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## China's Security Apprehension and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

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### Abstract:

The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan has increased China's security concerns. Beijing is attempting to protect Xingjian province from possible East Turkistan Islamic Movement cross-border incursion (ETIM). This research paper examines China's security concerns and strategic interests in Afghanistan, and how these have evolved over time. China's apprehension with respect to Afghanistan is shaped by its concerns regarding the spread of terrorism, extremism, and separatism in its Xinjiang region, which borders Afghanistan. China's strategic interests in Afghanistan are driven by its desire to secure its energy supplies, protect its investments in the region, and expand its economic influence in South Asia. The research analyses China's involvement in the Afghanistan peace process, its relations with the Taliban, and its growing military and economic presence in the region. The paper argues that China's engagement in Afghanistan is driven by a desire to safeguard its security interests, expand its global influence, and counterbalance the United States in the region.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, China, ETIM, Al Qaeda, Taliban, security, terrorism, militants

### INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has a unique and significant position in the geopolitical calculations of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese are primarily interested in Afghanistan for geopolitical and geo-economic reasons. China and Afghanistan have had diplomatic ties since China's inception. Afghanistan was one of the first nations to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) under Mao Zedong's communist rule (Khan, 20115). China's primary focus in Afghanistan is on its security objectives. It inhibits any support for Uighur militancy, which enhances the Islamization and rebellious antagonism of the Muslim minority in the Chinese region of Xinjiang against China. The great majority of the population of Xinjiang province is Muslim and has an ethno-linguistic connection with nations in Central Asia. The Han dynasty subdued the community (Panda, 2014).

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The foreign media has stated that Uighur Muslim populations are subjected to cruel incarceration and forced cultural re-education in China's secret camps. However, Beijing is attempting to ensure that these bordering nations provide no political support, spiritual solace, or material aid to the Uighur Muslim and militant organizations responsible for the violence in Xinjiang. Chinese authorities are concerned that if Uighur terrorists join forces with other terrorist organizations such as ISI-K, Al-Qaeda, or the Afghan Taliban, it will have spillover effect on China (Kam, 2022).

China wished to prevent anti-Xinjiang terrorists from uniting with organizations such as the Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIM), also known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISKP). During the late Taliban government of the 1990s, the Taliban in Afghanistan housed the ETIM group. The Uighur insurgents sought refuge and mobilised in Afghanistan under the Taliban government's protection. The terrorists resided in a northern Badakhshan region linked to the province of Xining (Vemra, 2020). Therefore, following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, China promptly reacted to the risks posed by these terrorist groups. There is an evidence that Chinese foreign fighters, mostly Uyghurs of Turkish descent, have travelled through Turkey and Southeast Asia to Syria and Afghanistan. For example, the August 2015 bombing of the Erawan temple in Bangkok showed the existence of trafficking lines that let Uyghurs infiltrate Southeast Asia and then Syria. The defendants were in possession of forged Turkish passports when they entered Thailand from Turkey. Between 2014 and 2016, Southeast Asian authorities uncovered terrorist contacts between selected Uyghur jihadists and the Pro-IS terrorist groups Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT) and Katibah GR of Indonesia. The ISKP's allegation that last October's strike in Kunduz was intended against China (along with the Taliban and Shiites) conveyed that future actions in Afghanistan would be organised according to internal and external circumstances, as well as China's attitude to the country (Kam, 2022).

China is increasingly worried about terrorism in Afghanistan; the ties between TIP and the Taliban pose a "direct danger" to China's "national security and territorial integrity." In addition, a number of high-profile incidents in China, such as the 28 October 2013 SUV attack in Tiananmen Square, the 1 March 2014 Kunming railway attack, and the 30 April 2014 suicide bombing attack at the Urumqi central railway station, strengthened Beijing's claim that the Terrorist Organization of the Islamic State (TIP) was involved in attacks in China. Therefore, on July 28, 2021, in a meeting with Taliban co-founder and chief negotiator Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi demanded that the Taliban split with the TIP. Due to the return of the Taliban, China is fearful that terrorist operations would restart (Verma, 2022). In addition, Beijing is concerned about terrorist groups in Afghanistan that operate in Pakistan, such as ISKP, as well as jihadist and rebel groups. The reason is that it is devastating for China mega projects like CPEC. Thus, this article discusses the security apprehensions of Chines after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The researcher found the books, research journals, articles, newspapers and conference papers on background and nature of Chinese foreign policy towards Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Evan S, Medeiros has mentioned in his book Title, China's International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism and Diversification, the significance of retaining autonomy and attempting to expand industrialization through diplomatic means. He claims China work as a defensive power whose goal is to sustain its business interests and avert threats and vulnerabilities domestically around its

frontier. China is already engaged in different national and international organizations and will stretch ahead for country interests. China is an economic and military rising power, but still, it has domestic security challenges in Xinjiang province. He articulated that China is involved with a different part of the world through the economic sphere (Medeiros, 2009).

