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# The China Factor in Pakistan–Afghanistan Relations: Strategic Counterterrorism Cooperation

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**Abstract**

The dramatic return to power of the Taliban regime in August 2021 significantly changed the security and power dynamics of South Asia. With the change in security and power dynamics, consequently, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan began trilateral negotiations to develop a framework to combat terrorism in this region. Pakistan urged the taliban to work against terrorism and take important and efficient decisions against Tehrike Taliban Pakistan so as to protect Pakistan's territorial integrity nd to stop the use of Afghan land against Pakistan. China is also concerned that its investments in Afghanistan or in Pakistan should not be used against Pakistan, and its economic support should not be used to benefit militant or terrorist organizations. In this paper, we have attempted to analyze and discuss the developments and incidents, including the 2022 ceasefire and 2024 cross-border strikes, as well as China-Pakistan security exercises by using a realist - liberal theoretical network.

**Key Words:** China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Trilateral, Terrorism

## Introduction

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021 dramatically reshaped South Asian geopolitics. Pakistan suddenly faced militant groups – especially the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – operating from Afghan soil, and China's multibillion-dollar investments (notably the $62 billion China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC) came under threat from cross-border violence. At the same time, Taliban leaders sought Chinese economic aid and international legitimacy. These dynamics forced Islamabad, Kabul, and Beijing into a new trilateral dialogue on counterterrorism. In practice, however, the three actors have very different goals. Pakistan's main focus is pressuring the Taliban to suppress TTP sanctuaries across the border. China's priority is stable borders for its projects and preventing Uyghur-related militancy from spreading (Zhang, 2022). The Taliban leadership tries to balance ideological solidarity with fellow jihadists (like the TTP) against diplomatic pressure to crack down on extremists.

The result is a fragile, issue-specific form of cooperation driven by competing interests. This research examines whether the China–Pakistan–Afghanistan counterterrorism "team" can function effectively or is mainly rhetorical. It argues that cooperation only emerges when interests align (for example, protecting Chinese engineers), whereas conflicting motives often lead partners to act unilaterally.

Even the immediate backdrop makes this clear. After two decades of U.S./NATO presence, the Taliban took full control of Afghanistan in late 2021. Pakistan – long considered a patron of the Taliban – suddenly found the tables turned, as militant groups used Afghanistan as a base to attack Pakistani targets (Gul, 2023; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025). Data confirm that violence in Pakistan has spiked: in the first half of 2025 there were 502 militant incidents killing 737 people, a rise of 5% in attacks and 121% in fatalities compared to the same period in 2024 (Khan, 2025). Meanwhile China sees this instability as a

threat to its "all-weather" partnership with Pakistan. Beijing has invested roughly $62 billion in CPEC projects (Afzal, 2020) and fears that unrest in Afghanistan could rekindle threats to Xinjiang. Hence the three countries have engaged in a counterterrorism dialogue – but with different emphases: Islamabad demands Taliban action against the TTP; Kabul insists on respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty (even refusing to recognize the Durand Line border with Pakistan) (Khaama Press, 2024); and Beijing calls primarily for general stability.

**Theoretical Application**

From a realist perspective, each state in the China–Pakistan–Afghanistan triangle pursues security and power above all. In this view, Islamabad, Beijing, and Kabul cooperate only when it serves their own survival. China's role is defensive: its foremost aim is to prevent spillover violence into Xinjiang. Attanayake and Zheng (2021) note that Beijing treats Afghan stability as vital to protect its own western border[1]. Latham (2021) similarly observes that the Taliban's rise forces China to confront Uyghur militant groups directly[2]. Likewise, Pakistan engages the Taliban instrumentally. Historically Islamabad helped foster the Taliban to counter threats, and today it expects Kabul to eliminate sanctuaries for the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on Pakistani soil[1][2]. Yet these ties are transactional. As one analyst notes, Pakistani Taliban and Afghan Taliban "returned favors" during past conflicts[3]. In realist terms, Pakistan leverages its relationship with Kabul only so long as it aligns with Pakistan's balance-of-power interests. China uses its economic leverage (CPEC/BRI) to exert influence, but not for any ideological mission. In short, the counterterrorism partnership is a convenience coalition: each side maximizes its security. Cooperation persists when aims converge, but agreements can be abandoned if national interests diverge[1][2].

