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## China's Soft Power in Afghanistan: Strategic Motivations and Objectives

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# China's Soft Power in Afghanistan: Strategic Motivations and Objectives

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## Abstract

*This study explores China's use of soft power in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2022, emphasizing its strategic goals in security, geopolitics, and economics. Grounded in Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, the paper highlights China's efforts to strengthen its regional influence through diplomacy and economic investment rather than military force. China's primary security objective is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven for Uyghur militants, which could destabilize its Xinjiang region. Through diplomatic engagement with the IEA, China seeks to ensure stability along its borders, though the IEA's tenuous control over Afghanistan and historical ties to militancy pose significant challenges. Geopolitically, China aims to counterbalance U.S. influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, especially following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021. China strives to fill the power vacuum and consolidate its regional influence by positioning itself as a peaceful alternative to military intervention. Economically, Afghanistan's rich natural resources and strategic location along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) present significant opportunities for China, particularly in securing energy and mineral resources vital for its economic growth. However, these efforts face obstacles due to ongoing instability and infrastructure challenges in Afghanistan. The study concludes that while China's reliance on soft power helps it avoid direct military engagement, its success in Afghanistan is contingent on the IEA's ability to ensure security and political stability, as well as China's management of reputational risks, particularly related to its policies in Xinjiang. The findings offer valuable insights into China's broader foreign policy strategies in Central Asia and the Middle East, illustrating how soft power is used to secure economic, political, and security interests in a complex and volatile region.*

**Keywords:** *Soft Power, China, Afghanistan, Objectives, Motivations, Strategy, Geopolitics*

## 1. Introduction

As conceptualized by Joseph Nye, soft power refers to a country's ability to shape preferences and influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than force. This form of influence, encompassing cultural diplomacy, political values, and foreign policy, enables nations to build partnerships and favourable reputations while reducing

conflict. Arif<sup>1</sup> notes that China has recognized the importance of this approach, viewing soft power as essential to advancing its national interests globally. By creating a stable environment conducive to economic opportunities, China seeks to secure the natural and energy resources vital for its domestic needs, a priority underscored by Gil<sup>2</sup>, who highlights China's objective of fostering a calm international arena for resource acquisition on a global scale.

China's expansion of soft power has not only facilitated its economic ambitions but also provided a strategic counter to American influence. Lum, Morrison, and Vaughn<sup>3</sup> argue that China's soft power efforts in Southeast Asia are designed to offer an alternative to U.S. dominance, and this counterbalancing approach extends to regions like Afghanistan. Given Afghanistan's historical resistance to foreign military intervention, as Hong<sup>4</sup> points out, China has avoided direct military involvement in favour of a soft power approach, aiming to cultivate positive relations through economic investment and respect for Afghan sovereignty.

In Afghanistan, China's strategy emphasizes investment and diplomacy over military action, allowing it to maintain stability along its borders and address security concerns, especially in the Xinjiang region, where unrest could threaten its internal stability. Ng<sup>5</sup> observes that China's avoidance of military engagement in Afghanistan stems from a desire to minimize potential terrorist threats that might otherwise intensify with foreign involvement. Instead, China's soft power approach has enabled it to build a positive image among Afghans, reducing the risk of its investments being targeted by insurgent groups.

This paper utilizes a comprehensive research methodology to examine the objectives of China's soft power strategy in Afghanistan. The research adopts a case study design to examine Chinese soft power dynamics from 2002 to 2022. Anchored in qualitative methodology, the study's data collection primarily involves primary sources, notably interviews with professionals intricately involved in China-Afghanistan relations. Conducted predominantly in May 2022 within Afghanistan, these interviews were subsequently extended to online sessions with respondents in China and other locations. Participants included diplomats, officials, and experts comprising 15 individuals closely associated with Sino-Afghan affairs. A non-probability Snowball sampling method was employed to identify these participants due to the specialized nature of the sample population. The identities, affiliations, and corresponding codes of each participant are documented in an appendix to this article. The defined sampling elements encompass Chinese or Afghan nationals in diplomatic, official, or expert roles related to China-Afghanistan relations. Complementary secondary data has also been incorporated to augment the primary findings and substantiate the research with existing scholarly work.

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<sup>1</sup> Arif, Zahid Shahab. "China's Soft Power Strategy: Engagement with Developing Countries." *Journal of International Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2017): 24–40.

<sup>2</sup> Gil, Jeffrey A. "Soft Power and Chinese Language Pedagogy in the United States." *Modern China* 34, no. 3 (2008): 324–344.

<sup>3</sup> Lum, Thomas, Wayne M. Morrison, and Bruce Vaughn. "China's 'Soft Power' in Southeast Asia". Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Hong, Yonghong. "China's Approach to Afghanistan: Implications for the Region." *Asian Journal of Public Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2013): 15–32.

<sup>5</sup> Ng, Michael. "China's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 39, no. 4 (2010): 81–108.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to interpret and derive meaningful insights from the collected data systematically. This analytical process, structured in six phases, identified recurring patterns and themes throughout the dataset, aligning with the theoretical foundation established in the study's introduction. The analysis provides nuanced insights into China's motivations for exercising soft power within Afghanistan. Through rigorous data collection and thematic interpretation, this research aims to offer substantive perspectives on the strategic objectives underpinning China's soft power initiatives in the Afghan context.

In brief, this paper examines China's strategic preference for soft power over hard power in Afghanistan, identifying three core motivations – security, political, and economic – that shape this approach. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with Chinese and Afghan diplomats, experts, and officials, the research highlights China's use of soft power as a key element of its foreign policy, especially in its immediate region. Central to China's strategy is fostering an environment conducive to its economic interests, including securing natural resources and energy supplies and countering American influence in the region.

Studying the motivations behind China's soft power approach in Afghanistan can yield valuable insights into the broader dynamics of China's foreign policy strategies and influence in Central Asia and the Middle East.

## 2. China's Relations with Afghanistan and Beyond: A Comparative Analysis

China's approach towards Afghanistan contrasts sharply with the history of military interventions by other powers. While the British Empire, the Soviet Union, and the United States attempted to assert control through force, China has maintained a consistent policy of refraining from military involvement. This approach highlights that, despite China's considerable strength, military intervention in Afghanistan has never been a part of its strategy. Instead, China has focused on diplomatic and economic engagement to establish regional influence.

Historically, geopolitical and strategic factors have shaped the relationship between Afghanistan and China. Tracing back to the 7th century, connections between the two countries were established along the ancient Silk Road, enabling extensive trade and cultural exchanges<sup>6</sup>. These early interactions laid the foundation for a lasting bond, reinforced by cultural and diplomatic interactions. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Afghanistan has been one of its earliest diplomatic allies<sup>7</sup>.