Similarly, Raja Muhammad Khan highlighted in his study, "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan," that the constructive engagement of China with Afghanistan will safeguard the Chinese economic, strategic, and security objectives. Afghanistan possesses a unique and significant strategic location that connects central Asia to Central South Asia and Middle East states. The strategic location of Afghanistan is vital for the Peoples' Republic of China. Afghanistan has mainly three glaring attributes for the Chinese national interests; strategic, geographical, and economic. The rapid change in the international security situation needs deeper cooperation demands between Afghanistan and China and regional states for regional peace and prosperity and integrations based on mutual respect (Khan, 2015).

In addition, Zao Huasheng has stated in the article, "Afghanistan and China's new neighborhood diplomacy," that Afghanistan has had numerous security challenges for China. For the last 40 years, Afghanistan has been facing bloody war. The Soviet Union occupied the country for ten years; the country faced eleven years of civil unrest. Post 9/11, the U.S. involvement in the country was a severe challenge to the Chinese objectives in Afghanistan because United States has waged a long war in Afghanistan in U.S. history. Furthermore, the Xinjiang internal security has been affected due to the Afghan crisis, and they are vulnerable to the spillover effect of extremism and terrorism from Afghan soil. The Xinjiang and Afghan security nexus can be explicitly observed in the close engagement between Taliban ETIM and Al-Qaeda in the pre-9/11 era (Huasheng, 2016).

Akram Umarov has underlined in his article, "Assessing China's New Policy in Afghanistan" that, Post 9/11, China has observed the principles of neutrality and non-interference in Afghan politics. China has been trying to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan, especially since 2014. However, different scholars proposed that Chinese foreign policy U-turn concerns the impending threat to China posed by the Uighur separates in Afghanistan (Umarov, 2017). But Adam Saud and Azhar Ahamad underlined in their article, "China's Engagement in Afghanistan: Implications for the Region" that China has increased its engagement with Afghanistan over the past few years. It is moving towards sturdier commercial and economic partnerships. China's economic policies for Afghanistan decreased due to the Post 9/11 scenario and its adverse impacts on Afghanistan's peace and stability. China's constructive involvement with Afghanistan is to assist the people of the war-torn country, and it will make Afghanistan part of mega projects like BRI. For China, peace and stability are imperative in its backyard because instability will decrease the economic activities of China (Saud & Ahmad, 2018).

The problem arises from the Uighur terrorist organization East Turkistan movement (ETIM) that operates from border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan to create instability in Xinjiang province and other parts of China. For instance, Brian Fishman has mentioned in the Article, "Al-Qaeda and the rise of China: Jihadi geopolitics in a post-hegemonic world." that the Uighur terrorist group has affiliations with Al-Qaeda and the links between these groups are profound, which can create instability in China. Al-Qaeda has created instability at the international level, a severe threat to international peace (Fishman, 2011).

China can assist and take Afghanistan from the flux. It can invest in Afghanistan; investment in the country will create jobs and upsurge the income. Moreover, she argues that the Chinese objectives in the region are based on geo-strategic and geopolitical concerns (Hussain, 2012). Afghanistan played the transit route among East Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (Silk Road). Afghanistan plays a vital role in trade transit; currently, China focuses on Afghanistan to utilize Afghan land for strategic and economic purposes. BRI project will connect Afghanistan with China. Both countries will be the beneficiaries of the mega project. The integration of Afghanistan in the BRI project will enhance the economic policies of China (Safi, & Alizada, 2018).

Therefore, China has a concentration in Afghanistan; its engagement has been growing for the last few years. Although, the Afghan security challenges have decreased the Chinese economic engagement. China wants to ensure that anti-Chinese activity should not rise from Afghanistan, and ETIM organizations did not get support and assistance from the Taliban and other militant groups. Furthermore, the other objective of China is to decrease the Indian involvement (Felbal, 2020). However, Chinese national interests are dependent on Afghan stability. Instability in Afghanistan would pose a threat to Chinese interests. China has a direct 92 K.M. border with Afghanistan, the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from the country would indirectly affect the security of Xining (Van, 2014). Thus, China has been following a careful and unique foreign policy towards Afghanistan. China always tries to keep its economic interests on top, though it has security objectives (Mohan, 2013). So the gap in the above literature review is visible regarding the China's Security concerns and strategic interests after US withdrawal.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on the qualitative method; it applies the exploratory and predictive data analysis approach. The nature of the study is based on primary and secondary data. The researcher has collected relevant facts and figures related to this research from 2001 to 2021 from multiple sources such as government bodies, online sources, books, research articles, and research journals. The interviews being core source of this research are conducted by the researcher from scholars and experts who have a deep study on China & Afghanistan. These interviews provide an opportunity to understand underlying problems and critical concepts regarding Chinese economic and security strategies towards Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To justify China's economic and security strategies towards Afghanistan, this study follows the theory of Neo-liberalism. It is a prominent school of thought that promotes international peace, economic development, safety, and cooperation. All this cooperation diminishes the conflicts and tensions among the states. It has more concern about how a country would gain its objectives by peaceful means. Neoliberalism mainly focuses on relative gains in which both the states get equal opportunities and equal interest. It presents economic interdependence, which ensures that neither side can effectively exploit the economic ties and relationship and cannot gain the advantage of another side politically. Interdependence reduces and prevents the war between two dependent states.

