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Balancing Interests: China's Pragmatic Engagement with Post-withdrawal Afghanistan

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Abstract

The resurgence of the Taliban prompted China to reconsider its approach towards Afghanistan, striking a balance between safeguarding its economic interests and pursuing strategic objectives while simultaneously grappling with security concerns. While the rise of the Taliban poses security challenges, China recognizes the potential for economic cooperation, particularly in resource development and infrastructure connectivity. However, China remains cautious because of the risk of non-state actors exploiting Afghanistan as a safe haven. China's approach to Afghanistan involves fostering connections with the Taliban, contributing to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and promoting regional peace and stability. China seeks to cooperate cautiously with the Taliban on economic projects while emphasizing counterterrorism efforts. China also engages with regional partners to promote its stability and development. The key to China's success in Afghanistan lies in its ability to balance security imperatives with economic pursuits and strategic objectives. This delicate balancing act is crucial to ensuring regional stability and fostering development in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Re-emergence of Taliban, China, Geopolitical Ambition, Interest in Afghanistan

Introduction

Afghanistan is geographically considered the most critical country in Asia. In history, every superpower has strived to control somehow and involve Afghanistan, mainly because Afghanistan connects South Asia and West Asia to Central Asia. South Asian countries are characterized by overpopulation and a lack of energy resources, while Central Asian nations possess abundant energy resources. Afghanistan, situated in the middle of these regions, serves as the heart of Asia or a land-linked nation surrounded by six neighbouring countries (To the North: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan; to the West: Iran, China to the remote east, and Pakistan to the southeast). Throughout history, Afghanistan's strategic geographical and geopolitical positions have presented persistent challenges in deterrence, with negotiations and political agreements proving more effective than military weaponry. Even though Afghanistan has been engulfed in conflict for more than four decades and has experienced inconsistent political instability, it has nevertheless missed out on a significant economic opportunity. The Taliban was founded in the 1990s as an armed group during Afghanistan's civil war, and it has since been in existence for three decades. By 1996, they had gained control over most of the country.

On the other hand, considering early China and Afghanistan bilateral trade and diplomatic relations and new opportunities for China-Afghanistan relations, the growing diplomatic influence of China over the years could signify a broker of peace in the war-torn nation. After the Taliban regained political control in 2021, some countries assigned the chargé d'affaires-level diplomats without officially recognizing the Taliban regime. In September 2023, The People's Republic of China grabbed attention by designating Zhao Xing as a new ambassador to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban's ascension, despite refraining from the official acknowledgement of the group. China strongly backs Afghanistan in discovering its path to modernization tailored to its national conditions and autonomy. Beijing is committed to helping the country shape its destiny and future. China is enthusiastic about sharing its governance experience with Afghanistan to foster mutual growth and development.

Consequently, China is actively working toward shaping its future per its objectives. For this reason, China is now sharing its experiences in governance to achieve joint and bilateral development in the region that impacts not only Afghanistan's economic expansion and reintegration but also Chinese geopolitical, economic, and the implementation of megaprojects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects most Asian nations. In May 2023, a joint statement was published by China-Afghanistan-Pakistan after a meeting of their representatives in the capital of Pakistan. The delegates of the three nations reaffirmed their dedication to "enhance trilateral collaboration under the Belt and Road Initiative and expand the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan collaboratively."

In addition, the primary goal of forming the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was to build relationships with Central Asian nations, focusing on combating terrorism, enhancing stability, and driving economic development. The initiative started in 1996 when the Shanghai Five, comprising China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, united to address border disagreements and fortify security measures. In 1998, the Forum focused on regional stability and economic harmonization. During this time, the Shanghai Five expressed their concerns regarding the situation in Afghanistan through official statements released in 1998-99. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization held a summit in 2008 to explore the political contributions of the Hamid Karzai government. Beijing follows a policy of not meddling in the political affairs of other countries; however, it acknowledges the possibility of the SCO helping facilitate Afghanistan's integration with the security establishments in the neighbouring region. Considering the SCO's objectives, the member countries were also interested in revealing their political, social, and environmental protection during the last Ashraf Ghani administration, like the expansion of gas pipelines from Afghanistan to Pakistan and India and the TAPI or TAP countries project connecting the regional countries was one of the SCO objectives.

