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China-Afghanistan Geoeconomic Cooperation and Regional Economic Integration During the Taliban Period (2021-2025)

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Abstract

China's engagement with Afghanistan entered a new phase after the Taliban returned to power in 2021, prompting Beijing to recalibrate its westward geoeconomic strategy. This article examines how China seeks to advance regional economic integration during the Taliban period (2021-2025) through a combination of geoeconomic instruments, security-development logic, and corridor-based connectivity. Using qualitative analysis supported by secondary data, the study evaluates China's post-2021 diplomatic initiatives, including trilateral mechanisms with Pakistan, exploratory infrastructure cooperation, and renewed interest in extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and assessing the feasibility of the Wakhan Corridor. Findings show that the Taliban's diplomatic shift from isolation in the 1990s to pragmatic engagement today, creates new opportunities for China's integration agenda, particularly as the group publicly supports regional connectivity and foreign investment. However, significant structural constraints persist, including fragmented governance, militant threats, contractual instability such as the collapse of the CAPEIC oil deal, and competing regional interests. The article concludes that while China views Afghanistan as a strategic land bridge linking South and Central Asia, the realisation of corridor-based integration remains limited by Afghanistan's institutional and security environment.

Keywords: **China-Afghanistan Relations, Geoeconomics, Taliban, CPEC, Regional Economics Integration**

1. INTRODUCTION

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 marked a structural rupture in Afghanistan's political landscape and reshaped regional dynamics across Central and South Asia (Frayer, 2021). The withdrawal of the United States created a profound geopolitical vacuum, while the Taliban emerged as the *de facto* government for the second time. China's response, however, was not developed in a strategic vacuum: Afghanistan has long occupied a place in Beijing's frontier security imagination, historically linked to China through Silk Road corridors and a settled border agreement in 1963 that shaped Beijing's approach to western peripheries (Anosh, 2025). China adopted a cautious but pragmatic posture after 2021, maintaining diplomatic engagement, preserving functional communication channels, and signalling readiness to expand economic cooperation without extending formal recognition (Hussain et al., 2025; Nan, 2025) This recalibrated stance marked the beginning of a new phase in China-Afghanistan relations, one defined by the interplay of geopolitical caution and geo-economic opportunity. This strategic shift is substantiated by recent official data showing that bilateral trade surged by 125.4% in 2023 to reach $1.33 billion, signaling a rapid materialisation of these economic ties (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

China's engagement after 2021 fits squarely within its broader geoeconomic strategy, which relies on investment, infrastructure, and connectivity to advance national interests (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2023; Shahzad, 2022). Beijing views economic tools not only as drivers of growth but also as instruments of security and influence. Within this logic, Afghanistan is increasingly framed as a potential *"missing link"* in China's westward connectivity ambitions—an actor whose geography could bridge South and Central Asia through economics corridor (Anosh, 2025). This strategic reinterpretation has translated into renewed interest in the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), discussions on reviving stalled resource projects, exploratory surveys in energy and mining sectors, and sustained participation in trilateral dialogues with Pakistan and the Taliban authorities (Ali, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025). These initiatives underscore a core Chinese calculation: regional integration, particularly through cross-border infrastructure, could stabilise Afghanistan while simultaneously advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (Ebrahim, 2022).

A crucial dimension of this landscape lies in the transformation of the Taliban's diplomatic and economic posture. During its first period of rule (1996-2001), the Taliban's governance style was characterised by isolation, limited diplomatic engagement, and an ideological disinterest in large-scale infrastructure or international investment (Rehaiem, 2025). The movement lacked administrative capacity, rejected external conditionalities, and presided over an economy largely detached from global markets. In stark contrast, the Taliban's second period of rule (2021-2025) has been marked by a distinctly more pragmatic orientation. Severe economic collapse, frozen foreign reserves, and an urgent need for revenue compelled the group to adopt a more open stance toward external economic cooperation, including with China (Fazli, Habib, Moaz, & Ayoubi, 2025; Rasooli, Yawar, Sharify, & Haqyar, 2023). Taliban officials have repeatedly expressed support for foreign investment, welcomed Chinese companies into mining negotiations, and signalled willingness to integrate Afghanistan into regional connectivity initiatives (Godek, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025).

This behavioural shift creates a significantly different environment for China's regional economic ambitions. Unlike in the late 1990s, the Taliban today actively seeks partners that can provide infrastructure, capital, and diplomatic legitimacy. China occupies a unique position in this regard: it offers investment as it maintains a long-standing dialogue with Taliban leaders, and has the strategic capacity to incorporate Afghanistan into broader regional economic configurations (Hashemi, 2025; Kumar & Ramachandran, 2024).