During the Cold War, Afghanistan's alliance with the Soviet Union created tensions with China, which was then in ideological conflict with the Soviets<sup>8</sup>. China supported the Mujahideen during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, but diplomatic relations were suspended when the IEA came to power in 1996<sup>9</sup>. The IEA's control presented a unique

<sup>6</sup> Forbes, A. "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan: A New Era for Regional Diplomacy?" *Asia Policy* 15, no. 1 (2020): 77–100. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2020.0004>; Wei, Y. "Afghanistan-China Relations: Historical and Cultural Perspectives." *Journal of Asian History* 52, no. 3 (2018): 359–76.

<sup>7</sup> Pandey, A. *China's Diplomatic Relations with Afghanistan: A Historical Perspective*. Springer, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Saikal, A. *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*. I.B. Tauris, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Afridi, M. K., M. Yousufi, and A. Khan. *China's Involvement in Afghanistan: The History and Future Prospects*. Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2014.

challenge, particularly concerning China's security concerns over Uighur separatists. While China did not officially recognize the IEA, it maintained informal communications to manage security concerns<sup>10</sup>. Despite these security issues, China avoided confrontation, prioritizing stability along its borders.

Following the September 11 attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, China momentarily aligned with global counter-terrorism efforts, contributing to reconstruction and stabilization initiatives in Afghanistan<sup>11</sup>. During this period, China significantly expanded its economic interests in Afghanistan, investing in natural resources and infrastructure projects, including the Aynak copper mine<sup>12</sup>.

Formal diplomatic relations between China and Afghanistan were reestablished in 2001 after the Bonn Agreement. China's diplomatic approach emphasized cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagement to foster stability in Afghanistan<sup>13</sup>. Although China was wary of the U.S. military presence in the region, it adhered to a non-interventionist policy, relying on soft power strategies<sup>14</sup>. By 2002, China had positioned itself as a key player in Afghan affairs, contributing actively to diplomatic and conflict-resolution initiatives<sup>15</sup>. Under Hamid Karzai's and Ashraf Ghani's leadership, China maintained stable political, economic, and cultural relations with Afghanistan. China's engagement extended to peace talks with the IEA, reinforcing its role as a mediator in Afghan peace efforts<sup>16</sup>. This role deepened with China's involvement in trilateral dialogues, advocating for inclusive peace talks that included the IEA and other Afghan stakeholders<sup>17</sup>.

As the U.S. prepared to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, China increased its diplomatic presence, underscoring its interest in security cooperation and economic engagement amid Afghanistan's shifting political landscape<sup>18</sup>. The U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the IEA's subsequent return to power led China to recalibrate its strategy, focusing on stability and continued diplomatic engagement. This included hosting high-level IEA delegations and promoting the idea of an inclusive government in Afghanistan to ensure peace and security<sup>19</sup>.

China's policy toward Afghanistan aligns with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and regional security objectives. Although China exercises caution with economic investments due to security risks and questions about IEA governance, it remains

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<sup>10</sup> Kaplan, R. D. *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. Random House, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Xinhua. "China, Afghanistan Pledge to Boost Belt and Road Cooperation." Accessed July 12, 2016. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/12/c\\_135506545.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/12/c_135506545.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Forbes, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan: A New Era for Regional Diplomacy."

<sup>13</sup> Ng, L. *China's Role in the Economic Reconstruction of Afghanistan*. Routledge, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Kley, A. *China's Engagement in Afghanistan: Soft and Hard Power Strategies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Hong, "China's Approach to Afghanistan: Implications for the Region".

<sup>16</sup> Dumbaugh, K. "China's Dilemma in Afghanistan." *China Brief* 10, no. 6 (2010): 3-5.

<sup>17</sup> IPRI. *China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Dialogues: Prospects and Challenges*. Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Chew, E. K. *China's Foreign Policy Toward Afghanistan: Emerging Dynamics*. Lexington Books, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> CGTN. "China, Afghanistan Vow to Promote Ties in New Era." Accessed October 7, 2021. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-10-07/China-Afghanistan-vow-to-promote-ties-in-new-era-14wT83m2tHO/index.html>.

committed to securing its interests and promoting stability to mitigate risks to its Xinjiang province<sup>20</sup>. China's engagement in Afghanistan is marked by a pragmatic approach, balancing economic, security, and political interests while avoiding military intervention<sup>21</sup>. Through soft power, China seeks to influence Afghan affairs, adhering to the principle of non-interference<sup>22</sup>.

Afghanistan is not the only country where China exercises its soft power approach to achieve its objectives; it also pursues such policy in other countries. China strategically downplays its hard power to cultivate regional support, positioning itself as a non-threatening partner and influencing Southeast Asian countries away from U.S. alignment.<sup>23</sup> Lum, Morrison, and Vaughn<sup>24</sup> further discuss China's economic aid and investment, particularly in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, emphasizing that China's approach extends to tourism, trade, and infrastructure projects to solidify its influence. Huang<sup>25</sup> contrasts China's soft power success in Southeast Asia with its East Asian challenges, noting that Southeast Asia's economic reliance on China enhances its receptivity. Meanwhile, Huang and Liu<sup>26</sup> contextualize China's softer approach within lessons from the 1995 Taiwan Strait Crisis, underscoring China's intent to establish a dominant yet amicable presence. These perspectives illustrate China's strategic focus on fostering cooperation and reducing U.S. influence in the region.

China's soft power efforts in East Asia face more substantial obstacles, particularly in Japan and South Korea, where regional historical tensions complicate its outreach. Huang<sup>27</sup> highlights China's mixed results in East Asia, noting successes in Taiwan but significant resistance in Japan and South Korea. Holyk<sup>28</sup> quantitatively demonstrates China's limited success in shifting perceptions in Japan and South Korea, attributing any success partly to a concurrent decline in U.S. soft power rather than the effectiveness of China's approach. Lee<sup>29</sup> critiques China's soft power, asserting it falls short compared to the U.S., Japan, and South Korea despite considerable military resources. These analyses reveal the complexity of China's soft power in East Asia, suggesting that geopolitical rivalries and historical tensions dilute its influence compared to Southeast Asia.

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<sup>20</sup> Forbes, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan: A New Era for Regional Diplomacy?".

<sup>21</sup> Huasheng, Z., and A. C. Kuchins. "China and Afghanistan: Regional Security Dynamics and Implications." National Bureau of Asian Research, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Khaliq, U. "China's Afghan Policy: Non-interference and Security Concerns." *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Lum, Thomas, "China's "Soft Power" in Southeast Asia".

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Li, Xin, and Verner Worm. "Building China's Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16 (2011): 69-89.

