹ In contrast, Pakistan saw the Taliban as strategically valuable in its drive to secure its interests in Afghanistan.¹² Nevertheless, to address China's concerns, Pakistan pursued a dual strategy: convincing the Taliban to stop supporting Uighur Muslims and facilitating direct dialogue between the Taliban and Chinese leadership. These talks built trust and alleviated China's worries about the Taliban to a larger extent.¹³ In 2000, Pakistan mediated a meeting between Chinese Ambassador Lu Shunlin and Taliban leader Mullah Omar to obtain a promise from the Taliban that it would not support Uighur separatists.¹⁴

Moreover, Pakistani officials openly encouraged Uighurs to concentrate on enhancing their home country, China. Former Presidents Pervez Musharraf and Asif Ali Zardari made visits to Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, to promote a message of non-violence among Uighur Muslims towards the Chinese government and to foster a sense of patriotism urged them to “work for the good of China”.¹⁵ General Musharraf is known to have said that “Pakistan will wholeheartedly support China’s battle to strike against the East Turkestan terrorist forces”.¹⁶ Pakistani leaders encouragement of Uighurs to focus on their homeland demonstrates respect for China's sovereignty and promotes stability and cooperation, strengthening the bilateral relationship. Pakistan's efforts to persuade the Taliban to cease supporting Uighur Muslims and facilitate direct talks between the Taliban and Chinese leadership did alleviate China's concerns about the Taliban.

¹¹ Davis, Elizabeth Van Wie, and Rouben Azizian, eds. *Islam, oil, and geopolitics: Central Asia after September 11*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

¹² Mitton, John. "The India–Pakistan rivalry and failure in Afghanistan." *International Journal* 69, No. 3 (2014): 353-376.

¹³ Calabrese, John. 2014. "Balancing on ‘the Fulcrum of Asia’: China’s Pakistan Strategy." *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 27 (1/2): 1-20

¹⁴ Ali, Ghulam. 2022. "China–Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies." *The Pacific Review* 35 (3): 506-28

¹⁵ Haider, Z. 2005. "Sino-Pakistan Relations and Xinjiang’s Uighurs." *Asian Survey* 45 (4): 536–552.

¹⁶ *ibid* p.537.

These efforts also helped to build trust and understanding between the two sides, and ultimately led to a decrease in Afghan's militants support for Uighur separatists.

Similarly, Pakistani leaders took domestic measures to suppress support for Uighur Muslims, such as permanently closing two Uighur centers in Rawalpindi. In a move that pleased Chinese leaders, Pakistani security forces killed East Turkestan Islamic Movement leader Hasan Mahsum in the tribal areas in 2003.¹⁷ Both the Chinese and Pakistani governments were pleased with this development. Rehman Malik, the then-Interior Minister stated, "I am happy to inform you that their back is broken [referring to ETIM], it's weakened".¹⁸ Minister Malik further added "We treat ETIM not only as an enemy of China but also as an enemy of Pakistan ... Now the other so-called gang leader Haq has been killed recently, I can confirm that... "We will ensure with China they are rooted out, eliminated ... the main leadership is eliminated"¹⁹ Pakistani authorities' permanent closure of two Uighur facilities in Rawalpindi demonstrated the complicated dynamics of the Uighur issue in Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy. This decision had ramifications for Pakistan-China relations, as it signaled agreement with China's position on the Uighur issue and addressed Chinese concerns about separatist activity.

Pakistani officials and institutions have not provided open or covert support to the Uighur cause. Notably, the Chinese government has not made any accusations of Uighur support against Pakistani leaders or state institutions. Pakistan's abstention from supporting the Uighur cause strengthens Sino-Pakistan relations by demonstrating respect for China's sovereignty, preventing misunderstandings, and signaling Pakistan's prioritization of its relationship with China.

