

Foreign Policy of China: Pursuing the Resources in Afghanistan

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Received:
Mar 17, 2025

Published:
Jun 30, 2025

ABSTRACT

China, a major power playing the peripheral diplomacy to bring developing countries to a table of dialogues, negotiations and international conferences to express their interests and form new relations. Thus, it has always been friendly and supportive to Afghanistan; providing humanitarian aid, investing in infrastructure, and extracting natural resources. However, China spent more on the minerals of Afghanistan during the new acting government than in the previous government. China was not deeply involved economically with the former government though they had signed some significant agreements. This was also one of the reasons China did not resist and took part in the 20 years long war in Afghanistan, instead, China supported, hosted and mediated Taliban. After the fall of Kabul and the return of the Taliban, China turned its policy and filled the vacuum, gave them de facto recognition and backed them in terms of security and economic development. This paper deeply explores the foreign policy of China towards Afghanistan and how they invested in extracting natural resources, infrastructure and tightened major economic agreements with the Taliban and contributed to the internal security and stability. China, a pioneer in oil extraction in Afghanistan has signed significant agreements and contracts with the interim government of Afghanistan for mineral extraction and refinery development.

Keywords: China-Afghanistan, China's Interest, Security Threats, ETIM, Taliban, Foreign Policy.

Introduction

China has had decades-long relations with Afghanistan started in 1955 during the reign of King Zahir Shah and Afghanistan was the first country that recognized the PRC. Both countries have peaceful and cordial relations supporting each other in terms of security, economic and development. This policy of China comes out of its core and primary goals: safeguarding its sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence to center cooperation, bilateral relations, stability and security in the region, and enhancing national interests. These decades long relation has various phases, ups and downs but yet stable and stronger. During the Cold War, these relations experienced both limited and unlimited diplomatic connections. Afghanistan was balancing both the Capitalists and Communists while China adapted a more strategic approach toward the super powers; supported regional powers economically and militarily particularly Pakistan. China also gained assistance from the US to safeguard itself against the Soviet Union, supported pro

communist parties in Afghanistan and allowed the East Turkestan Movement to fight along with the Mujahideen to defeat the USSR in Afghanistan and hindered their ways of spreading communism in the region. In 1993, the relations between the two nations were cut off and limited due to the destruction of Afghanistan, the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the fragile security of the border between China and Afghanistan and the civil war in Afghanistan that brought insecurity, violence and power struggle between different groups inside Afghanistan. In 1996, when the Taliban thoroughly captured Afghanistan, it was a new phase for China because the East Turkestan Islamic Movement was widely supported by Al-Qaeda and Taliban which has been a threat to China. China urged the Taliban to ensure the absence of any kind of support towards the Uyghur militants and their absence inside Afghanistan because the Uyghur militants had close ties with Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. This paper will shed light on the role of China in building Afghanistan's infrastructure, its foreign policy for Afghanistan, and neutralizing the Uyghur militants.

After 9/11, things changed and the relations turned from security threats into more supporting, economic, humanitarian and developmental sides in Afghanistan. NATO eliminated the Taliban's regime and installed a new democratic government that pondered China to choose military involvement or economic and strategic approach in Afghanistan. However, China did not involve itself militarily and prioritized a limited but economic and humanitarian assistance to the new democratic government, contributed to the infrastructures of Afghanistan and built cordial diplomatic relations with the new democratic government but maintained secret ties with the Taliban as well. This paper will explore deeply the reasons behind China's limited presence in Afghanistan and the historical relations between two countries.

After the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Aug 2021 and the takeover of Taliban, China had an opportunity to fill up the most awaited vacuum in Afghanistan left by the US and its allies after being fully withdrawn. China started investing in Afghanistan and signed significant agreements with the Taliban for extracting minerals including oil, lithium and copper in Afghanistan. China also opened its embassy in Kabul, accepted the Taliban's ambassador and granted them de facto recognition. So, this paper will also discuss the investment of China, its new agreements with the Taliban's interim government and the growing involvement of China in Afghanistan that contributed to both the economy and security of Afghanistan.