<sup>26</sup> Huang, Y., and C. Liu. "Economic Diplomacy and Development Aid: China's Soft Power in Central Asia." *Asia-Pacific Economic Review* 12, no. 3 (2020): 56-72.

<sup>27</sup> Li, Xin, and Verner Worm. "Building China's Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise".

<sup>28</sup> Holyk, Gregory G. "Paper Tiger? Chinese Soft Power in East Asia." *Political Science Quarterly* 126, no. 2 (2011): 223-54.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, Geun. "A Soft Power Approach to the 'Korean Wave.'" *Asian Survey* 48, no. 3 (2009): 453-72.

In Africa, China has deployed a robust soft power approach centred on development aid, infrastructure projects, and cultural diplomacy. Bassan<sup>30</sup> discusses China's widespread investments in infrastructure and media, arguing that this strategy has positively influenced African public opinion. Li and Ronning<sup>31</sup> explore the multi-faceted involvement of Chinese government bodies and corporations, highlighting their focus on humanitarian projects, shared political values, and economic collaboration. Sall<sup>32</sup> provides a case study on Senegal, noting how China's extensive educational and media initiatives have significantly improved its image, contrasting with declining U.S. influence in the region. These studies emphasize that China's development-focused strategy has created a positive reception in Africa, strengthening its economic foothold and contrasting Western approaches.

In Afghanistan, China's soft power approach addresses a mix of security, economic, and strategic interests. Pandey identifies three core motivations: preventing terrorism spillover into Xinjiang, leveraging Afghanistan's resources, and countering India's influence<sup>33</sup>. Kley supports this by emphasizing China's preference for political and economic ties over military involvement, focusing on stability<sup>34</sup>. Ahmad describes China's involvement as mutually beneficial, stabilizing Afghanistan while granting China access to Central Asian markets, though he notes external pressures from India and the U.S. complicate China's objectives<sup>35</sup>. Andersen and Jiang point to China's dual approach of economic aid and counter-terrorism collaboration<sup>36</sup>, while Murtazashvili<sup>37</sup> Fischer and Stanzel discuss post-2021 priorities, including border security and humanitarian assistance<sup>38</sup>. Zhang introduces a "New Engagement Policy," highlighting recognition of the IEA, counter-terrorism cooperation, and advocacy for inclusive governance<sup>39</sup>. These studies depict a cautious yet strategic Chinese engagement in Afghanistan, blending economic aid with security objectives and diplomatic pragmatism.

Across regions, China's soft power strategies vary according to local conditions and geopolitical dynamics. In Southeast Asia, economic aid and tourism are central to shifting influence away from the U.S. In contrast, China's East Asian efforts are hindered by regional rivalries and historical animosities, resulting in limited success. Development aid and cultural diplomacy have enhanced China's image in Africa, contrasting with

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<sup>30</sup> Rønning, H. "How Much Soft Power Does China Have in Africa?" In *China's Media and Soft Power in Africa*, edited by X. Zhang, H. Wasserman, and W. Mano, 105-122. Palgrave Series in Asia and Pacific Studies. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137539670\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137539670_5).

<sup>31</sup> Li, Mingjiang, and Helge Rønning. *China in Africa: Soft Power, Development, and Political Influence*. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Sall, Ousmane. "Chinese soft power in Africa: Case of Senegal." *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 11 (2016): 133-142. doi: [10.4236/ojs.2016.411011](https://doi.org/10.4236/ojs.2016.411011).

<sup>33</sup> Pandey. "China's Diplomatic Relations with Afghanistan".

<sup>34</sup> Kley, "China's Engagement in Afghanistan".

<sup>35</sup> Iqbal, Musharaf, and Manzoor Khan Afridi. "New Great Game in Central Asia: Conflicts, Interests and Strategies of Russia, China and United States." *Dialogue (Pakistan)* 12, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>36</sup> Andersen, J., and L. Jiang. "China's Security Cooperation with Afghanistan: Drivers and Challenges." SIPRI, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Murtazashvili, J. *China's Post-Collapse Engagement in Afghanistan: Security and Economic Considerations*. Oxford University Press, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Fischer, L., and M. Stanzel. "China's Post-Withdrawal Strategy in Afghanistan: Security and Economic Perspectives." Institute for Security Studies, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Zhang, Y. "The Uncertainty of Government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and Its Impact on China's Soft Power Strategies." *Journal of Asian Affairs* 49, no. 1 (2022): 101-17.

Western soft power approaches. Afghanistan presents a unique case where China carefully balances economic investments with security concerns, navigating complex regional pressures from the U.S. and India. China's adaptive soft power approach demonstrates varied success across regions, influenced by economic dependencies, local receptivity, and geopolitical context.

The present analysis of China's soft power engagement reveals a considerable gap in the literature, pointing to the need for a more in-depth investigation into how Chinese soft power intersects with its military and economic strategies in Afghanistan. Although much attention has been devoted to China's hard power tactics, its soft power remains a vital yet underexamined element of its influence in the region, as demonstrated by its success in Southeast Asia and Africa. The absence of a comprehensive study on China's soft power initiatives in Afghanistan signifies a substantial gap in academic research. This paper seeks to fill this void by examining China's soft power efforts in Afghanistan and the strategic motivations and objectives behind these initiatives.

### 3. China's Strategic Motivations and Objectives in Afghanistan

#### 3.1 Security Reasons

China's primary interest in Afghanistan is driven by security concerns linked to its western Xinjiang province<sup>40</sup>. Specifically, China's counter-terrorism strategy in Afghanistan focuses on cutting off Uyghur militants from spiritual, financial, and political support, a measure against the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and related groups. This strategy encompasses a multi-faceted engagement approach with Afghanistan and the broader Central Asia region to counteract threats to its national security<sup>41</sup>.

China aims to prevent Uyghur militants from using Afghanistan as a sanctuary against Chinese interests. With Xinjiang's national security concerns in mind, China seeks to build a coalition involving Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to curb support for these militants. Felbab-Brown notes that part of China's soft power approach in Afghanistan is to deter Uyghurs from moving through its western border<sup>42</sup>. Xinjiang, which comprises 18% of China's landmass, has long been a site of tension between the Han Chinese and the indigenous Uyghur Muslim population<sup>43</sup>. The Uyghurs, who claim a historical right to autonomy, trace back their aspirations for independence to two short-lived states in the 1930s and 1940s, supported by the Soviet Union<sup>44</sup>. However, Xinjiang was re-incorporated into China after the CCP takeover in 1949, with autonomous status granted only nominally, a situation that worsened with the advent of the U.S. War on Terror<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Felbab-Brown, V. *The Afghanistan Challenge: China's Stake in Regional Stability and Future Prospects for Sino-Afghan Relations*. Brookings Institution Press, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Dabphet, Siriporn. "Conflict Management in China: The Case of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province." *Asian Review* 33, no. 2 (2020): 55-73.