Moreover, the CPEC Chinese megaproject is expected to be extended to Afghanistan and was updated at the first meeting of Afghan Foreign Minister Mr. Amir Khan Muttaqi and Mr. Wang Yi. This was a high-level meeting of Chinese officials since the Taliban took over political power. China considers its geopolitical ambitions by examining regional connectivity as an essential element. The significance of undertaking initiatives under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and nurturing trade potential while building robust infrastructure and energy connectivity between Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be overemphasized. Central Asia's economic integration and connectivity with South

Asia is crucial, as this has attracted the interest of several countries, such as the Central Asian Republics.

2. The Re-emergence of Taliban 2021

The resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 has led to a significant transformation in Afghanistan's political landscape. Following the Doha peace negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban, the group regained control over Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. This event generated widespread attention and raised concerns about the implications of Taliban rule. This section examines the consequences of their return, including challenges to women's rights, economic instability, security threats, and regional implications. The expectations of the international community and the importance of a peaceful Afghanistan are also addressed.

2.1 *The Taliban's Resurgence: Challenges and Consequences*

The United States, under its leadership, invaded Afghanistan in 2001, which resulted in the ousting of the Taliban regime. Subsequently, the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and started to reclaim control over the region. Just a decade after their ouster, the Taliban had made significant gains. In August 2021, they managed to seize power once again. Their lightning-fast advance occurred soon after the United States pulled out its final military contingent from Afghanistan, as per the terms of a peace pact signed with the Taliban in 2020. Despite facing significant challenges, the Taliban's macroeconomic management has shown surprising competence, evidenced by a stable exchange rate, low inflation, increased revenue collection, and expanding exports. These achievements starkly contrast their previous mismanagement of the economy during their 1996-2001 rule. However, these positive developments result from the economic recovery made possible mainly by humanitarian assistance in 2022. In addition, the situation with women's rights to education and work is rapidly deteriorating to a point where the continuation of humanitarian assistance, which has been the driving force behind economic recovery, is highly unlikely without any reduction.

The humanitarian needs in Afghanistan soared dramatically two years after the political change of power. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) cautions that the reduction in humanitarian aid has exacerbated the already dire situation by approximately 60%, compounded by economic downfall, climate change, and limited access to essential and vital services. Likewise, concerns persist over women's rights, the status of girls' schools and higher education remains uncertain, and ongoing migration and internal displacement, along with healthcare challenges and elevated maternal mortality rates, all underscore the adverse impact of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Conversely, prominent Taliban leaders asserted significant accomplishments in the past year. The achievements of The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) during the 1401 solar year were highlighted, with a focus on its progress in improving national security, curbing corruption, increasing exports and revenues, Sustaining the Afghani's value against other currencies, and fostering constructive changes in the societal and cultural environment of the country. The United States, as the world's most powerful nation, has long employed economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool to pressure and influence the actions of other countries. In the case of the Taliban, the United States imposed a range of financial sanctions aimed at disrupting the group's financial networks, weakening its ability to operate, and ultimately compelling it to change its behaviour. The United States has reiterated its stance that normalization of relations with Afghanistan will not be pursued

until and unless the fundamental rights of all Afghan citizens are fully respected and upheld.

More specifically, the U.S. aimed to guarantee the protection of women's rights and to prevent Afghanistan from serving as a haven for transnational terrorists. The U.S. will continue to pressure the Taliban to improve the lives of Afghan women, and normalization of relations will not be possible until they do so. The U.S. and other countries have made it explicitly clear to the Taliban that normalization of relations is contingent upon their commitment to upholding the rights of women and girls. The global spotlight turned to the perceived failure or unwillingness of the Taliban to uphold their commitments, particularly within the Doha peace agreement, following the U.S. drone strike that led to the demise of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri. In a written statement, Antony Blinken, the U.S. Secretary of State, asserted that the Taliban had reneged on their pledge to the Afghan people and relinquished their stated aspiration of being acknowledged and embraced by the global community. The most pressing issue for the international community is that extremist organizations that previously found refuge in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime continue to be present in the country, as evidenced by the July 31st airstrike carried out by the United States, which resulted in the death of al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Kabul. Outsiders must refrain from resorting to proxy wars or regular drone strikes. Instead, they should urge the Taliban to fulfil their security guarantees and, despite legitimate scepticism, engage in limited cooperation on specific matters. There remains a considerable debate between international donor communities, who are unwilling to praise the Taliban with normal relations, and the question remains unanswered on how to tackle the humanitarian crises in Afghanistan.

