
CONFERENCE ARTICLE**Afghanistan's Strategic Role and Historical Evolution In Chinese Foreign Policy****Otamurodov Mamurjon**

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Abstract: This article examines Afghanistan's strategic role and historical evolution in Chinese foreign policy. It analyzes how Afghanistan has gradually transformed from a peripheral neighbor into an important factor in China's regional security, geoeconomic interests, and Eurasian diplomacy. The study focuses on the main stages of China-Afghanistan relations, including the Taliban 1.0 period, the post-2001 international intervention phase, and the Taliban 2.0 period after 2021. Special attention is paid to China's security concerns related to Xinjiang, TITR/TIP, transnational terrorism, and border stability. The article also explores Afghanistan's relevance to the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, natural resources, transport connectivity, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The analysis shows that China's policy toward Afghanistan is based on cautious strategic engagement: Beijing seeks stability, influence, and economic opportunities while avoiding excessive political, military, and financial responsibility. The article argues that Afghanistan remains both a strategic opportunity and a security challenge for China, especially in the context of regional instability, Taliban rule, and changing geopolitical dynamics in Central and South Asia.

Keywords: Afghanistan, China, Chinese foreign policy, China-Afghanistan relations, Taliban 1.0, Taliban 2.0, Xinjiang, ETIM, Transnational terrorism, Belt and Road Initiative, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, regional security, Central Asia, South Asia, geoeconomics, strategic resources.

Introduction

Afghanistan has long held a special place in China's foreign policy due to its geographical proximity to Xinjiang, its location between Central and South Asia, and its potential role in regional security and economic relations. China and Afghanistan established diplomatic relations in 1955, and in 2012, the two countries announced a strategic partnership agreement. This reflected Beijing's growing interest in Afghanistan beyond traditional diplomatic ties. However, Afghanistan's role in China's foreign policy has never been limited solely to bilateral relations. This role has been shaped by factors such as regional instability, terrorist threats, the post-2001 U.S. military presence, the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

China's policy toward Afghanistan has historically evolved through several stages. During the "Taliban 1.0" period from 1996 to 2001, Beijing viewed Afghanistan primarily through the lens of security threats, particularly the potential activities of Uyghur militant groups and the spread of extremism to Xinjiang. As Zhang notes, China-Afghanistan relations have shifted from Cold War-era alienation to growing concerns about Uyghur terrorism in the 1990s, and then to more active cooperation following the U.S. intervention in 2001 [1]. After 2001, China supported Afghanistan's reconstruction and expanded diplomatic and economic ties, but it avoided taking on direct military responsibility and remained cautious about large-scale involvement.

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 created a new strategic environment for Beijing. During the "Taliban 2.0" era, China has adopted a pragmatic policy based on dialogue, security guarantees, limited economic cooperation, and cautious diplomatic normalization. China's official position emphasizes that security is the foundation of development and identifies the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a serious threat to China, Afghanistan, and the broader region [2]. According to Mansuri, China's current policy toward Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is a flexible approach aimed at protecting China's security interests while avoiding excessive political and financial commitments. Similarly, Glasserman and Mansuri describe Beijing's approach as a "waiting game", in which China maintains contact with Kabul but does not let down its guard due to terrorism, institutional weakness, and investment risks [3].

Afghanistan is also important for China's geoeconomic strategy. Its natural resources, transport potential, and location between Central Asia, Pakistan, Iran, and China make it relevant to the broader logic of the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, security challenges in Afghanistan, the Taliban government's lack of international recognition, sanctions, weak infrastructure, and attacks on Chinese interests are limiting the practical implementation of Chinese projects. Therefore, Afghanistan represents both an opportunity and a risk in China's regional policy.

Literature Review

The existing literature on this topic shows that Afghanistan has gradually transformed from a secondary issue in Beijing's diplomacy into a strategic factor related to security, regional connectivity, geopolitical balance, and China's westward-oriented foreign policy.

The first group of studies explains China-Afghanistan relations through a historical-evolutionary approach. Zhang divides the development of China-Afghanistan relations into several stages: limited interaction during the Cold War; China's growing concern over Uyghur militancy and instability in Afghanistan in the 1990s; and the intensification of Chinese involvement following the 2001

US intervention. This approach is significant because it demonstrates that Afghanistan's role in China's foreign policy has been shaped not by ideology, but by evolving security conditions and the regional situation. During the "Taliban 1.0" period from 1996 to 2001, China viewed Afghanistan primarily as a source of security threats related to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, transnational terrorism, and instability near Xinjiang. Research on China-Taliban relations notes that China's initial contacts with the Taliban were cautious and pragmatic, aimed at preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for anti-China militant networks.

