

Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (KJSSH)

ISSN: 2616-8707 (Print and Online), Journal homepage: kjssh.kardan.edu.af

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To cite this article: Bazwan, Jalal. "Afghan-China mutual security interests", *Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, (2022), 5 (2), 41-53.
DOI: KJSSH-5.2-2022-55

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31841/KJSSH-5.2-2022-55>



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Published online: 25 December 2022.



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Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities
5 (2) 41–53

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Kardan Publications
Kabul, Afghanistan

<http://dx.doi.org/10.31841/KJSSH-5.2-2022-55>
<https://kardan.edu.af/Research/CurrentIssue.aspx?j=KJSSH>

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Received: 20 July 22
Revised: 25 Sep 22
Accepted: 20 Nov 22
Published: 25 Dec 22

Abstract

The history of the Sino-Afghan relationship can be traced back to the 7th Century when Chinese monks traveled to Afghanistan through the Silk Road, to visit the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, a province in Afghanistan. The continued China-Afghanistan relationship was disrupted following 9/11 and the subsequent US-NATO military presence in Afghanistan. The former played a leading role in the reconstruction of a new Afghan government and training of the Afghan forces. There was no Chinese involvement in Afghanistan during the US-NATO years. Instead, a mutual relationship was formed after the US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. In a post-2014 combat forces withdrawal of the US-NATO forces, China started playing an active role in resolving the Afghan conflict. China has security interests in Afghanistan, and as long as the security threats in Afghanistan remain unsolved, China may hesitate to strengthen its economic and investment relationship with Afghanistan. When talking about the Chinese security interests in Afghanistan, East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is one of the grave concerns for China. In order to secure the China-Afghan relationship, the Chinese would require that the Afghan government contain ETIM and prevent their operation from Afghanistan. This is necessary so that ETIM is unable to function from Afghanistan and use the country as a safe haven for cross-bordered operations. Further, any subsequent strengthening of Afghan-China relations would require mutual interlards investment, and the success of investments is pegged on eliminating security threats. This paper discusses the Afghan-China mutual security interests and how an insecure Afghanistan is not only a threat to Chinese national security, but it will also have a grave impact on Chinese investment and the connectivity program of the region.

Keywords: *Afghan-Chinese relations; security; terrorism;*

Introduction

This paper will examine Afghan-Chinese relations, historical and modern exchanges, and most importantly the Afghan-China mutual security interests. The paper will look at the historical relations, exchanges, and how security interests have shaped the relations between the two countries. No wonder, if that was the ancient silk road or the 21st century President Xi's signature OBOR (One Belt, One Road) project, a secure Afghanistan is extremely strategic and important for a successful implementation. This research paper will mainly focus on post-9/11 Afghan-Sino relations and security interests. It will also look at how the US-NATO military presence in Afghanistan has influenced the two countries relations, and how Chinese relations have transformed from a low-key approach to playing a more active role in Afghanistan. The first part of this paper will look at the History and background of Afghan-China relations in terms of Ancient and historical exchanges, modern era relations, and exchanges. The

second part of this paper will look at the Changing Sino-Afghan relationship in the post-9/11 era, How the US-NATO presence in Afghanistan affected Afghan-China relations and the Chinese low-key approach to playing a more active role in Afghanistan. The Third part of this paper will briefly talk about Security as the core issue, Afghan-Chinese security interests, and bilateral relations. It will also look at the Chinese consensus and how China is addressing the security issues in Afghanistan. The fifth part will briefly explain what were the Chinese interests in the Afghan peace talks, how China has played an active role, and how it has facilitated the parties to the conflict. The last part is the conclusion and the future prospect of Afghan-Chinese relations.

2. History of Afghanistan-China relations

This section of the paper provides a glimpse of the Afghan-China historical relations, exchanges, and how the relations between the two countries have evolved throughout history. The aim is to show the Ancient historical exchanges and how it has shaped modern relations.

2.1 Ancient Historical Exchanges between Afghanistan and China

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, giving a lecture at the China Foreign Affairs University, noted that Afghanistan's relationship with China is longstanding, with a long history of exchanges between the two countries and Buddhism coming to China from Afghanistan.¹ He added that few people know that China had exchanges with modern Afghanistan in the 18th century as well. Ahmad Shah Abdali, the emperor, and founder of modern Afghanistan sent a mission to the Qing Dynasty in China between 1760-1780 and presented four horses as a gift to the Chinese Emperor at the time. A century later, another Afghan king, Sher Ali Khan, sent another mission to China.² The four splendid horses presented to the Chinese Emperor Qianlong are painted by Milanese Jesuit missionary artist Giuseppe Castiglione for the emperor in the 18th century. The original paintings of the Afghan steeds are kept at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.³ The relations between Sino-China could be traced to the Han dynasty with the profitable Silk Road. According to new research in China, a monk from the Afghan area converted the first Chinese Buddhists in 2 B.C. The Kushans dominated Afghanistan from the 1st to 5th century A.D., and during this time numerous monks found their way to China. Some eventually settled there prominently for missionary work.⁴ Chinese Tang dynasty which is considered one of the most powerful and flourishing dynasties of China, and one with a global vision. Therefore, modern Afghanistan's strategic place in the Silk Road was extremely crucial to China both in terms of economics and security. In the north of Afghanistan were nomadic Turks; to the south were Indians, in the west were Persia and Arabia. After Tang conquered the western Turks in 659, the Turkic of Tokharistan became its vassal. As a result, the land of modern-day Afghanistan became part of the Tang dynasty.⁵ The Tang dynasty lost the Afghan region during its defeat in the battle of talas against the Abbasid Caliphate in 751. It is believed that the loss of Afghanistan

¹ Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai speech at China Foreign Affairs University Beijing, 06 June, 2012.