Challenges and Implications: The Aftermath of the 2021 US Withdrawal from Afghanistan on Regional Security

The sudden US pullout from Afghanistan in 2021 was expensive and resulted in a humanitarian crisis. Years of investment failed to bring about an effective reconstruction of Afghanistan. After regrouping in the border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, this led to the

¹⁷ In 1995, Mahsum was indicted of plotting a blast, and he fled to Afghanistan in 1997

¹⁸ Graham-Harrison, Emma. "Uighur Leader Killed in Pakistan: Interior Minister." Reuters, 2010

¹⁹ *ibid.*

Taliban's reappearance. For Afghanistan's neighbors, Pakistan, Iran, China, India, and the Central Asian nations, the return of Taliban rule in 2021 after the US withdrawal, characterized by harsh limitations on women's rights and international skepticism, presents difficulties. In this situation, maintaining regional security is crucial. Afghans face uncertainty and deprivation under Taliban rule.²⁰

Ramifications for Pakistan: Navigating Challenges in the Wake of the 2021 US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan has significant implications for Pakistan, particularly in terms of regional stability and security. The Taliban's resurgence and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have raised concerns about the potential spillover of destabilization into Pakistan. The withdrawal could lead to increased security concerns in the region, including potential resurgence of extremist groups and political instability.

Politically, the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan emboldens other Islamist groups in Pakistan, leading to sectarian violence and damaging Pakistan's international reputation. Moreover, the Taliban's rule provokes a refugee crisis, with millions of Afghans fleeing to Pakistan. Additionally, the Taliban rule exacerbates the drug trade, with Pakistan being a major transit route for drugs from Afghanistan. Furthermore, the refugees can exploit Pakistan's resources without regard for the environment, leading to environmental degradation. Generally, the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan has a number of negative implications for Pakistan's security and other matters. Pakistan needs to carefully manage its relationship with the Taliban to mitigate these risks.

Apart from traditional fear, Pakistani policy makers worry that increased instability and violence in Afghanistan could spill over into Pakistan, the Taliban could provide safe haven to terrorist groups that target Pakistan like TTP, the Taliban could support Durand Line issue and the Afghan Pashtun insurgency in Pakistan.²¹ And finally, the Taliban could exploit Pakistan's economic and social problems to undermine its stability. Pakistani officials say they fear a further

²⁰ Fluri, Jennifer, and Sandra McEvoy. "Ask a Feminist: Jennifer Fluri Discusses the Gender Politics of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan with Sandra McEvoy." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 48, No. 2 (2023): 509-526.

²¹ Qazi, Raza Khan. "As Pakistan's Afghanistan Policy Falters, the Afghan Taliban Takes Action Against Islamabad." *SouthAsiaSource*, Atlantic Council, September 6, 2022.

intensification of civil war in Afghanistan following the completion of the pullout in the absence of a political settlement. This, they apprehend, can have a spillover effect pushing refugees into Pakistan, whose economy is already struggling.²²

Indeed, the US withdrawal has created a security nightmare for Pakistan. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a splinter group of the Afghan Taliban, is exploiting the situation by launching attacks from sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Despite the Taliban's assurances that Afghanistan's territory will not be used to harm other countries, there is a risk that the country could become a sanctuary for extremist groups that could pose a threat to the United States and its allies. Late in 2022, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant group based in Pakistan, violated a ceasefire agreement with the Pakistani government and carried out attacks across the country. Pakistani authorities have accused the Afghan Taliban of providing safe haven to the TTP.²³ This is a major obstacle to improved relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan are reluctant to normalize relations due to the TTP, a terrorist group that operates from Afghanistan.²⁴

The TTP threatens regional stability, and both countries need to work together to defeat it. The resurgence in TTP activity has been blamed on a number of factors, including the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the release of TTP prisoners from Afghan prisons, and the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan. The Pakistani government has responded to the TTP's resurgence with a renewed crackdown on the group. This has included military operations in the Pashtun tribal regions, arrests of suspected TTP militants, and a ban on the group's activities. However, the TTP has so far proven to be resilient and has shown no signs of weakening. The group continues to pose a significant threat to security in Pakistan.

