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Introduction

Afghanistan has systematically, throughout history, been victim of the ambitions of superpowers, exploiting its strategic position as a playground to increase their influence, irremediably plunging the country into a state of destruction and civil war over the last few decades (Baker, 2021). Foreign invasion, insurgency and oppression have punctuated the history of the Afghan people, forcing the population to flee, often in inhuman conditions, and considerably hampering the development of the country's infrastructure, agriculture, and economy. Tragically for this seemingly 'cursed' country, one of the darkest pages of its history opened with the lightning fall of the Republican government following the chaotic American withdrawal in August 2021, enabling the Taliban to regain power, and resulting in an unprecedented wave of atrocities, deprivation of fundamental freedoms and severe food insecurity. The growing disinterest of international public opinion and the media towards this conflict not only strengthens the Taliban's hold over the population, but also paves the way for other regional forces to advance their pawns in the region.

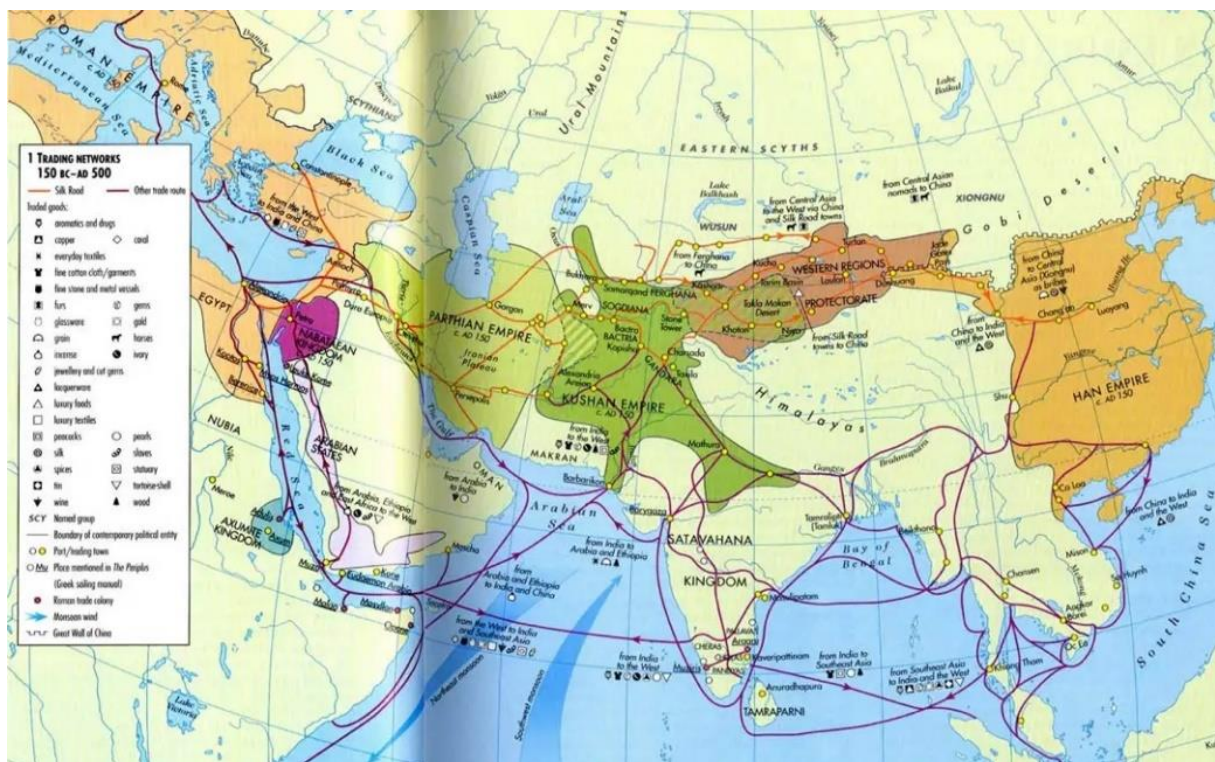
Traditionally, China has regarded Afghanistan as a neighbour of little diplomatic importance and has maintained a certain distance in its relations with the country. However, the US shifting away from Afghanistan and the emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have caused China's policy on Afghanistan to change "*from calculated indifference to strategic engagement*" (Pandey, 2019). In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, China declared that it respected Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, as well as the independent choices made by the Afghan people, and therefore expressed its support to the new Afghan interim government — a term frequently employed by senior Chinese officials as a substitute for the Taliban. By leveraging its economic power to participate in a post-war scenario and providing investments and loans to the country, China has consolidated its foothold in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, whereas Western countries are debating the continuance of international aid programs, China's approach towards the Taliban is shaped by expansionist pragmatism.

Firstly, this paper seeks to examine the historical connections between China and successive Afghan governments, whether democratic or insurgent in nature, highlighting their evolution through the years. The withdrawal of American forces followed by the Taliban takeover have inevitably altered the balance of power in the region, leading to the emergence of new and paradoxical alliances. Indeed, despite a tense international context, where international opprobrium is heaped on those who collaborate with the Taliban, China was among the only countries to maintain diplomatic and trade relations with the outfit. Thus, this paper attempts to examine this fragile alliance and the reasons behind this decision. Furthermore, since the Taliban took root in Kabul, China, via its network of State-owned enterprises, has intensified its investment in the mining sector, revealing its genuine interest in the country's natural mining resources. This paper, via examples, will discuss China's investment strategy in Afghanistan, focusing primarily on the country's progressive integration into the Belt and Road Initiative, notably through its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, while this economic prospect may seem attractive, it does not seem sufficient or convincing enough on its own to explain this surge of interest towards Afghanistan. The final section of this paper therefore aims to answer this question by

putting the economic dimension into perspective with the security aspect that this new relationship is offering China.