By contrast, liberalism emphasizes institutions, trade, and norms. Applied here, the theory suggests that common economic interests and multilateral frameworks could bind these countries to cooperation. China's narrative underscores mutual gains: it frames engagement in Afghanistan as part of a "community of shared future" built on mutual benefit[4][5]. Beijing has promoted institutional ties – for instance, backing Afghanistan's observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and proposing trilateral security dialogues[6][5]. A joint Pakistan–China statement explicitly pledges "zero tolerance" of terrorism and commits to fighting terrorism together within UN and SCO frameworks[6].

These moves reflect liberal assumptions that trade and institutions raise the costs of conflict (Kant famously argued that commerce compels states to pursue peace[7]). In practice, Chinese investments (such as CPEC projects) create economic interdependence: Pakistan has gained thousands of jobs from these projects, and Afghanistan hopes for growth from Chinese trade and aid. According to liberal logic, these economic linkages give all parties a stake in stability. Nevertheless, as the conflict shows, these ties are fragile. Violence deters investors and the Taliban remain largely outside formal institutions. Yet the rhetoric of mutual benefit and institutionalized cooperation suggests that, under liberalism, each side at least professes an interest in collective security. Institutional initiatives (like the SCO counterterrorism talks) and economic integration are meant to build interdependence, even if security dilemmas still loom large[6][7].

**Historical Context: Taliban Takeover and Shifting Alliances**

The sudden collapse of the previous Afghan government in August 2021 set the stage for new alignments. With the Taliban now in Kabul, Pakistan lost influence even as it saw the TTP movement into its border provinces. Simultaneously, China – which had largely steered clear of Afghan affairs during the U.S. era – moved rapidly to engage the new regime. Beijing warmly welcomed Taliban officials (for example, receiving Kabul's ambassador in late 2023) (Greenfield, 2023) and began hosting trilateral foreign-minister meetings with Pakistan and Afghanistan (such meetings were held in May 2023 and again in August 2025) (Hussain, 2025). These talks produced public commitments to enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, greater trade and transit links, and Afghan inclusion in Belt and Road/CPEC projects (Hussain, 2025).

Yet a core tension emerged. The Taliban emphasize Afghanistan's sovereignty – notably rejecting the Durand Line as an official border (Khaama Press, 2024) – even as they aggressively seek investment (for

example, signing a $540 million oil extraction deal with a Chinese firm in January 2023) (Al Jazeera, 2023). Pakistan views Afghan-based insurgents as a direct security threat that the Taliban should eliminate. The Taliban, however, feel no obligation to surrender territory or hand over militants, especially since many Taliban leaders see ideological kinship with the TTP (Atlantic Council, 2023). China, positioned as a "big brother" broker, primarily pushes non-confrontational solutions to safeguard its interests (Zhang, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

**Security Challenges: TTP, Separatists, and Border Violence**

Pakistan's security situation is dire. Data indicate it suffered the highest terrorism toll in years during 2024–25. The Institute for Economics and Peace reported that Pakistan experienced the second-largest global rise in terrorism deaths in 2024 – a 45% jump to 1,081 fatalities – largely driven by the TTP (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025).

According to conflict monitoring, about 85% of violence in Pakistan last year occurred in the border provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, where both Baloch separatists and the TTP are active (Pandya C Shah, 2024). Notably, separatist attacks in Balochistan roughly doubled in 2024 compared to the previous year, often targeting Chinese nationals and CPEC infrastructure (Pandya C Shah, 2024). High-profile assaults on Chinese workers have become symbols of Islamabad's predicament: a suicide car bomb in Shangla (March 2024) killed five Chinese engineers working on a CPEC dam, and a November 2024 Karachi bombing killed two Chinese nationals (Gul, 2024). These incidents underscore Pakistan's dual challenge – militants east and west of the Durand Line threaten both national security and the China relationship.

From Islamabad's perspective, the Afghan Taliban government has fallen short of countering these cross-border threats. Pakistani officials routinely allege that the TTP enjoys "safe havens" in border regions of Afghanistan (Gul, 2023) and warn that continued attacks – dozens of Pakistani soldiers were killed in 2023 – cannot go unanswered (Gul, 2023). At several points Pakistan and China even jointly demanded that the Taliban (which they refer to as the "Interim Afghan Government") take "visible and verifiable" action to dismantle all terrorist groups on Afghan territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The Taliban publicly deny harboring militants, with spokesmen declaring they will not allow any group (even the TTP) to use Afghan soil for attacks (Hussain, 2023). In practice, however, Islamabad feels betrayed. For example, the Taliban facilitated a ceasefire dialogue between Pakistan and the TTP in mid-2022 (with Chinese mediation), but the TTP soon resumed its insurgency by late 2022 (Greenfield, 2023). Some Taliban officials and Afghan local networks appear sympathetic to the TTP; Afghan commentators have even dubbed certain districts as "TTP districts," reflecting local support (Atlantic Council, 2023). In short, Pakistan faces a security dilemma: any overt pressure it applies on Kabul is countered as a violation of sovereignty, while continued Afghan inaction is perceived as hostile by Pakistan.