The US withdrawal has presented Pakistan with a range of complex challenges, including escalating security concerns, the potential for heightened instability in Afghanistan, and a

²² Khattak, Daud. "Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan Bolsters Pakistan's Insurgency." Radio Free Europe, January 13, 2022

²³ Threlkeld, Elizabeth, and Grace Easterly. "Afghanistan-Pakistan Ties and Future Stability in Afghanistan." Report No. 175, United States Institute of Peace, August 2021

²⁴ Mir, Asfandyar, Tamanna Salikuddin, and Andrew Watkins. "Is Pakistan Poised to Take on the TTP?" USIP, Tuesday, February 14, 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/02/pakistan-poised-take-ttp>.

burgeoning humanitarian crisis. Pakistan already hosts a substantial number of Afghan refugees and bears a significant burden in providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. The deteriorating security and economic situation in Afghanistan is exacerbating the refugee crisis and straining Pakistan's resources.²⁵

Pakistan is poised to capitalize on emerging economic and trade opportunities arising from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. By strengthening connectivity and cooperation with Afghanistan and other regional countries, Pakistan can tap into the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, as well as participate in transit and energy projects that connect Central and South Asia. Moreover, Pakistan can leverage its strategic location and role as a facilitator of dialogue and peace in the region to further enhance its economic prospects.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was expected, but its sudden and chaotic execution has caught everyone off guard. It is unclear when the Taliban will take full control of Afghanistan, or how neighboring countries like Russia, Pakistan, and China will interact with both the current government and the Taliban. The Taliban's rule in Afghanistan could lead to increased instability, violence, and terrorism in Pakistan, as well as damage Pakistan's economy and political stability. It could also lead to a refugee crisis and environmental degradation in Pakistan. Pakistan must carefully manage its relationship with the Taliban to mitigate these risks.

China's Concerns and Pragmatic Approach towards Afghanistan: Safeguarding National Security and Promoting Stability

China's concerns and pragmatic approach towards Afghanistan are based on its national security and regional stability interests. China has maintained a consistent and narrow policy towards its neighbor since 2002, focusing on two main objectives: ensuring stability in its Xinjiang province and trade with Central Asia. China is concerned about the potential for Afghanistan to become a safe haven for terrorist groups, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which it sees as a direct threat to its national security. China also worries that instability in Afghanistan could spill over into its own territory and destabilize Xinjiang, a strategically important region for China. With regard to China's role in Afghanistan, it has adopted a pragmatic

²⁵ Hussain, Abid. "Thousands of Afghan Refugees Fleeing Pakistan as Deportation Deadline Looms." Al Jazeera, 31 Oct 2023

approach to its relations with Afghanistan, engaging with the Taliban even though it does not recognize the Taliban government.

China has also provided humanitarian and development assistance to Afghanistan. Therefore, China's engagement with the Taliban is motivated by a number of factors, including ensuring that the Taliban does not provide safe haven to terrorist groups that could threaten China's security, promoting stability and development in Afghanistan in order to protect its economic and political interests, preventing the United States and other Western powers from gaining too much influence in Afghanistan, and finally, China's role in Afghanistan is likely to continue to grow in the years to come.²⁶

Economically, Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan offers China a precarious but strategically significant opening. China's foremost concerns in Afghanistan are maintaining stability in its conflict-ridden western neighbor, safeguarding borders, and protecting vital infrastructure investments. China is a major economic and political power with a lot to offer the Taliban. For the Taliban, China could provide much-needed financial assistance and political legitimacy. China could also help the Taliban to develop Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure. In return, China would gain access to Afghanistan's rich natural resources and a more stable and secure border with Afghanistan. A friendly Afghanistan would also be a valuable addition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure project that aims to connect China with the rest of Asia.²⁷

Moreover, Afghanistan's abundant natural resources, including iron ore, copper, and lithium, offer China opportunities to invest. Positioned along BRI, Afghanistan offers China entry into South and Central Asia, opening new markets for its products. A stable Kabul administration is crucial for the success of BRI projects, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China, not keen on military intervention, seeks to engage with Afghanistan economically, leveraging its mineral wealth. President Xi Jinping's global connectivity ambitions through

²⁶ Zhou, Jiayi, Fei Su, and Jingdong Yuan. "Treading Lightly: China's Footprint in a Taliban-Led Afghanistan." SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security No. 2022/08, November 2022

²⁷ Van Wieringen, Kjeld, and Julie Claustre. "Thinking About Tomorrow: Future of Sino-Afghan Relations - Impacts on EU Interests and Strategic Autonomy." Briefing, EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 747.434, July 2023.

corridors could be derailed if Afghanistan is unstable. Pakistan accuses India of waging a covert hybrid war to disrupt CPEC, adding to regional complexities.

