

China's Growing Role in Afghanistan after the U.S Withdrawal: Strategic Implication for Pakistan

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Abstract

The United States (U.S) withdrawal from Afghanistan following the Taliban' takeover in August 2021 had a significant impact on the geopolitical landscape of South and Central Asia, opening the door for China to increase its presence in Afghanistan. The study will explore the new role that China is playing in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan in terms of the country's involvement in the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. The study is conducted by using the qualitative research approach under the theory of Neo-Realist, with the source of the data used as secondary data, which are academic literature, policy reports, official documents, and credible news sources. It concludes that the motivation for Chinese involvement is largely related to border security, the security of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the access to the Afghanistan's huge mineral deposits and the expansion of China's regional political influence. China has been active in enhancing its ties with the Taliban since 2021, through diplomatic, economic, and counterterrorism cooperation and investment, without intervening in the conflict militarily. For Pakistan, China's growing influence offers great strategic possibilities, such as the possibility of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, greater connectivity in the region, improved cooperation on counterterrorism and better border management. But the opportunities must be realized with the continued political stability in Afghanistan, effective regional cooperation, and a fine balance between Pakistan's strategic partnership with China and its overall national interests. The study ends with the conclusion that the growing involvement of China in Afghanistan is likely to continue to shape the regional order in the future and will have long-term consequences for the security, foreign policy and economic interests of the Pakistani state.

Key Words: China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, U.S. Withdrawal, Regional Security, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Taliban

Introduction

Afghanistan's unique geo-political placement has made it one of the most strategically important states in Asia. Owing to its location at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, it is often described as the "Crossroads of Asia." Throughout history, Afghanistan has been a nexus of competition among major empires. British geopolitical thinker Halford Mackinder argued

that control over strategically important regions enhances geopolitical influence, making Afghanistan a key arena of great-power rivalry (Erfani, 2025). Afghanistan is a landlocked country in the center of Asia that links three main geographical regions where the cultural areas include the western Iranian plateau, Central Asia to the north, and the Indian subcontinent in the southeast. Afghanistan's history as a strategic corridor for invaders to Iran, Central Asia, or India spans thousands of years, even though geography may not be the deciding factor (Barfield, 2010).

After two decades of military involvement that started in 2001, the US military ended their operations in Afghanistan on August 30, 2021. U.S and the Taliban signed an agreement in Doha, Qatar, in February 2020 that set restrictions on both sides' on the ability to do wage war and the stipulation for withdrawal of all NATO forces from Afghanistan with The Taliban's anti-militancy undertakings efforts, and was carried out without the Afghan government's approval at that time (Akram & Akbar, 2023).

Although China did not play a direct military role in the Afghan conflict, it expanded its diplomatic and economic engagement following the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Afghanistan and China share a very short yet impactful border connection through the Wakhan Corridor, and because of Afghanistan's proximity to Xinjiang province and possible contribution to regional connectivity, China considers the country to be strategically significant. During the U.S presence in Afghanistan, China maintained minimal but steady contacts with the country, mostly due to security concerns raised by terrorist organizations like the ISKP and the ETIM (Rashid, 2025).

However, the realization of these prospects is still hampered by on-going security threats, political unrest, and geopolitical rivalry. Therefore, evaluating China's wider strategic ramifications for Pakistan requires an understanding of its changing role in Afghanistan.

Coupling with supporting China's larger role in fostering regional economic cooperation, Pakistan has played an important role in making great strides aimed at promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan. Unlike previous external powers whose engagement in the region relied heavily on military intervention, China has primarily emphasized diplomatic engagement, economic cooperation, and infrastructure development while seeking to address the regional and security challenges. China has adopted a flexible course of policies relevant to the region and is working toward regional cooperation while also attempting to peacefully settle the security challenges. In order to achieve stability and terminate the protracted conflict in Afghanistan, China has supported diplomatic initiatives and regional dialogue aimed at promoting political stability and long-term peace in Afghanistan (Tahir & Hussain, 2021). Therefore, this study examines China's growing diplomatic, economic and security engagement in Afghanistan following the U.S pull out and assesses its strategic ramifications for Pakistan, especially about CPEC expansion, regional connectivity, counterterrorism cooperation, and regional security. This study fills this deficit by investigating the implications of China's changing role in Afghanistan for Pakistan, particularly in respect of CPEC expansion, regional connectivity, counterterrorism cooperation, and regional security. Previous studies have looked at China's rapprochement in Afghanistan and Pak-China strategic relations separately, but little focus has been placed on how China's post-2021 engagement in Afghanistan affects Pakistan's strategic interests.