<sup>44</sup> Fuller, Graham E., and S. Frederick Starr. *The Xinjiang Problem*. Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Andersen. "China's Security Cooperation with Afghanistan".



The historical backdrop of foreign militants joining Afghanistan's Mujahideen against the USSR also impacts China's security calculations. After the Soviet withdrawal, Uyghur militants, influenced by Turkey due to ethnic ties, found themselves connected to the global jihadist network, including Al-Qaida, whose roots in Afghanistan concern China<sup>46</sup>. Despite abstaining from direct military engagement with Afghanistan's warring factions, China was cautious in its relations with the IEA, who harboured Uyghur fighters during their first regime in the 1990s. After the U.S. invasion in 2001, China faced two challenges: the proximity of the American military presence to its borders and the possible alliance between Uyghur militants and Al-Qaida. During this period, China maintained dialogue with the Kabul government and the IEA to address security threats on its borders<sup>47</sup>.

China aims to cultivate goodwill in Afghanistan as a security measure by adopting a soft power approach. With the IEA's return in August 2021, China's concerns about Xinjiang's security have intensified<sup>48</sup>. Consequently, China has adopted a cautious approach to engaging the IEA, refraining from formal recognition due to its ongoing security concerns<sup>49</sup>.

China's soft power strategy aims to foster an environment in Afghanistan that discourages support for Uyghur separatism. Tahir argues that China's strategy is rooted in intertwined national security and economic interests, as Afghanistan's stability can facilitate security and economic engagement. By fostering positive relations with Afghan authorities, China hopes to prevent governmental support for militants and curb the Uyghur threat from Afghanistan<sup>50</sup>. R1, an expert on China-Afghanistan relations, underscores China's historical focus on security in Afghanistan, citing concerns that militant networks in Afghanistan might spill over into Xinjiang. These concerns are compounded by the region's history of jihadi groups and inter-allied militants, which China sees as a direct security threat (R1, personal communication, May 9 2023).

R4, a Chinese expert, argues that

"Stability in Afghanistan is vital for Chinese national security, particularly to deter ETIM activities. China seeks to project a positive image in Afghan society to neutralize support for Uyghur separatists. (R4, personal communication, May 25 2023)."

R8, an Afghan diplomat, identifies China's primary motivation as thwarting security threats linked to Afghan militants' historical ties with Uyghur fighters during the Republic period. China's engagement with the Afghan Republic was strategically designed to garner cooperation in containing Uyghur militancy. Importantly, China refrained from joining the U.S.-led War on Terror to avoid legitimizing Uyghur militants' anti-China stance. Instead, China used soft power to maintain a distinct image, portraying itself as separate from U.S. interests in Afghanistan (R8, personal communication, May 12 2023).

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Kley, "China's Engagement in Afghanistan".

<sup>48</sup> Zhou, Jiayi, Fei Su, and Jingdong Yuan. "Treading Lightly: China's Footprint in a Taliban-led Afghanistan." SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, no. 2022/08 (November 2022).

<sup>49</sup> Murtazashvili, "China's Post-Collapse Engagement in Afghanistan".

<sup>50</sup> Tahir, A. *China's Diplomatic Dilemma: Balancing Interests in Afghanistan*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

R10, an Afghan official, highlights that China's engagement seeks to address security challenges emanating from Afghanistan preemptively. The strong religious sentiment among Afghans could lead to sympathy toward Uyghur Muslims, a concern China hopes to mitigate by keeping Afghanistan diplomatically engaged. China's soft power efforts aim to curtail potential connections between Uyghurs and the Afghan public (R10, personal communication, April 16 2023).

Ultimately, China's soft power strategy in Afghanistan is a deliberate attempt to mitigate security challenges. Recognizing Afghanistan's complex socio-religious landscape and the sensitive nature of its reputation regarding Uyghur treatment, China is eager to project a positive image. This approach is intended to delegitimize support for Uyghur separatism while countering narratives of Chinese hostility toward Muslims, thereby reducing the likelihood of spiritual, political, or logistical support for militant groups opposing China.

### 3.2 Geopolitical Reasons

China's efforts to build and expand its soft power in Afghanistan are closely linked to its political priorities within Afghanistan and across the broader region. These priorities include promoting China's peaceful rise and managing its geopolitical rivalry, particularly with the United States. China must cultivate a positive image in the region to achieve these political objectives, especially in Afghanistan. When the United States was preoccupied with its "war on terror," China strategically leaned on soft power to advance its influence in Afghanistan, seeking to establish itself as a world power with economic, security, and political clout. As China rises globally, one of its main goals has been to extend and strengthen its soft power in Afghanistan.

China aims to reassure neighbouring countries of its peaceful intentions, conveying that it poses no threat to their sovereignty. Afghanistan, notably, is one of the few neighbouring countries with which China has no territorial disputes. China aims to foster goodwill in Afghanistan and set itself apart from past major powers engaged in conflict in the region. R14 highlights that Afghans have historically viewed major powers as adversaries, a perception rooted in experiences with British, Soviet, and American interventions. In response, China emphasizes a respectful foreign policy toward Afghanistan and is committed to upholding Afghanistan's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and cultural values<sup>51</sup>.

A second political motive for China's soft power strategy in Afghanistan stems from its geopolitical rivalry with the West. The U.S.-led NATO presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 positioned China's global competitor directly on its doorstep<sup>52</sup>. This rivalry encompasses military, cultural, and political dimensions, with China competing for influence in Afghanistan. To counter the narratives and influence established by the U.S., China has strategically prioritized soft power in Afghanistan, using it to strengthen its presence and further its regional ambitions.

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "China's Position on the Afghan Issue." April 12, 2023. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wsrc/202405/t20240530\\_11335301.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wsrc/202405/t20240530_11335301.html)

<sup>52</sup> Kjeld Van Wieringen, Julie Claustre, "Future of Sino-Afghan Relations Impacts on EU interests and strategic autonomy European", Parliamentary Research Service, Policy Foresight Unit, PE 747.434, July 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747434/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747434\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747434/EPRS_BRI(2023)747434_EN.pdf).

