

Review Article

# Review of Opportunities and Challenges in China-Afghanistan Relations Post-U.S. Withdrawal

Abdul Salaam Acxir<sup>1,\*</sup> , Shams Rahman RahmanZai<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Law and Political Science Faculty, Muslim University, Ghazni, Afghanistan

<sup>2</sup>Law and Political Science Faculty, Kabul University, Kabul, Afghanistan

## Abstract

The relationship between China and Afghanistan has witnessed significant changes over the years, encompassing various political, economic, and security dimensions. Afghanistan's strategic location as a bridge between Central and South Asia holds particular significance for China, serving as a key transit route for infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and others. Additionally, Afghanistan's rich mineral reserves, including copper, oil, and lithium, are particularly attractive to China, especially for its technology and electronics manufacturing industries. Therefore, despite these attractions, China seeks to establish peace and stability in Afghanistan to enable the country to serve as a reliable economic and trade partner. However, despite the opportunities present in bilateral relations, the unstable security situation in Afghanistan, especially after the withdrawal of international forces, the presence of regional powers like India, Pakistan, and Iran, and their competition for influence in Afghanistan, along with security concerns, represent significant challenges that could impact bilateral relations. This article uses a descriptive library-based method to address the question: What opportunities and challenges exist in China-Afghanistan relations, and how can both countries manage these challenges to capitalize on opportunities to strengthen bilateral cooperation? It is assumed that China and Afghanistan, by leveraging economic opportunities stemming from Afghanistan's natural resources and joint infrastructure projects, can strengthen their relations, provided both countries manage security challenges and regional competition wisely to ensure the necessary stability for such cooperation.

## Keywords

Economy, Security, China, Foreign Relations, CPEC, Lithium, Taliban

## 1. Introduction

The recent developments in China-Afghanistan relations, two crucial countries in Central and South Asia, have increasingly drawn the attention of analysts and policymakers. Given the geopolitical and economic status of both countries, examining the opportunities and challenges in their relations can provide a better understanding of future cooperation and

interactions.

The importance of China-Afghanistan relations lies in the significant geopolitical and economic implications for both nations and the broader international community. China's interest in Afghanistan has deep historical roots, dating back to the 7th century AD when the Chinese monk Xuanzang

\*Corresponding author: [Salaam.ghazni@gmail.com](mailto:Salaam.ghazni@gmail.com) (Abdul Salaam Acxir)

**Received:** 8 October 2024; **Accepted:** 31 October 2024; **Published:** 26 November 2024



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

traveled to the Buddhist valley of Bamiyan, where the giant Buddha statues still stand. These two countries share a 47-mile border in the northeastern part of Afghanistan. The Wakhan Corridor, connecting Pakistan, China, and Central Asian nations, is located along this border [25].

More than two years have passed since the former Afghan president fled and the Taliban returned to power on August 15, 2021. Many countries have closed their embassies and diplomatic missions in Afghanistan, evacuating their citizens. Western countries also evacuated some of their local employees and collaborators. However, some countries, including China, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran, remained in Kabul, continuing their day-to-day diplomatic activities without formally recognizing the Taliban regime.

On August 15, 2021, following the collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, China strengthened its relations with the Taliban, meeting with their representatives. China maintained diplomatic communication channels with the group and expressed its readiness to establish friendly and constructive relations with the new government, appointing an official ambassador to Kabul, while the Taliban reciprocated by sending their ambassador to China. Chinese diplomats have continued to engage with Taliban officials in Kabul to pursue negotiations related to trade, cooperation, and security. Chinese investors have visited Kabul, openly expressing their willingness to invest in Afghanistan's mining sector.

China, as the world's second-largest economy and an emerging global power, plays a vital role in international affairs. Afghanistan, on the other hand, with its strategic location and rich natural resources, has long attracted the attention of major powers. The recent political and security changes in Afghanistan have had significant impacts on its relations with China.

On the one hand, there are opportunities for economic cooperation, infrastructure investments, and strengthened trade between the two countries. Projects like China's Belt and Road Initiative could contribute to the development of Afghanistan's infrastructure and open new trade routes for both nations.

On the other hand, security and political challenges continue to cast a shadow over China-Afghanistan relations. Issues related to terrorism, drug trafficking, and political instability in Afghanistan pose threats to China's interests in the region [23].

In summary, a comprehensive examination of recent developments in China-Afghanistan relations requires considering all aspects of these relations and exploring ways to capitalize on opportunities while mitigating challenges.

## 2. Literature Review

The relationship between China and Afghanistan has drawn significant attention following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. Many researchers and analysts have focused on the challenges

and opportunities that have emerged for both countries during this period. Below is a brief review of the literature related to this subject.

### 1) China's Role as an Economic and Strategic Player

A central theme in past research has been the role China has taken on as an economic and strategic player after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Studies indicate that China is interested in investing in Afghanistan's infrastructure and natural resources, particularly considering the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), with Afghanistan seen as part of this crucial route. According to Roland (2021), China can assist in rebuilding Afghanistan's economy through investments in its rich mineral deposits (copper, lithium, and other rare minerals) while also securing its own economic interests.

### 2) China's Security Concerns

There is extensive literature on China's security concerns in Afghanistan. Wu and colleagues (2022) have addressed the major challenge China faces in Afghanistan: the activity of extremist and terrorist groups, which could impact China's border security, particularly in the Xinjiang region. Studies show that China fears terrorist groups might use Afghan territory as an operational base to incite instability within China. This issue has been especially significant regarding the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which China has been particularly wary of.

### 3) China's Diplomatic Engagement with the Taliban

Research shows that China has expanded its engagement with the Taliban since the U.S. forces withdrew. Fletcher (2022) notes that China seeks stability in Afghanistan and has cautiously negotiated with the Taliban to prevent the spread of violence and terrorist threats. China aims to ensure that the Taliban can maintain relative stability in the country, so that China's economic projects can move forward without security risks.

### 4) China's Economic Role in Afghanistan's Reconstruction

Several studies suggest that China could act as a key player in Afghanistan's economic reconstruction. Mohammadi and colleagues (2021) explored China's economic opportunities in Afghanistan, pointing out that despite security challenges, China is interested in developing essential infrastructure such as roads, railways, and energy projects. According to them, Afghanistan possesses vast natural resources, and exploiting and developing these resources could contribute to Afghanistan's economic growth while also meeting China's industrial needs.

### 5) The Impact of U.S. Withdrawal on China-Afghanistan Relations

Some analysts, such as Zakaria and colleagues (2021), argue that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has shifted the geopolitical structure of the region. With the decline of U.S. influence in Afghanistan, more space has opened up for regional powers like China to expand their influence. This has positioned China as one of the most important political and economic actors in Afghanistan, while the U.S. plays a more diminished role.

The innovations in this article can contribute to the existing literature by providing new insights into the economic, security, and geopolitical fields, particularly regarding China's role in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal. By integrating these aspects into a cohesive analytical framework, it becomes possible not only to address the existing challenges but also to take a strategic look at new opportunities.