Research Objectives

- To use Neo-Realism to analyze China's geopolitical objectives and growing diplomatic, economic, and security involvement in Afghanistan after the U.S withdrawal in 2021.
- To evaluate the strategic ramifications for Pakistan of China's expanding involvement in Afghanistan, with a focus on CPEC, regional connectivity, counterterrorism cooperation, and regional security.

Research Questions

- How has China expanded its diplomatic, economic, and security engagement in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021?
- What are the strategic implications of China's growing role in Afghanistan for Pakistan, particularly regarding CPEC, regional connectivity, border management and counterterrorism cooperation?

Literature Review

According to a study by Zhang (2022), the geopolitical landscape in the area will have significantly changed by August 2021, when the United States' 20-year military engagement in Afghanistan would come to an end. It is expected that China would play a leading role in shaping Afghanistan's post-U.S future. In this review of the literature, we will examine previous studies on China's outreach in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the U.S and provide an overview of current knowledge. China became the dominating force in the region following the U.S ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, which could have a significant impact on Afghan politics going forward (Zhang, 2022).

The primary conclusion from the literature is that China's engagement is fundamentally anchored in economic calculation. Afghanistan's rich subsurface deposits, including copper, iron, gold, and lithium, have piqued the curiosity of China, a nation whose citizens are energyhungry. According to a U.S Geological Survey assessment, Afghanistan has unexplored mineral resources valued at \$1 trillion, Cementing its status as an economic powerhouse destinations (Katzman, 2012).

Afghanistan is a key location for China's BRI, a vast infrastructural growth program that intends to link China with Europe and Africa, and it contains natural resources. China has access to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea thru the CPEC, a crucial part of the BRI. China, a major participant in the CPEC, has made heavy financial backing construction of Pakistan's Gwadar Port and has been looking for methods to expand the corridor to Afghanistan (Bhatia, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Through the prism of neo-realism, we may comprehend China's actions in post-U.S from Afghanistan as motivated by its quest for regional supremacy, security, and power within the framework of anarchic international relations. These Neo-Realist ideas should be used to study China's strategic actions in Afghanistan to understand its goals and reasons.

According to researchers like Kenneth Waltz, neo-realism emphasizes states as logical actors motivated by power and self-interest (Waltz, 1979). The significance of states attempting to preserve or shift the regional equilibrium to their advantage is emphasized by neo-realism. There is now a power vacuum in the area as a result of the U.S left Afghanistan. China can see this as a chance to strengthen its position as a regional power and increase its influence.

According to Waltz (1978), state behavior and security concerns Neorealism focuses on how governments behave in anarchic international systems when security is the top priority (Waltz (1978). When neo-realism is applied to China's engagement in Afghanistan, it indicates that security concerns are the primary driving force behind China's actions. Beijing seeks stability in Afghanistan to prevent terrorism and separatism since the country's instability poses a threat to neighboring Central Asian states as well as China's Xinjiang province. Therefore, China's diplomatic efforts and economic investments are meant to fortify its borders and keep outside influences that might cause the situation to become unstable.

Balance of Power and Regional Influence (Rolland, 2017): Neorealism emphasizes how governments link themselves with other major powers and how power is distributed (Rolland, 2017). China's efforts in Afghanistan might be interpreted a component of its blueprint to restrain other regional powers, particularly the U.S and Russia. In this regard, China hopes to solidify its position as a major player in the area and improve its standing in Afghanistan and other countries through commercial ventures like the BRI and infrastructural investments.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate the strategic implications for Pakistan of China's expanding involvement in Afghanistan after the United States withdrawal. Since the research aims to analyze geopolitical changes, foreign policy choices, and regional security dynamics rather than create statistical links, a qualitative approach is acceptable. The study is based on secondary data collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, government publications, official statements, and credible news sources. These sources provide comprehensive insights into China's diplomatic, economic, and security engagement in Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan's strategic interests within the evolving regional environment. Key issues pertaining to China's regional policy, such as security, economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), can be identified and interpreted thanks to the qualitative content analysis of the data. Neo-Realism, especially Kenneth Waltz's theory, which explains state behavior in terms of security, survival, and the quest for power in anarchic international systems, serves as the basis for the analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to examine the gathered data. China's security, economic, and diplomatic involvement in Afghanistan were among the themes that emerged from the methodical analysis and categorization of secondary sources. In order to evaluate these themes' strategic significance for Pakistan, the Neo-Realist framework was applied, and source triangulation improved the conclusions' dependability and credibility.