China-Afghanistan Historical Relations (1955-2001)

Throughout history, China and Afghanistan have sustained friendly relations after establishing diplomatic ties between the two neighbouring countries in 1955. Both countries have been living in peace and deep cooperation with China for various fields in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was one of the first nations that recognized the People's Republic of China, and it started diplomatic relations in 1955 by

Foreign Policy of China: Pursuing the Resources in Afghanistan

posting the first Afghan ambassador, Abdul Samad, in Peking. The initiative to visit Afghanistan was taken by Prime Minister of China Zhou Enlai and his vice premier in January 1957. Following Prime Minister's visit to Afghanistan, the Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Daud Khan, later visited China, and cordial relations between the two countries commenced, leading to a boundary treaty over a disputed area of Badakhshan in 1963. These relations have had ups and downs as the Cold War era brought distance because the soviet pro-leadership in Afghanistan damaged the peaceful relations between these two nations. However, China always adopted noninterference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, though it received military assistance from the US to protect against the Soviet Union but still in favour of problem solving by mutual understanding and cooperation. Also, China did not support and recognize the government of Babrak Karmal for it was installed as a result of the Soviet Union's invasion. (Siddiqi,2020)

In the cold war period , relations between the two nations were not expectedly open and were limited because of the foreign policies of both countries. Afghanistan was trying to balance the Soviet Union and the US on its territory, while China was in favor of rational steps towards the super powers. China established strategic relations with regional states, backed Pakistan militarily and economically and allowed the Uyghur Muslim fighters to enter Afghanistan through Wakhan and support the Mujahideen against the USSR. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its defeat in Afghanistan, China cut off diplomatic relations with Afghanistan in 1993 due to the fragile border security and the destruction caused by the civil war. The violence and conflict sparked in Afghanistan that made China shut down its embassy in Kabul; which led to China's absence in Afghanistan for 9 years. In 1996, when the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, it opened a new phase for China because ETIM fighters in Uyghur were a threat to China's security who were supported by Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda has close ties with the Afghan Taliban. At Pakistan's behest, during the 1990s, China also started trade with the Taliban and was about to recognize them officially before 9/11 happened because the Islamist groups were rising more strongly than before.

China's interests in Afghanistan were greatly affected and lowered when the Soviet Union left Afghanistan and withdrew their troops completely in 1989. This temporary absence of Beijing from Afghanistan was attracted rapidly in the 1990s by the Uyghur separatist groups who found safe haven in Afghanistan and started terrorist activities. The Taliban , who controlled most parts of Afghanistan, were engaged by the Chinese officials to ensure that they would not provide any assistance to the activities of the Uyghur separatist groups in regions controlled by the Afghan Taliban. This issue of the Uyghur was also discussed with the head of the Taliban , Mullah Omar in 2010 by the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shu Lin. (Umarov, A. 2017).

Even though China engaged with the Taliban before 9/11 invasions to ensure the security of Chines and they do not support any militant groups like Uyghur separatist but the Chinese government along with the international community also welcomed the US led intervention and the ousting of the Taliban. China supported the United Nations backed government and new changes in Kabul but also kept secret ties with Taliban's leaders later to make sure anti china groups are not operating any activities against China. This period witnessed limited involvement from Chinese in Afghanistan in terms of counter terrorism, intelligence sharing and investment in Afghanistan at the initial stages because the entire policies and relationships of China with Afghanistan were deeply stuck based on various concerns, interests and periods but mainly three situations summed up all the historical policies and interests of China in Afghanistan: During the Cold War and Soviet Union's attack on Afghanistan from 1955 to 1990, raising Uyghur separatists and engaging with Taliban from 1991-2000 and finally the new phase of relations with the new government following the US invasion of Afghanistan from 2001-2021.(Pandey, S. & Observer Research Foundation. 2019).

China's Limited Involvement in Afghanistan (2001-2021) After 9/11 and the invasion of NATO, China recognized the new Democratic Government of Afghanistan yet was not involved militarily. China did not oppose or support the US intervention in Afghanistan for the State Department announced the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement(ETIM) as a foreign terrorist organisation. China provided humanitarian assistance to the new government and helped the Afghan Government in building infrastructures, backed it financially and played a key role for peace between Afghanistan and Pakistan by providing diplomatic support. Because China recognized the mistrust between Pakistan and Afghanistan as an obstacle to its economic goals especially the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). After 2014, when negotiations between the Taliban leaders and the US in Doha exposed, China showed little interest in the longstanding presence of the US in Afghanistan and strategically took steps to bring long standing peace in Afghanistan and avoided any direct involvement in the conflict. The major clue here is that China is putting the burden on SCO for managing the stability after 2014 but its main purpose is on bilateral cooperation. This strategic step by the Chinese government, has consequences for the great powers' rivalry in Central Asia, according to the US. China, in terms of strategic interest, is greatly involved not only in Afghanistan but in the whole region specifically Central Asia more than Russia. This will make China come up with firm and suitable solutions and responsibilities to address which China has not yet pointed out properly, not mainly for Afghanistan but for all Central Asian states. (khan,2015).

