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**PAKISTAN'S CONCERNS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CHINA'S  
ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN: A STUDY OF STRATEGIC  
INTERESTS, ECONOMIC BENEFITS, AND REGIONAL  
SECURITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Pakistan's strategic landscape is being reshaped by China's growing engagement in Afghanistan, presenting both opportunities and concerns for Islamabad. As Beijing deepens its economic and security footprint in Afghanistan, Pakistan finds itself navigating a complex geopolitical environment where its traditional influence over Kabul intersects with China's expanding regional ambitions. This study explores Pakistan's concerns regarding potential shifts in power dynamics, economic dependencies, and security challenges arising from China's increasing role in Afghanistan. At the same time, it highlights the economic benefits Pakistan could derive, particularly through the expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, enhancing regional connectivity and trade prospects. The paper assesses how Pakistan's policy responses reflect a careful balancing act between securing its strategic interests and leveraging Chinese investments for economic growth. It also examines the impact of regional security dynamics, particularly in relation to India and the United States, on Pakistan's positioning. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of a trilateral framework involving China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to ensure sustainable regional stability, economic cooperation, and security alignment. As China's engagement in Afghanistan evolves, Pakistan must adopt a pragmatic approach that maximizes benefits while mitigating risks to its strategic autonomy.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistan-China Relations, Afghanistan, CPEC, Regional Security, Economic Cooperation, Strategic Interests, Geopolitical Strategy, Belt and Road Initiative, Trilateral Diplomacy, South Asian Stability.*

### **Introduction**

Rapid changes in the strategic landscape as well as international politics over the past two decades have sparked fresh interest in the perennial issue of China's engagement in Afghanistan. By other accounts China's view of Afghanistan is seriously affected by the degree and speed of U. S. withdrawal, and may see the potential for an intensification of the conflict there leading to increased threats emanating from Afghanistan that can and likely will spill over into China (Rahman Tahiri, 2017). Almost every country including the United States (U.S.) has identified Afghanistan as a pivotal player for benefiting from comprehensive reengagement and development of its own relatively fragile, landlocked neighbors, China's view toward Afghanistan is no exception. Providing Afghanistan with alternatives and alleviating the latter's heavy dependency on the sea created a significant ground for having trilateral relations between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in transportation sector. In Afghanistan, China has been consistently playing a globally informed strategy to become a dominant regional power and to reconfigure its landscape in terms of power and stability, economic prosperity, and security.

Potential concerns and opportunities for Pakistan in terms of China's involvement in Afghanistan are becoming extensively more intricate and diverse. Consequently, Pakistan's policy highlights four main areas that are vital for its own national interest in the competitively rough and fixed regional environment in South Asia. Considering the current intricate strategic intricacies throughout the diverse form of geopolitical landscape in South Asia, strategic interests of China in Afghanistan appears to be complex and multi-dimensional and this further accentuates the greater necessity to examine the in-depth interaction and cooperation between Pakistan and China (Waqas Makhdoom et al., 2014). Among several reasons, Chinese security concerns could ultimately have a profound impact on the potential security of China's neighbors and compete to be managed in a way that limit diplomatic condemnation with regional partners. The more investment and hydropower engineering projects can employ thousands of workers and result in an initially significant boost to the Afghan economy. But the risks of a highly centralized economic development model with a high dependency on one

sector are significant: if the copper project is halted or delayed, the entire Afghan economy is very vulnerable to shock.

### **Historical Context of Pakistan-China Relations**

This chapter examines the strategic benefits of Pakistan's role and the economic benefits of Chinese engagement in Afghanistan. It particularly focuses on China's strategic interest in maintaining the mutually beneficial status quo in relations with Afghanistan via Pakistan. Afghanistan has been an important area for China from the ancient Silk Route to the more recent trade and economic relations. There are a trade and energy security interest of China in Afghan. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 the People Republic of China (PRC) became a major player in post 9/11 Afghanistan. The creation of National Reconstruction Afghanistan (NRA) was a quantum leap in their relation. The increasing interest in Afghanistan could also pose a challenge to the prevalent Indian view of Afghanistan as a natural security ally (Rahman Tahiri, 2017). Since 1949 the PRC sought to withdraw military forces from Xinjiang and Tibet. The interest in Afghan would also have the implications for unease in Chinese authorities about the Uyghur orientation with the Taliban and others. New areas of cooperation and competition in Afghanistan have implications for the ongoing relation between Pakistan and the PRC.