Historical background of the Sino-Afghan relations

Historically, Sino-Afghan relations have been mainly restricted to trade, with the first traces of these commercial activities dating back to 130BCE, with the emergence of the first Silk Road under the Chinese Han dynasty (202BCE- 220CE). Referring to a network of trade routes and trading posts used by merchants to link Asia to the Mediterranean basin between 130BCE until 1453CE, the term "Silk Road" (in German "Seidenstrasse") was first used in 1877 - nearly 400 years after its disappearance - by the German geographer and traveler Ferdinand von Richthofen (Mark, 2018). Running over almost 6,437 kilometers (4,000 miles), the ancient Silk Road facilitated the transit of caravans carrying a variety of goods, including textiles, spices and porcelain, while fostering the spread of ideas and religions across the Eurasian continent. Although the first Silk Road was boycotted by the Ottoman Empire, leading to its closure in 1453 CE, it is considered to have laid the foundations for world trade (Mark, 2018). In the earliest days of this intense trading network, the region of present-day Afghanistan has played a central role as it was located at the junction of four major empires: the Roman Empire to the west, the Parthian Empire, the Kushan Empire, and the Han Empire to the east (Bileta, 2022). Until the 16th century, Afghanistan was a hub of Eurasian trade, with cities such as Balkh, Bamiyan, Herat, Badakhshan and Kabul (referred to as "Kao-fu" by Chinese sources) still harboring vestiges of this prosperous period.



Source: Princeton University – The first “Silk Road”

Since their creation under their present form, Afghanistan and China have maintained a cordial coexistence, characterized by low intensity but constant diplomatic relations. The Kingdom of Afghanistan was among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC), and to establish diplomatic relations by sending its first ambassador, Abdul Samad, to Beijing in 1955 (Sekiyama, 2012). The visit of Chinese Prime Minister, Zhou Enlai, and his Vice Prime Minister, He Long, in January 1957 sealed the opening of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Amid this climate of good relations, Beijing and Kabul signed several agreements, including the mutual non-aggression treaty in 1960, also known as the "*New Silk Road*" treaty in reference to the historic links established over 2,100 years ago between the two countries, as well as the border treaty signed in 1963, which defined a 92-kilometer border along the Wakhan corridor. Despite the amicable relationship between the two nations, the Sino-Soviet split (1950-1980) crystallized Sino-Afghan relations, which gradually deteriorated with the Saur Revolution led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan in 1978. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led to a complete freeze in relations between the countries, altering the pre-existing balance between the regional powers. The People's Republic of China, which officially withdrew from the conflict, along with the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, provided economic and logistical support to the Mujahideen as they waged Jihad against the Soviets (Pandey, 2019). Therefore, the links between the People's Republic of China and the Taliban are not recent but go back to the early years of the group.

Although officially China never recognized the previous Taliban regime (1996-2001), it nevertheless maintained unofficial ties with the regime, notably through shuttle diplomacy with Pakistan. Fearing a spread of violence into the Xinjiang region, due to the close connections between the Taliban and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), China sought to maintain positive relations with the Taliban. In November 2000, China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, met Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, for the first time, thereby becoming the first representative from a non-Muslim country to meet him. During this meeting, the Taliban asserted that they would provide no support to Uyghur fighters in Afghanistan affiliated to the ETIM, although they would not exclude them from their ranks (Wani, 2023). Already driven primarily by security imperatives, this newly formed relationship was designed to protect China from the Uyghur separatist movement operating from Afghanistan. The fall of the regime and the accession to power of President Hamid Karzai in July 2002 marked the thawing of Sino-Afghan relations in the post 9/11 era. Despite the threat posed by the presence of the US-led coalition forces on its doorstep, the CCP welcomed the overthrow of the Taliban regime and officially recognized the Afghan government, thus supporting Afghanistan's democratic transition. Ironically, China was one of the main beneficiaries of American interventionism in the region, taking advantage of their presence and military power to reduce the scope of action of the ETIM militants and secure its borders. Consequently, the CCP has adopted a policy towards Afghanistan based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence: non-intervention, peaceful coexistence, mutual non-aggression, respect for sovereignty, equality, and mutual benefit (Yousafzai, 2022).

A significant turning point in the region's geopolitical landscape emerged in 2013, with the introduction of China's new policy of "*periphery diplomacy*", inevitably affecting Sino-Afghan relations. Addressing a conference in Kazakhstan in October 2013, President Xi Jinping laid the foundations of this new diplomacy towards China's peripheral countries, emphasizing greater engagement, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in order to produce concrete results and foster a regional environment conducive to China's development. The same year, the Taliban opened an official office in Doha, welcoming foreign delegations including Chinese representatives, under the protection of the Qatari authorities.

Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Afghan government, under the presidency of Ashraf Ghani, has shown particular interest in integrating this project, aligning some national plans with those of the BRI, and thus despite the early signs of dysfunction of the project (Airan, 2021). The withdrawal of international coalition forces in 2014 provided a springboard for Chinese investment, and in 2017, Afghanistan joined 130 other delegations to attend the first Belt and Road Initiative forum organized by China in Beijing. A year earlier, the two countries signed a *"Memorandum of Understanding"* along with a \$100 million investment to promote cooperation within the BRI framework. Yet, there is a considerable gap between signing memorandums and implementing investments, indeed, due to the country's instability and lack of security guarantees, Chinese investments have proven to be marginal and cautious. Over the past few decades, China has played only a limited role in Afghan affairs, while exploring ways of engagement involving ambitious investment projects in the country, which ultimately remained unsuccessful (Chia et al, 2021).