The second area in the literature focuses on the post-2001 period, during which China began to integrate its security concerns with economic and diplomatic activities. According to Zhao Huashen and other researchers, China's interests in Afghanistan became more significant after 2001, as instability in the country directly affected Central Asia, Pakistan, Xinjiang, and China's broader regional strategy [4]. During this period, Chinese policy remained cautious: Beijing supported the reconstruction of Afghanistan and participated in economic projects, but refrained from deep military intervention and from assuming large-scale political responsibility. This cautious engagement later became more evident in the Belt and Road Initiative, discussions on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, mining projects, and regional connectivity plans.

The third group of studies examines the "Taliban 2.0" period since August 2021. Zhang notes that China adopted a multifaceted policy following the withdrawal of US troops. This policy is based on the pragmatic recognition of Taliban rule, terrorism prevention, support for inclusive governance, provision of humanitarian aid, and criticism of the West's responsibility in Afghanistan. Mansuri interprets China's approach to "Taliban 2.0" as a policy of appeasement [5]. According to him, Beijing maintains diplomatic relations with the Taliban while demanding security guarantees and avoiding premature, full-scale commitments. Glasserman and Mansuri call this strategy China's "waiting game": Beijing keeps communication channels with Kabul open and explores economic opportunities, but remains cautious due to terrorism, political uncertainty, weak institutions, and threats to Chinese personnel and investments [6].

The fourth area analyzes Afghanistan from the perspective of geoeconomics and regional connectivity. These studies assess Afghanistan as a potential bridge between Central Asia, South Asia, China, Pakistan, and Iran. The Mes Aynak copper mine, the Amu Darya oil basin, lithium reserves, the expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and transport corridors related to the Belt and Road Initiative are often cited as key elements of Chinese economic diplomacy. However, researchers note that security threats, the Taliban government's lack of international recognition, sanctions, weak infrastructure, and governance issues have limited the practical implementation of many of China's initiatives. Consequently, Afghanistan is viewed as both an opportunity and a threat in China's regional strategy.

Uzbek scholars also put forward important regional perspectives on this topic. Abdusamad Haydarov focuses on the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the "SCO-Afghanistan" dialogue mechanism, particularly in humanitarian aid, economic recovery, and regional cooperation. Shoislom Akmalov analyzes Afghanistan within the framework of broader geopolitical competition involving India, Pakistan, China, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and regional transport interests, showing that the country's strategic position cannot be understood solely through bilateral Sino-Afghan relations. Suhrob Buronov develops the concept of Afghanistan as a bridge between Central and South Asia, emphasizing the importance of trans-Afghan transport, energy, and regional interconnectivity [7]. In his subsequent works on the Taliban factor, "Taliban 2.0" is analyzed as a source of both regional threats and strategic considerations for the Central Asian states.

Research Methods

This study uses historical, systemic, comparative, and content-analysis methods to examine this topic. The historical method is applied to trace the evolution of China-Afghanistan relations, especially after 2001 and following the 2021 political changes in Afghanistan. The systemic analysis method helps assess Afghanistan's place in China's broader foreign policy, including security, geopolitics, regional connectivity, and the Belt and Road Initiative.

The comparative method is used to compare China's bilateral policy toward Afghanistan with its multilateral approaches through regional mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The content-analysis method examines official documents, policy statements, international reports, and academic literature to identify China's main strategic priorities. In addition, SWOT analysis is used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks related to Afghanistan's role in Chinese foreign policy.

Discussions

Afghanistan's strategic role in China's foreign policy has evolved from a limited problem related to border security into a multifaceted issue encompassing the fight against terrorism, regional connectivity, geopolitical competition, economic diplomacy, and multilateral security governance. Although China and Afghanistan established diplomatic relations in 1955, Beijing's approach remained relatively cautious for several decades. Afghanistan's strategic importance grew after the 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of the Taliban, the emergence of transnational militant networks, and instability near China's western borders brought Afghanistan to the center of Beijing's regional security calculations [8]. In China's official foreign policy, Afghanistan is described as a "traditionally friendly neighbor", while it is also noted that bilateral relations were elevated to a new level with the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2012.

