

China's Footprint in Afghanistan after the Taliban Takeover

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Introduction

With its unique position as a land-locked country and traditional buffer zone between various empires, Afghanistan represents a geopolitical playground for great powers, amongst others, the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹ The China's relations with neighbouring Afghanistan started to increase from a low level in 1997, when China established official diplomatic relations with the Taliban who ruled the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* at that time and managed to re-establish it in 2021. When the US-operation *Enduring Freedom* ousted the Taliban in 2001, China increased its trade relations with the

¹ In this article, the abbreviation PRC refers to China.

Afghan government under the presidency of Hamid Karzai (2001-2014), focused on good neighbourly relations and provided humanitarian assistance. Maintaining security in Afghanistan was not the main focus for China at this stage of the US-intervention as this was the responsibility of the US-led military coalition.² In addition, China had no interest to play a subordinated role under the dominance of western stakeholders.³

In 2021, US-troops and their European and other allies withdrew from Afghanistan after 20 years of military intervention and crisis management efforts. This gives China the unique opportunity to expand its own bilateral approach with its neighbour, but it also comes with big challenges. In particular, China has to deal with an Afghanistan that is, again, dominated by the Taliban, driven by a civil war economy, traditional clan and tribe structures, growing ungoverned spaces under the rule of warlords and militias, high instability, and lacking human security. The Taliban leadership will increase uncertainty about the future of Afghanistan, but China appears to be well prepared in this matter.⁴

With US-China rivalry growing and US engagement in Afghanistan diminishing, China may gradually complement the US role in Afghanistan rather than replace it.⁵ China's increasing collaboration with stakeholders in Afghanistan (in particular with the Taliban) is driven by gaining access to the country and its vast resources,⁶ but most importantly, by massive concerns

² Webinar "China's Role in Afghanistan," *Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management (IFK)*, National Defence Academy, Vienna, March 16, 2021.

³ Zhao Huasheng, "China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives," *A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program* (March 2012), 2, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120322_Zhao_ChinaAfghan_web.pdf.

⁴ Yaron Steinbuch, "China ready to deepen 'friendly and cooperative' Afghanistan relations," *New York Post*, August 16, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/08/16/china-ready-to-deepen-relationship-with-afghanistan/>.

⁵ "China's Role in Post-Conflict Afghanistan. Interview with Janan Mosazai," *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-role-in-post-conflict-afghanistan/>.

⁶ Tiffany P. Ng, *China's Role in Shaping the Future of Afghanistan* (Washington DC, Carnegie Policy Outlook, 2010), 2, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/china_role_afghanistan.pdf.

of a growing security vacuum.⁷ Hence, the collapse of the Ghani-Administration turned into reality as a consequence of the US military withdrawal, in combination with the paralysation and surrender of the Afghan National Army, amongst many other factors.

In this context, it is important to shed some light on how China is interfering in Afghanistan and what the first implications of the Taliban takeover are. What are the diplomatic, economic, security-political and socio-cultural instruments it applies? What are China's narratives and persuasion factors to implement its strategy? How are US-China relations and policies elaborating on Afghan soil and what are the implications of China's presence for Afghanistan's security architecture and for the whole region with the Taliban in power? Increasing Chinese engagement in combination with the 2021 regime change in Afghanistan will also leave a substantial impact on the EU and its role as a big donor for Afghanistan, referring to its room for manoeuvre in diplomacy, humanitarian crisis response, development assistance, conflict prevention and peacebuilding in Afghanistan after the US-military withdrawal.



<https://es.sott.net/article/57696-Para-que-quiere-China-una-base-militar-en-Afganistan>

⁷ Charu Sudan Kasturi, "Butterfly effect: Is China ready to step up in Afghanistan?," *Ozy*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.ozy.com/around-the-world/butterfly-effect-is-china-ready-to-step-up-in-afghanistan/429437/>.

Narratives of China with regard to Afghanistan

Narrative 1: Securing China's periphery

China has a strong focus to maintain a safe and secure periphery. China's comprehensive approach includes the establishment of regional security arrangements, providing technical assistance and development cooperation in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan as well as seizing investment opportunities there. China's security concerns even go so far as to promote the narrative that "China will remain insecure as long as its periphery is not finally integrated into the Chinese homeland".⁸ To this end, China makes use of a substantial diplomatic, economic and intelligence representation in its periphery and aims to include its neighbours in regional security- and economy-related organisations and agreements. Afghanistan is China's test case for promoting this narrative.

