



## **China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan after 2001 AD**

**Mawladad Tobagar**

Wadie Helmand University, Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan

---

### **Abstract**

The official diplomatic relationship between China and Afghanistan has a half-century history. The Imperial Government of Afghanistan recognized the People's Republic of China in 1955, and diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and China were formally established. China did not recognize the Taliban Regime between "2001-1996", but until then had indirect relations with the Taliban through Pakistan. The main purpose of this study is to examine China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan after 2001. This research is written by the descriptive-analytical method. The results of the study show that China's attention to Afghanistan after 2001 and China's entry into the political arena of Afghanistan, indicates China's foreign policy to play an active role in Afghanistan and activated its foreign policy towards the Afghan government and help for Reconstruction of Afghanistan. It also maintained a relationship with the Taliban to protect its economic interests in Afghanistan. Given China's geopolitical and proximity to Afghanistan, four important political, strategic, geographical, and economic features are important to China, and Beijing hopes to pursue its foreign policy with the Taliban government to further its interests after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** foreign policy, government of Afghanistan, Taliban, 2001, China, Afghanistan

---

### **Introduction**

In the field of international relations, all countries need to establish relations with other governments for different reasons. Based on this issue, each country formulates principles in general for its foreign policy and principles specifically for specific relations with a specific country and creates its strategies based on the same principles. Thus, the behavior of actors in the field of international relations is influenced by the set of principles that each country creates for itself.

Understanding these principles is one of the most important issues in the field of international relations, which helps to predict the behavior of countries with various international issues.

Afghanistan has a special place in China's foreign policy due to its common borders. China's primary interest in Afghanistan is to curb extremism in Xinjiang province. The security interaction between Afghanistan and Xinjiang is obvious, and Afghanistan, as China's neighbor, has a greater impact on Xinjiang security. China suffers from drug trafficking and insecurity in Afghanistan, which is why Beijing seeks to strengthen its active foreign policy and strengthen Afghanistan's infrastructure to prevent insecurity in the country and its spread to the region and Xinjiang. China's foreign policy goals in Afghanistan are to control Xinjiang Islamists and separatists, as well as to protect its economic plans.

China has worked hard to get Pakistan to play a positive role in facilitating the Taliban's peace talks with the Afghan government. While Beijing did not want the US and NATO to have a permanent presence in Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the Chinese feared that the complete withdrawal of NATO troops from Central Asia would contribute to instability and the growth of terrorism in the region. Thus, the importance of Afghanistan in China's foreign policy and diplomacy is increasing.

Therefore, this study seeks to determine China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan after 2001, and it is based on the hypothesis that China's positive engagement with Afghanistan will develop China's strategic, economic, and security interests that are directly related to China's national security concerns and economic opportunities.

### **China-Afghanistan relations before 2001**

Afghanistan's relations with China have been good for a long time and there have been comprehensive trade between the two countries (Nazeri, February 5, 2018) <sup>[8]</sup>. Based on these good relations, the historical Silk Road has been formed, which has been a sign of the historical relations between the two countries ([www.iranica.com](http://www.iranica.com))

#### **1. Political relations between Afghanistan and China in 1955**

Diplomatic and political relations between China and Afghanistan were formally established after the Mao Zedong revolution in 1955, (Vice Minister 1, 7 January 1980) <sup>[11]</sup> which prompted Chinese Prime Minister Chuan Lai to visit Afghanistan. These relations made Afghanistan one of the first countries to recognize the communist regime of Mao Zedong.

During this important visit, the Chinese Prime Minister discussed the border with Afghanistan and the expansion of economic relations with the then King of Afghanistan Mohammad Zahir and Prime Minister Mohammad Daud. This important mission opened the debate on resolving border problems between the two countries In 1963, the

delegation travelled from Beijing to Kabul on a mandate, and a historic settlement agreement was signed between Wakhan, Badakhshan Province, and Xinjiang, China. The resolution of border disputes between the two neighboring states facilitated the improvement of political and economic relations between the two countries. These relations lasted until the coups of the kings in Afghanistan, but with the continuation of the coups in Afghanistan, relations with China experienced ups and downs (Musab, 2019, p127) <sup>[7]</sup>.