The return of the Taliban to power has generated uncertainty and concern among neighbouring countries as they contend with the potential for political instability, an influx of refugees, and the risk of Afghanistan becoming a haven for terrorist activities once again. Among neighbouring countries, including Iran, Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and China, militants remained armed and maintained safe havens in Afghanistan. The Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al-Qaeda militant groups are perceived as potential security threats not only for Pakistan but also for all regional countries, including China. The number of attacks on Chinese citizens has significantly increased in Pakistan. According to Fahad Nabeel, a security analyst at the Islamabad research firm Geopolitical Insights, a multitude of militant factions, such as TTP and ISIS-K, the regional branches of the Islamic State organization, have set their sights on them. In July 2021, a bus carrying Chinese engineers to a construction site near a dam in Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province was targeted in a suicide bombing, resulting in the deaths of 13 people, including nine Chinese workers. Pakistan subsequently offered financial compensation to the families of the deceased Chinese workers, amounting to millions of dollars. Based on the Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), a total of 207 terrorist attacks occurred in Pakistan in 2021, reflecting an increase of 42% from the previous year. Notable among these were five suicide blasts. The attacks, perpetrated by various nationalist insurgents and religiously motivated militant and violent sectarian groups, resulted in the loss of 335 lives, a 52 per cent increase from the number of fatalities in 2020.

Additionally, 555 people were injured. Al-Zawahiri and his family went back to Kabul in 2022 after being closely monitored by CIA officials for a month prior to the drone

attack. The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, asserted that al-Zawahiri's presence in Kabul was a blatant breach of the Doha deal 2020, which had previously established that Taliban officials would not assist any terrorist organization operating within Afghan soil. This statement was made following the death of al-Zawahiri.

Furthermore, Umar Khalid Khurasani was considered to be the most notorious TTP commander in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. He was not only designated a terrorist by the U.S. but also by the United Nations. Furthermore, a U.S. \$3 million reward was offered for his capture, and it is worth mentioning that the allowance of terrorists in Afghanistan is considered to be a violation and breach of the Doha agreement. The establishment of the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) by Hafiz Saeed Khan in 2014 marked the emergence of a new militant group that sought to expand its influence in the region. The IS-K declared its presence in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asia, which expanded security threats to regional and international communities. Moreover, two different branches of IS-K, known as Wilayat-I - Hind against India and Wilayat-I-Pakistan against Pakistan, were created and announced, where active attacks of this militant group were increased, mainly targeting the Shia community in Afghanistan, which declares a crystal warning and security threats for Afghanistan and regional countries.

Furthermore, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, President Ashraf Ghani's fleeing from the country, the unexpectedly quick fall of Kabul, and the re-emergence of the Taliban were unprecedented events in the history of Afghanistan. Now that the Taliban has regained power, The U.S., the international community, and regional countries expect the Taliban to fulfil its promises and all obligations to ensure the protection of human rights, women and minorities, counterterrorism issues, the promise of not letting Afghanistan again become a haven for terrorists, and to break linkages with Al-Qaeda, TTP, IS-K, and other militant groups that could negatively impact regional countries. Regional countries and the international community, such as the United States and Western nations, believe that Afghanistan, which is often cited as the "heart of Asia," has the potential to significantly impact global politics due to its volatile state, which also affects the security interests of neighbouring countries. Promoting trade, transit, and political stability across the Eurasian continent could greatly benefit from a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Regrettably, the ongoing unrest has impeded regional peace and stability.

3. China's Strategic Foreign Policy Shift: Unraveling the Motivations Behind Chinese Engagement in Afghanistan

This section delves into the progressing methodology of China towards Afghanistan, a country strategically situated in China's neighbourhood diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative. This section extensively delves into the historical context of China-Afghanistan relations, concentrating on the factors that have shaped China's strategic interests in the region. This section explicitly assesses China's security concerns, such as those related to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and its economic ambitions, including its aim to incorporate Afghanistan into its extensive Belt and Road Infrastructure Project. By analyzing China's policy pronouncements and actions, this section aims to shed light on the motivations behind China's engagement in Afghanistan. It assesses the extent to which China's approach is driven by its pursuit of economic opportunities, desire to bolster regional stability, and efforts to counter security threats

from Afghanistan. This section aims to shed light on China's changing position in Afghanistan and the potential consequences that may arise for the country's future.