One of the greatest reasons for China not to fully or militarily involved in Afghanistan during the US-led NATO invasion was Uyghur militants that had close ties with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. If China started supporting the NATO troops or the Afghan Government militarily, the Taliban and other militant groups would come together and back the ETIM fighters who have been posing a serious threat to the security of China. This security threat posed by the ETIM, China

Foreign Policy of China: Pursuing the Resources in Afghanistan

involved very limitedly with the Afghan government and took part in its affairs but explored possible ways to complete all the uncompleted projects in the country. The ETIM presence in Afghanistan severely concerned the Chinese because the ties between the Afghan Taliban and ETIM militants were firmly enhanced to fight the western troops and the Afghan security forces which was greatly concerning. It was not only due to their combined battlefields but the ETIM which is also recognised as the Turkish Islamic Party, and declared as a global terrorist group by the United Nations Security Council and affiliated with Al-Qaeda in 2002 (TIP) was mainly targeting China. This direct threat to China's security was also controlled and managed by the NATO and US troops in Afghanistan on behalf of China. (Zhou,Su and Yuan,2022).

This decades-long war on counter terrorism in Afghanistan not only affected the internal security and stability of Afghanistan but it also posed a threat to the security of the PRC and the whole region. China that was concerned about the Uyghur militants for decades, also had interest in the natural resources of Afghanistan to extract but did not fully tighten any significant agreement due to the security reasons in Afghanistan, they signed few but did not thoroughly applied any pact. The growing concerns of ETIM and China's struggle to the stability of the region and economic growth was not just symbolic. China realized that peaceful Afghanistan is in favour of economic growth and severely important for expanding the Belt and Road Initiative, especially CPEC and its expansion to Afghanistan. "Western countries are not, however, the only ones with an interest and a stake in Afghanistan's security. China has long been concerned about the spread of extremist ideas and activism from Afghanistan through Central Asia and across its own borders, particularly into its western-most territory, Xinjiang. This area is home to a Uyghur population, a predominantly Sunni Muslim Turkic ethnic group, of approximately ten million people. The Western military drawdown in Afghanistan therefore raises questions for China. This will be a defining period for China's relationship with its neighbour Afghanistan".(Kley,2014)

The fear that the Isalmist separatists of Uyghur will reshape and find safe shelters in Afghanistan turned Beijing's policy towards Afghanistan. Chinese authorities were concerned that these militants, located near Xinjiang in Wakhan Corridor, could inspire attacks on Chinese inside Xinjiang.China's focus on Afghanistan over the decades has been improved unexpectedly. Though it balances both the economic interests to be gained and security guarantees to be vowed that Uyghur militants and any anti Chinese groups do not pursue support from Afghan Taliban or use its territory against China. (Felbab-Brown,2020). Along with this critical plight, China started digging its roots in Afghanistan for commercial and economic interests. For Beijing,Afghanistan was a spotlight to boost its economic linkages and an economic hub for investment because Afghanistan could provide them a shortest route to Central Asian States and the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, China was not only aware of the security situations in Afghanistan but also balanced the Taliban and the Afghan government in terms of investing in

Afghanistan and only signed an MoU in 2016 with the Afghan government to link Afghanistan with the Belt and Road Initiative. Developing Afghanistan's infrastructure, and connecting the country with the BRI network were based on this Memorandum of understanding that announced a complete plan for its implementations. Few projects such as the Five Nations Highway or Sino-Afghan railway which would connect Afghanistan with the central Asian states and Iran were in this plan. The plan not only suggested this but to expand CPEC to Afghanistan that would be contained by railways, oil pipelines, roads and a direct border opening for China-Afghanistan trade. (Safi & Alizada, 2018).