² *Ibid*

³ Barmazid, Khan. "Ahmad Shah Durrani against Qing China," *Khyber.org*, March 1 2015. Accessed on June 24, 2022.

⁴ Yu-dai, Shen. "China and Afghanistan," Cambridge University Press (1996).

⁵ Kung, Chang. (2021). "China's tang dynasty and Afghanistan, the graveyard of empires," *The Diplomat*, August 28, 2021. Accessed: June 24, 2022.

meant that the Tang dynasty lost its dominant influence, which led to the encroachment and invasion of external forces.⁶

2.2 Sino-Afghan Modern-Era Exchanges

In 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded, and in January 1955, the Royal Government of Afghanistan declared recognition of the Government of the People's Republic of China.⁷ In January 1957, Then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai visited Afghanistan, which marked the first visit to Afghanistan by a Chinese national leader in history. Chinese Premier Zhou and Vice Premier He Long met with King Zahir shah of Afghanistan. In October of the same year, The Afghan Prime Minister paid a return visit to China. The exchange of visits by senior leaders of the two sides has enhanced mutual understanding and laid a foundation for the development of friendly relations between the two countries. The two countries signed a treaty of friendship and non-aggression in 1960 and a boundary treaty in 1963.⁸ From the 1950s to the late 1970s, many Afghan regimes changed, but the two countries maintained normal and friendly relations. In 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, China opposed the USSR invasion of Afghanistan by providing moral and military assistance to the Afghan Mujahideen and to Pakistan. It aimed to counter the Soviet encirclement around China and avoid a direct military confrontation with the vastly superior Soviet forces along the contested Sino-Soviet border.⁹ Although China maintained an embassy in Afghanistan, but China did not recognize Babrak Karmal's regime.¹⁰ In 1992, Relations between Afghanistan and China got normalized again. Although the Afghan civil war broke out again soon after, the Chinese embassy was evacuated from Afghanistan. In 2001, after the fall of the Taliban's regime, China attended the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction. After the Bonn Conference, China sent a working group to Afghanistan, attended the inauguration ceremony of the Afghan Interim government, and delivered a congratulatory letter from the Chinese government to Afghan Interim Government Leader Hamid Karzai.¹¹ The reopening of the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan in February 2002 marked a substantial step taken by China to participate in the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan.

3. The Changing Sino-Afghan Relationship: Post 9/11

This section of the paper provides a glimpse of the Afghan-China post 9/11 era relations, and how the US-NATO military presence has influenced this relationship. It will also have a brief look at how the Chinese low-key approach has evolved to a more active role in post-2014 US-NATO combat forces from Afghanistan.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Zhang, Feng. "China's new engagement with Afghanistan after the withdrawal." *LSE Public Policy Review* 2, no. 3 (2022).

⁸ China-Afghanistan bilateral relations, "中国同阿富汗双边关系", *Chinese Foreign Ministry*, August 28, 2007.

⁹ Hilali, A. Z. "China's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan." *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 3 (2001): 323-351.

¹⁰ Babrak Karmal served as the president of Afghanistan after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. He was leading the Parcham group of People's democratic party of Afghanistan.

¹¹ Remarks by H.E. Ambassador Wang Yu at the reception for the 65th anniversary of China-Afghanistan diplomatic relations, *Embassy of the P.R. China in The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, Jan 20, 2020.

3.1 How the US & NATO Presence in Afghanistan Affected the Afghan-China Relations

In January 2002, the leader of the Afghan Interim Government Hamid Karzai visited China. He met with President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji respectively, and the two sides signed MOUs that China would provide 30 million RMB in emergency aid and one million US dollars in cash to Afghanistan, beside this, China promised to provide another \$150 million in assistance to Afghanistan's reconstruction over five years.¹² Since then, the leaders of the two countries have met several times, and China has provided various forms of assistance to Afghanistan in a short period of time, and the relations between the two countries have steadily grown. China has devoted much attention to Afghanistan because a secure Afghanistan means the security and stability of the China's western Xinjiang region. China supported and actively participated in the international community's efforts to help Afghanistan, but it did not send troops to Afghanistan as it was not interested in being a "subordinate partner" of the U.S.-led alliance in that country. Besides, its goals in Afghanistan were "limited"¹³. After the US invaded Afghanistan, a large number of U.S. and NATO troops entered the country to provide political supervision and security for the new Afghan government. The U.S. and European countries played a leading role in the Afghan issue, including in the formation of the new government and other important issues such as military and economic reconstruction. In such situations, China has virtually no room to play a major role, but at the same time, it does not want to play the role of a junior Western partner too.