3.1 Afghanistan in China's New Neighborhood Diplomacy

China's new neighbourhood diplomacy, launched in 2013, prioritizes cooperation, connectivity, and mutual benefits. Under this framework, China has been actively expanding its economic and political influence in neighbouring regions, including Afghanistan, a strategically crucial nation positioned at the crossroads of Asia. Afghanistan holds a unique position in China's neighbourhood diplomacy. Despite sharing borders with 14 neighbouring countries, Afghanistan boasts the shortest land borders among them. At its narrowest point, where it meets China, the country's boundary extends to a mere 92.45 kilometres. This tiny stretch, known as the Wakhan Corridor, lies between the rugged peaks of the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush mountains.

China's initial interest in Afghanistan was sparked by growing security concerns in Xinjiang, stemming from the rise of the Taliban to power in the 1990s. The outcomes of this focus were not as anticipated; instead of fostering closer ties between China and Afghanistan, it had the reverse effect, exacerbating the distance. China's primary worry was the intimate relationships between the Taliban and extremist organizations affiliated with terrorist groups from the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement. Consequently, China distanced itself from the Taliban, severing its ties with Afghanistan. China refrained from acknowledging the Taliban government and abstained from initiating efforts to establish relationships.

Following the formation of the Interim Government in 2002, the relationship between China and Afghanistan underwent a significant change, with the two countries becoming more closely connected. China provided robust support for President Karzai's new regime, extended aid, and substantial investments in the Afghan economy. In 2012, China played a crucial role in supporting Afghanistan's observer status within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), significantly improving the bilateral relationship between the two countries. This development underscored Afghanistan's growing significance in China's perspective. The substantial withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014 sparked extensive discussions about potential entities that could fill the ensuing "vacuum." Some observers contend that China, given its growing prominence among global powers, should assume a role once held by the United States. Indeed, there are claims that China has already initiated this transition. Afghanistan's potential as a critical hub for regional connectivity and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is undeniable. The BRI project, which is extensive in scope, seeks to establish connections between China and several key markets in Europe, Asia, and beyond. Afghanistan could be pivotal in facilitating trade flow between these major markets.

China is keen on the economic potential of Afghanistan. Beijing regards Afghanistan as a potential source of valuable mineral resources, including copper, lithium, and rare earth elements, which are crucial for China's industries. Chinese companies have demonstrated a strong interest in the mining sector in Afghanistan and are eager to secure access to these resources. In addition, China sees opportunities to develop Afghanistan's infrastructure, which includes roads, railways, and power grids. China has embarked on a multifaceted investment initiative in Afghanistan, spanning sectors like iron and gold mining, agriculture, oil and gas exploration, and infrastructure development. This includes constructing highway overpasses and restoring the Salang Pass, a crucial

transportation route. Additionally, China envisions linking Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan to Pakistan via railways and highways traversing Afghanistan. China's involvement with Afghanistan following the Taliban's August 2021 takeover has demonstrated a cautious and pragmatic approach. While recognizing the Taliban's control, China has focused on safeguarding its security interests. This nuanced approach to Afghanistan demonstrates China's commitment to balancing its economic ambitions with its security concerns. As China deepens its engagement with Afghanistan, it is crucial to balance promoting stability and development while protecting its interests.

3.2 Chinese-Taliban Relations and the ETIM Factor

Before delving into the policy changes implemented by China after the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021, it is imperative to examine the fundamental elements influencing China's Afghan policy. Three critical areas that require consideration include the impact of security and stability in Xinjiang and China's western border region on Chinese policy, Afghanistan's importance in China's overall global strategy, and the role of great power politics involving the United States. Like many other nations, China is currently embroiled in an evident and comprehensively recognized battle against terrorism, with insurgencies posing a significant challenge to the stability of the Chinese government in the extensive region of northwestern China, commonly referred to as Xinjiang. Examining the shared security concerns and reciprocal ties between China and Afghanistan inevitably brings attention to the East Turkistan Terrorist Organization (ETIM). The connection between East Turkistan and the Taliban has garnered widespread attention in international media. During the Taliban's governance from 1996 to 2001, Afghanistan served as a reliable refuge for the "East Turkistan" organization. Beyond providing spiritual guidance, the Taliban actively supported "East Turkistan" by providing training to its fighters, furnishing them with weapons, and offering a safe base for those who had escaped from China. Previously, Beijing enjoyed a collaborative relationship with the Western-backed Afghan government, which included Afghan forces aiding in the monitoring and targeting of Uyghur militant groups at China's request. However, this partnership came to an end prior to the government's collapse. The Afghan government in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan surrendered a group of Uighurs to the Chinese government. A number of these Uighurs had fled Xinjiang and were residing in Afghanistan.