Finding of the Study China's Interests in Afghanistan

China's interest in Afghanistan has increased since the U.S left the country in August 2021. China has deliberately attempted to amplify its involvement and footprint in Afghanistan following the ouster of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's government and the Taliban's takeover. Afghanistan may be vital in thwarting China's expanding control in the area, so the US should view the situation as more than a humanitarian emergency. China's geopolitical interests in the region are reflected in a number of security issues that have a significant impact on its involvement in Afghanistan. The threat posed by extremist organizations like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which aims to free Xinjiang Province and has been connected to several violent occurrences in China, is the most significant of their work (Anosh, 2025). Afghanistan's economic potential is of great significance to China. Beijing sees the nation as a potential supplier of significant mineral resources, including rare earth elements, copper, and lithium, which are vital to China's businesses. Chinese businesses have demonstrated a geopolitical focus on Afghanistan's subterranean and a desire drive to tap into these reserves (Raz, 2023). The foundation of Chinese President Xi Jinping's new Silk Road initiative is the BRI, which forms the basis for the development of enormous economic power in addition to fortifying alliances in trade, defense, and energy. The CPEC, the Chinese flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), may extend into Afghanistan in order to maintain ties with the Central Asian nations (Ahmed & Khalid, 2021).

1. Security Challenges and China's Strategic Interests

China has been wary of Afghanistan because of worries that the unrest there would spread to Xinjiang, a region with a sizable Muslim ethnic minority that has experienced growing state control and persecution in the last twenty years. The actions of extremist groups in Afghanistan that endangered China's security is a contribute factor China backed the U.S war there, which started in late 2001. The U.S presence and actions in Afghanistan were beneficial since they reduced a number of security risks to China and other regional states. However, China and its interests in Afghanistan could be threatened by the U.S. presence there. "The U.S. presence was understood interpreted as a

hostile maneuver, much like the Soviet military presence in the 1980s, but Beijing had grown to see it as the lesser of two evils," said Andrew Small, a German Marshall Fund researcher on China's role in South Central Asia. As a result, China saw both benefits and disadvantages from the U.S presence. Beijing is also concerned about the spread of terrorism into nearby states, particularly Pakistan, its strategic ally and "allweather friend." As a key element of the Belt and Road Initiative, China undertook significant investments in China Pakistan Economic Corridor. However, both Chinese nationals and CPEC projects are seriously threatened by the Fitna Ul Hindustan groups and the actions of the Fitna Ul Khawarij (Yousafzai, 2022).

When a female suicide bomber attacked the Confucius Institute in Karachi in April 2022, the threat posed by Baloch militants increased. This incident marked a significant change in the Baloch insurgency's tactics. The threat to CPEC serves as a reminder to Beijing that its interests go beyond simply defending its borders; it also highlights the China's strong desire to advance regional security to secure its partners, investments, and labor force. China is deeply concerned about the growth of TTP and Islamic State Khorasan-Province (ISK-P) in the Pak-Afghan regions (Yousafzai, 2022).

