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# Containing the Spillover: Afghanistan as China's Immediate Frontier Risk

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**Abstract**
China's post-2021 engagement with Afghanistan is defined by security imperatives rather than economic opportunity. Beijing's approach is rooted less in expansionist ambition than in the urgent need to stabilize its western periphery and contain transnational militancy linked to Xinjiang. A historical look at China-Afghanistan relations—from the Cold War to the Taliban's return—reveals that security considerations have progressively eclipsed ideological distance and regime preferences in Beijing's strategic calculus. The U.S. withdrawal effectively transformed Afghanistan into an immediate frontier risk, intensifying Chinese concerns over ISIS-K, Uyghur-linked networks, and regional spillover. Within China's new concept of security, economic instruments—particularly those associated with the Belt and Road Initiative—function primarily as tools of stabilization and leverage rather than engines of growth. Afghanistan's marginal economic value underscores this logic. Engagement with the Taliban thus reflects a calculated strategy of risk management aimed at securing border stability and preventing the country from re-emerging as a sanctuary for anti-China militancy.

**Keywords**: China-Afghanistan relations; Taliban governance; Xinjiang security; Belt and Road Initiative; regional stability

The formalization of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and Afghanistan in 1955 (MFA 2025) unfolded against the shifting architecture of the Cold War and the fluid balance of power in Asia. From the outset, Afghanistan was never simply another bilateral partner. It functioned, rather, as a geopolitical margin—an arena in which Beijing could gauge and recalibrate its security posture vis-à-vis external pressures. The unravelling of Sino-Soviet relations rendered the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan especially consequential for Beijing. It nudged China into a quiet alignment with forces opposing the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul (Begum 2019; Niu 2020), less out of ideological affinity than strategic necessity.

These anxieties sharpened during the first Taliban period (1996-2001), when Uyghur militant networks operated in close proximity to Xinjiang (Zhang 2022). For Beijing, the issue was not merely Afghanistan's internal trajectory, but what that trajectory portended for China's own western frontier. After the 9/11 attacks, China endorsed the dismantling of the Taliban regime, while largely observing the ensuing international intervention from the sidelines. This distance was deliberate. It allowed Beijing to register support for global counterterrorism efforts without entangling itself in the burdens of occupation and state-building.

Throughout the two decades of U.S. and coalition presence, China cultivated a posture of studied caution. Economic engagement proceeded selectively, while Washington shouldered the overwhelming share of the security burden. One might reasonably describe this as a form of strategic free-riding: Beijing was able to protect its commercial interests without assuming the costly responsibilities of stabilization. Yet this equilibrium was contingent. When the Obama administration signaled a gradual disengagement, Chinese policymakers began to revisit their assumptions. From around 2012 onward, discreet channels were opened with the Taliban, even as Beijing continued to recognize and engage the internationally backed Afghan government.

The dual-track approach reflected uncertainty rather than duplicity—a hedging strategy in an increasingly fluid environment. Its logic became especially visible in the final days before Kabul fell, when Xi Jinping personally spoke with President Ashraf Ghani about reconciliation even as China was hosting a Taliban delegation in Tianjin (MFA 2021d; 2021b). This simultaneity exposed Beijing's unresolved assessment of which political authority would endure, shaped by a security issue long preoccupied with the risk of "spillover" into Xinjiang and the vulnerability of China's western economic corridor, concerns already articulated well before 2021 and carried into the crisis moment (Ramzy et al. 2019).

The abrupt collapse of the Western-supported state in August 2021 and the rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces transformed that uncertainty into strategic urgency. A vacuum emerged on China's near periphery. Much of the existing literature has interpreted this moment primarily through economic or geopolitical lenses, emphasizing potential gains for Chinese investment and infrastructural expansion (Rehaiem 2025; Singh 2025). Such readings, however, risk mistaking secondary effects for primary drivers. Afghanistan is not merely another node in Beijing's outward economic projection. It constitutes the western anchor of a contiguous security belt that intersects Tibet, Xinjiang, and the Western Theatre Command's operational horizon across the Himalayan frontier. In this sense, Afghanistan's fate is entwined with China's internal geography of insecurity.