Narrative 2: Strengthening cooperation on counterterrorism and de-radicalisation

China aims to strengthen cooperation with its neighbours by promoting various initiatives and multilateral formats. By using its image as a non-interventionist country and making use of its status of "relative neutrality",⁹ China is able to establish regional political, economic and security organisations with the *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* (SCO) as best example, but also alternative platforms for dialogue with neighbouring countries. In the framework of the SCO, Afghanistan has been holding an observer status since June 2012. According to SCO estimates, production of narcotics reaches up to 65% of the revenues made by militias and warlords in the region.¹⁰ In this context, the SCO's main goal is to counter cross-border drug trafficking.

⁸ Webinar "China's Role in Afghanistan."

⁹ Yun Sun, "China's strategic assessment of Afghanistan," *War on the Rocks*, April 8, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-afghanistan/>.

¹⁰ "SCO Secretariat holds roundtable discussion on Afghanistan," *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Secretariat*, January 9, 2019, <http://eng.sectsc.org/news/20200109/621306.html>.

Narrative 3: Regional economic integration

China considers Afghanistan not as a “buffer zone” but as a strategic transit and trade hub for continental economic corridors. In the framework of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), where Afghanistan is already integrated through a Memorandum of Understanding with China in 2016,¹¹ China promotes the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan and of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor to Iran.¹² As a consequence, Afghanistan is in a strategic position for China to play a crucial role in regional economic integration.

Political relations China – Afghanistan

There is a long history of friendly relations between Afghanistan and China that started during the Han Dynasty more than 2,000 years ago.¹³ The ancient Silk Road and trade played a substantial role for their relations. China never invaded Afghanistan militarily, compared to other big powers that were active in the “Great Game” like Great Britain, the former Soviet Union and, most recently, the USA. Since 2001, China has been supporting war-torn Afghanistan with development assistance, humanitarian aid and direct investments.¹⁴ Amongst others, this also includes the donation of Covid-19 vaccines.¹⁵ On the other hand, Afghan exports to China remain low compared to exports to the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan but have gradually been increasing since 2018.¹⁶

¹¹ Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, *Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative – Review, Analysis and Prospects* (Kabul, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018), Introduction, X, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/15587.pdf>.

¹² Doris Vogl in the Webinar “China’s Role in Afghanistan.”

¹³ Serafettin Yilmaz 姚仕帆, *Afghanistan: China’s New Frontier?* (e-IR, Shandong University, 2012), Abstract, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287196250_Afghanistan_China’s_New_Frontier.

¹⁴ Noor Rahman Tahriri, *Afghanistan and China Trade Relationship* (Munich, MPRA Paper no. 82098, Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 2017), 2-3, https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/82098/MPRA_Paper_No._82098.

¹⁵ “China-donated COVID-19 vaccines handed over to Afghanistan,” *China.org.cn*, June 13, 2021, http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2021-06/13/content_77565513.htm.

¹⁶ Hujjatullah Zia, “A surge in China-Afghan trade,” *China Daily*, February 14, 2019, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201902/14/WS5c65346ba3106c65c34e9606.html>.

The relations between the two countries are of strategic relevance for both. Afghanistan has been dependent on foreign aid and welcomes any support from China. This has not changed after the Taliban takeover, as the new regime needs to feed the population to avoid insurgency. On the other hand, China shares a 70 km long border with Afghanistan with direct security implications in case of a regime change, collapse or unlimited civil war in Afghanistan. China is one of the biggest donors to Afghanistan, together with the USA, EU and several other countries. The Hamid Karzai- and Ashraf Ghani-Administrations as well as the Taliban strengthened diplomatic ties with China, e.g., with several official visits to Beijing. In terms of foreign aid, Afghanistan has managed to diversify its portfolio of donors from the East and the West since 2001.

The strategic importance of Afghanistan for China has several dimensions. On the political level, China's role in the intra-Afghan peace process has been growing constantly since 2016 and reflects the security concerns.¹⁷ China had organised a series of conferences that were conducted complementary to the US-efforts for peace talks. Concerning the ongoing peace process, there is a linkage to China's non-interference policy as China has always advocated that this process should be "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led". Contrary to that, China has criticised the US withdrawal as "abrupt and irresponsible", as it has led to more violence in Afghanistan,¹⁸ before the Taliban finally assumed power in August 2021.

