



China's Approach to the Afghan Situation: Navigating Post-Withdrawal Security and Diplomacy

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Abstract

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover in August 2021 may appear as having reverted the clock twenty years. However, this perception is misleading; the global landscape has transformed significantly over the past two decades, with new actors emerging and existing relationships shifting. This master's project investigates Chinese engagement in post-withdrawal Afghanistan through multiple levels of analysis (local, regional, interregional, and global).

Although the stance that China is taking about Afghanistan diverges from the majority of countries, the pace of the engagement process is slow rather than fast. On one hand, China is no different from any other State, China has not formally recognized the Taliban Government. On the other hand, China is diplomatically engaging with the Taliban in a way that does not differ from engagement with a formally recognized government. These diplomatic relations reach a point where acts that might represent *de facto* or *de jure* recognition become blurred: China became in September 2023 the first country to appoint an ambassador to Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover, and China at the end of the same year accepted an Afghan ambassador to China appointed by the Taliban. Namely, China is accepting diplomatic representatives from a government that China officially (publicly) does not recognize. This contradictory stance shows the length that China is willing to go on the political sector to maintain a good relationship with the new *de facto* authorities of Afghanistan, but keeping on hold the formal recognition of the Taliban Government while reiterating the need of the (Taliban) Afghan authorities to break ties with terrorist groups and preventing Afghan soil from being used against Chinese interests.

Notably, China is not working in isolation: Afghanistan's neighboring countries have been participating in the Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meetings to emphasize the need for counterterrorism efforts from the Taliban, in particular, and from all actors, in general. While these collective engagements remain limited in tangible outcomes at the moment, they play a vital role in shaping the social networks that underpin the new (Taliban) Afghan government, where security issues take precedence over other concerns.

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China leverages the situation in Afghanistan on multiple platforms. In particular, China has utilized the chaotic US withdrawal and the subsequent freezing of Afghan assets in US to portray itself as a responsible power, criticizing the humanitarian crisis that was unfolded in Afghanistan after twenty years of US supported governments.

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List acronyms

BLA – Balochistan Liberation Army

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CAPEIC - Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company

CGTN – China Global Television Network

CNPC – China National Petroleum Corporation

CPEC – China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization

ETIM – East Turkestan Islamic Movement

FDI – Foreign Direct Investment

GSI – Global Security Initiative

IRGC – Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp

IS-K – Islamic State – Khorasan

NASC – New Asian Security Concept

NRFA – National Resistance Front of Afghanistan

NWFP – North-West Frontier Province

QCCM – Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism

RSCT – Regional Security Complex Theory

SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

TTP – Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan

TTT – Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan

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UN – United Nations

UNOCHA – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UNSC - United Nations Security Council

List of key people

Ashraf Ghani – President of Afghanistan (September 2014 - August 2021)

Bilal Karimi – (Taliban) Afghan Ambassador to China (since end 2023)

Jiang Zaidong – Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan (since September 2023)

Qin Gang – Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs (December 2022 – July 2023)

Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi – (Taliban) Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs (since September 2021)

Mullah Baradar Akhund – (Taliban) Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of Afghanistan (since September 2021)

Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada – (Taliban) Supreme Leader of Afghanistan

Nasir Ahmad Faiq – Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations (since December 2021)

Roza Otunbayeva – UN special envoy on Afghanistan

Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai – the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister

Suhail Shaheen – Taliban spokesperson in Qatar

Wang Yi – Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs (March 2013 – December 2022 and since July 2023)

Xi Jinping – General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (since 2012)

Yu Minghui – Head of the China-Afghanistan Trade Committee

Yue Xiaoyong – Chinese special envoy for Afghanistan

Zhao Xing – Chinese Ambassador in Afghanistan (since September 2023)

Introduction

In August 2021, the Taliban surprised the world with a rapid takeover of Afghanistan, forcing an accelerated US withdrawal from Afghan soil. The withdrawal had been planned to conclude on the symbolic date of September 11th, exactly 20 years after the September 11 attacks (BBC News, 2021; Marcus, 2021). This marks the second time that the Taliban has seized control of the Government of Afghanistan, and it presents a new challenge to the Taliban and the international community. As Barfield (2022, p. 373) points out, the international donors that allowed the Taliban success on the takeover by funding the “low-cost insurgencies” lack the incentive to continue the funding of a “high-cost government”. However, as Barfield (2022, p. 311) also points, historically, no Afghan Government has ever been stable without a significant foreign source of revenue. The U.S. and Western countries, which provided critical support to the Karzai and Ghani governments, did not extend the same support to the Taliban after their takeover. Considering that at least two third of the Afghan Government previously funding was coming from the US (Abbas, 2023, p. 2,3), the Taliban found itself in a precarious situation, struggling to access the amount of funds that were previously available to the US supported government. In order to secure the necessary funds, the Taliban government must engage with the international community.

As Abbas (2023, p. 167) mentions, the second generation of many religious movements alters the “group’s fundamental essence and future”. This is also true for the Taliban, which has exhibited a greater tolerance toward Shia communities (Abbas, 2023, p. 117), in part as a need to differentiate from a more radical group in the region, the IS-K (Islamic State – Khorasan) (Giustozzi, 2022, pp. 180–182, 218). However, these modest changes have not been perceived as sufficient by the international community. The situation in Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban resembles in some ways the First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996-2001), when the Taliban government was largely isolated internationally, with only the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia offering diplomatic recognition to the Taliban Government (Abbas, 2023, Chapter 2). The Second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is

even more isolated in terms of diplomatic recognition, as no state has officially recognized the Taliban government three years after their takeover.

Despite this lack of formal recognition, there are still significant interests in Afghanistan, and informal relations continue at various levels. Afghanistan, often referred to as the "Heart of Asia" due to its geostrategic location, holds the potential to play a key role in China's strategy for Central Asia Region, which aims to promote economic development in the region as a means to combat the "three evils" (terrorism, separatism and religious extremism) and stabilize the region, which ultimately would also help on the promotion of its national goal of development and stabilization of Xinjiang (Pantucci & Petersen, 2022, p. 22). The concern about the stability of Xinjiang is not new. Domestic stability has been a security focus of China since the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping attempted "to shift the focus from revolution to stability" (Vuori, 2024, pp. 49–52), and Xinjiang has been specially targeted on the strike hard campaign and singled out by the CCP in a 1996 Politburo paper as the most significant threat to stability and unity of the PRC (Vuori, 2024, pp. 140–143).

Although China has not yet provided official recognition of the Taliban Government, both sides have engaged with each other. The Taliban have sent "ambassadors" to four countries (China, Pakistan, Russia and Turkmenistan) (BBC News, 2022), and China became the first country to appoint a new ambassador in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover (Yunus Yawar & Greenfield, 2023), which might be considered a *de facto* recognition. However, some experts believe that China is in a difficult position to achieve its objectives. Verma (2023b) outlines four reasons to justify his position on why "China's counterterrorism diplomacy will most likely not be able to achieve its objectives":

- 1) The New Asian Security Concept (NASC) that considers that development is the key element to obtain security in the region is heavily influenced by Chinese own culture and history. Its extrapolation to other countries is not immediate, quite the contrary. There is evidence that the development has not led to deradicalization in other countries. In Pakistan, for instance, development efforts have not deradicalized the country, instead, it allowed radical groups like IS-K to recruit highly educated people (Giustozzi, 2022, pp. 105–108).

- 2) China's inability to change Taliban ideology. The hardliners inside the Taliban might defect to other groups like IS-K or Al-Qaeda if the Taliban are perceived as compromising their ideology.
- 3) The Afghan state lacks the necessary infrastructure and capabilities to effectively combat transnational terrorist groups operating within its borders.
- 4) The Taliban are unlikely to take military action against Uyghurs or other entities that China perceives as a threat in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Taliban are equally unlikely to allow China to undertake direct military action in Afghanistan. Aligning with an atheist government like China to act against Muslim groups could alienate the Taliban's allies and bolster IS-K's recruitment efforts.

While these points are well-reasoned, they can also be nuanced. The NASC, which China promotes as an ideal for fostering regional security, also includes a less-discussed but equally significant component: the repression of destabilizing factors (Andersen & Yang, 2018). This aspect of China's development model, its authoritarian control over ethnic and religious minorities represents an element that may not be easily exported. Moreover, when it comes to the issue of Taliban ideology, while it is widely accepted that the Taliban is an extremist group reluctant to compromise, there is also evidence that the Taliban has shown a capacity for pragmatic adaptation when necessary. For instance, Verma (2022a) himself acknowledges that the Taliban are able to compromise on their "strict Islamic ideology" in order to sustain their operations; during the insurgency, the Taliban lifted the ban on opium cultivation and taxed its production in order to finance their operation. This indicates that the Taliban may be more flexible than they appear when it comes to securing financial resources or maintaining control. Regarding the third point, while Afghan capacity might be limited to combat transnational terrorist groups, the activity of IS-K almost came to a halt in 2023 due to a funding crisis that is lasting from 2018, and the Taliban have made efforts to limit the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from inside Afghanistan (Guistozzi, 2024).

The last point mentioned by Verma, the unlikelihood of the Taliban to take military action (or allow Chinese direct military action) due to concerns about aligning with an atheist government, seems to assume implicitly that China is the only regional actor invested in

Afghanistan's stability. Nevertheless, among the six neighbors of Afghanistan, five are Muslim countries (Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). All the neighbors have an interest in avoiding extremist spillovers coming from Afghanistan. China does not need to act directly in Afghanistan, nor does it seem like a natural outcome following its historic pragmatic approach (Westcott, 2022). China can leverage its relations with other neighbors to achieve its desired outcome of promoting stability in the region, or at least preventing that the spillovers from extending to Xinjiang. Cooperation with these neighboring states can be instrumental in managing the "Afghan issue"¹ without direct Chinese military involvement.

As China increases its economic, political and military influence in the world, China becomes more active in its role as a global security actor. The recent events in Afghanistan serve as a way to study how China employs its influence around security issues. The project aims to study:

How is China employing its influence to handle the security dynamics surrounding Afghanistan's situation after the Taliban takeover and US withdrawal?

The project is structured as follows: After this introduction section, the methodology applied in the project is explained. Then, the theories selected for this this project are described and discussed. Next, the analysis section is presented. Finally, the project finishes with the conclusions section.

Methodology

This project takes the form of a single qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2009) of how China operates as a global security actor around a specific topic. The case should be a concrete entity within a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Chapter 4). In this project the entity is bounded by restricting the security interaction studied to the ones related to the situation in Afghanistan. It is also bounded in time as it considers as starting point the Taliban

¹ Term used in Chinese media and official statements to refer to the situation in Afghanistan.

takeover in August 2021 and as end point December 2024. This case study is especially significant because of the geographical situation of Afghanistan; its proximity to China represents an opportunity to observe how China influences the security dynamics around an issue that cannot be avoided and might provide insights on how China would react toward more distant threats. The complex geographical situation of Afghanistan in the periphery of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East and recent history of Afghanistan also provide an interesting point for the case study due to the large number of stakeholders involved.

As in any case study, these bounds that are chosen for the project's entity help to define the studied problem, but the limits might not always be very clear. From a time perspective, it is important to consider that while the starting point of the entity is August 2021, there are historical context and long-lasting relations that might still be important (e.g. BRI investments in the region).

The use of a qualitative case study is especially relevant in this case due to the difficulty of quantifying a topic that involves complex geopolitical dynamics. Quantitative methods may not adequately capture the depth and richness of these interactions that have been forged during a long period and limit the interactions to a specific dimension (e.g. foreign direct investment). When numerical data is provided in this project, it is with the objective of enhancing the qualitative description and to exemplify the magnitude of a specific topic, but no quantitative analysis is performed.

Choice of theories

The project follows a relational approach (Qin, 2016), which provides a good framework for exploring how the Afghan issue might be constrained by the relational circles in which the actors are embedded. While the primary stakeholders chosen in the question of the project are States (China and other neighboring countries), there are other implicit actors like the Taliban. The relational approach from Qin (2016) is well-suited for this question because unlike other mainstream International Relations Theories, it does not impose that the actor should be a State. This flexibility avoids the complexity of having to assess, for example, whether the current Afghanistan could be considered a State from a Realism perspective or

whether the Taliban Government could be considered as a representative of the Afghan State. This theoretical approach is accompanied by an additional theory, Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan, 1983; Buzan & Wæver, 2003) that provides a useful framework to structure the project. While the first theory provides a framework that focuses on the relations, the second theory provides a framework that studies the security dynamics by sector (economic, political, military, etc.) and with an emphasis on the regional level.

Data

The data for this project consist of academic literature on the role of China in Central Asia and South Asia, relevant official documents released by the different foreign affairs ministries (e.g. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, etc.), relevant reports and newspaper articles.

Regarding the newspapers, three news agencies have been consulted weekly to gather all new news related to Sino-Afghan relations, starting at the beginning by gathering all the articles from August 2021. Two of them (BBC and Reuters) use English as the main communication language, and one of them (Xinhuanet) uses Chinese as the main communication language. While with only these three sources is not possible to guarantee to cover all the relations between China and neighboring countries on the Afghan issue, after several years of news articles, the general topics that are covered in each new agency are exhausted (e.g. Xinhuanet is the only agency making references to the trade expositions in China that market Afghan products). These news articles might also help to find specific conferences and events, whose reports and official statements can be searched later for completeness. Furthermore, as specific topics have been investigated and more local newspapers (e.g. Afghanistan International, TOLO news, Ariana News, etc.) were discovered and consulted for additional information.

The idea behind the use of many different sources is to exhaust the topics, and be able to triangulate (Carter et al., 2014) the information. As every source of information might present some bias in the type of information that it provides and the way it provides the

information (as already commented for the news agencies), obtaining the information for a specific topic from different sources is a typical custom in qualitative studies.