The Taliban: a cautious and fragile alliance

Against the tide of international opinion, headed by the United States and Western countries, China sees the Taliban's rise to power in August 2021 as an expression of *"the will and choice of the Afghan people"*, and consequently considers it legitimate to recognize them as valid interlocutors in talks concerning the future of Afghanistan. One month before the completion of the foreign troop withdrawal, China welcomed a delegation of nine senior Taliban officials, led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, becoming one of the first countries to officially open a channel of diplomatic discussion with the Taliban. During this meeting, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, described the Taliban as *"an essential military and political force in Afghanistan"*, underlining their *"important role {to play} in the process of peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction"*. In accordance with China's doctrine of *"non-interference"*, Wang Yi reiterated China's commitment to respect Afghanistan's sovereign independence and territorial integrity, stressing the importance of non-interference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs (Cheung et al, 2021). The Afghan delegation, meanwhile, announced that *"China has always been a reliable friend of the Afghan people and welcomed China's fair and positive role in the peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan"*, adding that the Taliban *"will never allow any force to use Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental to China"*, in reference to the numerous hints made by China concerning ETIM's actions (Griffiths, 2021). On this occasion, China unveiled its next move on the vast chessboard, which is Afghanistan, anticipating the events which will take place a few months later. As Anwasha Ghosh explains, *"while some speculated that this overture indicated China's intentions to expand its sphere of interest in the region, it more likely reflected the Chinese government's hedging strategy - its primary interests in Afghanistan being contingent on constructive, even cooperative, relations with whichever faction took the reins in Kabul"* (Ghosh, 2023). Devoid of any moral compass, China sees Afghanistan solely as a reflection of its own self-interest and the Taliban as the key to achieving them.

Thus, at the time of the Kabul takeover by the Taliban, China stood out by maintaining its embassy open, and more recently, was the first country to dispatch an ambassador. China's new ambassador to Afghanistan, Zhao Sheng, arrived at Kabul's presidential palace in September 2023 to present his credentials in the presence of the Taliban's interim prime minister, Mohammad Hassan Akhund, and interim foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi (The Diplomat, 2023). Other diplomats currently in Kabul carry the title of ambassador, but all assumed their positions before the Taliban seized power. Also, other countries or organizations,

such as Pakistan or the European Union (EU), wishing to maintain a diplomatic presence in the country have sent high-ranking diplomats with the title of *chargé d'affaires*, thus not requiring credentials to be presented to the host country (Yawar et al, 2023). While the Taliban were expressing their difficulties in ensuring representation abroad either due to lack of cooperation from the host country, or due to the fact that embassies are still occupied by the previous Republican administration - as was recently the case in India (BBC, 2022), China made a strong gesture by welcoming the first Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ambassador, Bilal Karimi, to Beijing (Jalalzai, 2023). The Chinese authorities claim that this step does not constitute official recognition of the Taliban, however, it does send a significant message to other States considering establishing relations with them. Becoming one of the Taliban's first and foremost allies on the international stage, China uses this posture to advocate a return to dialogue with the country and "*abandon double standards in the fight against terrorism, return the country's assets abroad and lift sanctions*". China is also striving to rally the support and assistance of the international community in tackling the dire humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and was the first foreign country to pledge emergency humanitarian assistance worth 200 million yuan (US\$ 31 million).

The Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, a seemingly arid, hostile and mountainous country, is in reality very rich in natural resources. According to a geological mission launched in 2019 aimed at mapping Afghanistan's mining sector, the country has untapped mineral reserves worth an estimated \$1,000 billion. Estimates include 2.3 billion metric tons of iron, 30 million metric tons of copper and 1.4 million metric tons of rare earths, however, these estimates do not consider the astronomical cost of their extraction and are not unanimously supported by scientists (Blumenthal et al, 2022). China's domination of this new mineral supply chain, essential to the ongoing ecological transition, represents a major strategic challenge for the country. Among the high-value minerals present in the soil lies lithium, an indispensable component for the construction of high-capacity batteries for electric vehicles and clean energy storage systems (Horowitz, 2021). There is also copper, nickel, cobalt and rare earths, all essential to the energy transition. All these minerals are highly coveted, and a stranglehold on these resources would enable China to gain the upper hand over its competitors, notably Europe and the USA, and control part of the market. China has therefore seized the opportunity to relaunch two major mining projects in Afghanistan:

- Amu Darya oil field

Among the resources that have attracted Chinese investors are the oil reserves of the Amu Darya basin, located in the northern province of Sar-e Pol, which are reported to contain up to 87 million barrels of crude oil. In January 2023, the Taliban signed a 25-year contract with the Chinese company Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Compagnie (CAPEIC), a subsidiary of CNPC, to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin. Signed in Kabul, this contract is the first major raw materials extraction contract that the Taliban administration has signed with a foreign company since taking power in 2021. The project plans to drill over 4,500 square kilometres in the Sar-e Pol, Jawzjan and Faryab provinces, extracting between 1,000 and 2,000 tons of oil per day. With an estimated investment of \$540 million over three years, the Taliban administration has a 20% stake in the project, rising to 75%. The Taliban will also perceive 15% in royalties. The contract also includes the creation of 3,000 jobs for the local population (Aljazeera, 2023). A similar contract had been signed in 2012 between the Afghan government

of the time and the Chinese company CNPC, but it failed to materialize due to delays and lack of progress in the work (Shalizi, 2012). The signing of the contract happened a day after the Taliban government announced that it had shot dead eight fighters from the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), suspected of being behind an attack last month on a hotel in the capital hosting Chinese businessmen. Likely a demonstration of the Taliban government's commitment to ensuring the security of its newly established partners.