However, not all Afghan stakeholders are satisfied with Chinese advances to provide an additional platform for peace talks. For example, former president Hamid Karzai, still a very influential stakeholder in Afghanistan's politics, skipped his participation in an intra-Afghan dialogue series organised by China in 2019.¹⁹ Probably the fact that delegations of the Taliban had also been invited to Beijing on a regular basis since 2017 kept

¹⁷ Sohrab Azad, "China's stake in the Afghan Peace Process," *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/chinas-stake-in-the-afghan-peace-process/>.

¹⁸ "China criticises US over decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan," *South Asia Monitor*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/afghanistan/china-criticises-us-over-decision-withdraw-troops-afghanistan>.

¹⁹ Ahmad Shah Erfanyar, "Karzai to skip intra-Afghan dialogue in Beijing," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, November 25, 2019, <https://pajhwok.com/2019/11/25/karzai-skip-intra-afghan-dialogue-beijing/>.

him from joining Chinese peace efforts. However, Beijing tried to move forward to support the peace process shortly before the Taliban took over. Together with Afghanistan and Pakistan, China presented an 8-point consensus on promoting Afghanistan's peace process.²⁰

In fact, China is doing everything in its portfolio to prevent a spillover of terrorism from Central Asia and Afghanistan onto its soil. This includes maintaining official diplomatic relations with the Taliban before and after their takeover to be able to influence them to a certain extent. In parallel to its existing relations with the official government of Afghanistan, Chinese political and diplomatic ties with the Taliban are going back as far as 1996, when the Taliban ruled more than two thirds of the country. Based on earlier diplomatic relations, China was stepping up its ties with the Taliban again around 2015, anticipating the consequences of a US withdrawal and recognising the increasing power of the Taliban movement. China even goes as far as offering the Taliban a road network in exchange for peace.²¹

With its "Taliban diplomacy", China already tried to manage the terrorist threat in Afghanistan by legitimising and recognising the Taliban as a future political power – years before they actually ousted the Ghani government in 2021. To put it in context, according to Thomas Ruttig, China perceives the *Balochistan Liberation Army* (a terrorist organisation operating in Pakistan and beyond) as a bigger threat to China's interests than the Taliban in Afghanistan.²² This can be underlined by the attack on the Serena Hotel in April 2021 in Quetta / Pakistan, where the Chinese Ambassador was lodging at that time.²³ It is obvious that China intends to profit from good relations

²⁰ "China, Afghanistan, Pakistan reach 8-point consensus on promoting Afghanistan's peace process," *CGTN*, June 4, 2021, <https://newsaf.cgtn.com/news/2021-06-04/China-Afghanistan-Pakistan-reach-8-point-consensus-10NWx1Q50Iw/index.html>.

²¹ Lynne O'Donnell, "China offers Taliban road network in exchange for peace," *Financial Times*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/69110b85-bce9-45cb-a2f4-eacd3edc6e3>.

²² Thomas Ruttig, "Climbing on China's Priority List: Views on Afghanistan from Beijing," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/climbing-on-chinas-priority-list-views-on-afghanistan-from-beijing/>.

²³ Reuters, "Car Bombing At Hotel In Southwest Pakistan Kills 4, Wounds 11," *Tolonews*, April 22, 2021, <https://tolonews.com/world-171619>.

with the Taliban for future economic projects in Afghanistan in the context of its Belt and Road Initiative.²⁴

Political relations in context: comparing US and Chinese approaches on Afghanistan

China's footprint in Afghanistan cannot be analysed as isolated from the engagement of the United States in this protracted conflict zone. China and the USA have various policies and instruments to deal with Afghanistan, but not necessarily diverging perceptions in all domains. Both the USA and China do not list the Taliban as a terrorist organisation, as both countries intend to maintain, at least, constructive relations with them. On the operational level, both countries had collaborated to a certain extent in the fields of logistics, police training and mine awareness training during the US military presence in Afghanistan.²⁵ Both do not want Afghanistan to be a safe haven for transnational terrorists and are taking action against terrorist financing (by the Taliban, Al Qaida and other militant groups and extremists) in the whole region. To this end, both are members of the *Financial Action Task Force* (FATF).²⁶ In addition, China and the USA are, together with Russia and Pakistan, members of the *Extended Troika* to facilitate peace talks, political settlement and inclusive governance in Afghanistan. This body may be of relevance also after the Taliban takeover. However, both China and the USA were explicitly against a restoration of an *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* by the Taliban²⁷ as they prefer a less rigid political system in

