

MS Research
CHINA'S ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY TOWARDS
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FINAL APPROVAL

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Dedication

I dedicate this MS Thesis to my esteemed parents for their unwavering support and financial assistance. Additionally, I extend this dedication to my elder brother, whose guidance has been instrumental in shaping my professional journey and academic pursuits.

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List of Abbreviations

ACCI	Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AISS	Afghan Institute of Strategic Studies
ARA	Afghanistan Railway Authority
ANPDF	Afghan Government's National Peace and Development Framework
ANRP	Afghanistan National Railway Plan
APPRO	Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization
APPTTA	Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil-Russian Federation- India- China- South Africa
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CASA	Central Asia to South Asia (Central Asia to South Asia Regional Energy Market)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPEC	China Pakistan Economic Corridor
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
TAP	Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan
TAPI	Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India
DROPS	Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
MOU	Memorandum of Understandings
RECCA	Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Research is to analyze China's economic diplomacy towards Afghanistan after 9/11. As a major global power with a large population and significant industrial growth, China has shown strong political, economic, and security interests in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, rich in natural resources like the Aynak copper mine and various oil reserves, presents attractive opportunities for China. By providing economic aid, China aims to strengthen its political ties with Afghanistan and ensure access to these valuable resources. Afghanistan's strategic location in Central Asia, acting as a bridge between Central and South Asia, increases its geopolitical importance. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) plays a key role in addressing Afghanistan's security needs, with China participating as an observer and Afghanistan being a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This creates a complex geopolitical landscape. The Afghan government views China's growing involvement positively, marking a shift from a bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership. This change reflects a new level of caution and cooperation in their relationship, highlighting the evolving regional geopolitics and economic priorities.

1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Afghanistan and China have shared a close relationship as neighboring countries, with historical ties dating back to ancient times. Despite being landlocked, Afghanistan recognizes China's potential as a valuable partner in various political contexts. Even with the Taliban assuming control of Afghanistan, China maintained an active embassy in Kabul and was acknowledged as a significant partner by the Afghan government. Recognizing the potential for mutual economic benefit, the economic and trade corridor between the two nations has recently been reopened. This research aims to delve into the depth of economic engagement between Afghanistan and China while exploring potential future projects. Additionally, the study will examine the obstacles that may impede economic agreements and identify strategic interests that could bolster the connection between both countries.

Historian Arnold Toynbee astutely dubbed Afghanistan the "roundabout of the ancient world," acknowledging its strategic geographical position as a crucial juncture for diverse peoples and cultures throughout history. Functioning as a vital conduit between the terrestrial routes from China and India to the West, Afghanistan has long served as a pivotal hub connecting present-day South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and East Asia. Over the course of history, the region has been traversed by migrants, leaving behind a multifaceted mosaic of cultural and linguistic groups that contribute to Afghanistan's extraordinary cultural diversity.

Undoubtedly, Afghanistan's culturally diverse terrain bears the indelible imprint of Chinese civilization, a testament to the profound influence that China has exerted on its historical narrative. The enduring political ties between China and Afghanistan have weathered the test of time. Throughout the Cold War epoch, China staunchly opposed Western intervention in Afghanistan and aligned itself with the United States and its allies in opposing the Soviet invasion. However, subsequent to the withdrawal of Soviet forces, China shifted its stance, signaling a cessation of its support.

Following the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan and the subsequent rise of the Taliban regime, China, like many other nations, reacted with disapproval towards the Taliban's rule. The Taliban's extreme policies and human rights

abuses prompted widespread condemnation from the international community, including China. As a result, China, in line with diplomatic norms, severed formal ties with the Taliban-led government, a move that included the closure of its embassy in Kabul. This decision underscored China's stance against supporting regimes that violated fundamental principles of governance and human rights.

However, with the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, China swiftly moved to establish formal diplomatic relations with the newly elected government led by Hamid Karzai. This decision reflected China's recognition of the new political order in Afghanistan and its willingness to engage with the internationally recognized government. By establishing diplomatic ties with Afghanistan, China aimed to contribute to the country's stability and reconstruction efforts while also safeguarding its own interests in the region.

Presently, China continues to actively cultivate business ties with Afghanistan as part of its broader economic strategy in the region. Recognizing Afghanistan's strategic location and potential as a market for Chinese goods, China is keen on leveraging economic cooperation to safeguard its commercial interests and promote regional stability. This includes investments in infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and economic partnerships aimed at facilitating trade and fostering economic development in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, China's rich cultural heritage and extensive historical background play a significant role in shaping its interactions with Afghanistan. The historical Silk Road, which connected China to the Middle East and Europe through Afghanistan, underscores the long-standing cultural and economic exchanges between the two nations. Today, this historical legacy continues to influence China's approach to engaging with Afghanistan, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation in various fields.

From the beginning, Afghanistan has maintained close relations with various nations (Huashenp, 3). The Afghan Empire and the Aryan series of migrations (Scott, 2008) played significant roles in shaping these interactions. The spread of Buddhism from Afghanistan further exemplifies the historical connections between Afghanistan, China, and other neighboring countries. Numerous indicators highlight the deep-rooted and multifaceted relationships Afghanistan has fostered with its neighbors throughout history.

Afghanistan and China are closed in sort of making relations since ancient era till now and this had resulted on diplomatic recognition of each other's, and economic and trade relations are also considered as an important portion. By the passage of time there are some reasons that prove the Close relations between Afghanistan and China such as the silk way, and the excessive visits of Chinese to Kabul to have a glimpse over history of that relation the presence of Buddha in Bamyana can be a good benchmark for that.

The interim government of Afghanistan in 2001 and the newly elected government in 2004 established a new bilateral trade agreement, which resulted in a reported trade value of \$220.93 million (Khalil 240). This was twice the amount under Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001. In 2006, President Hamid Karzai visited China and signed two economic agreements, which led to the formation of a committee to oversee economic engagement and related matters. The committee surprised many by announcing that 278 materials would be exempt from taxes. By the end of 2006, bilateral trade relations had increased to \$473.19 million (Khalil, p. 241), and in 2007, it reached \$613 million. Afghan exports also rose from \$0.19 million to \$2 million during this period (Khalil, p. 241).

China views Afghanistan as strategically located, offering a potential route for importing oil and gas from the Middle East and neighboring Pakistan. China's ambitions in the region are centered on enhancing collaboration through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to establish comprehensive economic and transportation networks that include Afghanistan. Despite past BRI endeavors in Afghanistan encountering significant security risks—such as the failed copper mining agreement with the Chinese state-owned company MCC—many infrastructure projects have begun implementation. Notable among these is a \$5 million roadway intended to link Kabul with China via the Wakhan corridor, a project that highlights China's long-term commitment despite the challenges.

The expansion of BRI projects and bilateral trade connections in Afghanistan faces substantial challenges as long as the domestic situation remains unstable. However, China is expected to leverage its substantial regional influence to actively promote peace and stability (Bryanski and Buckley, 2012). China's involvement is driven by its economic interests,

particularly given Afghanistan's vast undeveloped deposits of rare earth metals, which are crucial for various high-tech industries.