China is trying to engage in Afghanistan through economic investment; she wants to engage with the world through financial investment because trade and interdependence reduce the risk of war.

Beijing is strengthening its economic engagement with Afghanistan to gain its national interests. On the other hand, it reduces the security challenges for China. Beijing does not want instability in Afghanistan because war and uncertainty will affect Beijing's interests. It promotes peace and stability for BRI and its security which are the core objectives of China's foreign policy. It prevents the challenges through economic investments instead of using force and aggression. The fundamental focus of new liberalism is to improve inter-state collaboration in so many ways. Due to an anarchic international system, contemporary liberalism is synonymous with realism; yet, for liberalism, states are not the only main actors in world politics. Other key actors, such as individuals, interest groups, and international bodies, impact nations' decision-making. As a result, coordination can help lead to advantages; interdependence forms a win-win scenario for everyone; that's why China wants to enhance its engagement in Afghanistan to assist Afghanistan. Beijing wants to create a stable situation for the regional and international objectives.

Furthermore, China's new liberalism approach in Afghanistan is justified by providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and opposition against global poverty. The concept of China's emergence as a challenge to contemporary international regimes led by the United States began in the neo-realist ideology. It has since expanded to various viewpoints in International Relations. China is raising power and maintaining cordial ties with all states through economy mainly focusing on new liberalist school of thoughts on mutual benefits and cooperation, to stabilize the conditions and world economy. According to Chinese foreign policy, its strategies were quite optimistic towards Afghanistan by pursuing a foreign policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the neighbouring country.

#### **WAR IN AFGHANISTAN AND SECURITY CHALLENGES FOR CHINA**

Afghanistan has been plagued by conflict for the last four decades. Afghanistan was invaded by the Soviet Union for 10 years. Following the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the government faced eleven years of civil war and, last but not least, American military involvement. Long-term violence and warfare have wreaked havoc on the state, devastating the economy and leaving people destitute. Not only have these circumstances affected the country's peace and stability, but they also have security repercussions for neighbouring governments. However, because China and Afghanistan are connected by the Wakhan Corridor, bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan was a top priority for China, as it affects the western province of China in various ways. For instance, Afghanistan has emerged as one of the most significant sources of narcotics smuggled into China (Ahmad & Khan, 2021).

Second, the internal security situation of Xinjiang province was particularly susceptible that can be affected from Afghanistan owing to the presence of a large number of terrorist organisations during the last two decades. The Afghan–Xinjiang security nexus is established by the close relationships among the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and East Turkestan terrorist organisations, which may date back far before September 11, 2001. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which has consistently posed a security concern to the region of Xinjiang, is aided by terrorist groups. The worsening security situation has spread across China's cities. It has harmed China's social and political security, as well as other areas. Afghanistan's significance to China's national security is quite evident. If Afghanistan does not achieve peace, it will have to pay hefty protection fees to China. A kind of external impact on Xinjian and a crucial element make it more difficult to resolve the insecurity situation (Ali,

2020). According to numerous analysts, Daesh's purpose is not limited to Afghanistan, but entering China and Russia, as well as Pakistan and Iran, is its most significant objective; hence, Daesh poses a danger to China's interests (Dr. Muhammad Khan, personal communication, December, 12, 2021). The third is that war and instability in Afghanistan have had an impact on China, Pakistan, and the republics of Central Asia. Central Asian republics have a 2300-kilometer border with Afghanistan. Extremism and terrorism are a security threat for all five nations. Afghanistan has reminded Central Asian republics of an external destabilising element. China may have significant repercussions if terrorism and extremism completely expand to Central Asian republics, given China's extensive border with these nations. The inability to close these borders makes them more susceptible to the spread of terrorism and extremism. Any crises or acts of terrorism in Central Asian nations would threaten China's economic security, notably the safety of oil and natural gas pipelines (Zhuangzhi, 2007).

Afghanistan, located at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, is very important from a strategic perspective. For this reason, it is of tremendous geo-economics and geostrategic importance to China. According to a pessimistic viewpoint, Afghanistan may block off and imprison Central, South, and Western Asia but optimistically, Afghanistan's strategic positions are the key that can unlock the door to calibration and collaboration. After the Afghan lock is released, the Silk Road Economic Belt will establish economic, financial, and social linkages between these areas. If this software stays closed, all attempts to run it will be significantly impeded (Kunavut, Atsuko, & Dongjung, 2018).