Afghanistan's geostrategic importance is both advantageous and challenging, particularly for China's regional goals. China seeks to expand its influence in Afghanistan, a strategically located country, to safeguard its regional interests, curtail the influence of the United States and India, and promote stability for its economic interests. This approach involves engaging with the Taliban, offering humanitarian aid, signing deals with the Taliban government, and providing military support. China's increased involvement raises concerns among the United States and India, but Afghanistan remains a focal point for China's regional interests and aspirations.

Finally, Afghanistan's separatist movements, particularly those linked to the Afghan Taliban, challenge China's core One China policy, which asserts the indivisibility of China and encompasses territories like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet. China's escalating interest in Afghanistan is underscored by its engagement with Iran, primarily driven by Iran's vast hydrocarbon resources, particularly oil and gas reserves. With China's soaring demand for these resources, the two nations have inked a substantial \$400 billion investment deal over 25 years, cementing a prolonged economic partnership. Ensuring stability in countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan becomes pivotal for China to safeguard its investments, considering that it accesses Iran through this route.

Within Afghanistan, China has invested significantly in iron ore, though security challenges have impeded the success of these investments. China is Afghanistan's largest investor, with significant stakes in the country's iron ore sector, including the Mes Aynak project. However, security concerns have hampered the progress of these investments.

Shared Objectives: Pakistan and China's Mutual Goals and Concerns in Afghanistan

Pakistan and China have mutual goals and concerns in Afghanistan, which are based on their national security and regional stability interests. Besides, individual concerns, Pakistan and China share a number of concerns about Afghanistan, including the Taliban's return to power and the potential for Afghanistan to become a safe haven for terrorist groups, the instability in Afghanistan and the potential for it to spill over into neighboring countries, the economic and security challenges posed by the Taliban and other terrorist groups, and the need for Afghanistan to be integrated into the regional economy and security architecture.

Pakistan and China share a common interest in stabilizing Afghanistan, driven by both geostrategic and geopolitical considerations. They recognize that a breakdown in their cooperation could embolden extremist groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and TTP, which may exploit the Taliban's takeover and the resulting instability to regroup, sow discord, and target civilians. The global threat posed by al-Qaeda remains acute, as it played a key role in the 2019 reunification of TTP, which has since intensified its attacks against Pakistan. Until a stable and viable political system emerges in Kabul, the security vacuum in eastern Afghanistan, particularly outside Kabul, will remain vulnerable to exploitation by terrorist groups.

India's growing influence in Afghanistan has become a source of concern for both Pakistan and China. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, India has rapidly established a significant presence in Afghanistan through various initiatives, including infrastructure development, educational scholarships, and the Chabahar Port project. While India's engagement has contributed to stability and progress in Afghanistan, it has also raised geopolitical concerns, particularly for neighboring Pakistan and China. India's multifaceted approach, encompassing economic aid, investment, cultural exchanges, and limited security cooperation, has strengthened its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan and gained favor among the Afghan population.

On the other hand, Taliban have welcomed Chinese role in rebuilding Afghanistan. Pakistan has also welcomed Chinese role in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry spokesman Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri said at his weekly media briefing that "We believe that China being a neighboring country to Afghanistan does have an important role to play in the Afghan peace process" China is a big country with a huge economy and capacity — I think they can play a very big role in the rebuilding, rehabilitation, reconstruction of Afghanistan".²⁸

Exploring Opportunities and Risks: Pakistan and China's Strategic Landscape in Afghanistan

While it would be an oversimplification to assume that China's and Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan are now completely aligned, there is a discernible convergence that could lead to

²⁸ Pakistan appreciates China's engagement with Taliban, Pakistan Observer 2021 <https://pakobserver.net/pakistan-appreciates-chinas-engagement-with-taliban/>

closer cooperation between Beijing and Islamabad following the American withdrawal from the country. That is why, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has created both risks and opportunities for Pakistan and China almost equally. The Taliban could use Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks against Pakistan and China. Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS-K could use Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks against Pakistan and China. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan could lead to instability in Pakistan and China. Pakistan and China could expand their influence in Afghanistan and the region as a whole. Pakistan and China could cooperate with each other to address the security challenges posed by the Taliban and other terrorist groups. Pakistan and China could invest in Afghanistan's natural resources, such as copper and lithium.