As a historic study, episodic view on the interaction between Afghanistan and China cannot be explained without the role of Pakistan. Apart from the apparent geostrategic proximity and the consequent common border, the interested view of China in Afghans was through third state. Although post-9/11 cooperation in Afghan is regarded as the peak of Pak-China relations, cooperation between Islamabad and Beijing in regard to Afghan had begun long before. Though limited there is an element of the desire of Pakistan to convince China of its own stake in Afghan which led to the establishment of term collaboration meso of 2008 groups. There is also the desire to resolve long-standing disputes with Afghan in a manner that would make the interest of bilateral as well between Islamabad and Beijing (Ali, 2022). This has become one of the vivid examples where the economic strength and development of one country can force it to resolve long-standing disputes in the favor of another country.

### **The Geopolitical Significance of Afghanistan**

Afghanistan's multidimensional geographical, demographic, and historical characteristics make it a critical country in South and Central Asia for existing multilateral frameworks, such as the SCO, CAREC, and SAARC. Here, China has publicly agreed to a proposal on Afghanistan's sales agreement to boost peace,

reconstruction, and economic coherence. China has made increasing engagement with Afghanistan that includes economic projects, civilian assistance, and counter-terrorism. A researcher has urged the Chinese government to focus on economic and social growth in Afghanistan to have basic support from the Afghan people, because the foundations of the eventual political solutions are growth and connectivity (Zhang, 2022).

Afghanistan occupies the heart of the South Asian region and links Central Asia with the Middle East. It shares its boundaries with major regional powers including China, India, Iran, and Pakistan. Politically, the nature of Afghan state locations at the crossroads makes it significant due to its implication on numerous political interests within the region. The South Asian region is central to trilateral engagements between the United States (US), China, and two major militaries in the region; Pakistan and India. Located in the middle of this region, Afghanistan hosts regional headquarters of US military bases in Bagram and Kandahar. This Central Asian landlocked country connects South Asia to East Asia, Eurasia, and the Middle East, which could bring either geopolitical or geoeconomics significance. Both regions have shared historical connections and have rendered a vested interest in enhancing connectivity. This article discusses the evolving role of China and Pakistan in the South Asian regional framework, especially the possibilities and prospects to promote greater connectivity between them through its resumed significance for regional trade (Rahman Tahiri, 2017)

### **China's Growing Involvement in Afghanistan**

China's growing involvement in Afghanistan has intensified both Pakistan's worries and opportunities. Hence, an attempt is completed in this study to determine the causes that China stayed absent from Afghanistan in the 1980s and has been progressively concerned ever since. China's strategic interests are examined in perception of the Afghan region, its financial proceeds are calculated through China's participation in regional organizations and Afghanistan's rebuilding, and its devotion to peace and constancy is surveyed via its multilateral negotiation attempts on Afghanistan. In consequence, it is recommended that having Afghanistan's rich natural properties explored through steady Chinese companies, China has certain advantages to gain dominantly over adjacent countries like Pakistan in the long term. Meanwhile, China's involvement in Afghanistan is generally in consistency with what China pursues in its mastering of geoeconomics approach to Central-Eastern Asia. Moreover, its immunity from severe security turbulences and non-military

weather-political means to influence its neighbors provide enormous benefits to Pakistan's security and economic collaboration. Hence, it is crucial for Pakistan, to a sure extent, to cope up with China to unfold a circumspect understanding of China's participation in Afghanistan (Pradhan & Mohanty, 2021).

China's appearance in Afghanistan and the different features of this engagement have primarily remained unheeded, mainly in the West and South Asia. The information is rather anecdotal and no all-embracing analysis of China and Afghanistan has been effort to date. Given this need, this chapter efforts to sketch China's appearance in Afghanistan from different positions and fields, namely economic, political and security, peace and safety, investment, and companies' role. First, the incentive for China to engage or not in Afghanistan commonly needs to be established. Second, China's initiation in Afghanistan will be inspected through its various strategies undertaken. Third, this chapter shall consider China's devotion to the settlement of conflictual issues through a peaceful method in Afghanistan. Fourth, China's engagement in the Afghan economy through investment projects or corporate activities requires an investigation. Lastly, the appearance of China in Afghanistan is discussed so as to be perceived in broader Chinese geopolitical strategy in Central Asia. The mutual consequences of China's involvement in Afghanistan, both worries and opportunities, are centered on conceiving consequences, also for Pakistan.