### **Beijing's Security Concerns Regarding Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan**

Following the Taliban's capture of Kabul, many terrorist organisations, including the Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIM), united to become the ISKP, raising security concerns for China. China has significant economic investments in Afghanistan, such as the Amu Darya oil project and the Mis Aynak copper mine, and plans to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Kabul. These initiatives are dependent on the security situation and the Taliban's diplomatic contacts. Furthermore, despite Taliban government security guarantees, China is concerned about increased unrest in Xinjiang. An incident in Kunduz in October 2021 claimed credit for probable retribution by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province in reaction to growing Chinese support for the Taliban leadership. Uyghur militants affiliated with the East Turkmen organisation ETIM may find refuge under Taliban administration, heightening China's security concerns (Stone, 2021). Although it is too early to predict that China will establish full diplomatic ties with the Taliban administration in Afghanistan, it is critical for China to have complete security on its western border in order to prevent future danger. At the same time, it is unclear what China is willing to do or what it is capable of doing on its own or in collaboration with other regional or foreign forces to prevent ISKP Khorasan from fully operating in the area.

Similarly, the ISKP seeks to destabilise the Taliban and undermines the Taliban's tenuous relationships with regional nations via cross-border warfare. Recent ISKP propaganda focuses on the Taliban's contacts with China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Central Asian nations and exploits the continuing conflict in these countries. According to a former Afghan intelligence officer who asked not to be named, the ISKP has detailed how militants of diverse ethnic origins, including Baloch, Uzbek, and Uyghur, have carried out recent terrorist actions, including suicide bombings, as part of

its regional strategic plan. ISKP aspires to present itself a global jihadist organisation for security reasons and, more crucially, to cause problems in neighbouring nations.

With the above factors in mind, it is reasonable to expect that the IS-KP will pose various challenges to China in the near future, potentially jeopardising China's economic, social, and geopolitical interests in the area. Similarly, to neutralise the disclosed danger, China will need to engage in proactive interaction with regional players such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, the Central Asian Republics, and Afghanistan. The primary focus of Chinese Afghan policy is security concerns. They aim to keep extremism and radicalism in check in Afghanistan. The Chinese government is actively discouraging ETIM operations in Xinjiang Province. Their goal of establishing a new global order for Tianxia (the whole geographical globe) cannot be realised in a climate of constant struggle and insurrection. Second, they are using the BRI as a means of achieving Tianxia. Securing BRI security in Afghanistan is part of their bigger goal (Prof. Nasreen Ghufuran, personal communication, March 6, 2022).

### **Background of Terrorism and Militancy in China**

Beijing commonly blends political protest with terrorism; people who disagree with the sole authority of the Chinese Communist Party are constantly persecuted. The political opposition in Xinjiang, such as religious separatist terrorist groups, has resorted to violence to accomplish its goals. Xinjiang has spawned Western-style terrorist organisations for a variety of reasons. Western terrorism specialists describe terrorism as politically motivated violence committed against non-combatant targets by subnational organisations or clandestine operations, often to sway the public (Alan, 2007).

Due to the harsh and successful measures against insurgent forces in the Xinjiang sector, the ETIM and other terrorist groups have launched terrorist operations in China, notably in Xi'an province. The ETIM was created in 1940 by a group sponsored by the Soviet Union; throughout time, the organization's ideology, membership, and techniques have altered, but it still engages in violent confrontations with authorities to convey its ideals. The group remerged in the 1980s and began recruiting members for an assault that culminated in the 1990 seizure of a town. The Barren Rebellion was subsequently named after this event. Mashum was a prominent member of the Barren Rebellion, and he spent most of the 1990s in jail. After his previous release, he travelled overseas to seek financing and reformed ETIM in the late 1990s. In 1998, Mashum met with Osama bin Laden, and the ETIM relocated its headquarters to Afghanistan. He eventually built terrorist training centres. In 2003, Mashum was killed during a joint US-Pakistani attack. After the death of Mashum, ETIM has appointed a new head and begun its activities (Reed & Raschke, 2010).

China's terrorism is the outcome of the Chinese government's persecution of Uighur ethnic minority early after the country's creation. In Xining province, the suppression of terrorist activities has created a difficult environment. China has initiated operations against terrorist organisations, who have retreated to Afghanistan and Pakistan due to their ties to China. The unstable environment in Xinjiang has exacerbated ethnic Uighur grievances, insured the future formation of terrorist organisations, and will continue to pose a threat to China's government (Andrew, 2018). From the 1990s to 2016, a Chinese government official confirmed that multiple cases occurred. From 2008 to 2015, the number of terrorist activities increased by a factor of 10, reaching over

1,000. Throughout the previous several decades, Xingjing Province has been subjected to calamity assaults. The province saw the emergence of the security state via increased monitoring, securitization, and the creation of stringent re-education centres.