Afghanistan's strategic significance, particularly its 90-kilometer border with China at the terminus of the Wakhan Corridor in the northeastern region, underscores its pivotal role within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This geographical proximity positions Afghanistan as a crucial node in China's ambitious agenda for infrastructure development and economic connectivity, serving as a vital link between East and West Asia.

Moreover, Afghanistan's substantial reserves of rare earth metals further enhance its appeal as a target for Chinese investment, particularly in light of China's escalating demand for these critical resources. As a key component of high-tech industries, rare earth metals are integral to the production of a wide array of electronic devices, renewable energy technologies, and advanced military systems. Afghanistan's abundant reservoirs of these resources present a lucrative opportunity for Chinese investors seeking to secure a steady supply chain and bolster their strategic advantage in the global marketplace.

China's vested interest in Afghanistan's peace and stability has been accentuated by the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from the region. As a neighboring country and a major stakeholder in the stability of Central and South Asia, China recognizes the imperative of ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan to safeguard its own security interests and promote regional prosperity. The absence of Western military presence has prompted China to adopt a more proactive approach in regional affairs, including efforts to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation among various Afghan stakeholders.

China's growing involvement in Afghanistan reflects its evolving role as a key player in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region. Through diplomatic engagements, economic investments, and security cooperation, China seeks to assert its influence and contribute to the stability and development of Afghanistan. By leveraging its economic prowess and diplomatic leverage, China aims to play a constructive role in fostering peace and prosperity in Afghanistan, thereby advancing its broader strategic objectives in the region.

The international community, including China, closely monitors Beijing's potential role in facilitating the Afghan peace process. China's diplomatic engagement and economic incentives could serve as catalysts for fostering dialogue and promoting stability in Afghanistan. As a rising global power and a key player in regional geopolitics, China's involvement in Afghanistan's peace process holds significant implications for the region's stability and security.

During a recent press conference, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated Beijing's stance of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. However, he underscored the importance of collective efforts by various factions within Afghanistan to prevent further escalation of conflict. Wang Yi urged all Afghan parties to prioritize dialogue and resume negotiations to address the prevailing challenges facing the nation.

In his address, Wang Yi expressed concerns about the potential exploitation of the power vacuum in Afghanistan by terrorist groups. He emphasized the need for concerted action to counter terrorism and safeguard regional stability. Furthermore, Wang Yi called on the Taliban to fulfill their responsibilities to Afghanistan by severing ties with terrorist organizations and actively engaging in efforts to reintegrate into the country's political mainstream.

China is expected to adopt a pragmatic approach in establishing connections with Afghanistan, collaborating with the governing body most capable of safeguarding China's domestic and regional concerns. This is evidenced by China's previous discussions with the Taliban, who have taken control of several areas in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal. The Badakhshan region, in particular, is significant due to its border with China. The Taliban have expressed their willingness to reassure the Chinese government that their governance will not disrupt China's stability and have invited Chinese investments in Afghanistan.

Moreover, China maintains strong diplomatic relations with Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbor, which could facilitate future commerce and investment in the region. China is expected to assist in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts, particularly in infrastructure

development, which is crucial for stabilizing the region. While the exact outcome of Afghanistan's immediate future remains uncertain, China's strategic and economic interests suggest a continued and active engagement in the country's development.

1.1 Background of the Study

It has been stated that Afghanistan and China's trade relations date back to ancient times, with the Silk Road being a prime example of the depth of these connections. The caravans of camels transported various trade goods from ancient Xing Yang to Afghanistan. Currently, the focus is on determining what goods can be imported from China and what Afghanistan can export. Additionally, fostering healthy business relationships can lead to productive discussions on intellectual interests and possibly aid in normalizing these relationships.

1.2 Problem Statement

Afghanistan is war torn country which is marred by external invasions, internal subversions, civil unrest and regional proxy wars. This is the reason that despite having huge natural resources, it could not develop in last four decades. Afghanistan and China cultivated good economic ties with each other after 9/11 and try to open new avenues of cooperation and collaboration. But due to unrest in Afghanistan, Taliban activities and turmoil China and Afghanistan could not develop strong economic ties due to uncertainty. But after 2021 US withdrawal, China got the opportunity to revive her economic engagement in Afghanistan. This study would focus on China's economic interests in Afghanistan and challenges to Chinese economic engagement and opportunities.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Afghanistan is a crucial nation in South Asia, while China is the leading economy globally. Thus, the economic engagement between China and Afghanistan, despite the latter being war-torn, would be a crucial development. Through this research, a better understanding of the challenges and solutions of the Afghanistan-China economic engagement will be gained. Additionally, this will enable the citizens of both countries to understand the demands of each other. Since the current Afghan government has close relations with China, it would be a wise initiative to provide a prior comprehension of economic development.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the nature and extent of China's economic interests in Afghanistan, with a focus on the key sectors of investment and trade, and to identify the drivers behind these interests.
2. To examine the strategies and tactics used by China in its economic diplomacy towards Afghanistan, and to assess their effectiveness in achieving China's objectives in the country.
3. To evaluate the implications of China's economic diplomacy towards Afghanistan for the country's political and security situation, and to identify potential risks and challenges that could arise from China's expanding economic influence in the region.

1.5 Research Questions

This Research intends to examine the following research questions:

1. What is the role of Afghanistan's Geo strategic location in China's economic diplomacy towards the country?
2. What are the key strategies and tactics used by China in its economic diplomacy towards Afghanistan?
3. What are the major challenges faced by China in its economic engagement with Afghanistan and how has it responded to these challenges?

1.6 Delimitation of the Study

This research will cover the period between 2014 and 2022 only, however it seems impossible to consider all the regarding topics between Afghanistan and China relations. This research will focus on economic diplomacy of China towards Afghanistan only.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Upon researching the topic of "China's Economic Diplomacy towards Afghanistan," it appears that there are no specific studies that focus solely on this subject. However, there are some smaller articles available that touch on the general diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website provides a few statements related to economic diplomacy between Afghanistan and China, and the Afghan government has also issued some statements, though they may not be directly relevant to the subject of economic diplomacy. In order to conduct a historical research study on this topic, additional research and articles will be needed as reliable and useful references. It is necessary to study the work of other researchers to gain a better understanding of the main issues surrounding this topic. This paper will present some additional researchers who have written articles related to relevant topics.

The book titled "The Short History of Afghanistan" authored by Allama Habibi provides a reliable source for understanding the diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and China. The book covers various topics related to the beginning of the relations between the two countries and offers a clear understanding of the circumstances that led to their establishment. Allama Habibi has also identified some of the hurdles and obstacles that affected the relations between Afghanistan and China.