²⁴ "China signals veto in standoff over UN Afghanistan mission," *Aljazeera News*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/17/china-signals-veto-in-standoff-over-un-afghanistan-mission>

²⁵ Pan Guang, "USA und Taliban unterzeichneten ein Friedensabkommen, aber die Menschen um ihn herum riechen keinen Frieden" (translation from Mandarin), *Observer Network*, March 5, 2020, https://www.guanchna.cn/PanGuang/2020_03_05_539951.shtml. Additional: Ng, *China's Role in Shaping the Future of Afghanistan*, 3.

²⁶ Adam Weinstein, "What Will It Take for Pakistan to Pressure the Taliban Into a Cease-Fire?," *Lawfare Blog*, February 12, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-will-it-take-pakistan-pressure-taliban-cease-fire>. Additional: *Financial Action Task Force* (FATF) on <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/about/>.

²⁷ SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction Quarterly Report No. 51, April 30, 2021), 94, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-04-30qr.pdf>.

Afghanistan. Probably both the USA and China may have to accept the political reality of a Taliban-Emirate under certain conditions.

In fact, China and the USA have substantial overlapping factors in their policies and strategies for Afghanistan. Despite their growing rivalry, it appears that China-US interaction in the context of Afghanistan is working out quite well on the operational level. The lowest common denominator of their interests is that they “want the security threat contained” in Afghanistan.²⁸ Barnett Rubin, US-expert on Afghanistan, even states that, although China has been increasingly present in Afghanistan “to test the limits of US-China collaboration, China wants to help the USA because they share a common interest in a stable Afghanistan.”²⁹

Both countries are collaborating with Afghanistan on the basis of political agreements. China signed a “Cooperation Pact” with Afghanistan in 2012. China has agreed to support Afghanistan with 24 million USD in development assistance, border security and disease control assets. In return, Afghanistan “reaffirmed China’s sovereignty over the Xinjiang region”.³⁰ Epidemics and border security are clearly transnational issues, especially in times of Covid-19, and it is noteworthy that China was well aware of the dangers of epidemics long before the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

The USA and Afghanistan fixed their special relations in the *Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between Afghanistan and the United States of America*. This agreement was signed in 2012, the same year when China signed its cooperation pact with Afghanistan.³¹ The US-Afghan agreement should serve as a basis for future cooperation but ended obviously in August 2021 after the US-withdrawal. Therefore, Afghanistan had the special status of a “Major non-NATO Ally” together with (only) 17 other non-NATO nations worldwide between 2012 and 2021.

²⁸ Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan*, Foreword, V.

²⁹ Mat Nashed, “The road to peace in Afghanistan passes to China,” *Ozy*, September 9, 2019, <https://www.ozy.com/the-new-and-the-next/the-road-to-peace-in-afghanistan-passes-through-china/95969/>.

³⁰ “Beijing, Kabul sign cooperation pact,” *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, June 8, 2012, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-afghanistan-cooperation-pact/24607671.html>.

³¹ *Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between Afghanistan and USA*, May 2012, <https://photos.state.gov/libraries/afghanistan/231771/PDFs/2012-05-01-scan-of-spa-english.pdf>.

In 2019, Afghanistan received more than one quarter of US total military assistance (this was more than the US support for Israel) and was supported with 4.9 billion USD, the highest amount of US foreign aid (civil and military) for a country worldwide.³² From 2002-2017, China has been providing 400 million USD in financial aid for Afghanistan,³³ a very small amount compared to the USA. China perceives its support not as a donation, but as a long-term, strategic investment for a security cooperation with any regime in Afghanistan. In this context, it appears that China had, to a certain extent, anticipated the sooner-or-later takeover of the Taliban.

Security relations China – Afghanistan

Security in Afghanistan is of utmost relevance for China as the violent conflict has negative consequences for the whole region. Until 2020, China provided approx. 70 million USD of military aid.³⁴ Another aspect is to limit the huge opium influx from Afghanistan into China.³⁵ Out of these massive security concerns, China has been following the situation in Afghanistan and the actions of the present stakeholders (including the USA) very closely at least since 2001, in order to develop its own approach to contain the armed conflict in Afghanistan.