### 3.3 China's Peaceful Rise

As an emerging global power with the world's second-largest economy, China recognizes the need to foster a positive international image, particularly among its neighbouring countries, including Afghanistan. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, initially developed during the Cold War as the United States prepared for global leadership<sup>53</sup>, is relevant here, as China similarly began prioritizing soft power strategies in 2007<sup>54</sup>. Given Afghanistan's proximity, it is naturally included in China's regional influence efforts. According to R2, an Afghan expert on China-Afghanistan relations, history shows that as countries like Britain, France, Germany, and the U.S. achieved major power status, they also harnessed soft power to bolster their influence. China's ascent since the 1990s, particularly its efforts to gain regional and global influence, mirrors this trend, making soft power an essential component of its strategy (R2, personal communication, April 14 2023).

As Jain points out, China aims to rise as a peaceful and responsible power, countering narratives that portray it as a threat<sup>55</sup>. China's foreign policy emphasizes engagement with its immediate region to challenge this narrative before pursuing broader international ambitions<sup>56</sup>. Li and Worm note that China's goal of a peaceful rise, supported by rapid economic growth, relies heavily on soft power as a diplomatic tool<sup>57</sup>. Ding concurs that China aims to foster a "harmonious world" image, particularly in the Global South<sup>58</sup>. However, Huang argues that China's assertive actions in territorial disputes and the lack of political reforms may hinder its "peaceful rise" narrative, particularly in East Asia, where its use of hard power conflicts with its soft power ambitions in Japan and Taiwan<sup>59</sup>.

Nye suggests that great powers, such as China, must employ soft power to maintain regional trust, drawing a parallel with historical figures like Bismarck, who combined hard and soft power to establish Berlin as a diplomatic hub<sup>60</sup>. Similarly, China combines hard and soft power as it rises on the world stage, with Afghanistan as a focus for its soft power efforts<sup>61</sup>. For instance, the United Kingdom's use of soft power, as noted by MacDonald<sup>62</sup>, has cemented its global influence, and a British Council report reveals that China's network of cultural institutes has grown to be the largest globally, indicating its

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<sup>53</sup> Nye, J. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Breslin, Shaun. "China Engages Asia: The Soft Notion of China's 'Soft Power'." *Ethos* 8 (2010): 5-11.

<sup>55</sup> Jain, B. M. *China's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia: Myth or Reality?* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> Takahara, Akio. "Introduction to the Special Issue on the Comparative Study of Asian Countries' Bilateral Relations with China." *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10, no. 2 (2021): 157-161."

<sup>57</sup> Li, Xin, and Verner Worm. "Building China's Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise".

<sup>58</sup> Ding, Sheng. "To Build a 'Harmonious World': China's Soft Power Wielding in the Global South." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 13, no. 2 (2008): 193-213.

<sup>59</sup> Li, Xin, and Verner Worm. "Building China's Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise".

<sup>60</sup> Nye, Joseph S. "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power." *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (2009): 160-163.

<sup>61</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "China's Position on the Afghan Issue." April 12, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> MacDonald, S., & Murray, A. "Soft Power at a Turning Point: A Comparative Analysis". British Council, 2024. doi.org/10.57884/0F7H-YD62.

priority on soft power expansion<sup>63</sup>. This strategy is consistent with China's goal of promoting its narrative and fostering acceptance as it rises.

An Afghan official at the Foreign Ministry believes that as an emerging power, China must garner soft acceptance from different nations to solidify its status (R3, personal communication, April 18 2023). A Chinese expert on China-Afghanistan relations, R4, supports this view, noting that as China assumes greater global responsibilities, soft power can enhance its international image, facilitating these efforts (R4, personal communication, May 25 2023). A Chinese diplomat echoed this sentiment, explaining that China's diplomacy is built on mutual respect and benefits, aiming to foster global cooperation and tackle challenges collectively (R7, personal communication, April 3 2023). Another Chinese diplomat highlighted the importance of Afghanistan as an enduring neighbour, underscoring China's prioritization of neighbourhood diplomacy to ensure amity and stability (R6, personal communication, April 3 2023).

Afghanistan's strategic location is particularly significant for China's neighbourhood policy, prioritizing stable relations with nearby countries. As R10 from Afghanistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, China's proximity makes it a crucial player in Afghanistan's foreign policy (R10, personal communication, April 16 2023). China's approach to Afghanistan reflects a broader neighbourhood policy designed to build a foundation of peaceful relations critical for its rise, avoiding the conflicts historically seen with neighbours like Japan and Taiwan. Politically, China favours an independent Afghan government, free from Western influence, aligning with its regional integration ambitions for South and West Asia. Thus, China's "peaceful rise" hinges on its commitment to stable relations with Afghanistan and other neighbours.

As a rising power, China's neighbourhood policy strategically supports its economic and political objectives by fostering a favourable regional environment. Godement suggests that regional diplomacy is essential for China, which faces challenges with the U.S. and other regional powers<sup>64</sup>. This strategic focus underscores China's reliance on regional partnerships, especially through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which aligns with its soft power goals in Afghanistan. With SCO's member countries as a base, China bolsters its influence, positioning itself as a responsible regional power.

In 2021, China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister underscored the neighbourhood policy principles of "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness" while accusing the U.S. of fostering a Cold War mentality<sup>65</sup>. China has actively engaged in Afghanistan's security and humanitarian issues, organizing Foreign Minister meetings on Afghanistan's future and providing humanitarian aid. These initiatives signify China's commitment to stability in Afghanistan as an extension of its neighbourhood diplomacy.

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<sup>63</sup> Council, British. *Soft Power and Cultural Relations Institutions in a Time of Crisis*. Research report from International Cultural Relations. Available at: [https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/soft\\_power\\_and\\_cultural\\_relations\\_in\\_a\\_time\\_of\\_crisis.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/soft_power_and_cultural_relations_in_a_time_of_crisis.pdf) (Accessed: 10 April 2021), 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Godement, François. "China's Neighbourhood Policy." *China Analysis*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) February 2014. [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/China\\_Analysis\\_China\\_s\\_Neighbourhood\\_Policy\\_February2014.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/China_Analysis_China_s_Neighbourhood_Policy_February2014.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Republic of Fiji, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press." March 7, 2021. [http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/tpxw\\_1/202103/t20210308\\_9931791.htm](http://fj.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/tpxw_1/202103/t20210308_9931791.htm)

In summary, Afghanistan's role in China's soft power strategy reflects the country's broader goal of a peaceful rise. China seeks to communicate a different message from past global powers intervening in Afghanistan, emphasizing non-interference and respect for Afghan sovereignty. China's neighbourhood policy underscores this message, aiming to reassure the Afghan public that its intentions are peaceful and cooperative.