AI usage

The work of this project has been conducted by the author. However, common AI tools were used during the project to assist with document translation (Baidu Fanyi, 2024; Google Translate, 2024), and to enhance the fluency of the text by providing suggestions for rewriting sentences that initially appeared sloppy in terms of grammar (ChatGPT, 2024; Google DeepMind, 2024).

Limitations

This project presents several limitations, the foremost being its timeline. No doubt, many of the limitations discussed in the following paragraphs could have been minimized if a longer duration were available.

Even if the author finds the general topic for the project interesting and tried to start diving into it some time before the start of the project, the initial background knowledge on the relations between China and Afghanistan, and neighboring countries was very shallow. The complexity of the region with many transnational jihadist groups, whose structures are not so well known, and a situation that evolves rapidly with factions inside of the groups changing allegiances, makes the starting point in the region very challenging.

The complexity of the region is exacerbated by the peculiarity of Afghanistan's location, which borders many traditionally defined regions, but it is not properly included in any. It is always in the periphery of South Asia as a neighbor of Pakistan, in the periphery of Central Asia as a neighbor of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, in the periphery of the Middle East as a neighbor of Iran, and it even has a narrow 92 km border in the Wakhan corridor with China. Many authors in the literature are only interested in one of the regions and often they forget the impact of the others when describing Afghanistan as if the described issues were not impacted or influenced by actors of other regions.

Linguistic competencies might be the cause of this segmented approach in the literature. Two main languages are spoken in Afghanistan, Dari (a local dialect of Persian) and Pashto. However, for a deep analysis of the official documents and on field study of the neighboring countries, aside from these languages, at least Chinese, Russian and Urdu might also be needed. Of course, this complexity also affects the current author, who only has a limited knowledge of Chinese, and an even smaller knowledge of Persian.

Theories

Relational approach

According to Qin (2016), mainstream International Relations Theories are focused excessively on the actors, often overlooking the relational aspect of the field. This focus on rational individual actors, positioned as autonomous units fails to capture the dynamic, interconnected nature of international relations. Qin (2016), following a common sociological approach that emphasizes the relationships between the agents, remembers that the actors are always “actor-in-relations” instead of isolated entities, the actions are always taken in a specific context. A rational action needs to consider the relational context in which the action is taking place. The critique of the mainstream International Relations Theories from Qin (2016) should be taken as a way of introducing his relational approach that tries to differentiate as much as possible from existing theories. Qin (2016) recognizes that there are post-structuralist and constructivist theories that do not look the actors as autonomous units, but decides to emphasize his critique on the mainstream theories. Acharya & Buzan (2017) correctly identify that Qin’s theory “aligns with the concepts of Social Constructivism, which is a core element of International Relations Theory.

In recent years, the relational perspectives have been gaining traction, in part as a response to the troublesome origin of International Relations. These new theories are not exactly completely new, but arise from non-Western concepts, in the case of Qin from Confucianism (Kurki, 2022).

Qin’s theory (2016) takes three underlying assumptions:

- 1) The International Relations World is a universe of interrelatedness, namely, the world is seen as being composed of continuous events and relations. The actors appear through these relations as being related to each other and constrained through their relational circle.
- 2) Actors can only be “actors-in-relations”, namely, the role and identity of the actor are shaped through their social interactions. There is no absolute independent identity.
- 3) Processes are a key element of international relations. Through the processes, the actors produce their identity and redefine their roles. However, the processes have their own life. Once the process is started, it might lead to a modified or even different result from what was initially planned.

A significant logic of this relational approach is that actors-in-relations actively leverage their relational circles to achieve their own goals. In the context of Afghanistan, where the Taliban group now constitutes the de facto Government and its members are considered reluctant about compromising on their “strict Islamic ideology” (Verma, 2023b), this approach that emphasizes the actors as embedded in a web of networks is very inspiring and points to examine how the complex network of interrelations might help in solving or constraining the Afghan issue that affects all Afghan neighbors. In order to tackle the project, the relations are studied according to the degree of relations, starting with dyadic relations. This is a common approach to study social geometries that can be traced back to the works by Simmel (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2022, p. 54,55).

Regional security complex theory

The RSCT is one of the theories belonging to the Copenhagen School. It was initially conceptualized by Buzan (1983) and later expanded together with Wæver in their book “Regions and Powers” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This theory takes elements from neorealism like distribution of power and bounded territoriality, but it relies on constructivism in the study of the security issues. This theory also differs from common neorealist approaches on the fact that it concentrates on the regional level, instead of the global level (Buzan & Wæver,

2003, Chapters 3–5). The emphasis on the regional approach is justified because “threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 12). This is particularly important when we consider Afghanistan’s neighboring States, most of them have in common the sharing of permeable land borders with Afghanistan, which makes them vulnerable to extremist spillovers.

Buzan & Wæver (2003, pp. 45, 46) consider the security topic divided into five sectors. The economic sector is considered to have a less consistent relation between proximity and increase in security interactions, while for the four other sectors (military, political, societal, and environmental) the impact of the geographical proximity is considered more obvious.

RSCT does not limit the actors to States. It can accommodate non-State actors and allow them to be dominant. In this theory, Buzan & Wæver classify significant actors at the global level as great power, superpower, and regional power at the regional level (2003, Chapter 2):

- Superpower: A superpower exercises a broad spectrum of capabilities across the whole international system. It must possess first-class military and political capabilities, and it must be capable of exercising them globally. Additionally, it needs to see itself as a superpower and be accepted by others in their rhetoric and actions.
- Great power: Great powers do not need to have significant capabilities in all sectors or be active in every area of the international system, but they are treated as if they have the capabilities to become superpowers in the short or medium term.
- Regional power: A regional power’s capabilities are mainly concentrated on its regions, a regional power has larger capabilities than other actors in the region but does not have a significant influence at the global level.

Considering these definitions, only two types of powers could be considered global security actors under this theory, the superpowers, and the great powers. In the post-Cold world, Buzan & Wæver (2003) argued that the global security at the beginning of the twenty-first century could be better understood as having a superpower (the US) and four great powers (China, the EU, Japan and Russia). As great powers have the capabilities to be

involved in some areas of the international system, that would typically penetrate several adjacent regional security complexes (RSCs) (2003, pp. 45, 46). However, the definition of a RSC has been changed over time and by author. Originally, Buzan (1983, p. 106) provided a state-centric definition:

“states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another”

As the non-state actors become more important in IR, the definition has also evolved, in the latest version (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 44), a non-state-centric definition based on other theories of the Copenhagen school is provided:

“a set of units whose major processes of securitization and desecuritization or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another”

From the perspective of Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 48), a region can only belong to one RSC:

“We take as the starting point of the analysis that the whole world has to be divided up on a map producing mutually exclusive RSCs, insulator states, and global actors”.

However, other authors disagree (Lake & Morgan, 1997) or prefer to avoid the discussion for existing RSCs, but disagree when an emergent RSC is considered (Amable, 2022).

A specific concept in RSCT already mentioned in the previous quote, but not yet introduced, is the concept of insulator, “a location that is occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back” (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 41). These insulators are at least on the periphery of two RSCs, and might be influenced by the dynamics of each of the RSC. Buzan & Wæver identified three insulators in Asia post-Cold War (Afghanistan, Burma and Mongolia). In the case of Afghanistan, which is the most interesting for this study, it shows that it has maintained this status of insulator for a long time, also during the Cold War (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 97–100). The territory of Afghanistan can be found between the Middle East RSC, South Asia RSC and the post-Soviet

RSC that includes the Central Asian Countries (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 258). As time passes, the Central Asian countries cement their own historical and political particularities after having gained independence from USSR. As a result, the formation of an independent RSC in the Central Asian Region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) has been argued (A. Umarov, 2020).

Aside from insulators that are a special category for the territories, the RSCs are categorized as standard RSC, centred RSC, great power RSC, and supercomplex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 53–61):

- **Standard RSC:** This type of RSC is the most prevalent form of RSC. It has an anarchic structure with two or more (regional) powers without a clear hierarchy or a single (regional) power that does not dominate the region, and it has a predominant military-political security agenda. As Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 55) mention, the lack of a central authority in standard RSC fosters a balance-of-power that resembles a Westphalian world in form. In this type of RSC, the polarity is defined by the regional powers because it does not contain great powers. For example, Southern African RSC is an example of unipolarity, where South Africa is the most prominent power, but it does not dominate the region. Middle East RSC is also an example of this kind of RSC with a high degree of polarity; in this case, there are multiple regional powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc. South Asia RSC is also of this type of RSC according to Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 55), but that is an example of bipolarity with two regional powers (India and Pakistan). Inside a standard RSC, the security dynamics are determined by the relationship among the regional powers of the region. These relations establish the conditions for the other (minor) powers of the regions, and for possible involvements from (external) global security actors in the RSC.
- **Centred RSC:** This type of RSC is characterized by the dominance of a single powerful state or a strong regional institution around which the security dynamics revolve. This type is split into three modalities. The first modality is when there is a great power or superpower that dominates the region, an example would be the

- North American RSC, where the US dominates the region. Another modality is when a global actor dominates the security dynamics of a region different than their own, for example the US in the South American RSC during the Cold War. The third modality of Centred RSC is when a region has been integrated by institutions, the most typical example, the European RSC with the EU.
- Great power RSC: This type of RSC has the characteristic that it contains multiple great powers in the RSC. These RSCs are treated separately from standard RSC by Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 59) because their security dynamics affect balancing-of-power calculations at the global level and because the higher likelihood of wider spillover into adjacent regions. In the post-Cold War, Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 59) only identified one RSC that belongs to this type, the Northeast Asian RSC that contains two great powers (China and Japan), but it could also be seen as the traditional configuration of Europe. The presence of multiple global security actors allows for important interregional security dynamics that usually should be weak compared with the internal security dynamics. Twenty years ago, this was exemplified by Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 59) with the role played by China during the Cold War in South East Asia RSC and South Asia RSC. Nowadays, with the movement to the west of China as already mentioned, China has also increased its presence in Central Asian countries.
 - Supercomplex: As a possible outcome from the previous type, Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 60) consider that the spillover due to the competition between several great powers might bind together what in other situations would be separated RSCs. In this kind of situation, the three levels (domestic, regional, and global) that are usually taken into account are not enough; an additional level (superregional) is added and takes into account the strong interregional level. One example of this is found in the interrelations between Northeast Asian RSC and Southeast Asian RSC that are merged in the East Asian supercomplex.

These are not the only types of territories, there is an additional type that Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 41) describe, a buffer state that in some sense is similar to an insulator, but instead of being on the edge of a strong pattern of securitization (insulator), a buffer state is in the center of a strong pattern of securitization. Of course, the distinction between both terms depends on how the RSCs are constructed and might vary historically or depending on the considerations of the authors to define the limits of the RSCs. For example Nepal has been traditionally considered as an insulator, but if the East Asian RSC and South Asian RSC are merged into one supercomplex, the role of Nepal would be classified as a buffer between China and India (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 486). As we are talking about RSCs that at the end are encompassed by territories, after defining their characteristics, it is easier to understand the representation of the world that Buzan & Wæver (2003) are describing with this theory with a map. Figure 1 extracted from the book from Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. xxvi) shows the pattern of RSC after post-Cold war.

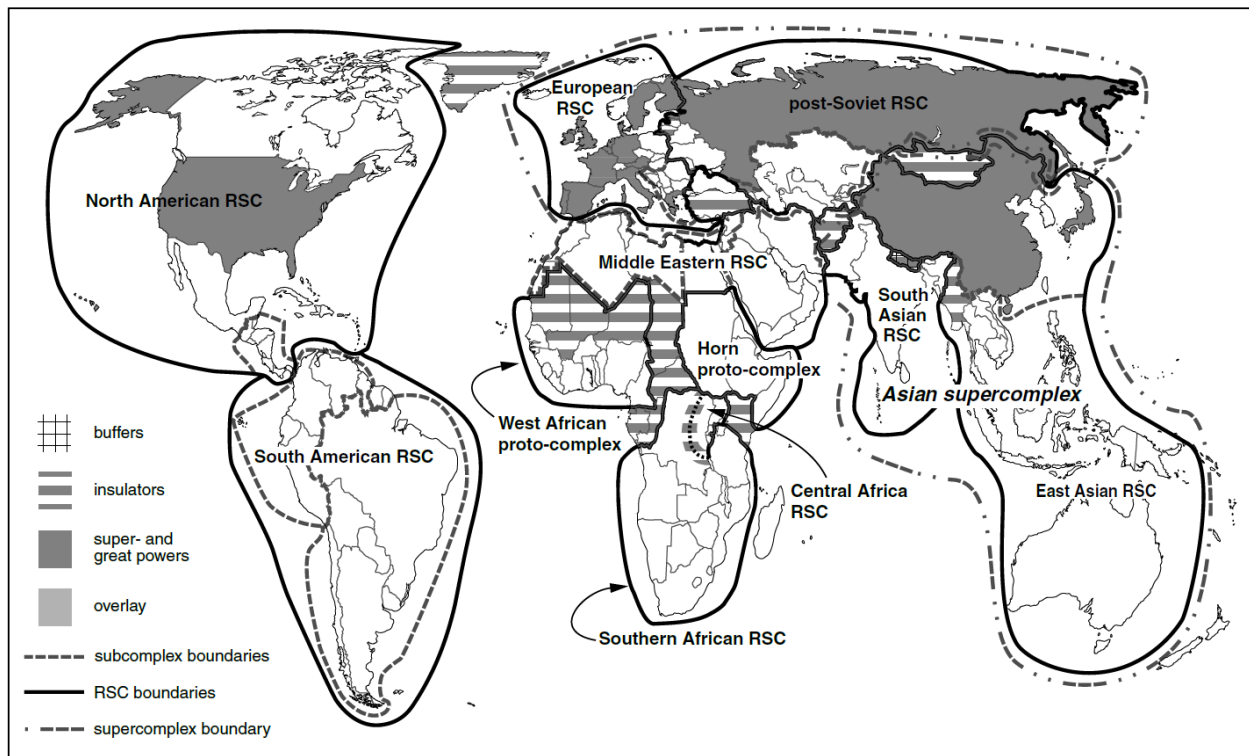


Figure 1 Patterns of Regional Security Post-Cold War extracted from Map 2 of Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. xxvi).

