

Sino-Afghan relations: a self-interested approach underpinning security and strategic issues in the region

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Sino-Afghan relations have been marked by cooperation in a number of areas, including trade, investment and security. Indeed, Afghanistan's important geostrategic position has caught China's interest regarding its regional strategy. As a result, there is one central issue that drives Chinese policy towards Afghanistan: security.

When the Taliban seized power in August 2021, to the great displeasure of several Western powers, China kept its embassy opened in Kabul, where its ambassador was still present, but repatriated 210 of its nationals. However, China does not officially recognise the Taliban regime, waiting to see the composition of a future government that it hopes to be "open, inclusive and broadly representative".

Since the Taliban returned to power, China has expressed reservations about the presence of terrorist groups in the region, particularly because of their ability to destabilise both the country itself and neighbouring regions, including the Chinese province of Xinjiang, which is home to a large Uighur Muslim community. Beijing fears a proliferation of jihadist networks that could destabilise the province. China's objective is to ensure the stability of its borders, so that Afghanistan does not become a refuge for "Uighur terrorists". Although China does not officially recognise the regime in question, the Chinese Foreign Minister at the time, Wang Yi, acknowledged that the Taliban were "a crucial political and military force in Afghanistan". This explains the security challenges on the borders, since the Taliban have historically had strong links with the East Turkestan Islamist Movement (Xinjiang).

Historically, the People's Republic of China has maintained diplomatic relations with Afghanistan since 1955, a long-standing relationship which shows that it is far from absent from the theatre of Afghan. It has to be said that the post-September 11 period marked a turning point in Sino-Afghan relations insofar as China embarked on a real policy of pragmatic engagement with the new Afghan authorities. Even if the Westerners had taken centre stage in Afghanistan, the audience acquired by China in this country since 2001 is not negligible. This trend has grown and gained in visibility in the years since. The Taliban have been ostracized from the international community by the West since 2021 and have seized the opportunity to exchange views with a strategic partner that counts on the international stage.

The situation has therefore changed since 2001. On the one hand, the withdrawal of the Americans from Afghanistan has made China uneasy insofar as the American presence guaranteed a certain stability in the country and safeguarded its security interests. Indeed, since the return of the Taliban to power, China fears that a terrorist axis is forming between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which would compromise the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the pioneering projects of the "New Silk Roads", in which Beijing has invested over 50 billion dollars. This corridor links the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to the port of Gwadar in south-west Pakistan, which is of geostrategic interest because it ensures control over the energy routes around the Strait of Hormuz. In doing so, the security of operations in Afghanistan counts as much as that with Pakistan and other neighbouring countries. The Taliban government thus represents a destabilising tool vis-à-vis Pakistan that China wishes to contain at all costs. On the other hand, Beijing has skillfully seized successive opportunities to cement diplomatic relations with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The most notable opportunity is the exacerbation of the Sino-American trade war. In a way, by acting in this way, Americans have pushed Afghanistan "into the arms" of the Chinese, which greatly

benefits bilateral relations between the two countries. The disengagement of the United States from Afghanistan, and a fortiori from the Middle East, leaves China free to play a significant role, notably by adopting a pro-Muslim policy on the international stage, paradoxically at odds with its national policy. The various trade and energy agreements, and the pro-Palestinian stance in the Middle East conflict, are noteworthy instances.

By extension, in order to solidify its relationship with the Taliban government, Beijing recently offered humanitarian aid to Afghanistan following the earthquake on October 7th. China's commitment is unequivocal, as shown by this extract from the press conference held on October 9th 2023 by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning: "As a close neighbour and sincere friend of Afghanistan, China deeply sympathises with the Afghan people who are suffering from the disaster. We have expressed our sympathy at various levels and offered our assistance to the country through many channels. The Red Cross Society of China has decided to provide emergency humanitarian cash assistance to the Afghan Red Crescent. We will continue to do our utmost to assist Afghanistan according to its needs and help the Afghan people overcome the difficulties".

At regional level, Afghanistan, far from being isolated, has been a member of various multilateral institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) since 2012 as an observer state, enabling it to take part in discussions on economic and security issues with other member states, including China. The country is also a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an organisation of Muslim-majority countries that aims to promote solidarity among Islamic nations by protecting the rights and interests of the Islamic world. Finally, the country has been a full member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since 2007, promoting economic and regional cooperation.