Existing scholarship offers valuable insights into elements of this new phase. Current research has extensively examined China's security concerns—especially regarding ETIM and IS-KP—its cautious diplomacy toward the Taliban, and the broader geopolitical implications of U.S. withdrawal (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2025; Verma, 2023). Studies on CPEC and the BRI provide rich discussions on regional integration, though they generally focus on Pakistan or Central Asia rather than Afghanistan under Taliban rule (Ali, 2022; Amir, 2016). Meanwhile, works exploring Taliban governance largely analyse internal political consolidation or ideological evolution, with limited attention to how the movement's new economic pragmatism interacts with China's geoeconomic strategy (Fazli et al., 2025). As a result, the intersection between Beijing's regional integration agenda and the Taliban's transformed diplomatic-economic posture remains understudied.

This article addresses these *lacunae* by analysing China's strategy for advancing regional economic integration with Afghanistan during the Taliban period (2021-2025), while simultaneously accounting for how the Taliban's evolving behaviour shapes the opportunities and constraints of this approach. The study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it incorporates Taliban agency as a central variable in understanding China's geoeconomic engagement (Hussain et al., 2025). Second, it integrates three conceptual lenses–geoeconomics, the security-development nexus, and corridor-based regional integration–to explain not only China's motivations but also the mechanisms through which integration is pursued (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2023; Hettne, 2010; Yawar, 2024). Third, it provides updated empirical insights, drawing on post-2021 diplomatic statements, investment negotiations, corridor initiatives, and governance challenges within Afghanistan (Kuhn & Ni, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025).

Accordingly, this article argues that China has pursued a pragmatic geoeconomic strategy toward Afghanistan that seeks to stabilise its periphery, secure long-term resource access, and connect South and Central Asia through strategic corridors such as CPEC and the Wakhan route (Rahman, Iqbal, & Pan, 2025; Sarbiland & Stanikzai, 2024). However, the effectiveness of this strategy increasingly depends on the Taliban's administrative capacity, internal cohesion, and willingness to align with China's regional integration vision (Godek, 2025; Nan, 2025). The central research question guiding this analysis is therefore: How does China pursue regional economic integration with Afghanistan during the Taliban period (2021-2025), and how does the Taliban's evolving diplomatic-economic posture shape the prospects of this strategy?

2. ANALITICAL FRAMEWORK

This article employs a three-pillar analytical framework that integrates geoeconomics, the security-development nexus, and corridor-based regional integration. Together, these perspectives provide a structured model for examining how China formulates and implements its strategy toward Afghanistan after 2021 during Taliban second period. Geoeconomics clarifies the instruments of influence, the security-development nexus explains the logic motivating those instruments, and corridor-based integration illuminates the mechanisms through which China attempts to operationalise its regional agenda. The following subsections outline these conceptual pillars and their relevance to the empirical analysis.

2.1. Geoeconomics and Economic Statecraft

Geoeconomics refers to the strategic use of economic instruments to achieve political and security objectives. Scholars such as Luttwak conceptualise it as the continuation of political competition through economic means, while contemporary IR literature emphasises how states engineer interdependence to shape regional orders (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2023). Economic statecraft, as a component of geoeconomics, includes the deployment of trade, investment, infrastructure financing, and development assistance to cultivate influence or manage external risks. In this logic, economic tools are not merely commercial but function as instruments embedded within wider geopolitical projects.

China's geoeconomic practice is often associated with the Belt and Road Initiative, which expands connectivity and market access while generating new patterns of interdependence. Scholars argue that China uses BRI projects to align neighbouring states with its long-term strategic interests, mitigate vulnerabilities along its periphery, and stabilise areas that affect its domestic security (Azzani, 2025; Shahzad, 2022). The emphasis on infrastructure corridors reflects Beijing's belief that connectivity can produce economic incentives that encourage political alignment. This approach allows China to advance strategic aims without relying on coercive means.

The relevance of geoeconomics to the China-Afghanistan case lies in the way China engages the Taliban authorities. Although it does not recognise the Islamic Emirate diplomatically, China maintains economic and political ties through investment pledges, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic exchanges. These engagements illustrate China's preference for using economic statecraft to cultivate stability near its borders while avoiding entanglements associated with formal recognition. The framework therefore positions geoeconomics as the primary conceptual tool for analysing China's behaviour, as it clarifies how economic initiatives function within Beijing's broader regional ambitions.

