



Security Nexus Perspectives

CHINA'S GLOBAL SECURITY ASPIRATIONS WITH AFGHANISTAN AND THE TALIBAN

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For centuries, Afghanistan was a crossroad for trade that linked Asia to the Middle East, Africa and Europe. But, advances in infrastructure technology have rendered it largely superfluous in modern times. Thus, as China's Communist Party (CCP) initiated its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Afghanistan was [not included](#). The other factors contributing to its initial lack of attractiveness to the CCP was its complex association with Russia and the United States, and that Pakistan and Kazakhstan were easier targets. Since then, several advances have been made to incorporate Afghanistan into the BRI with varying success.

China's interest in Afghanistan may be as trivial as wanting it like another piece in a puzzle. Indeed, Afghan government officials have complained that "[all China wants to talk about is India](#)." But more likely, Afghanistan is wanted as a stepping stone for strategic reasons, such as encircling India and securing another access into Pakistan. The CCP's relationship with Afghanistan appears to be driven primarily by economic and resource interests, secondarily by a desire to counter Islamic influence, and thirdly to evict the United States from the region. However, underlying these interests are clear expansions and benefits to China's global security aspirations. CCP's use of economics, and now counterterrorism, to advance their security agenda has long been suspected by observers and denied by China.

Economic and resources

While the BRI developed into a networked of land and sea-based economic corridors that connect China with regions in all directions, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) quickly became the [flagship project](#). Now that China has evicted India from the [Chabahar port in Iran](#), this provides it with another road-rail access into the Gulf region. This expansion not only allows China to thwart US ambitions in the region, but enables the development of an Afghan-China trade and energy corridor (Chabahar to Zaranj and then on to Delaram). Simultaneously, this move provides Beijing the necessary leverage with Afghanistan and its well-established

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partner Pakistan, to box in India and limit U.S. influence in South Asia. When combined with the existing digital Silk Road of Chinese fiber optics that connect much of the country, this is a good way for Afghanistan to strengthen connections with the BRI.

In the first big commercial deal between China and Afghanistan, worth \$3 billion, [China Metallurgical Group](#) was granted a 30 year lease from 2007 to build a copper mine in Mes Aynak. In 2011, [China National Petroleum](#) was licensed for three Amu Darya basin exploratory blocks containing gas-condensate and oil worth \$10 billion. After a formal BRI agreement was signed between the two nations in 2016, during which [promises](#) were made for \$100 million worth of investments, China has "[restrained its participation](#) in infrastructure, connectivity and trade projects to initiatives launched by the Central Asian republics bordering northern Afghanistan," and some projects by the United Nations and World Bank. This was due to security considerations.

The economic relationship appears to be [growing slowly](#) with both Afghanistan and China beginning to exchange goods. Very little progress has been made to develop the Mes Aynak mine, now thought to be the second largest copper deposit in the world and valued at \$50 billion. But the rhetoric remains positive. For instance, China's ambassadors in Kabul and Islamabad still speak of a [yet to materialize](#) dream rail link from China through Central Asia and Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran, envisioned under the Five Nations Railway Corridor.

These developments clearly indicate that Afghanistan is a low priority economic partner for the CCP. [Chinese investment](#) confirms this with only "[\\$2.2 million spent in 2016](#) and a mere [\\$400 million in all investment stocks](#) by the end of 2017."

Counter Islamic influence

Like Tibet, [Xinjiang](#) is an autonomous province in northern China that borders with Afghanistan. It was a short-lived state of East Turkestan before China re-established control in 1949. The local population of Sunni Muslim Uighurs are ethnically Turkic Muslims. Since the breakaway state was crushed, China has promoted large-scale immigration of Han Chinese to the extent that Uighurs now only make up 45% of the population and fear the loss of their religion and culture.

Uighurs have long resented Chinese suppression and have labelled Chinese government actions as totalitarian, intolerant, and terrorism. Oppressive Chinese actions have progressively [forced the Chinese Uighur community into militancy](#), Islamization and mobilization, which has created a new terrorism threat known as the Turkistan Islamic Movement. As a result, the CCP brutally placed Uighurs into mass detention in [concentration camps](#) and forced them to endure "cultural re-education" aimed at [destroying their identity and culture](#). CCP is using forced measures such [as intrauterine devices, sterilization and abortion](#) to control the population of Uighurs in Xinjiang. These extreme measures, aimed at preventing birth within a group, fall within the definition of the [1948 Genocide Convention](#).