Moving forward, Ghulam Mohammad Sukhanyar, an Afghan diplomat based in China, has authored a book titled "The Fifty Years Diplomatic Relations with China," which could be a valuable resource in understanding the history of their diplomatic ties. The book contains a chronological account of the relationship between the two countries and includes copies of official letters exchanged between Afghan and Chinese authorities.

Furthermore, Abdul Salam Zaeef has authored a book which centers on the relationship between Afghanistan and China during the Taliban's regime from 1996 to 2001. The book portrays China's eagerness to cooperate with Afghanistan and its prospective role in the country's future. It draws on some official meetings as its sources.

Ahmad Bilal Khalil has authored a comprehensive book titled "Afghanistan and China Bilateral Relations 1955-2015," which is a thorough examination of the engagement between Afghanistan and China. The book covers a wide range of topics, including political, economic,

trade, cultural, and other areas of relations between the two countries. As a result, it is considered one of the most reliable sources on the subject matter.

Ali Ahmad Kuhzad, an Afghan historian, has authored a book titled "Short history of Afghanistan," which includes a section that covers the political and economic relations between Afghanistan and China. This book can serve as a valuable resource on the topic.

Dr. Mohammad Hasan Kakar authored a book titled "The Diplomatic History of Afghanistan," which provides useful information on Afghan-China bilateral diplomacy. This book serves as a valuable resource on the subject.

In contrast, there is also a short article that has been published on the topic of China's interests, stances, and perspectives regarding Afghanistan. This article specifically covers the years between 2001 and 2012. In addition, a number of Afghan and Chinese authors have published research on China and Afghanistan, with a focus on people-to-people diplomacy and political relations. Raja Mohammad Khan has written an article in 2015 discussing China's economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan. The Danish Institute of Studies has also published a comprehensive article titled "Afghanistan and China's New Approach to Economic Diplomacy." Reuters news agency, Pajhwoke News Agency, and other news agencies have also published various articles, columns, and reports on the topic of Afghan-China engagement. However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no specific book available that provides an in-depth analysis of Afghanistan and China's economic diplomacy.

2.1.1 Research Gap (Gap of Knowledge)

According to Elyse (2021), a research gap refers to a problem or query that hasn't been addressed by previous research or studies in a particular field. Although numerous research and studies have focused on diplomatic relations with China, there appears to be no specific area of focus identified in these works. Therefore, I intend to address questions related to China's economic diplomacy in the Research Questions Section.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

To narrow down the scope of the relevant data and analyze it from a particular perspective, researchers employ a theoretical framework. This framework defines specific variables and offers a clear understanding of concepts and variables based on

predetermined definitions. By doing so, it enables the researcher to generate new knowledge by either confirming or questioning theoretical assumptions (Elyse, 2021).

2.2.1 The Realism Theory

Realism theory offers a compelling framework to comprehend China's economic diplomacy towards other nations. As per Realism, the international system is anarchic, and states pursue their self-interests in a power and security race. Consequently, cooperation between countries is constrained and subject to the balance of power. (Ashworth, Lucian M., 2002)

China's economic diplomacy can be analyzed through a realist perspective as it aims to advance its economic interests while increasing its power and influence. Its Belt and Road Initiative is an example of expanding its markets, securing resource access, and enhancing connectivity with other nations. However, its lending practices have raised concerns over undermining the economic sovereignty of the recipients and providing China greater control over them. (Bell, Duncan, 2017)

Realism highlights the significance of power in international relations, and China's economic development has been accompanied by military expansion and an assertive foreign policy, raising suspicions of challenging the US's dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. From this viewpoint, China's economic diplomacy could be perceived as a strategy to fortify its position relative to other powers, including the US. (Sheehan, 2015)

Realism also believes that international institutions, such as the WTO, are secondary to the power and interests of states. Thus, China's participation in such institutions can be viewed as a strategic choice, facilitating the country to expand trade and investment, while promoting its interests and contesting the predominance of Western powers (Sheehan, 2015).

The theory of Realism should be applied in a research titled "China's Economic Diplomacy Towards Afghanistan" because Realism emphasizes the importance of state interests and power dynamics in international relations. In this context, China's economic diplomacy can be seen as a strategic maneuver to enhance its national security and economic power. By investing in Afghanistan's natural resources and infrastructure, China seeks to expand its influence in the

region and secure its access to critical resources. Realism provides a framework to understand these actions as part of China's broader effort to maximize its power and ensure its security in a competitive international system. This theoretical perspective highlights the motivations behind China's policies, focusing on the pursuit of national interest, the importance of state sovereignty, and the role of power in shaping international interactions.

In conclusion, Realism offers a useful perspective to decipher China's economic diplomacy towards other countries. Its emphasis on power, self-interest, and competition in international relations aligns with China's economic strategy. Therefore, policymakers and analysts could utilize a realist perspective to anticipate China's conduct and address its challenges as it continues to expand its economic influence worldwide.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study will employ a qualitative approach, utilizing both primary and secondary data to examine various aspects of the topic. The methodology involves engaging with a diverse range of people related to the subject matter. The data collection process will involve reviewing papers published by the ministries of Foreign Affairs of both governments, as well as analyzing statements, articles, treaties, presidential and foreign minister trips, and other relevant sources. These resources will serve as first-hand materials for conducting the qualitative research.

3.1 Research Design

According to Gschwend and Schimmelfennig (2007), a research design is a blueprint that outlines the steps to be taken in conducting a research project and specifically how the gathered evidence will be used to respond to the research question. The research design is essentially the primary framework or structure for any research endeavor.

The primary emphasis of this study lies in examining China's Economic Diplomacy vis-à-vis Afghanistan subsequent to the 9/11 era, thus underscoring the paramount significance of qualitative research methodologies. Within this framework, case studies emerge as a pivotal research design encompassing various approaches, including descriptive-interpretive, hypothesis-generating, and least-likely, most-likely, and deviant case studies. Employing the method of difference entails juxtaposing two or more cases characterized by significant similarities, aiming to mitigate alternative interpretations and discern patterns with greater precision (Odell, 2001).

The study will be conducted using the descriptive-interpretive case study design as described by Elliott and Timulak (2005). This type of case study is typically used to document significant events with the goal of creating a record that can benefit policymakers, scholars, and others in the future. Descriptive studies have the potential to inspire new analytical perspectives and the evidence they provide can be useful in evaluating theories.

The utilization of case study methods presents various notable benefits. To begin with, qualitative studies are either equivalent or better in creating sound theories compared to other methods (Odell, 2001). A more comprehensive and detailed examination of concrete examples of events and behaviors provides greater clarity and discernment. Furthermore, a case study that

examines a previously analyzed event can reveal alternative perspectives that compel a reconsideration of the previously accepted interpretation (McKeown, 1999).

The use of case studies is typically preferred over other methods for documenting processes. The bilateral engagement between countries involves various processes such as market innovation, competition, collusion, equilibration, influence, bargaining, communication, conflict, learning, institutional change, regional integration and disintegration, and politics, which are crucial for our comprehension. While structures are significant, case studies also provide valuable insight into how changes in institutions occur. For instance, successive rounds of multilateral trade negotiations have led to changes in the structures of the global trading system, and case studies are the most effective means of understanding how these changes come about (Odell, 2001).