### 3. Problem Statement

In recent decades, geopolitical shifts and global policy changes have brought China-Afghanistan relations into a new phase. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the rise of the Taliban, Afghanistan's political, economic, and security landscape has undergone significant changes. During this time, China, as a major global power and Afghanistan's close neighbor, has played a crucial role in the country's developments.

China-Afghanistan relations are built on diverse foundations, including economic, infrastructure, security, and political cooperation. China, through large infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, aims to expand its influence in the region and benefit from Afghanistan's natural resources. Conversely, Afghanistan seeks to attract foreign investment and strengthen its economic and trade ties with China to achieve economic development and infrastructure reconstruction.

However, these relations face numerous challenges. Political instability and insecurity in Afghanistan, terrorist threats, and international concerns over the Taliban government's approach to both domestic and foreign affairs are among the issues that could negatively impact the relationship. Moreover, geopolitical rivalries and conflicting interests among regional and global powers could further complicate the stability and development of China-Afghanistan relations.

While previous studies have been conducted, the specific opportunities and challenges in bilateral relations have not been thoroughly discussed. The purpose of this article is to analyze the recent developments in China-Afghanistan relations and examine the challenges and opportunities facing the two countries. The central question addressed is: What challenges and opportunities do recent developments in China-Afghanistan relations present, and how can these challenges be managed and opportunities utilized?

This article, through a detailed analysis of these questions, seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the current and future state of China-Afghanistan relations and offer strategies to exploit opportunities and address challenges.

### 4. Importance of the Subject

The new developments in China-Afghanistan relations carry significant political, economic, security, and social importance. This significance can be analyzed from several perspectives:

**Geopolitical Role:** China, as one of the world's major powers, and Afghanistan, with its strategic position at the heart of Asia, play key roles in the region's geopolitical dynamics. Studying their relations helps analysts and policymakers better understand the impact on the region's balance of power and beyond.

**Economy and Infrastructure Development:** Afghanistan's geographical location and abundant natural resources provide substantial potential for economic development. China's global initiatives, like the Belt and Road Initiative, aim to develop infrastructure and trade networks worldwide. Economic and infrastructure cooperation between the two countries could contribute significantly to Afghanistan's development and reconstruction while creating new economic opportunities for both nations.

**Regional Security:** Afghanistan's security situation, especially after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, and China's role in ensuring stability in the country have profound impacts on regional security. China, due to its concerns about extremism and terrorism, seeks to play a more active role in Afghanistan's stability. Analyzing these relations can provide a deeper understanding of regional security challenges and potential solutions for addressing threats.

**International Competition:** China-Afghanistan relations are increasingly significant in the context of international competition and the conflicting interests of global powers such as the United States, Russia, and India. Studying these relations helps understand the competitive and cooperative dynamics between global powers and their impact on Central Asia.

In general, analyzing the new developments in China-Afghanistan relations not only enhances the understanding of the current situation between the two countries but also offers insights into ways to capitalize on opportunities and manage existing challenges. This subject is important from various perspectives, including geopolitics, economics, security, and society, and can contribute to more effective regional and international policy-making.

### 5. The History of China-Afghanistan Relations

According to foreign policy and international relations scholars, countries that share a geographical compulsion often have both ancient and modern relations. The relationship between Afghanistan and China exemplifies this concept. Historically, Afghanistan, known as ancient Ariana, and old China were not only neighboring lands but also two great civilizations that lived alongside each other and engaged in various exchanges over centuries. The Silk Road and mutual cultural and artistic influences are among the most significant symbols of this longstanding relationship. Ariana, in the pages of history, served as a resting point for large Chinese caravans on their journeys to Europe and vice versa. The documented political relations between the two countries go back over

2,000 years. In 130 BCE, Zhang Qian, the first envoy of the Han Dynasty, traveled to the northern regions of Ariana, beyond the Oxus, to visit the court of the Yuezhi. In return, envoys from the Kushan Empire also visited the Chinese emperors' courts.

## 6. The Establishment of Formal Relations Between the Two Countries

In more recent centuries, as political stability in Afghanistan and the establishment of a new government in China took hold, relations between the two countries took on a new form. In 1922, Mohammad Sharif Khan became Afghanistan's first representative to Chinese Turkestan and was stationed in Kashgar. Although the embassies of both countries were largely ceremonial at the time, relations did not remain limited to this. Both Afghanistan and China felt the need to deepen their cooperation and worked to strengthen it. In 1933, Habibullah Tarzi was appointed as Afghanistan's ambassador to Nanjing, and in 1944, a friendship treaty was signed between the two nations [8].

In 1950, Afghanistan was one of the first countries to officially recognize the People's Republic of China, issuing an official declaration on January 20th. In 1955, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Sardar Mohammad Naim Khan, met with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at the Non-Aligned Movement Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, where they officially announced the establishment of direct relations between the two countries. Both nations subsequently opened permanent embassies in each other's capitals [2].

In 1973, a coup led by Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan overthrew the Afghan monarchy, and the Republic of Afghanistan was established. China was the first country to recognize the new republic. However, due to the influence of leftists within Daoud Khan's government, Afghanistan's dealings with China were cautious. Despite this, China respected the position, even though it had quickly recognized Afghanistan's new government.

On December 25, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, a move that China viewed as a threat to its national security and an obstacle to normalizing relations with Moscow. In the 1980s, China was among the countries that supported Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet invasion, joining the anti-Soviet coalition and backing Afghanistan's resistance [11].

In 1988, following the signing of the Geneva Accords, which led to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, China shifted its focus to resolving Afghanistan's political crisis. During the 1990s, while Afghanistan was mired in civil war, the Taliban took control of the country in 1996, exacerbating China's security concerns in its Xinjiang region. China's major concern revolved around the links between the Taliban and terrorism, particularly the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Fearing that instability in Afghanistan could spill over into Xinjiang, China distanced itself from the Taliban and severed relations, refusing to recognize the regime [9].

After the establishment of Afghanistan's new government in 2002, relations between China and Afghanistan improved, with China strongly supporting President Hamid Karzai's administration and investing significantly in Afghanistan's economy. In 2012, Beijing endorsed Afghanistan's observer membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, further deepening relations [6].

Afghanistan has consistently sought China's help in establishing a direct road connection through the Wakhan Corridor, which could link the two countries. The Wakhan border is near Kashgar, an important economic zone in China. Beijing hopes to restore Kashgar's historic position along the ancient Silk Road. Such a route would connect China to Central Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf through Afghanistan, making the country a critical land bridge for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

During Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit to China in October 2014, he proposed that both countries work together to establish a transportation route through the narrow Wakhan Corridor. While the West has largely spoken of a regional strategy as key to Afghanistan's future, China has acted on this vision, engaging in extensive investments in infrastructure projects, including high-speed rail. Whereas former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had promoted the idea of re-connecting East and West through a new Silk Road, China has turned that vision into reality by creating new trade routes that link Afghanistan to Central Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf.