Critiques of Regional Security Complex Theory

As any theory, RSC theory has been heavily criticized from different perspectives. A common critique has been that it is rooted in European history; Croft (2005) argues that RSC theory as explained in the book by Buzan & Wæver (2003) presents a 'Europeanised' notion of organization with strong and weak states and a preset series of stages (premodern, modern, and postmodern) mirroring European experience. This progression suggests that states should evolve from being weak and premodern to being strong and postmodern.

Another critique has been on the ambiguity in defining the regional complexes. As already mentioned, the authors of RSC theory recognize themselves that the classification of Nepal as an insulator or buffer depends on how the RSCs are constructed (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 486), the consideration of an actor as a superpower or great power is not always easy and can modify the resulting typology of RSCs. These constructions and considerations are not out of social or political influence. In the beginning of their book, Buzan & Wæver (2003, p. 36) already provide evidence of this difficulty of classifying actors when mentioning that during the late nineteenth century Russia might be considered a great power if it is not accepted as a superpower. This problem is not unique to RSC theory, but to all IR theories that add a "regional flavour" (Fawn, 2009). This critique becomes more relevant when looking at the special cases of the RSC theory like Turkey that is considered an insulator, as pointed out by Barrinha (2014), RSC theory implies that a state can only become a great power or superpower if it can first become a regional power, but for that to happen it needs to belong to a RSC. Furthermore, even if Turkey were not considered an insulator, "it is not particularly easy to insert it into one exclusive RSC" (Barrinha, 2014). Nevertheless, Bagdonas (2015) does not have any issue considering Turkey a regional power in the Middle East, even when keeping its insulator status under RSC theory, but he rejects the status of regional power in Europe or the post-Soviet space. Some authors (Kotkin, 2016; Lo, 2016) also argue that Russia's self-perception as a great power is not reflected in its actual economic and institutional capabilities.

Although Buzan & Wæver (2003, Chapters 6 & 12) explicitly consider the emergence of the East Asian complex after post-Cold War and the emergence of key Balkan units, some

scholars argue that the emergence of RSCs is under-theorized due to their focus on existing RSCs (Amable, 2022), or as Acharya (2007) mentioned in his review of emerging regional architecture of world politics “although regions change, they cannot change too much”. Namely, the theory has been criticized for presenting a static picture that fails to explain how the world system changes and how different circumstances are accommodated in a different way (Hills, 2008). Despite the critique from Hills (2008) that focuses on the usage of RSC theory in Africa, Walsh (2020) that also agrees that Buzan and Wæver’s “portrait of Africa is too static” found that RSC theory provides a useful conceptual framework to study East Africa’s and South Africa’s security issues.

Usage of Regional Security Complex Theory

The usage of RSC theory to understand the security dynamics around Afghanistan is not new; there are various cases in the literature where this theory has been operationalized for this topic. In this subsection, the most recent and relevant articles from the literature are mentioned.

Sarwar & Siraj (2021) in an article at the beginning of 2021 (i.e. prior to the Taliban takeover) combined RSC theory with Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane & Nye, 1973) to emphasize the economic interdependences in the region. This study focuses exclusively on the role of China through the BRI, especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that connects Gwadar Port in Pakistan with Xinjiang Province. The study found that China has a direct stake in the peace of Afghanistan, which is needed for a peaceful implementation of the BRI. Stability in the region would allow for the development of the shortest route to connect South-Asia and Central Asian, as well as China and the Middle East. That would offer an economic incentive to maintain the stability, for that reason Sarwar & Siraj (2021) end recommending that China should avoid getting militarily involved in Afghanistan.

Tahir (2022), similarly to Sarwar & Siraj (2021), used RSC theory to map Chinese engagement in Afghanistan focusing primarily on the South Asian RSC, and also especially the security threat to the CPEC. In this study, RSC theory is combined with the concept of soft power (Nye, 2012) to emphasize the financial and humanitarian aid provided by China,

as well as the economic engagements. Despite this article being from the middle of 2022 and mentioning the US withdrawal of Afghanistan, recent data after the Taliban takeover is not explored, and most of the comments are very shallow without mentioning the specific details, and the most recent reference that is used is from 2018.

Sharma (2022) used RSC theory to explore the impact of the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan on the South Asian RSC, a region that has had a (historically) volatile security environment. Although the study is after the Taliban takeover, the concerns that rise, events and relations among actors that are mentioned are rooted in the historical development (Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Afghan Mujahedin, First Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the US supported governments during the “War on Terror”) of Afghanistan, rather than on episodes following the recent Taliban takeover. Sharma (2022) highlights the different roles among the various actors regarding their historical support of the Taliban. While China and Pakistan have maintained relations with the Taliban, even supporting the new Taliban regime, the attitudes of India and the US towards the Taliban are on the other extreme. These two actors have been actively backing the establishment of a democratic regime in Afghanistan during the last two decades. This dynamic creates a complex balance-of-power game in the South Asia and Afghanistan region, which already had significant tensions² even before the comeback from the Taliban. Sharma (2022) identifies in this region two regional powers (India and Pakistan) and three global powers (China, Russia and the US). The historical description of events and relations helps Sharma (2022) to explain that “the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan poses a serious security dilemma for the South Asian states” (p. 111), and suggests that South Asian States should act collectively in their relation with the Taliban to handle this regional security issue.

Khan et al. (2023) examined the role and strategic interests of China in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal using RSCT to argue that Afghanistan’s security directly affects China due to its regional economic projects. In the study, they emphasize that China and

² Best exemplified by Sharma (2022) on the conclusions by mentioning that since India independence in 1947, it has been dealing with security threats from almost all its international borders (Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal).

other powers in the region (Pakistan, Iran, and Russia) have common interests in the security of the region, but it does not into details to articulate how they cooperate, their description solely shows that they have stakes in common and show “the potential areas where China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran need to work together and use their resources and influences to resolve the Afghan issues”.

Analysis

Using RSC theory as a framework to structure the study and expose the multifaceted security dynamics, this analysis section is divided into four interconnected levels (local, regional, interregional, and global). By dissecting the security dynamics across these four levels within the RSC theoretical framework, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of how China is employing its influence to handle the security dynamics surrounding Afghanistan’s situation after the Taliban takeover and the US withdrawal.

Local level

At the lowest level, the Chinese security concerns and interactions in Afghanistan and/or with the Taliban are analyzed. The Chinese approach to Afghanistan during the last two decades can best be described as pragmatic in the pursuit of its interests of “ensuring stability in Xinjiang and trade with Central Asia” (Westcott, 2022). The Chinese presence in Afghanistan has followed the turmoil of Afghan conflicts. Following the sectoral approach of RSC theory, the local level section has been divided into two relevant sectors (political and economic), the other three sectors (military, societal, and environmental) suggested by Buzan & Wæver (2003, pp. 45, 46) are not relevant at this point.

Political sector

In the most recent times, China closed its embassy in Kabul soon after the Afghan civil war (1992-1996) that led to the first Emirate of Afghanistan. Only after the US invasion of Afghanistan did the Chinese embassy open again, in February 2002 (Bazwan, 2022). While most of the foreign embassies in Afghanistan closed during the Taliban takeover, China (and

other States like Russia) maintained the embassy open and in operation (Cheng & Pan, 2021; Kozlov & Rynda, 2021; Zhou, 2021).

Despite keeping the embassy open, China did not provide a recognition of the Taliban's new government, but the Foreign Ministry issued early statements in which it did not condemn the takeover and emphasized the need to “respects the right of the Afghan people to independently determine their own destiny” (Daly, 2021; Zhou, 2021). While avoiding an overtly supportive stance and recognition of the Taliban government, China became the first country to name a new ambassador in Afghanistan after the takeover, in September 2023 Zhao Xing became the Chinese ambassador in Afghanistan (Yunus Yawar & Greenfield, 2023). The naming of an ambassador required presenting ambassadorial credentials to the Taliban government³, a contrast with the official non-recognition of the Taliban Government. This shows the balancing that China is taking around the Taliban, on the one hand, China avoids providing official recognition, but on the other hand, China shows its intention to keep stronger interactions than other States. This is the reason that some authors have labeled the Chinese approach in Afghanistan as pragmatic (Bazwan, 2023; Krishnan & Johny, 2022; Niu & Huang, 2022; Verma, 2023a; Westcott, 2022).

From the Taliban side, they used a representative in Beijing with the naming of Chargé d'affaires until the end of 2023 when they appointed Bilal Karimi as the Ambassador to China, Karimi became the first ambassador appointed by the Taliban. The acceptance of the ambassadorial credentials by China came without any comment on what it meant about the recognition of the Taliban government. The Taliban would have preferred a formal recognition of their government, but in any case, this first appointment of an Ambassador shows the willingness of China to have a preferred position on the dialogue with the Taliban, which would have to wait nine months to appoint their second ambassador, the UAE accepted the appointment of the Taliban Ambassador to the UAE in August 2024 (Greenfield, 2023; Greenfield & Cornwell, 2024).

³ For this reason, other States that had to change their ambassadors after the takeover decided to name the new representatives as *chargé d'affaires* (Yunus Yawar & Greenfield, 2023).

This special political relationship is subtly evident in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have sought to demonstrate their commitment to preventing Afghan soil from being used against Chinese interests. As part of these efforts, they relocated Uyghur militants from areas near the Xinjiang border to regions closer to the borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. However, these actions fell short of the Chinese expectations, who would like them to be arrested (Rubin, 2024).

The economic turndown that followed the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan (20.7% contraction in the economy in 2021, an additional 6.2% in 2022) resulted in a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The World Bank estimated that in 2023 that 48% of the Afghan population lived in poverty, and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) estimated that half of the Afghan population would require humanitarian assistance in 2024 (UNOCHA, 2023). China was one of the first countries to send humanitarian aid to Afghanistan weeks after the Taliban takeover (Greenfield, 2021a). The initial RMB 200 million in humanitarian aid (Gabriel Crossley & Daly, 2021), was weeks later extended to include COVID-19 vaccines (Gabriel Crossley, 2021), and RMB 50 million in humanitarian aid after a devastating earthquake in June 2022 (Brenda Goh & Stonestreet, 2022; Yunus Yawar, 2022a). To coordinate the efforts for the humanitarian “assistance and economic reconstruction”, the China-Afghanistan liaison mechanism was created on 30 December 2021 with participation of the Taliban Government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021a), and has served as a dialogue platform between Chinese and Taliban Governments on three occasions⁴ (Ariana News, 2024b). Aside from China, other countries pledged humanitarian aid to Afghanistan (Asif Shahzad & Fahmy, 2023), although Western Countries were initially reluctant to provide aid for Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover (Walker, 2021), the value of the assistance provided in the 2022 earthquake was higher than that of China⁵ (Menon, 2022). More importantly for the Taliban, unlike Chinese aid that was

⁴ Latest meeting on the time period studied on this project happened on 16 April 2024 (Ariana News, 2024b).

⁵ China: \$7.5 million, US: \$55 million, UK: \$3 million, EU: \$1million (Menon, 2022).

given through the Taliban Government, Western States prefer to provide the aid through International Organizations and aid agencies directly to the people (Verma, 2023b).

Even before the Taliban takeover, China maintained contact with the Taliban, the most relevant encounter before the Taliban takeover happened on 28 July 2021 when a delegation of nine Taliban representatives led by Mullah Baradar Akhund met with the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, in Tianjin for a two-day visit (Kevin Liffey et al., 2021). The meeting might be considered not very successful if the objective was to convince the Taliban to do not pursue a military victory, but it helped in keeping open a dialogue with the group that would soon become the *de facto* ruler of Afghanistan and to reiterate Chinese position against allowing Afghan territory as a base for groups carrying out attacks to China (Myers, 2021).

Meeting with the Taliban did not mean that there was no contact with the Afghan government at the moment. Some days prior to the meeting in Tianjin, Chinese President, Xi Jinping, and Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, maintained a telephone call in which Xi Jinping showed China's long maintained equidistance on the issue by declaring to Ghani that China believes in political dialogue and a base to achieve peace and that China will continue to support "an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution" (Myers, 2021), which might well be understood as China intending to maintain its relationship with any Afghan actor that becomes the ruler of Afghanistan.

The meeting in Tianjin was not the first time that the Taliban sent a delegation to China, there was a previous meeting in 2019, but at the time the position of the Taliban was much less powerful in Afghanistan (Yew, 2021). The meeting in Tianjin left an unusual picture of Wang Yi posing next to Baradar who was wearing traditional Afghan clothes and a noticeable long beard, the same outfit in Xinjiang would be considered a sign of extremism according to the Chinese Communist Party and require internment in a "re-education" center (Krishnan & Johny, 2022, Chapters 7&8). Chinese media still had a long way to go to change the perception of the Taliban in a more favorable way that were still remembered by blowing up the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001 (Yew, 2021).

A few days after Taliban takeover, on 19 August 2021, Chinese state media, China Global Television Network (CGTN), interviewed Taliban spokesman in Qatar Suhail Shaheen (Heinrich & Cooney, 2021). In the interview with Journalist Tian Wei, Shaheen downplayed the future effect of the takeover on society in general, and on women's right in specific. At the end of the twenty-five minutes interview, the interview focused on the encounter in Tianjin and mentioned the hope for China to contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan (CGTN, 2021). The relationship between China and the Taliban is not without challenges, not only for China, given its controversial internal policies towards Muslims, particularly the Uyghurs, but also for the Taliban. Just weeks after the Taliban takeover, during an interview with BBC's Hindi Service, Suhail Shaheen underscored the perceived rights of the Taliban to advocate for Muslims beyond Afghanistan, he stated that "as Muslims, we also have a right to raise our voice for Muslims in Kashmir, India or any other country." (Khare, 2021). The Taliban has avoided making any public reference to the Uyghurs since the takeover. However, as early as July 2021, just weeks before the takeover, Suhail Shaheen indicated that the Taliban would try to avoid public disputes with China. When questioned about the situation in Xinjiang, Suhail Shaheen answered that the Taliban would seek to help the Muslims in Xinjiang through dialogue with China, but he added that they "we do not know the details." (Farmer & Watt, 2021).