China increased its security relations with Afghanistan around 2017/2018, after several visits of the Afghan President Ghani in China. At that time, China was starting to fund a “training camp” for the Afghan National Army in the Wakhan Corridor on Afghan soil, close to the Chinese border. In this context, China is using its narrative of “military cooperation” to support Afghan security structures and deploy Chinese soldiers but would never call

³² Kaia Hubbard, “3 Charts that illustrate where U.S. foreign aid goes,” *U.S. News*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2021-05-24/afghanistan-israel-largest-recipients-of-us-foreign-aid>.

³³ Sun, “China’s strategic assessment of Afghanistan.”

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar, *China’s Evolving Stance on Afghanistan: Towards More Robust Diplomacy with “Chinese Characteristics”* (Warsaw, Strategic File No. 22 (58), Oct. 2014), 3, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/184324/PISM%20Strategic%20File%20no%2022%20\(58\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/184324/PISM%20Strategic%20File%20no%2022%20(58).pdf).

it a “military base”. It is reported that there are several hundreds of Chinese soldiers and engineers in the Wakhan Corridor to help construct a camp, but information on this project is very rare.³⁶ In any case, it shows that China is highly active in Afghanistan and has its boots on the ground.

Chinese Military Cooperation in Afghanistan



<https://www.inkstonenews.com/china/china-fund-construction-anti-terrorist-training-camp-afghanistan/article/2161869> (Illustration: Cena Lau)

China’s strong commitment to counterterrorism and de-radicalisation is focusing on the homeland (in particular on the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) as well as on security in its periphery. The worst-case scenario for China would be a possible transnational unification of violent extremists and militant Islamist groups alongside its western and southern borders.³⁷ To pre-empt this, China is very active in its periphery, in particular with regard to Afghanistan, where, for example, a re-unification of *Al-Qaida* and the *Islamic State in Khorasan Province* (ISKP) terrorist organisations is

³⁶ Kinling Lo, “Why is China funding a military outpost in Afghanistan?,” *Inkstonenews*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.inkstonenews.com/china/china-fund-construction-anti-terrorist-training-camp-afghanistan/article/2161869>.

³⁷ Webinar “China’s Role in Afghanistan.”

possible.³⁸ In this context, China has been active in establishing the *Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (RATS SCO), a permanent platform of the SCO in which China promotes regional cooperation for counterterrorism, against separatism as well as extremism. Afghanistan is included in the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure RATS as part of a greater Chinese de-radicalisation-strategy. In this context, China aims to identify adversaries in its periphery, based on an increased use of intelligence, with special regard to Afghanistan.³⁹

China is also the driving force behind the *Afghanistan-Pakistan-China Trilateral Dialogue* that was established in 2017 to strengthen collaboration efforts on counterterrorism. China perceives Afghanistan as a substantial threat since hundreds of Uyghur militants appear to be active in Northern Afghanistan, amongst many other militant groups and insurgents.⁴⁰ The joint statement of the *Trilateral Dialogue* meeting on July 7, 2020 speaks a clear language with regard to the Xinjiang-Uyghur question,⁴¹ as all sides (not only China, but also Pakistan and Afghanistan) agreed “to combat the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM; the Chinese label for Uyghur militant Islamists), and all other terrorist forces and networks posing threats to our common security”.⁴² According to this agreement, China is enabled to prosecute Uyghur militants operating in Afghanistan, in particular by making use of its intelligence units.⁴³ The presence of Chinese intelligence in Afghanistan has manifested in the so-called “Kabul spy case” (December 2020), when several Chinese spies were arrested in Kabul.⁴⁴ It appears that China is not only

³⁸ Ruttig, “Climbing on China’s Priority List.”

³⁹ Lynne O’Donnell, “Afghanistan wanted Chinese Mining Investment. It got a Chinese Spy Ring Instead,” *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/afghanistan-china-spy-ring-mcc-mining-negotiations-mineral-wealth/>.

⁴⁰ Chienyu Shih, “The Uyghur factor: China perceives Afghanistan as a threat,” *Sunday Guardian Live*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/uyghur-factor-china-perceives-afghanistan-threat>.