Since 2014, China's evolving political and military stance toward Afghanistan has become more apparent, signaling a shift in its objectives. China's efforts in Afghanistan, whether in political, security, economic, social, military, humanitarian, or strategic arenas, have become increasingly prominent, reflecting China's ambition to expand its influence in Afghanistan and the broader region. Officially, China claims that it only engages in joint counterterrorism and cross-border criminal activities with Afghan security forces. However, these actions highlight a change in China's political and military approach, which previously did not include such strategies in Afghanistan.

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha, which was met with cautious optimism in the U.S. In contrast, China was less optimistic about the agreement, viewing it with skepticism. Chinese media compared the U.S.-Taliban peace deal to America's "shameful" withdrawal from Vietnam in the 1970s, asserting that the peace agreement primarily served U.S. interests rather than bringing lasting peace to Afghanistan or the region [4].

## 7. China's Major Economic Steps and the South Asian Regional Security Complex

In the late 1990s, China shifted from a passive approach to

regional affairs and emerged as an active participant and leader in regional cooperation in Asia, becoming a key player in shaping regional economic regimes [24]. As China re-evaluated its view of neighboring regions, the security complex of South Asia became increasingly important to it.

China's foreign policy has evolved through different phases, from anti-imperialism and the "Three Worlds" theory to peaceful coexistence, pragmatism, open-door policies, and multilateralism. However, the central theme in China's foreign policy, after over half a century of Communist Party rule, has been its security concerns, which heavily influence its foreign policy direction. Geographical constraints, demographic pressures, a closed political environment, and foreign rivals' interference have been critical factors contributing to China's security fragility [24].

Donald Trump, in his 2017 national strategy announcement, identified China as the most significant and immediate threat. His administration's decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan, particularly in 2017, was part of a broader U.S. strategy to shift focus from the Middle East and Afghanistan's war on terror toward East Asia and China. U.S. strategists emphasized that America should exit the wars in the Middle East and focus on China. As a result, Afghanistan's importance in China's energy plans has increased step by step, as threats to China from the U.S. in East and South Asia have grown. Chinese leaders viewed Trump's policies as a danger to their interests and, in response, took significant steps in Afghanistan.

China's major steps in Afghanistan include forming regional alliances centered around Afghanistan, increasing Afghanistan's importance in China's grand strategies, expanding China's geopolitical influence in Afghanistan, and boosting its economic, cultural, and political activities there. These developments aim to secure China's position in Afghanistan and involve Afghanistan in a new phase of Chinese policy. China seeks to maintain its special role in the Afghan peace process, using this to manage its relationship with the U.S. effectively [12].

China is concerned about both the presence and absence of the U.S. in Afghanistan. It views U.S. presence in Afghanistan as a major obstacle to China's ambitious global projects, given Afghanistan's strategic location at the crossroads of Eurasia and the ancient Silk Road, linking Asia and Europe. Simultaneously, China's leadership has closely monitored the U.S. and NATO troop withdrawals in 2014 and 2019, seeing them as contributing to a regional security vacuum. China seeks to address these two conflicting concerns through its diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan, hoping that China's emergence as a dominant force in the region and Afghanistan's potential will change the geopolitical scene and bring Central Asia's potential to the forefront [3].

Thus, a stable and secure Afghanistan, without heavy political and military dependence on Washington, is a key objective for China. This goal is significant for China in three ways: first, it saves China from potential terrorist infiltration

from Afghan soil without high financial or military costs. Second, it provides opportunities for large-scale investments and rapid economic growth in the region. Third and most importantly, it reduces the strong U.S. presence in the region, opening the door for regional alliances that advance China's "grand global objectives" or its ambitious global programs. It also allows China to manage any potential threats from its neighbors [21]. Additionally, China is keen to connect with Iran and the Middle East through Pakistan and Afghanistan, a route that Afghanistan could also benefit from.

Xi Jinping has recognized that the various geopolitical realities emerging in the post-Cold War world cannot be analyzed solely through the lens of realism or idealism. A closed communist economic system cannot support a population of 1.4 billion people on its path to becoming a superpower. China's foreign policy has undergone significant changes since 1978, especially after 2000, reflecting the open-door strategy that China has pursued.

The theory of regional security complexes examines various regions, including the South Asian security complex, based on mutual security dependencies among the governments located in a geographically coherent group, often influenced by external powers. The formation of the South Asian security complex has been shaped by two factors: the India-Pakistan rivalry and "security dependencies" within the complex. In fact, the "Belt and Road Initiative" and "security dependencies" have changed China's approach to the South Asian security complex, making China both an internal and external power in this security complex [20]. Through its economic corridors, such as the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC), the "Gwadar Port Development," the "China-Bangladesh Economic Corridor," the "India-Myanmar Economic Corridor," the "Colombo Port," and others, China has become a part of the South Asian security complex, linking its security concerns with those of the region [12].

Now, China has entered the South Asian security complex as an external power through its economic projects, including investments in the "Belt and Road Initiative," "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," and "mutual security dependencies," while also searching for its "friend-enemy" model. China's "economic projects" and "mutual dependencies" within this security complex have led to greater Chinese influence after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban. China is keen to cooperate with the Taliban to advance its economic projects and address security threats, solidifying its military dominance [15].

In current theoretical understanding, China is considered an external member of the South Asian regional security complex, but given its extensive interaction through the "Belt and Road Initiative" with South Asian countries and its influence on the region's security dynamics, China should be viewed as an internal member. China's involvement with South Asia and Afghanistan occurs in two ways: 1) as a neighboring external power entering the regional security complex, and 2) as an

internal actor through initiatives like the "Belt and Road," CPEC, and port developments, linking itself to the regional

security complex [15].



*Figure 1. (Dimensions of China and the Islamic Emirate in Bilateral Relations).*

Thus, as one of the primary members of this complex, China seeks to implement its economic and security policies within this framework. This article highlights three key elements of the regional security complex theory: economic factors, security dependencies, and the friend-enemy pattern. China's economic ties with the Taliban and its security dependencies on Afghanistan under Taliban rule are two crucial factors that drive China to deepen its "friendship model" with the Taliban after the U.S. withdrawal. In fact, the foundation of China's "friend-enemy" model with the South Asian regional security complex is based on economic and security issues, which have led China to establish a friendship with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [10].

## 8. China's Strategy Toward the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Amidst Opportunities and Challenges

China is seeking constructive engagement with the current Taliban government, aiming to gradually strengthen relations and eventually establish a strategic partnership. It has adopted a policy of "constructive intervention" combined with "economic development and integration" and "intervention to

mitigate security threats." In reality, China's strategy and diplomacy have shifted from a "passive actor" or "wait and see" approach to an "active actor" or "effective intervention." Below is an analysis of the dimensions and strategy of China for expanding cooperation with the Taliban [15].