- Mes Aynak copper mine

Located 40 kilometers southeast of the capital in the Logar province, the Mes Aynak mine, whose name literally means *"little copper spring"* in Dari, and is one of the world's largest copper deposits discovered to this date. Largely unexploited, it has been valued at 12 million tons of ore, with a total estimated value of at least \$50 billion. Widely used in cutting-edge renewable energy technologies for its conductivity, copper accounts for 70% of total consumption of minerals critical to ecological transition. This mine therefore represents a major asset for the Taliban at the negotiating table with China. In 2008, Hamid Karzai's government had already signed a contract with China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) to exploit the mine, and at that time, it was the largest foreign investment in Afghanistan's history. The 30-year contract, worth an estimated \$3 billion, included copper extraction and production, including smelting and processing of raw copper, in Afghanistan. The contract also encompassed the construction of a 400 MW coal-fired power plant and a rail link between Hairtan and the ports of Torkham. However, the terms of the contract as outlined above proved impossible to achieve, and the Chinese company repeatedly renegotiated the contract. Fifteen years after signing the contract, the project was still at a standstill, and the main reason given by the Chinese investors for the lack of progress was the persistent insecurity caused by insurgent attacks on Chinese investments in the region. Ultimately, the project failed, and the Chinese personnel were evacuated from the site. But despite the resounding failure of the first contract, the Taliban, through the intermediary of their Minister of Foreign Relations, Ziad Rashidi, urged the MCC to resume work on the site, under terms unchanged from the 2008 contract. The latter stated that it was inclined to resume work on the condition that it renegotiates certain terms of the contract, including reducing taxes and almost halving the 19.5% royalty rate. According to a Chinese official, negotiations are ongoing and, if successful, the deal could be one of the most important ever signed by the Taliban (Kullab, 2022). In addition to being a highly strategic site in terms of resources, Mes Aynak is also a historical and archaeological treasure trove containing traces of an ancient Buddhist city dating back to the 8th century. Excavations have uncovered *"400 statues and wall paintings across a citadel, numerous monasteries, stupas and small forts"* (Gronlund, 2021). This archaeological discovery is of great importance for understanding the region's past, especially the development of Buddhism in the Kingdom of Afghanistan, as well as providing indications of how knowledge and cultures were transmitted along the early Silk Road. The Chinese authorities have pledged to preserve the site during the works, as have the Taliban, even though the latter have a record of destroying the world's historic heritage, as with the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Noorzai, 2023).

China's investment and financing strategy in Afghanistan is primarily based on the gradual integration of the country into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially as part of the flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Introduced in 2013 by Xi Jinping during his visit to Kazakhstan, the Belt and Road Initiative, initially known as *"One Belt One Road"* (OBOR) and referring to the mythical project of the *"first silk roads"*, is the spearhead of Chinese foreign policy. This *"project of the century"* is designed to create a new

generation of sea and land routes connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, with the aim of improving connectivity, infrastructure networks and the economic development between member countries (McBride et al 2023). Although the ultimate aim of this project seems clear, namely to definitively interconnect all the world's economies via a single network, the exact contours of the project remain unclear. Indeed, from the beginning, the BRI has been characterized by a broader, multifaceted lack of transparency and sustainability. While this is most obvious in the case of debt sustainability, these concerns also extend to the social, political, and environmental ramifications of the initiative. The lack of transparency and clear guidelines makes the conceptualization of the project complex, however what is certain is that the BRI is the largest infrastructure development project in the history of mankind, a multi-billion dollar undertaking through which China aims to integrate its own economy with those of some 152 partner countries (Schulhof et al, 2022). China regards the "infrastructure deficit" as one of the main factors limiting greater economic integration in Eurasia, and has therefore made investment in infrastructure a priority, capitalizing on the construction of physical infrastructure such as roads, railways, ports, and airports. The ostensible purpose of these investments is to facilitate the movement of goods, services, capital, and people across borders, as well as to foster regional economic integration and cooperation. The BRI is part of a wider policy legacy in China that seeks to promote the global presence of Chinese companies, with the 'Go Out' (1999) and 'Go Global' (2006) strategies pursuing similar objectives (Yu, 2012). Contracts for infrastructure projects under BRI have mainly been awarded to Chinese companies and suppliers, creating a market-seeking effect for Chinese - State-owned - companies. The potential benefits created for both Chinese companies and overseas beneficiaries initially gave rise to a narrative of the BRI as a "win-win" scenario, normalizing a depiction of the BRI as an economic rather than a political initiative, however, in the light of recent events, whether in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or African countries, this "win-win" concept is gradually crumbling (Rauf, 2021).

While the provision of infrastructure financing for developing economies provides development opportunities, Chinese lending practices have also evoked significant concerns, especially regarding debt sustainability. Some participating countries, most notably in Africa and South Asia, have accumulated significant debt burdens from BRI projects. Pre-pandemic debt distress has been worsened by the economic impact of COVID-19. To this date, Chinese efforts to mitigate these concerns have proven ineffective - or non-existent in some cases, meaning that much of the BRI continues to focus on countries that cannot access more established development financing mechanisms due to concerns about their ability to service their debt. One of the most striking and inglorious famous examples, is Sri Lanka, which was one of the first countries in South Asia to become a part of the BRI, with infrastructure financing frequently being provided via low-interest loans and structured based on long repayment periods. The availability of cheap development financing at favorable interest rates resulted in Sri Lanka accumulating a growing pile of Chinese debt over time. By late 2022, Sri Lanka owed Chinese creditors 7.4 billion US\$, accounting for nearly 20% of Colombo's total public external debt (CNBC, 2023). The ongoing crisis in Sri Lanka is unprecedented and out of all proportion, leaving the country at the mercy of its creditors.