2. China Interest in Afghanistan's Mineral Resources

China has several potential challenges to perform a regional role in Afghanistan after the U.S left the country after almost 20 years of war, leaving a security, economic, and humanitarian void. China, whose Belt and Road program passes through Afghanistan, needs Afghanistan to be stable. Furthermore, a stable Afghanistan is necessary for the country to move past its years of strife and toward development. However as China has been involved in this exploration of Afghanistan mineral resources their position as a peripheral actor with a little operational scope in the country is gradually shifting. China's alliance with the Taliban, however, is like balancing pragmatism and a knifeedge. Wahidullah Shahrani, who was Afghanistan's mines minister from 2010-13 had mentioned an unexplored natural resource endowment of roughly \$1 trillion. Such reserves can support a nation's shaky government, in this case, Afghanistan's. More than ten years ago, in 2010, the U.S government asserted Afghanistan as the "Saudi Arabia of lithium" due to the country's abundance of resources, which include vital rare earth minerals like lithium. Among the top ten mountainous countries, Afghanistan stands at eight, making access to many of its areas extremely difficult. Over 2.2 billion tons of iron ore, 1.3 billion tons of marble, and 1.4 million tons of rare earth elements are speculate to be stored in the country. However, many of these enormous natural riches have remained mostly unexplored due to decades of strife that have prohibited their exploration and extraction. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its allies in Eastern Europe carried out large surveys in the 1960s and 1970s to learn more about Afghanistan's subsurface. Nonetheless, because the nation was plagued by decades of warfare, this could not be accomplished successfully. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) and the Afghanistan Geological Survey (AGS) just conducted a thorough investigation in 2010. They included 24 areas of interest in 34 provinces here. The search for minerals necessary for the shift to green energy has accelerated with the discovery and identification of lithium reserves (Karlekar et al., 2025).

3. China's Political and Diplomatic Interests in Afghanistan

China's post-isolation involvement in international politics and they claim their position as a global leader are defined by their political interests. China has a number of political maneuvers in Afghanistan, such as promoting the contribution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the stability of Afghanistan, expanding its involvement in peace building by proactive participation in the war zone, and implementing strategies to fight the Indo-U.S axis. China has been stepping up to resolve disputes in conflict areas for the past ten years, which indicates that China's strategy is to expand their influence globally. Throughout their history, China has maintained a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan, but in 2014, China intervened for the first time with the aim of further their political calculus. After a careful costbenefit analysis, the next engagement took place when it

was thought to be the most practical course of action. Due to the growing instability in Afghanistan and the planned withdrawal of the NATO forces, China was forced to defend BRI trade routes and stop extremists from infiltrating China, which led to direct engagement with Karzai led government in Afghanistan. In October 2014, China sponsored "The 4th Heart of Asia/Istanbul Ministerial Process," which focused on Afghanistan's future stability. China held a peace conference on Afghanistan for the first time, making it evident that they are intended to engage with the country deeply. Since then, China has emerged as one of the leading players in setting up peace negotiations and convincing all sides to attend. It had separate bilateral sessions with Afghanistan and the other parties during the event. China appears to be recognized for the first time for their important connection between their economic objectives and regional security with Afghanistan. The wisest course of action for China is to get directly involved in Afghanistan's security affairs to safeguard the \$150 billion BRI centerpiece at all costs (Haider & Hussain, 2020).

4. Protection of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

President Xi commenced the global connectivity venture known as BRI in September and in October of 2013, they aligned with the introduction of the new regional diplomatic framework. While the Road aims to connect the Western Pacific, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean, the Belt portion of the BRI envisions an integrated trans-Eurasian network stretching from East Asia to Western Europe. According to assessments, the BRI network requires a massive investment of \$20 trillion in its first ten years, with 4.4 billion people (63% of the world's population), 64 nations, and a consolidated economic scale of \$21 trillion (29% of the global GDP) (Zhang, 2022).

However, China is eager to make more political and economic investments in Afghanistan as well as strategically use the nation as a base for its BRI projects in order to avoid Kazakhstan and eventually reach Russia's economy and Europe. It is evident that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is about more than just trade; it is also about regional and global hegemony. To put it another way, China's doctrine to Afghanistan goes beyond the BRI. In fact, people today see China's BRI as a "Trojan horse for Chinese attempts to exert in global economic preeminence and establishing hegemonic geo-strategic position" (Rehaiem, 2025).



Source: Reproduced from China unveils broader co-op plan ahead of Tariq's visit, by J. Islam, 2026, June

6, The Financial Express. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/china-unveils-broader-co-opplanahead-of-tariques-visit>

China's Expanding Engagements with Taliban- led Afghanistan

China bit by bit converted its long-standing strategic objectives in Afghanistan into a more all-encompassing involvement strategy. Beijing took a practical stance to protect their security interests, increase economic prospects, and bolster its influence in the region rather than formally recognizing the Taliban regime. China's involvement with the Taliban has developed through three interrelated dimensions: security collaboration, economic cooperation with investments, and diplomatic engagement. When taken as a whole, these programs show Beijing's approach to accelerating the BRI, safeguarding its own interests, and strengthening its standing as a major regional player while fostering a stable Afghanistan.