### 8.1. Opportunities in China-Afghanistan Relations

Since the Islamic Emirate regained power, several opportunities have emerged in bilateral relations due to factors such as China's efforts to maintain good relations with the Islamic Emirate, the Emirate's economically focused foreign policy, China's special attention to economic investments in Afghanistan, and its efforts to establish positive ties with Afghanistan under the Emirate's administration. Below is a brief overview of these opportunities:

#### 8.1.1. Trade Relations Between China and Afghanistan

Trade relations between China and Afghanistan have been growing, as indicated by import and export figures. China's exports to Afghanistan in 2022 reached \$550.13 million,

while Afghanistan's exports to China amounted to \$40.02 million in the same year. These figures demonstrate that after the Islamic Emirate's return to power, not only did bilateral trade not decline, but it also showed significant growth. Additionally, estimates show that trade between Afghanistan and China in November 2023 saw a 95% increase in China's exports to Afghanistan—from \$60.3 million to \$118 million—and a 15.1% increase in Afghanistan's exports to China—from \$15.1 million to \$16.1 million—compared to the same month in 2022. Based on this trend, China is expected to become Afghanistan's second-largest trading partner after Pakistan, as the current trajectory of increasing bilateral trade shows faster growth compared to other neighboring countries, accelerating economic cooperation between the two nations.

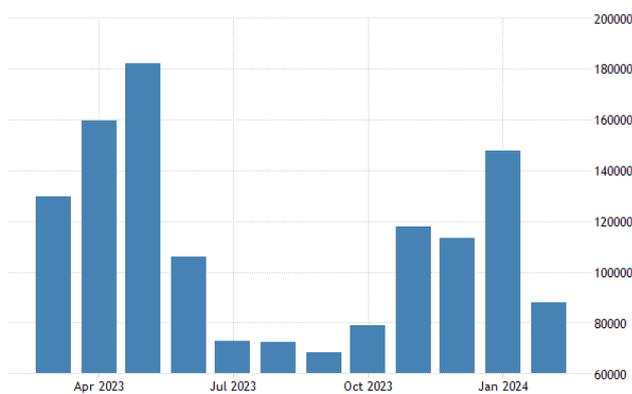


Figure 2. Trade Relations Between China and Afghanistan.

### 8.1.2. Infrastructure Development

China's grand strategy encompasses several goals, including safeguarding economic interests, expanding global influence, and ensuring stability in its borders and surrounding regions. Against the backdrop of persistent conflict and evolving regional dynamics, the prospect of a stable Afghanistan presents an opportunity for neighboring countries to align with China's overarching strategic objectives [22].

China's active involvement in Afghan affairs is driven by Afghanistan's strategic position at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, along with its abundant natural resources. The country's valuable mineral reserves, including lithium, copper, and other rare elements, are particularly appealing to China. As the world's primary consumer of raw materials, China views these resources as essential for bolstering its economic development and technological advancement.

China's engagement in Afghanistan has significantly increased, particularly since 2012. After maintaining low-level relations, China's interest in Afghanistan grew due to concerns about instability in Central Asia and its potential impact on the security of China's western provinces, especially Xinjiang. China recognized the need to address its security concerns and ensure stability in Afghanistan to protect its economic ambitions, including the success of the Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Beijing has initiated interactions with Kabul through peace efforts, financial aid, and investment in resource extraction and infrastructure development [22].

During the fifth round of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue held in Islamabad, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan emphasized the importance of trilateral cooperation to achieve a stable, prosperous, and peaceful Afghanistan. They reiterated their commitment to expanding CPEC by including Afghanistan in this project.

### 8.1.3. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Its Function for Afghanistan

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive infrastructure and economic development project launched by China in 2013, designed as a global development and infrastructure initiative with far-reaching impacts on trade and international cooperation. This project encompasses Asia, Europe, Africa, parts of America, and Afghanistan. The goal of the BRI is to enhance connectivity and economic development by revitalizing the ancient Silk Road. Afghanistan's strategic location enables it to play a role in this initiative.

Following the reduction of American troops in 2014, China sought to invest extensively in Afghanistan's economy as part of the BRI. Significant steps in this direction include the first freight rail connection between Afghanistan and China in 2016, Afghanistan becoming part of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2017, and the construction of the Wakhan Corridor highway. In April 2021, the Afghan Ministry of Transport announced the commencement of the construction of a 50-kilometer road connecting China and Afghanistan in the Pamir region (Future Directions International, 2021). According to the Ministry of Public Works, the construction of the China-Afghanistan road in Pamir is 40% complete. The Taliban government views the BRI as an opportunity to modernize Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure, facilitating its integration into global trade. The BRI's focus on developing Afghanistan's infrastructure aligns with the country's needs for modern transportation and energy. Investment in this project could improve access, enhance trade, create jobs, and attract foreign investment, which is crucial for Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability [17].

While the BRI has generated many hopes, it has also raised challenges and concerns in Afghanistan. The country's security situation, political stability, and the issue of establishing lasting peace are critical factors that could affect its successful integration into BRI projects. Additionally, Afghanistan's lack of access to the sea makes it dependent on its neighbors. Successful integration of Afghanistan into the BRI hinges on regional cooperation with countries like Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states. The Taliban government expects that participation in the BRI will yield economic benefits for Afghanistan, strengthen its diplomatic relations, and foster regional stability. They see this as an opportunity for Afghani-

stan to transform its economy and become an important player in regional trade and communication. However, this endeavor requires careful management of strategic cooperation, a strong government, and a commitment to peace and stability.

An alternative option to the BRI was proposed at last year's G20 summit in Delhi: the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which does not include Afghanistan. This plan could leave Afghanistan entirely within the sphere of influence of China in the ongoing competition between China and the West [26].

#### 8.1.4. Land Route Between China and Afghanistan

The land route between China and Afghanistan is considered one of the most important communication projects between the two countries. This road connects to China's Xinjiang region through the Wakhan Corridor in northeastern Afghanistan. The Wakhan Corridor, a narrow and mountainous strip, is recognized as the only land border between the two countries. Given the geographical location and economic and security significance of this road, both countries seek to improve and develop transportation infrastructure in this area [24].

1. Economic Development and Trade: The primary goal of constructing and developing this road is to increase trade between China and Afghanistan and provide better access to regional markets. Through the "Belt and Road Initiative," China aims to strengthen this route to leverage it as part of the

trade pathway between East and West [15].

2. Security and Regional Stability: Both China and Afghanistan hope that the development of this road will help reduce instability and create security in the region. China, in particular, is concerned about the spread of insecurity from Afghanistan to Xinjiang and believes that economic development can help mitigate extremism in both countries [24].

3. Geopolitical Role: Beyond economic benefits, this road has significant geopolitical importance. By establishing this road, China can gain more influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, especially following the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 [15].

4. Creating New Transit Links: Afghanistan, as a crossroads of Central and South Asia, can connect to other countries through this road. This route could transform Afghanistan into one of the critical transit pathways in the region and alleviate its geographical isolation. Additionally, it could provide a new route for Chinese goods to Central Asia and even Europe [5].

The road between China and Afghanistan holds great significance as it could contribute to economic and security improvements in the region while assisting China in achieving its long-term objectives in the "Belt and Road Initiative." Given Afghanistan's poor economic and security conditions and infrastructure challenges, this project has not yet been fully operational. However, both countries continue to pursue the construction and completion of this land route [15].