2.2. Security-Development Nexus

The security-development nexus refers to the mutually reinforcing relationship between security and economic development. Hettne (2010) explains that development cannot be sustained without stability, and stability is difficult to achieve without addressing economic deprivation and weak governance. This perspective has become central in post-conflict policy debates, where external actors often pursue economic programmes to reduce incentives for violence and stabilise fragile environments.

China has increasingly incorporated this nexus into its foreign policy. Chinese policymakers view economic development as a prerequisite for containing security threats emanating from neighbouring regions. In the context of Afghanistan, concerns about cross-border militancy, extremist networks, and instability near Xinjiang shape China's engagement. Studies show that Chinese officials interpret Afghanistan's fragility as a security risk that can be mitigated through development-oriented cooperation, including infrastructure investment and regional connectivity (Hashemi, 2025; Verma, 2023). The nexus therefore provides a theoretical explanation for China's insistence on stability as a condition for economic integration.

The framework is relevant for this article because it helps unpack China's dual motivation toward Afghanistan. While geoeconomics highlights the instruments, the security-development nexus explains why these instruments are deployed in a fragile setting. Limited empirical examples illustrate how Beijing consistently links security and development in its diplomatic statements. For instance, the Tunxi Initiative (2022) emphasised that regional cooperation should prioritise stabilisation, economic recovery, and connectivity as complementary goals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2022). Similarly, China's participation in the 2025 trilateral meeting reiterated that regional security is inseparable from development pathways. These references show how the nexus underpins China's broader engagement strategy.

2.3. Regional Economic Integration

The third pillar concerns regional economic integration through economic corridors. Corridors are geographically defined routes that cluster infrastructure, trade logistics, and development projects to enhance regional connectivity. They function as mechanisms that promote integration by reducing transaction costs, linking markets, and creating interdependencies that may spill over into political cooperation. The approach resonates with neo-functionalist insights that economic cooperation in strategic sectors can generate broader integration effects.

Within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, corridors structure China's regional connectivity vision. Key corridors such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor illustrate how China organises infrastructure projects into regional frameworks. Existing research shows that corridors serve both economic and strategic purposes, enabling China to expand access to markets while consolidating its influence across regions (Ali, 2022; Amir, 2016). Corridors also help coordinate multi-state cooperation, offering platforms for diplomacy, investment, and development financing.

The relevance of the corridor concept to the China-Afghanistan case is twofold. First, Afghanistan's geography positions it as a potential connector between South and Central Asia. This has prompted discussions about extending CPEC northward and activating the Wakhan Corridor, which could link Afghanistan with China's western regions. Second, corridors provide a mechanism to interpret China's regional ambitions by showing how infrastructure projects translate into integration strategies. Limited empirical references illustrate this logic. For instance, analysts argue that extending CPEC into Afghanistan could integrate infrastructure systems across a wider region (Ebrahim, 2022), and studies on the Wakhan Corridor highlight its potential to bridge CPEC and Central Asia (Rahman et al., 2025). These examples demonstrate how corridors function not only as development tools but also as pathways for regional integration.

Together, the three pillars create a comprehensive analytical foundation for examining China's strategy. Geoeconomics identifies the instruments of influence, the security-development nexus explains the motivations guiding their deployment, and corridor-based integration clarifies the mechanisms through which China seeks to reshape regional connectivity.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to examine China's geoeconomic strategy toward Afghanistan during the Taliban period (2021-2025). By focusing on how and why China mobilises geoeconomic instruments, the method enables a contextual understanding of state behaviour, policy motivations, and the regional conditions that shape China-Afghanistan engagement. The analysis applies the congruence method, which compares the expectations derived from the study's analytical framework with empirical evidence from the case. The three pillars of the framework—geoeconomics and economic statecraft, the security-development nexus, and corridor-based regional integration—serve as thematic categories for evaluating China's policies. Rather than testing theories statistically, the congruence method assesses the degree of fit between theoretical propositions and observable patterns in China's behaviour.

The study relies exclusively on secondary data, including peer-reviewed academic publications, policy documents, official statements from Chinese institutions, and reputable news and analytical platforms published between 2016 and 2025. Data were analysed through thematic reduction and categorisation based on the three conceptual pillars, followed by comparative assessment to identify convergence or divergence between theoretical expectations and empirical realities. This procedure allows the research to systematically interpret China's strategic choices, evaluate the conditions enabling or constraining geoeconomic engagement, and draw analytically grounded conclusions.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1. China's Geoeconomic Strategy toward Afghanistan Post-2021

The withdrawal of U.S. forces in August 2021 generated a geopolitical vacuum that transformed Afghanistan into a zone of strategic ambiguity but also opportunity for regional actors. In this context, China adopted a low-risk, geo-economically driven engagement strategy designed to stabilise its western periphery, maintain counterterrorism leverage, and prepare the foundation for long-term economic influence (Frayer, 2021; Nan, 2025). Rather than extending diplomatic recognition, Beijing moved to preserve practical cooperation by maintaining its embassy in Kabul, increasing humanitarian assistance, and engaging the

Taliban through high-level meetings and trilateral forums with Pakistan (Hussain et al., 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025). This calibrated approach reflects China's preference for shaping regional order through economic instruments rather than overt political or military intervention.