Utilizing case methods offers a solid empirical underpinning for investigating research questions pertinent to the specific cases under scrutiny. This approach engenders heightened assurance in the credibility of the cases analyzed vis-à-vis statistical methodologies. While aggregated data might suggest a broad correlation between cooperation and variables like the invocation of cooperation by international institutions, case methods furnish more granular and nuanced understandings. (Odell, 2001). Additionally, case methods facilitate a qualitative exploration of intricate interplays, thereby enriching scholarly discourse and deepening comprehension within academic circles. The fourth point in favor of conducting a detailed case study is that it allows for the preservation and reporting of more comprehensive information about the case, which can enable readers to come up with alternative interpretations of the same events and generate new questions and hypotheses.

Furthermore, the data gleaned from these reports can serve as valuable inputs for researchers aiming to develop quantitative indicators in subsequent analyses (Odell, 2001). Moreover, even if a case study does not explicitly seek to yield theoretical implications, it still offers a nuanced comprehension of the case, presenting a wealth of evidence and insights into the contextual dynamics and underlying processes (Odell, 2001).

3.2 Operational Definition(s)

Geo-Politics: The endeavor to secure control over geographical entities with global ramifications and leverage them for political gain constitutes a pivotal struggle in geopolitics (Flint, 3rd edition, pp. 16, 36-39).

Geo-Economics: The combination of economic and geographic factors relating to international trade (The National Interest page 17–23).

Foreign Policy: Foreign policy encapsulates a government's overarching strategy and objectives when engaging with other nations, delineating the guiding principles that shape a state's interactions and relationships within the international community. It encompasses a spectrum of diplomatic, economic, military, and cultural initiatives aimed at advancing national interests, promoting security, and fostering cooperation on a global scale.

3.3 Procedure (data collection)

Data collection encompasses the systematic process of gathering and quantifying data from various sources to achieve a comprehensive and accurate understanding of a particular subject or field (Emilly, 2020). Typically, there are two primary types of data collection methods: Primary and Secondary. Primary data involves collecting data specifically for the research problem at hand, employing methods best suited to the study's objectives (Hox & Boeije, 2005). On the other hand, Secondary data refers to pre-existing information obtained by another individual or organization and is available for research purposes (Clark, 2013).

In line with the research criteria, this study will exclusively utilize secondary data to analyze and elucidate various aspects of the research using descriptive methodologies. Secondary data will be gathered from a multitude of sources, including books, documents, journals, newspapers, online portals, and published research articles and reports. This approach allows for the synthesis and analysis of existing information to address the research objectives effectively

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis constitutes a fundamental element of any research undertaking, serving to extract meaningful insights from collected data. It involves the systematic examination and evaluation of gathered data to discern patterns, relationships, and trends. This process entails applying analytical and logical reasoning to interpret the data effectively (Bazeley, 2013).

Secondary data analysis, in particular, is a versatile method that offers numerous applications across research domains (Doolan & Froelicher, 2009). This approach involves analyzing existing data sets that have been previously collected by other researchers or organizations. By reexamining and reinterpreting these data, researchers can derive new insights, validate findings, or explore different research questions. Moreover, secondary data analysis allows for cost-effective and time-efficient research, as it eliminates the need for primary data collection.

Discourse analysis is a fundamental analytical approach employed by qualitative researchers, although it may be applied in various ways. Various perspectives offer distinct definitions of the term 'discourse' and propose diverse methods for its empirical analysis. Nevertheless, the fundamental concept is that language is organised based on various patterns that individuals use when engaging in different aspects of social existence. Discourse analysis, as defined by Joergensen and Phillips (2002), involves examining these patterns. This type of analysis can be used in various social contexts, such as institutions or media, to examine the language used in a specific context, such as political or medical discussions. It can also be used to define certain aspects of the world from a particular viewpoint, such as a 'neo-liberal discourse of globalisation' (Fairclough, 2013). From this standpoint, discourses have the capacity to facilitate the coordination of actions among a significant number of individuals and organisations. The objective of discourse analysis is to reveal the specific perspectives, language usage, and comprehension of the world or a specific component of the world within a particular social and political context. The researcher will perform an in-depth examination of existing literature regarding the stated countries, focusing on their achievements and shortcomings in creating geopolitical and geoeconomic relationships.

For the data analysis in the study titled "China's Economic Diplomacy Towards Afghanistan," Discourse Analysis has been employed. Discourse Analysis is a qualitative method that examines how language is used in texts and contexts to construct meaning and convey power dynamics. By analyzing official statements, policy documents, media reports, and speeches, this method allows for a deeper understanding of how China frames its economic diplomacy and strategic intentions towards Afghanistan. Discourse Analysis reveals underlying narratives and ideologies, highlighting how China articulates its interests and objectives, and how these are received and interpreted by Afghan stakeholders and the international community. This approach is particularly valuable for unpacking the complex interplay of economic,

political, and security discourses that shape China's engagement with Afghanistan, providing insights into the broader implications for regional geopolitics and international relations.

3.5 Organization of the Study

- **The first chapter** of this study serves as an introduction, comprising three chapters in total. Within this introduction, an overview of the research content is provided, along with the introduction of research questions and objectives. This chapter also discusses the research's significance, problem statement, research scope, literature review, theoretical framework, research methodology, and the overall structure of the study.
- **In the second chapter** of this research, we will delve into the modern history of Afghanistan-China relations, spanning from the era of King Zahir Shah to the year 2001. This chapter will comprehensively examine the various matters, fluctuations, challenges, and discussions that have characterized the relationship between China and Afghanistan during this period. It aims to provide a thorough understanding of the unrest and instability in Afghanistan and China's corresponding policies.
- **The third chapter** of this research will center on China's economic interests within Afghanistan. This chapter will delve into China's economic objectives in Afghanistan, exploring the available opportunities and the potential achievements they aim for in the country. It will also analyze the challenges and provide corresponding solutions. This particular chapter can be regarded as pivotal within the thesis.
- **The fourth chapter** will delve into the Wakhan Economic Corridor, covering various aspects. It will provide insights into the geography of Wakhan and the historical background of this corridor. Additionally, it will explore the potential for the corridor's development. Moreover, this chapter will address the human ecology in Wakhan, as understanding the living conditions of the local population in less-developed areas is essential before considering the corridor's development.
- **The fifth chapter** will examine the potential for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Afghanistan. This chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of the BRI proposal in Afghanistan, shedding light on the various infrastructure projects outlined within the framework of the BRI. It will be informed by interviews conducted by the researcher with scholars specializing in Afghanistan-China economic engagement. Towards the conclusion of the chapter, recommendations will be presented for both Afghan and Chinese

stakeholders, culminating in a final conclusion. The subsequent section of the chapter will include a list of sources and references utilized throughout the research.