Economic sector

The presentation of the new Taliban and the opportunities in Afghanistan was followed by a small number of Chinese entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs were not always successful as shown by Al Jazeera programme 101 East (2022) that followed some of the initial entrepreneurs until November 2022, which in some cases arrived to Afghanistan unprepared and found "bureaucratic" delays, restrictions from the Taliban, and security concerns to their activities. Not only were entrepreneurs attracted to the new economic opportunities, but a small number of contracts involving important investment also started to be signed. Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC) signed a contract with the Taliban government to extract oil from Amu Darya basin, although the right to exploit Amu Darya basin was already given by the previous Afghanistan government to its parent

company, National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in 2012 that failed to continue the oil extraction (Kumar & Noori, 2023; Mohammad Yunus Yawar, 2023). CNPC faced security threats from local armed groups in the north of Afghanistan, where the basin is located, these local groups were neither part of their agreement with the Karzai Government, nor related with CNPC partner Watan Group, a Kabul based group linked to the Karzai family (Pantucci & Petersen, 2022, pp. 75 & 208).

The security concerns were not in vain, a month after the release of the documentary from 101 East, an attack from IS-K targeting international investors killed five Chinese and left 13-14 Chinese wounded at Longan hotel⁶ in Kabul where thirty Chinese investors were staying (Al Jazeera, 2022; Yunus Yawar, 2022b). These numbers are huge, as they show that a considerable percentage of Chinese investors in Afghanistan at that time were affected in the attack. According to the Head of the China-Afghanistan Trade Committee, Yu Minghui, since the Taliban takeover in 2021, approximately 500 Chinese businessmen have shown interest and entered Afghanistan to study business opportunities (Greenfield & Yawar, 2022).'

The interest in the economic sector has been propelled by the Chinese Government by introducing a zero-tariff treatment for Afghan products, which already by July 2022 included 98% Afghan goods, and it was further increased in October 2024 to include 100% of tariff lines (Brar, 2023; Cash, 2024). However, this beneficial treatment shows a more mundane perspective when trade data, from Chinese authorities, is considered. In year 2023, Afghan exports to China amounted to \$64 million, 90% of which consisted of pine nuts (Cash, 2024). Although significant for the local communities where the pine nuts are produced, this trade is not new, the air corridor to import pine nuts from Afghanistan to China was already launched in 2018 (Wang et al., 2022; Zou, 2022), and considered as a "great success" by the Chinese authorities to help on the Afghan development (Pantucci & Petersen, 2022). However, the air corridor was temporarily closed in 2021 due to the situation in Afghanistan, it was relaunched in October 2021 after the Taliban takeover (Zou, 2022).

⁶ One of the examples of Chinese entrepreneurs shown at 101 East.

On the list of relaunched activities after the Taliban takeover, there is also the freight train from Nantong (close to Shanghai) to Hairatan port in Afghanistan (close to the Afghan border with Uzbekistan) (Kabul Now, 2024). This route traversing Central Asia (via Alatau Pass) and joining East coast of China and Afghanistan has been inaugurated two times in the past (2016 and 2021) with initial hopes in 2016 that “ the traffic levels will increase sufficiently to support the operation of a weekly train by the end of this year”, the 2021 reinauguration was on 11 July 2021, some weeks prior to the Taliban takeover (Railway Gazette International, 2016, 2021a).

Another railway connection that was tested after the Taliban takeover was the one connecting the Chinese city of Kashgar with Hairatan (Papatolios, 2022). However, a more direct connection between China and Afghanistan would require the transit to go through the Wakhan corridor. This option is promoted by the Taliban, the provincial government of Badakhshan even announced in January 2024 the completion of a road connecting up to the border to China. However, this announcement seemed premature due to the bad conditions of many sections that were unpaved and off-road track. Additionally, no infrastructure exists on the Chinese to trade through this route (A. U. Khan, 2024).

As the security in Afghanistan improved⁷, and the number of flights resumed, not only Chinese businesspeople showed interested in this neighboring country. Tourism in Afghanistan has shown a 913% increase in foreign tourists between 2021 to 2023, most of which are Chinese (Wu & Wood, 2024). Although, still low on absolute numbers⁸, this trend indicates that the perception of Afghanistan is slowly changing among Chinese people.

⁷ After leading the Global Terrorism Index since 2019, Afghanistan position improved slightly in 2023, getting to the sixth position, even behind Pakistan that is found on the fourth position (Vision of Humanity, 2024).

⁸ According to the Tourism Directorate in Kabul, foreign tourists increased from 691 in 2021 to around 7,000 in 2023 (Associated Press, 2024).

Regional level

At the regional level, the interest for this analysis is the trilateral relations involving China, Afghanistan, and a third actor or a group of actors belonging to the same region. Taking the insight from RSC theory, which posits that threats travel more easily over short distances, Afghanistan's neighboring countries are selected for study in this section. For example, the impact of the Afghan situation on Chinese investments in Pakistan and the resulting implications. The relations between different regions are considered in the interregional level section.

Pakistan

The current border between Afghanistan and Pakistan was established in the Durand Agreement in 1893, when the Emirate of Afghanistan of the Amir Abdur Rahman (1880–1901) depended on regular subsidies from the British Indian Empire (Barfield, 2022, pp. 151–153). However, the Durand line is a controversial topic in Afghanistan, many Pashtuns on both side of the border believe that the “Pashtunistan” region should have reverted after the British left. Consecutive Afghan governments have refused to acknowledge the Durand line, although it has been reconfirmed on three occasions, in 1905 Anglo Afghan Pact, 1919 Treaty of Rawalpindi and 1921 Anglo Afghan Treaty (Brasseur, 2011). The Taliban is not an exception, the group has asserted on multiple occasions that they do not recognize the Durand line, for example, in February 2024 the Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, said that Afghanistan will never recognize the Durand line (Ariana News, 2024a; O'Donnell, 2024). The statement hardly caught anyone by surprise; similar statements have been made by Stanikzai and other Taliban members in the past (Jamal, 2022). The Durand line is crossed regularly by the Pashtun tribes living in the mountainous region of Peshawar without papers and openly carrying guns (Barfield, 2022, p. 54).

This permeability creates a security threat in Pakistan, which, a year after the Taliban takeover showed a 50% increase in terrorist attacks (Abbas, 2023, p. 177), and also to Chinese investments in Pakistan, which have been targeted by some terrorist groups. IS-K

formed the Gansu Hui Group⁹ in 2014 with the claim of starting launching attacks in China to co-opt Chinese Muslims and has maintained its presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan as training for the Jihad (Giustozzi, 2022, pp. 43–45, 65–67, 135).

Economic sector

Pakistan's importance for the study of Sino-Afghan relations is also evident in the economic sector. Pakistan represents the main intermediary for trade between Afghanistan and China. Most of the trade between both countries occurs through ship transport using Pakistani ports (A. U. Khan, 2024). Additionally, Chinese investments in Pakistan are also seen by the Taliban as an opportunity to recover and stimulate the Afghan economy.

The main Chinese investment in Pakistan is known as CPEC, which is the flagship of the BRI. It connects Xinjiang and the south of Pakistan through a network of multiple infrastructures, many of them are still under constructions (CPEC, 2024). The CPEC is a 15-year investment plan (scheduled for completion in 2030). Under this investment plan, China plans to invest \$62 billion in Pakistan in infrastructure and energy projects, the investment has been told to be two thirds in the form of foreign direct investment (FDI) and one fourth as loans, but the exact terms of the investments and loans are not known (Afzal, 2020). Some of the loans (\$11 billion) that are known from Exim Bank of China are offered at low interest rate¹⁰ (Anwar & Ahmad, 2021). The huge potential of these investments does not go unnoticed for the Taliban. Already in September 2021, Pakistani representatives were discussing with the Taliban the possible extension of the CPEC to Afghanistan (Greenfield, 2021b). It is true that Afghanistan signed the entry into the BRI during the Ghani Government (Roy, 2017), but no specific steps were performed at the time.

All three parties have their own interests in Afghanistan joining the CPEC. For Pakistan, Afghanistan's inclusion into CPEC is perceived as a strategic opportunity to pacify the historically volatile Afghanistan-Pakistan border. For the Taliban, joining the BRI represents

⁹ Although the Gansu Hui Group is mentioned in several articles, news articles and reports, all the references to this group seem to originate from a single source, the Book of Giustozzi (2022).

¹⁰ Nevertheless, Pakistan has found economic difficulties to pay its debt to IMF and China (Janjua, 2024).

a crucial opportunity to improve their precarious economic situation and develop the infrastructure of the country that has suffered through decades of conflict. For China, the inclusion of Afghanistan can be seen as a calculated *quid pro quo*. Beijing would be willing to offer economic incentives in exchange for the Taliban addressing “Chinese security concerns”, especially regarding Uyghur militant activities on Afghan soil (Kuo, 2023). These considerations have been a central part of the discussions at the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue, which began in 2017 during the Ghani Government and has continued after the Taliban takeover. These Trilateral Dialogues are mentioned later under the Political Sector.

While IS-K did not claim any attack targeting Chinese in Pakistan, two other groups have found in the Chinese investments and Chinese nationals their target. In the Southwest of Pakistan, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has targeted the Gwadar port that is part of the CPEC (Reuters, 2023; A. Shahid, 2024), while in the Northwest of Pakistan the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) targeted the Dasu Hydropower Project that is also under the umbrella of the BRI (Ali, 2024; Shahzad, 2024a, 2024b; Yunus Yawar & Greenfield, 2024). China has replied to these attacks by pushing Pakistan to adopt measures to protect Chinese citizens (Al Jazeera, 2024).

TTP activity has increased significantly after the Taliban takeover, especially since 2023 as shown in the following figure from International Crisis Group (2024) that represents the number of fatalities associated with TTP attacks in Pakistan between 1 January 2018 to 1 January 2024. While in the period prior to the Taliban takeover, the monthly fatalities due to TTP attacks in Pakistan rarely reached 40 fatalities, an increase was observed during the year following the takeover, and even higher numbers were observed in 2023.

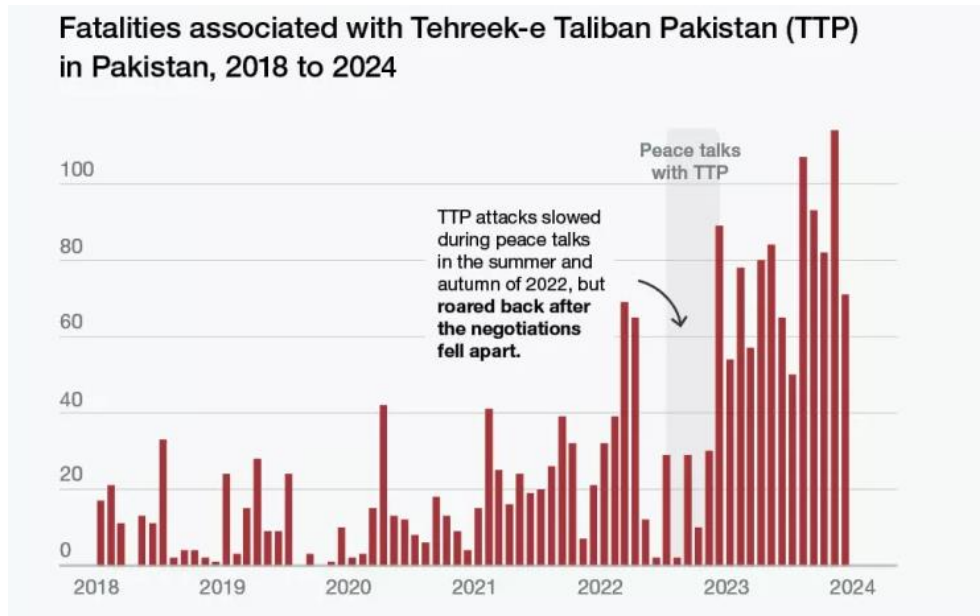


Figure 2 #Fatalities associated with TTP attacks in Pakistan between 2018 to 2024 (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Military sector

China has not undertaken military operations in Afghanistan against its perceived threats. However, in the 1990s, when the Taliban ruled during the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, China used its relations with Pakistan to act against Uyghur militants. Nevertheless, China has also expressed its frustration repeatedly with Islamabad for “allowing the Uyghur threat to persist” (Verma, 2023b).

From Islamabad’s perspective, the BLA and TTP have become natural operational allies, and these groups have been linked to Afghanistan because of their supporters in Afghanistan and alleged sanctuaries for the TTP (K. K. Shahid, 2024; Shaikh, 2024; Yunus Yawar & Greenfield, 2024). The Taliban, and especially the Haqqani Network, has had a long-lasting relation with the TTP since it emerged in 2007 and declared Mullah Mohammad Omar, the founder of the Taliban, as its spiritual leader (Abbas, 2023, pp. 179–189). Although the Taliban usually rejects Pakistan’s claims (Yunus Yawar & Greenfield, 2024), Pakistan has launched attacks on Afghan soil against the TTP (Javed, 2024), and has made preparations for a major offensive against Balochistan separatists (Al Jazeera, 2024). The offensive against the BLA was launched in response to a series of attacks carried out by Balochistan militants, but this offensive also came after China expressed its frustration with the security

situation around the CPEC. Just one month before the offensive, Jiang Zaidong, Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, criticized the repeated attacks as “unacceptable for China” and urged Pakistan to adopt appropriate measures (Rahmati, 2024).

