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**Sino-Afghan Relations under the New Taliban  
Regime from the Perspective of Security  
and Economic Gains**

Bachelor's Thesis

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I declare that I have independently authored this thesis on “Sino-Afghan Relations under the new Taliban regime from the Perspective of Security and Economic Gains,” and have cited all sources and literature used in my work.

In Olomouc, 30.11. 2023

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## Introduction

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, officially the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), and the retreat of the United States' (US) forces from the country in August of 2021 have meant drastic changes for the IEA. Many states decided to recall their diplomatic missions for fear of their safety in the unstable environment, while the Taliban itself has taken control of only approximately 14<sup>1</sup> diplomatic missions abroad up until November 2023, replacing the former government's internationally recognised diplomats. No states recognise the new government outright, but some are friendlier to it than others, including the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China has hosted the regime's foreign ministers in Beijing and although the Taliban's restrictive laws prompted even the PRC to call for an easing of such restrictions, the new government's unwillingness to do so did not stop China from taking the relationship one step further. China is now the first and only country to have officially appointed an ambassador<sup>2</sup> to Kabul after the fall of the former government (Center for Preventive Action, 2023).

Observing the economic and security strategy of a state is key in understanding the motivations of a given actor. When it comes to the relationship between China and Afghanistan, both these factors play an important role. Afghanistan is considered pivotal in the Central Asian region as it provides a land bridge between Greater Central Asia's northern and southern parts and between the Middle East and Greater Central Asia as well (Starr, 2008, p.168). To achieve the "Chinese Dream"<sup>3</sup> and stay on the path of development, China is likely looking to expand its influence in Afghanistan for a multitude of reasons, the main ones appearing to be the long-term plans for an economic corridor with Pakistan, India and eventually Iran; an environment where China can profit from Afghanistan's untapped potential in terms of resources, and further situate itself in the region. Importantly, the CCP's legitimacy is largely dependent on continuous economic growth (Zhou, 2012, p. 128). The issue of China's external and internal security with connection to terrorist and extremist threats must also be considered as a valid reason for their dealings with the Taliban. According to the August 2022 report provided to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) by the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations and other International Organisations in Switzerland titled "Fight against Terrorism and Extremism in Xinjiang: Truth and Facts," as

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<sup>1</sup> The Taliban has sent diplomats to China, Iran, Turkey, Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Qatar, the consulate in Dubai and the UAE, and allegedly to Indonesia, Tajikistan, and other African countries (Associated Press, 2023; Putz, 2023; Siddique, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Zhao Xing presented his credentials to the Taliban's Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> *Chinese Dream* - Xi Jinping's policy of rejuvenating China, mentioned since 2012. There are different interpretations as to the definite meaning of the phrase, but it can be assumed it is meant as a general plan and ideology of furthering China's position and perception in the world, and in China itself (Mohanty, 2013).

many as several thousand terrorist attacks were carried out by religious extremists and terrorists between 1990 and 2016. This report was provided as a response to the OHCHR report on human rights abuses in Xinjiang [Xīnjiāng 新疆] province and in that vein, we cannot take all its claims at face value when it comes to the truthfulness and severity of the propagated acts.<sup>4</sup> However, it is still a notable admission of a terrorist threat on Chinese soil when it comes to looking at this issue from the perspective of security policy.

The main aim of this thesis is to look at the factors influencing China's decision to continuously maintain and develop relations with the Taliban after the fall of the former government. In this work, the motivations that may be governing the PRC's behaviour are limited to economic and security factors, more specifically Chinese investments in Afghanistan and security elements involving internal and external terrorist threats.

The following chapter introduces the methodology used to assess economic and security factors influencing China's approach to the Taliban, presents relevant hypotheses, and explains the subsequent structuring of chapters, as well as the review of the cited literature.

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International expressed concern that Uyghurs and Tibetans continue to be charged with "separatism" for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and maintaining their cultural identity (UN, 2018).

# 1 Methodology

The focus of this thesis are the different economic and security factors that may be influencing the PRC's position towards the Taliban's regime, and it endeavours to answer the following research question: *From an economic and security perspective, what are China's main objectives in dealing with the Taliban?* By analysing China's position, this thesis further investigates the question of *Does security hold greater value for China than economic factors when it comes to Afghanistan?* The first hypothesis **H1** states that "China's main reasons for relations with the Taliban are the perceived economic advantages." The alternative hypothesis **H2** then states that "China's internal and regional security concerns are of greater value than economic relations when it comes to its position on Afghanistan and the rule of the Taliban."

The methodology used to explore these objectives is a comparative analysis of China's economic and security strategies in and related to Afghanistan. Together with the multidimensionalism theory and a brief analysis of the concept of security, both of which are explained in the next chapter, comparative analysis allows this thesis to view the development of Sino-Afghan relations and the shift, or lack thereof, in China's priorities. By looking at Chinese investments in Afghanistan, major trade deals, and official PRC statements related to economic interests, it is then possible to compare these with security dialogues, Chinese security initiatives related to Afghanistan, and official statements, to ascertain whether there is more evidence to support H1 or H2.

As mentioned, the second chapter introduces the theory that is used to frame my hypotheses. Specifically, it makes use of David A. Baldwin's paper on the concept of security and his take on the theory of multidimensionalism in international relations, which allows for the specification of relevant research topics as well as to view the subject matter from the perspective of a multitude of actors.

The third chapter's focus then is the historical background of Sino-Afghan relations, where key events are briefly introduced, with more emphasis on the events after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, which prompted China to re-evaluate its position towards Afghanistan. The Doha Agreement is broached, and the Taliban's final takeover of Afghanistan in August of 2021 is also included in this chapter. The point is to explain the relevant events with the intention of understanding the change and reasoning behind the PRC's priorities over the years.

In addition, the economic and security factors, which are the key points of study here, are divided into two separate chapters, the fourth and fifth, with appropriate subchapters. As examples of economic determinants to be explored, the instances of investments in the Aynak

Copper Mine, the Amu Darya Basin, and the complex project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) were chosen. The security elements analysed are the effects of separatism in the Xinjiang region, the threats of terrorist organisations, and the dynamics in the region, with Pakistan being the main consideration.

Finally, this thesis works with the gathered information to present a cohesive overview to compare the relative value of economy vs. security for China in its relationship with the Taliban. The key objectives are highlighted in each chapter. After careful evaluation and comparison, a conclusion on whether the perspective of economy or security plays a larger role in the decision-making of the Chinese government regarding Afghanistan is drawn in the final chapter.

This topic was chosen for its relevance and place in current events, paired with my general interest in East Asian politics and the Middle East. As much as this topic is rewarding for its ongoing nature, it is challenging for that same reason. The limitation of my methods and literature is the fact that it has not been a long time since the events explored in this thesis took place, most are still in progress, making it difficult to reach definitive conclusions. There are not many academic books published on the current rule of the Taliban, so the majority of my literature comes from academic journals and articles written either before or after the takeover in 2021. Articles from sources such as the Journal of Political Studies; Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism; Journal of Public Affairs, and more were accessed on ProQuest, JSTOR, or found in paper form. Domestic articles and official statements of Chinese or Afghani officials also constitute a portion of my sources. Other literature includes books from authors such as Jan Marek, who was an associate professor at Charles University in Prague dealing mainly with Iran, South Asia, as well as Afghanistan. Toby Dodge, a British political scientist and expert on the Middle East is also cited via the book *Afghanistan: To 2015 and Beyond* together with Nicholas Redman, a professional in geopolitical security at the time working for the International Institute of Strategic Studies. An insightful look into the politics of Asia is offered thanks to the book put together by Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, which is a composition of interviews with the first Singaporean Prime Minister Li Kuan Yew (Li Guangyao). An additional limitation when discussing China's motivations is the lack of transparency, as sensitive meetings are not always publicised, whereas this thesis can only be built on publicly available source materials. The attempt here is to build on information from many different sources to offset this disadvantage as much as possible.



## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 The Concept of Security by David A. Baldwin

The theoretical background of this thesis makes use of David A. Baldwin's 1997 paper titled *The Concept of Security* and his further theories of multidimensionalism related to international relations and economy. David A. Baldwin is a prominent political scientist, currently a professor at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. *The Concept of Security* is a conceptual analysis providing a different point of view on the way we approach defining security. In international relations, there is not one singular definition of security that is universally agreed upon, as it usually depends on the theory pursued. Baldwin's work offers a new approach to defining security based on the type of research one plans to conduct. Baldwin cites and discusses positions of other influential authors and theorists of international relations, notably Kenneth Waltz, Barry Buzan, and Felix E. Oppenheim. Security is a key term that must be well defined, as misunderstandings in the meaning of basic concepts often lead to larger discrepancies; Oppenheim's argument here is that "the elucidation of the language of political science is by no means an exercise in semantics, but in many instances a most effective way to solve substantive problems of research" (Oppenheim, 1975, p. 284). With the help of Baldwin's approaches to defining security and his conceptual framework, this thesis expounds on what security means to China relative to the Taliban and uses these tools as the lens through which the dynamics between Afghanistan and China are explored.

Baldwin predicates that security as a concept is often neglected by scholars and offers several explanations as to why, including the lack of consensus on the proper definition. According to Baldwin, approaches undertaken by Barry Buzan or Richard Ullman lack a defining line between conceptual analysis and empirical observation pointing out that "If one has no concept of security, one cannot know whether one is threatened with losing it or not. Inquiry into the opportunity costs of security is an excellent way to determine the value of security, but it is no help at all in determining what security is." The questions of what security is and what the conditions for attaining it are fundamentally different. Logically, a conceptual definition must supersede the search for necessary conditions, given that identifying such conditions presupposes a concept of security (Baldwin, 1997, p. 8). Baldwin offers up inquiries that help specify the meaning of security based on the given research, "Both the number of dimensions in need of specification and the degree of specificity required will vary with the research task at hand... For purposes of systematic comparison of policy alternatives, the last

three specifications, i.e., means, costs, and time period, must be specified” (Baldwin, 1997, p. 17).