### **Pakistan's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan**

East of Pakistan, bordering its North-West periphery, is Afghanistan, a nation known for its rugged terrain, turbulent history, and defiant people. Since Pakistan's creation in 1947, Afghanistan has played an essential role in shaping its destiny, as well as the region's overall trajectory. The importance of Afghanistan for Pakistan is not a secret; during the Cold War, Washington soon realized the Afghan mole's potential and significantly increased funding and arms to Afghan insurgents. Pakistan is one of the few countries that recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan (Fatima, 2014). After 9/11 and the beginning of the war on terror, the US pushed Islamabad to sever ties with the Taliban, but due to security needs and political realignments, Pakistan remains influential with the Taliban.

From this vantage point of regional and global interest, Pakistan's multiple stakes in Afghanistan and potential roles are critical. The understanding of Pakistan's ever-evolving interests in Afghanistan remains incomplete within the constraints and implications of Afghanistan security. The issue only seems to have sharpened



since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. Much attention has been placed on astute precise and situational interests, particularly the angle of Pakistan's perceived support for the Taliban, but insufficient consideration has been given to its panoply of interests and interactions with Afghanistan (Jayasree Nath, 2019). Moreover, the above-cited factors can be understood in terms of a few issues which not only embrace but go far beyond Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban and local warlords.

### **Economic Benefits for Pakistan from China's Engagement in Afghanistan**

There are significant economic benefits for Pakistan with regards to China's growing engagement with Afghanistan. Over the past few years the Chinese have pursued a large number of infrastructure development initiatives in Afghanistan, including investing in mining, hydro-electricity, agriculture and industrial projects. These initiatives are supported by the Five Nations Railway Project which aims to link China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Stability in Afghanistan will also reduce the cost of doing business in the region and could bring economic dividends for the entire region and boost intra-regional trade. In the long run, the Chinese presence in Afghanistan could provide additional pressure on Pakistan to speed up its operations against the Uighurs and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) who allegedly use the tribal areas to attack Chinese assets (Saqib Irshad et al., 2016).

Pakistan stands to gain economic advantages from Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, facilitating trade and new product opportunities, like cheaper Afghan pomegranates. Chinese investments in Afghan mining provide opportunities for Pakistani firms, with the Afghan ministry considering collaboration on mineral resources an exclusive chance for them. Consequently, some assert that China's activities in Afghanistan can bolster Pakistan's regional stability interests, fostering Chinese-Pakistan security cooperation and addressing Uighur separatist threats. This partnership may yield Pakistan leverage in stabilizing Afghanistan, aligning mutual strategic goals. Additionally, enhancing Afghan integration could extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to broader industrial and agricultural collaboration. However, these benefits come with significant risks. As China's influence grows, Pakistan may encounter challenges along its informal border with non-state actors, potentially unsettling regional elements (Threlkeld & Easterly, 2021). For China, deeper engagement might entangle its companies in complex local dynamics and international military issues, raising concerns that

any Uighur terrorism resurgence linked to its interests could draw Beijing into conflicts it prefers to observe from a distance.

### **Regional Security Implications of China's Presence in Afghanistan**

China's role in Afghanistan is growing, with enhanced economic ties and infrastructure development. The Badakhshan highway has been improved due to Chinese investments linked to valuable mineral discoveries. Contributions also include office buildings, homes, and market facilities that boost local economies. About 400-500 commercial vehicles transport goods daily to Sost, an important Sino-Afghan border town, showcasing its cultural heritage. Afghanistan borders Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China, marking their economic cooperation. The Afghan government supports Chinese investments in a gold mine to enhance its economy. China also provides essential transportation gear to Afghan security forces, emphasizing their partnership. Balancing China's interests with Central Asian and Afghan issues is vital for regional stability, requiring strategic diplomacy and collaboration. Stability is essential for growth, and fostering cooperation serves long-term interests. Proposals include establishing security frameworks via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to address cross-border challenges and improve intelligence sharing. Moreover, the strategic interests of China and the U.S. in South Asia may align concerning Afghanistan, influencing China's relations with India and the U.S., thus creating prospects for peaceful diplomacy in a complex geopolitical context. (Zhang, 2022)

### **The Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact on Afghanistan-Pakistan Economic Cooperation**

The alarming recent terrorist incidents in Afghanistan have severely worsened its already fragile security situation, plunging the country into a historical low amid ongoing conflict. China faces significant pressure from a variety of Afghanistan-related issues, leading to complex challenges on multiple fronts. In response, China initiated the "China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue," a crucial diplomatic effort intended to strengthen relations and alleviate regional tensions. Chinese officials emphasize their commitment to respecting the sovereignty of both Pakistan and Afghanistan, aiming to promote lasting peace through a carefully conceived reconciliation process. Infrastructure projects stemming from these diplomatic efforts indicate a proactive approach aimed at stability and development.