From a historical perspective, the evolution of China's policy on Afghanistan can be divided into several stages. The first stage covers the Cold War period, when Afghanistan was perceived largely through the prism of great-power rivalry and border stability. The second stage emerged in the 1990s, specifically during the "Taliban 1.0" period from 1996 to 2001. During this period, Afghanistan became more relevant to China due to the Xinjiang factor, Uyghur militants, concerns related to ETIM/TIP, and the possibility that Afghan territory could serve as a base for anti-China extremist networks. Zhang's periodization of Sino-Afghan relations highlights three main stages prior to 2021: alienation during the Cold War, growing concerns over Uyghur terrorism from 1991 to 2000, and China's increased engagement following the US intervention from 2001 to 2020 [9].

The "Taliban 1.0" era was significant not because China had deep ideological or institutional ties with the Taliban, but because Beijing began to formulate a pragmatic, security-oriented approach toward whoever controlled Kabul. China's concern was not with Afghanistan's domestic political model, but with the possibility that its territory could be used by forces threatening China's territorial integrity and internal stability [10]. Abdusamat Haydarov's research on the relationship between Islamic institutions and political power in Afghanistan is significant in this regard, as it shows that political Islam, religious authority, state weakness, and external interference have long shaped Afghanistan's internal political dynamics [11]. His analysis helps explain why China has treated

Afghanistan not as a traditional bilateral partner, but as a complex security environment where religious-political movements, armed groups, and regional actors interact.

After 2001, Chinese policy entered a new phase. The collapse of the first Taliban regime, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the long-term presence of the US and NATO shifted the regional balance. China supported the post-2001 Afghan government diplomatically and economically but avoided direct military intervention. Zhao Huasheng argues that China wants to contain threats to Afghanistan's security but is unwilling to assume the military burden of stabilizing Afghanistan [12]. Beijing preferred economic recovery, diplomacy, and regional coordination over military responsibility. This approach reflected a broader principle of Chinese foreign policy: engagement without overextension.

The China-Afghanistan Strategic and Cooperative Partnership agreement signed in 2012 marked a turning point in bilateral relations. The Joint Declaration identified political, economic, cultural, security, and regional-international cooperation as the five pillars of the partnership [13]. It also emphasized sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, and cooperation in the fields of resources, energy, infrastructure, engineering, and agriculture. This document shows that China's policy on Afghanistan had already expanded beyond narrow security concerns even before the Taliban's return in 2021. Afghanistan is increasingly viewed as part of China's western neighborhood diplomacy, the "Belt and Road" Initiative, and the broader connectivity between Central Asia, South Asia, Pakistan, and Iran.

At the same time, China's activity post-2001 remained cautious. Chinese companies showed interest in Afghanistan's mineral resources, particularly the Mes Aynak copper project and the Amu Darya oil basin, but the implementation of these projects was limited by insecurity, corruption, weak institutions, and poor infrastructure. Elizabeth Economy's research on Chinese investment in Afghanistan described Mes Aynak and Amu Darya as symbols of Beijing's economic interests, while also demonstrating that investment plans do not automatically translate into successful strategic influence [14]. Thus, Afghanistan was both an opportunity and a risk: it possessed strategic resources and transit potential, but its security environment constrained China's ability to convert economic deals into sustainable long-term projects.

The Taliban's return in August 2021 created a new phase in China's foreign policy toward Afghanistan, often described as the Taliban 2.0 era. Unlike many Western countries, China maintained its embassy in Kabul and adopted a pragmatic engagement strategy. Zhang asserts that after the US withdrawal, China developed a five-pronged policy: a cautious acceptance of Taliban rule, preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists, supporting inclusive policies, humanitarian cooperation, and criticizing Western responsibility for the crisis in Afghanistan [15]. According to Mansuri, China's current approach is a flexible policy: Beijing engages the Taliban de facto, exchanges diplomatic signals, and supports limited normalization while avoiding official recognition and large-scale commitments.

This cautious accommodation was evident in diplomatic practice. China became the first country to appoint a new ambassador to Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power, and the Taliban also sent an ambassador to Beijing. These steps did not constitute full legal recognition, but they laid the groundwork for de facto diplomatic normalization. Glasserman and Mansuri describe this policy as China's "waiting game": Beijing keeps diplomatic channels open, explores resource and connectivity opportunities, and fosters limited cooperation, but avoids deep involvement due to terrorism, political uncertainty, and risks to Chinese personnel and investments [16].