### **China Religious Repression of Uighur Muslim**

Uyghurs are Turkic-speaking people who reside mostly in China's northwest. This area is linked to nations in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. China has designated the region as the Xinjiang province. China desires peace on its perimeter, and Afghanistan's peace is China's current top goal. Since there was terrorism in the area after September 11, which had a spillover effect on China. Numerous terrorist activities have occurred in the Chinese province of Sichuan with the participation of terrorist gangs and separatist organisations (who work for China) located in Afghanistan and doing terrorist activities against Xinjiang province. This became a significant fear of China (Dr. Muhammad Khan, personal communication, December 12, 2021). Uyghurs account for 1 percent of China's total population. In the past, they were the majority in the province of Xining. The territory that China governed upon its independence and where China has encouraged Han Chinese to migrate to Xinjiang due to the region's economic growth. Due to the Han's migration, tensions between the Han majority and the Uighur minority have increased. Since 2000, Uyghurs have fought unfair treatment by the majority of Han, resulting in many riots, including one in 2009 in which 200 people were murdered. In recent years, the Chinese government has retaliated against prominent Uyghurs with widespread persecution, claiming that separatist-fueled terrorist organisations were responsible for the violence. In 2016, the government implemented surveillance and enforcement measures against the Uyghurs, making Xinjiang one of the most closely monitored regions in the world. Uyghurs were prohibited from fasting during Ramadan, giving their children traditional Muslim names, and growing "abnormal beards." In opposition to these crimes in Xining, the ETIM and Uighur Muslims have united to establish an autonomous Turkistan (Marim, 2022). China's animosity towards the Uyghurs extends back longer than previous decades. As part of society-centered warfare, a cultural campaign aimed at reducing and restricting all aspects of Uyghur life is conducted. The use of the Uyghur language is banned at Xining University and other academic institutions; Uyghur Muslims are compelled to send their children to Mandarin-speaking schools. Muslims are prohibited from wearing Islamic garb and adhering to Islamic customs, principles, and standards. In the public sector, Uyghurs are not authorised to wear beards or facial hair; however, they are free to demonstrate their Islamic beliefs. In Xinxiang, Islamic religious activities are severely curtailed to combat what China has labelled extremism, and Uyghurs formed insurgencies (Zambelis, 2010). These measures indicate how far Beijing was willing to go to repress religious dissent in Xinjiang; ethnic tensions escalated as a result of religious persecution. To confront Beijing's radicalism, Xinjiang's religious ceremonies were severely regulated. At the age of 18, individuals were prohibited from praying in mosques. In madrasas, religious activities were forbidden, and imams were not permitted to discuss spiritual topics. Few young people have united and formed a movement to teach Uyghur culture and the Muslim religion. Eventually, the activity was halted, preventing the teaching of the Islamic religion (Clarke, 2018).

In the 1990s, bombings, murders, and riots in Xinjiang indicated to Beijing that a separatist movement was gathering momentum. The inability of local party leaders to halt the tide of dissent, resulted in nationalists from the Uighur ethnic group seized control of local government



organisations from the Chinese Communist Party, while opposition members were permitted to organise in mosques and religious institutions. The terrorist events of September 11 gave Beijing the rationale to change officials at all levels, drastically enhance military and police presence in Xinjiang, and establish a totalitarian state in which all activities were supposed to be watched by the secret police. Before the riots of 2009, this counterinsurgency strategy looked to be effective. China's aggressive counterinsurgency measures blur the boundaries between political and terrorist activity. In addition, they cannot differentiate between religious conviction and extremism. In Xinjiang, Chinese officials often refer to "the three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, mixing the three concepts symbolically and aiming to obfuscate the distinction between terrorism and nonviolent dissent. The Chinese regime profits from the Western conception of terrorism being confused with political activity. It gives them the freedom to classify any political activity as terrorism and to impose ever-increasing levels of interference into the lives of ethnic Uighurs (Mumford, 2018).

### **China's Struggles for Stabilizing the Xinjiang**

To appease the Uighurs in Xinjiang, the People's Republic of China used economic success. Xinjiang is geographically adjacent to the vast energy sources of Central Asia and has 30percent of China's indigenous oil reserves. The Westward Development project includes connecting highways, pipelines for oil from Xinjiang, and a power and commercial hub with Central Asia. China's state-owned investment banks and businesses have invested a great deal of time, money, and effort in importing oil, gas, and trade from Central Asia. Although Xinjiang's population does not warrant the development of major roads, their presence improves military reaction times in the case of an outbreak of violence. It is believed that the wealth has not been dispersed equitably, despite the fact that more money in the region has enhanced the standard of living. This impression has fuelled the notion that China's economic development is essentially another tool of repression (Andrew, 2018). Therefore, China's primary interest in the present situation is Afghan peace. Because the BRI, their aim to develop the Silk Road, and their investment in CPEC are all contingent on stability in Afghanistan. Work on the Central Asian BRI is infeasible due to the risk of insecurity in Afghanistan, and CPEC will also be unsafe because Pakistan shares borders with Afghanistan, and any instability between these states could endanger Pakistan, posing a threat to the Chinese. As a result, peace in Afghanistan is China's top priority. In addition, China is worried about preventing the growth of Islamic radicalism (Dr. Amna Mahmood, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