Navigating Afghan Security Challenges: Insights into Pakistan-China Responses

To cope with this security issue, both bilateral and multilateral approaches have been adopted by China and Pakistan in order to cope with their policy concerns regarding Afghanistan. On 11 Nov 2022, representatives of the extended “Troika,” comprising the US, the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, met in Islamabad to discuss Afghanistan in the backdrop of Taliban takeover, through this Islamabad is advocating for external powers, particularly the U.S. and its Western allies, to initiate engagement with the Taliban. Pakistan has been urging the Taliban to form an inclusive government and respect basic rights, but the Taliban has so far resisted these calls.²⁹ Moreover, the recent development in Afghanistan after withdrawal of the U.S clearly indicating that Pakistan and China could cooperate in a number of ways to address the security challenges in Afghanistan. For example, they could share intelligence, conduct joint military operations, and provide training and equipment to Afghan security forces.

One way that Pakistan and China are working together to achieve these goals is through the CPEC. It is a massive infrastructure development project that will connect China to Pakistan and to other countries in the region. CPEC is expected to have a significant impact on the economies of Pakistan and China, and it could also help to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan. China initiated a trilateral foreign ministerial relationship with Afghanistan and

²⁹ Pakistan's Dilemmas in Afghanistan: Hard Policy Choices - Report 320 / Asia, February 04, 2022 - International Crisis Group

Pakistan in 2017. Its main aim was to promote talks between Pakistan and Afghanistan and extend the CPEC to Afghanistan. CPEC includes a number of projects that are relevant to Afghanistan, such as roads, railways, and power plants.

These projects could help to improve Afghanistan's infrastructure and to connect Afghanistan to the global economy. CPEC could also help to create jobs and to reduce poverty in Afghanistan. This could help to reduce the support for terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan. However, there are also some potential risks associated with CPEC. One challenge is the security situation in Afghanistan. The country is still unstable and there is a risk of terrorist attacks. This could deter foreign investment and make it difficult to build and maintain CPEC infrastructure.

China and Pakistan have showed willingness and invited Afghanistan to join BRI in general and CPEC in particular. In such a scenario, Afghanistan's stability will be significant for the success of CPEC. China can't afford to lose its investment under the CPEC, so it is likely to engage Afghanistan irrespective of the government in Afghanistan. China is also likely to engage the Taliban to ensure its region security as well as BRI security. China may have leverage more than any other nation with the Taliban as the Taliban leadership have also made attempts to take China onboard. In case the Taliban's control of Afghanistan persists, they will need finances to run the country; China may be one of the sources to fulfill the void left by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Another challenge is the lack of capacity in Afghanistan. The country's economy has been devastated by decades of war and there is a shortage of skilled workers. This could make it difficult for Afghanistan to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by CPEC. Despite these challenges, there are a number of potential benefits for Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan if Afghanistan does join CPEC.

Fostering Trilateral Cooperation: Dynamics of China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Partnership

The trilateral cooperation between China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is important for regional peace and prosperity. The three countries have pledged to work together to address security challenges, promote economic development, and improve connectivity. In a meeting in July 2023 in Islamabad, the Foreign Ministers of Pakistan, China and Afghanistan pledged to

strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation.³⁰ The fourth China Pakistan Afghanistan Foreign Ministers meeting in China in 2021, discussed that China is concerned about the potential for instability in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal.³¹ Therefore China is likely to rely on Pakistan to help it achieve its goals in Afghanistan. China is likely to deepen its engagement with Pakistan after the US withdrawal. China's and Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan have become more aligned. China is refining its policy toolbox to calibrate its response to the unfolding Afghan scenario. China sees itself as a mediator in the Afghan peace process.

There is no denying that Afghanistan's potential benefits from joining the CPEC are numerous and could have a positive impact on each of the three nations' bilateral relations and individual prosperity. For example, it can bring Economic Interdependence between Pakistan and Afghanistan. CPEC would create a strong economic linkage between Pakistan and Afghanistan, fostering mutual interdependence and shared prosperity. The enhanced trade and investment opportunities would encourage cooperation between businesses in both countries, leading to job creation and improved livelihoods.