Security remains a key focus of China's Afghanistan policy during the "Taliban 2.0" era. In its official position on Afghanistan, Beijing emphasizes that security is the foundation and a precondition for development, calling ETIM a serious threat to China, Afghanistan, and the entire region. China also calls on Afghanistan to take effective measures against all terrorist groups and to ensure the security of Chinese citizens, institutions, and projects [17]. This stance indicates that Beijing's engagement with the Taliban is effectively conditional, even though it is not framed as official political conditionality. China expects the Taliban to prevent Afghan territory from being used against Chinese interests, specifically against Xinjiang and Chinese projects in Pakistan and Central Asia.

However, the Taliban's ability to provide such guarantees remains uncertain. Networks affiliated with ISKP, TTP, and al-Qaeda, along with Uyghur militant elements and other armed groups, continue to shape the security environment in Afghanistan. An FPRI analysis of northern Afghanistan notes that after the Taliban's return, Central Asian states relied on the Taliban's promises that Afghan territory would not be used against neighboring countries, but the growth of ISKP activity near Central Asian borders has revealed the limits of this strategy [18]. For China, this means that relations with the Taliban must be based not only on trust but also on constant negotiation, intelligence assessment, and risk management.

Afghanistan's geoeconomic role is the second key aspect of China's policy. Beijing views Afghanistan as a potential link between China, Pakistan, Central Asia, Iran, and the broader Middle East. In this regard, Afghanistan could be relevant to the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, trans-Afghan transport routes, energy corridors, and mineral supply chains. According to official Chinese data, bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan reached \$1.59 billion in 2024, a 19% increase compared to the previous year. Reuters has also reported that China offered duty-free access for Afghan goods and has been negotiating with Taliban officials regarding the mining industry and Afghanistan's participation in BRI-related structures [19].

The Central Asian dimension is particularly important for understanding Afghanistan's role in China's foreign policy. Uzbek scientist Suhrob Buronov envisions Afghanistan as a bridge connecting Central and South Asia, emphasizing its relevance for regional corridors such as Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar, TAPI, CASA-1000, and Surkhan-Pul-e-Khumri. This approach aligns with China's logic of interdependence, as the stabilization of Afghanistan could create new routes connecting Western China, Pakistan, Central Asia, and South Asia. However, Buranov's scheme also shows that Afghanistan cannot be reduced to a Chinese bilateral agenda; it is a regional link whose stability affects the strategic interests of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Iran, India, and Russia.

Shoislom Akmalov's analysis of India's Afghan policy is also relevant, as it places Afghanistan within a broader geopolitical triangle that includes India, Pakistan, China, CPEC, Chabahar, and the trans-Afghan transport corridors [18]. His work demonstrates that China's Afghan policy is intertwined with the interests of other regional powers, and discussions surrounding CPEC could raise strategic concerns for India. This suggests that Afghanistan's role in China's foreign policy is not only economic or security-oriented, but also permeated by competition in South Asia and competition between various regional connectivity projects.

N. Tulaganova's research is significant in that it links the Afghan conflict to the formation of a new security system in Central Asia. His work emphasizes the direct impact of instability in Afghanistan on the security architecture of Central Asian countries and the unique

role of Pakistan in the Afghan conflict [19]. This perspective helps explain why China cannot build an effective Afghan policy without considering security challenges in Central Asia and Pakistan's strategic role.

Abdusamad Haydarov's latest expert assessments also emphasize the need to view Afghanistan through the prism of stability and cooperation. He noted that the current leadership of Afghanistan is interested in maintaining internal stability and cooperation with the outside world, while Central Asian countries are interested in seeing Afghanistan not only as a source of threat but also as a link with South Asia [20]. This position is close to Uzbekistan's broader pragmatic approach: cooperation with Afghanistan is considered essential for regional stability, humanitarian aid, trade, transit, and long-term security.

Results

Research findings indicate that in China's foreign policy, Afghanistan has transcended the status of a mere neighboring state to become a strategic space integrating security, geoeconomic connectivity, transport diplomacy, and regional influence policy. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1955, and a strategic partnership was announced in 2012, which shows that Beijing's approach to Afghanistan has a long historical continuity. China's sustained political dialogue with Kabul after 2021, the intensification of high-level meetings since 2022, and the bilateral trade turnover reaching US\$1.59 billion in 2024 confirm the growing practical importance of the Afghan direction for China [1].