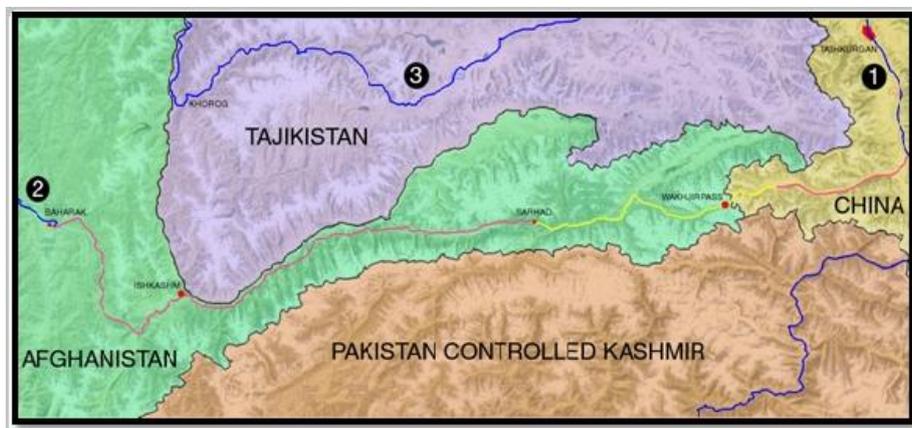


Figure 3. Land route between China and Afghanistan.

#### 8.1.5. CPEC: Intertwining Interests of China and Afghanistan

According to the "Long-Term Plan for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC), the initiative aims to establish a new international logistics network and create industrial plans based on essential transportation infrastructures at the international and regional levels. It seeks to enhance the status of South and Central Asian countries in the global economy, integrate regional economies through sustainable trade growth,

and promote economic and technological cooperation and personnel exchange internationally. This economic corridor significantly impacts Xinjiang province [14].

and its importance has increased with the Taliban's presence in Afghanistan. The initiative outlined in China's constitution emphasizes connectivity to Central and South Asia, which has led to efforts to connect Pakistan's Gwadar port with Afghanistan and Uzbekistan [15].

One of Afghanistan's most significant geopolitical advantages is its location at the heart of Asia, and investment in

railways could be a gateway to the country's economy. Thus, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has adopted a coherent policy regarding railways by separating the railway sector from the Ministry of Public Works and converting it into an independent ministry with adequate budget allocation. The launch of the transit train from Kashgar (China) to Osh (Kyrgyzstan), Andijan (Uzbekistan), and Hairatan (Afghanistan) in early October, which mainly transported Chinese goods to Afghanistan, aligns with this policy [15].

Additionally, the Karachi-Peshawar railway project is set to connect to Afghanistan in the future. In this context, China has proposed to the Taliban the establishment of highways, connecting all cities in Afghanistan, and developing energy projects for Afghanistan's advancement. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian stated that "Beijing is negotiating through diplomatic channels regarding the proposal to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor into Afghanistan." Afghanistan exports and imports goods through the Gwadar and Karachi ports. Afghanistan's inclusion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor during the Taliban era will ensure the progress of the Belt and Road Initiative in the region. Consequently, China's partnership and prioritization of CPEC projects can reinforce its strategic goals for future regional objectives. Indeed, China, needing Afghanistan for its strategic aims, is seeking to establish a connection between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in the absence of American forces, requiring cooperation and alignment with the Taliban. Therefore, one of China's future plans for Afghanistan will be "China-Pakistan-Taliban cooperation" [15].

## 8.2. Exploitation of Afghanistan's Raw Mineral Resources

China is one of the developed countries in the world and has an urgent need for raw natural resources. Due to its proximity to China and having untouched natural resources, Afghanistan is a very good place to exploit its natural resources. Here we take a look at some important projects.

### 8.2.1. Mes Aynak

The Mes Aynak copper mine is located 40 kilometers southeast of Kabul in the barren area of Logar province. This area hosts the second-largest copper reserve in the world and constitutes a significant source of revenue for Afghanistan. Mes Aynak also contains over 20 archaeological sites related to the greatest Buddhist monks of the fifth and sixth centuries. The ruins and findings indicate that even Bronze Age artifacts are buried beneath the ancient debris of the copper mine.

In 2008, the Chinese company (MJAM\_MCC) obtained the contract for extracting copper from Mes Aynak to develop the copper reserves for the Afghan government. This project is substantial for Afghanistan, as it is important for job creation, education, revenue generation, and infrastructure development.

Logar province, located about 30 kilometers south and southeast of Kabul, is home to the Mes Aynak mine. Due to its copper deposits, this region has attracted attention since ancient times. Numerous excavations and pits, along with remnants of smelted ores discovered in the Aynak area and nearby Darband and Jawhar, demonstrate this fact [22].

More than one and a half decades have passed since the signing of the contract in 2008 with the Chinese MCC company, yet extraction operations had not begun until this year. According to the terms of the contract, the Chinese company will initially invest nearly three billion dollars in this project, which will later increase to five billion dollars.

One of the major issues hindering project activity is the presence of archaeological remains in the mining area and its surroundings. Despite the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum spending several million dollars on excavations, surveys, restorations, and the transfer of necessary chemicals from abroad for restoration with the help of foreign specialists, a temporary museum worth one million dollars has been established in the Aynak area with the assistance of American security forces and the US embassy in Kabul. So far, around one hundred items have been under restoration in it, and more than one hundred other items have been transferred to the Kabul Museum after restoration. Unfortunately, due to the delay and inaction of the esteemed Ministry of Information and Culture, eight archaeological sites that were prioritized in the project have not yet been handed over to the company [22].

### 8.2.2. Lithium Reserves

Lithium resources in Afghanistan were first discovered by Soviet mining experts in the 1980s. In a survey conducted in 2010, geologists and researchers working for the U.S. military estimated the value of Afghanistan's lithium resources, distributed in Ghazni, Herat, and Nimroz, at three trillion dollars (Lithium Reserves in Afghanistan: Resource Potential and Development Prospects).

China's disproportionate dependence on lithium imports, particularly for its downstream industries in battery and electric vehicle production, has made its economy vulnerable to fluctuations in global lithium prices and supply guarantees. In the past two years, China has invested over \$4.5 billion in lithium extraction, with a significant portion of this investment spent in African countries like Namibia [1].

For countries aspiring to lead in the growing electric vehicle production sector, ensuring a secure and uninterrupted supply chain of lithium is not only a strategic choice but a fundamental necessity. The analogy of a potential cold war over the geopolitical complexities intertwined with lithium resources emphasizes China's dominant position in the electric vehicle market, placing it in a pivotal role and necessitating a nuanced understanding of global lithium resources. Against this backdrop, Afghanistan's lithium reserves gain greater geopolitical significance as countries strive to maintain their positions in the evolving landscape of clean energy.

The narrative of Afghanistan as a potential center for lithium extraction introduces a new dimension to the international competition for sustainable resources and highlights the complex interplay between geopolitics, energy transition, and the critical role of lithium in shaping the future of transportation. Americans believe that the Afghan government, prior to the Taliban, could achieve self-sufficiency through the sale of lithium, a valuable resource, thus creating a self-sustaining economic model [1].