3.2 China Kept A Low Profile Toward Afghanistan

China maintained and is perceived to maintain a relatively low profile in Afghanistan as the U.S. led the reconstruction of post 9/11 Afghanistan. According to Hu Shisheng, a south Asian expert, "In the past we said: 'The Americans are there, and the Americans don't want anyone else, especially not another great power, taking their place'." ¹⁴ However, China's low-profile stance does not imply a low level of relations with the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. China has maintained close and friendly relations with the new Afghan government since its formation in 2001. After the US announced the withdrawal of its combat forces from Afghanistan, some western officials believed that China will seek to fill the gap, but the Chinese special envoy Sun Yuxi has made it clear and said, western officials have said China is likely to emerge as a strategic player in Afghanistan, China's involvement would remain largely commercial. "This idea about filling a void after the withdrawal of troops, I think it doesn't exist," ¹⁵ While China avoided participating in multilateral efforts in Afghanistan in the 2002-12 period, it maintained close ties with the Afghan government. It signed the treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighborly relations with Kabul in 2006. Two years later, Chinese companies won a \$3 billion contract to extract copper from the Mes Aynak mines in Logar province. ¹⁶ Looking post 9/11 Sino-Afghan relations, it could be divided into three phases:

¹² Sino-Afghan bilateral relations. "中国同阿富汗双边关系", *Chinese Foreign Ministry*, December 2019.

¹³ Ramachandran, Sudha. "Is China bringing peace to Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, June 20, 2018. Accessed on June 24, 2022.

¹⁴ Houreld, Katharine, Blanchard, Ben. "Anxious China emerges as diplomatic player in Afghanistan", *Reuters*, April 14, 2014.

¹⁵ Martina, Michael. "China will not fill U.S. void in Afghanistan: Official", *Reuters*, July 21, 2014.

¹⁶ Ramachandran, Sudha. "Is China bringing peace to Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, June 20, 2018.

Phase 1: 2001-2010: During the 2001 war in Afghanistan, China, along with other members of the international community, providing necessary support for the establishment of a new post-war government in Afghanistan. China at this phase has kept a low-key approach and only supported the UN mission in Afghanistan.¹⁷

Phase 2: 2010-2013: In this phase, China was deeply concerned about the uncertainty surrounding the post-war reconstruction of Afghanistan. It is important to note that China had no intention of replacing the U.S. in filling the void and would not change its good-neighborly foreign policy toward Afghanistan, but the potential challenges to China from the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and the need to develop good-neighborly relations have prompted China to play a more active role in the Afghan reconstruction process. In June 2012, China and Afghanistan issued the Joint Declaration on The Establishment of Strategic and Cooperative Partnership, which mapped out the development prospects of Bilateral relations from a strategic and long-term perspective and identified political, economic, cultural, security and international and regional cooperation as the main areas of Sino-Afghan strategic and cooperative partnership.¹⁸

Phase 3: Post-2013: Since 2013, with the changing situation in Afghanistan and the continuous improvement of neighborhood diplomacy in the overall status of Chinese diplomacy, China's Afghanistan policy has become clearer under the leadership of the new generation, and China's initiative and intensity of diplomatic participation in Afghanistan have significantly increased. The development of bilateral relations has entered a new era. The U.S. and NATO began accelerating their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2013, with the majority of NATO combatants withdrawn by the end of 2014.¹⁹ In July 2014, China announced the appointment of Sun Yuxi as China's First Special Envoy to Afghanistan. Sun Yuxi, a former ambassador to both Afghanistan and India, has been named to the new position and will have close "close communication" with Afghanistan and other relevant parties. "China and Afghanistan are traditionally friendly neighbors. China pays great attention to development in Afghanistan and is committed to deepening both countries' strategic partnerships, and so decided to appoint a special envoy."²⁰ The same year Chinese diplomats in Afghanistan for the first time start visiting southern Afghanistan. At the end of August 2015, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Deng Xijun visited Kandahar province²¹, the first visit to southern Afghanistan by a senior Chinese diplomat in 40 years. Deng Xijun said in Kandahar that Afghanistan and China share a common destiny, and the prosperity of Afghanistan is the prosperity of China. Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao and Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission Fang Fenghui also visited Afghanistan in late 2015²² and early March 2016 respectively. The meetings of high-level bilateral officials marked that China's low-profile policy towards Afghanistan has come to an end.

4. Security - The Core Issue

¹⁷ Bazwan, Jalal. "شننه: چین په افغانستان کې تر پخوا ډېر فعال رول لوبولو ته ملا نرلي ده." *BBC Pashto*, May 31, 2020.

¹⁸ LIU Zhongmin, and FAN Peng. "China's diplomatic engagement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan." *Asian-African Vertical and Horizontal* 1 (2015).