On one hand, this thesis hypothesizes that China values security above economy when it comes to Afghanistan and thus that is their primary objective when dealing with the Taliban, but what exactly is meant by security in this context? Very obviously, security and economy are interconnected. The economy in focus here could even be called “economic security,” since the topic of exploration is China’s investments in Afghanistan and their relevance to China’s internal position. So how can value be placed in “security” above “economy” without properly understanding what it means in this instance? Within Baldwin’s framework of multidimensionalism and conceptualization, in the context of Sino-Afghan relations and for the purposes of this thesis, “security” and “economy” are interconnected yet specific determinants. “Security” covers regional stability, given concerns over China’s territorial integrity with Uyghur separatists in Afghanistan and overarching terrorist threats, as well as the general regional balance. “Economy” is taken as a standalone determinant, centering around Afghanistan’s natural resources and its role in the China-Pakistan economic corridor. While security has the potential for extraordinary measures, economic interests reflect China’s long-term strategic regional development plans. Summarily, security in the Sino-Afghan context epitomizes China’s concerns for stability in the region, especially related to Uyghur separatists and other terrorist threats such as ISIS-K, particularly in the time after the Taliban’s takeover in 2021. The means for achieving it may be diplomatic, through counterterrorism measures, or even through economic development whereas the costs differ based on the means. The factor of economy, on the other hand, highlights Afghanistan’s important role in China’s broader economic ambitions. “Since security competes with other goals for scarce resources, it must be distinguishable from, yet comparable with such goals. This requires that the relative importance of security be left open rather than built into the concept in terms of ‘vital interests’ or ‘core values’,” (Baldwin, 1997, p. 24). Additionally, the point here is not to necessarily criticise the way security has been defined or approached by others, merely to highlight that to not prejudge the value of the concepts we are exploring relative to other goals, we should have a degree of specificity unique to the topic.

Using Baldwin’s multidimensional approach to international relations and security as the core theory means that essentially, this thesis is looking at the relationship between Afghanistan and China as not one governed by a singular purpose but as one multidimensional in nature, including not only security but economic and geopolitical aspects. The scope here is mainly focused on the development of Sino-Afghan relations after the fall of the Afghan government

and the Taliban takeover in August 2021 in relation to China's economic and security policies. As previously mentioned, the key hypotheses are that the Chinese government views security and their internal security concerns as a more valuable reason for their continuous presence in Afghanistan rather than economic gains, or alternatively that the key reasons for China's communication with the Taliban are the perceived economic advantages due to China's internal situation. Baldwin's framework allows me to look at this relationship from the perspectives of the involved states, as well as the broader regional system, which is discussed primarily in connection with Pakistan. The assumed value and related indicators of security and economic strength are likewise analysed, primarily through examples and exploration of Chinese investments in Afghanistan and the concept of security as it has been defined. Viewing these relationships from a multidimensional perspective allows for a greater understanding of the CCP's motivations. In this thesis, multidimensional theory, together with comparative analysis of the explored determinants offers the required frame and method to better understand China's position and the conditions influencing it.

### 3 Historical Background of Sino-Afghan Relations

The third chapter briefly introduces the situation and relations between China and Afghanistan from a historical perspective. To view today's developments between the Chinese government and the Taliban, the origins of their connection should first be explored, as well as the way the relationship was shaped under the former government. This section will not go into too much detail, as topic-specific historical background is offered in the corresponding chapters but will present a general overview to provide appropriate background knowledge. Through this short historical analysis, I aim to look for common traits and underlying patterns in the Chinese approach towards Afghanistan.

First diplomatic relations were established in 1955 and in 1960 the two countries even signed a Friendship and Mutual Non-Aggression Treaty, calling it the "New Silk Road." In 1963 they followed up with a border agreement where China abnegated its claims to the Wakhan Corridor<sup>5</sup> (Dai, 1966, p. 213; Qaiser, 1987, p. 56). More notable developments came in the 1970s when China provided support to Afghani mujahedeen resisting the Soviet invasion of 1979-89<sup>6</sup>. Attacks on Afghan land also came from the PRC's territory, perpetrated by ultra-leftist extremist groups. In 1979, with the help of the Maoist leadership, these groups formed a pro-Chinese Communist party of Afghanistan and began an armed resistance against the government in the north and east of the country. Their soldiers were trained and equipped in Xinjiang and Pakistan, whom China had strategically good relations with (Marek, 2021, p. 280).

Under Mohammad Daud Khan<sup>7</sup> who although initially supported by the Soviet Union (USSR) was trying to lessen their dependence on the country, Afghanistan became increasingly polarised. This division and subsequent events during the Soviet invasion allowed the militant groups on the outskirts to regroup and form a cohesive body with influence, as the mujahedeen became "the only viable opposition," for the people (Rubin, 2002). When the Afghan Civil War erupted amidst the Soviet's withdrawal from the country in 1989, China had more pressing internal issues<sup>8</sup> and chose not to officially engage, instead recalling its diplomats from Kabul (Rayaje, 2019, p. 125).

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<sup>5</sup> Located in the Badakhshan province (Afghanistan) it connects Afghanistan to Xinjiang and separates the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region (eastern Tajikistan) in the north, from Pakistan in the south.

<sup>6</sup> The Chinese aimed to be a counterweight to the Soviet communists, providing weapons against the Red Army. This type of engagement was already apparent in 1966 when they established Shola-e Jawid, a Maoist movement against the Soviet backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) (Ehsan, 2019, p. 125). The Chinese believed USSR wanted to control Afghanistan to open a land route through Iran and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean, gaining a foothold in Indochina (Qaiser, 1987, p. 58).

<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan's president from 1973 until his death during a communist coup in 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Tiananmen Square protests and massacre in April 1989.

### **3.1 Taliban's Rule Between 1996 - 2001**

On September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1996, the Taliban took control of Kabul and established its governance over nine-tenths of Afghanistan. After a long period of lawlessness, the perceived stability of the new regime was welcomed, gaining support for trying to remove corruption and even for the ban on opium poppy cultivation. Unfortunately, the positives were overshadowed by the establishment of an extremely harsh regime in line with the strictest ideas of fundamental Islam and the creation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, led by Mullah Muhammad Umar. The Taliban also began persecuting their enemies, including former communists (Marek, 2021, p. 288). Mullah Umar's extremely harsh backward rule was only acknowledged by three Islamic states: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; apart from Pakistan however, the latter two promptly severed any diplomatic ties again in 2001 (Marek, 2021, p. 290). China did not recognise the Taliban's government during this time period, but they had indirect communication channels through their ally Pakistan (Hong, 2013). This is a continuous pattern from the period of the Soviet invasion, as China never aimed for direct association with the Afghan mujahedeen, instead opting to work through US or Pakistani proxies (Dodge & Redman, 2011, p. 220).

### **3.2 China's Position after the Events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001**

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, were a turning point for Sino-Afghan relations, as China was able to slowly re-evaluate its stance of non-direct involvement in Afghanistan. "The war on terror," proclaimed by George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks in the US meant yet another period of turmoil for Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, had been taking refuge under the Taliban regime since 1996 after a forced expulsion from Sudan. Following the attacks, the Taliban faced diplomatic pressure to give up the terrorist organisation. Pakistan played an important role, as it had been a staunch supporter of the Taliban until some leaders began to realise the dangers the increasingly volatile regime influenced by al-Qaeda could pose for the Pakistani Pashtuns<sup>9</sup>. Pakistani recruits of the Taliban and emerging neo-Taliban parties had cross-border repercussions. Officially, the Western world, together with Pakistan, had decided to remove the uncooperative Taliban from power, and by the end of the year, a provisional government led by Hamid Karzai was established (Vogelsang, 2008, pp. 326–328; Rashid, 1999, p. 27).

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<sup>9</sup> Pashtuns are an ethnic group based in both Afghanistan and Pakistan; In Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces, along with tribal areas on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, the Pashtuns make up the second largest ethnic group, with 15% of the population, in the country (Yousaf, 2019). They comprise approx. 42% of the Afghan population (Puri-Mirza, 2022).

What followed was a great improvement in Sino-Afghan relations, with the relationship being officially more focused on the economic sphere (Hong, 2013). As a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation<sup>10</sup> (SCO), China had added opportunities to get more involved in the region through this connection. Afghanistan established contact with the SCO in 2005 through a Protocol on Establishment of a Contact Group, which gave it a chance for more association with the regional powers and China (Protocol on Establishment of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, 2005). Previously, China's main concern was safeguarding Xinjiang province from possible extremist spillover related to the Taliban and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement<sup>11</sup> (ETIM). Although China could have interfered, given the very real threats that the Xinjiang region was facing from across the border, in line with its policy of nonengagement in Afghanistan it chose not to. It helped that a "unified and friendly Afghanistan under a broad-based government has been the main concern of Pakistan since 1992," (Akhtar, 2008, p. 58). Even though the US stabilisation efforts in Afghanistan were beneficial for China, as they removed the conundrum of possible engagement and provided for relatively safe investment conditions, China did not wish to see the US in the region indefinitely. For this reason, the PRC preferred a multi-national coalition. This came to be in 2003 in the form of NATO/ISAF<sup>12</sup>, where the leadership of the US and Great Britain took control of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which had been present in Afghanistan since 2001 (Ludwig, 2015, p. 45).

According to some critics, since China contributed to ISAF neither with equipment nor funds, it was only using the environment provided by the US to exploit its position and gain a foothold in the bid for Afghanistan's natural resources (Downs, 2012, p. 65). This excludes the outlook of the rebuilding efforts, in which investment is a necessary tool. In 2010, during a conference on Afghanistan, China's foreign minister Yang Jiechi, referring to the period in 2002, said "In the after-war peace rebuilding of Afghanistan, China has been an active supporter, anticipator, and promoter," (Zhao, 2012, p. 1). As far as official development funds go, however, the Chinese contribution has been modest in comparison to those words. Based on data from the 2009 Donor Financial Review Report on the state of Afghanistan's assistance funds, China ranked 23<sup>rd</sup> with a pledge of \$197 million in the time frame from 2002-2013

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<sup>10</sup> An intergovernmental organisation founded by China and Russia in 2001. It focuses on regional security issues, fight against terrorism and regional development. Currently it comprises of eight members, four observer states (including Afghanistan since 2012), and six "Dialogue Partners," (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, n.d.).

<sup>11</sup> ETIM is further explored under Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> As a NATO-led mission, ISAF's primary objective "was to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists. From 2011, responsibility for security was gradually transitioned to Afghan forces, which took the lead for security operations across the country by summer 2013. The transition process was completed and Afghan forces assumed full security responsibility at the end of 2014, when the ISAF mission was completed," (NATO, 2022).

(Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Finance, 2009). The investments aimed at exploring Afghanistan's mineral wealth are an entirely different story, one that is further clarified in Chapter 4. For context, it was in 2007 and then in 2013, when China won the tender for investment into the Aynak Copper mine and launched the project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) respectively, that investments flowing into Afghanistan exponentially increased (Zhang, 2022; Small, 2014). The relative lack of assistance funds provided does not necessarily signify that Afghanistan, far from stable as it was, was not perceived as volatile and thus not a high-priority issue. China was simply cautious in its policy towards Afghanistan, preferring to ensure its needs through a long-standing partnership with Pakistan (Correspondents, 2015; Parveen & Shah, 2021, p. 2). It also does not mean that the CCP was unaware of Kabul's importance for their political, security, and economic interests, merely that they were not yet ready to prioritize this type of involvement. China was cognizant of the fact that Afghanistan could be a "testing ground for Beijing's regional strategy," and that any Chinese achievement would be proof of "the viability of Beijing's international governance model," (Rajaye, 2019, p. 136).