Kumar & Ramachandran (2025) observe that China's post-2021 engagement unfolded through a phased and cautious strategy informed by political, security, and economic risk assessments. In the initial phase (late 2021-2022), Beijing prioritised diplomatic stabilisation and insisted that the Taliban demonstrate commitments to counterterrorism particularly concerning ETIM while maintaining public calls for a more inclusive governance structure (Verma, 2023). Humanitarian aid deliveries were expanded to gauge the Taliban's administrative responsiveness and establish minimal operational trust (Fazli et al., 2025).

In the second phase (2022-2024), China shifted toward structured economic engagement. The 2022 Tunxi Initiative, endorsed by China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, called for integrating Afghanistan into regional connectivity frameworks and strengthening cross-border economic linkages (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2022). Chinese enterprises, including energy and mining companies, conducted field assessments in northern and eastern provinces to evaluate resource potential and security risks (Godek, 2025). CAPEIC's oil extraction agreement in 2023 marked the first major post-Taliban Chinese investment, although it later collapsed due to governance and contractual disputes (Kuhn & Ni, 2025). Despite this setback, the agreement illustrated China's willingness to re-enter Afghanistan's resource sector under the Taliban and the group's readiness to accommodate external investors (Fazli et al., 2025).

Recent empirical data underscores the asymmetric nature of China's geoeconomic engagement with the Taliban regime. According to the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (2024), bilateral trade surged by 125.4% in 2023, reaching a total volume of $1.33 billion. However, this relationship remains heavily skewed; Chinese exports to Afghanistan accounted for $1.269 billion of this total, compared to a mere $64 million in imports from Afghanistan (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2024). This disparity suggests that while China is successfully filling the market vacuum left by Western powers, Afghanistan's capacity to export resources remains severely underdeveloped, limiting the partnership to a one-way flow of consumer goods rather than a balanced economic integration.

Furthermore, a significant gap exists between diplomatic signaling and actual capital deployment, revealing Beijing's cautious *'hedging'* strategy. While high-profile agreements have been publicized, such as the $540 million contract signed by Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co in 2023 for the Amu Darya basin, official statistics paint a more conservative picture. Data from China's Ministry of Commerce indicates that the actual flow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into Afghanistan in 2023 was only $1.69 million (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2024). This stark contrast, where realized investment is less than 0.5% of the pledged contract value demonstrates that China prioritizes securing long-term resource rights over immediate, high-risk capital expenditure.

By 2024-2025, cooperation increasingly centred on economics corridor. Beijing committed to exploring the technical feasibility of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, an idea consistently emphasised in Chinese and Pakistani diplomatic statements (Ali, 2022; Ebrahim, 2022). China's strategic view of Afghanistan increasingly reflected its characterisation as a potential *"missing link"* within a broader westward connectivity architecture that could bridge South and Central Asia while reducing China's exposure to chokepoints elsewhere in the region (Anosh, 2025). The May 2025 Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting further formalised this by identifying Afghanistan as a *"bridge"* linking South and Central Asia and reaffirming support for infrastructure, trade facilitation, and border connectivity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025). Parallel to this, Chinese research teams examined possible routes through the Wakhan Corridor to connect Xinjiang with Afghan Badakhshan, reflecting a long-term interest in developing a westward BRI linkage (Rahman et al., 2025; Yawar, 2024). These developments underscore that China's geoeconomic approach is not episodic but progressively institutionalised.

A distinctive component of China's post-2021 strategy is the treatment of the Taliban as a pragmatic partner rather than solely a security liability. Hashemi (2025) notes that Beijing has publicly welcomed the Taliban's anti-terrorism assurances while privately evaluating their administrative reliability and capacity to secure investment flows (Kumar & Ramachandran, 2024). For their part, Taliban authorities have repeatedly expressed support for Chinese investment, prioritising mining, energy, and infrastructure deals to generate revenue amid fiscal collapse (Fazli et al., 2025; Rasooli et al., 2023). Statements by Taliban officials, including commitments to facilitate investor protection and secure project sites, indicate a willingness to align with China's geo-economic calculus—though the sustainability of these commitments remains uncertain due to internal fragmentation and weak regulatory structures (Godek, 2025).