CPEC facilitates infrastructure connectivity between Pakistan and China, extending beyond Pakistan's borders to connect Afghanistan to regional trade routes and transportation networks. This enhanced connectivity will streamline the movement of goods and services, fostering regional economic integration and reducing trade barriers. A related element involves the elevation of People-to-People interactions to the next level. CPEC would facilitate greater interaction between the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan, breaking down barriers and promoting cultural exchange. Increased trade, tourism, and educational opportunities would foster mutual understanding and appreciation between the two nations.³²

Another important element of regional stability is CPEC which will contribute to regional stability by providing Afghanistan with a pathway for economic development and integration. By addressing Afghanistan's infrastructure and connectivity challenges, CPEC could help reduce poverty and create opportunities for its citizens, potentially reducing the risk of instability and

³⁰ China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan Foreign Ministers Hold Talks in Islamabad - Al Jazeera, May 7, 2023

³¹ Kaura, Vinay. "The Pakistan Factor in China's Afghanistan Policy: Emerging Regional Faultlines amid US Withdrawal." Middle East Institute, July 6, 2021

³² Shekhawat, Shivam. "Betting on Connectivity: Afghanistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Ambitions." Expert Speak, Raisina Debates, June 07, 2023.

conflict. Furthermore, it will foster Political dialogue and cooperation between them. CPEC could serve as a platform for political dialogue and cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The shared investment in the project could encourage joint efforts to address common challenges, such as border security, counterterrorism, and regional development.³³

Another important element which is so crucial for Pakistan-Afghanistan is trust and confidence building. CPEC could help build trust and confidence between Pakistan and Afghanistan, overcoming the legacy of mistrust and fostering a more positive relationship. The shared benefits of the project could create a foundation for cooperation and address the historical grievances that have strained relations between the two countries.³⁴ Similarity shared responsibility for peace and development is responsibility of each nations, so CPEC could foster a shared sense of responsibility for peace and development in the region. By working together on a project of mutual benefit, Pakistan and Afghanistan could recognize their interconnectedness and work towards a common goal of stability and prosperity.³⁵

Afghanistan inclusion will be a regional gateway. CPEC could position Afghanistan as a regional gateway for trade and transit between Central and South Asia. By improving Afghanistan's connectivity and infrastructure, CPEC could open up new trade routes and economic opportunities for the country. In addition, it will make possible counterterrorism cooperation. CPEC could provide a framework for enhanced counterterrorism cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The shared interest in protecting the project and ensuring regional stability could encourage joint efforts to combat terrorism and extremism.

It is also people centric approach which is essential improvised nations of South Asia. CPEC could be implemented with a people-centric approach, ensuring that the benefits of the project reach all segments of Afghan society. By prioritizing inclusive development and addressing the needs of communities along the CPEC corridor, the project could contribute to poverty

³³ KIZILAY, Şeyma. "Afghanistan's Increasing Role in CPEC." Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies, 23 May 2023.

³⁴ Rizwanullah, Muhammad, et,al. "Role of CPEC in Enhancing Mutual Trust and Regional Integration: Across OBOR Countries." International Journal of Business and Social Research, vol. 10, no. 02, 2020, pp. 18-27

³⁵ KIZILAY, Şeyma. "Afghanistan's Increasing Role in CPEC." Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Studies, 23 May 2023.

reduction and social progress in Afghanistan. In essence, CPEC could serve as a catalyst for transforming Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, fostering economic interdependence, promoting regional connectivity, and encouraging cooperation on issues of mutual interest. By addressing the underlying causes of tension and mistrust, CPEC could pave the way for a more stable, prosperous, and interconnected region.

Multilaterally, it will be a regional economic hub. CPEC could transform the region into a vibrant economic hub, attracting foreign investment and facilitating trade flows. The improved connectivity and infrastructure would create a more interconnected and dynamic regional economy. It will provide Energy Security. CPEC's energy projects could address energy shortages in Pakistan and Afghanistan, providing a stable and reliable power supply. This enhanced energy security would support economic growth and development in both countries. Cultural Exchange will also be possible.