**China's Interests and Role: Stability, Development, and Ideology**

China's calculus differs markedly from Pakistan's. Beijing's chief concerns are stable regions to protect its CPEC/BRI investments and to prevent Xinjiang-related terrorism. The Xinjiang issue looms large: Chinese security planners vividly recall that the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) once used Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as a base in the 1990s (Zhang, 2022). Today China fears that unrest in Afghanistan could reignite Uyghur militant activities in Xinjiang. Yet China's approach remains governed by non-interference and incentives rather than public pressure. Chinese officials have largely avoided lecturing the Taliban on human rights; instead, they emphasize development and trade. For example, in August 2025 China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi assured Afghan leaders of continued investment in mining and infrastructure and inclusion in the BRI (Sharafat, 2025). Beijing even offered customs exemptions and revived stalled projects such as the Mes Aynak copper mine to court the Taliban (Sharafat, 2025).

Economically, China is gradually pulling Afghanistan into its orbit. Bilateral trade is rising: the Taliban's commerce ministry reported about $1.3 billion in Sino-Afghan trade in 2023, including $1.54 billion of Chinese exports (Sharafat, 2025). Chinese officials envision including Afghanistan in CPEC's network,

for example by building a road through the Wakhan Corridor into Central Asia (Sharafat, 2025). To the Taliban, these Chinese investments are invaluable – they create jobs (CPEC has already created around 155,000 jobs for Pakistanis) and lend the regime some prestige (Khan, 2023; Cheema, 2023).

However, China's gains are not guaranteed. Security is a serious worry: China has paused some projects following attacks on its nationals (Pandya C Shah, 2024). Chinese strategists warn that continued violence could force Beijing to rethink its strategy (Khan, 2023).

Overall, China positions itself as the "rich neighbor" offering investment and mediation. It has opened trilateral China–Pakistan–Afghanistan dialogues and engaged the Taliban bilaterally. In October 2024, Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Pakistan's leaders pledged ever-deeper strategic cooperation, and Beijing publicly reiterated support for Pakistan's security concerns (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Importantly, in joint statements China has urged the Taliban to act against all terrorist groups in Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Yet China stops short of pushing the Taliban too hard. Its ambassador to Kabul has privately encouraged the Taliban to act against ETIM and the Islamic State- Khorasan, but Beijing is careful not to alienate Kabul by loudly demanding a crackdown (Zhang, 2022). In short, China uses funds and diplomacy to promote stability, but it ultimately prioritizes quiet economic progress over ideological battles (Sharafat, 2025; Zhang, 2022).

**Trilateral Counterterrorism Cooperation**

In this context, Islamabad, Kabul, and Beijing have attempted various bilateral and trilateral counterterrorism initiatives. Since early 2022, they have held multiple foreign- minister-level trilaterals (often in China), each time issuing joint communiqués on issues like border management and intelligence sharing (Hussain, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). These meetings often pledge joint working groups and evidence-sharing to locate TTP cells in Afghanistan (Hussain, 2025). In the latest such meeting in August 2025 (in Kabul), Pakistan reportedly presented proof of TTP cells operating in Afghanistan, and China urged the Taliban to act on it (Hussain, 2025). The post-meeting statements reaffirmed each country's "vital role" in a peaceful Afghanistan, but did not announce any new concrete commitments beyond broad neighborliness (Hussain, 2025).

On the ground, however, cooperation has been sporadic. The Taliban did help facilitate the 2022 ceasefire dialogue with the TTP (under Chinese encouragement), which briefly paused violence before the TTP attacked again (Greenfield, 2023). Conversely, Pakistan has at times taken unilateral action. Notably, in June 2024 Pakistan launched Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, conducting cross-border airstrikes against alleged TTP camps in Afghanistan's Paktika province (Ahmad, 2024). The Taliban condemned these strikes as violating Afghan sovereignty, and China – while diplomatically silent – quietly signaled discomfort. This operation demonstrated Pakistan's impatience and highlighted the limits of tri-party coordination: Islamabad publicly pleaded for Taliban help ("to prevent militants using Afghan soil"), but ultimately acted on its own initiative (Ahmad, 2024; Atlantic Council, 2023).