Political Sector

On the political sector, there has been meetings among Chinese and Pakistani representatives to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, as well as trilateral meetings (China-Afghanistan-Pakistan). The profile of China as an external actor to the region allows Chinese representatives to mediate among both Pakistan and the Taliban. Yue Xiaoyong, the Chinese special envoy for Afghanistan, regularly travels between Islamabad and Kabul to emphasize the need for improving relations, and Chinese representatives have shared Pakistan’s concerns about TTP as an effort to put pressure on the Taliban (Yaqubi, 2024d),

China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue

Five dialogues have been carried out under this format between 2017 and 2024. The first four dialogues¹¹ were held during the Ghani Government, but more interestingly the fifth China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue was held on 6 May 2023 in Islamabad, almost two years after the Taliban takeover.

Despite the five years and a half between the first and fifth Dialogue, the topics of the meeting highlighted in the joint statement do not seem to have evolved. In the Joint Press Release of the 1st China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue (2017), it was already mentioned the reaffirmation of the commitment to advance the connectivity under the BRI. Regarding the security situation, in 2017, it was mentioned the need for an “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” peace and reconciliation process, and the Taliban were called to join the peace process.

Three years and a half later, the Taliban did not become the *de facto* ruler of Afghanistan in 2021 through a peace process, but they were eventually invited as representatives of

¹¹ December 2017 (Beijing), December 2018 (Kabul), September 2019 (Islamabad) and June 2021 (Originally planned for 2020 in Beijing, it was postponed and done virtually due to COVID).

Afghanistan to attend the fifth Dialogue that was held almost two years after their takeover. The 5th Dialogue was attended by the Chinese Foreign Minister at the time, Qin Gang, Afghan (Taliban) Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, and the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (Hussain, 2023).

The Joint Statement of the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue (2023) gathers the concerns of the three parties. After stressing the need for security in the region, two groups are singled out in the statement, the already mentioned TTP and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)¹². The initial strong words of the phrases of the statement that refer to agreement and commitment are softened very rapidly as they refer to soft commitments (i.e. to continue discussions), instead of hard commitments (i.e. infrastructure investments). The statement also calls Western Countries, especially US¹³, to lift their unilateral sanctions that were taken to freeze Afghan overseas assets after the Taliban takeover.

Troika Plus Meeting

The 5th Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue was not the first time that China and Pakistan met with the Taliban. A few months after the Taliban takeover, China and Pakistan met with the Taliban under a different platform, known as Troika Plus (or Extended Troika) Meeting. This meeting format comprises of representatives from the US, Russia, China and Pakistan, which highlights the complexity of the Afghanistan situation with one regional power involved (Pakistan), two great powers (China and Russia) and one superpower (US) trying to influence the regional security dynamics. In the first meetings (before the Taliban takeover), there were also representatives from the Ghani Government and the Taliban (US Department

¹² The ETIM has been a securitization topic for the Chinese since they adopted the macrosecuritization "War on Terror" discourse from the US. China has been successful in getting the ETIM added to several terrorist lists, but it has been removed from the US list of terrorist organizations since 2020 due to US's alleged doubts about its continued existence during the last decade (Vuori, 2024, Chapter 6).

¹³ The statement does not name the US, but the reference to "return the assets overseas" is clearly directed at the US, who froze \$7 billion of Afghan assets in the US (Wei, 2022).

of State, 2021a, 2021b), but in the two meetings after the Taliban takeover, only the Taliban were present (US Department of State, 2021c).

The first meeting after the Taliban takeover was held on 11 November 2021 in Islamabad. The joint statement called on the Taliban to form an inclusive government, cut ties with all terrorist groups, and respect human rights, especially mentioning the vulnerable situation of women and children (US Department of State, 2021c). However, a topic that is highly underrepresented in the joint statement is the call from Pakistan and China to lift the restrictions on the Afghan banking system and unfreeze the Afghan assets abroad (Greenfield, 2021c), this topic was only covered subtly in the statement (US Department of State, 2021c):

(The four participating States:): “Acknowledged international humanitarian actors’ concerns regarding the country’s serious liquidity challenges and committed to continue focusing on measures to ease access to legitimate banking services.”

The misalignment among the different parties at this meeting would only become more pronounced over time. At the subsequent meeting, held on 31 March 2022, in Tunxi (China), the participants were unable to agree on a joint statement. One of the contentious points was the issue of Afghan frozen assets held abroad. All parties, except the US, called for these assets to be unfrozen to alleviate Afghanistan’s economic crisis. This divergence and the conditional humanitarian aid that the US proposed led to no consensus, with sources from Russia publicly blaming the US for failing to sign the final document that was already agreed (Associated Press, 2022; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022). This disagreement underscored the geopolitical complexities that hinder coordinated action on Afghanistan’s situation. It also marked the final meeting held under this particular format, at least for the time being. Moving forward, China shifted its focus toward other meeting formats that prioritize Afghanistan's neighboring countries, as discussed in the interregional level section.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has seen how the security risks originating from Afghanistan spread across their border. A small number of cases of IS-K attacking Tajikistan from Afghanistan occur every year (U.S. Department of State, 2023b, pp. 178–180, 2023a, pp. 184–186). Additionally, the impact of the attacks has extended beyond Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The 2024 attack in Moscow claimed by IS-K that killed more than 100 people, and left a similar number of injured, (Doyle, 2024) was carried out by Tajik nationals (Najibullah, 2024). The 2024 attack in Moscow was not the first time that IS-K actions has caused an undesired connection to Tajikistan. In 2019, IS-K militants crossed the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan to attack a border post with Uzbekistan. In 2024, two Tajik killed almost 100 people in Iran in a suicide bombing (T. Umarov, 2024).

In addition to concerns about IS-K, there is another group with a presence in Afghanistan that worries the Tajik Government. After the Taliban takeover, the Jamaat Ansarullah group was renamed as Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan¹⁴ (TTT). Jamaat Ansarullah group emerged following the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war and has the objective of overthrowing the Dushanbe Government. Members of the TTT have been put by the Taliban in charge of five districts of the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan that borders with Tajikistan (Bifolchi, 2022).

Chinese workers in Afghanistan have been affected by the attacks. In November 2024, an unidentified¹⁵ group penetrated the Khatlon region of Tajikistan from Afghanistan and attacked a group of gold mining workers that were in the area conducting prospective operations. This assault resulted in the death of one Chinese national and injuries to four

¹⁴ There is not much information about this group and the transition from the Jamaat Ansarullah group. An element seems clear across the different sources: the previous head of Jamaat Ansarullah, Mehdi Arsalan, appeared in 2021 as head of the Tehrik-e Taliban Tajikistan (Bifolchi, 2022).

¹⁵ At the time of writing, detailed information about this recent attack in Tajikistan is limited. The best source appears to be a newspaper article (and related video) in the Tajik language from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2024). The attack was reported to happen near to Sarigor, even if not the closest district, the Khwahan district that is supposed to be managed by TTT is only 20 km away according to Google Maps (2024).

other Chinese workers and a local Tajik resident (Crisis24, 2024; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2024).

Another point on possible conflict for Tajikistan is the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRFA). Following the experience of the first Emirate of Afghanistan with the Northern Alliance, non-extremist anti-Taliban fighters have regrouped to form the NRFA, and it maintains its only political office in Dushanbe with the support of Tajikistan (Coffey, 2022; D'Souza, 2023b).

Military sector

Tajikistan has entered into diverse agreements with other States (China, the US, Iran and India) to increase its security over the years (T. Umarov, 2024). Two of them are related to the Tajik-Afghan border. The US has provided support for the construction or renovation of border posts, even after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022; U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan, 2021). In a similar manner, China has also supported Tajikistan in the construction of around a dozen border posts. More importantly, there is a Chinese military presence in Tajikistan. Although not always acknowledged by the Chinese government or officials, there has been reports over the last decade of the presence of a Chinese military activity in the Gorno-Badakhshan region (Bawa & Ashish, 2023; Goble, 2024; Pantucci & Petersen, 2022, p. 227,228).

Iran

Iran has for a long time thought on supplying oil and gas through Afghanistan to China and other East and South Asian countries, but this ambitious endeavor requires stability and security in Afghanistan (Verma, 2022b). The relationship between Iran and the Taliban is at times paradoxical, reflecting a mix of historical conflict and pragmatic cooperation. Iran and Afghanistan almost went to war during the first Islamic Emirate after Taliban militants killed Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, the relation between Iran and the Taliban improved slightly after the US invasion of Afghanistan (initially supported by Iran) and the inclusion of Iran in the “axis of evil” (Abbas, 2023, p. 218).

Despite this improvement, their relationship can be very tense. For example, a recent armed clash in 2023 over the rights to use the water resources of the Helmand River underscores the fragility of their interactions and the potential for conflict (D'Souza, 2024b). Nevertheless, there is an important cultural, social and economic link between both Afghanistan and Iran. Iran depicts itself as the protector of the Shia community, which represents a 15% of the Afghan population (Barfield, 2022, pp. 40–42). Tens of thousands of Afghan Shia, mainly Hazara, have been trained by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) to form the Liwa Fatemiyoun (or Fatemiyoun Division) to fight in Syria on the side of the Syrian Government, but some political analysts consider them as an Iranian proxy in Afghanistan after thousands of Fatemiyoun militants returned to Afghanistan from gaining experience in the Syrian war (Verma, 2022b). Additionally, as a neighbor country to Afghanistan that shares one of the languages (Farsi), Iran has received millions of Afghan immigrants fleeing from the Afghan conflicts during the years. Estimates suggest that up to 8 million Afghans reside in Iran, but Iran is planning to deport 2 million back to Afghanistan (Hein, 2024). However, the most striking unexpected connection came after the Taliban takeover, their new Government model resembles the Iranian model with a supreme leader in the cleric figure¹⁶ of Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada (Abbas, 2023, p. 86,87; Daudzai, 2024).

The complex relationship between Iran and the Taliban/Afghanistan could be benefitted from the mediation of an external great power like China, but these mediations are not typically happening at the regional level. An additional element is missing in the equation, the rivalry between Iran and Pakistan (Bajpae, 2024; Manish & Kaushik, 2023). The efforts of China, among other things with the “Quadrilateral Meetings Involving China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia”, are described in the interregional level section.

¹⁶ A clerical profile that has helped out to avoid to be included in the US wanted list and the UN sanction lists (Ramachandran, 2021), even three years after the Taliban takeover, Akhundzada is not found in any international sanction list (OpenSanctions, 2024).

Political sector

In March 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year Cooperation Program (Harrison & Liffey, 2021). This agreement began being discussed in 2015, but the press statement from Iranian authorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2021b) did not give specific details on the initiatives that were planned to be covered under the program. The statement mentions close consultation on regional issues, strengthening defense infrastructure, financial-banking cooperation, economic cooperation on the fields of oil, mining and energy, as well as infrastructure and communication. It also mentions Iran participation on the RBI. Regarding the oil supply infrastructure, the New York Times (Fassihi & Myers, 2021) based on a draft of the agreement reported that China would invest \$400 billion during the 25-year period. However, these numbers are not easy to verify because the agreement is not public. Figueroa (2021) examined the Chinese and Iranian perspectives on this agreement and found that representatives from both countries firmly denied the inclusion of these specific details in the signed document. According to Zhao Lijian, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, the document represents a general framework for the cooperation. Similarly, Reza Zabib, head of East Asia at Iran Foreign Ministry, described the 25-year program not as an agreement (which would have a legal requirement to be published), but as a non-binding document (Figueroa, 2021). Regardless of the exact numbers, these investments would require the connectivity through Afghanistan to boost the regional trade.

Economic Sector

On the economic sector, freight transport by train between Afghanistan and Iran has been promoted with the opening of new lines after the Taliban takeover. Almost two years after the takeover, the 140 km railway between the Iranian city of Khaf and the Afghan city Herat concluded its first cargo trial. The construction of the line started long back in 2007 during the Karzai Government, but it has started the test runs under the Taliban Government. Iranian ambitions are not restricted to Afghanistan. On the contrary, the route represents an opportunity to continue expanding regional transit routes, as initially planned, and arrive to link with China and India (Burna-Asefi, 2023). Precisely, Khaf is one of the terminal stations

of the proposed Five Nations Railway Corridor that would connect on one end Khaf and the other end the Chinese city of Kashgar (Ebrahimbay Salami, 2019). Although the Khaf-Herat railway connection remains incomplete on the final kilometers leading to Herat, Iran has provided multiple rounds of training to Afghan railway personnel to build operational capacity. Recognizing the strategic importance of this route, Iranian representatives have advocated for a trilateral meeting with Afghanistan and China to advance the development of this trade corridor. However, it is important to differentiate between the potential future operation of the corridor and the current usage. As of late November 2024, only three trains per week were running on this route (Yaqubi, 2024b). This modest frequency reflects the current early stage of the project, and the need for further infrastructure development and coordination with partners like China.

Nevertheless, Iran and Afghan economic relation does not only have China in mind. As already mentioned, India is another actor that represents an opportunity to balance Chinese and Pakistani influence. Iran is expanding with the support of India that is the main investor in its port in the southern city of Chabahar. Chabahar is close to Gwadar, hence, this port would compete with the one in which China is investing (Aliasgary & Ekstrom, 2021). The Taliban are also expecting to profit from this access to the sea. An agreement with Iran was reached in March 2024, and the Taliban plan to invest \$35 million in the Chabahar project (D'Souza, 2024a). This would allow the Taliban to have a transit route for goods from Chabahar to the Afghan city of Zaranj, which is close to the border with Iran (and from there to Kandahar and Kabul). This route would be less impacted by the regular tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan (Kaleji, 2024). The railway connection between Iran and Afghanistan also opens new trade routes from China without the need to connect through Afghanistan. At the end of 2024 the first shipment from China to Herat was sent via ship to Iran (van der Laan, 2025; Yaqubi, 2024e).