Seen from this perspective, China's engagement with the Taliban—both before and after 2021—is more plausibly explained by security imperatives than by economic optimization. What matters most to Beijing is not mineral access or transit corridors, but the Taliban's capacity, or willingness, to restrain transnational militant groups. The core concern is the mitigation of perceived threats to Xinjiang and the prevention of extremist diffusion across China's western borders. The American withdrawal, followed by the Taliban's swift consolidation of authority, compelled Beijing to rethink its position as a contiguous neighbor rather than a distant observer. During this transition, anxieties over instability, cross-border militancy, and the erosion of regional order intensified (MFA 2021c).

As this article contends, these developments bind Afghanistan's internal stability directly to China's evolving Xinjiang-Himalayan securitization strategy—one that is shaped not only by domestic imperatives, but also by competitive interaction with India along a shared and increasingly militarized frontier.

This paper assumes that when faced with proximate and persistent security threats—particularly those posed by transnational militant groups—states prioritize risk containment, border stability, and threat mitigation over economic expansion or ideological alignment. Applied to China's western periphery, this lens highlights Beijing's preference for diplomatic engagement, economic inducements, and indirect stabilization as tools to manage insecurity emanating from Afghanistan, rather than direct security involvement or opportunistic expansion.

## China's Logic in the Afghan Context

China's approach to Afghanistan is best understood as the product of intersecting structural forces operating across multiple levels: its evolving grand strategy, the behavior of rival great powers, the lure of economic opportunity, and—most decisively—the security risks emanating from Xinjiang and China's western frontier. These variables are not discrete; they interact and

reinforce one another. Yet, this article argues that it is the cumulative elevation of security imperatives after August 2021, amid perceptions of a power vacuum and renewed militant mobility, that most convincingly accounts for Beijing's increasingly pragmatic—if often hesitant—engagement with Kabul.

Before Xi Jinping's rise in late 2012, Afghanistan occupied only a marginal place in China's strategic imagination. Two developments altered this peripheral status. The first was the consolidation of China's "neighborhood diplomacy" following the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference in 2013 (CCICED 2013), which reframed China's surrounding regions as spaces to be actively shaped rather than passively endured. Stability along China's borders came to be cast not merely as desirable, but as a prerequisite for sustained economic growth and domestic security. The second was the articulation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the same year. Conceived as a project to knit together Eurasian political economies (Zhang 2022), the BRI imposed new spatial and security logics on Chinese foreign policy. Within this reframing, Afghanistan's geography was cast in Chinese discourse as that of a prospective "land-linked" hub and "platform for cooperation," transforming it from a distant conflict zone into a pivotal node of regional connectivity and order (Zhou 2023). Instability there threatened to fray the connective tissue of Beijing's continental ambitions.

Great power dynamics sharpened this sensitivity. In the years following the 2001 U.S. intervention, Chinese policymakers viewed the American military presence with a kind of strategic ambivalence. On the one hand, U.S. forces constrained militant activity hostile to China. On the other, a prolonged American footprint raised fears of encirclement and containment (Clarke 2016). The tension was conceptual: the same actor that suppressed threats to Xinjiang also embodied a longer-term strategic risk. Once Washington opted for disengagement, that contradiction dissolved, but at a cost. The implications of Afghanistan's internal fragility could no longer be externalized. Chinese policy subsequently evolved toward a calibrated balancing strategy—less oriented toward offsetting U.S. presence and more focused on managing the instability that might follow its absence.

