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## AN ANALYSIS ON CHINA'S NATIONAL INTEREST IN AFGHANISTAN DURING THE UNITED STATES MILITARY WITHDRAWAL ERA

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### Abstract:

China has been playing active role in Afghanistan during the post-United States withdrawal from military intervention. The main problem statement laid on China's national interest in rebuilding Afghanistan from the perspectives of security, economy, and politics. The main objective of this study aims to determine the development of China-Afghanistan bilateral relations and further analyses China's national interests in Afghanistan in addressing the emerging and existential challenges faced by China in Afghanistan. Multiple qualitative research methods are used in this study involve secondary data collection and thematic analysis approach for reporting. Based on the study, the researchers have found that China's push on the bilateral ties with Afghanistan in the aftermath of the United States military intervention is complex and diverse. It is resulted from a confluence of geopolitical, diplomatic, economic, and security factors. China lays the groundwork in Afghanistan plausibly demonstrates a commitment to statecraft that extends beyond short-term goals, as it navigates issues of internal security while also promoting stability in the region and interacting with international society. As the conclusion, by utilizing the neo-realist lenses as the theoretical framework, this paper has found that the emerging discussion carries the potential of mutual prosperity, stability, and a diplomatic tapestry woven with strands of understanding and shared goals as these two nations embark on closer bilateral ties towards a robust future.

### Keywords:

Afghanistan, Bilateral Relations, China, National Interest, Neo-Realism

## Introduction

The intricate web of geopolitical interests has woven the history of Afghanistan into a tapestry of complex alliances and conflicts, with global powers vying for influence in this strategically vital region. One such influential player in Afghanistan's tumultuous journey has been China. Since the Cold War era to the aftermath of the United States military intervention, China's involvement in Afghanistan has been multifaceted, marked by shifting alliances, economic interests, and regional security concerns.

The evolution of China's presence in Afghanistan could be traced since the Cold War era to the contemporary landscape which oversees the motivations and strategies in shaping the relationship. During the Cold War era, Afghanistan became a battleground for ideological and strategic contests between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, the Afghan resistance force, the *Mujahideen*, received significant support from the United States, China, and other Western nations to counter the Soviet's invasion (Girard, 2018). With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Afghanistan entered a new phase of instability marked by internal conflicts and the rise of the Taliban regime. China, along with neighbouring countries, closely monitored the evolving situation, as it had implications for regional stability and security. During this era, China adopted a cautious approach, engaging with various Afghan factions while emphasizing non-interference stance in the respective internal affairs. Economic interests also began to shape China's involvement, as there are vast reserves of natural resources in Afghanistan present lucrative opportunities for Chinese investments in the post-Taliban era. In an era marked by globalization and interconnectivity, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a transformative force, redefining international trade, infrastructure development, and diplomatic engagements. Spearheaded by China, the BRI represents a colossal network of roads, railways, ports, and pipelines, aiming to enhance economic cooperation and foster cultural exchange among nations. While the initiative spans several continents, its impact in Afghanistan stands out as a testament to the far-reaching ambitions and complexities of this visionary project.

The problem statement at the heart of this study revolves around the need to analyse the alignment or divergence of China's national interests with Afghanistan's post-U.S. military intervention realities. Identifying the overarching objectives, priorities, and potential areas of tension is essential to comprehend China's role in Afghanistan and the extent to which it contributes to the national stability and development. By exploring China's strategic calculus and policy decisions in this context, this analysis seeks to provide insights into the broader geopolitical landscape of the region and the implications for Afghanistan's future. Hence, the main problem statement revolves around understanding China's national interests in the context of Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability efforts.

In this pursuit, the main objective this paper aims to dissect the multifaceted dimensions of China's presence in the war-torn nation, include economic initiatives as in BRI, security concerns related to border stability and counter-extremism efforts, as well as broader regional aspirations in the Central and South Asia. The bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan have evolved significantly over times, driven by a combination of strategic, economic, and political factors. China's national interests in Afghanistan primarily revolve around ensuring regional stability, safeguarding investments, and preventing the spread of extremism into its own borders, particularly in the Xinjiang region. However, the challenges posed by Afghanistan's internal instability, include security concerns and the presence of

various militant groups, have compelled China to adapt and recalibrate the strategy to preserve its interests while engaging in the region.

The scope of this paper is confined within the relationship of China and Afghanistan which took place between 2020 and 2024. By utilizing neo-realism theory as the framework, the national interests of both states, particularly China, in the post-United States withdrawal era from the security, geopolitical and economic lexicons. Further, the existential and emerging challenges that China is facing and relevant strategies in preserving national survival became the scope of this study.