China's foreign policy of peaceful coexistence and non interference is widely appreciated by many states and based on these principles; China involved itself in rebuilding the war torn Afghanistan without taking any sides. The PRC granted aid of 81.7 million dollars to the Afghan government in 2014, and the following year another package of 245 million dollars. They also trained 3,000 experts and professionals in various fields and provided 5,00 scholarships to the Afghan students. Not only this, the Vice President of PRC granted 1500 additional scholarships to the Afghan students in 2015 for pursuing Higher Education in China. (Panda, 2014). This flow of China's humanitarian assistance and its part of cultural diplomacy, the PRC backed many developmental projects only in Badakhshan province worth \$90 million in 2017. These humanitarian support from China, friendly diplomatic and cultural ties between Afghanistan and Beijing enhanced trade policies, connectivity, integration and coordination that mainly benefited Kabul. Various Chinese firms including Huawei are working on the optical fiber national grid and other developmental projects. (Ahmadzai & Hashmat, 2021).

China's Growing Involvement in Afghanistan and Significant Agreements With Taliban

Following the fall of Kabul, the chaotic withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan and the return of Taliban in Aug 2021 was a new era and phase for China in the region. China filled the long waited vacuum left by the US and its allies and continued its stable, strategic, balancing and long standing mission in Afghanistan. China was the first country to open its embassy in Kabul and sent its ambassador to Afghanistan. Later in January, 309 foreign diplomats including Bilal Karimi presented their credentials to the president of the PRC, Xi Jinping at an official ceremony in Beijing by the Chinese government. The recognition of Bilal Karimi, a former Taliban spokesman, as an official envoy to Beijing not only made the Chinese government first in the world to take this huge step but gave a great return of the two years long negotiations to the Afghan Interim government. (Kumar, R., 2024). Five days after the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, a former senior official in the People's Liberation Army pointed out that following the full evacuation of the US and in its absence in Afghanistan, China is the only country that could provide whatever is the need of Afghanistan including

Foreign Policy of China: Pursuing the Resources in Afghanistan

economic investment and political impartiality. However, in turn Kabul would provide what China prioritizes, has unmatched expertise and interest including industrial development, opportunities in infrastructure and most importantly hands on the Afghanistan untapped minerals worth \$1 trillion. (Wilson Center, 2001).

The year 2022 was full of meeting and discussions between the Taliban interim ministers and Chinese officials. China started engaging with the new interim government as they were in touch from the beginning. The focus was still the same: economy and minerals, security and stable region but more practical and steadfast than before in terms of inking huge and significant agreements and boosting trade. In 2022, China sustained deep exchanges and cooperation with Afghanistan. It was boosted and supported by the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi when he visited Kabul in March 2022. In this high ranking visit, he discussed strategic agreements and opportunities with Acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi of the Interim Government of Afghanistan. They also discussed economic development along with security issues because the office of Deputy Prime Minister issued a statement mentioning that Afghanistan will never allow any militants to operate against China and there will be no threat to China in terms of security from Afghanistan though they did not directly mention the presence of ETIM. These meetings and discussions were consistent. Later, Amir Khan Muttaqi went to China and was officially invited to attend a dialogue of Foreign Ministers “Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan Plus Afghanistan” in March 2022. Moreover, Amir Khan Muttaqi had a telephonic conversation with State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in June, 2022. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tashkent, Amir Khan Muttaqi again met and had discussion with State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in July, 2022. These meetings and dialogues accelerated the economic ties and cooperations between China and Afghanistan. It not only strengthened diplomatic ties between both countries but boosted bilateral trade by 13.6% in one year from January to December 2022, when the import and export between China and Afghanistan hit \$595 million. (Documents_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (n.d.).