Chapter II

2.1 The diplomatic ties between Afghanistan and China in the Modern Age

Throughout the Contemporary Era, the dynamic between Afghanistan and China has evolved into a bilateral friendship marked by multifaceted interactions and mutual interests. This diplomatic rapport has emerged against the backdrop of China's ascendancy as the most populous nation globally and the second-largest economy on the international stage. China's formidable stature in global affairs, epitomized by its membership in the United Nations Security Council with the privilege of wielding veto power, underscores its consequential role in shaping the geopolitical landscape (Khalil, 2018).

Central to understanding the depth of this bilateral relationship is an appreciation of China's rich historical and cultural heritage. China's millennia-old civilization has engendered a legacy of diplomatic finesse and cultural exchange, fostering enduring ties with diverse civilizations, including Islamic and European cultures. This historical backdrop provides a nuanced context for comprehending China's contemporary diplomatic overtures, including its engagement with Afghanistan.

Against this historical tapestry, Afghanistan occupies a strategic position as a gateway connecting Central and South Asia, rendering it a pivotal player in regional dynamics. China's strategic interests in Afghanistan encompass a range of economic, political, and security considerations. Economically, Afghanistan's resource-rich terrain presents opportunities for Chinese investment and infrastructure development, aligning with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative aimed at bolstering connectivity and trade across Eurasia.

Moreover, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance extends beyond its borders, intersecting with China's broader regional and global aspirations. As China seeks to expand its influence and safeguard its interests in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics, fostering stable relations with Afghanistan becomes increasingly imperative. This imperative is underscored by Afghanistan's potential to serve as a buffer against

transnational security threats emanating from the region, including terrorism and extremism.

The bilateral friendship between Afghanistan and China thus transcends mere diplomatic rhetoric, reflecting a strategic calculus informed by historical legacies, economic imperatives, and geopolitical exigencies. This evolving relationship not only shapes the destinies of the two nations but also reverberates across the wider geopolitical landscape, underscoring the intricate interplay of interests and dynamics in the Contemporary Era.

2.1.1 Afghanistan and China two neighbors connected in the roof the world

China and Afghanistan have maintained a historical trajectory characterized by the absence of major conflicts, a testament to the resilience of their diplomatic engagements. As articulated by Chen Yi, China's foreign minister in 1957, geographical barriers such as the formidable Himalayas and the imposing Pamir Mountains—the "roof of the world"—have not hindered the interaction between these two nations (Sukhanyar, 2005). This acknowledgment underscores the enduring nature of their bilateral relations, which have transcended geographical impediments to foster continued cooperation and engagement.

The absence of significant conflicts between China and Afghanistan throughout history underscores the durability of their diplomatic exchanges. Despite the formidable geographical barriers separating them, including the Himalayas and the Pamir Mountains, both nations have managed to navigate these challenges to maintain cordial relations. Sukhanyar (2005) highlights Chen Yi's observation from 1957, emphasizing how geographical barriers have not obstructed the historical ties between China and Afghanistan. This historical perspective sheds light on the resilience and adaptability of their diplomatic relations, which have persevered despite physical obstacles.

Chen Yi's assertion from 1957, as cited by Sukhanyar (2005), offers valuable insight into the historical dynamics between China and Afghanistan. By acknowledging the limited impact of geographical barriers on their interactions, Chen Yi underscores the significance of cultural, economic, and political affinities that have facilitated bilateral engagement. This perspective challenges conventional narratives that emphasize geographical isolation as a barrier to

diplomatic relations, highlighting instead the agency and adaptability of nations in forging connections across seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

In essence, Chen Yi's observation serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring nature of China and Afghanistan's bilateral relations. Despite the imposing geographical features that separate them, both nations have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to overcome barriers and cultivate a history of cooperation and mutual understanding. As such, Chen Yi's insights offer a nuanced perspective on the resilience of diplomatic engagements, transcending geographical constraints to foster enduring ties between nations.

2.2 First phase of diplomatic relations: Introduction and Friendship

Afghanistan formally acknowledged the People's Republic of China on January 13, 1950. (Habibi 2005). However, it took an additional Five years for the normalization of diplomatic relations to materialize. Official diplomatic ties between the two nations were inaugurated on January 20, 1955. Notably, Afghanistan promptly extended recognition to China, whereas the Chinese response was relatively subdued during the early stages. This discrepancy is illustrated by a Chinese researcher who suggests that Afghanistan swiftly established relations, yet China's engagement was relatively restrained. The context of this disparity can be traced back to the year of Afghanistan's recognition of China when the United States was actively involved in various projects within Afghanistan. Nevertheless, when the USA began entering into military agreements with Pakistan, China redirected its focus toward forging a closer partnership with Afghanistan. (Shen-Yu Dai 1996)

In 1950, a significant portion of the countries that swiftly extended recognition to the People's Republic of China were those under communist regimes or those espousing a policy of neutrality in international affairs. Notably, Afghanistan, steadfast in its historical commitment to neutrality, emerged as one of the early adopters of this diplomatic stance towards China. This strategic decision by Afghanistan to promptly acknowledge the legitimacy of the Chinese government held profound implications for the nascent relationship between the two nations.

This historical backdrop underscores Afghanistan's proactive approach to international diplomacy, guided by its principled stance of neutrality. By swiftly extending recognition to

China, Afghanistan signaled its willingness to engage with diverse actors on the global stage, irrespective of ideological differences. Moreover, this diplomatic overture played a pivotal role in catalyzing closer ties between the two nations. In response to Afghanistan's gesture of recognition, China reciprocated by dispatching its ambassador in 1955 to present credentials to King Zahir Shah. This diplomatic exchange marked a significant milestone in the bilateral relationship, cementing the foundation for mutual engagement and cooperation. Khalil (2015) underscores the importance of Afghanistan's early recognition of China, emphasizing how this gesture paved the way for the establishment of formal diplomatic channels between the two countries.

The decision by Afghanistan to recognize China in 1950 exemplifies the country's commitment to an independent foreign policy agenda grounded in principles of non-alignment and neutrality. This strategic maneuver not only bolstered Afghanistan's standing on the international stage but also facilitated the cultivation of robust diplomatic ties with China. In hindsight, this early recognition by Afghanistan served as a precursor to deeper cooperation and collaboration between the two nations in subsequent years.

2.2.1 The Chen Yi Trip to Afghanistan

On January 19, 1957, a significant diplomatic event unfolded as Chen Yi, the Foreign Minister of China, responded affirmatively to an invitation extended by Sardar Mohammad Dawood Khan, who held the dual roles of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Afghanistan at the time. Leading a high-level delegation, Chen Yi embarked on a consequential four-day visit to Afghanistan, marking a milestone in the bilateral relations between the two nations (Sukhanyar, 2005).