The inaugural Foreign Ministers' meeting was followed by the Vice-Ministerial Strategic Dialogue and the Foreign Secretaries'

Consultation, highlighting a strong commitment to ongoing engagement amid regional volatility. Additionally, Pakistan's proposal to include India in its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects marks a significant change in regional economic planning, reflecting China's strategy to balance its policies towards both nations. This backdrop sets the stage for analyzing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its implications for economic cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, potentially improving development and connectivity (Rasool et al.2024).

The BRI is integral to China's grand strategy to expand its influence in Asia through substantial infrastructure development. Challenges in the Indo-Pacific have prompted a shift in China's foreign policy focus towards Europe for future growth and partnerships. The One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative facilitates connections across diverse regions, promoting mutual development. The Silk Road Economic Belt emphasizes long-term infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing regional integration.

Limited information currently exists about these initiatives, but they clearly serve China's strategic interests. They seek to deepen economic ties with Europe while establishing a comprehensive Eurasian network of trade routes to enhance connectivity and trade efficiency. As military partnerships between the U.S. and India grow, Afghanistan's strategic importance is rising, complicating the geopolitical landscape and necessitating careful navigation of international relations. (Saqib Irshad et al., 2016)

### **The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its Connection to Afghanistan**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is generally acknowledged as a milestone in Sino-Pak relations, reshaping the landscape of economic collaboration between the two. It is labeled as the 'Flagship Project' of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with USD 62 billion investments planned in the energy sector and various infrastructure projects (Tayyab Sohail & Chen, 2022). The objective of CPEC is to put in place infrastructure and enable economic connectivity in order to enhance trade and foster economic growth and development in the region. CPEC is anticipated to boost Pakistan's GDP by 2-3% annually and traffic over USD 10 billion through planned road infrastructure annually by 2025. In the volatile geostrategic environment of the wider South Asia, CPEC is read as another illustration of a web of emerging power politics.

The 46 billion Yuan China-Pakistan economic corridor launched in April 2015 is an example of China's One Belt-One Road appeal. It is to implement one of the six corridors of One Belt-One Road



Initiative; linking the Gwadar Port to the Xinjiang region. CPEC would also be a game-changer in national, regional, and international politics and economics, altering the narratives. Concerning connectivity, transportation, and economic corridors, CPEC offers the possibility to be a economic corridor between China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. At the same time, CPEC is framing an alliance between China and Pakistan, causing concerns about how it could alter Turkey-Pakistan-China ties; and as a chance to boost its global impact, and that of developing countries connected to it. On the other hand, CPEC has become a point of argument about China's debt diplomacy and neo-colonialism.

### **The Potential for Trilateral Cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan**

The neighboring countries share a foundation of peaceful and economic development, aiming to initiate dialogues and joint projects. A key concern is the escalating violence and terrorism in Afghanistan, which undermines regional stability. The parties uniformly oppose terrorism, advocating for the total eradication of ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and related groups. Multilateral counter-terrorism mechanisms are encouraged to collaborate in various capacities, focusing on ideological and social interactions that tackle economic development, poverty, and inequality. Economic progress and stability in Afghanistan are deemed vital for prosperity and integration in the region. They recognize the Belt and Road Initiative as a catalyst for growth and regional connectivity projects, targeting infrastructure improvements, free trade agreements, and industrial cooperation for mutual benefits. All efforts aim to restore peace and socio-economic balance in Afghanistan and the surrounding areas. To foster a conducive atmosphere for launching these initiatives, consultations will address common concerns and opportunities. (Safi, 2024)

### **Counterterrorism Cooperation and Security Measures in the Region**

Amid the change of Afghanistan's political future, there are a few key issues of China's concerns and opportunities that China and Pakistani experts offer. After the study and careful thinking, it becomes apparent that these issues should not only be concerned with domestic, regional and bilateral trends but also be considered in broader global context (Zhang, 2022). Geographically, China finds itself in the confluence of Afghanistan, Central and South Asia, with Tajikistan and Pakistan's North West Frontier Province on the northeast, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan on the northwest. Afghanistan is in the southwest, separated by in line with