The existence of lithium reserves in Afghanistan has led China to sign contracts with the Taliban to study and exploit two potential mines in the country. China, which holds a significant 56.3% share of the global electric vehicle market, views Afghanistan—often referred to by American geologists as the "Saudi Arabia of Lithium"—as a potential hub in the transition towards clean energy (Afghanistan's Lithium Resources: A Potential Economic Game-Changer).

### 8.2.3. Amu Darya Oil

The Ministry of Mines and Petroleum of Afghanistan has announced that a Chinese company will invest \$35 million to drill 18 oil wells in the Amu Darya oil basin. This new contract is part of broader efforts to develop and exploit Afghanistan's natural resources. Investment in oil refining in Afghanistan began about a decade ago. The previous government signed a 25-year contract for oil extraction in the Amu Darya basin with the China National Petroleum Corporation in 2012, but extraction work did not commence due to "insecurity".

Despite having five oil fields, Afghanistan imports over 80% of its oil from other countries. The main reason for this oil importation has been insufficient investment in extraction. However, since the arrival of the Taliban, efforts to attract investors for oil extraction have increased. As a result, one of the recent contracts signed with a Chinese company will soon launch 18 oil wells in the Amu Darya basin with a \$35 million investment. Once these drilling operations commence, Afghanistan's oil extraction is expected to reach 3,000 tons per day [20].

Under this contract, the Chinese company is required to establish the necessary infrastructure for storing and processing oil in addition to drilling new wells. This project, which is concentrated in the provinces of Sar-e Pol, Jowzjan, and Faryab, is expected to significantly increase Afghanistan's oil production capacity. For example, in the Kashkari oil field located in Sar-e Pol, the company has already opened its first oil well, which has a daily extraction capacity of 50 tons of crude oil.

### 8.2.4. Security and Military Cooperation

Security and military cooperation between China and Afghanistan has increased due to China's need to maintain regional stability and prevent the influence of terrorist groups along its western borders, especially Xinjiang. China seeks to prevent the influence of terrorist groups like the East Turkestan

Islamic Movement through enhanced security and military cooperation with Afghanistan. Security issues are pivotal in the friendship paradigm between China and the Taliban. Given China's "mutual security dependence" on South Asia in general and the Taliban in Afghanistan in particular, China is not infiltrating the regional security complex based on the India-Pakistan rivalry. Instead, it is strengthening its strong mutual security dependence with members of the security complex (the Taliban have a good opportunity to strengthen their position in the security complex after the U.S. withdrawal) and seeks to play a central role in security with the Taliban, aiming to redefine the regional security complex after the U.S. exit [15]. Particularly after the Taliban's return to power, China has focused on establishing military bases and strengthening Afghanistan's defense capabilities. To counter terrorist threats and drug trafficking, China has implemented training programs and equipped Afghan forces through trilateral cooperation with Pakistan and Afghanistan [24].

Additionally, China has sought to aid Afghanistan's economic and security development through infrastructure projects such as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). These collaborations aim to improve border security and facilitate the implementation of major economic projects in Afghanistan [19].

## 8.3. Challenges in China-Afghanistan Relations

The relationship between China and Afghanistan, while presenting opportunities, is also confronted with multiple challenges in the realms of security, politics, economy, and culture, each of which can negatively impact the cooperation between the two countries.

### 8.3.1. Unstable Security Situation

One of China's major concerns for investment in Afghanistan is the unstable security situation, which has hindered the initiation of large Chinese projects in the country. The security challenges in China-Afghanistan relations have become multifaceted and complex, especially after the Taliban regained power. One of the primary challenges for China is the presence of radical Islamic groups, such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), operating in border areas between Afghanistan and China, particularly near Xinjiang. Due to fears of these groups influencing Xinjiang, China has intensified its efforts to prevent the spread of extremism [13].

Additionally, China faces challenges due to the internal instability in Afghanistan and the Taliban's inability to maintain full control over the country. The unstable security situation and the presence of multiple armed groups in Afghanistan pose obstacles to advancing security and economic cooperation between the two countries. Moreover, the presence of regional players such as India, Pakistan, and Iran, along with their rivalries in Afghanistan, creates further challenges for China in ensuring security and implementing infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Another concern for China is the insecurity related to drug trafficking from Afghanistan. As one of the largest opium producers globally, Afghanistan serves as a major source of drug trafficking to China, which is recognized as a threat to China's internal security. [13].

### 8.3.2. Conflicting Regional and Global Interests

Conflicts of interest between China and Afghanistan, particularly at the regional and global levels, manifest in several important areas. One of the main issues is the economic and strategic competition between China and regional powers like India and Iran. Through its investment in Afghanistan, especially in the BRI project, China aims to expand its influence in the country and the region. Meanwhile, India and Iran are also pursuing economic and strategic influence in Afghanistan, which could lead to conflicts of interest among these countries.

At the global level, China's competition with the United States is a primary source of conflict between China and Afghanistan. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan created a vacuum that China has attempted to fill by expanding its economic and security relations. This situation has led China to play a larger role in addressing terrorist groups and internal security issues in Afghanistan, conflicting with U.S. strategic interests [16].

Moreover, the presence of terrorist groups such as the ETIM, which poses a threat to China's internal security, represents another source of conflict between China and Afghanistan. China seeks Afghanistan's cooperation in combating these groups, while the Taliban's capability and willingness to do so remain questionable.

### 8.3.3. Cultural and Political Differences

Political and cultural differences between China and Afghanistan are pronounced due to their histories, governance systems, and social contexts. Politically, China operates under a one-party system led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), with all political power concentrated in this party. The governance structure in China emphasizes government control, central planning, and social stability. In contrast, Afghanistan has undergone a tumultuous and varied history of governance, from monarchy to republic to Soviet occupation, and most recently, the Taliban's rule after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. Afghanistan's political system is currently under Taliban control, which imposes strict interpretations of Islamic law and distances itself from democratic norms.

Culturally, China is a country of ethnic and cultural diversity, heavily influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These philosophies emphasize social order, harmony, and the primacy of the group over the individual. As a multi-ethnic nation, China strives to maintain its cultural diversity within a framework of national unity. In contrast, Afghanistan has a strongly Islamic and conservative culture, where tribal and Islamic traditions play a significant role in daily life and political decision-making. Islam, particularly in its conserva-

tive forms, has a profound influence on both politics and the broader culture of Afghanistan.

Another significant cultural difference between the two countries is the role of women in society. In China, despite challenges, women have made significant achievements in many fields, and the Chinese government officially emphasizes gender equality. In Afghanistan, especially following the Taliban's resurgence, the role of women has been severely restricted, with many of their rights, including the right to education and work, curtailed. This difference in attitudes towards women is a fundamental cultural disparity between the two countries.