To summarize, the PRC's strategy was consistent with its post-Cold War stance of peaceful development and in accordance with the dynamics of regional geopolitics (Parveen & Shah, 2021, p. 2). Until about 2007, the bulk of investments was directed towards stabilisation with the hopes it would limit the export of extremism to Xinjiang, yet from that point onwards more emphasis was put on projects geared towards national economic interests (Ludwig, 2015, p. 47). "China gradually became the largest investor in Afghanistan, which became important for the development of bilateral relations," (Yongbiao, 2018, p. 284). There is a clear shift from a greater focus on security issues to an economically minded policy, which is in line with China's focus on using regional dynamics and natural resources to maximise its gains.

### **3.3 The Doha Agreement and the Taliban's Takeover in August 2021**

Leading up to the events of August 2021 Afghanistan had long been in a period of turmoil. The announcement of the US withdrawal in April of the same year only sped up the downfall of President Ashraf Ghani's<sup>13</sup> government. This information came on the tail of the Doha Agreement (or the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan), signed in February 2020 between the US and the Taliban. The Agreement was meant to bring an end to the war first started in 2001, while addressing four main areas; reducing violence, withdrawing foreign

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<sup>13</sup> Afghan President from 2014-2021.

troops, starting intra-Afghan negotiations, and guaranteeing Afghanistan won't again become a refuge for terrorists (Maizland, 2020). However, since the deal was not made with the Afghan government, there were problems regarding a pledge to release prisoners as then-president Ghani refused to cooperate (BBC News, 2020). Many others also criticised the deal; with Shaharзад Akbar, the chair of the Independent Afghan Human Rights Commission, saying "The general secrecy around the deal, the lack of presence of non-Taliban Afghans in the process, the fact that the US-Taliban talks seemed to marginalise other Afghan voices, all have made me anxious," (Graham-Harrison, Sabbagh, Makoi, & Borger, 2020). Assumed to have been a gesture of goodwill towards talks with the Taliban, Ghani did eventually agree to release the promised 5,000 prisoners over a period of time starting in March 2020, presupposing a reduction in violent attacks (Welna, 2020). Although talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban did begin after the Doha Agreement, the relationship was strained at best and did not amount to anything as fighting sporadically continued (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). This agreement is pivotal, as many agree it was the catalyst for the Taliban's takeover of the country. Noteworthy especially in light of US President Joe Biden's administration's decision to withdraw at a faster pace, effectively further destabilizing the already tumultuous situation (Martinez, Seyler, Kolinovsky, & Gomez, 2023).

The Taliban took over on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021, when their militants entered Kabul, whereas the last US troops left on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August. President Ghani fled the country and Taliban's leader Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada became the supreme leader of the IEA. Before the withdrawal was fully completed, on August 26<sup>th</sup> a suicide bomber detonated himself near the Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, killing 170 Afghans and 13 US service members. It was attributed to the terrorist organisation Islamic State-Khorasan Province<sup>14</sup> (ISIS-K), which has long been a threat to Afghanistan's stability (Seligman, Ward, Desiderid, Lippman, & Mcleary, 2021). The US drone attack conducted in response also killed several innocents (Jazeera, 2023). In the volatile situation propagated by the withdrawal, China has had to reconsider its priorities once again as the security guarantees it wants from Afghanistan can only be achieved on moderately friendly terms with the Taliban.

Covering its bases, China, aware of the impending likelihood of a change in leadership in Afghanistan, hosted a diplomatic delegation of the Taliban already in July 2021 (Johnson, 2021). Following this, in 2022 China allowed Taliban's representatives to occupy the embassy in Beijing, which some experts take as a *de facto* recognition of the regime, even if it has not

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<sup>14</sup> ISIS-K is investigated in Chapter 4.



yet been recognised *de jure* (Murtazashvili, 2022). In 2023 the relationship progressed even further in the diplomatic sense, for China was the first nation to officially appoint an ambassador to Kabul. Despite Afghanistan experiencing economic decline, inflation, drastic rise in poverty, near-collapse of the national health system, and the exclusion of women and girls from public life, China still expresses its intention to work with Afghanistan on economic matters (Stefan, 2023; Johnson, 2021). According to Feng Zhang, a Professor of International Relations at Guangzhou University in China, since the withdrawal Beijing has created a new engagement policy towards Afghanistan made up of “pragmatically and cautiously accepting the Taliban’s dominance in Afghan affairs, preventing the re-emergence of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists, facilitating an inclusive politics in the country, demonstrating a greater degree of humanitarian concern, and shaming the US and the West for forfeiting their responsibility,” (Zhang, 2022). Afghanistan’s role in securing China’s borders and stability in Xinjiang, as well as its economic value, are factors influencing this policy. The Taliban has also joined a high-profile conference on The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in October 2023, which included talks of the CPEC being extended through Afghanistan (Yawar & Greenfield, 2023). It is clear the relationship between China and the Taliban is twofold, focused on both mercantilist ideas and security guarantees. These aspects are presented in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

## 4 Economic factors

Johnston and Trautwein (2019) view China's economic strategy position as one of peaceful development, guided by the model of a socialist market economy characterised by state and privately-owned businesses and strict government regulation. Afghanistan has great, mostly untouched, reserves of mineral wealth including copper and other valuable metals such as lithium (Ruttig, 2023). In a statement titled "China's Position on the Afghan Issue," published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in April 2023, China expresses its support towards reconstruction and economic development in Afghanistan saying it "supports Afghanistan's integration into regional economic cooperation and connectivity that will transform Afghanistan from a *land-locked country* to a *land-linked country*." China needs to be mindful of its surroundings because without resources such as nickel or petroleum, its development will stagnate (Allison, Blackwill, & Wyne, 2012, p. 11). Having a foothold in Afghanistan plays into China's long-term plans for securing strategic resources, including involving the country in its CPEC initiative.

First, this Chapter offers a look at Chinese investments in general and what apparent purpose they may serve, as well as a brief explanation of the role and line separating the CCP and the enterprises taking part in these investments. Additionally, a succinct overview of the economic situation in Afghanistan is presented. The main cases that are then investigated are the investments into the Aynak Copper Mine, the Amu Darya Basin, and the project of the CPEC.

### 4.1 Chinese Investments

"A key factor in China's approach to Afghanistan is the question of access to natural resources, seen as a prerequisite for sustaining strong economic growth rates vital to ensuring China's internal stability," (Dodge & Redman, 2011, p. 225). Access to such resources is most easily gained through investment opportunities. It is primarily the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC), China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), Jiangxi Copper Company Limited (JCCL), and the Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC) that have relevant stakes in these investments. Due to China's unique position in the region and its willingness to invest, Chinese companies have had an easier time winning important tenders e.g., the Aynak Copper mine tender won by MCC in 2007, which was worth an estimated \$2.87 billion (Synovitz, 2012; Peter, 2011; "Chinese Firms Win Afghanistan Copper Mine Bid," 2007). State ownership is also a consideration in such bids, as these types of companies

have lower costs of inputs and capital than private sector competitors, enjoy a greater deal of diplomatic support, and are more risk-resistant (Downs, 2012, p. 74; NG, 2010 p. 7). Additionally, as stated in a World Bank document on “Mineral Resource Tenders and Principles Guiding Mining Infrastructure Projects,” governments (especially those of developing states) seek comprehensive packages of contributions from mining companies to ensure broader economic impact (Stanley & Mikhaylova, 2011, p. 10). Afghanistan cannot survive on humanitarian aid alone thus their own resources must be tapped and used, in order for the country to develop. Chinese President Xi Jinping claims China’s goals are to support multilateral trade, international and economic cooperation, increase imports, promote the BRI, and advance economic globalization (Hui, 2018). There is a question of how much involvement the Chinese state, a major shareholder or sole owner of these companies,<sup>15</sup> has in the decisions to participate in the Afghanistan projects. It is, however, clear that the CCP has a stake in these operations. In both Chinese private corporations and state-owned enterprises, the Party organizations are established to “implement the Party’s principles and policies, guide and oversee,” (Francia, 2020, p. 189). The goal is to adopt the big picture of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Xi Jinping also said that “State-owned enterprises are an important material and political foundation for socialism with Chinese characteristics, and an important pillar and reliance for the party to govern and rejuvenate the country,” (Renmin ribao [People’s Daily], 2023).

A report published in October 2022 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Afghanistan, expressed the economic situation is substandard on almost all fronts.

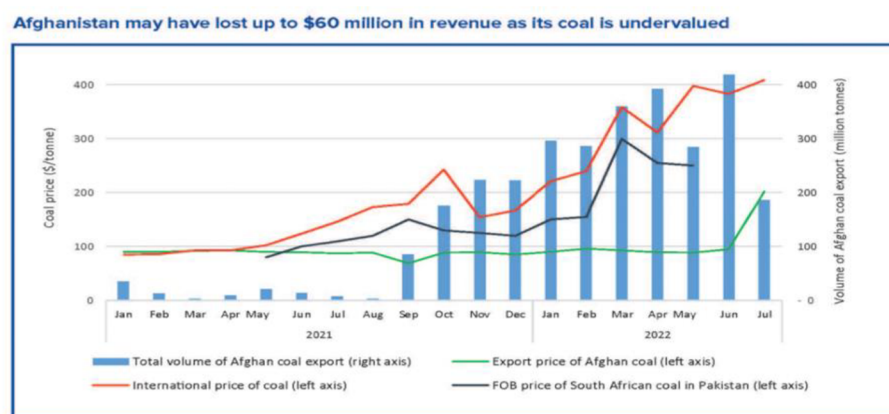


Figure 1: Afghanistan may have lost up to \$60 million in revenue in 2022 (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Afghanistan, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> MCC is a state-owned enterprise (Reuters, 2021); JCCL is a regional state-owned enterprise (“Global Trade Alert,” 2021); CNPC is a state-owned company (China National Petroleum Corporation, 2018). It is unclear what the ownership distribution of CAPEIC is, as the company was restructured from a former Xinjiang oilfield branch of the CNPC. Information indicates it now works somewhat independently, but it is necessary to note Chinese private companies (if that is the case with CAPEIC) are called upon to conduct their operations in line with governmental objectives and ideologies and are closely linked with the CCP especially in fields of importance such as oil and gas, and full independence is not realistic (CAPEIC n.d.; Olson, 2020).

