



# RCAS Commentary

## **China-Afghanistan Relationships: A Tale of Strategic and Economic Compulsions**

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November 12, 2023

## About RCAS

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RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

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## **China-Afghanistan Relationships: A Tale of Strategic and Economic Compulsions**

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People's Republic of China (PRC) has always been cautious and selective about her relationships with the neighboring, regional and extra regional states. Owing to the unique political system, strategic culture and social fabric, China has always dealt with the other states as per her requirements of security paradigm, national interests and prospective opportunities of cooperation. China-Afghanistan bilateral relationships have been a combination of all the above-mentioned policy compulsions during the last few decades.



▲ Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, political chief of Afghanistan's Taliban in Tianjin, July 28, 2021. (Xinhua/Li Ran)

The perpetual instability and uncertain situations in Afghanistan have severe impacts on the internal situations of the neighboring countries. China also shares a border with Afghanistan in the northern province of Badakhshan through Xinjiang province. China has been facing issues of instability and freedom struggle in the Xinjiang province since long due to the presence of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

ETIM tried to establish an independent state for Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province. During the first tenure of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, popularly known as Taliban, ETIM was driven out of China and got refuge in Afghanistan where Taliban provided them with sanctuaries in 1998. Upon the Chinese insistence, the then Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Umar assured China of not letting Afghan land to be used against any state including China, and forbidden ETIM from attacking China from Afghan land.

During the first tenure of Taliban government (1996-2001), although China had not officially recognized their government, yet media reports suggest that she maintained interactions with them, as high-level Chinese delegations including scholars and diplomats have visited Afghanistan for cooperation in development sector, resuming direct flights between Urumqi and Kabul, repairing of worn out or damaged power grid stations and humanitarian assistance. As soon as in October 2001, the US under the shadow of NATO invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban government, the US installed Hamid Karzai as new Afghan president and China officially recognized Afghanistan's new government. In December 2002, China was one of the six neighboring states of Afghanistan, who signed the Kabul Declaration meant for maintaining good-neighborly relations with the Hamid Karzai government. She pledged 150million USD for assisting the Karzai regime in the coming five years. China also provided about 197million USD to the Afghan government in the period between 2002-13. All these commitments were part of China's Official Development Assistance (ODA) package for Afghanistan. The Peoples Republic signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and good-neighborly relations with Afghanistan in 2006, but tried to remain out of Afghanistan's affairs during the presence of NATO and confined herself to a limited role of investment in the development projects and security affairs. China, through various development firms have got 30-year mining project in Mes Aynak region of Logar province in 2008 and Amu Darya Oil basin project in 2011.

Moreover, when Barrack Hussain Obama won the presidential elections in the US and announced his intentions of withdrawing NATO forces from Afghanistan; China decided to explore new avenues in Afghanistan and accelerated her engagements with the Afghan authorities especially in security affairs. She provided assistance to the Afghan security forces and helped in training the Afghan National Army. The American government during that period started negotiations with the Afghan insurgents and resistance forces led by Taliban. China fully supported the initiative and provided assistance and facilitations along with Pakistan to bring Taliban to the negotiating table. China was the first country who announced a country-specific special envoy for Afghanistan, followed by the US, Russia and Pakistan. She was present as an observer in Pakistan's hosted and facilitated Murree Peace Talks in July 2015. China was an integral part of Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), meant for bringing Taliban to the negotiating table and reach out to a negotiated settlement before withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. China also hosted various meetings of Afghan Taliban in the cities of Urumqi, Tianjin and Beijing. The other regional states also have a considerable say in Afghan affairs especially the future of Afghanistan, so Russia also started Moscow Process for playing her role in resolving the Afghan conflict through negotiated settlement, where China was also present as an active actor in the region. Apart from political engagements, in 2016, China offered over 70million USD, military equipment, and vehicles to Afghanistan for helping her military. China was present in Doha Peace Agreement between Taliban and the US on February 29, 2020 at Doha Qatar. She also hosted a high-profile meeting of about nine Taliban leaders in July 2021 in Tianjin, just one month before the Taliban took over control of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. In the aforementioned meeting Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi termed Taliban as a political reality and critical military group that is expected to play a crucial role in the restoration of peace, and reconstruction process in Afghanistan. Few days before the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan, while responding to a question, Chinese spokesperson of the foreign

ministry announced that China was ready to work with the Taliban and continue good-neighborly and friendly relations with Afghanistan.

China also took the initiative of starting Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue among Chinese, Afghan and Pakistan's foreign ministers. The last session of Trilateral Foreign Ministers Dialogue was held in Islamabad in May 2023, where counterparts of the three countries met and discussed various issues pertaining to Afghanistan. China has now sent a dedicated diplomat to Afghanistan without formally recognizing the Taliban government, which shows China's commitment and seriousness about Afghan affairs. As China has to deal with all the regional states for ensuring regional connectivity for materializing BRI in its letter and spirit, so she has to look into Afghan affairs with a keen eye and ensure peace, stability and harmony among various stakeholders. She has announced extension of CPEC to Afghanistan, which will definitely mean a lot for Afghanistan in the economic and regional connectivity perspective. She is engaged in various developmental projects, construction, widening and carpeting of roads and bridges in Afghanistan for making it an economically stable and interconnected for realizing the potential of Afghanistan as a hub of transit trade. These economic projects will definitely help the land-locked country to benefit from the ports of Gwadar and port Qasim in Pakistan and Chabahar in Iran.

To cut it short, China-Afghanistan relationships have always been driven by the security concerns of China and are now shifting towards her gigantic economic projects meant for ensuring regional connectivity and transforming Afghanistan and the region to economic hub. She has been working on transformation of Afghanistan's agricultural sector, establishment of industrial park in the outskirts of Kabul, initiated 'Pine-nut Corridor', and helping Afghans to find alternatives to opium production. China has been open to all for helping Afghanistan, first in overcoming the country's security matters, developmental projects, restoring peace and stability and now leading the economic projects there.

Cited as Mairaj ul Hamid Nasri, “China-Afghanistan Relationships: A Tale of Strategic and Economic Compulsions”, *RCAS Commentary*, Nov. 12, 2023.

## About Author



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