Turkmenistan

Although without officiallly recognizing the Taliban Government, Turkmenistan maintains its traditional neutrality, and has engaged with the Taliban on their common topics (border

management, economic development and water resources) (Gusseinov, 2024). Turkmenistan is one of the four countries to which the Taliban sent an “Ambassador” (BBC News, 2022) shortly after the takeover. However, despite the multiple sources (BBC News, 2022; The Print, 2022) indicating a formal ambassador recognition by Turkmenistan already in 2022, the recognition of the Taliban representative as ambassador has not yet been confirmed, and remains pending. As late as July 2024, when the Taliban representative changed, the Taliban representative has been accepted by Turkmenistan as Chargé d’Affaires, not as Ambassador (TOLO news, 2024a).

Turkmenistan is one of the States participating in the Afghan Neighbors’ Foreign Ministers’ Meeting hosted by China that is introduced in the Interregional level section. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan’s involvement is, for the time being, mostly regional, and it would be covered in this section.

Economic sector

Two main initiatives are highlighted in the economic sector between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in the statement of the Third Foreign Ministers’ Meeting Among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan (2022) that was held in Tunxi, during the same days that the Troika Plus meeting that was introduced previously related to the Chinese involvement of Pakistan on the “Afghan issue”.

The most immediate initiative is the promotion of the railway connectivity across two lines:

- The Akina-Andkhoy railway between two Afghan cities, Andkhoy and the city of Akina, from where the connection goes to Central Asia through the Turkmen city of Ymamnazar. This route is “designed to connect the countries of the region with further access to the railway network of China” (ibid). This connection was first inaugurated in January 2021 (Railway Gazette International, 2021b), but the construction was not finalized. It was only after the meeting in Tunxi that the construction of the final steps to Akina was completed in summer 2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 2024).

- The other railway line that in which Turkmenistan is interested is the 173 km line between the Afghan cities of Herat and Turgundi. However, the discussion about the additional capacity in the connection between Turgundi and the Turkmen city of Serhetabat would still need more than two years after the meeting in Tunxi to be realized in September 2024 (Diplomat Magazine, 2024; TurkmenPortal, 2024).

These connections (Akina-Ymamnazar and Turgundi-Serhetabat) are not limited to railroads, they also serve as a multimodal infrastructure link that also encompass fiber optic lines and gas pipeline, as mentioned in the statement of the Third Foreign Ministers' Meeting (2022). These fiber optics were inaugurated in 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 2021).

Uzbekistan

After the China-Afghanistan border, the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border is the shortest of Afghanistan's international boundaries. However, unlike the China-Afghanistan border, the areas near the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan boundary are populated on both sides. This proximity of cities and towns has enabled IS-K¹⁷ to claim multiple attacks on Uzbekistan from Afghan soil. For example, the group asserted that it fired rockets from the border town of Hairatan toward the Uzbek city of Termez, although both the Taliban and Uzbekistan dismissed these claims (Pannier, 2022).

Regarding the relation between Uzbekistan and the Taliban, October 2024 marked an important milestone. On 9 October 2024, Uzbekistan became the third country to accept a Taliban appointed ambassador (Gul, 2024). On 27 October 2024, Uzbekistan envoy, Abibek Usmanov, arrived to Afghanistan (Ziaei, 2024), and some weeks later on 20 November 2024, Usmanov presented his ambassadorial credentials to the Taliban Government (Ariana News, 2024d; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2024).

¹⁷ IS-K absorbed in 2015 the majority of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), when Osman Ghazi, IMU's leader, swore allegiance to ISIS (Guistozzi, 2024, pp. 154–157).

Economic sector

Uzbekistan is currently a key player in the railway connection between China and Afghanistan. The two trade routes (Nantong-Hairatan and Kashgar-Hairatan) that were mentioned previously run through Uzbekistan before arriving to Hairatan. As shown in the following image¹⁸ (Figure 3), the routes cross the Alatau pass on its way to Kazakhstan, from where they reach the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, before it arrives to the border with Afghanistan in Termez, and finally it reaches Hairatan.

Nevertheless, the future connectivity between China and Uzbekistan has already been under discussion for more than 10 years, and the final steps to start the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan were agreed in January 2024 (Lee & Woo, 2024). This route that would reduce cargo delivery time between Nantong and Kashgar with Uzbekistan was finally agreed by the countries on 6th June 2024 (Anadolu Agency, 2024; Khitakhunov, 2024).

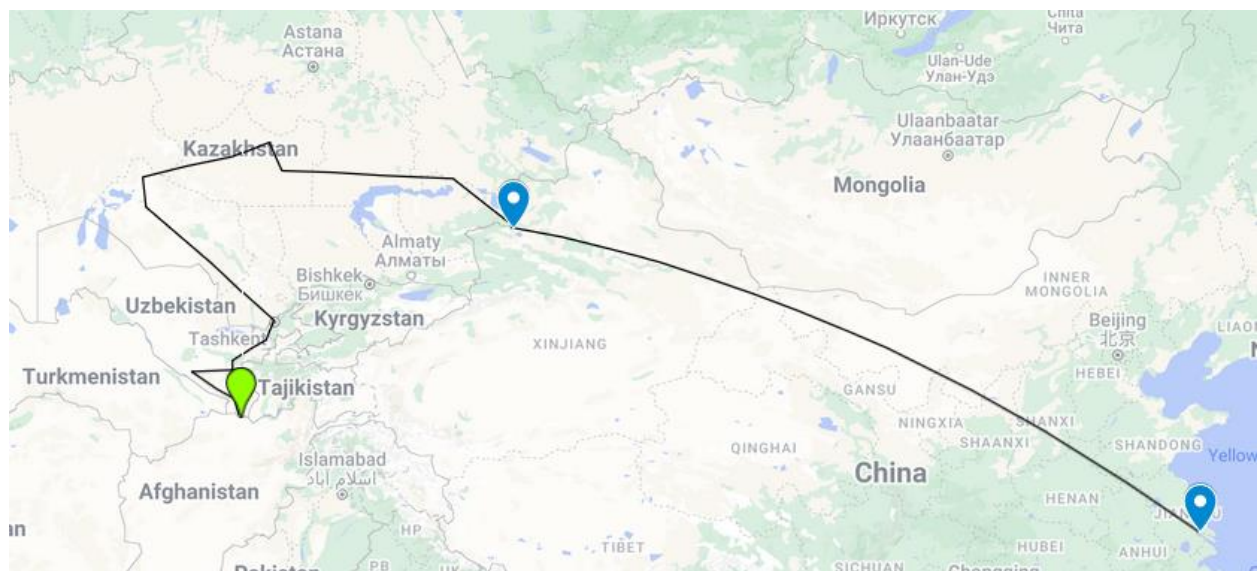


Figure 3 [Own creation in Google Maps] Nantong-Hairatan railway.

¹⁸ Image reconstructed with the information from the report from Safi & Alizada (2018) that is based on the 2017 RECAV report (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2017). Safi & Alizada (2018) provide the wrong image because they locate the Alatau Pass next to Kyrgyzstan, instead of Kazakhstan

Political sector

Uzbekistan as one of the Afghanistan's neighboring countries is usually consulted and briefed by Yue Xiaoyong. Although the exact content of the meetings is not disclosed, the travels activities of Yue Xiaoyong are usually reported by regional news media (Bakhtar news, 2024; UzDaily.com, 2022) and also in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2024). The paper of Uzbekistan will be highlighted in the following section because Uzbekistan has hosted some of the meetings (e.g. Imamova, 2022) discussed in the interregional level section.

Final remarks on the regional level

Aside from the triangular relations previously mentioned, there is a series of meetings that belongs to the regional level that has been used partially for the discussion of the “Afghan issue”. This is the China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting. This is not an ad-hoc meeting to discuss the issue, but a series that started in July 2020 focusing on regional economic cooperation and security. The last three meetings¹⁹ took place after the Taliban takeover, hence, the topic of the stability of Afghanistan has been briefly mentioned as impacting the security of the Central Asian Region, and the participants have called Afghanistan to form an inclusive government (Ge, 2023; Maryam, 2023). These initial calls (to the Taliban) for an inclusive government in Afghanistan seems to have been ignored. Nevertheless, in the last meeting in Chengdu on 1st December 2024, these states agreed to work together in helping Afghanistan achieve peace and reconstruction, a statement that seems to indicate a further working together with the Taliban Government (Soltani, 2024).

Before finishing the regional section, it seems interesting to examine the engagement of the Chinese special envoy for Afghanistan with representatives of each of Afghanistan's neighboring countries. While the content of the meetings cannot be known with certainty,

¹⁹ Third meeting in Nur-Sultan (7th and 8th June 2022), Fourth meeting in Xian (27th April 2003) and Fifth meeting in Chengdu (1st December 2024).

the number of meetings²⁰ might help to understand how China is considering the importance to engage with each country to handle the situation in Afghanistan. Using the reported data from the MFA of the PRC, Figure 4 was created representing the number of meetings that Yue Xiaoyong has held with representatives of each Afghanistan's neighbor country²¹ since the Taliban takeover until the end of 2024. Figure 4 shows a relatively similar engagement with all Afghanistan's neighbors, but with a clear preference with involving Pakistan, and Iran in a lesser degree. The importance of both countries (Pakistan and Iran) has led to triangular China-Pakistan-Iran consultations and meetings regarding the regional security and stability (Raza & Shoaib, 2023), but this is a topic to be discussed on the following section.

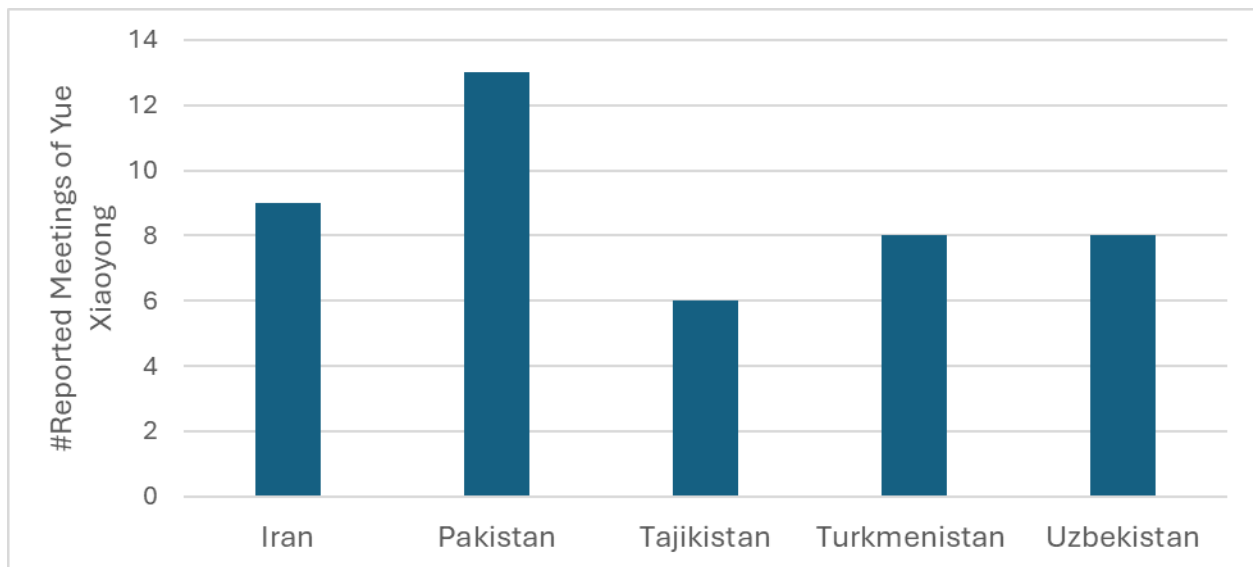


Figure 4 Number of meetings between August 2021 and end of 2024 of the Chinese special envoy for Afghanistan with representatives of each Afghanistan's neighbor countries according to MFA of the PRC [own].

²⁰ These numbers do not cover all meetings in which Chinese representatives are meeting. Some of the previously reported meetings do not mention the presence of Yue Xiaoyong, but it provides a good starting point to assess how China is engaging with these countries due to the specific role of Yue Xiaoyong as special envoy for Afghanistan.

²¹ Yue Xiaoyong has also joined meetings with representatives of other countries. The two main actors that are not considered in Figure 4 are the Taliban representatives, and also with Russian representatives. Additionally, there have been multiple meetings (but less numerous) with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, etc.

Interregional level

After the previous regional-level section, which introduced many of the elements examined here, this section focuses on China's efforts to engage States from different regions in order to jointly contain the threats emanating from Afghanistan and foster stabilization. These efforts can be classified into two big groups, diplomatic conversations across multiple actors and participation in economic initiatives. Therefore, the sectorial analysis of this section uses the economic and political sectors. As it can already be observed on the local and regional level, the sectors are used to organize the discussion, but they are not completely unrelated, economic initiatives are likely to be followed or be promoted through the political meetings.

Political sector

Around the Afghan situation after the Taliban takeover, there is no lack of different meetings on different formats and different actors in which China participates or takes the lead. These meetings might take the form of trilateral or quadrilateral meetings, but also there are multilateral meetings with many actors.

Among the meetings, there are two elements to notice. The first element is the purpose of the meeting, namely, whether the situation in Afghanistan is the main content of the meeting or one of the many topics discussed. The second element is the meeting start date, namely, whether the meeting series started after the Taliban takeover, or the meetings are a continuation of an existing regular series. The list of all the following meetings can be found at Appendix A – List of meetings

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Meetings

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was established in June 2001, which followed the initial 1996 regional agreement coined as “Shanghai Five” to demilitarize the former Sino-Soviet border that existed between China and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. This organization was seen by Gill (2001) at the time as an effort to seek “security-related mechanisms without the participation of the United States”. It focused on countering the

“three evils” (terrorism, separatism and religious extremism) and it might have played an important role on the regional security, but the September 11 attacks happened few months after its creation and many of the SCO members welcomed the US military forces into their countries instead of strengthening the security mechanisms of this new organization (Pantucci & Petersen, 2022, pp. 152–157).