On the trade front, Sino-Afghan relations have been progressing since the fall of Kabul. Trade between the two countries is increasing thanks to the customs agreement signed between the two countries in August 2014 and renewed in December 2022¹. Afghan shipments to China, which focus mainly on fresh and dried fruit, wool, and minerals, rose by 56.4% between December 2021 and 2022. Beijing's support for the Afghan economy underlines China's pro-Muslim policy in response to Western sanctions but does not presage a real strengthening of trade relations between the two countries. Indeed, Afghanistan is a second-rate trading partner from Beijing's point of view. The domestic market is too weak and Chinese shipments of electrical equipment and rubber products to the country remain anecdotal.

Nevertheless, China is one of the main investors in the country. According to the Taliban administration's Minister of Industry and Commerce, Chinese FDI flows have reached \$2 billion since the collapse of the former Afghan regime. China is showing an interest in Afghanistan's natural resources.

Gochin, a Chinese company, would like to invest more than 10 billion dollars in the exploitation of lithium deposits in Afghanistan. The company is also proposing to rehabilitate the infrastructure of the Salang Pass (north of Kabul) and to dig a tunnel within 7 months to facilitate the transport of lithium. Gochin is also proposing to build a hydroelectric dam near the deposit and to tarmac the road networks in the Laghman region. Although these investments are substantial, they are still anecdotal compared with the scale of Afghanistan's lithium deposits, which are estimated to be worth more than \$1 trillion.

¹ Although no free trade agreement has yet been signed between the two countries, in August 2014 a partnership was agreed, granting a 0% tariff rate on exports of certain Afghan products to China. China renewed this commitment in December 2022, and currently 98% of products from Afghanistan benefit from zero tariff lines.

Lithium is not the only mineral of interest to Beijing, and the Afghan subsoil is said to be rich in resources such as gold, uranium, bauxite, coal, iron ore, rare earths, chromium, lead and zinc. Other projects are also underway, including a copper mine and an oil field². However, security instability in the country, the lack of infrastructure and the absence of data on the extent of resources in Afghanistan remain risk factors for Beijing, which is concentrating on its other strategic partners in the region, notably Russia for gas.

Sino-Afghan trade cooperation is also part of a regional connectivity perspective directly linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. At the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue, held in Islamabad on May 6th 2023, the respective foreign ministers of Beijing and Islamabad reaffirmed their commitment to pursuing regional cooperation by including Afghanistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This extension could result in the construction of the North-South Trans-Afghan Railway, linking Peshawar in Pakistan, the Afghan capital and the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, on the border with Uzbekistan. The east-west axis is also important for Beijing. This is reflected in the development of a new transport route in Central Asia. Launched in 2014, the "Five-State Rail Corridor" is a rail link over 2,100 kilometres long that will cross Iran, Afghanistan³, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China. This link would give China access to the ports of Mahshahr, Chabahar and Bandar Abbas in Iran, providing a direct link to the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Although progress on the project remains limited, an important first step was taken with the passage of the first freight convoy on the Khaf-Herat railway on May 9th 2023. This railway line currently stretches 225 kilometres across the steppes of Iran and Afghanistan. Negotiations are also underway to reopen the historic Silk Road trade routes, particularly the Wakhan corridor, a strip of land south of Tajikistan linking Afghanistan to the Xinjiang region of China.

Although China is somewhat reticent about Islamic morality, as long as this bilateral relationship remains as it was under the previous government, China will continue to lead this partnership. If the security situation stabilises, Afghanistan's geographical position will open up major transit opportunities for Chinese goods or goods destined for the Chinese market to or from Iran, the Persian Gulf or the Indian Ocean. In this way, China wishes to preserve its interests in the region while protecting its border with Afghanistan.

² In January 2023, Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) signed a contract to operate the 4.5 km² Amu Darya oil field in the north of the country. The agreement also provides for investments of \$150 million in the first year and \$540 million over the following three years. At the same time, the Chinese company Metallurgical Group Corp (MCC) wants to take over the operation of the Aynak mine. In 2008, MCC signed a 30-year operating contract for this copper deposit, estimated to contain more than 5.5 million tonnes. However, there have been a number of setbacks, and operations are currently at a standstill.

³ Approximately 50% of the entire railway line, some 1,148 kilometres, will cross Afghanistan, passing through the provinces of Kunduz, Balkh, Jawozjan, Faryab, Badghis and Herat.