Viewed through geoeconomics and the security-development nexus, China's strategy in Afghanistan embodies a *"stability-through-development"* logic. Beijing seeks to create structured interdependence that supports its security interests in Xinjiang while cultivating Afghanistan as a long-term node within transregional corridors (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2023; Hettne, 2010). This approach is reinforced by China's long-standing frontier-security calculations, which have historically framed the Wakhan-Badakhshan region as a critical buffer zone against extremist spillover and as a potential route for westward connectivity, an assessment that predates the Taliban's return and remains central to Beijing's risk calculus (Anosh, 2025). However, this logic is not purely unilateral: it is conditioned by the Taliban's evolving behaviour and their need for economic legitimacy. The Taliban's shift toward openness and economic pragmatism has thus expanded China's room for manoeuvre, enabling deeper engagement than would have been possible under the movement's earlier ideological rigidity (Fazli et al., 2025; Rehaiem, 2025). Overall, from 2021 to 2025, China's geoeconomic strategy during the Taliban period demonstrates a cautious cooperation evolved from risk-containment and diplomatic management to exploratory economic projects and explicit corridor planning.

4.1.1. Taliban's Diplomatic Shift and Its Implications for China

Departing sharply from the isolationist and ideologically rigid governance of the late 1990s (Rehaiem, 2025), the Taliban's post-2021 authority has adopted a markedly more pragmatic and outward-oriented diplomatic posture (Fazli et al., 2025; Rasooli et al., 2023). Whereas the earlier regime rejected most forms of foreign engagement and lacked the institutional capacity to manage external economic cooperation, the current leadership faces acute fiscal shortages, frozen reserves, and collapsing state revenues, conditions that have compelled it to actively court external partners (Godek, 2025). This shift is not merely rhetorical. According to the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (2024), bilateral trade between China and Afghanistan surged by more than 125 percent in 2023, reflecting the Taliban's efforts to facilitate cross-border commerce and position Afghanistan as a viable economic interlocutor, senior Taliban officials have repeatedly framed Afghanistan as a potential *"bridge"* within regional connectivity.

Several structural drivers underpin this new pragmatic orientation. First, the Taliban's urgent need for stable revenue sources has pushed the movement toward external economic engagement, particularly in mining, energy, and infrastructure which is sectors where China possesses both capacity and interest (Fazli et al., 2025). Second, internal competition between factions in Kabul and Kandahar has produced a bureaucratic divide that encourages more technocratic elites to seek external partnerships as a means of consolidating administrative authority (Godek, 2025; Rasooli et al., 2023). Third, China's reputation for offering investment without political conditionalities makes it an attractive partner for a government wary of Western pressure yet eager to project an image of diplomatic functionality (Hashemi, 2025). These factors collectively create incentives for the Taliban to align themselves more closely with China's geo-economic vision.

For China, the Taliban's diplomatic shift presents both opportunity and constraint. On the one hand, the group's openness to corridor development, public endorsement of the Belt and Road Initiative, and explicit support for projects linked to CPEC and the Wakhan Corridor align closely with Beijing's long-term objective of stabilising its western frontier and expanding westward connectivity (Ali, 2022; Ebrahim, 2022; Yawar, 2024). On the other hand, China remains cautious in interpreting Taliban guarantees. The collapse of the 2023 oil agreement with CAPEIC illustrates a broader governance deficit: the Taliban's inability to ensure consistent enforcement across provinces, regulate local actors, or secure project sites against non-state spoilers (Kuhn & Ni, 2025). Beijing reads this episode as evidence of structural administrative weakness, reinforcing the need to evaluate Taliban commitments through demonstrated performance rather than stated assurances (Hashemi, 2025). For China, the emerging opportunities are strategically significant, but they remain conditional on governance improvements that the Taliban have not yet fully demonstrated.

4.2. Economic Corridors and Regional Integration: BRI, CPEC, and the Wakhan Corridor

Breslin & Nesadurai (2023) argue that economic corridors occupy a central position in China's strategy for advancing regional integration, and Afghanistan's geography provides a unique opportunity to connect South Asia and Central Asia through structured infrastructure networks. Beijing has long viewed corridor development as a mechanism to consolidate cross-border interdependence, reduce security externalities, and create trade linkages that support regional stability (Shahzad, 2022). Within this logic, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) increasingly frames Afghanistan as a potential link in China's westward connectivity architecture, an actor whose positionality can bridge CPEC and CAEC while diversifying routes away from politically sensitive alternatives (Anosh, 2025). This geostrategic positioning gained renewed relevance after the Taliban takeover, as China began recalibrating its connectivity ambitions to align with shifting political realities in Kabul.