As shown in *Figure 1* titled “Afghanistan may have lost up to \$60 million in revenue as its coal is undervalued,” Afghanistan has not been able to benefit from the global increase in coal prices due to its lack of structural security and the difficulties with money transfers. Not only have all the ministries in Afghanistan lost technical advisors between 2021-2022, but the sanctions imposed on international payments and freezing of foreign assets mean an ongoing increase in reliance on cash and *hawala*<sup>16</sup> payments. This does not bode well for the overall stability of the economic system and the possibility of a more functional infrastructure system. It is improbable for Afghanistan to stabilize without international aid combined with internal economic growth and as explained, humanitarian aid alone is unlikely to be enough (Ryan Teston, Konyndyk, Ferguson, & Heffron-Casserleigh, 2022, p. 115; Faqeerzai & Samad, 2020). Despite having an estimated \$1 trillion worth of mineral deposits according to a US Geological Survey, Afghanistan is unable to tap these resources on its own (Choi, 2014). The previous government’s extraction deals and their lack of fruition indicate a myriad of problems, some of which are still not fully resolved, such as the lack of viable infrastructure, corruption, and security concerns (previously the Taliban insurgency, now terrorist organisations such as ISIS-K or ETIM) (O’Donnell, 2022).

Afghanistan’s long-term economic stability is largely dependent on cooperation with regional forces, namely China, which the Taliban considers to be its “main partner,” in the task of rebuilding the country (Seçkin, 2021). The Taliban government sees Chinese investments and their incorporation into China’s regional projects as vital for their overall interests and immediate needs. China is aware that good relations with its neighbours aid its own development and goals, internal as well as regional. Investing in Afghanistan is by no means an altruistic project for China, but an amalgamation of its interests. Access to resources would fuel China’s own economic growth, where improved infrastructure would then improve connectivity and facilitate further development (Khan, 2015).

#### **4.1.1 Aynak Copper Mine**

The Mes Aynak, or the Aynak Copper Mine, is a site located some 40 km from the capital Kabul in the Logar Province. Per the Afghan Ministry of Mines and Petroleum’s (MoMP) information, it is the second-largest copper deposit in the world and so in turn a potential source of vast income (“Mes Aynak | Ministry of Mines,” n.d.). Several factors have historically

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<sup>16</sup> A traditional system of informal money transfers, used mainly in Muslim countries, that is based on trust. The *hawaladars* (money brokers) hold deposits, offer loans, and make international payments on behalf of traders. The government tolerates this unlicensed brokerage because it facilitates the much-needed flow of money. Although it can also be used for money laundering, with international banks and companies avoiding transactions with traders for fear of non-compliance with sanctions, it can often be the only way for traders to pay for imports (UNDP Afghanistan, 2022; Jost, Sandhu, United States Department of the Treasury, & INTERPOL/FOPAC, 2016).

complicated the extraction of resources from the mine, some of the most relevant being the lack of infrastructure and the fact the site is an ancient archaeological complex. A Buddhist monastic complex<sup>17</sup>, devotional galleries, and a number of sculptures dating back to the Bronze Age (3000 B.C.E.) can be found, which is in part why large-scale mining has yet to take place in the area (World Bank Group, 2013).

After winning the 2007 tender with a bid of \$3.4 billion, MCC signed the deal in 2008, granting them the right to develop the mine for 30 years. It was estimated this would bring in about 10,000 jobs and be the most profitable business venture in Afghanistan's history (Bailey, 2010; Stanley & Mikhaylova, 2011, p. 45; Fazl-E-Haider & Hope, 2023). The deal also stipulated that the MCC would, at its own expense, construct both a railway associated with the project and a four-hundred-megawatt coal-fired powerplant, as well as pay the government a premium totaling some \$808 million (Zhao, 2012, p. 6). These arrangements turned out to be unprofitable and somewhat unrealistic for the Chinese company. Particularly the delay due to archaeological mapping and the decline of world copper prices became obstacles in the mine exploration. Although the mining was expected to start within six years of signing the deal to allow for the necessary infrastructure to be developed, the security situation had, in that time, gotten progressively worse with the Taliban insurgency gaining traction (Noorzai, 2023; Byrd, 2017; Synovitz, 2012). The contract specified that wars, insurrections, epidemics, or even acts of God or public enemy could be reasonably construed as reasons for halting operations or postponement of the project. This gave the MCC leeway for holding off commencement of the project despite Parts X and XI of the contract stipulating operations could not be halted for longer than six months, and that commercial production was required to begin within 60 months of the contract date (Mining Contract for the Aynak Copper Deposit, 2008, pp. 33–34). Renegotiating the deal would have opened China up to criticism and potential competition, a rather undesirable possibility, and so the project stalled. Influenced by allegations of corruption and mismanagement it could not live up to the expectations of the previous government. The looming exit of US troops from Afghanistan and the worsening security situation in the fraught Logar province also likely caused the MCC's reluctance to mobilize more capital and personnel. Many consider it to be a failed investment given the project was abandoned in 2014 (A. U. Khan, 2023; O'Donnell, 2021; Yongbiao, 2018, p. 288; Downs, 2012, p. 78).

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<sup>17</sup> The Buddhas of Bamiyan, a holy site for Buddhists and a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, were destroyed on Mullah Omar's orders by the Taliban in 2001. This destruction could be an added factor for the carefulness with handling the ruins in Mes Aynak (Noorzai, 2023).

Since the Taliban retook power, it has been in their interest to attract Chinese investors to take up the project mantle once again. While the original contract was never officially terminated and the Taliban is keen on China restarting the project, the situation is not so simple (Fazl-E-Haider & Hope, 2023). The new government received recommendations for a smoother extraction process, one that would consider the need for prudence when it comes to preserving Afghanistan's cultural heritage. Noor Agha Noori, former director of Afghanistan's Institute of Archaeology said "The central part of the mine should be extracted via underground mining to preserve the ancient city," (Noorzai, 2023). Open-pit extraction is more likely to put the artifacts present at risk, but the Chinese are reluctant to consider the other option as it is noticeably more costly (Geranpayeh, 2023). Any substantive discussions of restarting the project have been few and far between. Even though the former Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan Wang Yu ascertained that talks were indeed ongoing regarding the Mes Aynak mining project in 2022, no specifics were divulged apart from the need for a deal with more equal returns (Shah, 2022).

The Mes Aynak Copper Mine remains a prospective economic venture, but it is unclear what will become of it in the near future. There is also a modicum of mistrust between the Taliban and the Chinese regarding this project due to the history of unfulfilled promises and instability. In 2021, individual Chinese businessmen attempted to involve themselves in the Afghan mining industry but were instead faced with uncertainty from the Afghan government, as it is reported the Minister of Minerals and Petroleum had changed several times only since August 2021 (Fazl-E-Haider & Hope, 2023). Likewise, China does not need to immediately, unnecessarily, burden itself with a project that could take several years to be viable given the predictions for how long it might take to secure the archaeological site (Geranpayeh, 2023). China is one of the world's largest consumers of copper, using it to fuel its economic growth and as an essential component in renewable energy innovation, including the export of solar panels and electric vehicles (Blumenthal, Purdy, & Bassetti, 2022). However, China has more convenient options for mineral extraction, such as Argentina, Chile, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Zambia (Trakimavičius, 2021). While it is clear China is unwilling to hand the Mes Aynak project to anyone else and is keen on enjoying the mineral resources Afghanistan is rich with, it does not feel a sense of urgency to settle for unfavourable terms.

#### **4.1.2 Amu Darya Basin**

Afghanistan's oil and natural gas deposits are concentrated in the north of Afghanistan in the Afghan-Tajik Basin and the Amu Darya Basin, which is the object of study here. The Amu

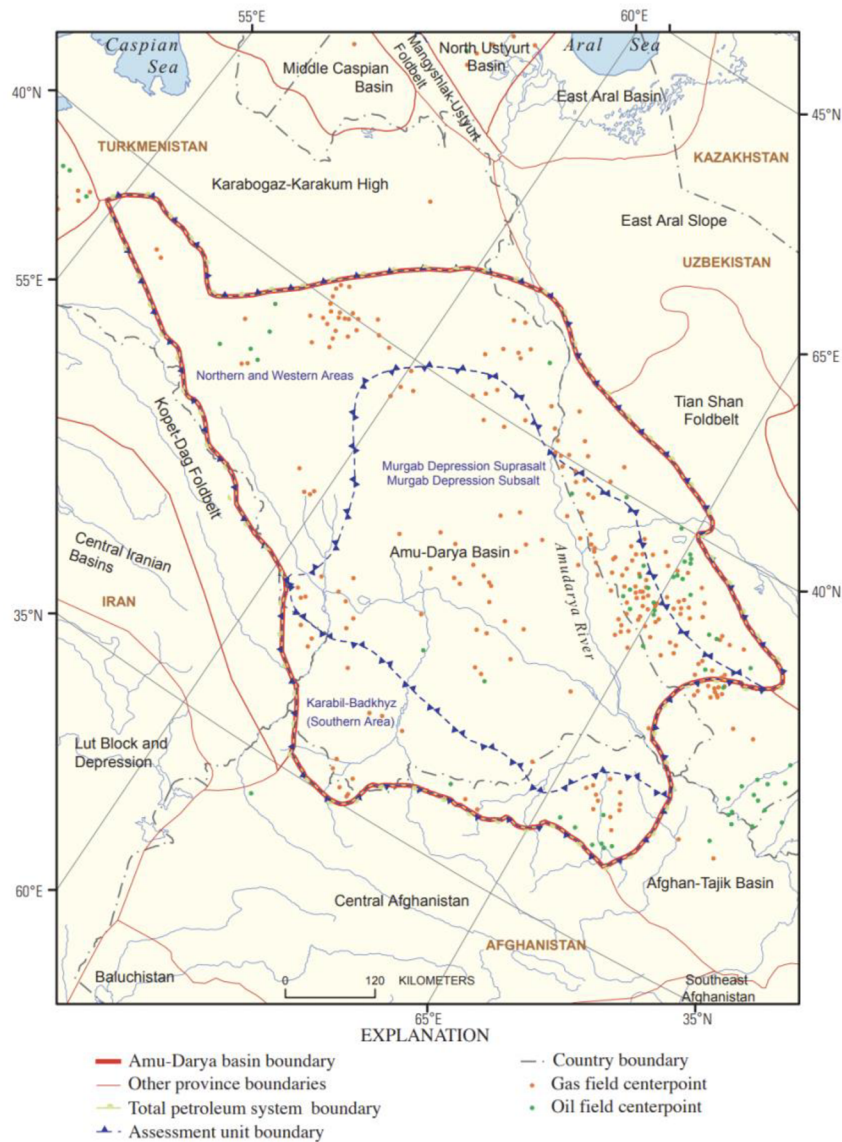


Figure 2: The total petroleum system and assessment of the Amu Darya Basin, also showing the Afghan-Tajik Basin (Ulmishek, 2004)

Darya Basin is a sedimentary, hydrocarbon basin in Central Asia spanning the areas of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Iran, and northern Afghanistan. The province is incredibly rich with sources of petroleum and natural gas, with the mean value of total assessed resources being approximately 164 trillion cubic feet of gas and 4 billion barrels of petroleum liquids, most of it condensate (Ulmishek, 2004, p. 2; Klett et al., 2012). Figure 2 shows the extent of the Amu Darya Basin, as well as the boundary where the US geological survey was conducted. Notably, the estimated “undiscovered, but technically recoverable,” resources of the Amu Darya Basin amount to some additional 962 million barrels of crude oil, 52 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 582 million barrels of natural gas (Klett et al., 2012). These numbers do not all pertain solely to the area belonging to Afghanistan, but Northern Afghanistan alone is thought to contain more than 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas,

and 500 million barrels of natural liquids gas (Klett, Ulmishek, Wandrey, Agena, & Steinshouer, 2006). In Afghanistan, the basin is located in the Faryab and Sar-e-Pul provinces and it is there that China was awarded the project for developing the Kashkari, Bazarkhami, and Zamarudsay oil blocks in 2011 (Mehrad, Zvolinski, Kapralova, & Niazmand, 2020; Harooni, 2011).