Pakistan's Baluchistan Province by the Wakkan Corridor of around 80 km. Previously, the Soviet Union, Iran, India and Afghanistan composed the so-called "power axis in the southern underbelly of China", to balance US global policy at the time of cold war, but this axis has fallen apart with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the US pivot to Asia with its rebalancing policies seems to re-ascend the challenge to China's security sphere there. Over the past few years eliminating the East Turkistan movement, the movement has been moving towards the southern underbelly of China due to tightened security all over Katze. To safeguard its national security and economic interests including energy and mineral oil and gas, Central Asia is important for China. Meanwhile, by the end of 1990, Chinese debt to Central Asian States or FSR's 16.7 billion, and they have been part of the indispensable markets for consumer goods manufactured in China to maintain the operation of hundreds and thousands enterprises in Xinjiang's interior provinces. Now the places have been taken over by Chinese private enterprises due to the lack of infrastructure in Xinjiang. In recent years, China's government has been taking measures to open the export-import of consumer goods to Central Asian States, to reopen overland trade via Khunjerab pass and cities of Kashgar, Horgas. However, the importance of China for Central Asia far exceeding the aforementioned things.

### **The Role of Regional Organizations in Facilitating Cooperation and Stability**

The regional affiliations of the three thoughtful republics goal to dialogue, trade, and the subsistence of balance in the multifarious method. Recognized republics could function as tools to further bridging the hole between the PRC and Afghanistan. Extra prominently the SCO, recalling the vital roles of durations of enabling in agreements and calm upkeep. Looking at the SCO and RECCA individually, there is a possibility of evolving into melting-pots of complex collaboration. Mediation of conflicts and maintenance of calm demands for meticulous and putative unbiased constancy, which could furthermore be enhanced as a result of shared systems. Emphasized in this respect might be the mediation of collective dialogues and cooperative ventures concerning security or trade and expansions as regards complex collaboration on the bases of growth and social advancement. The SCO could offer potentials in the matter of dialogues, and of expectations in regard to supplementary facets, or in respect of belief or risk concerns. The possibilities develop as releases of echelons of more meticulous deliberations, including the accessory of subsidiary, four discovers, while the common suppositions of

the whole BAL questions are attended to in matters of participancy approach and in general actions. (Rahman Tahiri, 2017).

Long-lasting quiet now not prevailing. Such tranquil is correspondingly essential to Atlases of profusion, consequently there is then a guarantee that the aforesaid key states will threshold numerous shared insights as to barbarous combating, stimulating them to action. Much as this is exhibited in varied frames of bilateral treaties, establishing multilateral rules may additionally give rise to lowered proceedings imprecation. Proffers related to unpredicted struggles, voyagers or staple may moreover be facilitated regarding the implementation of common arrangements. Transition is contingent upon the betterment of ultimate measures, thus evolving republics should entertain peculiar assiduity as to the provision of appropriate policies. Most importantly, comradely and practical facilities demand gratification, countenanced by a partially appointed apparatus. Simultaneously, highways and overland conduits are mandatory to furnish the right to tenures for tribute. There is the establishment of trust to be taken care of which may be underwritten through the mechanism of declarations or consensus papers (Zhang, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The study has examined the Pakistan-China-Afghanistan relationship through the lens of Pakistan's concerns and opportunities in view of China's engagement in Afghanistan. The conclusion refines the broad question of research interest into 3 specific themes, i.e. strategic interests, economic benefits, and regional security and summarizes the findings according to these elements before reflecting on the implications of the growing ties between China and Afghanistan for Pakistan-China relations. Throughout the history of relations between these countries, there have been periods of great cooperation, but there have also been phases when tensions arose while each country sought to maximize its own interests. The current phase of cooperation between China and Afghanistan offers considerable opportunity for all three sides to bring about a positive outcome through a more serious discussion of the issues, so that the fruits of that cooperation can be directed into greater stability, peace, and development. Nonetheless, given the somewhat desperate state of Afghanistan, it is essential for Pakistan to remain realistically aware of the potential risks to its interests and the challenges that its fellow partnership with China surmounts.

This research has looked at the potential benefits and concerns for all three sides. Among the main conclusions drawn is that Pakistan's strategic interests and regional security considerations

pushed it ever closer to Beijing. Such dynamics would contribute to stronger economic ties between the three countries, with Pakistan benefiting most like this process. The growing role of China in Afghanistan and the potential increase in its economic benefits could contribute to the growth and development of Afghanistan's economy, but much depends on security and regional connectivity. Given the complexity of Pakistan-China relations, it is necessary for Pakistan to reconcile its transient interests with long-term prospects and history of the relationship. However, by considering post conflict reconstruction and an approach that is more inclusive and involves not just both sides bilaterally, but also Afghanistan, the study abides that the benefits can be most effectively reaped in sustainable development and security, in which China is able to play a balancing role.

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