Through the lenses of neo-realism, the interaction between China and Afghanistan is manifested in China's national interests that emphasizes on state survival, dynamics and economic security (Keohane, 1986). China-Afghanistan bilateral relationship is two-folded: strategic interests and security concerns. In the lexicon of strategic interests, China's presence in the Afghanistan at large extent serves as geostrategic influence and deterrence factor in addressing the traditional powers in the Central-South region, inter alia, the United States and India. On the security aspects China aims to preserve its national interests on regional stability and BRI security from the potential spill-over impacts led by the extremism threats. China's presence in Afghanistan reflects the needs of self-help on strategic mechanisms in the anarchic international system.



**Figure 1: Map of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Afghanistan**

Sources: (Rakisits, 2023)

## Literature Review

Prior to the study, a literature review is comprehensively conducted in line with the bilateral relationship between China and Afghanistan and significance of BRI in Afghanistan. There are three themes developed for this research:

- Theme 1: China's diplomatic relations with the Central Asia;  
Theme 2: China's national interest in the Central Asia; and  
Theme 3: China's security dilemma in Central Asia.

### ***Economic Presence of China in Central-South Asia***

China emphasizes the importance of global connectivity through BRI by optimising soft power paradigm, as institutions support a nation's policies, beliefs, and values while strengthening its soft power. Nye (2004) states that a free trade economy which includes other nations in its economic model would generate soft power. Realpolitik-based powers, inter alia the U.S., Russia, Germany, and Britain, pursue their national goals from weaker states by using forces to advance their interests. On the contrary Japan with stable economies and modest military might, pursues modern liberalism fundamental principles. The BRI serves as a canvas for strategic application of soft power strategy, as nations become not just linked by roads and railways but also by the BRI, transforming the global connectivity.

Under the auspices of the BRI, China's economic presence in the Central-South Asia is pervasive. BRI is complemented with six extended economic corridors and among others, three of them stretch over the Central-South Asia regions, include China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC). This complex structure indicates that the central of gravity of the three economic corridors in addressing its economic and energy security of China (Frankopan, 2019). The relevant projects mainly involve infrastructure mega projects which aim to secure domestic and regional connectivity heading to China, among others, roads, railways and deep seaport projects.

With this paradigm in mind, China's policy makers comprehend the significance of spatial development around its strategic partners as demonstrated through the BRI and the economic corridors. This means that each inclusion of states would be expected to become the contributors, particularly China's energy projects (Liu & Zhang, 2022). Hence, China is encircled by both the land roads and maritime routes in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, as well as Iran and further transcended to India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, China's economic presence in Afghanistan remains minimal although it is one of the immediate neighbours to China. At large decree, the economic corridors route map seems intend to circumvent Afghanistan, although the war-torn states officially has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on BRI collaboration since 2016 (RECCA, 2025). Thus, a review of the literature reveals a gap in addressing the strategic importance of Afghanistan to China in the South-Central Asia.

### ***China's National Interest in the Central Asia***

China has long been a pivotal player in Central Asia, a region with significant economic, political, and security implications. Central Asia has been a significant part of China's long-distance overland trade with Europe and the Middle East, connecting it to the ancient Silk Road. The region has historically contributed to Turkic and Islamic influence and links to Xinjiang. China has been essential to the stability of a large portion of the western border region during the last few centuries. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's ambitious on 'Go West' effort to spur catch-up development in its border and interior areas found fresh prospects in Central Asia. More recently, Central Asia has become an essential part of China's BRI initiative, which aims to revive and expand the ancient Silk Road through the Silk Road Economic Belt and the

Maritime Silk Road (Chen & Fazilov, 2018; Frankopan, 2019). In this sense, China's national interest in Central Asia is a nuanced tapestry woven with economic aspirations, strategic importance, and the imperative to ensure stability. As China navigates the complex dynamics of this region, its strategic endeavours would shape the geopolitical landscape and influence the trajectory of development in Central Asia for years to come.

### ***China's Security Dilemma in Central Asia***

China's relationship with central Asia is crucial for its security and growth, particularly in the energy sector. In 2018, China's main energy consumption increased by 4.3%, the largest annual increase since 2012, and it is the world's largest energy user, contributing 24% of the world's energy consumption and 34% of the rise in energy demand. This has led to China contributing the most to global growth over the past 18 years (Melnikovová, 2020). China's motivations are stemmed from its security concerns in Afghanistan, opposing radical and terrorist activities spreading from Afghanistan into China. It seeks to prevent the region from becoming unstable due to extremism threat. China's active interaction with the Taliban should not be interpreted as assistance, as neighbouring countries and regional powers are obliged to cooperate with the current leadership. Murtazashvili (2021) suggests that other nations, include Iran, Uzbekistan, and Russia, have also endorsed American policy in Afghanistan. Since August 2021, China's approach to the Taliban has been governed by security concerns and apprehension over violent extremism. China's main objective in Afghanistan strikes to prevent violent extremism from destabilizing the region particularly concerning possible religious radicalism leaking into Western China and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, particularly the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-KP), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the al-Qaeda (Rahmati, 2025).