CNPC, together with their local Afghan partner Watan Oil & Gas, agreed to invest \$600 million to develop the three oil blocks in the basin, approximated to hold 87 million barrels of oil, in a deal poised to last 25 years (Wishnick, 2011, p. 135; Shalizi, 2012; BBC News, 2011). The overall details of the deal were quite favourable for the Afghan government, as the CNPC agreed to “pay a 15 percent royalty on oil, a 20 percent corporate tax and give up to 70 percent of its profit from the project to the Afghan government,” (Shalizi, 2012). The Afghan government expected to make at least \$7 billion throughout the contract with an oil price of \$100 per barrel (Hargreaves, 2011; Downs, 2012, p. 77).

The practical work and first oil extractions began in 2012 but the output was less than 2000 b/d [barrels per day] due to the lack of a proper export sales contract and the fact that the CNPC failed to construct an oil refinery as per the original contract (Mackenzie, 2023; Hashimy, 2023, p. 452). With a lack of a proper refinery, Afghanistan’s reliance on trade agreements with its neighbours only increased, but the initial expectation was that such a refinery would take three years to build (Donati, 2013). Whether the CNPC had any actual plans to build the refinery remains unknown as complications began to pile up. The project suffered an attack in 2012, the plan for refining the oil in Turkmenistan and conditions of an export deal with Uzbekistan became problematic in 2013, and eventually, drilling was halted in 2014 because of budgeting disputes between the CNPC and Watan Oil & Gas (Renaud, 2014, p. 5; Andersen & Yang, 2018, p. 24; Daly, 2021). Similarly, as with the Aynak Copper Mine, the Amu Darya investment turned out to be full of empty promises. It is unclear when exactly CNPC pulled out of Afghanistan fully, but some sources say the previous government terminated the contract in 2017 (Amu TV, 2023). An annual report of the MoMP published in 2019 mentions a need for revision of the project and the failure of a “Contractor” to do so. This contractor is said to have received termination notices and subsequently offered to sell their shares of the project through proposals. There is mention of Watan Gas & Oil and “GI Technology,” where GI Technology could be assumed to be the Beijing-based international oilfield service company (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2019, p. 20). Taliban’s Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar said in January 2023 that another Chinese company, apart from CNPC, discontinued extraction after the fall of



the previous government, making the likelihood of CNPC's early disengagement higher (Jazeera, 2023a).

January 2023 marked the signing of a new extraction contract between CAPEIC and the Taliban, the first major deal and a perceived economic victory for the Taliban government. This new 25-year venture will allow CAPEIC to extract oil from a 4,500 km area in northern Sar-e-Pul, Faryab, and Jawzjan provinces and give the Taliban a 20% partnership with a possible increase of up to 75% over the years (Jazeera, 2023a). Over the first three years, CAPEIC has pledged to invest \$150 million a year in exploratory endeavours, which, although a small-scale investment, has the potential to grow to around \$540 million and comes at a time when no other investments<sup>18</sup> are readily flowing into Afghanistan, making it that much more significant for the Taliban.<sup>19</sup> This business deal is another factor some experts claim is a sign of a *de facto* recognition from Beijing towards the Taliban government, though no state has yet recognised the regime *de jure* (Samad & TRT World Now, 2023; Taneja, 2023; Reuters 2023). China, in line with its official policy of non-engagement in the internal affairs of sovereign states,<sup>20</sup> did not let the human rights situation in Afghanistan be an obstacle to the advancement of Beijing's goals.

London-based economist Darya Khan Baheer has expressed that the deal is tipped in favour of the Chinese, citing the contract's technical issues and its non-alignment with Afghan laws and principles (Hamza, 2023). The contract does however include a stipulation wherein if CAPEIC does not deliver promised materials within a year, the deal falls through (TVP World, 2023). The unfavourable political conditions of the past translate into the careful positioning of China in Afghanistan through this deal. Significantly, this deal was signed during a time of increased terrorist activity, also aimed at Chinese nationals, which may have been a contributing factor. Beijing is set on following its own regional and international agenda and if successful, the Amu Darya venture could provide China with additional economic growth and become a stepping stone for the involvement of Afghanistan in the BRI and CPEC (Airan & Rahimi, 2022, p. 14; EFSAS, 2023).

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<sup>18</sup> Taliban's policies aimed at women, together with a bad state of the economy have exacerbated their isolation (UNDP, 2023)

<sup>19</sup> If the Taliban is able to handle this project well, it could open the door for new investments coming not only from China, but Turkey, Pakistan, or even Arab states (Samad & TRT World Now, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Most importantly related to the assumption of reciprocity in this matter (Li, 2019).

## 4.2 The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has been hailed as the flagship project of Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative<sup>21</sup> (also called the New Silk Road) since it was announced in 2013 (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky 2023; Fan, 2023). This estimated \$62–65 billion strategy is a sum of projects set on connecting western China's Khunjerab to Pakistan's Gwadar port in the Balochistan Province, and then further to the Arabian Sea through a series of roads, railways, and pipelines. CCP's likely hope for the CPEC is to gain access to the Indian Ocean through Gwadar port. Access to Gwadar port would among other benefits alleviate the dependence on maritime travel through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow stretch of water between Malaysia and Singapore that has experienced an increase in piracy in 2023 (Andersen & Jiang, 2018, p. 20; Sacks, 2021; Storey, 2006; Crossley, 2023). In a letter written on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the CPEC, Xi Jinping said, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has become a vivid interpretation of the all-weather friendship between China and Pakistan," (Xinhua, 2023). Nice words do not change the fact that Pakistan is in a deep economic crisis at the moment and not even CPEC investments have managed to bring about an economic turnover (Fazl-E-Haider, 2023; Shahbaz, 2023). While Pakistan did benefit from improved infrastructure thanks to the CPEC, the initiative has also been marked by stalled projects, corruption, and terrorist attacks (Sacks, 2021).

Additionally, although rhetoric from key actors makes the implementation seem rather simple, there are numerous challenges facing the plans for the corridor. One such challenge is India's criticism of the CPEC, as it's supposed to pass through the Khunjerab Pass,<sup>22</sup> part of the Pakistan-administered section of Kashmir<sup>23</sup>. China has long since employed the use of the People's Liberation Army to perform joint patrols with Pakistani forces to safeguard the area, but the number of security forces would likely increase if it came to the inclusion of Afghanistan in the CPEC (Panda, 2023).

The idea of including Afghanistan in the BRI, and by extension the CPEC, has been present since China signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Afghanistan in 2016, intending to foster various methods of cooperation (Qi, 2018; Ruttig, 2023, p. 11). The original

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<sup>21</sup> The BRI is Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy meant to create a connection between China and Europe through investment and infrastructure. It now also includes Southeast Asia, North Africa, and Latin America. As an economic initiative, it is meant to help Chinese companies grow and obtain strategic assets. As a foreign policy initiative, it is meant to strengthen diplomatic ties and promote a multipolar world order (Andersen & Jiang, 2018, p. 19).

<sup>22</sup> The Khunjerab Pass is a major trade route between Pakistan and China, connecting Pakistan's Karakorum highway with southwestern China. The border crossing was opened again in early 2023 after three years of closure due to Covid-19, boosting economic relations (The Express Tribune, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> India claims the ownership of the region of Kashmir in its entirety. Negotiation over Kashmir could prove to be more difficult with the CPEC, but China wants to avoid building on disputed territory and has been pressing Pakistan to strengthen its control (Asoori, 2020; Sacks, 2021).

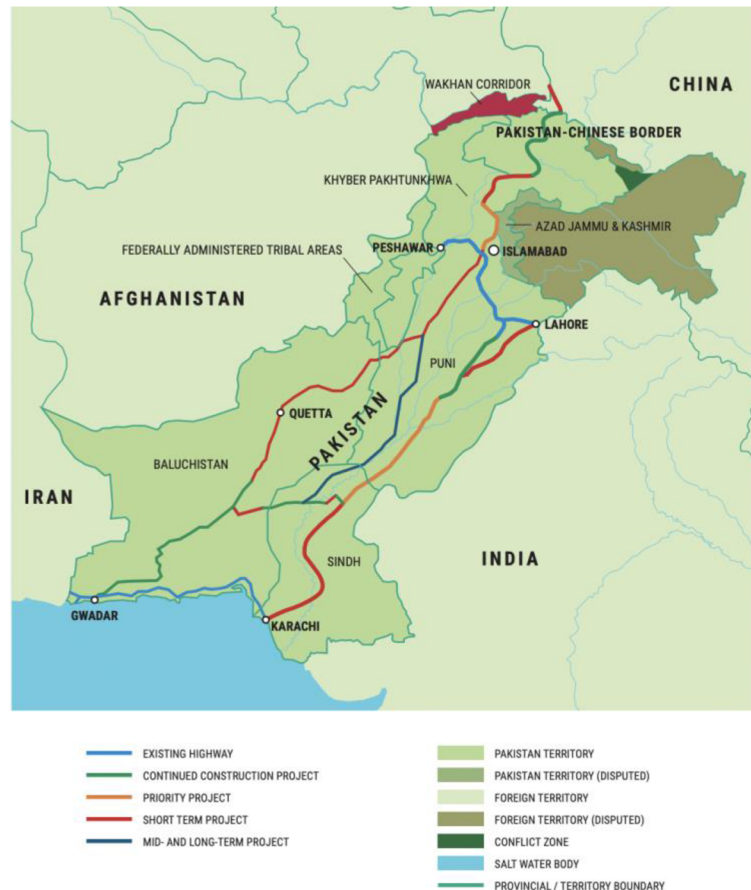


Figure 3: Map of the CPEC (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Afghanistan would be joined through the Wakhan Corridor in the northeast.