⁴¹ Doris Vogl in the Webinar “China’s Role in Afghanistan.”

⁴² “Joint Press Release of the 3rd Round China - Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministers’ Strategic Dialogue,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Afghanistan*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.af/press-releases/1901-joint-press-release-of-the-3rd-round-china-afghanistan-pakistan-trilateral-vice-foreign-ministers-strategic-dialogue.htm>.

⁴³ Webinar “China’s Role in Afghanistan.”

⁴⁴ O’Donnell, “Afghanistan wanted Chinese Mining Investment.”

collaborating with the Taliban before and after gaining power, but also making use of the Haqqani-Network, a terrorist organisation linked to the Taliban, to hunt down Uyghurs in Afghanistan.⁴⁵

China is showing an increasing presence in international UN peacekeeping and political missions. In Afghanistan, the NATO-led *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF; 2002-2014) or *Resolute Support Mission* (RSM; 2015-2021) were, of course, no option for Beijing. However, China made use of its leverage as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSR) and advocated its *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) infrastructure project into the mandate of the UN political mission UNAMA, active in Afghanistan since 2002.⁴⁶ This case shows that China is using its UNSR position to add a different dimension to BRI by including it in UN Resolutions for their own purpose and not in purpose for the mission, as the USA had criticised.⁴⁷ In addition, China has contributed with military officers to UNAMA since 2017 to be able to follow and shape UNAMA's approach in Afghanistan more intensively. It is not unrealistic that China may send military peacekeepers to Afghanistan to secure its border regions against security threats.⁴⁸

Put into context, Afghanistan is strategically relevant, but Pakistan is still much more important for China in terms of security and economic cooperation, with the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor* (CPEC) as the strategic infrastructure project. The regime change in Afghanistan 2021 represents a big challenge for China. However, if Pakistan as a nuclear power would collapse, this would be a much higher risk for China and international security. On another note, "Pakistan does not want China to become directly involved in Afghanistan".⁴⁹ In fact, being active in Afghanistan is a very tricky political issue for China in order not to collide with the interests of Pakistan in Afghanistan and its strategic environment.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "China signals veto in standoff over UN Afghanistan mission," *Aljazeera News*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ma Haiyun, "Could China send peacekeeping troops to Afghanistan?" *ThinkChina*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/could-china-send-peacekeeping-troops-afghanistan>.

⁴⁹ Ruttig, "Climbing on China's Priority List."

Economic relations China – Afghanistan

Before 1996, China's economic footprint in Afghanistan was relatively limited, as it had experienced war since 1979 (Soviet intervention, civil war). This has changed since the Taliban established power in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. At that time, China's demand for resources was growing as fast as its economic growth was speeding up. In 2020, China's official economic approach in Afghanistan is determined as follows:

China will continue to support the integration of Afghanistan in regional cooperation. We welcome Afghanistan to take an active part in the development of China-proposed Silk Road Economic Belt and, with its geographical advantage and resource endowment, to become an active player in regional connectivity, energy transport and regional trade.⁵⁰

With the aim to improve regional connectivity, ensure the transport of goods and maintain the stability of regional supply chains, China is promoting the reduction of regional import tariffs and trade barriers. To this end, the *China-Afghanistan-Central Asian Countries* (CA-5) Meeting on Trade and Connectivity was held on December 9, 2020. Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Luo Zhaohui commented on the CA-5 Summit that economic cooperation is key:

All parties should further step up cooperation in agriculture, energy, infrastructure, production capacity and other fields, and improve the level of industrialization. China is willing to leverage its strength in digital technology and scale and work with all parties to build a “digital Silk Road”.⁵¹

⁵⁰ “Promote China-Afghanistan Cooperation and Bring New Life to the Silk Road. Vice President Li Yuanchao of the People's Republic of China,” *Embassy of the PRC in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, November 5, 2015, <http://af.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxw/t1312041.htm>.

⁵¹ “Vice Foreign Ministers of China-Afghanistan-Central Asian Countries Hold a Virtual Meeting on Trade and Connectivity,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC*, December 9, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1839389.shtml.