### **Development of China-Afghanistan Bilateral Relations**

The bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan have evolved significantly over the years, marked by a complex interplay of historical, geopolitical, and economic factors. The roots of diplomatic ties between the two nations can be traced back to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with formal diplomatic relations established in 1955. During the Cold War era, both countries maintained a generally positive relationship, and Afghanistan recognized the People's Republic of China in 1950, shortly after its establishment. However, the dynamics of the relationship shifted in the late 1970s and 1980s with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. China became one of the supporters of *Afghan* resistance against Soviet occupation, providing diplomatic and military support to the *Mujahideen* factions (Girard, 2018). The withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989 marked a critical juncture in the region, shaping the subsequent developments in Afghanistan and influencing China's role in the post-Soviet era. In the post-Cold War era, China and Afghanistan sought to redefine their relations within a changing geopolitical landscape. The 1990s witnessed a complex situation in Afghanistan with internal conflicts, and China, while maintaining diplomatic ties, adopted a cautious approach due to the fluid political environment. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a notable revitalization of China-Afghanistan relations. As Afghanistan faced ongoing challenges, including security issues and post-conflict reconstruction, China emerged as a key player in supporting stability and development. China's BRI became a focal point for economic cooperation, with Afghanistan expressing interest in participating in BRI projects to enhance connectivity and economic development. In recent years, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan has added a new layer of complexity to the geopolitical landscape. China has expressed its commitment to playing a constructive role in Afghanistan's stability and development, contributing to regional security and promoting peace through diplomatic means.



Within the framework, the development of the bilateral relations between the two nations is discussed in four distinctive eras, include the early history, post- Cold War era, post- 9/11 era, and China's economic presence era.

### ***Early History Era (206 BCE – 907 CE)***

China and Afghanistan have long-standing relations that mainly accommodates the economic and cultural dynamics during the early history era. In the economic lexicon, the historical development dated back to the Ancient Silk Road, a commercial route network that united Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. With Kabul strategically located at the heart of the international trade route, the trade network had promoted intellectual, cultural, and religious exchanges in addition to the trade of products (Whitfield, 2015). The Silk Road was a complex network of interconnecting roads that crossed a variety of geographies to link the rich civilizations of Central Asia and the Han Chinese civilization. Chinese silk, which was highly valued for its excellence and craftsmanship in the early Common Era, rose to great demand along the Silk Road (Hansen, 2017). Produced in China using a tightly guarded method, this opulent cloth was made as the exclusive commodity in exchange for spices, precious stones, and other products from farther west. Afghanistan's location at the intersection of two major trade routes, Central Asia and the West made it a crucial hub for traders, tourists, and academics from both regions.

Culturally, China has embraced Buddhism since the religion was disseminated from India through Afghanistan. The enormous Buddha sculptures that formerly lined the Ancient Silk Road in the Bamiyan are a witness to the interchange of cultures between the Chinese and Afghan civilizations (Liu, 2010). The Silk Road fostered a cosmopolitan ethos that lasted for millennia by bringing ideas from other cultures and religions to the civilizations it connected. Further, the Silk Road was essential to the spread of ideas and information in addition to trade (Beckwith, 2011). Through these trading channels, China's discoveries on gunpowder, papermaking, and printing found their way west and influenced the rise of communities along the Silk Road, include those in Afghanistan. Parallel to this, the cultural exchanges that occurred over this antiquated network helped Buddhism grow from India to China and beyond.

### ***Rising of Security Concerns Era***

The early 21<sup>st</sup> century sees a crucial period in the historical development between China and Afghanistan which was defined by a changing geopolitical landscape and a complex diplomatic environment (Marsden, 1998). With the end of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Soviet forces withdrew in 1989. Since then, Afghanistan descended into a state of civil war and internal conflict, which had far-reaching effects. As with many other nations, China had to accommodate its strategy in dealing with Afghanistan after the bipolar framework of the post-Cold War era. Afghanistan saw a complicated power struggle in the 1990s between a number of militia groups, notably the Taliban regime, who took over Kabul in 1996 (Rashid, 2010). China expressed its commitment to Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity by preserving diplomatic contacts with various Afghan factions during this volatile time. China was able to preserve its national interests and avoid the domestic problems with a pragmatic strategy.

The establishment of the Taliban administration marked a turning point in the post-Cold War era. China engaged in diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime in safeguarding its interests, despite absence of formal recognition from the international community. This move was

critical for due to security concerns on extremist groups being harboured by Afghanistan due to the Taliban's control over the country resonated with China's own efforts against the extremism and separatist movements, especially the Xinjiang area. China played a careful balancing act in its diplomatic contacts at this stage (Feng, 2022). While realizing the complicated and fractured political situation, it attempted to retain contacts with various Afghan factions. On the other hand, in order to address common worries on Afghanistan's stability, China deliberately engaged with allies in the area and beyond. Therefore, a practical and flexible diplomatic strategy typified China-Afghanistan bilateral ties in the post-Cold War era. China interacted with many factions, negotiated the complexity of internal disputes in Afghanistan, and adjusted to the changing security environment. Important turning points were the rise of the Taliban, and the start of economic cooperation through the BRI, which helped to shape the course of the bilateral relationship in this era.