1. Diplomatic Engagement with the Taliban

China moved on and started its early involvement with Taliban-administered Afghanistan after taking these pivotal strategic and economic factors into account. Beijing's practical and forward-thinking diplomacy was discernible in China's outreach to the Taliban-run Afghanistan, which started even before the Taliban seized control of Kabul in August 2021. In Tianjin on July 28, 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with a consular team headed by Mullah Baradar, a founding member of the Taliban, and China's stress concerns about Uyghur extremists. After the Taliban regained control later in August 2021, the importance of this visit increased significantly. In 2021, China selected Yue Xiaoyong as its new envoy for Afghan affairs, demonstrating its strategic involvement with the Taliban prior to their takeover of Afghanistan. China increasingly institutionalized this

relationship when Taliban 2.0 was established. Following the July 2021 conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Afghanistan's Provisional Deputy Prime Minister, Mullah Barader, on March 24, 2022. Afghanistan promised that it would never permit any person or group to use its territory against China. Wang Yi added that China is prepared to engage in orderly and mutually beneficial collaboration with Afghanistan on the basis of respect for Afghan sovereignty. On October 13, 2023, China emerged as the pioneer nation to designate an ambassador to Afghanistan, with Zhao Xing formally becoming the sixteenth Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan, marking a significant turning point in China-Afghanistan ties under Taliban 2.0. This diplomatic move was swiftly followed by another noteworthy event on October 14, 2023, when the Taliban attended the third Belt and Road Forum following an official invitation from China. This was one of the most prominent multilateral summits the Taliban had attended since 2021. The Taliban declared at the event that they will formally join BRI by joining the CPEC (Yadav, 2026). Following this, China kept expanding their diplomatic ties with Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Bilal Ahmad Karimi became Afghanistan's thirteenth ambassador to China on December 1, 2023, making China the first nation to accept the credentials of an ambassador chosen by the Taliban. In October 2024, China extended economic cooperation beyond discussions and dialogue by extending zero tariff treatment to Afghan goods access to its extensive consumer, energy, and construction industries. The sixth China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue was conducted in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, on August 20, 2025, further solidifying this expanding collaboration and opening the door for Afghanistan's possible involvement in the CPEC. When taken as a whole, these events demonstrated China's slow transition from cautious involvement to a formal strategic collaboration with Taliban 2.0 (Yadav, 2026).

2. Economic Cooperation and Investment

China considers Afghanistan to be a tactically significant location. The nation serves as a link between the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia. China may increase their strategic and economic ties with Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian countries. Because of the location of the Afghanistan, China can extend the BRI, a paramount long-term economic plan, through Afghanistan. Afghanistan is regarded as one of the nations with the most abundant natural resources in the world. China views the exploration of these assets as a significant economic potential, particularly in the fields of rare earths, copper, lithium, and iron. One of a premier global copper reserves in the world, the Mes Aynak copper mine, has a contract with China to mine it, but the project's execution has been hindered by security concerns. China's economic strategy also heavily relies on lithium mines, which supply essential resources for electric vehicles and technology (Basirat & Samandar, 2025).

It is evident that China is becoming more involved with Afghanistan; between 2022 and 2023, bilateral trading increased from USD 595 million to USD 1.33 billion, more than doubling the range. Conversely, aside from the 2023 Amu Darya oil basin deal, not many new significant investments have been announced and made. Additionally, China's BRI has not yet resulted in tangible engagement with Afghanistan. China's economic intervention in Afghanistan is growing; at least four significant mining contracts have reportedly been acquired by Chinese businesses, which are reputedly more active in Afghanistan than other nations (Godek, 2024). Increased involvement in mining projects is where China stands to gain the most; Afghanistan is home of untapped mineral deposits valued at an estimated \$1-3 trillion, and the Chinese funded Mes Aynak mine is the second most prolific copper extraction site. According to reports, a Chinese corporation proposed to invest \$10 billion in Afghanistan's Hard-rock lithium sites in 2023. Thus, it is evident that profiting from the exploration of Afghanistan's resources offers substantial rewards (Godek, 2024).