¹⁹ Bazwan, Jalal. "شننه: چین په افغانستان کې تر پخوا ډېر فعال رول لوبولو ته ملا نرلي ده." *BBC Pashto*, May 31, 2020.

²⁰ Staff, Reuters. "China appoints special envoy for Afghanistan", *Reuters*, July 18, 2014.

²¹ "Chinese envoy visits Kandahar," *Tolo News*, August 31, 2015.

²² "Promote China-Afghanistan cooperation and bring new life to the silk road," *Embassy of the Peoples Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, November 05 2015.

This section of the paper will briefly talk about how security is the core issue between Afghan-China, bilateral relations, what is Chinese consensus, and how China is addressing the security issues in Afghanistan.

4.1 Afghan-Chinese Security Interests and Bilateral Relations

When considering the common security interests and mutual relations between China and Afghanistan, the East Turkistan Terrorist Organization (ETIM) issue cannot be avoided. The relationship between East Turkistan and the Taliban often makes headlines in international media. Tracing the historical relations of Sino-Afghan, During the Han Dynasty era, a special envoy of Emperor Wu (140 B.C.), sought a military ally against the Hsiung-nu tribesmen in China's northwest. The Ta Yueh-Chih people, then living in the Afghanistan area, originally lived in the Kansu area of China but migrated towards the Oxus river valley under pressure from the Hsiung-nu tribesmen. The Hsiung-nu, therefore, gave the Chinese and early Afghans a common cause for alliance in the following century.²³ During the Tang dynasty, they paid great attention to the western part of China outside the core area and controlled parts of Afghanistan. The establishment of military bases in that region ("Frontier Command of the Pacified West") as its network center, was meant to maintain the security of the silk road²⁴. Still the Sino-Afghan relations, to a large extent, the security and stability of Xinjiang is the starting point of China's Afghanistan policy, which also reflects the characteristics of China's Afghanistan policy. China also has big projects and investments in Afghanistan, but they are normal business activities and are of China's economic interest, not China's 'concern.'" So, these Chinese projects and investments are normal activities in Afghanistan, and what all Afghans desperately want and seek is peace, and all Afghans have been exhausted by 40 years of civil war.²⁵

Under the Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001, Afghanistan became a reliable base for the "East Turkistan" organization. The Taliban was the spiritual agitators and material supplier to "East Turkistan", training the fighters of "East Turkistan," supplying the with weapons, and sheltering those who fled China.²⁶ Although the exact number of Trained ETIM elements in Afghanistan is difficult to determine, the actual number is certainly not small. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the "East Turkistan" terrorists have close ties with international terrorist forces. At least hundreds of "East Turkistan" terrorists have received training in Afghanistan.²⁷ During the cold war, the soviet union's invasion of Afghanistan created a breeding ground for terrorism and the rise of Osama bin Laden²⁸. Other terrorist organization has also established training camps in Afghanistan such as ETIM (East Turkistan Islamic Movement) which had close ties with the Taliban²⁹.

²³ Yu-dai, Shen. *"China and Afghanistan,"* Cambridge University Press, (1996).

²⁴ Kung, Chang. (2021). "China's tang dynasty and Afghanistan, the graveyard of empires," *The Diplomat*, August 28, 2021.

²⁵ Huasheng, Zhao, and Andrew C. Kuchins. "China and Afghanistan." China's interests, stances, and perspectives, *A report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia program*, March (2012).

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Chinese Spokesperson answers reporter's question, "发言人美称中国维吾尔族人在阿富汗与塔利班的部队作战答记者问", *Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, November 11, 2001.

²⁸ "Soviet Union invades Afghanistan," *History*, November 24, 2009.

²⁹ "China wooed Afghanistan's Taliban with investment promises that have not panned out", *Alarabiya News*, September 27, 2022.

Back during the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan era, The Afghan government handed over a dozen of Uighurs to the Chinese government. These were some of the Uighurs who fled from Xinjiang and started living in Afghanistan. According to the NDS (National Directorate of security) official, "Some [of the detainees] were spies, some were [potential] suicide attackers and some illegally entered the country."³⁰ But some political analysts believe that China has never had a low-key approach and policy towards Afghanistan, China rather maintained a 'Wait and See' policy. Besides the "East Turkistan Terrorist" Network operating in Afghanistan and in the region, China has plans to invest billions of dollars in Xi Jinping's signature project Belt and Road initiative. CPEC is the crown jewel of Beijing's massive Belt and Road initiative, which aims to build infrastructure, expand trade links, and deepen ties across Eurasia and Africa.³¹ The CPEC which is believed to be a game-changer project for Pakistan will connect the landlocked Chinese western Uighur-Muslim province with international water and at the same time, the port will be connected with Central Asia through Afghanistan. To pave the way for it, Beijing has been pushing Pakistan to open border points with Afghanistan in order to increase trade with an eye toward CPEC. As a result, Pakistan announced plans to establish 12 border markets with Afghanistan, versus just six border markets with Iran.³² Since Gwadar is located in the Baluchistan province, and Baluch is struggling for freedom is facing a direct security threat. Recently, Chinese citizens came under attack in different parts of Pakistan while the most recent one was a suicide attack by a female Baluch on the Chinese Language teachers van in Karachi university.³³