### **ETIM Militancy in China and its Connections with other Non-State Actors**

Several violent and nebulous groups claim to represent the Uighur ethnic minority, while the ETIM is a proscribed international group. On the basis of its fundamentalist Islamic beliefs, the ETIM's nationalist objective was to create the state of East Turkistan and, ultimately, the Caliphate. The "divinely assigned duty" of jihad was one of the group's core tenets; however, they concentrated on China instead of the West. The organisation promotes violence to attain its goals, and its language is very suggestive of Al Qaeda connections. The group thought that China was a reasonably proximate opponent that had to be subdued before the West could be annihilated (Putz, 2016). The relative calm of the early 2000s started to dissipate in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Government tensions were so intense that ethnic Uighurs were forbidden from booking hotel rooms during the Olympics in Beijing. In April, a woman on a plane bound for Beijing attempted to

start a fire; in May, the ETIM claimed responsibility for bus fires in Shanghai; and in August, police officers in Kashgar were attacked with a grenade and killed. ETIM threatened future attacks on the Olympics, which did not occur but strengthened their international profile and attracted attention to their Uighur nationalist cause (Saidazimova, 2008). Due to the rivalry between the United States and China, throughout the United States' almost two-decade occupation of Afghanistan, Washington exerted pressure on Kabul to keep Beijing at bay. In addition, the United States is accused of backing terrorist organisations such as ETIM and ISIS-K, both of which represent grave dangers to the national security of China. The linked Afghan Civil War and National Liberation War made it impossible for China to engage in economic investment cooperation with Afghanistan on the same level as with its other global partners (Andre Korybko, personal communication, March 9, 2022). The 2009 riots were not regarded as "terrorist" and were prompted by events before the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. From these occurrences, it may be concluded that the ETIM is an ineffectual terrorist group. The PRC's societal struggle against the three evils counterterrorism campaign has effectively prevented terrorist activities, according to this viewpoint. Another conclusion reached by the ETIM is that other groups are unable to properly organise and conduct strikes in China. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and its successor, the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP), are formed by Beijing to legitimise its persecution in Xinjiang, while according to a second theory; the ETIM has shifted the majority of its operations to Pakistan and Afghanistan (Giglio, 2014).

China has publicly linked ETIM to al-Qaeda and the Taliban since the 1990s; however, ETIM has refuted these claims. According to a Chinese government assessment released in January 2002, the ETIM received funds, weapons, and help from the terrorist group. According to the poll, members of the ETIM were trained and supplied by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan before being sent to Xinjiang; al-Qaeda has created a training cell for the ETIM in Afghanistan. Mahsum, the leader of ETIM, denied the allegation, stating that the group had no links to the Taliban or al-Qaeda. Atrocities committed against Uyghurs in Xinjiang have driven the most insurgents and separatists into volatile neighbouring states, such as Pakistan, where they have established cordial ties with and even led jihadist coalitions affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, according to an article published in 2013 by expert Philip Potter in *Strategic Studies Quarterly*. As a result, terrorist groups are anticipated to increase their relations with a large network of overseas terrorist organizations, perhaps improving their capabilities (Xu, Fletcher, & Bajoria, 2014).

The United States suspected that ETIM and al-Qaeda had a link. According to the State Department, ETIM received "support, training, and funding" from al-Qaeda and fought with the organisation against U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. In August 2002, the Bush administration labelled ETIM a terrorist organization. Twenty-two Uighurs were captured in an Afghan camp and detained at the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay. In the end, they were exonerated of all terrorism-related accusations in several countries, including Albania, Bermuda, Palau, Switzerland, and Pakistan. Analysts estimate that hundreds of Uighurs previously joined al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan (Xu, Fletcher, & Bajoria, 2014).

### **The ISIS Threat to China Interests**

In the provinces of Latakia and Idlib, Uyghur jihadist militants operating in Syria are engaged in an ongoing conflict against the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). A source indicates that there are between

1,000 and 5,000 TIP militants in Syria fighting with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, also known as Jabhat al-Nusra. In 2017 and 2018, between 3,000 and 5,000 Uyghur militants and their families were reported in Syria and Iraq, according to a separate study. In Syria, it is believed that the number of Uighurs aligned with ISIS would be far lower. Between 2013 and 2014, the Islamic State camp in Raqqa was reportedly home to over 400 Uyghur families, including 1,200 combatants (Blanchard, 2017). Despite this, relations between ISIS and the Uyghurs seemed to worsen in 2017 as ISIS encountered regional and military opposition. The complete absence of Uighurs from IS's messaging during this time period lends credence to the aforementioned assertion. Thus, in the Kunduz assault on October 8, 2021, the purported ties between ISIS and Muhammad al-Uighuri, an alternative to Quenya, allude to the possibility of ties between ISIS and Uighurs interested in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