Silk Road, which led to China through Afghanistan, encouraged a mutually beneficial relationship between the two states, allowing China to profit from access to the West and giving Afghanistan the role of an important trading channel (Hashimy, 2023, p. 451). Afghanistan’s current involvement in the CPEC may not be as auspicious as the Silk Road of the past but for the present-time Taliban, any hope for reviving the economy is greatly welcomed (Shekhawat, 2023). That is why on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023, during the fifth China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Foreign Minister’s Dialogue meeting, the foreign ministers agreed on advancing the Belt and Road cooperation and introducing an extension of the CPEC into the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2023b). The attendance of the Taliban’s acting Minister for Commerce and Industry, Haji Nooruddin Azizi, at the October 2023 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing further cemented this plan as discussions presently continue (Yawar & Greenfield, 2023). Figure 3 shows the planned outlook of the CPEC, it is expected that the Afghan portion would pass through the Wakhan corridor. The connection with the Wakhan corridor in the northeast, Tajikistan in the north, and Pakistan in the south would provide Pakistan with “the shortest route to Central Asia via Afghanistan,” and facilitate China’s access to Central Asia (Kizilay, 2023).

For Pakistan, the new cooperation on the CPEC may also prove a useful tool to get Afghanistan's Taliban to reduce their support for the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) (Kuo, 2023). However, the Pakistani Minister of Interior Rana Sanaullah's dissatisfaction over the actions of TTP militants in Pakistan and the Taliban's perceived lacklustre response, hint at a deeper level of distrust between the two states and means cooperation will be no easy task (Shekhawat, 2023; Rahmati, 2023). For China, the new Taliban and all projects associated with it pose both an opportunity and a threat. Pakistan, for one, is believed to have an extensive network of proxies and spies in Afghanistan and despite the "iron brotherhood" between China and Pakistan, the latter has its own independent policy related to the Taliban and the United States. The inclusion of Afghanistan into the CPEC could alleviate some concerns over tension with Pakistan through a heightened level of influence (Standish & Aand, 2021; Li, 2023). The economic advantages of working together on the CPEC for China and Afghanistan only seem manageable under a stable security situation (Hashimy, 2023, p. 452). Economically, it is clear China's approach to Afghanistan and the CPEC would have Pakistan at the centre with both countries cooperating, as China has so far not gained much from Afghanistan in this regard. China's position as a mediator between Afghanistan and Pakistan has also further enhanced its role in the region (Taneja, 2023; Kuo, 2023).

Despite the various obstacles and difficulties facing all the projects discussed under Chapter 4, China seems determined to forge a deeper, "mutually beneficial," relationship with the Taliban. This determination may seem like Beijing using investments as leverage through which it plans to address its larger geopolitical, structural, and security concerns and prove its belief of achieving security through economic development (Blumenthal et al., 2022; Kuo, 2023).

## **5 Security Factors**

Security in this thesis is viewed as China's concern for stability considering the conflicts caused by Uyghur separatists in the Xinjiang region, terrorist organisations such as ETIM with ties to al-Qaeda, and regional instability involving Pakistan. Islamic terrorism has been a general threat since the 1970s, but it seems it will not be going anywhere anytime soon. The role of non-radical Muslims is key in balancing out the rise of radical Islamism, wherein Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan, have important roles (Allison et al., 2012, pp. 80–81). At one point “more than 100,000 foreign Muslim radicals were directly influenced by the Afghan jihad,” and camps in both Afghanistan and Pakistan served as breeding grounds for pan-Islamic radicals (Rashid, 1999, pp. 31–32). With the Taliban's takeover, it becomes a question of whether the new government will be able to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists and how this will affect China. Pakistan is relevant due to its connection to the activities of ETIM and ISIS-K and its inability to successfully deal with recent attacks on its soil, causing more tension with Afghanistan (Seldin, 2023).

The discussion in this chapter focuses on the perceived threats and the means China employs to deal with them. Specifically, the Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang, the role of ETIM and the Taliban's promises in this context, as well as Afghanistan's current role in the region associated with al-Qaeda, the TTP, and ISIS-K, and what this may mean for China. The first subchapter looks at the situation in Xinjiang and groups that may pose a danger to China in this regard but are associated with the Taliban, whereas the next subchapter presents the regional dynamics with attention on those opposed to the Taliban.

### **5.1 Separatism in Xinjiang and Related Terrorist Affiliates**

Xinjiang, Uyghur Autonomous Region is China's largest province, sharing its borders with Russia, Mongolia, Tibet Autonomous Region, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, the disputed territory of Kashmir, and Afghanistan (BBC News, 2023; Hsieh & Falkenheim, 2023). The separatist tendencies of the Uyghurs, China's largest Turkic ethnic group and largest [Muslim] minority, first took a violent turn during the Baren uprising in 1990. The justifications given for their goal of creating a separate Uyghur state (Uyghuristan or East Turkistan) are of an ethnic and religious nature (Davis, 2008). To suppress these tendencies China has implemented both the use of force and various policies aimed at reformation and restriction of freedoms associated, in Beijing's view, with dangerous extremism. High officials, like Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, have said that “Xinjiang-related issues are in essence about countering violent terrorism and separatism,” (Wang & Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's

Republic of China, 2021). The 2022 report by the OHCHR on human rights abuses in Xinjiang presents accounts of internment camps (“Vocational Education and Training Centres” or so-called re-education camps in the Chinese view), restrictions of religious freedoms, and many other severe violations of human rights, which China either refuses to acknowledge or emphasizes the threat of Uyghur terrorism and Beijing’s conduct being in line with the rule of law in place of an explanation. A Chinese publication responding to the OHCHR report further justified the measures by highlighting various cases of violence attributed to terrorism and extremism<sup>24</sup> (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2022; Information Office of the People’s Government, 2022). By China’s own admittance, for example through the words of the Chinese Ambassador to Liberia H.E. Ren Yisheng, “There have been no more terrorist attacks in the Xinjiang region for five consecutive years since 2017,” (Ren, 2022).

The CCP is using the policies applied in Xinjiang to both exert control over the population and suppress any dissent related to separatism. All this leads to the idea that today’s Beijing may be more conscious about possible spillover of violent extremism from Afghanistan, which could in turn aggravate the internal situation. Furthermore, there is the emerging suggestion of building a second capital in Xinjiang. In China’s view, a second capital would ease the strain of an economic thrust westward from Beijing and help end the historical “preconception” of Xinjiang being the Uyghur’s homeland. This once again makes Afghanistan an important component in guaranteeing stability (Chen, 2023; Ablet, 2023).

### **5.1.1 Al-Qaeda and ETIM**

China has long claimed that terrorists linked to the “anti-China” ETIM use camps set up in Afghanistan to wage cross-border terrorism (Gul, 2023). In early 2021, the previous Afghan government’s forces dismantled an alleged Chinese spy cell operating, according to Afghan officials, with the purpose of using the Haqqani<sup>25</sup> network to infiltrate Uyghur groups operating in Afghanistan (Standish & Aand, 2021). This shows that China continues to view spillover as a very real threat. Both the Doha Agreement signed with the US and “China’s Position on the Afghan Issue” ask the Taliban to commit to stopping activities of groups such as al-Qaeda, ETIM, and TTP, as the former Taliban’s regime previously accommodated Uyghur terrorists

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<sup>24</sup> The OHCHR report states that the distinction of what constitutes minor or serious acts of “terrorism” and “extremism” is unclear, as is the classification of cases based on “gravity,” creating too broad of a scope that is liable to arbitrary and subjective application of the law (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> The Haqqani network is a Pakistan-backed Islamist group linked to the Taliban operating in Afghanistan. Under the current Taliban several of its members hold cabinet positions. In the 2000s it was responsible for many of the highest profile attacks in Afghanistan and is considered a terrorist group under Interpol (“Haqqani Network (HQQN),” n.d.; Nctc, 2022).

and let them join al-Qaeda affiliated camps (Subh, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023; Zhang, 2022, p. 4). Despite initial hopes, Afghanistan two years after the takeover does not seem to be doing too well on that front and is allegedly “turning into a cauldron for terrorist activity,” (Seldin, 2023). The UN Sanctions Monitoring Team's report indicates that al-Qaeda has set up training camps in Afghanistan and their relationship with the Taliban is progressing in a symbiotic manner, with al-Qaeda members gaining advisory roles in the Taliban's security structures (Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2023, p. 14). Although senior US officials reportedly refuted this information, they have done so anonymously and many of their claims (such as that al-Qaeda was weakened by the withdrawal of the US) do not hold up very well<sup>26</sup> (Ignatius, 2023; Byman, 2023). Naturally, al-Qaeda does not currently pose a threat of resurgence even if the reports of them training recruits were to be believed, but the possibility of Uyghur extremists entering the country to join their ranks, or other groups taking advantage of the situation is worrying for Beijing.

ETIM, the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, has been designated by the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee as an entity pursuant to terrorism sanctions since 2002 due to its purported association with al-Qaeda and the Taliban (UN Security Council Sanctions Committee, 2011). Presumably ETIM was founded by Hasan Mahsum, a Uyghur from Xinjiang, in the 1990s, albeit sources disagree on the specifics (Pereire, 2004, p. 4; Xu, Fletcher, & Bashoria, 2014). China has continuously labelled it as the group responsible for violence related to Uyghurs on its soil (Soto, 2020). According to Interpol, in the past ETIM had received significant support from al-Qaeda and the Taliban and in 2009 was known to have published videos inciting Uyghurs to launch attacks on China. However, in 2020 the US removed ETIM from its list of terrorist organisations, saying that for more than a decade there has been little evidence of the group's activity from sources other than Beijing (“Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM),” n.d.; Jazeera, 2020).

Moreover, there are opinions insinuating that China has incorrectly labelled the TIP (Turkistan Islamic Party) as ETIM, where they are more likely two different entities. The Pakistan-founded TIP is a pro-Uyghur extremist group allied with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, operating in Afghanistan and Syria. Although the two groups share the common goal of creating an independent Uyghur state and the TIP could potentially hold a connection with ETIM, it is improbable they are one and the same (Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2021; Xu et al., 2014). The

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<sup>26</sup> This assumes that al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan was contingent on fighting the US forces, disregarding al-Qaeda's goal of creating an Islamic caliphate and supporting the Islamic jihad's purpose around the world (Roggio, 2023; Byman, 2016).

reason for this lack of designation could be China's effort to not put the blame on Pakistan while still justifying its actions in Xinjiang by holding ETIM responsible.