A [Chinese analyst](#) claimed that Uighur militants enter Afghanistan and Pakistan with fake Turkish passports and join Saudi Arabian-funded extremist groups that bestow ideological indoctrination and military training. From there they are said to proceed to Syria and [join Islamic State](#). It has been confirmed that some Uighur militants

lived and during the 1996-2001 Taliban period of rule. Due to China's growing relationship with Pakistan over the past few years, some Uighur militants [relocated](#) from havens in Pakistan into Afghanistan. **Over the** last several years, China has strengthened the border with Afghanistan and has provided investment and equipment support to the [Tajik border forces and to the Pakistani security forces in Gilgit-Baltistan mobilized in Afghanistan](#) during the 1996-2001 Taliban period of rule. Due to China's growing relationship with Pakistan over the past few years, some Uighur militants [relocated](#) from havens in Pakistan into Afghanistan. **Over the** last several years, China has strengthened the border with Afghanistan and has provided investment and equipment support to the [Tajik border forces and to the Pakistani security forces in Gilgit-Baltistan](#).

[Some experts](#) have pointed out that these suppressive actions against the Uighur coincided with the establishment of extensive BRI infrastructure in Xinjiang. They pose that the CCP's narrative is based on a counterterrorism strategy because that is acceptable to the rest of the world, when in reality what is really happening is economic protectionism. China's behavior in Tibet, which also features extensive infrastructure construction such as the Qinghai-Tibet high altitude train and various other suppression and brutal control policies, confirms a CCP intent to destroy Uighur movements and prevent fighters in Afghanistan forming alliances with Uighurs, and [preventing Islamic State](#) from establishing itself in the in the Xinjiang region.

Expanding security interests

Regarding economic engagement, Nasir Ahmad Andisha, Afghan Deputy Minister for Management and Resources at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that the BRI "is not about Afghanistan ... we should understand that this is a [Chinese project](#)." It is thus important to consider security implications underlying China's BRI engagement with Afghanistan.

Chinese debt funds typically are invested in highly visible infrastructure, such as highways, railways, waterways, and economic zones and resource corridors. These can be self-serving in that they link resources to ports in aid of more efficient exploitation. Far less emphasis is placed on developing human resources, managing corruption and promoting good governance, and enhancing local capacity in contract negotiation. Thus the Afghanistan government remains in a state that is more susceptible to influence, manipulation and coercion.

Likewise, the argument that China's "[fundamental interest](#) in Afghanistan is stability" and [preventing terrorism](#) appears only partly true. Analysts have argued that while China prefers "a government not dominated by the Taliban," it is now dealing with the Taliban because it has determined that the [Taliban is undefeatable](#). However, this is a convenient and likely flawed conclusion. The Taliban is arguably the only entity that has a history of successfully fighting both Russia and the U.S. while surviving and thriving in the process. As a traditional enemy of both Russia and the U.S., it is the ideal ally for an expanding China that faces resistance from all geographic quarters.

The CCP has fostered relationships with many different factions in Afghanistan, but continues to refuse to take a clear leadership role with Kabul. While this may continue until the CCP determines the "exact [role the United States](#) sees for itself in the longer run," it is more likely a stalling tactic as the CCP waits for the Taliban to assume power.

Meetings between China and Taliban in [started in 2014](#) when the Taliban initiated regular visits to China. [Deal-making](#) meetings in [2018](#) and 2019 further demonstrated a growing association between these two partners, to the probable detriment of the Kabul government and any other foreign party in Afghanistan. The association is obviously distasteful for China, given their aversion to Islamic influence in Xinjiang, but convenient until it no longer matters.

As the U.S. plans its departure from Afghanistan, China is using the COVID-19 pandemic as a backdrop to [build regional ties](#) in meetings with Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan that aim to extend the BRI. Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi said](#), "We will actively promote the building of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Trans-Himalayan Connectivity network, support the extension of the corridor to Afghanistan, and further unleash the dividends of regional connectivity." As the new [heightened intelligence-sharing arrangement](#) between China and Pakistan accelerates, Beijing's influence in Afghanistan will also expand.

The [U.S. reduced their military](#) presence in Afghanistan to around 8,600 since signing a pact to withdraw from the country, and just [announced plans](#) to halve troop numbers before the November presidential election. Withdrawal of the remaining 4,000 to 5,000 troops is somewhat dependent on whether the Taliban lives up to its counterterrorism pledges. There is no doubt that the CCP will exercise its relationship with the Taliban to ensure that they continue to work towards this agreement.

As the CCP gets further into bed with the Taliban, it is only natural to wonder when they will start to see Islamic State as an ally of convenience.

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