

The Xinjiang Factor in China's Security Policy Toward Afghanistan

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Abstract: This article analyzes the security interests of the People's Republic of China in Afghanistan through the prism of the Xinjiang factor and transnational threats. The study examines the role of Afghanistan in China's security strategy, the activities of extremist groups such as ETIM/TIP, the security commitments of the Taliban authorities, and the impact of transnational terrorist networks, including ISKP, Al-Qaeda, and TTP, on regional stability. The article argues that China's policy toward Afghanistan is shaped by the interaction of cautious pragmatism, border security, counterterrorism priorities, and geo-economic interests. The stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is interpreted as one of the key security determinants of China's Afghan policy. The research applies historical-analytical, comparative, content analysis, discourse analysis, and systemic methods. The findings demonstrate that China's interests in Afghanistan are closely connected with domestic security, regional stability, transport and communication projects, and the security of the Belt and Road Initiative. The article substantiates the need to examine China-Afghanistan relations in connection with the wider security environment of Central Asia.

Keywords: China, Afghanistan, Xinjiang, security interests, ETIM, TIP, Taliban, transnational threats, terrorism, extremism, ISKP, Al-Qaeda, Central Asia, geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction: Afghanistan occupies a geographically narrow, yet strategically significant place in the foreign policy and security strategy of the People's Republic of China. Its direct border with China, its location at the geopolitical junction of Central and South Asia, and the long-standing presence of transnational extremist networks on Afghan territory increase the importance of this country in Beijing's regional security outlook. The withdrawal of United States and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and the return of the Taliban to power created a new security environment for China. According to SIPRI analysis, China's activity in Afghanistan is based on a cautious, pragmatic approach constrained by security concerns. Beijing seeks to manage threats through regional mechanisms, diplomatic contacts, and economic incentives rather than assuming direct military-political responsibility in Afghanistan [1].

The Xinjiang factor occupies a central place in

understanding China's security interests in Afghanistan. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is viewed by the PRC as a strategic territory associated with domestic stability, border security, the western direction of the Belt and Road Initiative, and connectivity with Central Asia [2]. Zhao Huasheng notes that China approaches Afghanistan primarily from the perspective of preventing instability from spreading into Xinjiang. Michael E. Clarke demonstrates that domestic security issues in Xinjiang are directly linked with China's policy toward Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the broader Eurasian space. Afghanistan therefore appears to China as a zone where internal security and external geopolitical strategy intersect [3].

Within this topic, the issue of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement or the Turkistan Islamic Party has particular significance. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China interprets the presence of ETIM forces in Afghanistan as a serious threat to the security of China,

Afghanistan, and the wider region [4]. Analytical materials related to the United Nations Security Council sanctions list describe the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement as an organization connected with the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan [5]. Consequently, China's security interests in Afghanistan extend beyond bilateral border security and include transnational jihadist networks, foreign fighters, radicalization, illicit financial flows, and risks of regional destabilization.

After 2021, the complexity of the security situation in Afghanistan created a dual challenge for China. On the one hand, the withdrawal of Western military forces opened opportunities for Beijing to expand its diplomatic and economic presence in Afghanistan. On the other hand, serious doubts remain regarding the Taliban authorities' capacity to fully control terrorist groups. Reports of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute identify divisions within the Taliban, the presence of regional and global terrorist groups, and risks of transnational organized crime as key security trends in Afghanistan [6]. According to the European Parliamentary Research Service, although the level of violence has decreased in certain respects, the Taliban faces major constraints in stabilizing the Afghan economy and in effectively countering terrorist groups on Afghan territory [7].

China's policy in Afghanistan is being shaped through the interdependence of security and economic interests. For Beijing, the stabilization of Afghanistan is connected with Xinjiang's security, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, transport and communication links with Central Asia, and the security of the Belt and Road Initiative. A 2025 analysis by the Observer Research Foundation explains China's dialogue with the Taliban and its economic activity through the objective of preventing ETIM from finding a safe haven in Afghanistan [8]. At the same time, China's approach of achieving stability through development is being tested in the Afghan and Pakistani contexts, while this model remains contested because of the complex social and political experience associated with Xinjiang.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of China's security interests in Afghanistan has emerged in recent years as a distinct research direction within international relations, security studies, regional geopolitics, and counterterrorism studies. Existing literature usually explains China's policy toward Afghanistan through three main factors. The first is the need to ensure stability in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The second is the prevention of Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for transnational extremist groups. The

third is geoeconomic connectivity between Central and South Asia, especially the security of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Feng Zhang interprets the history of China-Afghanistan relations in three stages: relative distance during the Cold War, concern in the 1990s over potential Uyghur militancy originating from Afghanistan, and Beijing's gradual activation on the Afghan issue after 2001[9]. In Zhang's research, China's post-2021 policy is characterized by cautious and pragmatic dialogue with the Taliban, prevention of Afghanistan serving as a sanctuary for terrorists, and the centrality of Xinjiang's security.