Non-mineral investments are also of interest to Chinese businesses; most recently, a Chinese business agreed to pay \$25 million to enable the shipment of 10,000 tons of cotton to China. Another committed to funding the construction of a pine nut processing facility in Kabul with Chines Yuan

(¥) 95 million, or roughly \$13 million (Godek, 2024).

3. Security Cooperation and Counterterrorism

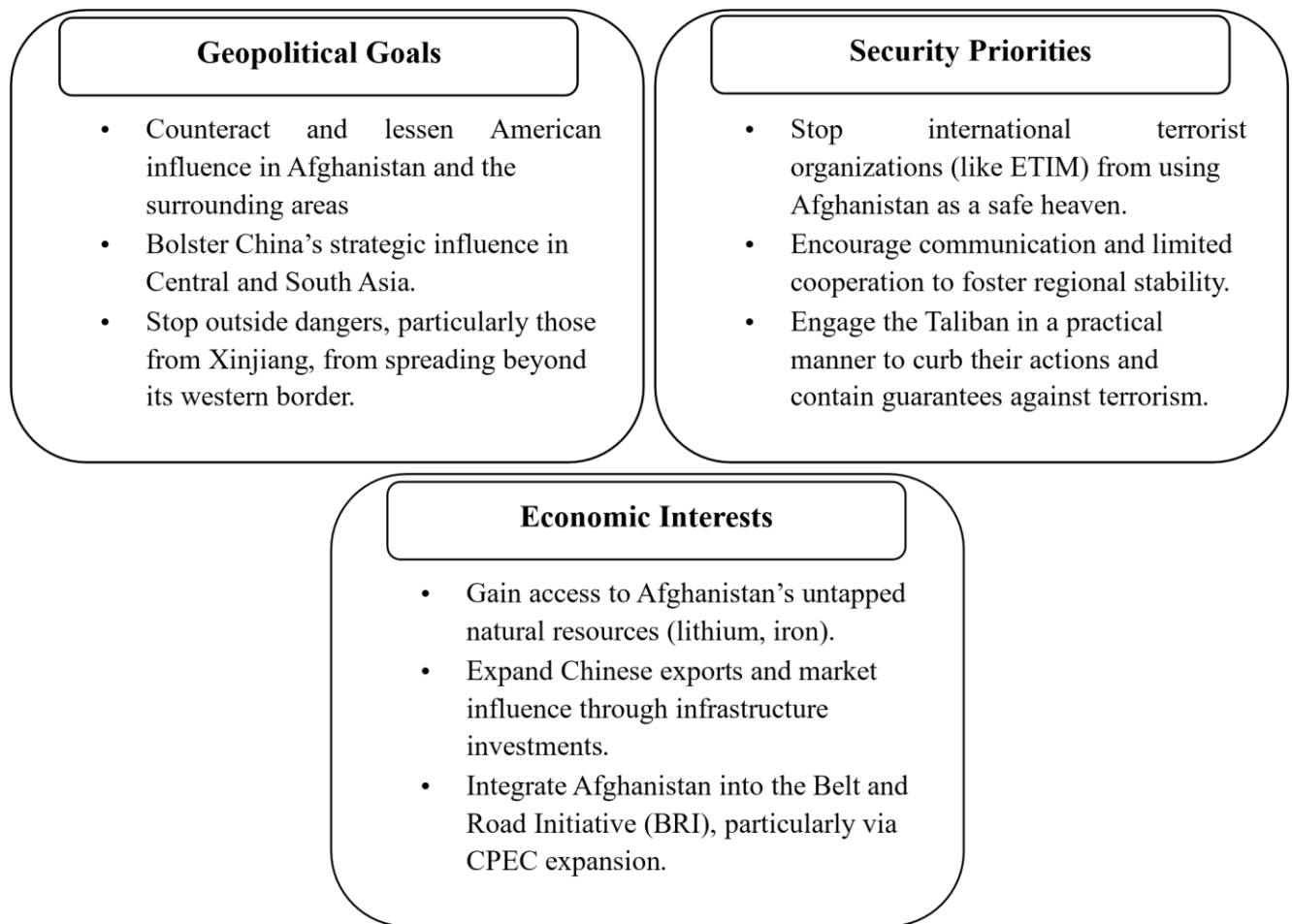
Afghanistan and China have a long chronicle of friendship and are close neighbors. China's current stance on the Afghan concern is the "Three Nevers" and "Three Respects." China admires Afghanistan's autonomy, sovereignty, and territorial sanctity; it also respects the autonomous decisions enacted by the Afghan people; and it respects Afghanistan's national customs and religious convictions. China never pursues a "sphere of influence," meddles in Afghanistan's domestic affairs, or pursues its own interests there (MoFA of the PRC, 2023).