Importantly, the Kunduz strike has long demonstrated the ISKP's regard for Uyghur displeasure with the Taliban government and the former's value to the latter's contingents in Afghanistan. Given that the Turkistan Islamic Party has criticised the ISIS caliphate as unlawful and illegitimate in the past, the statement seems to be an effort by the ISKP to court the Uyghur population in Afghanistan. Given the aforementioned incident, it is likely that IS will create lasting ties with the Uyghur in the future to harm China's regional interests. In addition, the pattern of assaults by individuals claiming Central Asian ancestry or having direct or indirect ties to ISIS, which is located in Syria and Iraq, poses a threat to the established order in the area of Central Asia bordering China. These developments inside the Islamic State or al-Qaeda may influence the security and stability of Central Asia, posing a risk to China's regional security. In addition, parallel to Afghanistan, other regions of jihadist struggle, such as West Africa and the Sahel region have emerged as more enticing launching pads for international terrorist combatants.

Similarly, the assault communications reveal a shift in the ISKP's attitude towards China. By attacking a targeted government in its messaging strategy at a time when China is facing international pressure and criticism from the United States and its allies over its human rights record and treatment of Uyghurs, the attacks are more likely to garner attention, depending on the larger context. In the past, Islamic State made no direct, explicit reference to Uyghurs or Xinjiang following an assault on Chinese citizens or interests. However, ISKP's remarks after the Kunduz incident demonstrate its determination to leverage larger geopolitical situations involving China to further its goal. In addition, as China's global footprint grows, the redirection of transnational armed networks from Syria and Iraq would exacerbate Beijing's security concerns in the battle against terrorism.

### **China's Strategic Objectives in Afghanistan**

China has several strategic interests in Afghanistan that have influenced its foreign policy towards the country. One of the key interests is related to security concerns, especially regarding the potential for terrorism and separatism to spread into its western Xinjiang region. Therefore, China has been keen to maintain stability in Afghanistan and promote peace talks between the government and the Taliban. Additionally, Afghanistan is a crucial node in China's Belt and Road Initiative, providing access to important energy and transport routes that could facilitate economic integration between China and the region. Moreover, China has also been seeking to deepen its engagement with Afghanistan to counter the influence of the United States and other Western

powers in the region. Overall, China's strategic interests in Afghanistan are centered on promoting regional stability, economic development, and countering Western influence.

It requires proactive diplomacy to protect national interests from the wickedness of other governments. So, what drives China's Afghanistan diplomacy? What is Beijing's strategic objective? Both international and domestic factors are discussed. The international component derives from worries about a vacuum left by the US and NATO withdrawals from Afghanistan, which causes uncertainty about the country's future and poses threats to regional security. Consequently, China is compelled to impose more stringent restrictions. China began the BRI initiative and intends to expand into Central and South Asia. Afghanistan's participation in the BRI project is crucial for its reconstruction, particularly in terms of infrastructure development and connectivity. Afghanistan is one of the geographic intersections between China, Iran, and western Asia. Geographically, there are many options: going straight to Iran through Pakistan and Afghanistan; travelling via Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan; and finally, Iran. China favours a feasible commercial route to Iran that travels through Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Due to its short distance, this route lends China the opportunity to construct projects in Tajikistan and Afghanistan (Alexander, 2016). Beijing has economic goals in Afghanistan, including investments in the development of the Amu Daria oil field and the Aynak copper mine. Both initiatives have hurdles, and China is in continual communication with the Afghan government in an effort to achieve its objectives. China has never been involved in the development of Afghanistan's domestic politics or attempted to mediate its internal conflicts. This stance seems to be altering, with indications that China is eager to break Afghanistan's stalemate and progress the country's political solution. "For a long time, Afghanistan has endured the turmoil, poverty, and chaos of war," the Chinese said in various venues (Tiezzi, 2015). This phase must reach its conclusion. Furthermore, China views Afghanistan from two different perspectives and goals.

Afghanistan can be a supportive territory for China to advance its belt and road initiative. In the future, China can use Afghan territory for economic gains that will benefit both countries because of presence of oil and gas which China requires a great deal of and China shares a 67-kilometer border with Afghanistan. Therefore, the new regimes of Xi Jinping and the Taliban see Afghanistan favourably (Dr. Muhammad Khan, personal communication, December 12, 2021).

Prior to the strategic goals, the security objectives were centred on limiting threats emerging from Afghanistan, such as those presented by pro-separatist militants in Xinjiang and, more recently, ISIS-K. The strategic objectives related to incorporating Afghanistan into a central part of the BRI via the de facto northern expansion of CPEC into Afghanistan and beyond (N-CPEC+) and potentially exploring the viability of the so-called "Persian Corridor" for connecting China with its new 25-year strategic partners in Iran via Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Also, China may want to buy some of Afghanistan's rare earth minerals, which are said to be worth \$1 trillion (Andrew Korybko, personal communication, December 14, 2020).