It is not only the Baluch separatist but simultaneously India and America have also openly challenged the CPEC project. "The one Belt, One Road also goes through disputed territory, and I think that in itself shows the vulnerability of trying to establish that sort of a dictate," US defense secretary James Mattis told the Senate Service committee.³⁴ "Regarding 'One Belt, One Road,' I think in a globalized world, there are many belts and many roads, and no one nation should put itself into a position of dictating 'one Belt, One Road.'³⁵ The seven-decade-old Baluch separatist movement is aimed at establishing a sovereign state. In the past, the Baluch movement was induced by fundamental Marxist ideology and received support from the former Soviet Union. The new generation of leaders continues to be directed by the same fundamental ideology. Pakistan believes that the Baloch separatists fled to next-door Afghanistan owing to the clampdown by Pakistani armed forces.³⁶ Now since the U.S. and NATO combat forces are withdrawn from Afghanistan, the TTP and other nationalist elements have carried out attacks in Pakistan and their targets have shifted to Chinese investments, including CPEC. The success of CPEC, and by extension, the entire BRI, now depends on Afghanistan, which expected to become a new battleground.³⁷

4.2 Chinese Consensus: Addressing Security Issues in Afghanistan

³⁰ Matta, Bethany. "China to neighbours: Send us your Uighurs", *Aljazeera*, 18 February 2015.

³¹ Notezai, Muhammad Akbar. "Chaos in Afghanistan threatens CPEC", *The Diplomat*, July 21, 2021.

³² *ibid*

³³ Suicide bomber kills Chinese teachers, Pakistani driver in Karachi University blast, *DW News*, April 26, 2022.

³⁴ Iqbal, Anwar. "CPEC passes through disputed territory: US," *DAWN News*, October 7, 2017.

³⁵ "Many belts and many roads", *Reconnecting Asia* October 11, 2017.

³⁶ Kalita, Jayanta. "Baloch rebels on warpath: Why afghan Taliban could be role model for Pakistan's headstrong separatists?", *The EurAsian Times*, February 1, 2022.

³⁷ Notezai, Muhammad Akbar. "Chaos in Afghanistan threatens CPEC", *The Diplomat*, July 21, 2021.

Afghanistan is suffering from constant political instability and regime changes, meanwhile, China is also suffering from insecurity in its western province Xinjiang. What is common between the sufferings of the two countries is Islamic fundamentalism. It is believed that the 21st century is the century of Asia and China will be leading it, but what if the political instability and terrorism remain unresolved in Afghanistan, Would the Chinese investment in Gwadar and Central Asia in the Belt & Road initiative be successful? The former Afghan warlord Abdulrab Rasool Sayaf during Afghanistan's former vice president's death anniversary said, "If the issue of Afghanistan did not solve, the terrorism will expand and spread out to the entire world.³⁸ During his visit to Kandahar province in 2015, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Deng Xijun also reminded that if the Afghan issue is not solved accordingly, then it will definitely affect regional security, he further said, "Afghanistan and China have a common destiny and the prosperity of the Afghans is the prosperity of China." He drew an analogy that only when an Afghan sleeps peacefully in Afghanistan, the Chinese can sleep in soothe and peace.³⁹

During Karzai's first state visit to China in 2006, the two sides signed a number of agreements, including the Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on Combating Transnational Crime, and the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. As Zhao Huasheng said, the Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation between Afghanistan and China is an important document that establishes the basic political principles and points the direction for the development of bilateral relations. Afghanistan and China agreed on a framework for strategic cooperation. Both sides agreed to continue the cooperation and friendship between the two countries in accordance with the UN Charter and historical traditions. Strategic cooperation clearly defines the international interests of both countries, including strengthening and maintaining a historical friendship, mutual political support, financial assistance, cultural exchanges, and maintaining security in the region. The two countries clearly support each other's common issues of integrity, unity, and mutual assistance, without pitting them against each other.⁴⁰

5. China and Her Interests in Afghan Peace Talks

This section of the paper provides a glimpse of how China begins to play a more active role and how China has made an immense amount of contribution to facilitate the Intra-Afghan peace negotiations.

5.1 China Begins to Play an Active Role in Afghanistan

China has made a minimal security contribution to Afghanistan since 2001. Its aid commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction has been very modest US\$250 million.

⁴¹ Diplomatically too, China took a low-key approach to Afghanistan between 2001-

³⁸ "د مارشال فہیم څلورم تلین ولمانځل شو" *Dunia Newspaper*, Page# 2, March 10, 2018.

³⁹ Spitsaly, Muhammad Ibrahim. "چيني سفير په كندهار كي: «زمونږ امن مشترک دی»" *DW Pashto*.

⁴⁰ Huasheng, Zhao, and Andrew C. Kuchins. "China and Afghanistan." China's interests, stances, and perspectives, *A report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia program*, March (2012).

⁴¹ Van der Kley, Dirk. "China's foreign policy in Afghanistan." (2014).