One of the clearest indicators of China's renewed interest in Afghanistan's connectivity potential is the diplomatic restoration of trilateral mechanisms among China, Pakistan, and the Taliban authorities. The 2022 Tunxi Initiative explicitly encouraged the integration of Afghanistan into regional economic and transport networks, emphasising the need for infrastructure development, customs cooperation, and cross-border trade facilitation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2022). This direction was further reinforced during the 2025 Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting, in which Afghanistan was explicitly described as a *"bridge"* linking the broader region and a candidate for deeper participation in regional connectivity initiatives (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025). These diplomatic signals demonstrate that China's interest in corridors is not merely rhetorical but supported by structured multilateral dialogue.

Within this framework, CPEC emerges as the most immediate mechanism through which China envisions Afghanistan's integration. Although originally conceived as a bilateral project between China and Pakistan, CPEC has increasingly been articulated as a platform that can be expanded northward and westward. Analysts have noted that extending CPEC into Afghanistan could link Gwadar Port to Central Asia, enabling a continent-spanning infrastructure chain (Ali, 2022; Ebrahim, 2022). Such an expansion would allow Beijing to consolidate influence across adjacent regions while offering Afghanistan access to critical infrastructure and new trade routes.

Yawar (2024) emphasises that the Wakhan Corridor which long regarded as a dormant and underdeveloped passage has regained strategic relevance as China evaluates alternative westward routes connecting Xinjiang to Afghan Badakhshan. Historically, the region has functioned both as a frontier buffer and a connective pathway linking Chinese dynasties to broader Eurasian networks, a dual role that continues to inform Beijing's perception of the corridor's long-term value (Anosh, 2025). This narrow strip, although constrained by rugged topography and limited infrastructure, is increasingly viewed in Beijing as a politically less sensitive pathway that could diversify BRI routes. The corridor offers China a unique opportunity to expand connectivity initiatives into a region that historically lay outside formal infrastructure planning (Rahman et al., 2025). For the Taliban, supporting Wakhan's development aligns with their strategy to attract external investment and signal Afghanistan's transformation into a cooperative regional actor.

The Taliban authorities have publicly and consistently expressed support for integration into regional economic corridors. Statements from Taliban representatives highlight the group's desire to frame Afghanistan as a transit hub and to benefit from BRI-linked infrastructure (Fazli et al., 2025; Rasooli et al., 2023). This enthusiasm reflects the Taliban's broader pragmatic turn, as they recognise that corridor development could bring immediate economic benefits, job creation, and revenue streams in the absence of formal international recognition. Their willingness to participate in trilateral and multilateral discussions indicates an attempt to position Afghanistan favourably within China-led connectivity frameworks.

Overall, the emergence of corridors as the backbone of China's integration strategy illustrates how Beijing conceptualises Afghanistan's role within its wider regional ambitions. Whether through the extension of CPEC, the revival of the Wakhan route, or broader diplomatic efforts to embed Afghanistan within regional cooperation mechanisms, China's approach is centred on infrastructure-driven connectivity. Yet the operationalisation of these corridors—their technical feasibility, governance requirements, and security considerations—depends on a range of practical factors that warrant closer examination.

4.2.1. The Prospects and Constraints of CPEC and the Wakhan Corridor under Taliban Governance

Ebrahim (2022) highlights that the prospect of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan has emerged as one of the most debated yet technically uncertain dimensions of China's regional integration agenda. Analysts argue that a CPEC-Afghanistan linkage could form a continuous infrastructure chain stretching from Gwadar to Central Asia, granting landlocked Afghanistan access to maritime trade routes and strengthening China's trans-Eurasian connectivity ambitions (Ali, 2022). Such an extension could also revitalise northern segments of CPEC while stabilising Pakistan's frontier with Afghanistan. These strategic incentives have been reiterated in recent diplomatic forums, including the 2025 Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Meeting, which reaffirmed joint commitments to integrate Afghanistan into regional energy and transport networks (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025).

Yet the technical feasibility of a CPEC extension remains highly uneven. While the conceptual vision is compelling, the terrain connecting Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to eastern Afghanistan consists of underdeveloped roads, difficult mountain passes, and zones affected by intermittent insecurity (Ebrahim, 2022). Significant financial investment would be required to upgrade and secure transport routes, but neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan currently possesses sufficient fiscal capacity to undertake such projects independently. For China, this raises questions about cost-benefit balance and the risk exposure associated with deploying firms and personnel into territories with fluctuating security conditions.