Economic considerations overlay these concerns without displacing them. Since 2001, Beijing has explored Afghanistan's extractive potential, seeking both diversification and secure access amid accelerating growth (Van Wieringen and Claustre 2023). Copper deposits, oil reserves, and critical minerals such as lithium (Ruttig 2023), alongside projects like the Amu Darya oil fields (Turgunbaeva and Ghiasi 2024), testify to concrete material interests. Yet each of these ventures remains hostage to security conditions. Instability amplifies operational risk, disrupts supply chains, and complicates broader ambitions associated with the BRI. Competition with regional rivals—India foremost among them—adds a geopolitical inflection, as investment becomes a vehicle for influence across Central Asia. Still, these calculations remain secondary. Economic opportunity, in Beijing's view, is meaningful only insofar as a stable environment can be sustained.

It is in the security domain that Afghanistan acquires its most acute relevance. Xinjiang, China's largest province, shares a narrow yet symbolically charged border with Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor. During the late 1990s, the Taliban permitted Uyghur militants, including elements associated with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), to operate and integrate with Al Qaeda-aligned networks (Small 2015b). Although the U.S. intervention disrupted many of these formations, fragments later resurfaced in northern Afghanistan, reviving Chinese anxieties about cross-border linkages. Even under Taliban rule, Afghanistan continues to function as an enabling ecosystem for transnational militancy—a space in which extremist

networks circulate, regroup, and potentially reconnect with Uyghur actors. Therefore, extremist groups originating in Central Asia could utilize Afghanistan as a 'basing territory' to connect with and subsequently spillover of extremism to Xinjiang (Murtazashvili 2022). Particularly troubling for Beijing is the prospect of coordination between ISIS-Khorasan and Uyghur-linked factions, given the group's explicitly regional ambitions.

Taliban assurances that Afghan territory will not be used against China (Ali Seerat 2025), alongside Beijing's persistent framing of counterterrorism as a central diplomatic theme (Ali Seerat 2024), reveal how security has been institutionalized as the organizing principle of bilateral engagement. Periodic reports of Uyghur fighters embedded in broader jihadist constellations, together with recurring references to ETIM activity (Verma 2020), sustain this perception of latent threat.

These anxieties are further magnified by developments beyond Afghanistan's borders. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), reportedly benefiting from Taliban goodwill, has intensified attacks on Chinese targets in Pakistan since the American withdrawal (Ahmad 2024). The pattern underscores Beijing's overarching objective: to prevent the diffusion of militancy across its western periphery. Accordingly, Beijing has repeatedly embedded its demands regarding Uyghur militancy in formal diplomatic language. In its 2023 "Position on the Afghan Issue," the Chinese Foreign Ministry urges Afghanistan to "crack down on all terrorist forces including the ETIM" (MFA 2023). This posture was already evident at the Tianjin meeting, where Foreign Minister Wang Yi described ETIM as a "direct threat" and called on the Taliban to "make a clean break" with such groups (MFA 2021b). At the same time, the relative absence of large-scale recent attacks invites a more cautious interpretation. It is conceivable that Chinese officials also amplify the Uyghur threat narrative as leverage to secure deeper Taliban cooperation. In this sense, security concerns—both materially grounded and strategically emphasized—supersede economic motives in shaping China's contemporary policy toward Afghanistan.

**China's Policy Adjustment in Afghanistan**

China's posture toward Afghanistan after August 2021 did not emerge from strategic improvisation. Rather, it reflects an accumulated pattern of risk management shaped by decades of shifting threat perceptions and calibrated restraint. An examination of the historical trajectory reveals that Beijing's current engagement with the Taliban is the endpoint of a gradual reorientation in which security considerations progressively eclipsed ideological distance and political preferences regarding Kabul's governing authority.

Early China-Afghanistan diplomatic relations were marked by modest economic exchange and codified in the 1960 *Treaty of Friendship and Non-Aggression* (Dai 1966). This cooperative phase was short-lived. As Cold War alignments hardened, Kabul's growing reliance on Moscow placed Afghanistan on the opposite side of the Sino-Soviet divide. Beijing denounced the Soviet invasion and, in parallel with Washington, provided covert support to *mujahideen* forces (Hilali 2001). With the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime and the onset of civil war, China closed its embassy in 1993 and declined to recognize the Taliban government that consolidated power in 1996 (Zhang 2022), signaling deliberate political disengagement rather than active intervention.