The fall of the Islamic Republic in August 2021 and the subsequent seizure by the Taliban resulted in a significant change in the regional and international landscapes. Among the countries that have closely monitored the situation in Afghanistan is China, which shares a long and porous border. China's approach to Afghanistan has been cautious and pragmatic, seeking to balance its security concerns with the potential economic opportunities it presents. China's central concern in Afghanistan revolves around the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), identified by Beijing as a terrorist organization and a Uyghur separatist group. ETIM has faced accusations of orchestrating attacks in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. China is apprehensive that Afghanistan could serve as a base for ETIM, enabling the group to launch additional attacks.

Talibans' relationship with ETIM is complex and unclear. The Taliban denied providing support or protection to the group, but there have been reports of ETIM members in Afghanistan. In October 2021, Uyghur militants near the Afghanistan-China border were reportedly expelled by the Taliban, according to sources in the region cited by RFE/RL. Analysts interpret this action as a sign of increased cooperation between the Taliban and

Beijing. Despite its security concerns, China has engaged with the Islamic Emirate since the takeover of Afghanistan. In November 2021, Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, had a meeting with Mullah Baradar, a co-founder and deputy leader of the Taliban, in Tianjin, China. The two sides discussed various issues, including Afghanistan's security situation and its potential for economic cooperation. Wang urged the Afghan Taliban to differentiate themselves from ETIM and other extremist and terrorist organizations and to vigorously and effectually combat them in order to eliminate impediments and establish favourable conditions for regional peace, stability, and growth. The Taliban pledged to China that it would not allow ETIM to use Afghanistan as a safe base for terrorist activities. Baradar declared that the Afghan Taliban would under no circumstances tolerate any harmful actions taken by any force on Afghanistan's soil that could potentially impact China. He emphasized that the Afghan Taliban believed in fostering amicable ties with neighbouring nations and the international community.

3.3 Chinese Economic and Connectivity Interests in Afghanistan

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a crucial turning point in the nation's history, concluding two decades of uninterrupted U.S. military presence and a conflict that incurred expenses surpassing one trillion U.S. dollars. Despite the prolonged conflict, Taliban insurgents managed to reach the gates of Kabul and efficiently took control of the presidential palace with minimal resistance. The international community, having invested billions of dollars in Afghanistan's development, was left grappling with the implications of the Taliban's return to power. China, a rising global power with growing strategic interests in Central and South Asia, has been exceptionally cautious about its approach to Afghanistan. While maintaining a distance from the Taliban regime, China expressed willingness to engage with the group on economic and connectivity matters. This cautious yet pragmatic approach reflects China's desire to protect its economic interests in Afghanistan while managing potential security risks.

Afghanistan is home to a wealth of untapped natural resources, including notable reserves of iron ore, copper, gold, rare earth minerals, and many other resources. Although petroleum resources have been identified in the country for some time, their development has been restricted. Metals like iron ore, copper, aluminium, tin, lead, and zinc are widely present across Afghanistan. At the same time, Central Afghanistan, Baghlan, Kunduz, Logar, and Khost are home to an abundance of gemstones, rare-earth metals, sulfur, talc, gypsum, and chromite. These resources can transform Afghanistan's economy, providing much-needed revenue and employment opportunities. China, with its vast economic resources and expertise in mining, is well-positioned to play a leading role in Afghanistan's resource development.

In addition to its mineral wealth, Afghanistan also has a strategic geographic location bordering China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. This proximity presents opportunities for China to expand its regional trade and connectivity networks. By investing in infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and ports, China could help integrate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vast infrastructure development program connecting China to Europe and Africa. On April 12, 2023, The Chinese Foreign Ministry released a statement titled "China's position on the Afghan issue": China intends to integrate Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative and regional economic cooperation to transform Afghanistan from a landlocked country to a land-linked one. China supports Afghanistan's involvement in this endeavour and

eagerly awaits its participation. With its focus on infrastructure development and regional connectivity, the BRI aligns closely with China's economic interests in Afghanistan. By connecting Afghanistan to China's vast rail and road networks, China could gain access to new markets and resources while also facilitating trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan's neighbours. The country's potential is to act as a land bridge that connects the regions of Asia, namely north-south and east-west Asia, to the rest of the world. Afghanistan operates as a vital passageway that connects China and India in both East Asia and Central Asia, as well as the Middle East and Europe in the West.