### *3.4 Geopolitical Rivalry*

China's expansion of soft power in Afghanistan is driven by its geopolitical rivalry with regional and global powers. As China strives to solidify its regional influence – a crucial step toward establishing itself as a global power – it must strategically compete with its rivals, particularly in geopolitically significant locations like Afghanistan. Over the past two decades, while the U.S., China's primary competitor, maintained a military presence in Afghanistan, China utilized soft power to cultivate a positive image, build alliances at governmental and local levels, and influence Afghan perspectives on China. Kjeld Van Wieringen et al. highlights that Afghanistan's unstable domestic, regional, and international environment could make it a hotspot for insurgency and great-power rivalry, positioning China as a significant actor in Afghanistan's future<sup>66</sup>.

China's goals in Southeast Asia illustrate its broader soft power strategy<sup>67</sup>: maintain peace to facilitate Chinese investments, push regional competitors like Japan and Taiwan out, establish military bases, and create a "Monroe Doctrine" atmosphere, excluding U.S. influence. China has similarly sought to implement these objectives in Afghanistan, projecting itself as a peaceful power with regional goodwill.

An Afghan diplomat, R8, noted that China's soft power has successfully garnered Afghan support for China-led initiatives like the "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) project, as opposed to the U.S.-proposed "New Silk Road" (R8, personal communication, May 12 2023). This soft power influence has even extended to mediation efforts, with China facilitating the first secret talks between the Afghan government and the IEA. R9, an Afghan expert, affirms that China's soft power strategy aims to counteract the influence of rival states in Afghanistan while fostering a positive regional image and building alliances (R9, personal communication, April 14 2023).

In 2011, the U.S. launched the "New Silk Road" initiative to integrate Afghanistan into Central and South Asia, which China viewed with suspicion, suspecting U.S. strategic ambitions. China responded by inviting Afghanistan to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While logistical challenges prevented Afghanistan from fully joining the U.S.-led coalition, the IEA's 2021 return revived Kabul's interest in the project<sup>68</sup>.

Following the U.S. and NATO's withdrawal in August 2021, China leveraged its accumulated soft power to establish deeper ties with Afghanistan's new government. R9 points out that despite the IEA's efforts to balance relations with the U.S. and China, a discernible trend favouring China has built a strong partnership with the IEA (R9,

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<sup>66</sup> Kjeld Van Wieringen, "Future of Sino-Afghan Relations Impacts on EU interests and strategic autonomy European".

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Lum, "China's "Soft Power" in Southeast Asia".

<sup>68</sup> Safi, Mariam, and Bismillah Alizada. *Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative: Review, Analysis and Prospects*. Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies (DROPS), 2018. <https://dropsafghanistan.org/integrating-afghanistan-into-the-belt-and-road-initiative-review-analysis-and-prospects/>

personal communication, April 14 2023). China's influence has grown steadily, partly due to its emphasis on diplomatic engagement rather than military intervention (Ali, 2020). As Felbab-Brown argues, China views Afghanistan through a geopolitical lens, focusing particularly on countering India's influence<sup>69</sup>. With the IEA's ascent, China and Russia emerged as the main beneficiaries of the U.S. departure, maintaining a consistent influence throughout the U.S. occupation<sup>70</sup>.

China's soft power approach in Afghanistan contrasts starkly with the U.S. and its allies, as it did not resort to hard power. Instead, China sought to win over hearts and minds, managing its rivalry with India and the U.S. by maintaining a non-military presence and fostering goodwill. While India and the U.S. exited Afghanistan with NATO, China continued its diplomatic engagement, leaving its embassy open and supporting the new government. Over the past two decades, China's soft power strategy prepared it for this moment, positioning it as a diplomatic player across Afghanistan's political spectrum and giving it an edge in the ongoing geopolitical competition.

China's soft power in Afghanistan underscores its ambition to present itself as a responsible regional power with positive intentions. By embedding its soft power within a "friendly" regional diplomacy, China aims to demonstrate a commitment to peace and conflict resolution rather than military intervention. The primary drivers of China's soft power strategy in Afghanistan – its geopolitical rivalry with the U.S.-led NATO coalition and regional competitor India – align with its broader aim of achieving a "peaceful rise" while pursuing security, economic, and political interests. The IEA's ascension allowed China to leverage its soft power influence, maintain a presence on the ground, and foster relations with the IEA government, underscoring China's dual goals of peaceful rise and geopolitical positioning.

### 3.5 Economic Reasons

China's expansion of soft power in Afghanistan is closely tied to its economic interests, leveraging Afghanistan's abundant natural resources and strategic location to support its regional policy objectives<sup>71</sup>. Afghanistan's rich mineral resources, including copper, iron, coal, lithium, and rare earth elements, present a valuable economic opportunity for China<sup>72</sup>. China has secured two critical projects in Afghanistan – the Aynak copper mine and the Amu Darya Petroleum contract – which are significant components of its economic strategy<sup>73</sup>. In 2007, the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation (JCCL) committed to a large-scale investment in the Aynak mine, marking one of the largest foreign investments in Afghanistan<sup>74</sup>.

<sup>69</sup> Felbab-Brown, "The Afghanistan Challenge: China's Stake in Regional Stability".

<sup>70</sup> Fischer, L., and M. Stanzel. "China's Security Concerns in Xinjiang: Implications for Soft Power in Afghanistan." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51, no. 1 (2021): 127–43.

<sup>71</sup> Khan, A. "The Impact of Non-Recognition on Regional Mechanisms and Security." *Central Asian Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (2021): 34–47.

<sup>72</sup> Huasheng, Z. "China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives: China's Interests, Stances and Perspectives," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March, 2022. [https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/csis/0024849/f\\_0024849\\_20320.pdf](https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/csis/0024849/f_0024849_20320.pdf)

<sup>73</sup> Khan, Raja Muhammad. "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan." *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1-11.

<sup>74</sup> Downs, Erica. "China Buys into Afghanistan." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2012): 65-84.

China's adoption of soft power in Afghanistan is also part of its broader strategy to compete in the global race for resources while projecting a peaceful rise and promoting its cultural heritage<sup>75</sup>. Scholars generally agree that China is on a path toward becoming the world's top economy. As such, it seeks secure access to critical resources worldwide, often using soft power to establish favourable conditions for these investments.

Afghanistan's strategic position offers China significant potential for regional integration. Through the Wakhan Corridor, which borders China's Kashgar city, Afghanistan could directly connect China with Iran and Central Asian countries, reviving a route reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road<sup>76</sup>. During a 2014 visit, President Ashraf Ghani proposed to President Xi Jinping that they revitalize the Silk Road via the Wakhan Corridor, which could foster deeper economic ties<sup>77</sup>. Additionally, Afghanistan is part of a "five-nation railway" initiative, which, once complete, would expedite China's trade with Iran and other Central Asian nations, facilitating a regional transit network for Chinese goods<sup>78</sup>.