China is assisting Afghanistan in its firm and determined fight against terrorism. Development is based on response of militant groups and might require levitated security from China's act. The UN Security Council has recognized the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist group, and the Chinese government has legally designated it as well. The security of China, Afghanistan, and the region is seriously threatened by the ETIM extremist in Afghanistan. China hopes that Afghanistan will sincerely fulfill its commitment, take more decisive action against all terrorist groups, including the ETIM, and assiduously assures protection and safeguard of Chinese and other nations' citizens, establishments, and projects in Afghanistan (MoFA of the PRC, 2023).

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China, urged advocating for increased international and bilateral collaboration in the fight against terrorism. The international community must increase counterterrorism security cooperation at the bilateral and multilateral levels and give Afghanistan much-needed supplies, equipment, and technical help as the country faces severe security challenges related to terrorism.

Afghanistan should be assisted in implementing all-encompassing policies to deal with the symptoms as well as the underlying causes of terrorism with a view to keep the nation from turning into a shelter, breeding ground, or source of terrorism once again (MoFA of the PRC, 2023).

Hence, China looks forward to collude in to combat extremism, separatism, and terrorism in Afghanistan. Afghanistan's terrorism, separatism, and extremism continue to pose a danger to regional and global security. China urges the international community to firmly support Afghanistan's efforts as well as its proactive exertion to dismantle extremist funding mechanisms, prevent violent extremist enlistment and inter regional movement, stop the spread of violent militants multimedia materials which contains extremism, youth radicalization, and the spread of terrorist ideologies, and where terrorists safe havens and sleeper cells (MoFA of the PRC, 2023).



Source: Developed by author

Strategic Implications for Pakistan

China's deepening footprint in post-2021 Afghanistan carries profound and multidimensional consequences for Pakistan. As Beijing's closest regional partner and the anchor of its BRI ambitions, Islamabad stands at the intersection of opportunity and risk. A possible extension of CPEC into Afghanistan could reposition Pakistan as a vital trade and transit hub linking Central Asia to the Arabian Sea (Rafiq & Hussain, 2026). Strengthened regional connectivity through frameworks such as the SCO promises expanded commerce with Kazakhstan, Iran, and beyond (Inayat, 2025). At the same time, Beijing's growing security stake compels closer counterterrorism coordination against shared threats like the ETIM, while its mediating role in Pakistan-Afghanistan border disputes reflects an emerging, if uneasy, trilateral security architecture (Fiala & Kulkarni, 2025). Together, these dynamics demand that Pakistan navigate China's rise with strategic clarity and resolve.

1. Extension of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The CPEC the leading project of BRI has given Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan a multilateral perspective. In a joint statement released in May 2023, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan expressed their commitment to extending the CPEC into Afghanistan and their vision of a multibillion-dollar rail and road link between the three nations. Beijing and Islamabad then decided to allow outside parties to participate in this project (Rafiq & Hussain, 2026).

Most people believe that CPEC is a game-changer and that its success will completely alter Pakistan's destiny, as well as the destiny of all of South Asia. China's economy will benefit greatly from it, but Pakistan will also gain a lot from the influx of capital and goods. It has the potential to boost Pakistan's

exports and expand its transit capacity, which could entice foreign businesses to invest in Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and Russia have expressed a strong desire to join this project. In Gwadar, Saudi Arabia has already promised to construct an oil refinery (Kundi, 2017).

2. Regional Connectivity

The CPEC has the potential to significantly enhance Pakistan's regional connectivity by expanding trade and economic cooperation with Kazakhstan, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. Complementary measures, including preferential trade agreements, streamlined customs procedures, and more flexible visa regimes, would further encourage private-sector participation and cross-border investment. Furthermore, regional platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provide opportunities for strengthening diplomatic engagement, regulatory harmonization, and economic cooperation among participating states. CPEC may further enable more seamless commercial flows and lower logistical hurdles through the development of modern transport infrastructure, logistics hubs, energy projects as well as trade corridors (Inayat, 2025).