2012. When the U.S. and NATO announced the withdrawal of combat forces, Russia, China, and India condemned this unilateral decision of the U.S. and NATO. Russia, China, and India have concerns since they supported the ISAF's mission in Afghanistan and now the US and coalition forces without finding a proper solution to the Afghan issue have started withdrawing their troops. As the US & NATO withdrawal started, China put an end to keeping low profile policy towards Afghanistan and has started a more active and unprecedentedly vigorous role in Afghanistan. Political analysts believe that: "China has always maintained a keen eye on the issue of Afghanistan. Since the United States and NATO were in Afghanistan, China has kept a low profile. But now that the United States and NATO forces have withdrawn, China is increasingly playing an unprecedentedly active role in the issue of Afghanistan."⁴² China has many economic and security interests in Afghanistan⁴³, such as the success of the Central Asian investment, CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), the security of Xinjiang, and Chinese investment in Afghanistan's natural resources.

The post-US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, The West Wonders why China is Interested in Afghan peace Talks? The stability of Afghanistan is critical to China's economic development due to its unique geographical location. China has invested billions of dollars in Afghanistan, especially in the mining and oil industries. Another large-scale project is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a trade corridor consisting of highways, railways and gas pipelines linking Xinjiang in northwest China and Gwadar port in southwest Pakistan,⁴⁴ with different entrances and exits where Afghanistan will be acting as transport walkway for China.⁴⁵ In addition to economic interests, another reason for China's interest in the Afghan peace talks is its own security issues on its western border. "China is particularly concerned about "Separatism" in the Xinjiang region, which borders Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Chinese authorities believe that the separatists have bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and if the security issue in Afghanistan continues to be unresolved, the separatists will continue using Afghanistan as a safe haven."⁴⁶ China has positioned itself as an active participant but has kept a low profile. China is actively involved in the reconstruction of the Afghan economy, providing financial support and various kinds of assistance." China wants to ensure that its border with Afghanistan is secure to prevent violent extremists from entering its territory. For a successful Afghan peace process, China proposed an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" peace process. Since this is an Afghan issue, and It is a fact that Afghans have a deeper understanding of the ongoing conflict than the International community so the peace process should have also been Afghan-led and Afghan-owned. From 2007 to 2008, The Chinese government offered 10 short-term training classes for Afghanistan, including diplomats training, human resource management and leadership ability construction, project contract management, hospital management, government fiscal

⁴² Author's personal communication with the former Afghan Ambassador to Iran, Abdul Ghafoor Liwal.

⁴³ Khan, Raja Muhammad. "China's economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan." *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1-11.

⁴⁴ Watch: Why is China interested in peace talks in Afghanistan? *BBC News*, July 29, 2015.

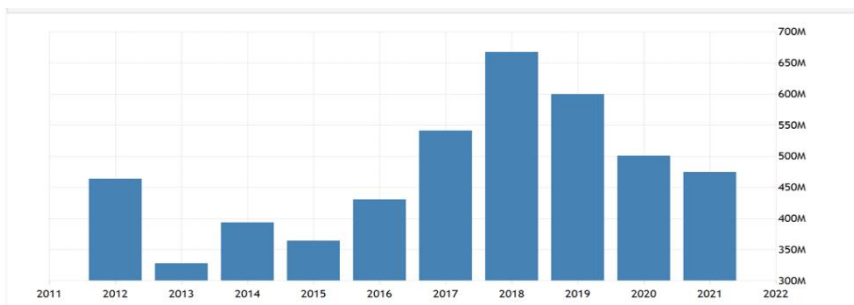
⁴⁵ Khurshed, Ambreen, Syed Karrar Haider, Faisal Mustafa, and Ayesha Akhtar. "China-Pakistan economic corridor: A harbinger of economic prosperity and regional peace." *Asian Journal of German and European Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1-15.

⁴⁶ Watch: Why is China interested in peace talks in Afghanistan? *BBC News*, July 29, 2015.

and financial management, economic management, public administration as well as other filed. Under these projects, China trained up to 200 Afghan officials.⁴⁷