The Wakhan Corridor presents a different set of prospects and constraints. Strategically located as Afghanistan's narrow gateway to Xinjiang, the corridor has long been considered a potential direct link between China and Afghanistan. Recent Chinese exploratory teams and feasibility reviews indicate renewed interest in evaluating routes through this remote region (Yawar, 2024). From Beijing's perspective, a Wakhan link offers a politically cleaner alternative to routes dependent on Pakistan's internal stability, and it could serve as a security buffer by enabling closer monitoring of movements near the Chinese border (Rahman et al., 2025). For the Taliban, the corridor represents both an economic opportunity and a political symbol: an avenue to demonstrate international engagement and to position Afghanistan as a cooperative partner in the BRI (Rasooli et al., 2023).

However, Wakhan's constraints are severe. The corridor traverses extremely rugged topography, with high-altitude passes that would require substantial investment before they could support regular trade flows, environmental challenges compound the difficulty of developing a viable transport route (Sarbiland & Stanikzai, 2024). Security concerns also persist: while Wakhan itself remains relatively stable, adjacent districts have seen the presence of militant groups, raising questions about the Taliban's ability to guarantee long-term protection for Chinese personnel and infrastructure (Godek, 2025). The Taliban have repeatedly pledged to secure corridor routes, but their capacity to enforce control across all relevant territories remains uncertain.

Despite these constraints, the Taliban have publicly supported both CPEC extension and Wakhan development, framing them as strategic opportunities to generate employment, attract investment, and normalise Afghanistan's image as a transit hub (Fazli et al., 2025). Such endorsements reflect the group's broader pragmatic posture and their recognition that corridor infrastructure could anchor Afghanistan more deeply into regional commerce. Nonetheless, the operationalisation of these corridors ultimately depends on a combination of technical feasibility, financial commitments, and sustained governance—factors that remain fragile under the current political context.

4.3. Challenges and Limits of China's Integration Strategy

Despite the opportunities created by China's geoeconomic engagement and the Taliban's new diplomatic pragmatism, the operationalisation of regional integration through corridor development remains hindered by multiple structural constraints. These limitations form the core risks that shape China's cautious, low-exposure approach toward Afghanistan, reflecting Beijing's recognition that the local environment still lacks the institutional stability required to sustain large-scale connectivity projects.

One of the most persistent challenges lies in the internal fragmentation of the Taliban administration. Although the movement maintains unified branding as the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," governance is divided among competing factions with divergent priorities, particularly between the Kandahari leadership and technocratic officials based in Kabul (Godek, 2025). This fragmentation manifests in inconsistent regulatory decisions, overlapping chains of command, and uneven enforcement of agreements—conditions that undermine the predictability demanded by foreign investors. For China, the risk is that commitments made by one faction may not be fully implemented by others, creating uncertainty in contract execution and security guarantees (Fazli et al., 2025). Such institutional incoherence limits the Taliban's capacity to provide the stable governance required for corridor development or long-term Chinese investments.

Security risks further complicate China's engagement. While the Taliban have pledged to protect foreign economic interests, groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) have intensified attacks targeting sites associated with Chinese diplomats, firms, or nationals (Verma, 2023). ISKP explicitly frames China as an adversary due to Beijing's policies in

Xinjiang, rendering Chinese-linked infrastructure and personnel attractive targets. These concerns are amplified by China's long-standing anxieties about militant infiltration through Badakhshan and the wider Wakhan region, which Beijing has historically identified as a potential *safe haven* for Uyghur and ETIM-linked groups—an assessment that continues to shape its strategic calculus post-2021 (Anosh, 2025). These threats are particularly relevant for corridors traversing northern and eastern Afghanistan, where ISKP maintains operational cells and has previously conducted high-profile attacks (Hashemi, 2025). The Taliban's counterterrorism capabilities remain uneven, and their ability to suppress cross-border militant flows into Badakhshan which directly affects the feasibility of the Wakhan route remains contested.