China has also been drawn in more directly to protect its interests in Pakistan. In late 2024, Beijing sent troops from the People's Liberation Army to participate in joint counterterror drills (codenamed "Warrior-VIII") hosted by the Pakistani military (Gul, 2024). This was China's first such counterterror exercise with Pakistan in five years, explicitly aimed at protecting CPEC assets (Gul, 2024). Pakistan officially welcomed the drills and pledged to bolster security (Gul, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). China has also urged Islamabad to establish "joint security management" for Chinese workers after repeated attacks (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Islamabad publicly played down the idea of foreign troops on its soil but tacitly accepted the signal: Chinese engineers must be protected (Sharafat, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). These steps show China's willingness to become more hands-on with security – but only to safeguard its own interests, not to directly shape the broader TTP issue.

In summary, cooperation happens when interests overlap (for example, drills to protect Chinese projects). But when objectives diverge – crushing the TTP vs. preserving Taliban sovereignty – cooperation unravels. Pakistan's priority is to eliminate the TTP, the Taliban's is to preserve their movement and territory, and China's is to "buy peace" through investment. Taliban fighters see the TTP as ideological brothers, whereas many in Pakistan see them as traitors; China sees neither as brethren. These mistrustful identities mean that

each party often resorts to self-help. As one Pakistani official admitted, China has repeatedly pressured Islamabad to help stabilize Afghanistan's border areas (especially around CPEC), but Beijing is limited in what it can demand without risking its own economic interests (Cheema, 2023).

**Case Studies: When Cooperation Fails (or Succeeds)**

Several recent episodes illustrate these dynamics:

- **2022 Pakistan–TTP Ceasefire (mediated by China):** In June 2022 China helped broker talks in Kabul that led Pakistan and the TTP to agree to a temporary ceasefire. Violence in Pakistan subsided for a few months, raising hopes that the Taliban might rein in the TTP. In practice, however, the TTP unilaterally ended the ceasefire by November 2022 and resumed attacks (Greenfield, 2023). This case shows Pakistan's leverage (threatening force or convening talks) met the TTP's intransigence. It also revealed the Taliban's limited control: some Taliban officials apparently tried to enforce the truce, but hardliners overrode them. Islamabad left the process deeply frustrated.
- **China–Pakistan Warrior Drills (Late 2024):** After the attacks that killed Chinese engineers, China deployed PLA troops to Pakistan for the "Warrior-VIII" counterterror exercise (Gul, 2024). This unprecedented move signaled China's readiness to share the security burden. Pakistan publicly accepted the drills and promised additional measures (Gul, 2024). However, China framed the exercise broadly – official media said it was to "enhance joint counterterrorism capabilities" (Sharafat, 2025) – focusing on protecting Chinese projects rather than targeting the TTP specifically. The drills reassured Beijing and reminded Pakistan of China's clout, but they did not directly advance the campaign against cross-border militants. Indeed, after the drills China's special envoy reported back to Beijing mainly on shared concerns and reassurance, not on tangible outcomes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).
- **Pakistan's Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (June 2024):** Pakistan launched a major military offensive – including airstrikes – against alleged TTP camps in adjacent Afghan provinces (Ahmad, 2024). This operation followed a visit by Pakistan's leadership to Beijing and underscored Pakistan's impatience. The strikes reportedly inflicted losses on the TTP but also caused civilian casualties. Kabul angrily protested, and China stayed diplomatically silent. In effect, Pakistan acted unilaterally when it felt trilateral efforts had stalled. Islamabad insisted it had evidence of TTP bases in Afghanistan, but the incident deepened Afghan suspicion. In other words, when diplomatic channels frayed, Pakistan resumed unilateral action – highlighting how easily the cooperative rhetoric collapsed.
- These examples make clear that counterterror cooperation is episodic. It works when immediate interests overlap (for example, protecting Chinese nationals led to joint drills), but breaks down when goals clash. Pakistan's goal is to crush the TTP insurgency; the Taliban's goal is to preserve their own movement and avoid appearing to capitulate; and China's goal is to minimize violence around its projects. An Islamabad analyst summed it up: China will keep urging Pakistan to "stabilize" Afghanistan (for the sake of Chinese projects), but Beijing cannot force the Taliban's hand without endangering its own gains (Sharafat, 2025).