Following the withdrawal of the United States and NATO from Afghanistan in 2014, a new era of Sino-Afghan relations began. As Ashraf Ghani became the president of Afghanistan in late 2014, his first state visit was to China. When asked by reporters why he chose China for his first official trip, he said, "Because China and Afghanistan have had diplomatic relations for almost 60 years and their friendship has always been strong, and China has been a 'catalyst' for peace and stability in Afghanistan. I am very grateful to China for inviting me. I hope to bring my most sincere greetings to China."⁴⁸ Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao visited Afghanistan at the end of 2015.⁴⁹ The former president of Afghanistan, Karzai, was also invited by the Chinese government several times after 2014. This has led to increasing bilateral cooperation and mutual visits between the two countries. China's economic support for Afghanistan has increased significantly. Between 2001 and 2013, China provided 1.5 billion yuan (about \$240 million) in aid to Afghanistan. But in 2014 alone, China provided 500 million yuan (\$80 million) in aid to Afghanistan and has pledged 1.5 billion yuan (\$240 million) in aid over the next three years. In addition, over the next five years, China would provide 500 scholarships for Afghan students coming to China and would train 3,000 Afghan professionals in a variety of fields, including counter-terrorism, anti-drug trafficking, agriculture, and diplomacy. From 2002 to 2021, the import and export trade between Afghanistan and China has been growing too. China has become the second-largest importer and the fifth-largest export market for Afghanistan. China and Afghanistan haven't signed any free trade agreement, but the two sides have established the China-Afghanistan Joint committee on Economics trade (JCET), which was held in 2010, 2015 and 2017. In 2014, the two sides signed the exchange notes granting Zero-tariff treatment to exports of some Afghan goods to China. Since 2015, 97% of goods originated from Afghanistan can enjoy zero tariff when exporting to China.⁵⁰ Chinese exports to Afghanistan mainly include machinery, electronic equipment, construction materials, light industrial products, household appliances, and green tea; Chinese imports from Afghanistan include sheepskin, carpets, cotton, and other products.

Figure 1. China's export to Afghanistan (2011-2021)



Source: Tradingeconomics.com

⁴⁷ Shida, Wang. "China's role in facilitating the peace process of Afghanistan." (2017).

⁴⁸ Shan, Chen, Hanqi, Chen, Bo, Qiu. "访阿富汗总统阿什拉夫·加尼·艾哈穆德扎伊," *China Daily*, 2014-10-28.

⁴⁹ "China's Vice president pledges support in Afghanistan visit" *China Daily*, May 7, 2015.

⁵⁰ "China and Afghanistan: Bilateral trade relationship and future outlook", *China Briefing*, August 4, 2021.

5.2 China's Role in Facilitating and Solving the Afghan Conflict

On November 12, 2001, After the collapse of the Taliban's first regime, Chinese Foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan attended the 6+2 Foreign ministers' meeting on Afghanistan at the UN headquarters in New York. In that meeting, The Chinese foreign minister proposed a five-points proposal on Afghanistan's reconstruction: First, the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan should be ensured; Second, it is up to the Afghan people to decide on their own solutions. Third, the future Afghan government should be broad-based, reflect the interests of all ethnic groups and live in harmony with other countries, especially its neighbors. Fourth, it should be conducive to maintaining peace and stability in the region. Fifth, the United Nations should play a more active and constructive role.⁵¹

Since 2012, China has played an active role in resolving the Afghan issue. Although China has participated in and organized many meetings and conferences on Afghanistan, but these struggles were not much successful. Why China wanted to facilitate and solve the Afghan conflict because China has three major and overarching complementary national interests in Afghanistan. First, security front, China does not wish to see a war-torn Afghanistan become a haven for terrorism. It fears hasty decisions and does not want a security vacuum without proper precautions taken. Second, it fears terrorism gaining a hold in Afghanistan, particularly the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which poses a direct threat to the domestic security and territorial integrity of China. Third, Afghanistan is a quagmire and serves as the graveyard of the empires. It is also strategically located with the Belt and Road initiative, with Chinese ambitions of connecting countries from India to Iran Via railways, energy corridors, and other infrastructure projects. Former Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Yao Jing once said in 2016, "Without Afghan connectivity, there is no way to connect China with the rest of the World." ⁵²

Since China had kept a low profile all the way from 2001 to 2011, and sat completely on the sideline, while just using to send people to read out statements in meetings,⁵³ had put an end to its low-key approach after the US announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan. In 2012, the then security chief Zhou Yongkang made a visit to Kabul, becoming the most senior Chinese leader to visit the country in decades. In 2014 China appointed a special envoy for Afghanistan and committed to increasing its economic footprint in the country substantially. ⁵⁴ Since the special envoy's post-creation, there have been four special envoys for Afghan affairs: Sun Yuxi (2014-2-15), Deng Xijun (2015-2020), Liu Jian (2020-2021), and Yue Xiaoyong (2021-)⁵⁵Other key plays during meetings and conferences on the Afghan peace process include Yang Jiechi, Foreign minister Wang Yi, Luo Zhouhui, Wu Jianguo, Former president Hu Jintao and President Xi Jinping.

Below is a table of some of the conferences and forums where China has actively participated to find a proper solution to the Afghan conflict.

⁵¹ Liu Zhong min, Fan Peng. "中国对阿富汗重建的外交参与," *Shanghai International Studies University*.

⁵² Li, Jason. China's conflict mediation in Afghanistan, *Stimson*, August 16, 2021.

⁵³ Van der Kley, Dirk. "China's foreign policy in Afghanistan." (2014).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*

⁵⁵ Li, Jason. China's conflict mediation in Afghanistan, *Stimson*, August 16, 2021.