The Afghanistan situation is mentioned in all the kind of meetings of the SCO that were held after the Taliban takeover, including the yearly Foreign Ministers’ Meetings (July 2022 in Tashkent, May 2023 in Goa and May 2024 in Astana), the yearly Heads of State Council meetings (September 2021 in Dushanbe, September 2022 in Samarkand, July 2023 virtual meeting and July 2024 in Astana), the yearly Council of Head of Government meetings (November 2021 virtual meeting, November 2022 virtual meeting, October 2023 in Bishkek and October 2024 in Islamabad). However, the special SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group that was established in 2005 (SCO, 2019) has not had any meeting since the Taliban takeover. The fifth and last meeting (at the end of 2024) held by the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was on 14 July 2021 (SCO, 2021). Some actors (e.g. Pakistani Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, and former Uzbek Foreign Minister, Vladimir Norov) have called for the revival of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group (Ariana News, 2024c; Norov, 2024). However, as indicated by Pantucci & Petersen (2022, p. 166), China already appeared to have lost the interest in the SCO engagement on Afghanistan, and created in 2016 the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. Although the QCCM has not continued after the Taliban takeover, a different quadrilateral meeting appeared, one involving two great powers (China and Russia) and two regional powers (Iran and Pakistan).

China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Foreign Ministers on Afghanistan

With the occasion of a SCO and a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit in Dushanbe, the first informal meeting of China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran on the Afghan issue was held on 16 September 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021b). The SCO summit that served as occasion for this informal meeting was also the one in which it was announced that Iran will join the SCO as a full member. The coordination of these four States

is especially important for the regional development and it was perceived as an “opportunity to use the SCO to establish a regional order” (Eguegu & Aatif, 2021). The stabilization is necessary to develop the economic initiatives mentioned in the economic sector section.

The first meeting served as another platform to outline three expectations for the new Afghan Government: 1) An inclusive government should be built. 2) The Taliban should cut ties with terrorist organizations. 3) Afghanistan should be a good neighbor. The meeting also served to criticize the US and its allies because of their role in the current situation of Afghanistan²² (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021b):

“We should urge the international community, especially the United States and its allies, to shoulder their due responsibilities for resolving the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.”

Keeping an open relation with the Taliban is seen as more important than achieving short-term goals. While the first expectation was not fulfilled and in the next meeting on 13 March 2023, with occasion of an Afghan Neighbors’ Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, the inclusiveness was reframed as promoting an “inclusive governance with the practical participation of all ethnic groups” in the Joint Statement of the Second Informal Meeting (2023). The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, even said that the Taliban Government is “adopting moderate, prudent and inclusive policies” (Gul, 2023).

Despite the efforts of the Taliban fighting the IS-K (Mir, 2023) and its acknowledgment in the Joint Statement of the Second Informal Meeting and Third Informal Meeting (2023, 2024), the leniency is not extended to the counter-terrorism goal; the Joint Statements mentioned specific terrorist groups²³ as indicating to the Taliban where to focus their security efforts.

²² Similar statements can be found in the Joint Statement of the Second Informal Meeting and Third Informal Meeting (2023, 2024) but referring to NATO countries.

²³ IS-K, Al-Qaeda, ETIM, TTP, BLA and Jaish al-Adl in the Second Informal Meeting, while in the Third Informal Meeting, IS-K was replaced by ISIL, and a component of the BLA, the Majeed Brigade (c.f. Pakistan subsection in the regional level section, especially the military sector) was also mentioned.

As mentioned in the regional level section, terrorist attacks in Pakistan have increased in 2023. At a time when Pakistan faces some of its most challenging circumstances, and given the scale of Chinese investments in the country, which have also been targeted, coordination among various actors to achieve regional security becomes especially important. Furthermore, relations between Iran and Pakistan are not always peaceful, requiring heightened diplomatic efforts to ease tensions and foster collaboration against cross-border terrorism in the region. An additional meeting format emerged under these circumstances, a trilateral meeting among China, Iran and Pakistan.

China-Pakistan-Iran Trilateral Consultation on Counter-Terrorism and Security

Although there were already existing meetings that could have been used by these three countries (China, Iran and Pakistan) to align on counter-terrorism mechanisms, this new format was inaugurated on 7 June 2023 with a meeting in Beijing. This meeting was embedded within a distinct framework, the Global Security Initiative (GSI), as reported by Wang Yi (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023b).

The GSI was announced on 21 April 2022 at the Annual Bao Forum by Xi Jinping, and it is seen as opposing US-led alliances (Arase, 2023). GSI is based on the indivisible security concept, namely, that the security of a nation depends on the other countries in its regions; hence, this initiative is well aligned with the RSCT insight that threats travel more easily over short distances²⁴. This parallelism with the RSCT might explain why in this meeting format, two regional powers were selected to coordinate on counter-terrorism and security. Additionally, China has a long standing relation with both countries, as mentioned previously, which facilitates that China takes a mediation roles between Iran and Pakistan.

Aside from a shared interest in the stability of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan also need to improve their bilateral relations, which at times are on the brink of a military confrontation²⁵.

²⁴ Of course, the term region is having a slightly different meaning in RSCT.

²⁵ The most recent example was in 2024 when Iran launched an attack against Balochistan insurgents on Pakistan soil, and Pakistan replied by launching its own attack against Balochistan insurgents on Iranian soil (Ashraf, 2023).

Consequently, the purpose of this meeting format extends beyond addressing cross-border terrorism originating from Afghanistan, an issue that concerns both Iran and Pakistan and represents a key topic of discussion of this meeting format (Kulkarni, 2023). Notably, the special place of Afghanistan under the GSI was highlighted in advance by the Embassy of the PRC in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2023) one week prior to this trilateral meeting. Furthermore, the level of the attendees of this meeting format (i.e. directors general level of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023b) differentiates it from other gatherings.

Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan

The Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan is a diplomatic mechanism initiated by Russia in 2017 with the participation of Afghanistan, India, Iran, China and Pakistan (D’Souza, 2023a). Over time, the Moscow Format has undergone several rounds of consultations, representatives of the Taliban joined on the second meeting in November 2018, and they are the only representatives from Afghanistan since the third meeting in October 2021²⁶. As the time passed, the language and petitions to the Taliban also changed. While in the fourth meeting, the participants requested Afghanistan²⁷ in the Joint Statement (2022):

“to fulfill its commitments to eradicate terrorism and drug trafficking emanating from its territory, take more visible steps against all terrorist organizations, and to firmly fight, dismantle and eliminate them”

In the sixth meeting, that happened around six months after the Crocus City Hall attack, the Joint Statement (2024) referred the Taliban group as the *de facto* authority and called for verifiable actions and the fulfilling of the international commitments made by Afghanistan:

“They called on de facto authorities to take visible and verifiable actions in fulfilling the international obligations and commitments made by Afghanistan

²⁶ Although, the Taliban were not invited to the fourth meeting in November 2022 (Russian News Agency, 2022).

²⁷ Avoiding in this way to name the Taliban.

to fight terrorism, dismantle, and eliminate all terrorist groups equally and non-discriminatory and prevent the use of Afghan territory against its neighbors, the region, and beyond.”

A growing consensus appears to be emerging around the Taliban government, viewing it not only as the *de facto* authority but also as inheriting the international obligations of Afghanistan. Gradually, and within a small circle of countries, the path toward the *de jure* recognition of the Taliban Government is being paved.

Afghan Neighbors’ Foreign Ministers’ Meeting

A meeting format that has been created specifically after the Taliban takeover is the Afghan Neighbor’s Foreign Minister’s Meeting. This format is a diplomatic mechanism that brings together the countries bordering Afghanistan (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). This format aims to establish a common regional approach toward counterterrorism efforts, refugee management, cross-border trade, and overall stability in post-conflict Afghanistan. Although in the first meeting on 8 September 2021 Russia was not invited, Russia started to be part of this meeting format in the following meeting on 27 October 2021 in Tehran (Iran), despite not sharing a border with Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2021a).

Due to the participants of this Meeting format, many of the economic initiatives that are mentioned in the economic sector section are directly influenced. The third meeting under this format was held in Tunxi (China) on 31 March 2022, and China as the host invited the Taliban for a gathering with these participants called Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan Plus Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2022). For the fourth meeting on 13 April 2023 in Samarkand (Uzbekistan), the Taliban were initially not invited, but an invitation was sent at the last moment for a sideline meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister, Qin Gang (Amu TV, 2023; Milenković, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023a). The fifth meeting under this format was scheduled during the fourth meeting to be held in 2024 in Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), but the meeting has not yet taken place. Nevertheless, China has

already invited the Taliban to attend the fifth meeting in a meeting on 25 November 2024 between Yue Xiaoyong and Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi (TOLO news, 2024b). The type of participation that the Taliban would take on the fifth meeting is not known, namely, it is not known if it would be a formal participation or as in previous meetings as an invitation for sidelines discussions. In any case, China is seeking to maintain open channels with the Taliban and position itself as a key interlocutor for regional stability.

Tunxi Initiative

Last but not least, the Tunxi Initiative refers to the discussions held in Tunxi (China) with occasion of two meetings mentioned previously, the third meeting of the Afghan Neighbor's Foreign Minister's meeting and the Troika Plus meeting. Additionally, as mentioned previously, China took occasion of the meeting to host the first Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan Plus Afghanistan, a meeting to which there were also invited as guest two additional actors, Qatar and Indonesia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2022). By combining the two meetings' formats and inviting additional participants, the Tunxi Initiative shows an additional effort to promote multilateral diplomacy regarding the situation of Afghanistan with actors from several Regions, while it restricted the representation of Afghanistan in these meetings to the Taliban Government.

Economic sector

An important question is whether all the political engagement with the Taliban has resulted in economic initiatives to connect the different Regions through Afghanistan. Some of the initiatives have already been mentioned in part previously, but in this section the emphasis is on the whole initiative that, when completed, will allow interregional trade.

Infrastructure projects like railway connections are one of the main topics under discussion in a country that has had its infrastructure destroyed after decades of conflicts. As the initiatives materialize, there are also spillovers for other railway projects to take advantages of the newly designed routes to increase the connectivity through Afghanistan. The most promising railway project, and one that serves as a kind of skeleton for other projects is the Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan Railway Project. This project aims to

connect the Uzbek city of Termez (c.f. Uzbekistan section in the regional level to see a previous mention) and the Pakistani city of Peshawar through two important Afghan cities (Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul) (Umarova, 2024). Despite the suggestions that this route might be part or to be extended to the CPEC²⁸, and that China is willing to provide funding for the project²⁹, China is not one of the current potential investors (Government Media and Information Center of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2024; Umarova, 2024). Nevertheless, on the side of Pakistan, the route can connect to the routes created under the CPEC (Daryo, 2023; Sadozai, 2023). The Khaf-Herat railway that connects Iran and Afghanistan would also use this new route to connect to Central Asia and China after the railway between Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif is completed (Umarova, 2024). Despite the alignment of the Five Nations Railway Corridor with the RBI, the agreement with the Taliban to extend the RBI to Afghanistan (Najafizada & Dilawar, 2023), and the political goodwill that China has been showing to the Taliban Government, China is still cautious about providing financial investment to these projects.

Global level

As observed in the interregional level section, the efforts of China to engage with the Taliban in the economic sector pale in comparison to the political sector. While China has signaled an interest in infrastructure projects, trade initiatives, and potential investments in Afghanistan, these initiatives have yet to materialize. At the global level, as expected, the contrast is even higher, hence, only the political sector is considered.

Political sector

At the global level, the Taliban Government lacks formal recognition by any State, and it has been denied taking Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations (UN) for four years in a row. The

²⁸ For example, in the news article from Achakzai (2024).

²⁹ Yue Xiaoyong reportedly said that China is ready to support regional projects, "including the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway" (Salehi, 2022). It has also been mentioned that the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank might become one of the investors (Yaqubi, 2024a).

situation of Afghanistan has been discussed at the UN, where the Afghan seat is occupied by Nasir Ahmad Faiq, as representative of the former government (Yaqubi, 2024c). This section starts with the analysis of the Chinese discourses at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), but later some UN meetings attended by the Taliban are also discussed.

United Nations Security Council

The first meeting of the UNSC in August 2021 was the 8829th UNSC meeting, but the topic of that meeting was not about the situation of Afghanistan, nor Afghanistan was mentioned at any point. From August 2021 to the end of 2024³⁰, there have been a slightly more than 1,000 meetings. For the analysis, the records of all the meetings have first been downloaded from the UN Documentation Research Guides (United Nations, 2024d) and data scraped to find references to Afghanistan and the Taliban (c.f. Appendix B – Script download UNSC meeting records and data scraping).



Figure 5 Percentage of the sessions in which Afghanistan or Taliban are mentioned, the Chinese representative at UNSC is mentioning also refers in full or part to the situation of Afghanistan (starting in August 2021) [own].

³⁰ Because of the delay between the meetings and the publication in the Official Document System, the last 9 meetings of 2024 were not analyzed. The topic of these missing meetings was not Afghanistan, but there might have been some references. Additionally, there are 55 meetings (a couple of them related to the situation of Afghanistan) that are considered closed and have no publicly available records.

As shown in Figure 5, initially in 2021, when the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban was in progress or happened recently, 40% of the instances that Afghanistan or the Taliban was mentioned in the meeting, the Chinese representative was also commenting or referring the situation in Afghanistan, but then the percentage decreased in the following years. This gives a list of 216 meetings that have been analyzed to find how China handles the Afghanistan situation at this level.