Major component of the Chinese pharaonic project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an infrastructure network project, running over 3000 km (2000 miles), and connecting the port of Gwadar in Pakistan to the city of Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China. This project aims to stimulate and develop the Pakistani economy while strengthening economic and trade ties between the two countries. A bilateral agreement was signed on 20 April 2015 marking the launch of the project, involving the creation of motorways, railways, energy production centres and pipelines, with a total

estimated budget of \$60 billion (Afzal, 2020). Out of this sum, \$45 billion would be spent to support the vision of making the corridor operational by 2020, and the remaining funds would be invested in energy production and infrastructure development. Under Chinese leadership, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China have established a platform of discussion known as the “China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue” with the aim of developing win-win trilateral economic cooperation and promoting regional development. The first edition of the trilateral China-Afghanistan-Pakistan foreign ministers' dialogue was held in Beijing in December 2017. The Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan has not hindered this collaboration, quite the contrary since at the 5th edition, held in Islamabad in May 2023, the three ministers reaffirmed their commitment to continuing trilateral cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road initiative and to jointly extending the China-Pakistan economic corridor to Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). On this occasion, they also underlined the importance of existing projects, such as the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000), the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAPI) and the Trans-Afghan railways. At the end of the meeting, the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Qin Gang, and the acting Afghan Foreign Minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, jointly expressed their desire to deepen and broaden cooperation between their countries in the fields of security, economic development, and politics.

This vast project is portrayed as being mutually beneficial ("win-win" scenario) for all parties involved, however the reality is far more nuanced. Concerning the beneficial aspect, in the case of Afghanistan, the project offers some economic opportunities, vital to its development and crucial to prevent the complete collapse of the country. With the Taliban in power, the country is subject to major international sanctions, including the freezing of foreign financial assets and an embargo, making it essentially dependent on Western donors' foreign aid, which is becoming increasingly rare and difficult to access (Johnson, 2021). China is currently the country's most important partner, and the only one to take the risk of investing in a country in ruins. Unlike other foreign investors, China does not make its investments subject to social requirements such as respect for democracy and individual freedoms, including women's rights, which is particularly convenient for the Taliban. The relationship rests on a mutual agreement of non-interference by each party in the internal affairs of the other, including the treatment of the Uyghur community on the one hand and respect for fundamental human rights on the other. Joining the CPEC would therefore enable the country to finance its reconstruction, open up its economy by establishing economic links and trade routes with its neighbours, and attract potential new investors and companies to Afghanistan. Moreover, China is approaching the Afghanistan issue from a different angle than its predecessors, rejecting any "boots on the ground" policy and wishing only to engage on the economic stage (Ramachandran et al, 2024). For Pakistan, this extension represents significant advantages, but also raises a number of concerns. The Pakistani economy, badly affected by political instability and recent natural disasters, desperately needs the economic development opportunities offered by the CPEC. In this view, this extension would improve connectivity with the Central Asian republics, expand its market and facilitate exports to Europe. In addition, the prospect of a "stable" and "thriving" Afghanistan is particularly attractive, given that Pakistan has been directly impacted by successive wars and chronic instability of its neighbour, manifested in a growing flow of refugees and an increasing infiltration of terrorist groups on its territory. However, the tumultuous relationship between the two countries, linked in part to the funding of terrorist groups, complicates the project's implementation. Pakistan recently launched a crackdown on undocumented immigrants, mainly Afghan refugees, resulting in a mass exodus and tensions with the Taliban (Kugelman, 2023). This radical measure takes place in a tense security context, marked by an upsurge of terrorist attacks, mostly perpetrated by the Tehreek-

i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Pakistani authorities accuse the Afghan Taliban of supporting this organization, while the Taliban refute these accusations. In other words, despite the possibility of mutual economic benefits, the two countries are definitely not ready to overcome a complex history of bilateral relations, marked by security concerns and territorial disputes, to create the climate of trust needed to build a long-term project. Moreover, the hypocrisy and lack of substance which underlie these exchanges will only ensure the temporary continuity of the project. Only a sincere and complete commitment from all the parties involved will ensure its long-term success, but this does not seem to be the trademark of Chinese diplomacy.

China's "Great Game"

Although the economic benefits may seem attractive at the first sight, they do not constitute the main motive for China to deepen its involvement in Afghanistan. Indeed, while these investments may offer the prospect of long-term profits, in the short term they are a burden for any company wishing to invest (Rahimi, n.d.). China finances the BRI through a complex network of State-directed policy and commercial banks that provide funding for BRI-linked projects. The policy banks, including the China Development Bank (CDB) and the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank), have played a significant role in providing long-term, low-interest loans for BRI projects, while commercial banks have provided short-term financing for trade and investment. The policy banks, particularly the CDB, have been the main source of funding for BRI projects (Chen et al., 2022). They provide loans to host countries for infrastructure projects, including transportation, energy, telecommunications, and industrial parks. These loans are typically long-term, low-interest loans with a repayment period of 20-30 years, which were initially portrayed as being designed to allow host countries to fund large-scale projects that may not be feasible through other means of financing. The State-directed nature of the policy banks place BRI financing in direct connection with the Chinese Status apparatus rather than allowing BRI financing to operate on a more privatized lending market. Overcoming the lack of infrastructure and transport, the management deficiencies combined with rampant corruption, and the political and economic instability resulting from successive wars over the past three decades would require colossal investments, with no guarantee of success. Furthermore, even if Sino-Afghan relations are tending to improve, investments remain marginal vis-à-vis the various financial commitments made by China in neighbouring countries. In order to increase this cooperation, Afghan governments have highlighted Afghanistan's strategic position as a decisive advantage for China's "westward march", an argument that has also been echoed by the Chinese authorities. However, while Afghanistan's central geographical position is certainly advantageous, it is not essential for BRI, since for almost a decade China has been building its communications and transport networks around Afghanistan, bypassing the country and its internal problems. In fact, two main BRI corridors bypass the country to the south and north respectively: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, which crosses the five Central Asian republics as well as Iran and Turkey (Zhang, 2022). In other words, Afghanistan is not a necessary component for the success of the Belt and Road Initiative.