The plausibility of Chinese claims relating ETIM to al-Qaeda has also been questioned. A US Congressional hearing from 2009 presents testimony of a Western journalist who interviewed Mahsum in 2002,<sup>27</sup> where Mahsum asserted that ETIM had never received help from al-Qaeda<sup>28</sup>. This led the hearing to the idea that ETIM could have been a smaller organisation made up of Uyghur separatists mounting a resistance against China from Afghanistan, but which then likely ceased to exist after Mahsum's death (Exploring the Nature of Uyghur Nationalism, 2009; Davies, 2008). China's insistence that ETIM has widespread capabilities and is connected to al-Qaeda is uncorroborated by much other evidence<sup>29</sup> (Roberts, 2020, p. 72). The separatist agenda must be acknowledged but some argue China may be exaggerating ETIM's role and the threat it presents, as a tool for justifying the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Zambelis, 2010). China attributing the responsibility for violent attacks in Xinjiang to Uyghur separatists related to ETIM has allowed it to continue oppressing the Turkic Muslim minority. The UN has said that since launching the "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism" in 2014, the crimes committed by Beijing may constitute crimes against humanity. China does not accept this and maintains that Uyghurs are an ethno-nationalist threat and Xinjiang must be controlled lest "The Three Evils;" terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism, continue to affect Xinjiang (Yang, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Looking at this information from the perspective of China's security policy towards Afghanistan, even if ETIM no longer exists and China truly incorrectly labels the TIP as ETIM, the situation remains volatile. Without Afghanistan providing security guarantees, Uyghur separatists could endanger China's control of Xinjiang and in this, their affiliation is secondary (Popalzai, Jarne, & Robinson, 2023).

### **5.1.2 TTP**

The Tehrik-i-Taliban or Pakistani Taliban is another organisation with ties to the Taliban, rooted along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Recent reports say that under the sanctuary provided by the Taliban, the TTP is getting closer to al-Qaeda which could provide it with insight into operations in Pakistan ("Tehrik-E Taliban Pakistan (TTP)," n.d.; Zimmerman &

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<sup>27</sup> Mahsum was assassinated by Pakistani troops in 2003 (Xu, Fletcher, & Bashoria, 2014; Jazeera, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Some claim that ETIM could have been formed by Uyghur nationalists fleeing Xinjiang for Afghanistan in the 1990s to plan against China, but not to join forces with al-Qaeda as China claims (Zambelis, 2010; Jazeera, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> This does not mean that the information from Interpol related to ETIM is false, only that there are sources suggesting that actions which have been attributed to ETIM after Mahsum's death on Chinese insistence, may in fact be the work of separate Uyghur militias or even the TIP. It is very likely that ETIM in the 1990s did have a connection to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban.



Vincent, 2023). Both China and Pakistan, as also mentioned in Chapter 4, expect the Taliban to reject and control the spread of extremism in Afghanistan (Xinhua, 2021). The Taliban has made attempts to acquiesce to these demands, for example by relocating Uyghur militants away from the Chinese border<sup>30</sup> or through Mullah Akhundzada's order forbidding cross-border attacks in July 2023 (Felbab-Brown, 2023; Seldin, 2023). However, since the facilitation of peace talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government by the Taliban broke down in 2022, the group has resumed its attacks on Pakistan. Pakistani officials have said that the Taliban has failed to stop TTP's cross-border attacks and must now choose between bilateral ties or support for militants (Reuters, 2022; Mir, 2022; Gul, 2023a). Evidence that the TTP is launching attacks into Pakistan with the Taliban's support indicates the possibility of a greater threat across Afghanistan's borders (Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2023, p. 3).

For China, control of the TTP is necessary especially because of the CPEC, but the fragmented Taliban is having problems consolidating its authority. Despite the Taliban's claims to the contrary, sources such as Rahmatullah Nabil, former head of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) of Afghanistan, say that members of foreign terrorist groups have obtained Afghan identities and settled in the country (Subh, 2023). This is further evidence that economic innovation involving Afghanistan is ultimately connected to security (Chen, 2023).

Taliban's leadership, with their key interests in mind, wishes to appease China in order to benefit from the relationship. China, on the other hand, wants to see its border concerns addressed but the Taliban is fragmented and has obvious difficulty confronting the different groups scattered across Afghanistan (Ash Center Communications, 2023). The Taliban may be able to curb actions of the TTP, but it is yet to be seen how its current division will affect dealing with potential Uyghur insurgencies (Shekhawat, 2023b).

## **5.2 Regional Instability and ISIS-K**

China, as well as the SCO it is a part of have a vested interest in a stable regional environment that includes Afghanistan. In the past, Afghanistan was the regional centre for terrorism and while Xinjiang is China's biggest internal security worry, its stability is directly linked to China's current most direct cause for concern, Afghanistan (Zhao, 2012; Zimmerman, & Vincent; 2023). As mentioned above, the TTP also plays a meaningful role in all this due to its part in undermining Pakistan. The impact of violence in Pakistan on Sino-Pakistani relations is another worrying matter for China (Elleman, Kotkin, & Schofield, 2013, p. 227). The TTP is

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<sup>30</sup> There are signs this relocation happened, but it is unclear what became of these militants, as there is no evidence of them entering China's custody. It is also unclear if there have been more attempts by the Taliban to take these kinds of steps (Murtazashvili, 2022).

a group with historical ties to the Taliban, meaning that even though its actions are not conducive to the overall stability of the region and the two organisations' relationship is strained at the moment, there is a chance the Taliban could mitigate some of the problems. It is apparent though that the Taliban is not very willing to significantly pressure the TTP, which may be because of the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), its main adversary and concern (Mir, 2023).

ISIS-K wants to establish an Islamic caliphate in the region and start a sectarian war in Afghanistan. The terrorist group has openly condemned China's approach to the Uyghurs (Doxsee & Thompson, 2021; Felbab-Brown, 2023). Their first direct threat aimed at Beijing came in 2018, in the form of a video with Chinese Uyghurs promising to "return home to carry out attacks," and they even claimed responsibility for the 2023 attacks in Kabul (Stanzel, 2018, p. 3; Noorzoi & Litvinova, 2023). China's concern is that ISIS-K could establish a foothold in Badakhshan province and convince ETIM fighters to come, as well as provide Uyghur militants with training and weapons (Verma, 2020, pp. 571–577).

China's policy toward Afghanistan has always been cautious, strictly pragmatic, and limited in its engagement. This kind of approach only remains viable as long as the Taliban has credible current and future benefits to gain from the partnership. Especially true since the degree to which the Taliban defends Chinese security interests endangers their own legitimacy in the eyes of Islamic hard-liners (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022, p. 7; Westcott, 2022, p. 447). The prospect of stability in Afghanistan is further linked to Pakistan-based insurgents. The Taliban's tension with Pakistan is not ideal, not only because of the CPEC but because of the overall implications (Dodge & Redman, 2011, p. 181). China needs the Taliban to provide security guarantees and considering Afghanistan's broken-up internal situation and Beijing's relation with Pakistani intelligence, it does have the leverage to push this. However, because of the TTP, Pakistan's support of the Taliban is waning, and this creates an interconnected issue for China. Beijing needs security assurances, but the Taliban is not consolidated and discord within does not bode well for structured planning. ISIS-K then poses a real threat not only to China but also to the Afghan regime and the entire region. The Taliban is not taking ISIS-K lightly and has even managed to eliminate some of its leaders in 2023, but with support from Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, the organisation is still active (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 8; Farooq & Moheb, 2022, p. 124; Mir, 2023).

In June 2023, China, Pakistan, and Iran's foreign ministers met in Beijing for a trilateral discussion on the growing threat of terrorism in the region. The priority was increased engagement with Afghanistan aimed at mitigating the growing instability and based on the

results of this consultation, the states decided to hold these meetings regularly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023c; Gul, 2023b). The absence of Taliban's representatives at this discussion implies that in Beijing's view, the weight of responsibility for a secure regional environment cannot be placed solely on Afghanistan.

For China, Xinjiang is of utmost importance, and as long as it is endangered, it will look for solutions involving the Taliban out of necessity. Nevertheless, it would be amiss to assume that ETIM is an imminent threat, as it is at least partially a tool used by the CCP to suppress Uyghurs in Xinjiang. When it comes to ISIS-K, the Taliban will continue to try and deter it, since this course of action is rooted not only in compliance with Beijing's wishes but in self-preservation (Dodge & Redman, 2011, p. 227; Mir, 2023). Regionally, political instability in Pakistan would most likely spread to Afghanistan, which would then have ramifications for Xinjiang and China as a whole (Verma, 2020, p. 579). These facts make China implicitly connected to the happenings inside Afghanistan and provide an insight into the CCP's approach to the Taliban.

## **6 Evaluation of Chinese Involvement in Afghanistan**

After considering China's approach toward Afghanistan in terms of economy and security in chapters 4 and 5, it is now possible to compare them in terms of importance for the CCP. The point here is to summarize Chinese objectives in Afghanistan, their relation to the Taliban, and through an evaluation provide an answer to the research question of whether security holds greater value for China than economic factors when it comes to Afghanistan.

Historically, Chinese involvement in Afghanistan has been one of limited economic engagement, with no direct security participation, which is not likely to change even under the current circumstances. Although indirectly, security was the more pressing issue for the CCP while Afghanistan was in turmoil in the years before 2001 and directly afterward. There have been varying levels of interest in Afghanistan from Beijing over the years, mostly pertaining to economic investments, especially in the period after the attacks of 2001. At that time, Beijing's movements in Central Asia and Afghanistan were mainly for development and approach to natural resources (Parveen, 2021, p. 5). This level of economic association was only possible due to the presence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan after the first Taliban government's ousting. The factors of economy and security in Afghanistan are intrinsically connected to the point where it may be relevant to consider economy, in relation to Chinese investments in Afghanistan, as "economic security." One way of looking at the situation is that it is vulnerability, which drives China's foreign policy (Yale University, 2018).

America's presence in Afghanistan gave China certain safeguards against the threat of terrorism on its soil, which is why Beijing was keen on investing in Afghanistan under the previous government's rule. In the present time scenario, China is pushing the Taliban to become that safeguard in place of the United States. China is unwilling to involve itself militarily but as the Taliban desperately needs economic help, China has the perfect kind of sway to push the Taliban in the direction it wants. Beijing will invest and plan to integrate Afghanistan in projects that would benefit the country, it will not, however, give anything away for free. This means China's cautious approach to Afghanistan will not cross a line without measures and provisions ensuring the Taliban has taken steps to prevent ETIM and ISIS-K from approaching Chinese borders (Standish & Aand, 2021). Terrorist organisations take advantage of "developing nations, political instability, and under governed territory to entrench themselves in difficult operating environments and ingratiate themselves with local populations," (Abizaid, 2023).

Afghanistan's internal situation of course does notably influence the environment of Xinjiang. On the other hand, the promises of the Taliban regarding ETIM and other militants are wisely taken with a grain of salt by Chinese officials, as similar promises have been made before. Beyond pressuring the Taliban and relying on them to solve the issue China is increasingly emphasizing multilateralism as a way to combat terrorism in the area (Zhang, 2022, p. 7). Additionally, the fight against terrorism overflowing from Afghanistan to Xinjiang is largely used by the CCP as a justification of controlling the undesirable portions of the populace.