## **2. China's foreign policy during the former Soviet era in Afghanistan**

After Mohammad Daud Khan's coup in Afghanistan in 1973, the Chinese followed the events in Afghanistan more cautiously and completely. Although Beijing recognized the first republican government in Afghanistan on July 28, 1973, they were concerned about Mohammad Daud's close ties to the former Soviet Union (Rangoli Mitra, September 3, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup> With the military coup in April 1978 in Afghanistan, a democratic republic was established. On May 3, 1978, a letter was sent to China by the Revolutionary Council and the leadership of the Communist Party of Afghanistan, led by the Communist Party, requesting them to recognize and continue diplomatic relations.

## **3. China's foreign policy with the Taliban government**

During the Taliban regime, relations between them and China reached their coldest political period. China did not recognize the Taliban, (Rangoli Mitra, September 3, 2021) <sup>[9]</sup> which ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, but had indirect relations with them through Pakistan.

China did not have good relations with the Taliban before the US-led invasion of Afghanistan because Chinese politicians believed the Taliban supported Uighur fighters and were concerned. In this regard, Chinese officials and observers believe that insecurity in Afghanistan is causing problems for them in the Muslim region of Xinjiang. Andrew Scoble said China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shunlin, had a secret meeting with Taliban leader Mullah Omar in December 2000. Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban ambassador to Pakistan, said in his book "My Life with the Taliban": Mullah Omar assured the Chinese ambassador that the Taliban would not allow any group to use its territory, and the Taliban promised not to support any attack on China. In return, Beijing recognizes the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and uses its power to prevent the passage of possible UN sanctions against the Taliban regime (Zaeef, 2010 , p 135). During the meeting, they assured that Afghanistan, led by the Taliban, would not join or support the claims of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement fighters. Instead, they are likely to have given money and weapons to the Taliban. However, it is possible that the Pakistani military intelligence agency equipped them without Chinese permission (Yitzhak Shichor, 2004, p157-158) <sup>[12]</sup>.

## **China's foreign policy in Afghanistan after 2001**

### **1. Principles of China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan**

The principles of China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan are defined based on its national resources. Therefore, in general, six basic considerations can be enumerated in China's policy towards Afghanistan:

1. The United States should not pose a threat to the region or China.
2. Prevent India from infiltrating Afghanistan (this policy sometimes coordinates with Pakistan)
3. Prevent the spread of Taliban fundamentalism and support the Afghan government's peace process policies (for the consideration of Xinjiang fighters)
4. In its relations with Pakistan, it has adopted a neutral policy in response to the crisis in Afghanistan, and is often on the side of Pakistan.
5. Pay attention to Afghanistan's underground resources
6. Afghanistan's prominent role as an important geography in imports and exports
7. A skeptical view of Afghanistan due to its presence in this country (in this regard, it is also coordinated with Russia and Iran).

### **2. Main core China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan**

China's three main fore of Afghanistan's foreign policy:

1. Using foreign policy to support China's economic growth (this strategy is associated with risk in high-risk regions of the world)
2. Following the "Go West" plan to increase economic development in western China. In this regard, "Xi Jinping" has proposed the creation of an economic belt along the Silk Road with the aim of developing transportation infrastructure in the region, which is China's investment in Afghanistan in line with this plan.
3. The principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries, this policy is used as a tool of China's soft power.

In addition, Article 65 of China's National Defense Law, adopted in 1997, states about China's military relations with foreign countries: The People's Republic of China adheres to the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity in relation to other countries, which are: From non-aggression and interference in internal affairs to each other, equality and mutual benefit, peaceful coexistence, observance of independence in military relations and military cooperation and exchange with other countries (Jalali Nasab, 2015, p.126) <sup>[6]</sup>.

### **3. Support for the government of Hamid Karzai**

In the wake of 9/11 and the rise of terrorism and its regional threats, China decided to support a new government led by President Karzai and provide significant assistance to Afghanistan.

During Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to China in 2002, this country reopened its embassy in Kabul after allocating \$ 150 million in reconstruction assistance. China was one of the first countries to formally establish relations with the new Karzai government.

China was concerned that Uighur separatists would not be joined by extremist groups in Afghanistan.

Drug trafficking from Afghanistan to China was another of China's concerns. A report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that more than 25 percent of China's opium imports come from Afghanistan and that the country's share has been growing since then (<http://www.unodc.org>). The Qaraqorum Highway in northern Pakistan and the Afghan-Tajik border are the two main gateways for drug trafficking to Xinjiang, and another emerging threat was that drug trafficking could become a lucrative source of funding for Uighur separatists and other disaffected populations in China.

#### **4. China's foreign policy during Ashraf Ghani's presidency**

Ashraf Ghani, after taking the oath of allegiance on September 29, 2014, during his speech at the Citadel, explaining the foreign policy lines of his government, placed China in the top five of its six foreign policy circles among Afghanistan's six neighboring countries. At the citadel, he went to China on his second foreign trip. In his speech, he cited China as a short-term, medium-term and long-term strategic partner, praising the Chinese president's vision for the Asian continent, describing it as "a complete book for the continent."

China-Afghanistan relations, under Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG), we're closer than ever. The trend of increasing Sino-Afghan security relations, along with good diplomatic and economic relations, came after President Ashraf Ghani's first trip abroad — to China in October 2014. There, he was warmly received by President Xi Jinping himself at the airport; during the visit, Ghani's Chinese counterpart announced \$329 million in Chinese grants (Khalil, June 23, 2016).

#### **5. China's role in Afghanistan reconstruction**

China's largest investment in Afghanistan is the Aynak copper mine, which was contracted in 2007. During five years, the mine was attacked 19 times, and 40 Chinese engineers left due to the security situation (Khalil, June 23, 2016). As Chow Washington puts it: "Chinese investors are powerless in the face of Afghanistan's political, social and religious problems, and China alone cannot solve these political and security problems." Diplomatically, China had a restrained approach to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2012. Andrew Small of the American think tank (German Marshall Fund) sums it up briefly and usefully: "Since then [end of 2011] China has completely withdrawn." They used to send only a few people to read statements in the meetings."

China's then-head of security, Hao Yangkong, traveled to Kabul. He was the most important Chinese official to visit the country in decades in 2012. China appointed a Special Representative for Afghanistan and pledged to increase its economic participation extensively in 2014 (<http://www.reuters.com>).

#### **6. China's soft diplomacy with the Taliban**

China believes that the Taliban is not just an extremist religious group in Afghanistan, but a real political force that could well be a viable element in Afghan politics. Given this assessment, China has a long-term perspective on the Taliban. In practice, Beijing hoped to reduce as much as possible the potential damage from the Taliban and its historical connection to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. China has tried to avoid provoking direct clashes with the Taliban as much as possible, as it believes the Taliban could create more problems for China (Shafiee, 2016, P 91) <sup>[10]</sup>.

As a result, China's diplomacy with the Taliban softened, and relations between the two sides grew closer in 2016. Therefore, a delegation of the Taliban traveled to China in July 2016 and met with Chinese officials. Some analysts said the trip was aimed at both sides. Accordingly, China intended to moderate the US role in Afghanistan and reassert its political presence in Afghanistan, as well as pave the way for its economic investments in areas where the Taliban can be influential. At the same time, the Taliban have carried out numerous attacks on Chinese projects in Afghanistan (Musab, 2019, p 18) <sup>[7]</sup>.

#### **China's foreign policy with the Taliban government after the complete withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan**

After the failed US withdrawal from Afghanistan, many expected Beijing to act quickly to fill the power vacuum and recognize and legitimize the Taliban regime within weeks or months. In addition, many, including the Taliban themselves, expected China to start investing in Afghanistan's untapped natural resources, including trillions of dollars in mineral reserves such as lithium.

However, despite maintaining China's diplomatic relations with the Taliban, Beijing has avoided hastily accepting the new regime in Kabul and has instead taken a conditional approach. The Chinese Communist Party's Global Times explicitly set out four conditions for the Taliban, including taking a tough stance against Uighur militants, forming an inclusive government, distancing themselves from the United States, and adjusting their domestic policies. During the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in September 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping repeated the same situation (Ahmadzai, January 27, 2022) <sup>[2]</sup>.