### ***China's Active Engagement Era***

China significantly re-evaluated its diplomatic approach to Afghanistan in the wake of the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks. Following the U.S.-led operation, China realized it is critical to maintain political stability in Afghanistan. The major power participated in international conferences and forums centered on Afghanistan's rehabilitation while actively pursuing diplomatic initiatives. China pledged to assist inclusive political processes in Afghanistan in support of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, which sought to build a transitional administration. Through diplomatic involvement, China was able to influence the political landscape of Afghanistan after the conflict.

Following the events of 9/11 and the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, China took an active role in international diplomacy to navigate the changing circumstances (Feng, 2022). China took part in several forums and conferences centered on Afghanistan's rebuilding after realizing the necessity of a coordinated international response. China was able to voice its opinions about Afghan political processes, influence foreign policies, and promote collaboration with important parties through the use of multilateral venues. China's commitment to promoting open political processes in Afghanistan served as the cornerstone of its diplomatic efforts in the wake of 9/11. China acknowledged the value of political stability in Afghanistan when it supported the 2001 Bonn Agreement, which sought to install a transitional government in the nation. China aimed to promote stability and progress in Afghanistan's political landscape and aid in its post-conflict governance by endorsing inclusive political procedures. China pursued regional stability through diplomatic initiatives in addition to direct involvement with Afghanistan. China was concerned about the Taliban's ascent and the possibility that Afghanistan would contribute to regional instability. Diplomatic endeavors centered on fostering regional agreement and collaboration to tackle shared security issues. China took an active engagement in regional conferences and initiatives, highlighting the necessity for cooperative measures among neighboring nations and the interconnection of security challenges. Thus, China's diplomatic efforts were marked by a complex and sophisticated strategy. China's position was distinguished by its multilateral diplomacy, support for inclusive political processes, careful balancing act when dealing with various groups, emphasis on regional stability, active engagement in international forums, and sporadic efforts at mediation. In a geopolitical environment that is complicated and constantly changing, China's diplomatic approach shown its commitment to aiding in the political stability and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

### ***China's Economic Presence in Afghanistan Era***

China's engagement with Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks as well as the U.S. military intervention indicate a strategic rebalancing based on economic, diplomatic, and security factors. China first remained on the side-lines throughout the U.S.-led military operation, gradually increasing its involvement as the crisis developed. Subsequently, China's economic presence (mainly the BRI) acts as a key component of China's strategy, with infrastructure projects aiming at improving regional connectivity and economic development around Afghanistan. This economic participation serves two purposes: it aligns with China's global economic objectives as well as concerns on regional stability and the possible spread of extremism. Since 2013, China's BRI is a comprehensive and ambitious infrastructure and economic development project that seeks to enhance global connectivity and cooperation. The initiative draws inspiration from ancient trade routes, reviving the Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road to promote economic integration, cultural exchange, and mutual benefit among participating countries. The BRI encompasses a vast network of infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, and energy pipelines, spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond.

The BRI consists of two main components: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The SREB focuses on connecting China to Europe through Central Asia, while the MSR aims to strengthen maritime trade routes connecting China to Southeast Asia, Africa, and Europe. These components are envisioned as a cohesive framework for regional and global economic integration (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). The primary objectives of the BRI are manifold. Firstly, it aims to stimulate economic development by fostering infrastructure construction, trade facilitation, and investment promotion. Second, the BRI seeks to enhance regional connectivity, reducing transportation costs and promoting more efficient movement of goods and people. Additionally, the initiative aspires to strengthen cultural ties and people-to-people exchanges, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration.