CPEC could promote cultural exchange and understanding among the three countries, fostering people-to-people connections and building bridges of cooperation. Increased interaction and collaboration could enhance mutual respect and appreciation of diverse cultures. In essence, Afghanistan's inclusion in CPEC holds immense potential to transform the region, bringing economic prosperity, infrastructure development, and enhanced trilateral cooperation. By fostering trade, investment, and regional connectivity, CPEC could serve as a catalyst for peace, stability, and shared progress.

US Pullout: Regional Power Implications

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to have a significant impact on the regional balance of power. The United States is no longer the dominant power in the region, and this will create a vacuum that could be filled by other countries, such as China, Russia, and India. China is likely to be the biggest beneficiary of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.³⁶ China is already expanding its influence in Afghanistan, and it is likely to continue to do so in the years to come. China has a number of interests in Afghanistan, including its natural resources, its strategic location, and its potential as a market for Chinese goods and services.³⁷

³⁶ Sakhi, Nilofar, and Annie Pforzheimer. "Missing the Bigger Implications of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan." Middle East Institute, July 29, 2021

³⁷ Sharan, Timor, and Andrew Watkins. "From Uncertainty to Strategy? Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal for Afghanistan's Neighbors and Key Partners." Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021.

Russia is also likely to expand its influence in Afghanistan. Russia has a long history of involvement in Afghanistan, and it has strong ties to the Taliban. Russia is likely to use its influence in Afghanistan to counter the influence of the United States and its allies. India is also likely to expand its influence in Afghanistan. India has a long-standing rivalry with Pakistan, and it is likely to use its influence in Afghanistan to counter the influence of Pakistan. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to lead to a more multi-polar regional order. This will create new challenges and opportunities for Pakistan and China. Pakistan and China will need to carefully manage their interests in the region in order to protect their security and prosperity.³⁸

Finally, the intricate dynamics of the India-Pakistan-China triangle significantly impact the joint efforts of Pakistan and China in Afghanistan. The longstanding historical and geopolitical complexities, fueled by unresolved border disputes and military confrontations, create an environment where the strategic collaboration between Pakistan and China faces challenges. The power shifts within the triangle, with China becoming more influential relative to India, contribute to the delicate balance in the region.

The evolving U.S.-China confrontation and India's perceived role in containment efforts by the United States further heighten tensions. As India emerges as a key factor, its strategic importance cannot be ignored in the joint endeavors of Pakistan and China in Afghanistan. The power asymmetry and security dilemma inherent in the triangle justify close collaboration between China and Pakistan to counterbalance India's influence. The potential for crises and conflicts at the borders, exacerbated by the complex geopolitical landscape, adds an additional layer of complexity to the joint efforts in Afghanistan. In managing this intricate relationship, careful consideration of India's role is essential to navigate the regional dynamics and ensure the success of collaborative initiatives between Pakistan and China in Afghanistan.

³⁸ *ibid*

China's Role in Strengthening Afghanistan-Pakistan Relations Through Infrastructure Development

China's inclusion of Afghanistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) creates an opportunity to improve relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Infrastructure development can create new trade routes, improve transportation networks, and foster economic integration for both countries. Collaboration on these projects can also lead to increased security cooperation and a sense of shared purpose, promoting regional stability. China's financial resources and expertise in infrastructure development are valuable assets.³⁹ Extending CPEC to Afghanistan can create a robust regional transportation and energy network, connecting Central Asia and beyond. Upgrading transportation infrastructure and building a regional energy grid will not only benefit trade but also improve living standards and attract further investment. Overall, China's involvement in Afghan infrastructure development has the potential to strengthen relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, promote regional stability, and contribute to long-term peace and prosperity. Beyond the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan and China can cooperate in several ways to further augment new dimensions of collaboration.

Pakistan and China have an opportunity to expand their partnership beyond the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. This can be achieved through collaboration in defense and security (joint military exercises, counter-terrorism efforts, and technology transfer), science and technology (space exploration, joint research, and knowledge sharing), education and cultural exchange (student programs, research projects, and cultural events), regional development (joint infrastructure projects, Gwadar Port development, and cooperation with Afghanistan), and people-to-people exchange (visa simplification, business partnerships, and language and cultural programs). By working together in these various areas, Pakistan and China can strengthen their relationship, promote regional stability, and achieve greater prosperity.