### 8.3.4. Security Threats

China and the Taliban are seeking cooperation to address threats from ISIS in general and ISIS-Khorasan in particular. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's Khorasan Province, which emerged in 2015, opposes the Taliban, believing that the Taliban has colluded with China against Uyghur Muslims. Following the meeting between Chinese and Taliban officials in October 2021, ISIS supporters dismissed this engagement, viewing the meeting between Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi as a betrayal of Chinese Muslims (Uyghurs).

On the other hand, the "Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan" (TTP) has attacked Chinese nationals working through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Pakistan over the past few years, posing a threat to China's large-scale development projects throughout the region and Afghanistan. According to reports from the United Nations Monitoring Team on Sanctions, the TTP has approximately 6,000 trained fighters mainly along the Durand Line. The Taliban view the TTP not as their issue but as a problem for Pakistan that needs addressing. Kabul has urged Islamabad to reach a political agreement with this group.

## 9. Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges

Although the current state of economic relations between Afghanistan and China presents an optimistic future, both countries have significant economic attractions for each other, where high levels of investment could revolutionize their economic relations. Below are some of the most important aspects of this discussion.

Attractiveness of Afghanistan's Mineral Resources for China: Beyond other factors, what makes Afghanistan particularly attractive to China is the significant amount of mineral reserves, including copper, coal, iron, niobium, cobalt, gold, molybdenum, silver, and aluminum, as well as resources like fluorite, uranium, beryllium, talc, and lithium. Afghanistan also has substantial oil and gas reserves, mainly located in the northern part of the country. It is even said that some of these items, like lithium, are comparable to the world's largest

lithium mine in Bolivia. According to initial estimates made in 2010, the estimated value of Afghanistan's reserves is projected to be up to three trillion dollars. Due to its economic and industrial growth, which heavily relies on mineral resources, China has paid particular attention to Afghanistan. In this context, during the Republican era, China managed to sign several billion-dollar mining extraction contracts (such as the Aynak copper mine contract in Logar and the Amu Darya oil contract) with the Afghan government, despite U.S. opposition. However, for reasons previously mentioned, their operational activities did not commence. Now that the Islamic Emirate is established in Afghanistan as an independent government, relatively free from direct foreign influence, especially from the U.S., China has once again shown its interest in investing in Afghanistan's mining sector. During this period, China announced its commitment to commence work on the Aynak copper mine and signed new contracts with the Islamic Emirate, the most significant being the contract for extracting oil from the Amu Darya region. This contract, specifically with the Chinese company CPEIC, includes an initial investment of 150 million dollars, escalating to 540 million dollars over three years, for a duration of 25 years. It aims to initially extract 200 tons of oil daily from the Amu Darya region, which spans 4,500 square kilometers, covering the provinces of Sar-e Pol, Jawzjan, and Faryab, and eventually increase this to 20,000 tons per day. Additionally, a Chinese company has signed a contract with an Afghan company to extract gold in Takhar province worth 310 million dollars. Furthermore, a major Chinese company is currently exploring a large investment in Afghanistan's coal sector for electricity generation. Reports indicate that around 100 Chinese companies are registered with the Ministry of Mines of the Islamic Emirate, showing interest in investing in various sectors, and approximately 500 Chinese traders have entered Afghanistan to explore investment opportunities in mining.

**Attractiveness of Afghanistan's Transit Route for China:** Another factor that makes Afghanistan attractive to China is its transit position. Afghanistan is the only country that connects China to Western Asia with the least geographical distance. Specifically, by traversing Afghan territory, China can reach Iran, the gateway to Western Asia and Europe, in less than two thousand kilometers. However, China had initially excluded Afghanistan from its "Belt and Road" initiative. The primary reason for this exclusion can be attributed to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the unfavorable security conditions under U.S. occupation. With the emergence of the Islamic Emirate and the ongoing fruitful efforts of its officials, the Chinese government committed to including Afghanistan in this major project. The initial plan is for Afghanistan to join the initiative through the CPEC project. With Afghanistan's participation in the Belt and Road initiative, it will open up possibilities for millions of dollars of Chinese investment in infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. Besides incorporating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road initiative through participation in the CPEC project, efforts are also underway be-

tween the two sides to establish an independent corridor through Wakhan that connects China to Western Asia and, through it, to Europe. In addition to the direct railway line that exists between Afghanistan and China via Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, other projects, including a railway known as the Five Nations (Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China), are also on the agenda of the involved countries, and practical steps may be taken for its realization in the future.

## 10. Proposed Strategies for Improving Bilateral Relations

Ways for Afghanistan to Benefit from China's Regional Programs:

To maximize its benefit from China's regional programs, Afghanistan can undertake the following actions:

- 1) **Developing Bilateral Cooperation:** Afghanistan should strengthen its bilateral relations with China and focus on increased cooperation in various economic, security, and cultural fields. This includes forming joint commissions, exchanging official visits, and organizing specialized meetings.
- 2) **Promoting Foreign Investment:** Afghanistan must prepare the necessary policies and readiness to attract foreign investment, particularly from China. This includes providing financial and tax incentives, protecting intellectual property rights, and streamlining administrative processes for investors.
- 3) **Developing Necessary Infrastructure:** Afghanistan should develop the infrastructure necessary to attract investment and facilitate trade, including the construction and improvement of ports, airports, roads, and railways.
- 4) **Strengthening Soft Power:** Afghanistan should focus on strengthening its soft power to achieve a favorable position in negotiations with China. This includes promoting culture and arts, enhancing media and advertising, and promoting the Afghan language and culture.
- 5) **Developing Human Resources:** Afghanistan should prioritize the development of its human resources, enhancing the necessary knowledge and skills to leverage Chinese programs. This includes technical and vocational training, higher education, and academic exchanges.
- 6) **Cooperation in the Energy Sector:** Afghanistan can benefit from cooperation with China in developing its energy resources. This includes power plants, extraction and utilization of renewable energy sources such as wind and solar, as well as developing electricity networks and transferring energy to other regions.
- 7) **By implementing these measures,** Afghanistan can derive greater benefits from China's regional programs and advance its economic and social development while improving bilateral relations with China.

## 11. Conclusion

The conclusion regarding the challenges and opportunities in China-Afghanistan relations indicates that these relations are significantly influenced by a complex environment of internal and external factors. As one of the major global powers, China seeks to capitalize on the economic and strategic opportunities in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, due to its geographical location and rich natural resources, especially in the mining sector, offers numerous economic attractions for China. On the other hand, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) encourages it to view Afghanistan as one of the key points of this project, as the country could serve as a bridge between Asia and Europe, helping to enhance China's position in the region.

However, the China-Afghanistan relationship faces serious challenges. First, security challenges arising from the activities of extremist Islamic groups in Afghanistan, and China's concerns about the spread of this extremism to its Muslim regions, particularly Xinjiang, pose a serious threat. The Taliban and other extremist groups still possess the capability to create instability in Afghanistan and the region, which could negatively impact China's security. In particular, groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which China sees as a direct threat to its security, are present in Afghanistan, thus presenting security challenges for the relationship between the two countries.