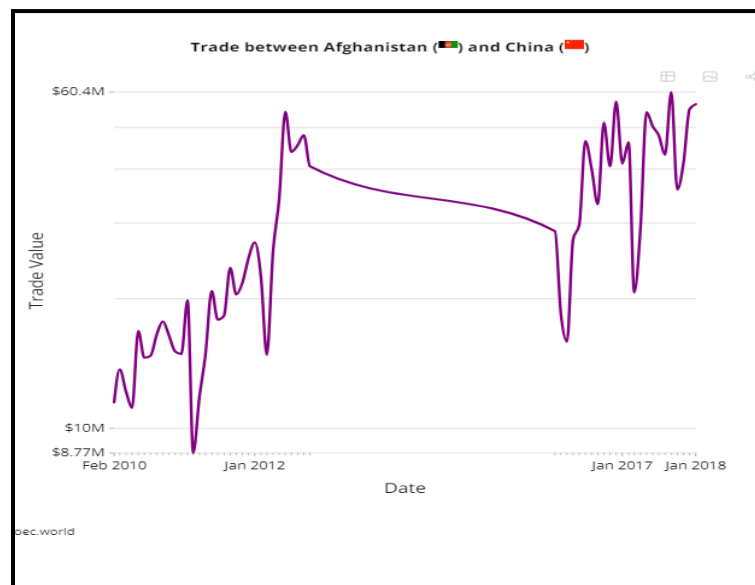
The BRI represents a multifaceted global infrastructure and economic development strategy for Afghanistan as well. While Afghanistan might not be the most central participant in the BRI, it holds a strategic position in China's regional ambitions. The New Silk Road seeks to enhance connectivity, trade, and economic cooperation across Asia, Europe, and Africa, and Afghanistan, as a key crossroads in Central Asia, has garnered increasing attention within the framework of this initiative. One of the primary pillars of China's engagement with Afghanistan under the BRI is economic cooperation. Afghanistan, with its rich mineral resources, including copper and lithium, presents economic opportunities that align with China's resource needs (Chen & Fazilov, 2018; Tahir, 2022). Since the United States' military intervention in Afghanistan, China decided to use the soft power method to gain the trust of the Afghanistan regime which currently acts as a body or a government in the state. Since then, China has become an active supporter of Afghanistan to rebuild its country after a decade-long war with the United States (Tahir, 2022).





**Figure 2: Map of China's BRI Route Around Asia, Africa and Europe**

Sources: (Nayal & Gonen, 2021. <https://Maritimeindia.Org/Chinas-Belt-And-Road-Initiatives-Contours-Implications-And-Alternatives/>)



**Figure 3: Statistic on Trade Between Afghanistan and China**

Source: (Afghanistan (AFG) and China (CHN) Trade | The Observatory of Economic Complexity. (2022).

Retrieved October 21, 2024, from The Observatory of Economic Complexity website:

<https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/afg/partner/chn?redirect=true&measureBilateralTradeSelector=vizValueOption3&depthSelector=HS6Depth#country-exports-2>

## **National Interest of China in Afghanistan and Power Dynamics**

The national interest of China involving Afghanistan is closely drawn from the new map of the power dynamics of the Central Asia in the post-U.S. withdrawal era. It is the ‘shadowboxing match’ caused by the China-U.S. geostrategic competition in ensuring security and promoting regional influence amid differences in strategies (Feng, 2022; Murtazashvili, 2022). China prioritizes economic security and border security over Afghanistan primarily due to the ramifications it holds for the high-profile BRI security. In this regard, the discussion on China’s national interest in Afghanistan are three-folded, include the security, geopolitical and economic perspectives.

### ***Security Perspectives***

China’s national interest in Afghanistan is primarily revolving on security concerns, especially the threat of terrorism and its potential to spread to its Xinjiang province (Ng, 2010). China seeks to reduce the possibility of extremist actions that might jeopardize its domestic stability by actively participating in peace negotiations with Afghanistan and supporting regional security efforts. China's engagement in Afghan security environment is a proactive move to preserve its borders and ensure it’s the internal security, not merely a show of might.

A careful balance between counterterrorism measures, regional stability, and internal security protection is required to ensure state survival in the complex web of China’s national interest in Afghanistan. This is where the security viewpoint comes into play. The main source of concern for China's security is the possibility that extremism from Afghanistan would spread to the Xinjiang province, which is home to the Uighur Muslim minority. With ethnic conflicts and separatist inclinations, restive Xinjiang becomes a focal point for China's security imperatives, which place a premium on containing terrorist threats and preventing radicalization. China understands that the stability of Afghanistan is linked to its own domestic security. Hence, China actively participates in peace negotiations with Afghanistan and working with regional powers to reduce security threats.

China’s commitment to promoting peace in Afghanistan and the larger Central Asian area is further demonstrated by leading membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Albert, 2015). China’s diversified strategy demonstrates the delicate tango between security imperatives and commercial interests. Although the exploitation of resources and economic involvement in Afghanistan are crucial, they are inextricably linked to the larger security environment. China's pragmatic knowledge that state existence requires not just economic resilience but also the capacity to negotiate and mitigate security challenges in its wide geopolitical area is reflected in the complex interplay between the economic and security views.

### ***Geopolitical Perspectives***

China's involvement in Afghanistan is motivated by its larger geopolitical agenda of asserting sphere of influence at the world stage. The geopolitical environment of Central Asia and beyond is asserted by China's capacity to maintain peace and influence in Afghanistan. China began to engage as the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan, demonstrating its deft diplomacy and geopolitical influence over the region Through diplomatic involvement, China could fortify relationships, promote stability, and establish its place as a major factor in determining the future of the area. For China to remain influential on the international scene and maintain its geopolitical existence, these diplomatic efforts must be successful.