Opportunities and Apprehensions for China Linking with Iran through Pakistan and Afghanistan.

China has the chance to significantly boost trade with Iran and establish itself as a key player in Eurasian trade by creating a secure trade route through Pakistan and Afghanistan. This collaboration could revitalize Iran's energy sector and provide China with a reliable energy source.

³⁹ Siddiq, Ayesha. "Expansion by Stealth: China's Interests, Infrastructure & Investments in Pakistan & Afghanistan." CIDOB Policy Research Project. Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: a regional perspective (2012).

Additionally, a potential alliance with Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan could counter US influence in the region and open new markets for China. However, security concerns, US sanctions, political tensions, and infrastructure challenges pose significant risks. China will need to navigate these complexities carefully to ensure the success of this ambitious project.⁴⁰

Central Asian States Seeking CPEC for Trade and Transit.

Central Asian countries see the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a chance to boost trade and access new markets. CPEC offers them a direct route to the Arabian Sea and major markets in Pakistan and China. Improved transportation networks through CPEC would significantly reduce their export costs, making them more competitive globally. Additionally, CPEC development could attract investment in transportation, logistics, and other sectors, creating jobs and stimulating economic growth across Central Asia. Some Central Asian nations like Kazakhstan are already exploring ways to connect their transportation networks to CPEC.⁴¹

Conclusion

Afghanistan's neighboring countries are closely monitoring the situation and evaluating their options in the wake of the US withdrawal. The political trajectory of Afghanistan will have a profound impact on regional security and geo-economics, with various nations holding contrasting priorities and broader pan-Asian interests. Afghanistan's potential to exacerbate poverty, mass migration, and instability is rapidly becoming a pressing concern for all. Afghanistan's neighbors – Pakistan, Iran, China, India, and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) – are already contemplating the security costs associated with ensuring stability in the post-US withdrawal era. Afghanistan, historically known as the epicenter of "the Great Game," now finds itself at the center of emerging Asian power rivalries following Washington's decision to depart.

The evolving security situation in Afghanistan has ignited a race for influence among regional powers, each with their own strategic interests. This heightened geopolitical maneuvering underscores the realpolitik at play, as Afghanistan's future remains uncertain and its stability continues to deteriorate. Given the stakes involved, Pakistan and China cannot afford to ignore the situation in Afghanistan. Both countries must adopt a pragmatic and proactive approach to foster lasting peace. This entails urging the Taliban and other factions to engage in genuine negotiations,

⁴⁰ Shafqat, Saeed. "China's Rise: How Is It Impacting the Gulf, Iran, Pakistan and Beyond?." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11.1 (2017): 15-36.

⁴¹ Khetran, Mir Sher Baz, and Muhammad Humayun Khalid. "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Gateway to Central Asia." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 5.03 (2019): 455-469.

the only viable path to a sustainable settlement. Pakistan and China, leveraging their influence over the Taliban, can encourage their participation in the peace process and promote compromise. However, they must tread carefully to avoid the perception of interference. The peace process must be Afghan-owned and Afghan-led, with Pakistan and China playing a supportive role rather than imposing solutions.

Both Pakistan and China must proactively identify and prevent spoilers of the peace process in Afghanistan. Numerous groups hold vested interests in undermining the peace process, and Pakistan and China must collaborate to identify these groups and develop countermeasures. Constructive engagement with the Taliban is essential, as isolating the group will only exacerbate the situation. Lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan can only be achieved through constructive engagement with the Taliban. This does not imply that Pakistan and China must endorse all Taliban actions. Rather, it necessitates a willingness to work with the Taliban to address their concerns and reach mutually agreeable solutions. Pakistan and China can play a constructive role in Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban's efforts to develop the economy, promote human rights, and combat terrorism. By working together on these issues, Pakistan and China can help to create a more stable and prosperous Afghanistan for the benefit of all Afghans. The success of Pakistan-China cooperation on Afghanistan will depend on their ability to address the challenges posed by the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The future of Afghanistan will be shaped by the ability of regional actors to cooperate and find common ground.