Promoting China's strategic BRI's interests, Afghanistan provides regional geoeconomic power to China to find its reliable route to Iran and middle east. Hence, China centered mainly on economy, business and trade with Taliban along with security. The Taliban's interim government, suffering from the burden of international sanctions, agreed to extend CPEC to Afghanistan as the former government and Chinese were willing in 2016 while China also kept an eye on Afghanistan's minerals worth over 1 trillion US dollar. China, as they were helping the former government to build Afghanistan also opened its hands to the Taliban not only in terms of economy, infrastructures, health and extracting precious minerals but also stability and security. Beijing's envoy to Afghanistan announced that China will back the Taliban interim government to build up its

markets and with access to energy, construction and consumer sectors free from tariffs. Since the Taliban fully controlled Afghanistan in 2021, China developed its ties with them and was closely engaged with them diplomatically though the other countries abstained from recognizing the Taliban's government over girls' education and human rights violations. (Reuters,2024). However, for the first time in Afghanistan, oil from the Amu Darya basin was extracted with the help of the Xinjiang Central Asian Petroleum and Gas Company that signed a \$540 million agreement for oil and gas. Along with this milestone, a Chinese company, Gochin, also offered to invest \$10bn in Afghanistan's lithium mining industry. The factors driving China to heavily invest in Afghanistan is not only filling the vacuum left by the US but is the energy and resources of Afghanistan which is a dire need of the Chinese fast growing economy. Due to the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, and barriers in importing raw materials, the Chinese leadership sought to find a possible alternative market and adequate resources that could fulfill their needs, such as Afghanistan and the Central Asian States. Afghanistan, in this case, is both a threat to the stability of the regional countries by supplying significant volumes of natural raw materials to the PRC and a new source of resources that the Chinese economy lacks. (Umarov, A. 2017).

China has already proved its interest in investing in Afghanistan and has been tightening various agreements in various fields. The trading company and the Fan China Afghan Mining Process also nodded to investing \$350 million in these years. Many company representatives were positive due to the welcoming nature of 20 Chinese companies to inspect Afghanistan substantial lithium during their visit that was coordinated by diplomats. After a \$10bn deal with Gochi, Taliban also revealed some valuable contracts including a lithium ore processing plant worth \$6.5 billion with some foreigner and local companies. The Qashqari oil is already been extracting and provides 300 tons daily but the Taliban promising to increase it to 1000 tons per day, urging the Chinese National Oil Company to invest another \$162 million this year and \$540 in the coming years.

When the US fully evacuated its force along with NATO and Taliban fully controlled Afghanistan, the People's Republic of China formed a new policy for Afghanistan consists of five main points: to carefully accept that Taliban are the dominating and controlling group in Afghanistan, make sure Afghanistan is not a safe haven for terrorist groups, supporting inclusive government in Afghanistan, blaming the US and the West for not properly and fully completing their responsibility and demonstrating humanitarian concerns. Making this new five pillared policy were affected by four factors that will also continue to impact it in the future were: the economic value of Afghanistan, great power politics involving the United States, Afghanistan's place in China's overarching international strategy security and stability in Xinjiang and China's western border region. (Zhang,2022).

The foreign policy of China for Afghanistan has been turned from a turtle investment to a steadfast and more prompt one. China craves for natural resources and energy and Talibans need a source of funding. China, more than any other

Foreign Policy of China: Pursuing the Resources in Afghanistan

country, opened its hands for Taliban, inked major agreements of which one is the Mes Aynak Copper extraction after a 16 years delay, accepted Taliban's envoy to Beijing and has been actively investing in Afghanistan. On the other hand, if security situations worsen for BRI, China would have Wakhan Corridor as an alternative which is already under construction with the help of China. China would also have a close eye on ETIM fighters and would make sure that there's no threat to the interest of China which is mostly promised and fulfilled by the Afghan interim government. China playing the key role in the reconstructions of Afghanistan also contributed hugely to the security of Afghanistan. The major step towards a secure Afghanistan is putting 90,000 CCTV Cameras just in Kabul City by a chinese company Huawei, this plan was crafted by the US before abandoning Afghanistan. This project helps the security personnel to keep an eye on every single move of the citizens and tighten the security around the capital. Despite critics, it will also help fight against crime and drugs as they monitor every single group of people, from license plates to facial expression. According to the Taliban, there are over 62,000 cameras in Kabul city and other areas of the capital that are managed and controlled from a central control room. As per the previous government, which depended heavily on Western-led international forces for security, the last major camera installation took place in Kabul in 2008. In January 2021, when the NATO forces were slowly rolling out from Afghanistan, then-vice president Amrullah Saleh told the media that their government will introduce and install a new upgraded camera surveillance system in Kabul city that was supported by NATO worth \$100 million. "The arrangement we had planned in early 2021 was different," Saleh told Reuters in September, adding that the "infrastructure" for the 2021 plan had been destroyed, (Reuters, 2023).

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