Second, political instability in Afghanistan is also a major barrier to the development of relations between these two countries. The Taliban government, while holding power, has not yet achieved the necessary international legitimacy, and this lack of legitimacy may cause China to hesitate regarding long-term investments in Afghanistan. Additionally, the absence of efficient institutions and weak economic management hinder the execution of large-scale economic projects such as BRI infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, due to significant economic interests, China is keen to strengthen its relations with Afghanistan. Afghanistan's mineral resources, especially lithium, which is widely used in electric battery production, are of great value to China, one of the largest producers of modern technologies. China is also seeking access to Central Asian markets and even Europe through Afghanistan, aiming to exploit the economic and geopolitical advantages this country offers.

Ultimately, the future of China-Afghanistan relations largely depends on the Taliban's ability to ensure internal security and create an appropriate environment for attracting foreign investment. As a cautious player in the international arena, China aims to navigate the security and political challenges to take advantage of Afghanistan's economic opportunities. Overall, while numerous challenges exist, Afghanistan's economic and strategic potentials continue to motivate China to pursue interactions and investments in this country.

## 12. Findings

The potential findings regarding the challenges and opportunities in China-Afghanistan relations highlight several key aspects:

### 1) Security Concerns and Their Impact on China's Policy

One significant finding in China-Afghanistan relations is China's serious security concerns, which profoundly affect its foreign policy toward Afghanistan. China is particularly worried about the spread of extremism and terrorism to the Xinjiang region, where the Uyghur minority resides [27].

This finding indicates that China's policies in Afghanistan are closely tied to its internal security concerns, and any economic or political engagement must be accompanied by security guarantees.

### 2) Economic Importance of Afghanistan's Mineral Resources for China

Another finding emphasizes the importance of Afghanistan's natural resources, particularly lithium and other rare minerals. Afghanistan possesses one of the largest lithium reserves in the world, essential for electric battery production and modern technologies [18]. This indicates that China, due to its acute need for these materials, is eager to exploit these opportunities, and investment in Afghanistan's mining sector holds significant strategic importance for China.

### 3) Opportunities and Challenges of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

One of the other key findings is the role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC, and the border route between the two countries in China-Afghanistan relations. This project can act as an opportunity for developing Afghanistan's infrastructure and establishing international connections [7]. However, existing security and political challenges in Afghanistan hinder the complete execution of this project. This suggests that progress in economic and infrastructural.

## Abbreviations

CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement
TTP	Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan
MJAM_MCC	Metallurgical Corporation of China Jiangxi Afghanistan Mining Company _ Metallurgical Corporation of China
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
CPC	Communist Party of China
IMEC	India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor

## Author Contributions

**Abdul Salaam Acxir:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Meth-

odology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

**Shams Rahman RahmanZai:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Resources

- [1] Acxir, Abdul Salaam (2024) "Chain-Afghanistan relation and the impact of lithium resource on it". American research journal humanities & social science, Issue. 9. no 7. <https://www.arjhss.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/G795261.pdf>
- [2] Afghanistan and the World (2007), Volume 1, Center for Strategic Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan.
- [3] Aziz, Masoud (2018), Afghanistan: Geopolitics of Regional Economic Integration and China's Emergence as a New Facilitator, translated by Sayed Najibullah Mosab, Collection of Articles on China's Foreign Policy Toward Afghanistan, Kabul, Azam Publications.
- [4] Blaikie, P. (2022). Afghanistan in China's strategy: Opportunities and challenges. *Global Affairs Review*, 10(2), 105-123.
- [5] Cordesman, Anthony (26 September 2014), "US strategic vacuum in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and central Asia", Washington DC: CSIS.
- [6] Huasheng, Z. (2012), "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives", Centre for Strategic and International Studies. Washington, DC.
- [7] Huasheng, Z. (2022). China-Afghanistan relations: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 81(3), 510-525.
- [8] Jiang, Ji, and Naqibullah Mal (2012), China, Prominent Figures Fund of International Radio, First Edition, Kabul.
- [9] Kuhn, A. (2009), "China Becomes A Player in Afghanistan's Future", NRP News. Available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113967842> Accessed on: 19 October 2016.
- [10] Lin, C. (2011), "China's Silk Road Strategy in AfPak: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization", ISPSW.
- [11] Mal, Naqibullah (2015), Diplomatic Relations Between Afghanistan and China, Danesh Publishing Society, Kabul, Afghanistan.
- [12] Ma çães, Bruno. (2021). Belt and road: A Chinese world order. Oxford University Press.
- [13] Mohanty, Bisley (2018), China in Afghanistan: Security, Position, and Regional Status, translated by Sayed Najibullah Mosab, Collection of Articles on China's Foreign Policy Toward Afghanistan, Kabul, Azam Publications.
- [14] Muhammadkhan, Raja (2015), "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan", National Defence University-Islamabad, FWU Journal of Social Sciences, Special Issue, Vol. 1, No. 1.
- [15] Munawari, Seyed Ali, Keshvari, Azad Mohsen, and Mo-barakah Sadaqat (2022), China's Strategy for Expanding Cooperation with the Taliban After the U.S. Withdrawal, *Foreign Relations Quarterly*, Tehran, Iran. [https://frqjournal.csr.ir/article\\_160974.html?lang=en](https://frqjournal.csr.ir/article_160974.html?lang=en)
- [16] Nazer Shafiei and Ruhullah Salehi Dowlat Abad (2016), *Central Asia and the Caucasus Quarterly*, Summer 2015, Issue 72.
- [17] Panda, A. (29 October 2014), "Afghanistan and China Open a New Chapter", *The Diplomat*, Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/afghanistan-andchina-open-a-new-chapter/> Accessed on: 11 August 2016
- [18] Pant, H. V., & Haidar, S. (2021). China's dilemma in Afghanistan: Engagement without commitment. *International Affairs*, 97(4), 1023-1041.
- [19] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2023). A Year After Taliban Takeover, What Are China's Plans For Afghanistan?. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org>
- [20] (Rah Abrisham, 2024) <https://rah-abrisham.com/2024/07/20/chinas-35-million-dollar-investment-in-afghanistans-amu-darya-oil/>
- [21] Senanayake, Dilan & Prasad, Harsha (2020). Understanding the Dragon's Entry to South Asia: Revisiting the Regional Security Complex Theory. *Torun International Studies*, 1(13), 73-91.
- [22] Suzlik Tatar, Justina (2017), "China's Changing Stance on Afghanistan", translated by Abdul Ghani Farahi, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Special Issue on China, No. 37, Kabul.
- [23] Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada (2018), Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/15587.pdf>
- [24] *The Diplomat*. (2023). Afghanistan in China's Grand Strategy. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com>
- [25] Sarah Godek, (2024), Update on China-Afghanistan Relations. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/update-on-china-afghanistan-relations/>
- [26] Yari, Ehsan, and Abedi, Marzieh (2021), China's Strategic Knot in the Regional Network of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Feasibility Study of Opportunities and Challenges, *Foreign Relations Quarterly*, Tehran, Iran.
- [27] Yousaf, S. (2021). Security challenges for China in Afghanistan: Implications for the Belt and Road Initiative. *Security Studies Review*, 12(1), 65-82.