During this landmark visit, Chen Yi engaged in substantive discussions with Sardar Dawood Khan, encompassing a broad spectrum of global affairs. Notably, both sides expressed unwavering political support for Egypt amidst the Suez Canal dispute in Africa, underscoring their alignment on key international issues. Beyond geopolitical matters, the discussions yielded tangible outcomes in the form of bilateral agreements, particularly in the realm of technological cooperation.

The exchanges between the Afghan and Chinese delegations bore fruit in the form of concrete commitments to enhance bilateral ties. Chen Yi, in his capacity as the Chinese Foreign Minister, pledged to facilitate the engagement of economic delegations from Afghanistan in China, thereby fostering economic collaboration between the two nations. In a reciprocal gesture, Prime Minister Dawood Khan proposed the opportunity for Chinese students to pursue studies at Kabul University, an offer warmly accepted by Chen Yi.

As a testament to the sincerity of this commitment, two Chinese students embarked on their academic journey at Kabul University, marking the commencement of cultural and educational exchange between Afghanistan and China. This symbolic gesture not only deepened the bonds of friendship between the two nations but also laid the groundwork for future collaborations in academia and beyond (Habibi, 2005).

2.2.2 Sardar Mohammad Dawood Khan's Visit to China

In response to an invitation from China's Prime Minister Chen li, Sardar Mohammad Dawood Khan embarked on a significant journey to Beijing on October 19, 1957. This marked the first-ever high-level delegation from Afghanistan to visit China, garnering substantial attention and positive reception from the Chinese media. The official newspaper of China, the People's Daily, published a report emphasizing the potential for building trust and fostering commitments between the two nations through this visit. Furthermore, the newspaper commended Afghanistan for its principled and peaceful stance in international politics, highlighting its neutral foreign policy. (Skukhanyar, 2005, p45)

2.2.3 Sardar Mohammad Naeem Khan's Visit to China

In a notable diplomatic exchange, the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Sardar Mohammad Naeem, received an invitation from China's Foreign Minister Chen YI on September 4, 1959, to embark on a visit to China. His visit was accompanied by a high-level protocol, signifying the importance of the occasion. During this trip, he had the opportunity to meet with Mao Zedong, the revered figure behind the Chinese revolution. (Khalil 2015)

During this era of budding relations between China and Afghanistan, both nations maintained amicable ties. China faced various challenges, including border disputes with Russia

and India, among others. Afghanistan consistently adhered to a neutral stance in international affairs. Notably, during the India-China border conflict, even Afghanistan's official newspaper, the Kabul Times, refrained from extensive coverage of the issue. Furthermore, China and Afghanistan entered into an agreement that explicitly discouraged interference in each other's internal matters, fostering an environment of mutual respect and preventing border disputes. (Sukhanyar, p53,2005)

2.3 The Second Phase; China's ties with Afghanistan during the reign of Afghan Communist regimes

In July 1978, communist parties in Afghanistan united, and on April 17, 1978, the prominent Communist leader Mir Akbar Khyber was assassinated by unknown assailants. This event paved the way for a coup against Sardar Dawood Khan. On April 27, 1978, the Communist parties orchestrated a coup, not only toppling the Dawood Khan government but also executing all members of his family (Muzzamil, 2000). Initially, China did not acknowledge the new communist regimes in Afghanistan, driven by its own interests. However, when the Communist Regime formally requested China's recognition, it was granted (Vertzberger in 1982).

Despite recognizing the People's Democratic Regime in Afghanistan, China maintained a certain distance in their relations (Sukhanyar, 2005).

China held specific concerns during this period:

1. There was concern that Afghanistan might emulate Cuba's path in Asia.
2. The Communist Regime of Afghanistan had signed a treaty with the Soviet Union known as the Asian Collective Security plan. This treaty had been consistently rejected by King Zahir Shah, Prime Minister Musa Shafiq, and President Dawood Khan. China believed that this treaty could isolate China and pose a threat to its national interests.
3. Another factor deterring China from forging a close relationship with the Afghan Communist regime was the reported persecution of Maoists in Afghanistan. (Sukhanyar 2005, p254).

2.3.1 The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and China's support to Afghan Mujahideen

When the Soviet Union officially invaded Afghanistan on December 27, 1979, the Chinese government strongly condemned this act and refused to recognize the Babrak Karmal Regime in Afghanistan. China severed formal diplomatic ties with Afghanistan, reducing its embassy to a minimal representative's office primarily focused on visa issuance. (Khalil 2015).

Just four days after the Soviet Union's aggression, the Chinese government summoned the Soviet Union's ambassador in Beijing and conveyed a clear message: the attack on Afghanistan was perceived as a direct threat to China's security, causing significant concerns. (Gerald Segal in 1981).

Regarding the impact of the Soviet Union's aggression on China, an official Chinese newspaper articulated the following sentiments:

Afghanistan's position in the southern part of Central Asia holds significant strategic importance. Both historical Zari leaders and the modern Soviet Union have shared the ambition to dominate this nation. They aim to secure control over the pathway from the Indian Ocean, ultimately influencing the crucial routes to Japan and the western regions. Consequently, the Soviet Union is actively pursuing the goal of exerting authority in Afghanistan, in addition to establishing bases in Vietnam, with the intention of gaining mastery over maritime routes too. (Xue Yun1979)

In addition to this, the Soviet Union's invasion also raised concerns in China, as they feared that the Soviet Union might target Pakistan after Afghanistan. The strategic alliance between China and Pakistan began in 1962, following the China-India conflict. This partnership reached its pinnacle when Soviet Union President Brezhnev in 1969 declared the Security Belt. (Orlan Fallacia 1980), and in 1971, the Soviet Union formed a coalition with India. In this geopolitical context, China perceived a threat to both Pakistan and itself. Consequently, China supported Pakistan during the Afghan Jihad and issued certain statements in response to these developments.

China derived three benefits from its support of the Afghan Mujahideen:

- 1- They initiated covert ties with Saudi Arabia, which eventually laid the groundwork for diplomatic relations.

- 2- During the period when the U.S. imposed sanctions on the Soviet Union, China seized the opportunity to purchase millions of tons of wheat at a favorable rate. This occurred because the U.S. had placed sanctions on Russia, making China the sole customer and allowing them to acquire the wheat at a reduced price.
- 3- China established military relations with the United States, leading to the procurement of certain military equipment and technologies from the U.S. (vertzberger, 1982)

Another advantage gained by China through its support of the Afghan Jihad was the isolation of the Soviet Union in global politics. The Soviet Union found itself confronted by NATO in Europe and, in Asia, it had to contend with Afghanistan, China, and the Islamic world. (Khalil, 2015)

On December 26, 1985, as the Soviet Union commemorated the sixth anniversary of its invasion of Afghanistan, the Chinese Foreign Affairs spokesperson issued a statement. The spokesperson stressed that the assault on Afghanistan was not only a tragic event but also a menace to the stability and security of the region. Furthermore, China was perceived to be under a similar threat. China reiterated its strong condemnation of this invasion and asserted that the heroic Afghans would not be left isolated or surrounded. (Ottawa, Citizen)

Throughout the Afghan Jihad, China had significant security concerns and notably refrained from entering into any treaties, agreements, or pacts with the communist Afghan regime (Sukhanyar, p270-271, 2005).