Recognizing the need for a positive image to facilitate economic engagement, China has employed a soft power strategy in Afghanistan to build goodwill at both governmental and public levels. R2, an Afghan expert on China-Afghanistan relations, asserts that this strategy allows China to invest without encountering the resistance that Western businesses might face, as the Afghan public and IEA view Chinese investments more favourably (R2, personal communication, April 14 2023). R9 further emphasizes that China's economic ambitions in Afghanistan require a positive image, enabling it to capitalize on Afghanistan's resource wealth and economic potential (R9, personal communication, April 14 2023).

Afghanistan's central location, or "Asian roundabout," makes it indispensable for China's regional integration plans. As R3 notes, Afghanistan's connectivity potential is significant, and China's soft power approach aims to make Afghanistan a key player in this integration effort (R3, personal communication, April 16 2023). R10 concurs, suggesting that Afghanistan could open economic opportunities for trade and commerce with China (R10, personal communication, April 16 2023). According to R13, China's regional strategic ambitions depend heavily on its soft power presence in Afghanistan, facilitating regional goals without resorting to military force (R13, personal communication, May 10 2023). R4, a Chinese expert, adds that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) relies on Afghanistan's geostrategic position, underscoring the interdependence between China's soft power and its regional economic goals (R4, personal communication, May 25 2023).

Interviews with stakeholders revealed that China's soft power in Afghanistan supports two main economic interests: direct investments in resource extraction and establishing infrastructure to enhance regional connectivity. These projects, including those targeting oil fields, copper, and rare earth minerals, align with China's vision of using Afghanistan

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<sup>75</sup> Hunter, Alan. "Soft Power: China on the Global Stage." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 3 (2009): 373-398.

<sup>76</sup> Munir, Muhammad, and Muhammad Shafiq. "Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan, China and Pakistan." *Margalla Papers* 22, no. 1 (2018): 203-215.

<sup>77</sup> Panda, Ankit. "Afghanistan and China Open a New Chapter." *The Diplomat*, October 29, 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Choudhury, Rahul Nath. "China's Conundrum in Afghanistan." In *Mapping Chinese Investment in South Asia*, pp. 43-63. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023.

as a hub linking multiple regions. Given Afghanistan's security challenges since 2002, China has deliberately projected a soft image to foster acceptance at public and governmental levels, facilitating its long-term investment goals.

Rahimi highlights that while China's investments in projects like Aynak Copper and Amu Darya Petroleum have stalled, China's broader regional strategy suggests that these projects remain part of its long-term plan. Rahimi argues that although Chinese corporations might enter Afghanistan for corporate profit, the Chinese government's regional strategic interests indicate an intent to pursue these ventures eventually<sup>79</sup>. A Carnegie report cites limitations on China's investments due to Afghanistan's lack of infrastructure and unstable security conditions, further complicating large-scale projects like the Aynak mine<sup>80</sup>.

Following the IEA's return to power in 2021, China resumed its interest in Afghan resources, with the IEA government even signing a new oil production deal with a Chinese firm in January 2023<sup>81</sup>. This suggests that China's soft power has created a favourable environment for re-engagement in Afghanistan's resource sector, positioning it as a long-term economic partner for the IEA-led government.

China's economic initiatives in Afghanistan were initially constrained by inadequate infrastructure, volatile security, and stringent project terms. However, since the U.S. withdrawal and the IEA's rise, China has shifted its approach, signalling that it intends to fill the vacuum left by the U.S. not through military or political dominance but by establishing sustained economic ties. China's strategy in Afghanistan, grounded in soft power, aims to support its peaceful rise narrative while countering U.S. influence and enhancing its economic and geopolitical influence in the region.

## Conclusion and Implications

China's engagement in Afghanistan is a multi-faceted strategy that heavily relies on soft power to address its security, geopolitical, and economic interests. This strategic approach is framed by the challenges and complexities in each area, which need to be understood in the context of the broader international and regional dynamics.

China's primary security interest in Afghanistan is rooted in the protection of its Xinjiang province from separatist elements, particularly Uyghur militants tied to the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). As Felbab-Brown (2020) notes, China's counter-terrorism efforts are designed to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for these groups<sup>82</sup>. Historically, the IEA hosted Uyghur militants during their 1990s regime, amplifying China's security concerns. Despite the IEA's return to power in 2021, China has pressed for assurances that Uyghur militants will not operate from Afghan soil. However, the IEA's historical links to various militant factions raise doubts about their ability or willingness to honour these commitments.

<sup>79</sup> Rahimi, Haroun. "Chinese Investment in Afghanistan: A Story of Success or Failure." Academia.edu, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Ng, Michael. "China's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan".

<sup>81</sup> Encarnation, Luke, and C. Christine Fair. "China and the Taliban: Past as Prologue." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47, no. 5 (2024): 588-611.

<sup>82</sup> Felbab-Brown, V. "China's Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Afghanistan and Xinjiang Concerns," 2020.



Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the IEA's capacity to enforce these guarantees poses a significant risk to China's strategic interests. Furthermore, China's domestic policies in Xinjiang, including the reported human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims, add a layer of complexity<sup>83</sup>. As China seeks to employ soft power to project influence in Afghanistan, these domestic issues threaten to undermine its efforts, as international scrutiny of its treatment of Uyghurs could erode its standing in the region<sup>84</sup>.

China's involvement in Afghanistan also responds to its geopolitical rivalry with the United States and other regional powers. The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 was seen as a direct challenge to China, positioning a major competitor close to its borders<sup>85</sup>. In response, China focused on soft power strategies to gain influence in Afghanistan, presenting itself as a peaceful rising power in contrast to the U.S.'s military approach<sup>86</sup>. With the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in 2021, China sees an opportunity to expand its influence and fill the power vacuum left behind, using diplomatic and economic tools rather than direct military intervention<sup>87</sup>.

Ng (2022) highlights that while China has sought to establish a foothold through its support for the IEA, its internal instability and governance challenges remain major obstacles to its geopolitical ambitions. Without a stable Afghan government, China's influence remains susceptible to shifts in political and security dynamics<sup>88</sup>. Additionally, China's regional ambitions reflect its experiences in Southeast Asia, where it seeks to limit U.S. influence and consolidate its position<sup>89</sup>. In Afghanistan, China's strategy is similar, employing economic investments and diplomatic outreach to stabilize the region and secure its broader objectives<sup>90</sup>.