Source: The Atlantic Council – Two BRI corridors bypassing Afghanistan

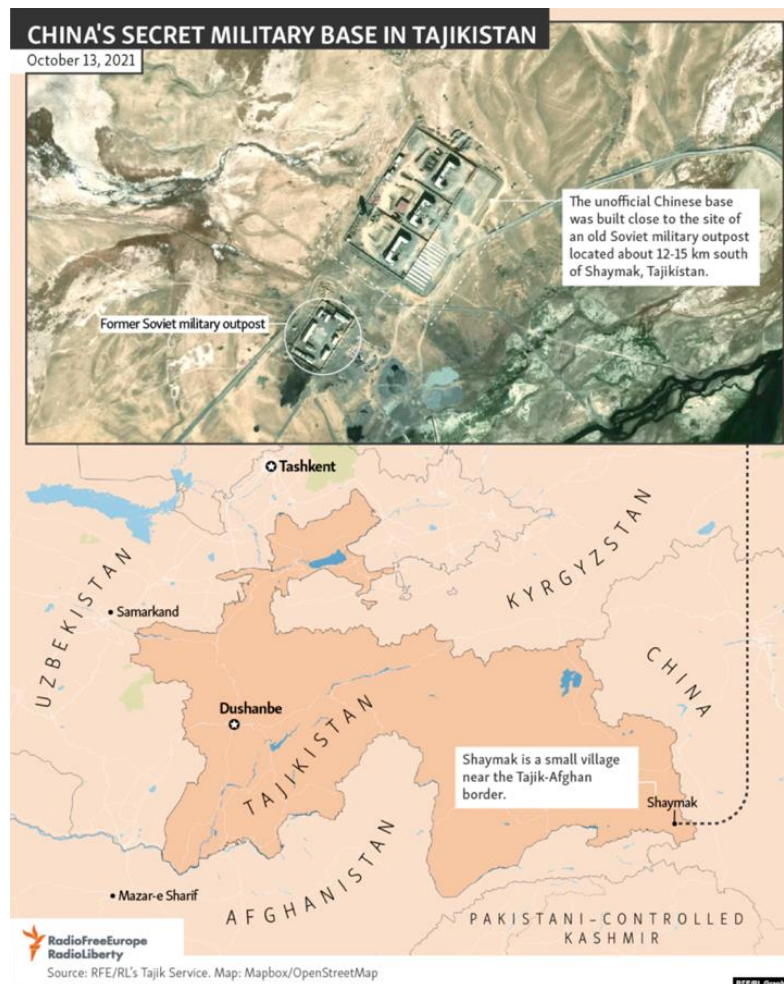
Renowned for its pragmatic approach to foreign policy, China is primarily addressing a security imperative in the context of Afghanistan. Ironically, China has been one of the main beneficiaries of the presence of the US and its allies in Afghanistan since, to a certain extent, this intervention has helped to contain the security threat by reducing the risk of insurgency and terrorist attacks on its own territory (Williams, 2021). The withdrawal of American troops and the return to instability has therefore rekindled Chinese security concerns. Thus, one of the primary and probably most compelling motivations for China to intensify its involvement is the threat posed by the geographical, religious, and cultural proximity between Afghanistan and its own province of Xinjiang, which shares a 74 km border via the Wakhan corridor. This predominantly Muslim mountainous region in northern China has for years been a major obstacle in the CCP's quest for ethnic assimilation and creation of a single "*Zhonghua Minzu*" (i.e unique Chinese nation - Hayton, 2020, p.75). Designated by the central government as the heart of the "three evils", which are terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, the Communist Party has been carrying out mass repression in Xinjiang since 2017, leading to the arbitrary internment of millions of people in "re-education" camps (Li, 2019). The Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking Sunni Muslim ethnic community, have become the main target of this campaign of ethnic discrimination and the worst victim of human rights violations. In 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination estimated that nearly one million Uyghurs were interned in "political education camps", although Uyghur human rights organizations put the number between two and three million. The gravity of the situation prompted the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to consider classifying China's actions as "*crimes against humanity*" in its latest report (OHCHR, 2022, p. 44).

Consequently, China's rapprochement policy with the Taliban is mainly guided by the fear that the ideological influence of Islamic groups operating in the tribal areas of Pakistan (FATA) and Afghanistan might spread to China, thereby exacerbating separatism in Xinjiang. Afghanistan is a haven for many transnational terrorist organizations, some of which seek to export Jihad to Xinjiang, as in the case of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Bête noire of the Chinese regime, the ETIM is a Muslim separatist group founded in 1998 by Hasan

Mahsum, operating mainly in Xinjiang, whose aim is to create an independent State called "East Turkestan", extending over part of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China (Xu et al, 2014). This outfit, essentially composed of Uyghur fighters, is held responsible for more than 200 "terrorist incidents" between 1990 and 2001. In parallel, China took advantage of the international context, following the 9/11 attacks, to launch its own "war on terror", and to identify Uyghur groups, previously qualified as "separatists" or "secessionists", as "terrorists" (Clarke, p. 32, 2019). Thus, in exchange for their cooperation in the fight against terrorism, the United States helped China to tackle this threat by putting the ETIM on its list of terrorist organizations. In 2002, the United Nations Security Council also placed the ETIM on the sanctions list for having proven links with Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban (UNSC, n.d). Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine the exact extent of this network given the lack of information available about this group. Some experts believe that it is an umbrella organization bringing together numerous splinter groups, while others believe that the organization has reinvented itself under the name of the Turkestan Islamic Party (Xu et al, 2014). The Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), which emerged in the 2000s, is notably known for its involvement in the war in Syria alongside Al Qaeda and the recruitment of many Uyghur exiles into its ranks (Rakisits, 2022). According to Professor R. Roberts of the George Washington University, those associated with ETIM in the late 1990s were part of a small group of Uyghurs who had left China for Afghanistan with the intention of building a guerrilla insurgency to liberate their homeland. In 2020, Mike Pompeo removed the ETIM from the list of terrorist organizations, due to a lack of "credible evidence" of ETIM activity since the 2000s, to the great displeasure of the Chinese authorities (Zhen, 2020). The Secretary of State accused China of using the war on terror as a pretext to support its repression of the Uyghur population. Once again, the lack of information makes it difficult to make a precise assessment, but it is clear that groups such as the TIP and the ETIM represent a serious threat to China, which intends to use all possible means to contain them. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunqing referred to ETIM as *"the most immediate and realistic threat to China's security"* (BBC, 2013). While 'East Turkistan' poses the most dangerous threat to Xinjiang's stability and security from within, Afghanistan is considered the most serious threat from outside.