Some experts insist the predominant interest for China in Afghanistan is its own stability and security (Xinjiang and the Western border abutting Central Asia) (Zhang, 2022, p. 10). Given that no economic investments have yielded worthy, tangible results for China yet, it is hard to dismiss security as the primary reason for working with the Taliban. However, the implication of various investments is far-reaching, as developing the infrastructure would link the region via highways, railways, and pipelines, allowing resources to flow into China (Schrag, 2023). Estimates claim that China will import up to 80% of its petroleum by 2030, becoming world's largest consumer of imported oil. Dependence on imported oil leaves China vulnerable to price fluctuations but most significantly, interruptions in supply. A disruption would severely damage China's economy and political stability (Nathan & Scobell, 2015, p. 382). Having Afghanistan's vast reserves of petroleum and the proper infrastructure to transport it would be a great benefit. Purely economically, there are clear benefits to greater connectivity and inclusion of Afghanistan in the CPEC (Airan & Rahimi, 2022, p. 14). Connecting a portion of the CPEC to the Wakhan corridor could let China avoid heightened tensions with India due to the disputed area the Khunjerab Pass is in. In this sense, Pakistan is as much a diplomatic asset, as it is a liability (Nathan & Scobell, p. 17). The fundamentals are in place, but up until now it has been the domestic political climate and lack of security that continued hindering meaningful progress. Notably, the CPEC is a core portion of the BRI, Xi Jinping's flagship project and part of his idea of the "Chinese dream," lending it not only economic importance but also ideological weight.

China, true to its policy of non-interference, will not take on the role of the US/NATO forces, but will instead proceed through a combination of diplomacy and incentives to achieve its goals. The overarching goal is the creation of a stable, favourable, international environment for China's economic growth. In simple terms, when it comes to Afghanistan, it does not matter to Beijing who is in power nor what their internal politics are like, as long as China's own interests can be met. Here, resources and investments have greater potential in terms of China's

continued development and as shown, Beijing is willing to take some risks to proceed with investments in Afghanistan.

It is impossible to say how the situation will develop in the future as the CCP's position is liable to change, given the fortunes of Afghanistan's economy are inextricably bound up with political stability, security, and the strengthening of state structures (Dodge & Redman, 2020, p. 97). China can only fully feel the advantages of situating itself in Afghanistan under suitable conditions (Hashimy, 2023, p. 451). Ever the pragmatic actor, if China judges that the Taliban is unable to provide a safe enough environment for its investments to come to fruition, then it may prioritise surface-level investments and interactions to keep Afghanistan as an option through transactional politics (Westcott, 2022, p. 457). The likelihood of China letting go of its projects in Afghanistan is small though, as this would give way for others to take their place, an option China is unwilling to consider. The objectives of peace and stability in Afghanistan, albeit critical, are being pursued purely for serving the CCP's own economic interests. Even though economic benefits will not materialise in the short-term, the conceivable future benefits outweigh the immediate concerns. Economic development is also another means of achieving greater security, both internal and regional. Once again, the interrelationship between the international environment and the factors that influence it becomes obvious. China cannot profit from its economic relationship with the Taliban unless the conditions are right for it to do so. At the same time, investments increase the likelihood of a more stable environment, creating a symbiosis.

Thus, it is plausible to say that economic security is the key driving force behind Beijing's continuous cooperation with the Taliban. As has been mentioned, economic growth plays a large role in legitimising the CCP's governance, showing again that the principles of China's foreign policy draw their meaning in specific circumstances and their ongoing utility comes from their service to national interests (Nathan & Scobell, 2015, p. 97). The best strategy allowing China to become a great power is the creation of a stable, prospering future to motivate its workers (Allison et al., 2012, p. 4). In the climate of the PRC such a combination can only be achieved under appropriate economic conditions and a firm leadership of the CCP.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis looked at Sino-Afghan relations under the new Taliban regime, from the perspective of security and economic gains. It aimed to answer the following research questions: *From an economic and security perspective, what are China's main objectives in dealing with the Taliban?*; *Does security hold greater value for China than economic factors when it comes to Afghanistan?* and sought to verify one of the presented hypotheses. **H1** states that “China’s main reasons for relations with the Taliban are the perceived economic advantages.” The alternative hypothesis **H2** then states that “China’s external and internal security concerns are of greater value than economic relations when it comes to its position on Afghanistan and the rule of the Taliban.”

Through the lens of a multidimensional theory, and without prejudging the concept of security as a “core” interest for China, this thesis looked at Sino-Afghan relations from multiple perspectives. From the available sources and through the comparisons made, it can be determined that the main goals for China in building a relationship with the Taliban are a combination of security and economic factors. This exploration of Sino-Afghan relations revealed a complex interplay between economic and security considerations. The key ones appear to be the creation of a stable, secure regional environment, which would then allow China to benefit from their investments and further itself economically. China’s primary considerations in Afghanistan are the projects it aims to undertake, including the CPEC with its relation to regional politics, as well as Xi Jinping’s ideals. In this manner, it is reasonable to verify H1. Principally, this does not reject H2, merely suggests the findings are more supportive of Hypothesis 1 (H1).

The shift of focus from security to economy is indicative of China’s greater ambitions in the region and is a continuation of a historical pattern, which in relation to Afghanistan emerged more strongly after 2001. It is factual that without a relatively stable environment in Afghanistan China cannot profit from its investments. However, it is also true that investments and improved development of a country reduce the risks of insurgency, potentially making it a mutually beneficial relationship. China has in the past exaggerated the threat posed by ETIM to justify its behaviour in Xinjiang and the repression of Uyghurs. As noted in Chapter 5, the instability and various terrorist organisations gathering in Afghanistan under the Taliban’s fragmented leadership could pose a threat. It is not mainly the Taliban though, that China means to use in keeping the region and its own borders stable, but Pakistan and Iran. Afghanistan is of course crucial in helping ensure China’s borders remain free of Uyghur militants and

maintaining peace in the region, but it may not be the primary reason for Beijing's behaviour. China is always focused on itself; its policy does seek to create a favourable international environment for economic growth but is not necessarily reduced to strict formulas. Rather, the formation of foreign policy, especially in connection to Afghanistan and the Taliban, responds to interests. Currently, these interests, while deeply intertwined with security, seem to be leaning toward the long-term protection of structural investments in Afghanistan. The goal of obtaining important natural resources such as petrol and copper from a close source, as well as the incorporation of Afghanistan into the ideologically important BRI's CPEC initiative, appear to be at the forefront of Beijing's decision-making. This is corroborated by the various investments and deals that have taken place despite the imperfect political situation inside Afghanistan.

Afghanistan will continue to play a part in shaping global narratives in conversations concerning both security and economic values. This thesis provides insight into the motivations and priorities driving China's engagement given these dynamics. To China, it does not matter who it negotiates with, as long as it can pursue its objectives. At the moment, projects such as the Amu Darya Basin and the CPEC are only beginning to get underway, implying that their outcomes are not yet certain and will only be revealed in the future. Were the security situation in and around Afghanistan to get worse due to the Taliban's incompetence, priorities would shift. China is a pragmatic actor and has no need to pursue stability in Afghanistan for reasons of altruism. It is certain, that there will be engagement no matter who rules the country but seeing as an increased willingness to cooperate with the Taliban from the CCP can be identified, China does view the current environment as one with potential.



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## **Abstract**

This thesis focuses on analysing the reasons China may have to increasingly involve itself with the Taliban after the fall of the former Afghan government in the summer of 2021. The possible explanations are categorised under economic and security factors and are explored with China's potential gains and interests in mind.

The main research questions investigated are as follows: *From an economic and security perspective, what are China's main objectives in dealing with the Taliban? & Does security hold greater value for China than economic factors when it comes to Afghanistan?*

To adequately understand Chinese objectives in Afghanistan, the historical context of Sino-Afghan relations is first presented to provide a general overview of the Chinese position and developments within Afghanistan itself. Specific economic objectives that China may be pursuing in and in relation to Afghanistan are looked at, as well as the security challenges facing bilateral relations between Beijing and Kabul in the current regional environment.

**H1** states that "China's main reasons for relations with the Taliban are the perceived economic advantages."

**H2** then states that "China's external and internal security concerns are of greater value than economic relations when it comes to its position on Afghanistan and the rule of the Taliban."

The thesis findings indicate a nuanced support for H1 while not excluding the significance of H2 and security factors in China's relationship with the Taliban. The evidence suggests economic considerations play a central role, reflecting a historical pattern of economic objectives shaping China's foreign policy. The analysis does not dismiss the importance of security but rather highlights a coexistence of factors.

**Key words**

China, Afghanistan, Taliban, Economy, Investments, Security, ETIM, Terrorist organisations, Pakistan

## Abstrakt

Tato práce se zaměřuje na analýzu důvodů, které mohou Čínu vést k tomu, aby se po pádu bývalé afghánské vlády v létě 2021 stále více angažovala ve vztazích s Tálibánem. Možná vysvětlení jsou rozdělena do kategorií ekonomických a bezpečnostních faktorů a jsou zkoumána s ohledem na potenciální zisky a zájmy Číny.

Hlavní výzkumné otázky jsou následující: *Jaké jsou z ekonomického a bezpečnostního hlediska hlavní cíle Číny při jednání s Tálibánem & Má bezpečnost pro Čínu větší hodnotu než ekonomické faktory, pokud jde o Afghánistán?*

Pro adekvátní pochopení čínských cílů v Afghánistánu je nejprve představen historický kontext čínsko-afghánských vztahů, který poskytuje obecný přehled o čínském postavení a vývoji v samotném Afghánistánu. Dále jsou rozebrány konkrétní ekonomické cíle, které Čína může sledovat v Afghánistánu a ve vztahu k němu, a bezpečnostní výzvy, kterým čelí bilaterální vztahy mezi Pekingem a Kábulem v současném regionálním prostředí.

H1 uvádí, že „Hlavním důvodem vztahů Číny s Tálibánem jsou vnímané ekonomické výhody“.

H2 pak uvádí, že „Obavy Číny o vnější a vnitřní bezpečnost mají větší hodnotu než ekonomické vztahy, pokud jde o její postoj k Afghánistánu a vládě Tálibánu“.

Zjištění práce naznačují větší podporu pro H1, zároveň však nevyklučují význam H2 a bezpečnostních faktorů ve vztahu Číny s Tálibánem. Důkazy nasvědčují tomu, že hlavní roli hrají ekonomické úvahy, což odpovídá historickému trendu, kdy čínskou zahraniční politiku formovaly ekonomické zájmy. Analýza nezpochybňuje důležitost bezpečnosti, ale spíše zdůrazňuje koexistenci těchto faktorů.



## **Klíčová slova**

Čína, Afghánistán, Tálibán, Ekonomika, Investice, Bezpečnost, ETIM, Teroristické skupiny, Pákistán