China's reasonable treatment of the Taliban stems from the deep mistrust that has developed since Beijing first contacted the group in the 1990s. At the time, Uyghur separatists had intensified their militancy in China and carried out bombings in various parts of the country, including Beijing. China has linked the attacks to Uyghur militant groups, which Beijing collectively sees as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a short-lived movement in the early 2000s - operating in shelters and training camps in Afghanistan.

However, after the Taliban came to power in August 2021, the Taliban denied the existence of Uighur militants in

Afghanistan, claiming that the Uighurs had left the country after the Doha agreement with the United States in early 2020. Beijing will continue to carefully assess the Taliban's position on these issues but is unlikely to formally recognize the Taliban regime in its current form. Although the Taliban desperately needed financial resources to run their government, China could start by investing in mining in Afghanistan.

### Conclusion

China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan can be viewed from three perspectives. The first view is from a security perspective. One of the issues with the US invasion of Afghanistan was the reduction of security threats by the Taliban to the Xinjiang region. China recognized the Afghan interim government in 2001 and began providing assistance to Afghanistan, trying to seize economic opportunities in Afghanistan.

The second view is in the economic dimension. From this perspective, China is the only beneficiary of the economic interests of the Central Asian region and Afghanistan, and therefore makes economic investments where it feels safe and secure. Even if Beijing has little interest in Afghanistan, it ranks first economically and in terms of foreign investment in Afghanistan; but it owes this position to the \$ 3.5 billion investment in copper mining at the Aynak copper mine in Afghanistan; the effort has been stopped for some time. To achieve its economic goals, China has sought to build ties with the Taliban to secure its economic interests in Afghanistan. China has had close relations with the Afghan government and has stepped up close consultations with Afghanistan's neighbors to support political transition and national reconciliation in Afghanistan. The Taliban has played. Following the failed US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Beijing was expected to recognize the Taliban and resume investment in Afghanistan. However, despite maintaining China's diplomatic relations with the Taliban, Beijing has avoided hastily accepting the new regime in Kabul and has instead taken a conditional approach.

### References

1. Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium, UNODC, Vienna, 2009. [http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan\\_Opium\\_Trade](http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan_Opium_Trade).
2. Atal Ahmadzai, Why China Is Slow-Rolling Taliban Cooperation, foreign policy website, 2022.
3. CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS VI. Modern Afghan – Encyclopaedia Iranica: [www.iranica.com](http://www.iranica.com)
4. Erica Downs, China Buys into Afghanistan, SAIS Review, 2012, 32(2).
5. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/21/us-china-afghanistanidUSKBN0FQ12I20140721>.
6. Jalali Nasab Abdullah, Safavi Seyed Yahya, Ezzati Ezatullah. An Analysis of China's Role and Position in Afghanistan and Its Impact on the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Journal of Geography, New Attitudes in Human Geography, 2015, (29).
7. Musab Seyed Najibullah. China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan, first edition, Kabul: Azem Publications, 2019.
8. Nazeri Masih. Increasing Afghanistan-China Cooperation with the Establishment of a National Unity Government, [peace-ipsc.org](http://peace-ipsc.org), 2018.
9. Rangoli Mitra. Research Assistant, ICS, China's Rendezvous with the Taliban: An Uneasy Alliance, 2021. <https://icsin.org/blogs/2021/09/03/chinas-rendezvous-with-the-taliban-an-uneasy-alliance/>
10. Shafiee Nozar. Explaining China's New Diplomacy to China's Neighborhood with Afghanistan, Central Asia and Caucasus Quarterly, 2016, (94).
11. Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhang Haifeng, Beijing Review, 1980.
12. Yitzhak Shichor. "The Great Wall of Steel: Military and strategy in Xinjiang", in Frederick Starr (eds.), Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland, M.E. Sharpe, 2004.
13. Zaef. My Life with the Taliban, London: Hurst, 2010.