In the name of safeguarding national security and territorial integrity, the CCP is prepared to support - to a certain degree - the Taliban in exchange for their cooperation. A gamble that for the moment seems to be paying off, according to researcher Lucas Webber, who recently commented: *"One set of markers that can be used is to compare the TIP in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics with its media production in the run-up to the 2022 Games. In 2008, the TIP was aggressively and loudly threatening China, whereas in 2022, the group must balance its hostilities towards Beijing with practical considerations regarding their Taliban hosts"* (Rehman, 2022). Moreover, the Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, announced at the international conference in Tashkent that *"the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will not allow any of its members, or any other individual or group, including al-Qaeda, to pose a threat to the security of others from Afghan soil"*. According to the Voice of America newspaper, the Taliban have also moved Uyghur militants from Badakhshan province, situated at the border with China, in response to Beijing's security concerns (Standish, 2021). Nevertheless, China does not appear to be satisfied solely with the word of the Taliban, who have proven in the past not always to be reliable interlocutors, and newspapers have reported the deployment of Chinese troops on the Sino-Afghan border, along the Wakhan corridor, in the form of security patrols or "mountain brigades" (Pandey, 2018). International sources, including an investigation released by RadioFreeEurope, also mention the construction of a Chinese military base on the Tajik-Afghan border, close to the Wakhan corridor, with at least one battalion of Chinese soldiers, as well as the necessary weapons and equipment (Standish,

2021). Although the Chinese and Tajik authorities have denied the existence of this military base, the hypothetical construction of such a base would undeniably represent a strategic advantage for China, as it could serve to secure the border. Under the guise of the fight against terrorism, this base could constitute Beijing's first military footprint in Central Asia.



Source: RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty– China's secret military base in Tajikistan

Hence, maintaining a favorable security paradigm in Afghanistan has become crucial for China in order to guarantee its national security and territorial integrity. Besides, a stable security environment would enable China to secure its economic interests in the region and strengthen trade within Central Asia. Its investments, particularly along the CPEC, are frequently the target of attacks perpetrated mainly by terrorist organizations based in Afghanistan, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (Rakisits, 2022). The risk of these outfits spreading across Central Asia could therefore jeopardise the Chinese Communist Party's regional ambitions. Experts have drawn an analogy between the new Chinese doctrine and the 19th century "Great Game" opposing the British and Russian empires for influence in Central Asia. The power vacuum resulting from the precipitous withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan has rekindled historic struggles for influence in the region, particularly in the heart of Russia's stronghold, comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and

Turkmenistan (Bradsher, 2022). Despite the united front that the Russian and Chinese heads of State are trying to maintain on the international stage, the two countries are waging a "silent" war of influence in Central Asia, a highly strategic region as much for its natural resources as for its access to the European continent. For these five republics, history seems to be eternally repeating itself, the only difference being that today we no longer fight with cannon fire but with financial loans and promises of economic growth. Faced with China's gargantuan appetite and the colossal resources at its disposal, it may seem difficult to imagine how Russia could compete, but history has also taught us never to underestimate Russia and its imperative to protect its 'vital space'. For China, the new 'Great Game' would mean significantly protecting its backyard from foreign influence, securing, and consolidating its Belt and Road Initiative, while seeking to position itself as the region's stabilizing power.

Conclusion

Taking advantage of the Taliban's diplomatic and economic isolation, China has been quick to move its pawns in Afghanistan, exploiting the power vacuum to pursue its own political agenda and increase its influence in the region. China's strategy in Afghanistan focuses on an economic approach, contrasting with previous initiatives deployed in the country which combined political ambitions with military interventionism, and capitalizing on the positive and beneficial repercussions of these investments to naturally divert the Afghan population's attention from extremism and terrorism (Ramachandran et al, 2024). Therefore, it is only once the Afghan people have secured full independence and the tools to build an economy sufficiently resilient to support the country's needs, that it will engage on the path of stable and sustainable political construction. Ultimately, this approach, devoid of any moral compass, enables China to be involved in Afghanistan and maintain control over the situation, while maintaining a certain strategic distance.

Although the economic benefits may seem attractive at the first, China's policy, shifting from calculated indifference to strategic engagement, seems primarily driven by a security imperative, with Afghanistan representing the most direct external threat (Pandey, 2019). Therefore, the recent involvement aims to preserve a "safe" paradigm in Afghanistan, in order to prevent the spread of 'terrorism' on its soil and to ensure the integrity of its national security. In other words, China's recent engagement in Afghanistan seeks to contain the threat posed by East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and forestall the return of the United States in the region (Kuma et al, 2023).

Having acknowledged the above, it is also undeniable that this partnership offers substantial economic benefits for China. Indeed, this new alliance also guarantees privileged access for Chinese State-owned enterprises to key natural resources and opens up new prospects of trade routes for the BRI. True treasure in terms of mining resources, Afghan soil contains large reserves of lithium and copper, essential components in the manufacture of rechargeable batteries and indispensable to the ecological transition. Benefiting from the country's pariah status and the shortage of competition on the market, China has seized this opportunity to establish its monopoly in this key sector. As the Taliban's most important trading partner, China is seeking to intensify its investment in Afghanistan by progressively integrating the country into the Belt and Road Initiative, notably through its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, an in-depth analysis highlights the gap between the rhetoric adopted by the government regarding its investment project in Afghanistan and concrete actions on the ground. Indeed, despite the growing number of statements, Chinese investment in the country remains limited and cautious. Beyond the high

instability and insecurity of the country, Afghanistan is currently also a failed State, suffering from a crying lack of infrastructure, an efficient health system, an education system, and many other socio-economic structures crucial to the country's reconstruction.