This economic caution is directly correlated with persistent security threats targeting Chinese interests. Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (2024) explicitly identifies attacks by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), such as the assault on the Longan Hotel in Kabul in December 2022 which injured five Chinese nationals, as critical risk factors. Consequently, despite the Taliban's assurances of safety, Beijing's economic footprint remains limited by the reality of the security environment, preventing the rapid operationalization of large-scale infrastructure projects envisioned under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Economic and contractual instability adds another layer of constraint. The collapse of the 2023 oil extraction agreement between the Taliban and China's CAPEIC, widely reported after site disruptions and disputed revenue arrangements, illustrates the fragility of commercial cooperation under current conditions (Kuhn & Ni, 2025). While the Taliban accused local actors of interference, Chinese sources cited banditry, contract violations, and failures of local authorities to provide the promised security guarantees. The public fallout from this incident underscores the vulnerabilities that foreign firms face when navigating Afghanistan's weak regulatory environment. For Beijing, this episode reinforced the need for a cautious, phased approach that avoids large-scale capital commitments without demonstrable improvements in governance capacity.

Regional politics impose additional constraints. Tensions between the Taliban and Pakistan—especially regarding border management, anti-*Tehrik-i-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) operations, and security incidents along the Durand Line—complicate the feasibility of linking Afghanistan to CPEC (Ali, 2022). Pakistan remains a critical stakeholder for any CPEC extension, yet its relationship with the Taliban has grown increasingly volatile, with periodic border closures disrupting trade routes essential for corridor planning. Simultaneously, Iran and Russia maintain their own strategic agendas in Afghanistan, occasionally competing with China's ambitions and shaping the broader geopolitical environment in which Chinese corridor proposals must operate (Rasooli et al., 2023). These rivalries reduce the likelihood of cohesive regional support for a unified connectivity strategy.

Finally, Afghanistan's fiscal and infrastructural limitations place structural boundaries on China's integration strategy. The Taliban government lacks the domestic revenue base, institutional financing mechanisms, and technical capacity required to co-develop large-scale infrastructure projects. While Chinese financing could theoretically fill these gaps, the political and security risks associated with full-scale investment mean that Beijing is unlikely to provide the substantial capital injections necessary to transform Afghanistan into a functioning connectivity hub in the near term (Ebrahim, 2022). These constraints collectively mean that China's corridor initiatives face significant barriers to realisation, despite their strategic promise and the Taliban's rhetorical support.

In sum, the strategic limits of China's integration agenda in Afghanistan are rooted in governance fragmentation, persistent security threats, economic uncertainty, regional rivalries, and infrastructural deficits. These challenges temper the optimism surrounding corridor-based integration and underscore the need for a cautious, incremental approach to engagement.

While China continues to explore pathways for long-term cooperation, the structural realities of Afghanistan constrain the depth and speed of progress achievable during the Taliban period.

5. CONCLUSION

This article examined China's strategy for pursuing regional economic integration with Afghanistan during the Taliban period (2021-2025), focusing on how Beijing employs geoeconomic instruments, security-development logics, and corridor-based connectivity to stabilise its western frontier and expand the Belt and Road Initiative. The study found that the Taliban's diplomatic and economic pragmatism marks a notable departure from its earlier, isolationist governing period, enabling new avenues for engagement that were previously inconceivable (Fazli et al., 2025; Rasooli et al., 2023). This behavioural shift provides China with a more cooperative partner—albeit an unpredictable one—in its efforts to explore the extension of CPEC, revitalise interest in the Wakhan Corridor, and embed Afghanistan within broader regional connectivity frameworks (Ebrahim, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, 2025).

The analysis also demonstrated that while China views Afghanistan as a strategic land bridge linking South and Central Asia, the practical realisation of this vision remains constrained by deep structural challenges. Governance fragmentation, persistent militant threats, contractual instability, regional rivalries, and Afghanistan's limited fiscal and infrastructural capacity collectively restrict China's ability to operationalise corridor-based integration at scale (Godek, 2025; Kuhn & Ni, 2025; Verma, 2023). These constraints compel Beijing to adopt a low-risk, incremental, and security-conscious geoeconomic posture, prioritising diplomatic engagement and exploratory projects over large-scale capital investment.

Taken together, the findings suggest that China's integration strategy during the Taliban period rests on a delicate balance between opportunity and risk. The Taliban's openness to foreign investment provides Beijing with unprecedented access to Afghan markets and territory, yet the sustainability of this alignment remains uncertain. For regional actors, the implications are significant: Afghanistan's role within BRI will depend more on domestic governance and security outcomes than on Chinese strategic intent alone.

Future research could further investigate two emerging dynamics. First, the long-term evolution of Taliban governance—especially the balance between its ideological and technocratic factions—will shape the viability of China-Taliban cooperation. Second, comparative studies on corridor development in other fragile states may help clarify whether Afghanistan's structural constraints are exceptional or part of broader patterns affecting BRI implementation. Such inquiries would deepen understanding of how major powers pursue connectivity initiatives in politically volatile environments and refine theoretical debates on geoeconomic statecraft.

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