## Policy Recommendations

Given these tensions, policy adjustments are essential to improve security. The following suggestions address each country's role and the need for regional cooperation:

- **Pakistan–Taliban Bilateral Confidence-Building:** Islamabad should combine pressure with tangible incentives. Instead of unilateral strikes (which provoke Afghan ire), Pakistan could offer technical aid or joint border-management support (with Chinese backing) in exchange for Taliban action against the TTP. Confidence- building measures – such as a jointly agreed demarcation of sensitive border areas or coordinated patrols (with Chinese observers as neutral guarantors) – might reduce mutual suspicions. Transparency mechanisms (for example, allowing third- party monitors or media to verify cross-border incidents) could prevent blame games. Pakistan should also consider deepening ties across the Pashtun tribes split by the Durand Line. Facilitating cross-border trade or legal work permits (even temporary ones) for border communities could undercut narratives of hostility. For instance, instead of mass deporting Afghan refugees (which the Taliban denounce as mistreatment), Islamabad could involve UN agencies to manage migration more humanely. Removing such "sticks" from its policy toolkit could strengthen Pakistan's case that it is acting in

good faith.

- **Taliban–Pakistan Confidence-Building:** The Taliban leadership needs to more clearly distinguish itself from the TTP and Baloch insurgents. This could involve symbolic gestures (for example, quietly handing over a few senior TTP fighters to Pakistani authorities) and toning down hostile rhetoric about the Durand Line (perhaps framing border disputes as a technical issue for future talks). Encouraging local Afghan elders to denounce foreign militants on Afghan soil could build internal pressure against the TTP. The Taliban could also facilitate Pakistani pilgrims and traders safely crossing the border – a traditional goodwill move – or reopen border markets that benefit ordinary people. Moreover, discreet intelligence-sharing with Pakistan about cross-border militants could signal goodwill (while still allowing the Taliban to avoid overt crackdowns). These steps would be politically sensitive in Kabul (likely enraging TTP sympathizers), but they could significantly placate Islamabad and help keep Chinese investment flowing.
- **China as Mediator and Institution-Builder:** Beijing can expand its role beyond issuing statements. For example, China could fund and host an Afghanistan– Pakistan counterterrorism coordination center (perhaps under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the Heart of Asia process). This center could facilitate shared intelligence, crisis communications (for instance, a hotline between Afghan and Pakistani military commanders), and joint training exercises (with Chinese instructors). Crucially, China should insist on verifiable outcomes. For instance, Beijing could make future Afghan economic aid or investment contingent on concrete counterterrorism benchmarks (such as deploying additional police along the border). Simultaneously, China should press Pakistan to improve socio-economic conditions in its own border regions (through development and deradicalization programs). After all, large infrastructure projects like the Karakoram Highway rail line (ML-1) will falter without local buy-in. China could condition new contracts on clauses that hire local workers and benefit border communities, helping to undercut the appeal of militancy among the poor.
- **Regional and International Support:** Other actors can contribute. Pakistan's upcoming (2025–26) seat on the UN Security Council and China's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) presidency offer platforms to pressure Afghanistan diplomatically. A joint UN–SCO counterterrorism fund could provide Afghanistan with tangible rewards (development grants or aid) for meeting specific security benchmarks. Iran and Russia – which also fear spillover – could be coaxed into a "4+1" security forum (China–Pak–Afghan–Russia) to address shared threats, reducing any one-sided pressure. While Western influence is limited, discreet diplomacy via regional mediators (such as Qatar or the UAE) might incentivize more inclusive governance in Kabul, thereby reducing extremist appeal in the long run.
- **People-to-People and Track-Two Engagement:** Even if the Taliban regime is rigid, broader Afghan society yearns for normal trade and travel. China and Pakistan should encourage educational and cultural exchanges: for example, scholarships for Afghan students in Pakistani universities, easier visas for Afghan traders, and joint healthcare projects along the border. A track-two dialogue involving tribal elders, clerics, and civil society actors from all three countries could foster mutual understanding beyond official channels. Over time, these bottom-up connections may build trust and weaken hard-line narratives on all sides.

In sum, any lasting solution must acknowledge the parties' conflicting motives. Pakistan must assert its security needs without simply punishing Afghan Pashtuns; the Taliban should earn goodwill by treating the TTP as a foreign foe rather than a comrade; and China must leverage its economic clout to incentivize outcomes. A stable solution will likely be fragile and incremental, but a comprehensive strategy addressing security, governance, and economic development could reduce the risk of the Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier becoming a perpetual conflict zone.

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