In research on this topic, the Xinjiang factor is assessed as the most important domestic security variable explaining China's Afghanistan policy. Michael E. Clarke analyzes the Xinjiang issue in connection with China's Central Asian and broader Eurasian policy. In his view, Beijing's integration policy in Xinjiang is more than a domestic governance issue; it directly affects China's western borders, relations with Central Asia, and regional security strategy [10]. Clarke's article on China's war on terror in Xinjiang explains some manifestations of Uyghur separatism and radicalization in relation to internal political processes in Xinjiang and Islamic radical networks in Central and South Asia.

Nadine Godehardt's monograph on China and Central Asia is also theoretically important for this topic. The author shows how Central Asia is imagined within Chinese expert discourse, how Beijing views its western neighborhood as a political and territorial category, and how security, economic development, and regional influence are combined in this process [11]. This approach substantiates the need to study Afghanistan within China's broader western neighborhood strategy, since Afghanistan is located in a security space directly connected with the Central Asian states, Pakistan, and Xinjiang.

Barnett R. Rubin's article on Chinese peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan emphasizes that China's attempts to mediate Afghan conflicts do not easily fit into conventional categories of intra-state or inter-state mediation [12]. The article situates China's conflict management, peacebuilding, and mediation efforts across a wider set of cases involving conflicts between states and non-state actors, including Ethiopia, South Sudan, Yemen, Mali, the Sahel, and terrorism in Africa.

In local academic literature, the political, security, geoeconomic, and regional factors of Afghanistan-China relations have been consistently studied by a number of researchers. In particular, the works of Abdusamad Haydarov, Shoislom Akmalov, Suhrob

Bo'ronov, Obidjon Abdurahmonov, and Sardor Rahimov examine Afghanistan's role in the regional security system, China's strategic interests in the Afghan direction, geoeconomic approaches within the Belt and Road Initiative, and factors affecting terrorism, extremism, cross-border threats, and Central Asian security. These studies support the need to examine China-Afghanistan relations within the broader contexts of regional security, transport and communication links, geopolitical competition, and transnational threats, rather than limiting the analysis to bilateral diplomacy.

The Observer Research Foundation also emphasizes that China's relations with the Taliban primarily serve security purposes. According to the ORF's 2025 analysis, China seeks to prevent ETIM from finding a safe haven in Afghanistan by developing political and economic ties with the country. It also aims to prevent various terrorist groups in Afghanistan from exporting instability to China's western borders. This approach shows that Beijing's economic diplomacy is subordinated to security objectives.

METHODS

This article employs a qualitative and comprehensive research approach to reveal the interrelationship between China's security interests in Afghanistan, the Xinjiang factor, and transnational threats. The historical-analytical method is used as the primary methodological tool. Through this method, the study examines the stages in the formation of China-Afghanistan relations, Afghanistan's place in China's security strategy after the Cold War, Beijing's cautious policy during the period of international military presence after 2001, and the new geopolitical situation that emerged after the Taliban returned to power in 2021. This method makes it possible to identify how China's security interests in Afghanistan have transformed over time.

The comparative analysis method is used to examine China's approach toward Afghanistan in relation to its security policy concerning Central Asia, Pakistan, and Xinjiang. The comparative approach helps demonstrate that China's policy in Afghanistan is a component of Beijing's broader strategy aimed at securing its western borders. It also clarifies the links among the Xinjiang factor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Central Asian security environment.

The content analysis method is applied to statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, United Nations Security Council materials, reports of international organizations, publications of analytical centers, and key ideas advanced in scholarly articles.

This method helps identify how concepts such as security, terrorism, extremism, ETIM/TIP, regional stability, Xinjiang's security, and security through development are interpreted in China's official discourse on Afghanistan.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The analysis shows that China's security interests in Afghanistan are primarily connected with the stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Zhao Huasheng argues that China's interests in Afghanistan are directed toward preventing instability from entering Xinjiang, in contrast to the wider military-political expansion associated with the United States or other major powers. This approach allows China's Afghanistan policy to be interpreted as limited interests, cautious engagement, and security-oriented pragmatism.

China's official position also explains the Afghan issue directly through a security discourse. The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs document titled China's Position on the Afghan Issue presents security as the foundation and prerequisite of development and assesses the presence of ETIM forces in Afghanistan as a serious threat to China, Afghanistan, and the entire region [13]. The UN Security Council sanctions list describes ETIM as an organization with links to the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. This indicates that Beijing's concerns are connected with transnational jihadist networks and regional extremist infrastructures in addition to the issue of domestic separatism.