Afghanistan's vast natural resources, including copper, lithium, and rare earth elements, present significant economic opportunities for China<sup>91</sup>. Projects such as the Aynak copper mine and the Amu Darya Petroleum contract demonstrate China's commitment to tapping into these resources<sup>92</sup> despite the delays and challenges these projects have faced due to Afghanistan's security issues and lack of infrastructure<sup>93</sup>. Furthermore, Afghanistan's strategic location along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is crucial for China's broader economic vision. The Wakhan Corridor, which links China to Afghanistan, is key to facilitating trade between China, Central Asia, and the Middle East<sup>94</sup>. At the same time, the proposed five-nation railway could further enhance trade

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<sup>83</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "IEA 'Removing' Uyghur Militants from Afghanistan's Border with China." October 5, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Dabphet, Siriporn. "Conflict Management in China: The Case of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang Province".

<sup>85</sup> Kjeld Van, "Future of Sino-Afghan Relations Impacts on EU interests and strategic autonomy European".

<sup>86</sup> Li, Xin, and Verner Worm. "Building China's Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise".

<sup>87</sup> Kjeld Van, "Future of Sino-Afghan Relations Impacts on EU interests and strategic autonomy European".

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Lum, Thomas, "China's "Soft Power" in Southeast Asia".

<sup>90</sup> Zimmerman, Thomas. *The New Silk Roads: China, the US, and the Future of Central Asia*. New York, NY, USA: Center on International Cooperation, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Huasheng. "China's Interests, Stances, and Perspectives: China's Interests, Stances and Perspectives".

<sup>92</sup> Rahimi, W. "Challenges Facing Chinese Investment in Afghan Mining,"

<sup>93</sup> Downs, Erica. "China Buys into Afghanistan".

<sup>94</sup> Munir. "Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan, China and Pakistan".

routes with Central Asia and Iran<sup>95</sup>. However, the success of these economic initiatives is heavily contingent on the stability of Afghanistan and the cooperation of the IEA<sup>96</sup>.

China's approach to these investments is characterized by a reliance on soft power to foster a favourable image, which helps it navigate the local distrust of foreign influence. As one Afghan expert (R2, personal communication, 2023) points out, Chinese investments are viewed more favourably than those from Western powers, partly due to the IEA's reluctance to engage with Western businesses. This soft power strategy enables China to pursue its economic objectives without facing the resistance often accompanying Western investment in Afghanistan.

Despite these opportunities, China faces considerable risks. Infrastructure deficiencies and ongoing security concerns continue to delay key projects, such as the Aynak copper mine<sup>97</sup>. However, China has cautiously resumed its engagement, evidenced by a recent oil production deal with the IEA in 2023<sup>98</sup>. These moves suggest that while economic incentives are critical, China's soft power efforts will play a key role in maintaining long-term engagement without direct military or political involvement<sup>99</sup>.

### *Implications*

The implications of China's strategy in Afghanistan are significant, spanning security, geopolitical, economic, and reputational aspects.

China's engagement in Afghanistan is driven by its need to secure its western borders against Uyghur militancy. Diplomatic efforts with the IEA aim to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a breeding ground for terrorist organizations that could destabilize Xinjiang. However, the IEA's historical ties to various militant groups and its limited control over Afghanistan's territory undermine China's efforts to mitigate security risks fully. This approach reflects China's preference for soft power over direct military action but may not eliminate the long-term threat posed by militancy in the region.

China's strategic positioning in Afghanistan places it at the centre of a changing power dynamic in Central Asia, especially after the U.S. and NATO's withdrawal. China presents an alternative engagement model by emphasizing economic and diplomatic influence, positioning itself against the U.S. and other global powers. Despite their governance challenges, diplomatic support for the IEA signals China's intention to fill the void left by the U.S. withdrawal, potentially intensifying competition with other regional actors like India and Russia, who also have a stake in Afghanistan's future.

China's economic ambitions in Afghanistan focus on extracting resources and developing infrastructure projects that connect Afghanistan to broader regional trade networks. These initiatives, including the BRI and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), aim to reduce China's dependency on maritime routes while tapping into Afghanistan's mineral wealth. However, instability in Afghanistan presents significant risks to these

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<sup>95</sup> Khan. "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan."

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Rahimi, Haroun. "Chinese Investment in Afghanistan: A Story of Success or Failure."

<sup>98</sup> Najafizada, E. "China's New Oil Production Agreement with the IEA," 2023.

<sup>99</sup> Ng, "China's Role in the Economic Reconstruction of Afghanistan".

ventures, and the success of these projects depends on the IEA's ability to ensure security and maintain political stability. If China succeeds in stabilizing Afghanistan, it could transform the country into a key hub for trade between Central Asia and China, benefiting its broader regional economic goals. However, ongoing instability could result in financial losses and stalled investments.

China's use of soft power in Afghanistan aims to project an image of a peaceful rising power. However, its association with the IEA, a group many view with scepticism, complicates its reputation on the global stage. Furthermore, its human rights record in Xinjiang has drawn international criticism, potentially undermining its soft power initiatives in Afghanistan and other Muslim-majority countries. These reputational challenges could isolate China diplomatically, especially from Western nations that view its policies in Xinjiang as a significant human rights issue.

In conclusion, China's engagement in Afghanistan is a calculated effort to secure its interests across security, geopolitical, and economic dimensions. While its reliance on soft power helps it avoid direct military involvement, the success of its strategy is far from assured. The IEA's ability to control Afghanistan's security landscape, coupled with the country's political instability and China's controversial policies in Xinjiang, complicates its efforts. Ultimately, the balance China must strike between diplomacy, economic incentives, and managing security risks will determine whether it can solidify its influence in Afghanistan and reshape the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia.

**Interviewee List: Their Affiliations, Nationality and Roles.**

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<b>Interviewee Code</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>
R1	Sino-Afghan Expert	Afghan	Expert on Sino-Afghan Relations	May 2023
R2	Sino-Afghan Expert	Afghan	Expert on Sino-Afghan relations	June 2023
R3	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IEA)	Afghan	Senior Official	June 2023
R4	Sino-Afghan Expert	Chinese	Expert on Sino-Afghan Relations	May 2023
R5	Prof. Alexander	Chinese	Expert on Sino-Afghan Relations	June 2023
R6	Embassy of China in Kabul	Chinese	Diplomat	June 2023
R7	Embassy of China in Kabul	Chinese	Senior Diplomat	June 2023
R8	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IRA)	Afghan	Former Ambassador	June 2023
R9	Sino-Afghan Expert	Afghan	Expert on Sino-Afghan relations	June 2023

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R10	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IEA)	Afghan	Senior Official	June 2023
R11	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IRA)	Afghan	Senior Official	June 2023
R12	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IEA)	Afghan	China Desk	June 2023
R13	Sino-Afghan Expert	Afghan	Expert on Sino-Afghan relations	June 2023
R14	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IEA)	Afghan	Senior Official	June 2023
R15	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IRA)	Afghan	Former Ambassador	June 2023

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