The first key result is that China's Afghanistan policy has historically evolved through five stages: an initial period of diplomatic rapprochement, a period of caution during the Cold War, a period of security challenges in the 1990s, a period of limited economic and political cooperation from 2001 to 2021, and a post-2021 period of pragmatic adaptation. Feng Zhang's research interprets China's Afghanistan policy as a special case of "neighborhood policy" and explains Beijing's approach through the objectives of a "friendly environment, security, and influence". In China's foreign policy, Afghanistan emerges as an integral part of shaping neighborhood security and the regional order.

The second shows that the concept of "secure connectivity" is central to China's policy towards Afghanistan. According to this concept, Beijing aims to develop economic, transport, and investment ties with Afghanistan, while regulating this process through conditions related to terrorism, extremism, Uyghur militants, transnational armed groups, and the security of Xinjiang. According to an NBR analysis, China supported the expansion of economic and security ties with Afghanistan in the 2010s but approached large-scale commitments cautiously due to political and security risks. In the post-2021 period, Beijing's priority is to mitigate the threat from Uyghur militants and other armed groups.

The third indicates that China has avoided a military-interventionist model in Afghanistan, instead pursuing a "cautious engagement" strategy that combines diplomatic oversight, economic incentives, and security constraints. An analysis by the Carnegie Endowment suggests that China's primary objective in the "Taliban 2.0" era is to assess Afghanistan's internal situation, economic potential, security risks, and the internal balance of power within the Taliban [13]. In this sense, Beijing is gradually expanding its influence through economic and diplomatic channels while cautiously refraining from official political recognition of Kabul.

The fourth shows that China's Afghanistan policy has transitioned from a bilateral format to trilateral and regional diplomacy. On August 20, 2023, the sixth trilateral dialogue among the foreign ministers of China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan was held in Kabul, where the parties discussed the continuation of political partnership, development, and security cooperation. This indicates that China views Afghanistan as a complex geopolitical space interconnected with Pakistan, Central Asia, Xinjiang, and the Belt and Road Initiative.

The fifth confirms the growing importance of Afghanistan as a transport and communications crossroads for China. The China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue emphasized strengthening trilateral cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan, and developing regional connectivity through projects such as CASA-1000, TAPI, and the Trans-Afghan Railway [22]. This finding highlights the necessity of applying the concept of "transport geopolitics": for China, Afghanistan is a strategic transit space that provides access to the resource base of and ports in Central Asia, South Asia, and Pakistan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic role of Afghanistan in China's foreign policy has evolved through a complex historical process shaped by security requirements, regional geopolitical shifts, economic interests, and multilateral diplomacy. During the "Taliban 1.0" era, Afghanistan was perceived by Beijing as a potential source of instability, largely due to transnational terrorism, the Xinjiang factor, the activities of the ETIM/TIP, and the fragility of China's western borders. At this stage, China's policy was largely defensive and cautious, aimed at preventing the territory of Afghanistan from becoming an arena of hostilities against China.

After 2001, China's approach gradually moved beyond security concerns. The fall of the first Taliban regime, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and the long-term involvement of the US and NATO created a new regional context in which Beijing began to combine diplomatic cooperation, economic cooperation, and regional coordination. Afghanistan is becoming increasingly relevant to China's comprehensive Western strategy, including the Belt and Road Initiative, regional connectivity, access to natural resources, and interaction with Central and South Asia. However, China preferred a cautious model of cooperation based on diplomacy, economic tools, and multilateral mechanisms, avoiding direct military involvement and broad political responsibility.

The post-2021 "Taliban 2.0" era once again demonstrated the pragmatic nature of China's foreign policy. Beijing maintained diplomatic relations with the Taliban government, supported limited economic cooperation, and demanded security guarantees against terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan. At the same time, China is avoiding full political recognition and large-scale investment commitments due to persistent security risks, weak institutions, international sanctions, and the uncertain domestic political environment in Afghanistan. This shows that China's current policy can be described as cautious strategic activity, in which influence is exercised without excessive responsibility.

To conclude, Afghanistan has transformed from a remote neighbor to a strategic factor in China's foreign policy. For Beijing, this is simultaneously a security challenge, an economic opportunity, a geopolitical space, and a test of regional diplomacy. China's policy toward Afghanistan will likely continue to be shaped by a balance between opportunities and risks: the desire to expand influence and connections on one hand, and the need to avoid instability, terrorism, and excessive commitments on the other. Therefore, Afghanistan remains an important but extremely sensitive direction in China's foreign policy, especially in the context of the "Taliban

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