Since 2014, China has been the largest foreign investor⁵² and biggest trading partner⁵³ of Afghanistan. The biggest investment announcement so far was to win a joint bid of three Chinese companies worth up to 3.5 billion USD for the *Ainak Copper Mine*, a 28-km² area in Logar Province.⁵⁴ However, by strengthening its already existing diplomatic ties with the Taliban since 2016, China was de-legitimising the Afghan government under Ashraf Ghani that was still highly dependent on foreign aid and financial support. Then-President Ghani, well aware of the worsening situation in all aspects, tried to move China into action to fulfil the Ainak contract, start the exploitation of the Copper Mine and create jobs for the Afghan population, but growing insecurity and other issues made it impossible.

China won the mine contract already in 2008, but it has always hesitated to invest because of rising security concerns. Its negative experience with the Ainak Copper Mine was a turning point for China to focus more on security as this mine can only be exploited if the overall security situation is reliable. The Afghan government was expecting huge revenues and benefits from this project including social welfare and job creation. This has not manifested yet as the risks and uncertainties appear to be too high for China to invest. In addition, this strategic mine investment was also slowed down by corruption and other issues.⁵⁵

On the other hand, China has more than enough time to wait until the political and/or security situation is in favour to start the exploitation process. This appears to be possible under the Taliban regime.

In addition, the substantial oil (est. 1.6 billion barrels) and gas (est. approx. 15 trillion cubic feet) reserves may also be of future interest for China. The transport of these commodities is relatively easy as China is opening up its

⁵² Banco Santander, "Afghanistan: Foreign investment. FDI in Figures, as of May 2021," <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/establish-overseas/afghanistan/investing>.

⁵³ Safi and Alizada, *Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative*.

⁵⁴ Monika Chansoria, "China is expanding its footprint in Afghanistan," *Sunday Guardian*, September 7, 2013, www.sunday-guardian.com/analysis/china-is-expanding-its-footprint-in-afghanistan.

⁵⁵ O'Donnell, "Afghanistan wanted Chinese Mining Investment."

infrastructure via the Wakhan Corridor and is able to move goods directly from Afghanistan to China.⁵⁶

Socio-cultural relations China – Afghanistan

The cultural relations between China and Afghanistan are relatively sparse, but there are several activities in this context. The Confucius Institute at Kabul University has been an important Chinese institution to promote culture and education exchange in Afghanistan since 2008. Up to 2013, the Confucius Institute had 174 Afghan students enrolled, and 50 of them studied in China with scholarships sponsored by the Chinese government.⁵⁷ Due to security concerns, the Confucius Institute in Kabul had to close for 18 months in October 2010 but reopened in 2012.⁵⁸

China has also an interest in preserving cultural heritage in its periphery in order to develop good relations with its neighbours. On May 12, 2021, China signed separate cooperation agreements with Afghanistan and Pakistan to protect and restore cultural artefacts in the *China-Afghanistan and China-Pakistan Joint Statements on Cooperation in the Asian Initiative for Cultural Heritage Conservation* under the framework of the Asian Initiative for Cultural Heritage Conservation.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Chansoria, “China is expanding its footprint.”

⁵⁷ “The Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan and Confucius Institute of Kabul University jointly hold ‘My Chinese Dream’ Speech Competition,” *Embassy of the PRC in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, October 21, 2013, <http://af.china-embassy.org/eng/zagx/sbgx/t1095375.htm>.

⁵⁸ “China reopens Confucius Institute in Afghanistan,” *Zeenews*, April 8, 2013, https://zeenews.india.com/news/south-asia/china-reopens-confucius-institute-in-afghanistan_840544.html.

⁵⁹ “In Asia first, China inks bilateral cooperation agreements on heritage conservation with Afghanistan, Pakistan,” *CGTN*, May 12, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-05-12/China-expands-action-to-safeguard-heritage-with-Afghanistan-Pakistan-10cr1JCYvBK/index.html>.

Conclusion

In 2021, the stability of Central and South Asia is at stake⁶⁰, with rising insecurity in Afghanistan negatively impacting on the whole region.⁶¹ There is one hegemon, China, with several failing states in its strategic environment. In this context, China is promoting the general narrative that “a safer Afghanistan implies a safer China”.⁶² China has the ability to make important contributions to Afghan stability⁶³ with a different approach compared to the USA, especially after the takeover of the Taliban in 2021. In this context, China’s engagement in Afghanistan represents a strategic test-case to show its ability and capacity to achieve a secure and stable periphery. Therefore, China has switched from an economic- and assistance-driven approach (approx. between 2001 and 2011) to a more security-orientated approach (2011-2021). The main driver for change was the growing instability in Afghanistan and its potential negative impacts for China.