3. Counterterrorism Cooperation

China and Pakistan have stated that they will continue to work closely together on Afghanistan and emphasized the need to stop extremist organizations from utilizing national territory to endanger regional security. Additionally, China expressed support for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. China and Pakistan emphasized how crucial it is to stop the ETIM and the Fitna-al-Khawarij from utilizing any nation's the domain jeopardizes collective defense stakes. Moreover, the two publics urged the international community to increase its collaboration in the fight against terrorism. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's state tour to China to commemorate the two nations' 75th anniversary of multilateral ties, a joint statement was released. "Beijing and Islamabad also voiced their objections to the politicization and instrumental use of terrorism, as well as what they called "double standards" in counterterrorism" (Afghanistan International, 2026).

4. Border Management

Conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan are not a recent occurrence. Since at least the late 20th century, there has been conflict between the two neighbors as contemporary governments, mostly because of territorial disputes over the "Durand Line," their shared border that Afghanistan does not acknowledge (Fiala & Kulkarni, 2025). China can help control border tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, but completely settling the deep-rooted issue remains a big task. Beijing has stepped in as a crucial mediator to ensure ceasefires and resolve cross-border security driven by its enormous economic stakes and regional stability worries (The Associated Press, 2026).

Conclusion

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has created a significant shift in the regional geopolitical landscape, and offered more opportunity for the Chinese government to expand its diplomatic, security, and economic interactions with Afghanistan. The findings of this study reveal that the reason behind China's increasing engagement is primarily their security concerns, protection of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), access to Afghanistan's natural resources, and their wish to enhance its influence in the region. In terms of Neo-Realism, the Chinese strategy is one of securing, national interests and power. China's increasing presence in Pakistan poses opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. China's involvement can help the possible extension of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, enhance regional connectivity, bolster counterterrorism cooperation, and contribute to improved border management. But such opportunities can be constrained by ongoing insecurity, terrorism, political unrest and unease at the Pak-Afghan border. So, it is essential for Pakistan to have close ties with China and safeguard its national interests as well. The rising profile of China in Afghanistan is expected to have a significant impact on Pakistan's security, foreign policy, economic engagement and regional profile in the near future. Pakistan's biggest interest will lie in having maximum benefits from the Chinese involvement

in Afghanistan, which will be possible if the region is cooperative and stable.

Recommendations/Suggestions

China is gradually expanding the boundaries of its geo-political cooperation zone in response to the changing geo-strategic environment. China has just started a thorough process of strategic partnership development on its Western perimeter as part of these important goals, with an emphasis on strengthening its ties in Afghanistan. This significant change in China's strategy could jeopardize Pakistan's long-standing geostrategic depth in Afghanistan. As a result, significant concerns are already being raised regarding whether China's interim action could certainly endanger Pakistan's long term outlook and whether the consequences of this change are actually dire or just exaggerated. By performing a detailed investigation of official and community perceptive along with the opinions of policymakers, the dissertation intent to fully engage with these important concerns. It seeks to provide a sharp and perceptive long-term perspective on the viability of the strategic and geopolitical partnership between China and Pakistan, taking into accounts the many facets and intricacies of their interactions (Makhdoom et al., 2014).

Scholars and geopolitical analysts have long recognized Pak-China collaboration and their strategic relationship as the cornerstone of world relations. This relationship, which is frequently referred to as a "sacred cow," is extremely important and acknowledged for playing a crucial part in creating a long-lasting link that is described as "all-weather" friendships. Both countries have consistently supported and protected the broad aspects of this yaar-dost-yaran relationship throughout history. The Chinese pledge to denounce or retaliated any transnational threats or combative actions against Pakistan's judicial autonomy and geographical domain's integrity has been enthusiastically welcomed by Pakistan. On the other hand, India believes that China's large investment in Pakistan is a covert effort to undermine India's dominance in the region. The relationships between China, Pakistan, and the U.S, along with its Western allies, continue to inflict more and more significant obligation on Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries as global political dynamics change. Pakistan has unavoidably been forced by this intricate interaction to take China's interests and influence into account when making strategic decisions over Afghanistan (Rahman & Zafar, 2025).

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