By the late 1990s, however, Afghanistan's internal dynamics intersected directly with China's domestic security concerns. The Taliban's tolerance of Uyghur militant organizations—most

notably the ETIM and the Turkestan Islamic Party—allowed these groups to train and operate from Afghan territory (Small 2015b). For Beijing, this permissive environment transformed Afghanistan from a distant conflict zone into a proximate security liability. Despite this shift, China neither possessed the power projection capabilities nor the inclination to intervene militarily. Instead, it relied on indirect pressure and diplomacy. In 1998, Beijing initiated direct contacts with the Taliban, often through Pakistani intermediaries, to secure assurances that Afghan territory would not be used for anti-China activity (Small 2015b). Regionally, these anxieties contributed to the creation of the Shanghai Five in 1996—later institutionalized as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001—reflecting an emerging architecture for collective counter-terrorism (Zhao 2006).

During the two decades of Western military presence (2001-2021), China adopted a posture of strategic distance from Afghanistan's security burden. Beijing concentrated on infrastructure projects and commercial engagement, becoming Afghanistan's largest trading partner by 2009 (Saud and Ahmad 2018). This approach aligned with the Afghan interim government's priorities while allowing China to benefit from a security environment maintained by U.S. and NATO forces. Despite persistent concern over cooperation between ETIM/TIP elements and Afghan insurgents, Beijing effectively free-rode on Western military protection (Pandey 2019). The announcement of a phased U.S. withdrawal under the Obama administration disrupted this equilibrium. Beginning in 2012, China expanded diplomatic and security engagement with Kabul, elevating bilateral ties to a strategic partnership in June 2012 (Clarke 2016). Concrete measures followed, including cooperation involving the People's Armed Police Force in Badakhshan and the presence of Chinese security personnel near the Wakhan Corridor by 2017 (Pandey 2019; Stanzel 2018). In parallel, Beijing opened limited channels with the Taliban between 2013 and 2020 to obtain assurances regarding Uyghur militants (Felbab-Brown 2020; Ruttig 2023). This evolution—from rejection in the 1990s to cautious engagement—demonstrates that the identity of Afghanistan's governing authority has become secondary to the acquisition of tangible security guarantees (Small 2015a; Jacob 2014).

After August 2021, security concerns became paramount. The U.S. withdrawal transferred de facto responsibility for regional stability to neighboring powers, forcing Beijing to confront the prospect of militant resurgence without Western containment. Consistent with defensive realism, China has sought to manage these risks through diplomacy and economic leverage rather than coercive force. The post-withdrawal environment saw a sharp escalation in militant activity. Groups such as the TIP, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) expanded their operational reach. Available data indicate an 83 percent increase in TTP attacks and a surge in ISIS-K activity from zero incidents in 2020 to 333 in 2021(Van Wieringen and Claustre 2023). A suicide bombing in Kunduz in October 2021, carried out by a Uyghur operative, exposed operational linkages among ISIS-K, ETIM, and TTP—an alignment that the United Nations assessed as granting militant networks unprecedented freedom of action (Van Wieringen and Claustre 2023).

For China, the consolidation of these networks constitutes a strategic nightmare, particularly the risk of infiltration into Xinjiang through Central Asia's extended and porous borders. Beijing's response has been twofold: domestically, ensuring that Afghan territory does not serve as a staging ground for threats to China; and regionally, embedding counter-terrorism within neighborhood foreign policy and the SCO's security mechanisms (Felbab-Brown 2020). The Taliban, viewing China as an indispensable source of economic support and international legitimacy, has publicly endorsed these priorities. Across successive diplomatic forums, the Taliban have repeatedly pledged that Afghan territory will not be used to threaten other states.