Stefanie Kam's article, *China and the Evolving Militant Threat in Post-war Afghanistan*, notes that after the withdrawal of United States troops, Beijing's main security objective was to prevent the destabilization of Xinjiang through the cross-border infiltration of TIP. The author argues that the activities of ISKP, Al-Qaeda, and TIP in Afghanistan indicate the multilayered nature of security threats for China [14]. In this respect, China's strategy in Afghanistan appears as a comprehensive security policy aimed at jointly containing terrorism, extremism, foreign fighters, border insecurity, and regional instability, instead of a policy focused on a single group.

The research of Raffaello Pantucci and Edward Schwarck on Uyghur extremism also shows the close connection between China's security policy and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. In their view, security vacuums in Afghanistan and Pakistan may create conditions for Uyghur militant groups to connect with transnational networks [15]. This approach supports the assessment of Afghanistan as an external security space affecting Xinjiang's stability, beyond its status as

a diplomatic neighbor of China.

Jiayi Zhou, Fei Su, and Jingdong Yuan characterize China's policy in Taliban-led Afghanistan as a strategy of treading lightly, or acting with caution. Their analysis suggests that China has the potential to become an important actor in Afghanistan's security and development, while Beijing avoids unilateral responsibility for the Afghan problem and prefers to exert influence through regional mechanisms, diplomatic channels, and economic incentives [16]. This shows that security guarantees and strategic caution are the main criteria in China's relations with the Taliban, rather than ideological affinity.

According to International Crisis Group, in response to the security concerns of neighboring states, the Taliban uses tactics of keeping many militant groups under control or denying their activities instead of eliminating them fully[17]. This creates a significant problem for China. Beijing expects the Taliban to take strict measures against ETIM/TIP, while the Taliban's internal political balance, ties with different factions, and selective approach toward militant groups limit the practical value of such guarantees. For this reason, China-Taliban relations are best assessed as conditional pragmatism and tactical coordination, rather than a strategic alliance.

China's economic activity in Afghanistan is also inseparable from its security interests. Afghanistan may be important for China in terms of mineral resources, transport corridors, connectivity between Central and South Asia, and the Belt and Road Initiative. However, according to the EPRS analysis, the Taliban's capture of Kabul on 15 August 2021 and the withdrawal of Western forces did not bring automatic peace and stability to Afghanistan. Therefore, China's economic projects remain constrained by the need for security guarantees, the lack of international recognition, the presence of terrorist groups, and the weakness of state institutions.

A 2025 analysis by the ORF explains China's dialogue with the Taliban through the security of Xinjiang and the objective of preventing the reactivation of the ETIM/TIP threat from Afghan territory, alongside economic interests. Thus, Beijing's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan functions as a tool serving security[18]. In other words, China promotes the formula of stability through development in Afghanistan, although this model faces serious limitations caused by the Taliban's practical capacity for control, international sanctions, terrorist group activity, and the local socio-economic crisis.

A UNICRI report explains Afghanistan's security environment through the complex interrelationship

between extremism, terrorism, and transnational organized crime. This shows that for China, the Afghan security problem cannot be reduced to ETIM/TIP. ISKP, Al-Qaeda, TTP, drug trafficking, illicit arms circulation, militant mobility, and financial flows turn Afghanistan into a broader space of transnational threats[19]. From this perspective, China's Afghanistan policy is closely connected with domestic security, border control, and regional security institutions.

Drug trafficking is also an important component of transnational threats originating from Afghanistan. According to UNODC data for 2025, opium cultivation in Afghanistan decreased by 20 percent compared with 2024, while this process is creating new changes in regional routes of drug production and trafficking [20]. For China, this means that security threats in Afghanistan manifest themselves through organized crime, illegal economic networks, and border instability in addition to terrorism.

From a securitization perspective, China links the Afghan problem with Xinjiang's security, territorial integrity, and regional stability, thereby framing it as a high-level security issue. This approach allows Beijing to continue dialogue with the Taliban, promote counterterrorism cooperation within the UN and regional platforms, and condition economic initiatives on security guarantees. At the same time, some Western researchers argue that China's counterterrorism discourse is also used as an instrument to legitimize domestic policy in Xinjiang. Therefore, academic analysis should maintain a balance among China's official position, UN documents, independent analytical centers, and critical academic literature.