However, China is well aware that a purely military solution and/or counterterrorism alone are not the appropriate instruments to solve the Afghan conflict and prevent negative spillover, as British, Soviet and US-interventions in Afghanistan have shown. However, it appears that China’s policy of non-interference has changed over time with Afghanistan as a vibrant example of rising Chinese engagement in several dimensions. In this context, China will follow an engagement strategy by supporting and appeasing any regime, including the Taliban, which is capable of managing Afghan soil on the basis of a low-intensity conflict that will not harm China’s security interests. In the case of complete mismanagement of the new Taliban regime, or if the Taliban continue to harbour and support international terrorism on a large scale, China will most likely switch to a

⁶⁰ “Joint Statement of the Fourth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue on Afghanistan’s Peace and Reconciliation Process,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, June 3, 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.af/news/3076-joint-statement-of-the-fourth-china-afghanistan-pakistan-trilateral-foreign-ministers-dialogue-on-afghanistan-s-peace-and-reconciliation-process.html?fbclid=IwAR3o_2QzHh9ThVckZW8zsm0UQRIoQMDiZtHa9vjX9CZv wV39AuXIBjkQlyM.

⁶¹ Otmar Höll in the Webinar “China’s Role in Afghanistan.”

⁶² Ali Baqeri in the Webinar “China’s Role in Afghanistan.”

⁶³ Ng, *China’s Role in Shaping the Future of Afghanistan*, Summary.

more military-related containment strategy if vital security interests are at stake. However, so far, China is reluctant to spend money in Afghanistan, because the interest rate is still too high to make it profitable,⁶⁴ as the standstill of China's Ainak Mine investment in Afghanistan has shown.

China is, without a doubt, increasing its leverage on Afghanistan whilst the USA completely reduced its footprint by August 31, 2021. Up to this date, China has shown a low profile in Afghanistan. This may change if security turns to the better or to the worse. In a worst-case scenario, trans-national terrorism from Afghanistan under Taliban rule may spill massively over into Xinjiang province. In this case, a Chinese military intervention may be possible.

In any case, China will do everything to contain Afghanistan in terms of security and may support inter-Afghan reconciliation with an inclusive approach towards all stakeholders if the Taliban comply to a certain extent. By establishing special relations with the new Taliban regime, China has already created a comparative advantage for its strategic approach to Afghanistan and leverage on them. In a best-case scenario, if overall security under the Taliban allows, China may start with geo-strategic infrastructure projects and mine exploitation in Afghanistan relatively quickly within a timeframe up to 2025.

So far, China's policy in Afghanistan is not only addressing symptoms of the conflict but tackles some root causes by focusing on a mixture of diplomatic and economic support, investments and development assistance on a larger scale. In this context, China has introduced its neighbour Afghanistan to several international organisations and formats to be able to collaborate on a larger scale and promote collective security. On the other hand, the perception that China has negative intentions appears still to be stronger in and around Afghanistan than the (undoubtedly) overall need for multilateral cooperation in the region that China is promoting. Regarding cultural soft power influence (lifestyle, education, social norms, or moral standards) it needs to be considered that a majority of the Afghan population tends to be neither open to Western nor to Chinese influence.

⁶⁴ Farshid Hakimyar in the Webinar "China's Role in Afghanistan."

In another best-case scenario, China will provide any support needed for stabilisation, recovery and peaceful reconciliation of Afghanistan out of strategic reasons, even if this process may last another 50 years. The time factor appears to be in favour of China and the Taliban, but both actors have to move forward and deliver prosperity, social welfare and the rule of law according to international norms and standards.

In a realistic scenario, China will choose a dualistic approach: On the one hand launch regional infrastructure projects, on the other hand continue to promote bilateral agreements with neighbouring states that may serve China's interests best. The bilateral approach, however, may not serve the Central and South Asian region as a whole, referring to the massive economic crisis and overall poverty. Instead, a comprehensive security and development agreement on a regional and multilateral basis would add a different dimension. Relatively new institutions like the SCR may serve this regional approach to achieve overall stability in the long run. Economic and security cooperation is the only way forward for China – with the test case of Afghanistan as a vibrant example.