Viewed through the geopolitical lens, where state survival is inextricably linked to diplomatic dexterity, regional influence, and the capacity to negotiate the complex dynamics of a post-U.S. military intervention era, China's national interest in Afghanistan assumes a nuanced and strategic dimension. Afghanistan plays a pivotal role as a geopolitical chessboard in China's overall ambition to dominate the region. China takes advantage of the power vacuum left by the departure of American soldiers from Afghanistan to assert its influence and become a major factor in determining the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. For China, Afghanistan's stability is essential to its larger goal of influencing events globally, not simply as a regional issue. China has positioned itself as a mediator and facilitator in the area via its diplomatic overtures and participation in the peace negotiations in Afghanistan, which highlight its commitment to stability.

Afghanistan would potentially become a pivot for connectivity and trade as a result of the BRI. In addition to supporting China's economic objectives, the economic corridors built as part of the BRI also increase China's geopolitical influence by offering a stage for force projection. By making calculated investments in infrastructural development, China solidifies its role as a regional power broker while simultaneously bolstering its economic links with Afghanistan. China's efforts to form strategic relationships with neighbouring countries highlight its geopolitical calculations in Afghanistan. China's geopolitical chess moves in Afghanistan are well-calculated, striking a balance between its economic interests and those of its strategic allies and diplomatic skill in the fight for state survival. Through the prism of geopolitics, this paper overlooks that China actively influences the course of a region that is vital to its aspirations for global dominance, in addition to safeguarding its own interests.

### ***Economic Perspectives***

China's national interest in Afghanistan manifested in the economic components that are entwined with state survival, creating a narrative in which strategic economic endeavours serve as a cornerstone of China's wealth and resilience. In this pursuit, China's economic presence in Afghanistan centred at the mineral deposits, include rare earth elements, copper and lithium. China is the world's biggest buyer of commodities, thus its interest in Afghanistan's resources goes beyond simple profit-making; rather, it is essential to the country's long-term economic viability. By making the BRI as a platform, China manages to gain access to Afghanistan's resources and increasing its economic sway over the country. This means the development of a contemporary Silk Road and improving regional connectivity and trade routes enables the BRI's expansion into Afghanistan strengthens China's economy (Frankopan, 2019; Tiezzi, 2023).

Under the auspices of BRI, trade routes, connectivity initiatives, and infrastructure development support the nation's economic growth and diversification—two factors critical to a state's existence. China's business activities in Afghanistan strengthen its resource base and serve as a buffer against global economic uncertainty in the post-US military intervention era. Afghanistan is crossed by the SREB, which represents the economic lifeblood that China is trying to maintain for both itself and its allies. Particularly, the CPEC creates a direct connection between Gwadar Port in Pakistan and extension into Afghanistan. It aims to improve commerce and communication throughout the region. China is advantageously positioned as a crucial contributor to Afghanistan's growth because of this economic involvement, which also fosters economic interconnectedness, which increases China's influence.

### **Emerging and Existential Challenges Faced by China in Afghanistan**

Despite the geopolitical and economic leverages of China's presence in Afghanistan, the superpower is facing several new and existential concerns that have led to a securitization of the perception of threat. First is the dynamic security environment, in which China's national security is directly threatened by the Taliban regime's comeback and the threat of extremism. The stakes are higher since Afghanistan is close to China's Xinjiang province, which is home to the Uighur Muslim minority. It is crucial for China to securitize the security concern because of the possibility that radical ideologies might cross international boundaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan and lead to political and societal unrest in Xinjiang.

This securitization goes beyond conventional military tactics to include economic and diplomatic endeavours aimed at stabilizing Afghanistan. China is strategically positioning itself as an intermediary in the peace negotiations with Afghanistan to shape the future of political stability in the area. Through the construction of stable infrastructure, the BRI serves as a financial instrument for gaining influence and reducing security threats. These are securitized remedies to existential difficulties arising from Afghanistan's unstable security environment, even though they are in line with China's economic objectives.

China's engagement in Afghanistan is becoming more and more complicated due to new and existential problems, which calls for the securitization of the concerns on the local, regional, and global levels. China's national security is directly threatened by the threat of terrorism and extremism at home, especially in the Xinjiang area where separatist sentiments and ethnic conflicts are already strong. The need for securitization is increased by the possibility of extremist beliefs from Afghanistan spreading throughout the country, which has led China to take strict steps to prevent security threats from occurring inside its borders. On the international front, questions concerning debt-trap diplomacy and environmental effects are raised by the BRI and China's expanding sway in Afghanistan. International securitization requires diplomatic skill to control perceptions and handle possible backlash from the international community. The securitization of these problems reflects the complexity of China's interests in Afghanistan as well as the interdependence of security concerns on the local, regional, and global levels.