In the speeches of the Chinese representatives, there are three repetitive topics that can be found as a critique to the US or its western allies (see Figure 6):

- 1) Hasty withdrawal: The withdrawal of the US military and its allies is mentioned as hasty to emphasize the chaos it caused and to blame them for the situation in Afghanistan. However, as displayed in Figure 6, the reference of this topic has lost prominence each year. In 2024, the withdrawal of the troops was a topic that was seldom mentioned, and its mention together with the term ‘hasty’ (or a similar term) was very infrequent. For example, at the 9577th UNSC meeting on 22 March 2024, Geng Shuang, the Chinese diplomat in this meeting, made a neutral reference to the withdrawal (United Nations, 2024a):

“Two and a half years after the withdrawal of foreign troops, Afghanistan is seeing an overall stable domestic situation,”

which contrasts with a similar reference made previously, two and a half years before, at the 8848th meeting on 30 August 2021 by the same diplomat (United Nations, 2021):

“The recent chaos in Afghanistan is directly related to the hasty and disorderly withdrawal of foreign troops. We hope that the countries concerned will realize that the withdrawal does not mean an end of their responsibility but the beginning of a process of reflection and correction.”

- 2) Unilateral sanction: Another repetitive call at the UNSC meetings by China is the call against the unilateral sanctions that some States took after the Taliban takeover, especially with reference to the \$7 billion in Afghan assets frozen by the

US Government. The percentage of speeches by the Chinese representatives mentioning this topic when referring to the situation of Afghanistan has remained very high over the last three years as displayed in Figure 6. Although without success when considering that the assets have remained frozen, China has used this as a critique of these States for holding Afghan assets while a humanitarian crisis develops in the country.

- 3) Travel ban: Some members of the Taliban Government are sanctioned under UNSC resolution 1267 from 1999 that imposes air travel ban and financial embargo on the Taliban. In order to facilitate the dialogue with the Taliban, the UNSC has been granting temporary exceptions to the travel ban. In this topic, China has become more vocal over time to advocate for extending the travel ban exception (United Nations, 2024b):

“As a crucial step in building trust, the Council should immediately reinstate the blanket travel-ban exemptions for the interim Government’s relevant personnel, make adjustments to the 1988 sanctions regime in a timely manner based on the dynamics on the ground and facilitate the interim Government’s engagement with the international community.”

China has also remarked the desire to avoid the spread of the usage of these sanctions to other topics different from originally intended, namely, as a measure to combat terrorism (United Nations, 2024c):

“Thirdly, the resolution reaffirms support for inclusive governance in Afghanistan and calls for the protection of the fundamental rights of Afghan women and ethnic minorities. China urges the Afghan authorities to effectively implement the requirements of Security Council resolutions and wishes to point out that the resolution 1988 (2011) sanctions regime is a coercive measure to combat terrorism, not an appropriate platform for addressing human rights issues.”

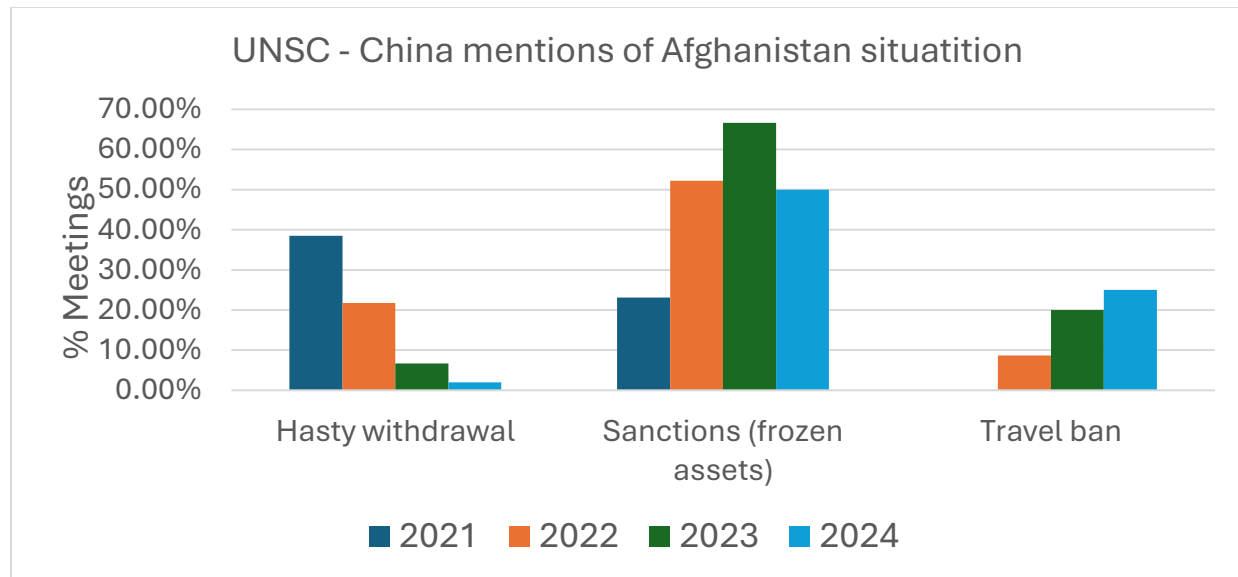


Figure 6 Percentage of mention of each topic in the speeches of the Chinese representative when referring to the situation of Afghanistan [own].

On the speeches, there can also be found instances of overselling the current mechanisms. On the 9448th meeting, on 20 October 2023, Zhang Jun mentioned that the UN “should strengthen coordination” with the SCO and the Afghanistan Contact Group (United Nations, 2023), a group that, as mentioned on the interregional level, has had no meeting since the Taliban takeover. The pine nuts air corridor between Afghanistan and China that was mentioned in the local level section was also highlighted at the UNSC meetings on five occasions (9118th, 9227th, 9574th, 9637th and 9700th meeting) as a success story.

UN meetings

The Taliban has refused to participate in some UN sponsored meetings because of the UN rejection to recognize the Taliban as the sole representative of Afghanistan, or directly not being invited to the first UN meetings with special envoys on Afghanistan (Mills & Greenfield, 2024; Nichols, 2023). They were, however, invited to the third meeting of special envoys on Afghanistan as noted and commended by China in the 9663rd UNSC meeting (United Nations, 2024b). This particular meeting drew criticism for excluding women, most notably the UN special envoy on Afghanistan, Roza Otunbayeva, in order to accommodate the Taliban

(Nichols, 2024). A separate meeting was organized by the UN with the Afghan civil society, but neither the Taliban nor the representatives from several countries, including China, attended this separate meeting (Davies, 2024). This approach followed by China and others (e.g. Russia) shows the willingness to engage with the *de facto* authorities of Afghanistan, but not with other members of the civil society.

Conclusion

China has already recognized the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, not officially, but a *de facto* recognition by gradually strengthening diplomatic ties with the Taliban Government in all the instances as the sole representative of Afghanistan. This careful approach reflects China's primary interest in regional security, particularly preventing cross-border militant activity that might extend to China, but more importantly, its impact on Chinese initiatives in countries neighboring Afghanistan. The political engagement with the Taliban follows the US withdrawal, signaling China's readiness to fill the diplomatic vacuum by balancing its security concerns with pragmatic cooperation across this neighboring region.

As explained on the local level sections, Chinese support for economic development, while important in relative terms due to the isolation of the Taliban Government, is mainly composed of small initiatives. These initiatives are not new, but re-inaugurations or re-starts of old initiatives that have already been running with the previous Afghan Governments. Nevertheless, after their failure to maintain these initiatives in the past due to economic reasons or safety concerns, these initiatives have been relaunched as a way to build a liaison with the new Taliban Government.

China is not working in isolation. Afghanistan's neighboring countries are all affected if the situation worsens; hence, all of them have been participating in the Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meeting to reiterate the need for counterterrorism efforts. The outcome of these engagements might still be limited, but they help to build the social network on which this new Afghan Government is operating, a network that prioritizes security issues over other concerns. China is not the only great power taking this approach, Russia even though

it is not a neighboring country of Afghanistan has also joined the Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meeting and participates in some of the trilateral and quadrilateral meetings together with China.

This different choice of priorities for the region, coupled with its differentiated engagement with the Taliban Government compared to the US and other Western countries, is framed by China as a critique that serves to portray itself as a responsible power. Despite the difficulties in giving access to Afghan assets to a government that the US does not recognize, China has criticized the freezing of Afghan assets in the US, underscoring the humanitarian crisis that Afghanistan has been facing over the last three years. This stance allows China to position itself as more sympathetic to Afghan needs, maintaining a positive image in front of both the Taliban Government and the Afghanistan's neighboring countries, which would also suffer if the crisis spills over their borders. Nevertheless, the more effective economic development of Afghanistan would require its interconnectivity with all its neighbors to boost interregional trade through Afghanistan. However, these interregional economic initiatives are still in a very premature stage with slow advancements in the last three years; security concerns are a key point inhibiting the launch of these economic initiatives. Although China has expressed its interest in these initiatives that might help the economic development of Afghanistan, the participation of China is not yet confirmed.

Although the stance that China is taking on the situation of Afghanistan diverges from the majority of countries, the pace of the engagement process is not fast, but slow. This pragmatic approach strives to balance a first-mover position with the Taliban while building of a long-term relation which eventually might lead to the desired stability. China's patient attitude toward this neighboring crisis suggests it may employ a similar strategy for more distant geopolitical challenges in the future.

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Appendix A – List of meetings

Date [First day]	Format	Edition	Location	Participants
2021-09-08	Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meeting	First Meeting	Online	Foreign ministers from China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
2021-10-27	Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Second Meeting	Teheran	Foreign ministers from China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia
2022-03-31	Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Third Meeting	Tunxi	Foreign ministers from China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia
2023-04-13	Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Fourth Meeting	Samarkand	Foreign ministers from China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia
Planned for 2024 - Still not happened	Afghan Neighbors' Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Fifth Meeting	Ashgabat	
2022-03-31	Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan Plus Afghanistan	First Meeting	Tunxi	China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia, and the Taliban
2017-04-14	Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan	First Meeting	Moscow	Russia, Afghanistan, India, Iran, China and Pakistan

2018-11-09	Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan	Second Meeting	Moscow	Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, the Taliban and Afghanistan's High Peace Council. The US and India.
2021-10-20	Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan	Third Meeting	Moscow	Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and the Taliban
2022-11-16	Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan	Fourth Meeting	Moscow	Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan
2023-09-29	Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan	Fifth Meeting	Kazan	Russia, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Central Asian countries, and the Taliban. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Turkey
2024-10-04	Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan	Sixth Meeting	Moscow	Russia, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and the Taliban
2021-09-16	China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Foreign Ministers on Afghanistan	First Informal Meeting	Dushanbe	China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran
2023-04-13	China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Foreign Ministers on Afghanistan	Second Informal Meeting	Samarkand	China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran

2024-09-27	China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Foreign Ministers on Afghanistan	Third Informal Meeting	New York	China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran
2021-07-14	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Dushanbe	SCO members
2021-09-17	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Heads of State Council	Dushanbe	SCO members
2021-11-25	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Council of Heads of Government	Online	SCO members
2022-05-16	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Anti-Terrorism Meeting	New Delhi	SCO members
2022-07-29	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Tashkent	SCO members
2022-08-25	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Defence Ministers' Meeting	Tashkent	SCO members
2022-09-17	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Heads of State Council	Samarkand	SCO members
2022-11-01	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Council of Heads of Government	Online	SCO members
2023-05-05	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Goa	SCO members

2023-07-04	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Heads of State Council	Online	SCO members
2023-10-26	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Council of Heads of Government	Bishkek	SCO members
2024-05-20	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Astana	SCO members
2024-07-03	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Heads of State Council	Astana	SCO members
2024-10-15	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	Council of Heads of Government	Islamabad	SCO members
2021-07-14	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group	Dushanbe	SCO members
2023-06-07	China-Pakistan-Iran Trilateral Consultation on Counter-Terrorism and Security	First Meeting	Beijing	China, Pakistan and Iran
2022-03-31	Tunxi initiative		Tunxi	China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, the US, the Taliban, Qatar and Indonesia.
2016-08-03	Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism	Inaugural Meeting	Urumqi	Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan

2022-06-08	China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Third Meeting	Nur-Sultan	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan
2023-05-18	China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Fourth Meeting	Xian	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan
2024-12-01	China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting	Fifth Meeting	Chengdu	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan
2021-03-18	Troika Plus Meeting	Regular meetings	Moscow	US, Russia, China and Pakistan, Aghanistan and the Taliban
2021-03-30	Troika Plus Meeting	Regular meetings	Qatar	US, Russia, China and Pakistan, Qatar, Afghanistan and the Taliban
2021-11-21	Troika Plus Meeting	Regular meetings	Islamabad	US, Russia, China and Pakistan, and the Taliban
2022-03-31	Troika Plus Meeting	Regular meetings	Tunxi	US, Russia, China and Pakistan, and the Taliban

Appendix B – Script download UNSC meeting records and data scraping

```
# -*- coding: utf-8 -*-
"""
Download and scrap UNSC meetings
@author: David Jaramillo Císcar
"""

import requests
from urllib.request import urlretrieve
import PyPDF2
import pandas as pd
import os

#8829th Security Council Meetings was held on 2st August 2021
language = "E"
for i in range(8829,9929):
    try:
        urlstr = "https://daccess-
ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=S/PV."+str(i)+"&Lang="+language
        path = str(i)+".pdf"
        urlretrieve(urlstr,path)
    except Exception as error:
        print("An error occurred:", error)
        print(i)

words_to_search = ['afgh','taliban']
listScrap = []
# Iterate over all files in the given folder
for filename in os.listdir():
    # Check if the file is a PDF
    if filename.lower().endswith('.pdf'):
        try:
            # Attempt to open and read the PDF file
```

```
with open(filename, 'rb') as pdf_file:
    reader = PyPDF2.PdfReader(pdf_file)
    # Check if the PDF is readable by accessing the number of
pages

    # Extract text from all pages
    text = ""
    for page_num in range(len(reader.pages)):
        page = reader.pages[page_num]
        text += page.extract_text().lower() or ""

    found_words = [word in text for word in words_to_search]

    listScrap.append([filename]+found_words)
except:
    print(filename)

df_listScrap = pd.DataFrame(listScrap)
df_listScrap.columns = ["filename"]+words_to_search

df_listScrap.to_csv('scrap_stat.csv', encoding='utf-8-sig')
```