It is worth noting that the BRI is not bound to emerge as an institutional alternative to distinct regional mechanisms in South Asia. While potentially producing beneficial net economic outcomes for recipient countries in the short-term, BRI policy continues to be largely shaped by China and the prioritization of Chinese domestic interests (He, 2019; Hoering, 2020). China will continue to secure necessary resources and markets for continued industrial expansion and as a result the BRI is likely to develop in a way that China perceives as most beneficial for its politico-economic goals, many of which are likely to shift over time. Through the BRI, China provides low-cost financing for countries in need of infrastructural development, while subjecting them to Chinese objectives which may not always overlap with the aims of countries in South Asia. In exchange for providing infrastructure, participating countries open their financial markets to China and take up extensive loans which have raised increasing concerns about debt sustainability and the untransparent restructuring mechanisms of these loans (Acker et al., 2020). Due to lack of bargaining power of recipient countries' governments, China is able to establish conditions that can prove unprofitable and disadvantageous for local people and leave taxpayers with the burden to repay debts over an extensive period of time. Thereby, funding is heavily tilted toward Chinese government-led construction companies and trade deficits are likely to increase (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). In addition to the official geopolitical and economic goals of the grand project, which include infrastructure, connectivity, free trade and the integration of financial markets, China's expansive foreign policy interests must be viewed with particular caution in the long-term. Partaking countries must develop administrative mechanisms that help to assess and balance the need for long-term loans and infrastructure investment with the costs of increasing economic dominance and influence of China. This creates an urgent need for South Asian countries to ensure the financial feasibility and sustainability of extensive infrastructure projects in order to minimize the exertion of political influence by China. Criticism of the BRI often focuses on concerns about China taking over strategic assets and infrastructure after countries are unable to repay the loans in what is called "debt-trap diplomacy". The Hambantota port in Sri Lanka is repeatedly referred to as an example for this concern. The port was leased to a Chinese State-owned enterprise for 99 years after Sri Lanka was unable to satisfy foreign loans (Moramudali, 2020). This means that the China Merchant Port company will handle significant portions of operations and profit, while the ownership remains in Sri Lanka. Similarly, in the case of the CPEC, the recipient country, Pakistan, pays a large share of the hidden costs of the BRI. Despite efforts to transform the Gwadar port in Pakistan into a global trade hub, delays in other BRI infrastructure projects in and around the port city of Gwadar led to slow business and protests. Following the Gwadar port deal, the China Overseas Port Holding Company receives 91% of the profits from terminal and maritime operations over the next 40 years in a leasing agreement similar to the one concluded for the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka (The Economic Times, 2017). Increasingly, opposition and protests have formed within local communities towards the CPEC project around the notion that China profits more from the economic corridor than Pakistan and that mineral resources are being exploited (Baloch, 2021). While the creation of economic corridors can contribute to the creation of job opportunities in the partaking countries, the special economic zone also allows for a higher influx of Chinese workers and goods which potentially drive local products and producers out of the market. The resentment within the local community in Gwadar hints at the fact that alleged job opportunities and figures put forward by authorities about the creation of jobs have failed to materialize. For the people in Gwadar, access to basic necessities like electricity and

water remains very limited and for the local fishermen, free access to the sea has been blocked as a result of the infrastructure development around the port (Ebrahim, 2021). In addition, the long-term costs of environmental degradation in the region are borne by the local residents. In the immediate vicinity of Gwadar, a \$540 million coal-fired power plant is being built by the China Communication Construction Company, despite the government's decision to forego new coal-fired power plants (Ebrahim, 2021). This example shows that while environmental degradation is outsourced, China continues to seek new ways to secure resources tapping into countries as part of the BRI.

Afghanistan is increasingly being seen through the light of great power competition, and while the United States (US) and its allies have, in the main, remained aloof towards the Taliban regime, there are calls from within the US and the West to engage in some way with it. It is possible that China's outreach to Kabul and its desire to make the most of the possibilities that the absence of the international community has presented to it will eventually nudge the US to talk more deeply with the Taliban. China is well aware of the risks of investing in Afghanistan and knows that sizable project investments need security and stability. The Taliban is still not a legitimate government, has no legal competence as a party to an economic contract and a reliable partner, and does not have a complete monopoly of power. Despite the group's rapid takeover of the capital and its institutions, the Taliban have neither sufficient sovereignty nor political legitimacy within the country and among the population. As soon as they took power, the Taliban faced significant resistance, both from the population urging greater individual freedoms, with half the population banned from the public sphere and deprived of their most fundamental freedoms, and from other terrorist groups - such as ISIS and IS-KP. Internal power struggles between different factions also make the exercise of power complex and their future uncertain.

Finally, China's recent moves have provided the Taliban with the necessary elements to maintain its grip on power on a medium-term basis: diplomatic relations with a pivotal country on the international stage and economic assistance to counter the dire humanitarian crisis. China seems determined to strengthen its relations with the Taliban, despite the country's internal issues and lack of governance. Recently, the spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed the deepest fears of human rights defenders in implying that diplomatic recognition of the Afghan government by his country will come naturally when the concerns of the various parties are effectively considered. In the current context, recognition of the Taliban seems inevitable and is only a matter of time, unless members of the international community implement the necessary measures to prevent it, which seems highly unlikely. The Chinese interventionism on international matters aims to completely change the balance of power between the powers, and to (re)-establish a doctrine in international relations in which respect for human rights is no more than an insignificant detail. The events taking place in Afghanistan have been known to impact greatly on global history, turning a blind eye to what is happening in the country today would thereby be either imprudent or foolish.

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