2.4 Third Phase; Afghanistan – China Ties after Soviet withdrawal

When the Soviet Union forces were preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan, China's Prime Minister, Li Peng, expressed during the 7th National Congress that this was a positive development and welcomed it. China expressed hope that Afghan parties would engage in dialogue and form a united, inclusive government. Such a step, it was believed, could pave the way for peace in Afghanistan and the eventual return of Afghan refugees to their homeland. (Riaz Ahmad Khan, 2013)

After the Soviet Union's withdrawal, the Afghan government aimed to restore its relationship with China. However, formal diplomatic exchanges and agreements were absent during this period. This was because China had stronger ties with the Afghan Mujahideen, rather than

Dr. Najib's government. (Khalil, 2015) Nevertheless, the Chief Justice of Afghanistan and the head of the National Statistical Authorities separately visited Beijing, attempting to normalize relations, but these visits had limited impact. During this time, as Afghan Mujahideen besieged Khost Province, Dr. Najibullah formally wrote to the Chinese president, requesting his influence to dissuade Pakistan from supporting the Mujahideen and preventing attacks on Afghanistan (Sukhanyar, P258 – 259, 2005).

2.4.1 Afghan – China Relations during the Mujahedeen Ruling in Afghanistan

When Dr. Najibullah relinquished his position in accordance with the terms of the Peshawar Pact, a pivotal shift occurred in Afghan governance, with Sibghatullah Mujadedi followed by Professor Rabbani assuming the presidency. This transition not only marked a significant political development but also heralded a new chapter in Afghanistan's diplomatic landscape, particularly in its relations with China. As Khalil (2015) observes, the Mujahideen's ascension to power represented the initial step in revitalizing the ties between China and Afghanistan.

Subsequently, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Afghan Mujahideen government, President Rabbani and Prime Minister Hikmatyar received congratulatory messages from the President and Prime Minister of China, signifying a gesture of goodwill and diplomatic overture. This exchange of pleasantries underscored the burgeoning rapport between the two nations under the new Afghan leadership.

As a further demonstration of China's commitment to nurturing bilateral relations, the Chinese Foreign Ministry formally extended an invitation to President Rabbani to visit China. This invitation, conveyed through a letter to the Afghan Embassy in Beijing, conveyed China's eagerness to host President Burhan Ul Din Rabbani, thereby solidifying the nascent diplomatic engagement between the two countries (Sukhanyar, 2005, p. 269-270).

As the civil war erupted in Afghanistan, China took the step of closing its embassy in Kabul, effectively severing ties with all factions involved. Amid the civil war, President Rabbani sent a letter to China, urging them to leverage their international influence to help stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. It was during this time that China faced challenges related to the smuggling of narcotics. Rabbani highlighted the connection between narcotics smugglers and extremist elements, emphasizing that this combination posed a significant threat to stability and security in the region. (Muzzamil, 2000).

2.4.2 Afghan – China Relations during the First ruling of Taliban

At the outset of the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan as the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan, China held apprehensions regarding three main issues: the situation of Uighur Muslims,

terrorism, and the illegal narcotics trade. To tackle these concerns, China, in cooperation with Russia, formed the Shanghai 5 organization. (Khalil, 2015)

As the Taliban advanced towards the outskirts of Kabul, President Rabbani, who was in office at the time, grew concerned about maintaining his leadership, viewing the Taliban as a significant threat. Rabbani believed that the Taliban had the backing of Pakistan. To address this, he sent a letter to the Chinese President on January 18, 1996, requesting China's influence on Pakistan to help halt the conflict. (Sukhanyar, p288, 2005) However, China did not provide a response. During this period, China faced another issue in Afghanistan, namely the presence of Chinese liberation groups. (Khalil, 2015)

Research indicates that during the Taliban's initial rule, approximately 1,000 Chinese Uighur individuals seeking liberation were present in Afghanistan. (Jae H Ku, Drew Thompson, Daniel Wertz, 2011) In response to this situation, a Chinese diplomatic delegation visited Afghanistan and, during negotiations, stated that the Uighur Muslims detained in China had claimed they received military training in Afghanistan. (Muzhdeh, 2003)

Furthermore, in Pakistan, the Chinese ambassador held a meeting with the Ambassador of the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef. With Zaeef's assistance, the Chinese ambassador traveled to Kabul and then proceeded to Kandahar. He received a warm welcome in Kabul and, in Kandahar, had a meeting with the Taliban's Supreme Leader, Mullah Mohammad Umar. It's noteworthy that this was the first encounter between Mullah Mohammad Umar and a non-Muslim ambassador. (Zaeef, 2010) The Chinese Ambassador expressed concern over the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (IEA) assisting Xinjiang Muslims. In response, Mullah Umar assured the Ambassador, stating that Afghanistan had no intentions of meddling in China's internal affairs. He emphasized that Afghanistan would not permit any organization to use its territory to launch operations against China or conduct activities within Chinese borders (Zaeef, 2010).

The Chinese Ambassador presented a camel statue made of mud, symbolizing the historical connections along the Silk Road when our ancestors relied on such camels for their journeys and trade caravans. The gift was offered as a gesture to rekindle our relations as

they were in the past. Mullah Umar accepted the statue initially, but after the Chinese Ambassador's departure, he shattered it into several pieces (Muzhdeh, 2000).

At the time of the Taliban's first rule, Waheed Muzhdeh, managing the Middle East Desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, interpreted the Chinese gift as a deliberate move. China intended to assess whether Mullah Umar valued relations with them and if he had the diplomatic capacity to engage with them effectively (Muzhdeh, 2000).

The Afghan Embassy in Islamabad, represented by Ambassador Abdul Salam Zaeef, maintained diplomatic ties with numerous nations. However, it had notably strong and close relations with China during that period (Zaeef, 2010).

During the Taliban's rule, Afghanistan hosted a considerable number of Uighur Muslims, which concerned China. In response, China initiated efforts to address issues related to extremism, terrorism, and Uighur liberation by establishing the Shanghai 5 Organization. Later, in 2001, this organization evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Additionally, China supported United Nations contracts aimed at imposing sanctions on the Taliban. Despite its policy stance, China provided humanitarian aid, granting \$1.6 million to Afghan refugees between 1995 and 2001. Furthermore, in 2001, when a drought crisis hit Afghanistan, China contributed \$242,000 through the UNHCR branch in Afghanistan to alleviate the situation (Agency France-press).

Chapter III

3. China's Economic interests in Afghanistan

China has been involved in Afghanistan since the ancient era. It has been step by step narrated that the caravans of camels were crossing the dangerous mountains of Wakhan and entering to Afghan Soil.