Table 1. Conferences China participated in and organized on the Afghan peace process

Date	Participating Countries	Agenda
2012	China, Afghanistan, Pakistan (Trilateral Negotiations)	Security cooperation and promote political reconciliation in Afghanistan
Sep 2012	China, India, Pakistan	Afghanistan and deteriorated security in Afghanistan
Jan 1, 2013 April 2	China, Pakistan	Consultation on the regional situation and the Afghan issue, reaffirm support for "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" efforts to help Afghanistan achieve peace
Feb 20, 2013	China, India, Russia	Post US & NATO withdrawal Afghanistan security
April 4, 2013	China, Russia and Pakistan	Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan maintain peace, stability and security in Afghanistan and the region, and support "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned"
April 18, 2013	China, India	Consultation and Solving Afghan Issue
Nov 2013	China, India, Russia	Foreign ministers meeting Afghanistan
Nov 20, 2013	China, Russia, Pakistan	The second round of trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan
Dec 9, 2013	China, Afghanistan and Pakistan	The third round of trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan
2014	China, Russia, Pakistan	The third round of trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan
Feb 24, 2014	China, Iran	The second round of consultations Afghanistan
March 6, 2014	China and Russia	6+1 Dialogue on Afghanistan chaired by China and Russia (Geneva)
Oct 31, 2014	14 regional countries, 16 international supporting countries, and 12 regional and International Organizations	The Istanbul Process was held Beijing for the fourth time
2015	China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan	Trilateral dialogue on the Afghan peace process
July 7, 2015	China, Afghanistan, US, and Pakistan	Quadrilateral talks with the Taliban
September 8, 2018,	China, Pakistan	To strengthen cooperation international and regional affairs. Jointly promote the reconciliation process in Afghanistan
October 15, 2018	China, India	The capacity building program, efforts to assist Afghanistan, the start of China-India-Afghanistan cooperation
December 15, 2018	Second trilateral Foreign ministers strategic dialogue	The comprehensive peace plan for Afghan Taliban to join the peace process
April 18, 2019	3 rd SCO-Afghanistan contact group meeting	Promote the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan,
July 11, 2019	Russia, US, Pakistan, China	Emphasized the importance of trilateral consensus on the peace process
September 7, 2019	Third trilateral foreign ministers strategic dialogue	Direct intra-Afghan negotiations,
September 22, 2019	China hosts Taliban delegation	Promote peace and reconciliation process

Source: Author compilation

Despite China's involvement and commitment to security in the region, it has not yielded results so far due to different reasons. Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai said, "The Quadrilateral Peace talks are the last chance for the peace process in Afghanistan. If this opportunity is not seized, peace will remain a dream." He further added: The "key for Afghan peace lies in the hands of Pakistan and the United States," Obviously, regional countries especially Pakistan plays a significant role in

the political games that are played in Afghanistan. Another actor in our affairs is the United States, a major world power that is actively involved in the events in Afghanistan by maintaining a military presence and investing billions of dollars. It appears that the US expressed interest in holding peace negotiations and reintegrating Afghanistan.⁵⁶

6. Conclusion: The Future Prospect of Afghan-Chinese Relations

Afghanistan has always played an important role in regional connectivity and more importantly in regional security. Afghanistan will remain a priority in Chinese security policies because a secure Afghanistan is a key to the success the Chinese investment and connectivity in both South and Central Asia. The biggest obstacle the new Silk Road (OBOR) faces is security problems in Afghanistan, Xinjiang, and Central Asia. For the successful implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Afghanistan need to enter a new phase of closer ties. The best solution to the Afghanistan decades-long issues is Chinese investment. The future development of the two countries is tangled. Afghanistan needs China, and likewise, China needs Afghanistan. Afghanistan needs security, likewise, China also needs security. Afghanistan has natural resources, China needs raw materials. Afghanistan needs economic development and China needs a larger market for investment in the region. China needs a close relationship with both South and Central Asia, while Afghanistan is the heart of Asia," As Chinese Vice President Li Yuan Chao, during his visit to Afghanistan in November 2015 said, "China and Afghanistan are linked by mountains and water, and the people of both countries have a long history of friendly relations. As early as 2000 years ago, the ancient Silk Road brought the two peoples together, and 60 years ago, the two countries established diplomatic relations, ushering in a new era of friendship and cooperation. Looking back on 60 years of wind and rain, China and Afghanistan have stood by each other in times of crisis; in times of peace, the two countries have worked together for development. The two countries have established a strategic partnership, and the friendship between people has been strong for a long time." With so many common goals, ideals, pursuits, and interests between the two countries, the road ahead for Afghan-Chinese relations is considerably bright. Now that the Taliban are back in power, ETIM is again making headlines in Chinese media. From a Chinese perspective, the Taliban haven't shown they are doing enough to clamp down on separatist groups in its western part of Xinjiang province. China has a crystal-clear policy regarding terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism which China also calls "The Three Evil Forces." As long as there is this fear of the Uighur's presence in Afghanistan, China won't be willing to keep close relations with any regime in Kabul. The future of the two countries relations is based all upon security relations, and, if the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan failed in not satisfying the Chinese side that the Afghan territory will not be allowed to be used against them, it will further be complicated and damage the two countries bilateral relations.

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⁵⁶ "Quadrilateral meeting: Hopes and fears", *Afghanistan Times*, January 10, 2016.