**Figure 2: Map of Major International Rail Routes in Central Asia**

Sources: Hong, Y. (2022). (<https://www.pbcc.org/is-there-a-belt-and-road-initiative-2-0-in-the-making-the-case-of-central-asia-source-journal-of-contemporary-asia/>)

On the domestic front, safeguarding borders has been a major challenge to China, especially in the Xinjiang area neighbouring with Afghanistan. It is caused by the fact that Afghanistan has historically served as a safe harbour for extremist activities which possesses potential spillover impacts to China (Feng, 2022; Murtazashvili, 2022). The possible spread of extremist ideology from Afghanistan into China's Xinjiang province, home to the Uighur Muslim minority, is the most serious of these problems. The prospect of Uighur extremists seeking refuge in Afghanistan not only poses a direct danger to China's national security but also adds an existential dimension to the problem (Feng, 2022). In this relation, China is responding domestically by enacting tougher border restrictions, increased surveillance, and counter-extremism programs, among other security measures. Even if the goal of these initiatives is to secure Xinjiang, they also enhance the larger China-Afghanistan relationship.

China's securitization of the domestic issues goes beyond standard security measures to include larger socio-political components, as such public opinion control as well as diversity of ethnic and religious (Murtazashvili, 2022). With its mixed ethnic composition and history of ethnic strife, Xinjiang has emerged as a focal focus in China's securitization efforts. The concern of Uighur separatism, fed or aggravated by external forces like Afghanistan, complicates China's internal problems. China's securitization of Afghanistan-related issues displays a holistic strategy that includes security measures, diplomatic endeavours, and narrative management in managing these domestic concerns. As a result, the Chinese government carefully curates the narrative around its presence in Afghanistan to coincide with existing home opinions. China hopes to gain popular support for its policy in Afghanistan by presenting its presence as a critical component of national security and counterterrorism measures.



At the broader regional context, China faces a slew of growing and existential concerns, reflecting the multifaceted dynamics of Central and South Asia (Kaura, 2020; Liaqat & Abbasi, 2023). What does China's growing engagement in Afghanistan mean for the US? Middle East Institute.). The shifting security picture in the aftermath of the United States' military withdrawal emerges as a critical problem with the Taliban's revival and the possibility of a power vacuum providing direct dangers to regional peace. Regional rivalry and competing interests need diplomatic skill to avoid being mired in localized disputes while promoting stability (Small, 2020). Furthermore, China's economic viability in Afghanistan is inextricably tied to the BRI, with the success of BRI projects strongly reliant on a stable regional climate. Any disturbance to regional peace jeopardizes not just possible economic advantages, but also China's aspirations for greater regional influence. Further, the complicated interaction of these regional difficulties highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that integrates economic, diplomatic, and security measures to protect China's interests in Afghanistan while also contributing substantially to broader regional stability.

At the international front, China assumes the leading role pushing for global recognition of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Being the first nation who resumed 'official' bilateral ties since the Taliban's takeover, China promotes greater regional and global security, political and economic collaboration with Afghanistan which would preserve regional peace and stability. The security concerns mainly incorporated with the BRI security to which would potentially be undermined by the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (IS-KP) and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Among others challenges which would plausibly emanate is China's bilateral relations mechanism of non-interference of 'internal affairs' on other nations while urging for re-integration of the Taliban with the international community. The actions include review of the sanctions against the Taliban, active participation of the SCO member states and secure Afghanistan participation in the Doha Conference (Godek, 2024; Kumar, 2024; Shekhawat, 2024). This pragmatic approach requires China to optimise its role as one of the global influences despite manifold criticism.

### **China's Strategy in Afghanistan**

China has taken a diverse approach to its strategic calculation in Afghanistan, combining alliance building with bilateral measures. China's approach reflects a comprehensive strategy spanning political, economic, and security dimensions as it increasingly takes central stage in the area. China's commitment to address Afghanistan's complex difficulties and promoting regional security is exemplified by this comprehensive approach. Hence, this paper argues that two fundamental approaches are in place: bilateral diplomatic efforts and form alliances.

China's bilateral diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan are intended to promote political stability and reconciliation among various groups. Recognizing the complexities of Afghan politics, China works directly with all parties to promote intra-Afghan dialogues. This approach portrays China as a mediator and peacemaker, utilizing its diplomatic power to bolster consensus-building and the development of a political framework that accommodates Afghanistan's different interests (Feng, 2022; Socialist China, 2023). China and Afghanistan share the long-standing history which dated back to the Ancient Silk Road, serve as a cultural and historical underpinning for bilateral engagement. China hopes to develop an atmosphere favourable to successful diplomatic interaction by drawing on these historical linkages. The goal is to ensure a stable and inclusive political order that can endure internal and foreign threats.

The BRI is central to China's economic agenda in Afghanistan. Infrastructure development, trade corridors, and investment projects are examples of bilateral economic initiatives (Leuter & Haver, 2020; Noorzai & Yousufzai, 2023; Uddin, 2023). The BRI serves as a framework for action, stressing shared prosperity, economic connectedness, and long-term development. China's economic cooperation with Afghanistan is more than just transactional; it aims to integrate the country into regional economic networks, encourage economic growth, and contribute to long-term stability. China's goal in investing in economic growth is to create a suitable environment that promotes to stability. With the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan and reaching the Wakhan Corridor, oil extraction and minerals industries (lithium and copper) based in the Amu Darya basin Mes Aynak copper mine has unequivocally become central of attention. In this pursuance, BRI's economic engagement highlights China's role as a vital actor in Afghanistan's rebuilding, underlining the interdependence of economic security and broader geopolitical stability.