Establishing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a vital aspect of this connectivity plan, as it is a project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that links China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar Port. The CPEC has the potential to be expanded through Afghanistan by constructing a land bridge that would link China to Central Asia and Europe. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor fosters regional connectivity, with its benefits extending to China and Pakistan and encompassing Iran, Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics, and the broader region. To facilitate foreign direct investment, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has formally become a participant in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This strategic decision, as announced by Hafiz Zia Ahmad, the deputy spokesman of the interim Foreign Ministry, underscores the commitment of the Taliban administration to attract international investment to the country. Afghanistan aspires to become a hub for trade and a magnet for investments by aligning with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a multi-billion-dollar initiative. Hafiz Zia Ahmad highlighted the transformative potential of CPEC, emphasizing its role in integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This association is expected to bring forth a range of projects spanning energy, railways, and various other sectors, thus contributing to the economic development of Afghanistan.

3.4 China's Position on Afghanistan

On April 12, 2023, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement titled 'China's Position on the Afghan Issue.' This statement outlined the country's official stance on Afghanistan's complex and evolving situation. This document provides a valuable window into China's priorities and concerns regarding its future. The core of China's position rests on two pillars: the "Three Respects" and the "Three Nevers." China places a high priority on respecting Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the choices made by its people, religious beliefs, and national customs, as evidenced by the "Three Respects." The "Three Nevers" state that China would refrain from interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs, pursuing selfish interests, or attempting to establish a sphere of influence.

China advocates for a moderate and inclusive government in Afghanistan, urging an open and stable political structure. Recognizing the crucial role of security in development, it also strongly supports Afghanistan's counterterrorism efforts. China urges the Afghan government to act decisively against all terrorist organizations, notably the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), in order to protect the safety of its citizens and projects within the nation. Furthermore, China welcomes Afghanistan's participation in the Road Initiative. This initiative aims to incorporate Afghanistan into regional economic cooperation and connectivity, transforming it from a landlocked to a critical node in the region's trade network. China demonstrates its desire for a stable and prosperous Afghanistan by outlining its position on the Afghan issue. Understanding the

significance of regional cooperation underscores the necessity for global partnership to tackle the nation's intricate issues. China's engagement in Afghanistan, guided by its stated principles and interests, will undoubtedly shape its future trajectory in the years to come.

Conclusion

Exploring China's strategic foreign policy shift and its intricate engagement in Afghanistan reveals a nuanced and evolving relationship. China's new neighbourhood diplomacy, unveiled in 2013, underscores its commitment to cooperation, connectivity, and mutual benefit. Afghanistan, strategically positioned at the crossroads of Asia, has emerged as a pivotal player in China's regional ambitions. Despite the initial security concerns in the 1990s, particularly with the Taliban's rise to power, the dynamics shifted after the establishment of Afghanistan's new government in 2002. China's support of President Karzai's regime marked a turning point, strengthening economic ties and increasing political influence. The withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO forces in 2014 prompted discussions about a perceived vacuum in Afghanistan, with China emerging as a potential successor. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) became a focal point, positioning Afghanistan as a critical hub connecting China to major European and Asian markets. The Taliban takeover in August 2021 marked a pivotal shift, prompting China to adopt a cautious and pragmatic approach. The complex dynamics of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) have become a central concern, intertwining security considerations with economic interests. Despite these challenges, China engaged with the Taliban, emphasizing the need for regional peace, stability, and development.

China's economic and connectivity interests in Afghanistan were underscored through its involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The strategic decision of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to participate in the CPEC highlighted a collaborative effort to attract international investment, positioning Afghanistan as a trade hub. The official stance outlined in China's Position on the Afghan Issue, released in April 2023, emphasizes principles encapsulated in the "Three Respects" and "Three Nevers." China advocates for a moderate and inclusive government in Afghanistan, emphasizing its commitment to stability and development. By welcoming Afghanistan's participation in the Road Initiative, China intends to integrate Afghanistan into regional economic cooperation and connectivity. In conclusion, China's engagement in Afghanistan is a complex interplay of historical context, geopolitical strategy, economic interests, and security concerns. As China navigates a delicate balance between stability, development, and safeguarding its interests, the trajectory of its relationship with Afghanistan will undoubtedly shape the region's dynamics in the foreseeable future.

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