The Islamic Republic formally committed in 2020 to prevent groups such as al-Qaʿida and ISIS-K from using Afghan soil, while Taliban leaders have echoed this assurance, declaring that Afghanistan "will not allow any…group…to pose a threat to the security of others" (DoS 2020). These commitments have since been embedded in regional diplomacy, including high-level exchanges with China, such as Wang Yi's 2022 meeting with Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Tashkent (Rehman 2022; MFA 2024). Early indicators—such as the relocation of Uyghur militants away from the sensitive Badakhshan region—suggest responsiveness to Beijing's demands (Murtazashvili 2022).

China's post-2021 policy is embedded in its new concept of security, which treats traditional and non-traditional threats as interconnected and identifies development as the primary instrument for addressing both. Within this framework, poverty is framed as a driver of instability, and economic growth—facilitated through mechanisms such as the BRI—is cast as a security tool. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's October 2021 statement, offering to assist the Taliban-led administration in economic development to enhance stability and counter the Islamic State, exemplifies this logic (MFA 2021a). Yet Afghanistan remains economically marginal, accounting for roughly just one ten-thousandth of China's total foreign trade (Ruttig 2023). This disparity underscores that Beijing's engagement is not commercially motivated. Rather, the Taliban is treated as a functional interlocutor capable of constraining militant threats. China's strategy thus seeks to reduce uncertainty and prevent further deterioration of the regional security environment through calibrated economic incentives—an approach that substitutes "economic deterrence" for direct military involvement.

**Conclusion**

China's post-2021 policy toward Afghanistan reflects a strategic orientation rooted less in opportunity-seeking than in the imperatives of containment, risk reduction, and border stabilization. Although public discourse often highlights the BRI or Afghanistan's mineral deposits, a chronological reading of Chinese actions shows that security considerations remain the decisive anchor. Viewed through this lens, Beijing's engagement has been guided primarily by the need to limit the ability of armed non-state actors to exploit Afghan territory as a platform for activities that could reverberate across Xinjiang and China's western periphery. The Taliban's willingness to respond—at least partially—to Chinese demands regarding Uyghur militant networks has provided the minimum foundation for a transactional partnership centered on security guarantees rather than ideological affinity or expansive economic integration. Far from representing a sudden strategic pivot after the U.S. withdrawal, China's diplomacy continues a longer pattern of seeking to ensure that Afghanistan does not evolve into a permissive sanctuary for anti-China militancy.

In the present environment, marked by ISIS-K activity, the activism of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, and the persistence of Uyghur-linked networks, the Taliban's consolidation of control has paradoxically become the most workable mechanism for safeguarding China's western frontier. Economic initiatives—whether linked to resource extraction or framed through the BRI—operate largely as instruments of leverage. They are designed to socialize the Taliban into a tacit set of obligations concerning counter-terrorism cooperation, rather than to transform Afghanistan's role in China's global economic profile. For their part, Taliban leaders, conscious of the need for external legitimacy and investment, have signaled responsiveness by relocating certain Uyghur elements and reiterating security assurances in regional forums.

Taken together, China's engagement since 2021 reveals a pattern of avoidance of costly military entanglements, and the preservation of border stability. The determining variable is the Taliban's capacity—uneven though it may be—to suppress transnational militant networks and inhibit cross-border infiltration. As long as this capacity persists, Beijing is likely to rely on calibrated diplomacy, selective economic inducements, and regional coordination mechanisms to maintain a precarious but functional equilibrium. The trajectory of China-Taliban relations will therefore remain anchored in a hierarchy in which security precedes development. The relative restraint in Chinese investment, despite frequent Taliban appeals for deeper partnership, illustrates that economic incentives alone cannot sustain the relationship; Kabul's behavior and expectations shape Beijing's calculus as much as Beijing's strategic preferences influence the Taliban.

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