In light of the complicated web of regional dynamics, security concerns and the need for collaborative solutions, the importance of alliances is emphasized in the Afghan environment. China's approach includes a deliberate and nuanced attempt to develop partnerships, both bilaterally and within regional frameworks, while acknowledging the interwoven nature of Afghanistan's difficulties. Given this context, the SCO plays a pivotal role as China's alliance-building policy in Afghanistan. The alliance acts as a platform for debating security measures, counter-terrorism activities, and regional stability. By joining the SCO, China not only boosts bilateral connections with neighbouring nations, but also builds a coherent regional coalition capable of addressing the growing situation in Afghanistan collectively.

In addition to regional partnerships, China deliberately forges bilateral relationships to address Afghanistan's challenges. Recognizing the country's vast array of political groups and interests, China communicates with many players directly to establish confidence and influence decisions (Feng, 2022; Kumar, 2024). China's bilateral partnerships in Afghanistan entail aggressive diplomacy to arbitrate warring parties, promote political stability, and aid in reconciliation initiatives. China views itself as a vital player in Afghan politics, capable of managing the complex political scene, by forging these strategic bilateral alliances. In terms of security, forming bilateral alliances allow China to actively contribute to counter-terrorism operations, partnering with Afghan authorities to handle the transnational threat that poses internal and regional security concerns.

China's policy in Afghanistan is essentially a delicate dance that employs a comprehensive and flexible approach to handle evolving issues. China's participation in Afghanistan demonstrates a commitment to statecraft that extends beyond short-term goals, as it navigates issues of internal security while also promoting stability in the area and interacting with international society. China aims to safeguard its interests while also contributing to the larger picture of an integrated, prosperous, and stable Afghanistan within a peaceful regional order as it tackles the complex issues.

## Conclusion

China's participation in bilateral ties with Afghanistan in the aftermath of United States military intervention is complex and diverse, resulting from a confluence of geopolitical, diplomatic, economic, and security factors. This is evident in the study findings on the subject. The main research findings may be used to explain China's national interest in Afghanistan.

China and Afghanistan have a long history of diplomatic, economic, and diplomatic ties, spanning over a century. The relationship's development is influenced by historical, cultural, economic, and diplomatic factors, rather than focusing solely on structural issues. The historical trajectory of China's ties with Afghanistan demonstrates its adaptability and longevity, as it continues to navigate the critical geopolitical arena. This comprehensive approach is essential for understanding the complex dynamics between China and Afghanistan.

China's national interests in Afghanistan are analyzed through the lens of neo-realism, focusing on the impact of the international system's anarchic structure and the pursuit of national security interests. This case study evaluates China's views on security concerns, power dynamics, and the international system's structure on its national interests in Afghanistan. The strategic justification for China's actions and policies in Afghanistan is determined, guided by neo-realist concepts. The study examines perceived security risks, such as terrorism and regional instability, and their impact on China's strategic considerations. The research also examines China's actions to protect its national security interests in Afghanistan, considering military, diplomatic, and intelligence aspects. The results provide a RO2 for understanding China's national interests in Afghanistan. While neo-realism has shed light on security problems and power dynamics, it may overlook other parts of the challenges, such as economic considerations or cultural nuances. And as for China's policy in Afghanistan, it is based on neo-realist notions that analyse the difficulties that occur in Afghanistan and how China formulates strategic responses. It has featured discussions on security concerns, power struggles, and the impact of the international system's structure on China's policy. While neo-realism can provide light on certain aspects of state behaviour in response to security challenges, it may not fully capture China's economic or cultural traits.

As the geopolitical landscape undergoes seismic shifts in the post-United States military intervention era in Afghanistan, scholars and analysts alike are turning their attention to the evolving dynamics of China-Afghanistan bilateral relations. This literature review aims to explore various key themes, insights, and perspectives that have shaped our understanding of this crucial relationship, with a specific focus on China's national interests in the aftermath of the United States military withdrawal.

In conclusion, the bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan in the post-United States military intervention era are characterized by a delicate dance of historical links, economic desires, security considerations, and diplomatic finesse. China's national interests are intertwined with Afghanistan's comeback under the Taliban regime administration, pointing to a future in which partnership is essential. The Taliban keen developing 'diplomatic' relations with the international community, especially China. The emerging analysis carries the potential of mutual prosperity, stability, and a diplomatic discusses China-Afghanistan bilateral relations: An Analysis of China's National Interest in the Post-United States Military Intervention Era.

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