### **Geostrategic Importance of Afghanistan for China**

Afghanistan is gaining prominence in China's geostrategic competition as well as in the strategies of other nations. Long ago, Beijing was concerned about the size of the US military presence on its borders while cooperating with the US in its outreach to the Taliban, and it was concerned that a

quick US withdrawal would stymie intra-Afghan talks. China requested confirmation from the United States that its military presence in Afghanistan would be restricted for a period of time. China sought to thwart U.S. activities on its western boundaries, especially in Afghanistan and Central Asia, which have been dubbed the "New Great Game." Beijing sought to strengthen its position as the leading economic power in Central Asia while enhancing its military force projection capabilities. Due to the fact that the former Soviet republics are a part of Russia's sphere of influence, both goals have collided from Russian standpoint. China increasingly saw India as a competitor in Afghanistan, a development that was essential to India's geopolitical conflict with China and the United States (Gang, 2005). China desires a peaceful neighbourhood because if it is caught in an unstable neighbourhood, it would be unable to pursue its international and global goals or have a global voice or influence. These are China's desired strategic objectives, which should continue unbroken. If Afghanistan becomes a rival state to China, the Chinese, who are already dealing problems with Japan and India, will face a multiplied force that will constrain and restrain China's strategic pursuit of some of its goals to become a superpower (Dr. Muhammad Khan, personal communication, December 12, 2021). India adopted a strategy of "soft power" towards Afghanistan and invested billions of dollars to further its national objectives. Regarding economic help and initiatives in Afghanistan, they include trade, infrastructure, energy, transportation, agriculture, communications, education, healthcare, and science and technology. India backed all of these improvements in Afghanistan (Fair, 2010).

A consortium of Indian companies headed by Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) outbid China to lease a massive iron oxide deposit in Hajigak. India is wary of China's stance and concerned about preserving good relations with Pakistan. China seems to be ecstatic that India and Afghanistan did not sign a mutual defence treaty prior to 2014 and that its prospects are now dim. China was glad that the possibilities of an Indian military presence on Afghan territory were minimal, a situation that China did not want to see given its strategic rivalry with India and strong connections with Pakistan. India is the only former member of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance that has not made peace with the Taliban and also prefers to assist China. The Taliban have frequently informed China that it would welcome, support, and safeguard Chinese investments in Afghanistan, limiting India's rivalry for commercial contracts in Afghanistan.

### **Peaceful Afghanistan is Vital for China BRI**

Afghanistan's peace and stability are China's main concerns because the BRI project cannot be successful until regional peace prevails, particularly in Afghanistan. Observing the Chinese strategy, its immediate priority is to expand the BRI to various regions. If peace did not prevail in Afghanistan, the mission would fail. On the other hand, Westerners are attempting to create hostile and unstable conditions for the BRI's development. If the factors that contribute to the maintenance of US global dominance are evaluated, there are multiple reasons for the United States' ascent to superpower status, but peace and stability in the country's periphery are the most significant. The same is true for China: if China wishes to become a superpower, Afghanistan's security is essential (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021).

China's foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan primarily centre on two factors.

### **Xinjiang Stability is linked with Afghanistan**

Xinjiang is strategically important for China because the eight countries are directly connected with Xinjiang province: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. BRI projects first take place from Xinjiang province. If there is instability and chaos in Afghanistan, then Chinese economic growth would be curtailed. China will not only face economic setbacks but it will be disconnected from its neighbouring states.

### **Chinese fundamental concern in Afghanistan**

China has adopted its foreign policy towards Afghanistan with these four points; safeguarding security, developing the economy, improving the governance, and mutual respect of territorial integrity. These are vital interests for the Chinese engagements with the Taliban 2.0.

### **CONCLUSION**

China's security apprehension and strategic interests in Afghanistan are multi-faceted and complex. The threat of terrorism and separatism in its western Xinjiang region has driven China's efforts to maintain stability in Afghanistan and promote peace talks between the government and the Taliban. At the same time, Afghanistan's location as a crucial node in China's Belt and Road Initiative has made it a strategic economic partner for China. Additionally, China's desire to counter the influence of the United States and other Western powers in the region has also contributed to its engagement with Afghanistan. Overall, China's approach to Afghanistan reflects its broader strategic interests in the region and its efforts to promote economic development and regional stability while safeguarding its own security concerns. The Chinese goal of a new global order for the entire Tianxia (geographic) globe cannot be attained in a climate of on-going strife and rebellion situation particularly in Afghanistan and generally on its borders. In addition, the China emergence is dependent on its BRI projects which are used as a tool for connecting the region as whole on economic grounds. Therefore, the protection of the BRI is a vital component of China's wider purpose. However, the close connections of terrorist organizations between ETIM and terrorist organizations operating in Afghanistan, is becoming an obstacle in the way of China's rise. Therefore, there is an urgent need to address the Chinese concerns regarding the connections of ETIM and other groups such as ISSI and Al-Qaida, if Taliban really want to enhance its diplomatic engagements with the world's second largest economy. The reason is that these terrorists' organizations will have regional repercussions and the ability to indulge the neighbouring states once again in proxy wars.

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