The study shows that China's security interests in Afghanistan consist of four main layers. The first layer is linked to Xinjiang's stability and the prevention of the ETIM/TIP threat. The second layer focuses on preventing Afghan territory from being used by groups hostile to China through pragmatic dialogue with the Taliban. The third layer covers broader security threats such as ISKP, Al-Qaeda, TTP, drug trafficking, and transnational organized crime. The fourth layer concerns the security of the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and transport and communication projects emerging through Central Asia. For this reason, it is academically justified to analyze China's Afghanistan policy through the interconnection between domestic and external security, rather than through economic expansion or geopolitical influence alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Issues related to China's security interests in

Afghanistan, the Xinjiang factor, and transnational threats are closely linked with the wider regional security system, the stability of Central Asia, counterterrorism, transport and communication projects, and geoeconomic interests. On this basis, the following scientific and practical recommendations may be advanced.

First, China's reliance on bilateral dialogue with the Taliban may be insufficient for containing transnational threats originating from Afghanistan. It is advisable to strengthen multilateral security dialogue with the participation of China, the Central Asian states, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia. Terrorist groups, drug trafficking, illegal arms trade, radicalization, and the movement of militants in Afghanistan have a transnational nature that cannot be confined within the borders of a single state. Therefore, regional security mechanisms should develop information exchange, border control, joint counterterrorism monitoring, and early threat detection systems.

Second, considering the importance of the Xinjiang factor in China's Afghanistan policy, the struggle against groups such as ETIM/TIP should not be tied exclusively to military and security measures. Ideological prevention, the reduction of radicalization risks, stabilization of the socio-economic environment, and support for the peaceful development interests of local communities are important in countering transnational extremism. Long-term stability in Afghanistan requires the coordination of security policy with economic recovery, education, infrastructure, and the strengthening of social institutions.

Third, in dialogue with the Taliban, the international community, including China, should assess security guarantees according to clear criteria. The Taliban's statements regarding the prevention of terrorist activity from Afghan territory against other states need to be confirmed through practical results. For this purpose, it is important to establish a permanent monitoring mechanism concerning the locations of terrorist groups, their financial sources, external contacts, and routes of movement. Although China's relations with the Taliban are based on diplomatic pragmatism, these relations need to be conditioned by real security guarantees.

Fourth, the Central Asian states should carefully analyze China's security policy in the Afghan direction and seek to harmonize it with their own national interests. The Afghanistan factor has a direct impact on the security of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Therefore, the Central Asian states should develop a coordinated regional approach to Afghanistan without becoming dependent

on the initiatives of external powers. In this regard, border security, trade corridors, humanitarian assistance, educational projects, and economic integration should be pursued on the basis of a single strategic program.

Fifth, the security of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and transport and communication projects emerging through Central Asia is directly connected with stability in Afghanistan. China should therefore implement economic projects in Afghanistan in coordination with security and local social stability factors, rather than within the narrow framework of resources, infrastructure, or trade interests. Economic projects that disregard local community interests may intensify social dissatisfaction, radicalization, and security risks in the long term.

Sixth, the fight against drug trafficking should be treated as a separate strategic direction in reducing transnational threats in Afghanistan. Drug trade is one of the financial sources of terrorist groups and is closely linked with regional crime, corruption, illicit arms circulation, and border instability. Consequently, China, the Central Asian states, and international organizations should strengthen alternative agricultural programs in Afghanistan, border control, financial monitoring, and joint operational cooperation against drug trafficking.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of China's security interests in Afghanistan shows that this direction occupies a distinct place in Beijing's broader regional security strategy. Although Afghanistan is connected to China through a geographically narrow border area, its security significance is closely linked with the stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the activities of transnational terrorist groups, the Central Asian security environment, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Belt and Road Initiative. China's policy toward Afghanistan is therefore being shaped through the interaction of security, diplomacy, economic cooperation, and regional stability.

The Xinjiang factor is one of the most important security determinants in China's Afghanistan policy. Beijing regards the presence of groups such as ETIM/TIP on Afghan territory and their possible links with Al-Qaeda, ISKP, TTP, and other transnational extremist networks as a threat to China's domestic security and territorial integrity. From this standpoint, the political situation in Afghanistan, the Taliban's security commitments, and its capacity to control terrorist groups have direct strategic importance for China.

China's relations with the Taliban are based on cautious pragmatism. Beijing views dialogue with the Taliban as a means of managing security risks in Afghanistan, preventing ETIM/TIP activity, protecting Chinese citizens and projects, and maintaining regional stability. At the same time, uncertainty regarding the Taliban's real capacity to control terrorist groups encourages China to pursue a cautious, gradual, and conditional form of cooperation.

Threats originating from Afghanistan have a multilayered character. Terrorism, religious extremism, the movement of foreign fighters, drug trafficking, illicit arms circulation, cross-border crime, and illegal financial flows increase China's security concerns regarding Afghanistan. The transnational nature of these threats limits the possibility of resolving them within a single state. For this reason, multilateral security mechanisms involving China, the Central Asian states, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and international organizations are of great importance.

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