In a landscape that is as dynamically shifting as it is rich in unexploited resources, Afghanistan stands as a linchpin in a new chapter of economic engagements for the People's Republic of China. The regional politics of this historically war-torn nation have always had a spectrum of global repercussions; yet it is the economic prospects in the recent decade that have drawn unequivocal attention from the world's second-largest economy, China. As study delve into China's economic interests in Afghanistan, we find a complex weave of strategies that are as much about stabilizing a bordering nation as it is about tapping into a rich vein of resources ranging from rare earth elements to untapped hydrocarbon reserves. (Sharma, Raghav, 2010) Moreover, Afghanistan's strategic location presents a golden opportunity for China to extend its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to foster connectivity and cooperation between East and West (Small, Andrew, 2020).

Yet, the road is fraught with challenges, both security and geopolitical, with a complex history of international interventions carving deep uncertainties in the region's economic landscape. China walks a tight rope, balancing economic aspirations with a cautiously diplomatic approach, in an area where political instability has often been a deterrent for sustained foreign investment. In this exploration, study unearth the multi-faceted dimensions of China's economic pursuits in Afghanistan, situating it within a larger canvas of geopolitical strategies and regional stability. Through this lens, we aim to offer a nuanced understanding of an economic relationship that is still in its nascent stage, yet holds the seeds for transformative regional dynamics in the years to come. (John Fox, Daniel Korski.2021)

The Silk Road facilitated extensive trade between Asia and Europe, with China serving as a major trading hub and Afghanistan playing a crucial role as a transit route linking the two continents. Over the centuries, China and Afghanistan maintained friendly relations, bolstered by

their shared history of trade and cultural exchange. Following the reshaping of global power dynamics after World War II, the People's Republic of China and Afghanistan formalized their bilateral ties in the 1950s, further solidifying their longstanding relationship (Raja Muhammad Khan, 2015).

China utilizes the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a platform to advocate its interests in Central Asia through multilateral channels, supplementing its primarily bilateral initiatives. Collaborating within the SCO, China and Russia strategically engage regional powers such as India, Iran, and the United States, albeit with limited concrete outcomes. The organization's charter identifies terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism as primary security threats in the region, with notable success in combating terrorism through security cooperation. (Erica Downs, 2012)

China's involvement in Central Asia burgeoned following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, initially aimed at resolving border disputes but swiftly transitioning into deeper security collaboration to counter separatist and terrorist factions in Xinjiang. Beijing's "open up the west" initiative chiefly concentrates on bolstering economic integration with Central Asia, concurrently thwarting the growth of separatist movements in Xinjiang, despite their popularity among Central Asian citizens. The dual emphasis on fostering economic and security ties epitomizes the SCO's overarching agenda. (Andrew Small, 2013)

Perceiving Afghanistan in a state of flux, China refrains from identifying a clear victor amidst the power struggle. Unlike other stakeholders such as the United States, Russia, or Pakistan, China enters Afghanistan without prior conflicts with past Afghan administrations, affording its diplomats and businessmen a relatively untarnished reputation to engage with Afghan counterparts and negotiate agreements. However, China is cognizant that its reputation could be compromised unless it exercises meticulous discretion in its engagements within Afghanistan. Adopting a cautious stance, China has maintained relations with the Taliban pre-9/11 and through its ally Pakistan, aligning with its long-term interests in Afghanistan. This prudent approach persists, underscored by State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) investments, particularly as U.S. forces progressively withdraw post-2014. Initially, China's involvement in Afghanistan was minimal, ranking twenty-third among international donors since the conflict's inception in 2001, contributing a mere \$197 million. However, from early 2012, Beijing has intensified its efforts, recognizing Afghanistan's implications for its future stability and indicating a proactive stance

toward the nation's development amidst the impending U.S. troop withdrawal. Before the events of 9/11, the SCO regarded the conflict in Afghanistan as an internal issue necessitating a diplomatic resolution rather than military intervention. This perspective reflects adherence to the five principles of peaceful coexistence and underscores the prevailing influence of Chinese perspectives within the organization. (Pandey, Shubhangi. 2020)

In 2012, Afghanistan achieved observer status within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a significant milestone reflecting its intent to bolster economic and diplomatic ties with China and other member states. The prospect of full membership in the SCO holds strategic implications for Afghanistan, as it would entail not only assistance but also obligations, particularly in the realm of counterterrorism efforts. As Krishnan and Ananth (2020) elucidate, member nations of the SCO have actively conducted security drills aimed at enhancing border security, a proactive measure designed to fortify regional stability in the face of potential challenges emanating from Afghanistan.

The SCO's proactive approach to security underscores its potential role as a stabilizing force in the region, especially amidst uncertainties surrounding the future trajectory of Afghanistan. In the event of a crisis within Afghanistan's central government, the country stands to benefit from the swift deployment of the SCO's quick-reaction forces, providing a crucial lifeline in times of turmoil. Furthermore, membership in the SCO offers Afghanistan a gateway to deepen connections with the Central Asian region, facilitating access to trade, aid, and military support. This becomes particularly pertinent as the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces looms large, necessitating alternative avenues for strategic engagement and assistance.

However, the efficacy of the SCO is not without its challenges. As Krishnan and Ananth (2020) aptly point out, the organization's decision-making processes are often hampered by the divergent interests and competing agendas of its members, particularly China and Russia. Disputes among Central Asian governments further complicate the attainment of consensus on critical issues, potentially impeding the organization's ability to respond effectively to challenges emanating from Afghanistan.

In September 2012, Zhou Yongkang, a distinguished luminary within the Politburo of the People's Republic of China (PRC), embarked on a consequential diplomatic mission to Afghanistan, emblematic of the deepening entente between the two states. This notable excursion

marked the inaugural instance of a senior Politburo official's presence in Afghanistan since the auspicious visitation of Liu Shaoqi in 1966. Throughout his diplomatic sojourn, Zhou articulated the imperative of elevating Afghanistan-China relations to the echelon of a Strategic Partnership, espousing a commitment to facilitate the progression of Chinese enterprises' investments in Afghanistan. This undertaking aimed at amplifying collaboration across an extensive spectrum of domains encompassing economic, trade, project contracting, resource development, agriculture, and infrastructure construction. Concurrently, President Karzai demonstrated unequivocal resolve in safeguarding the safety and security of Chinese nationals within the precincts of Afghanistan's borders. Beyond the realms of economic discourse, Zhou engaged in discourse concerning multifaceted concerns, prominently accentuating the exigency of combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and transnational organized crime. In this intricate milieu, he underscored the existential menace posed by the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), advocating for concerted endeavors to mitigate its deleterious activities. Remarkably, Zhou ardently advocated for Afghanistan's active engagement as an observer within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), urging collaborative initiatives in mitigating these pernicious forces. This pivotal diplomatic odyssey heralded the inception of a novel epoch in China-Afghanistan relations, underscored by their concomitant economic ambitions and shared resolve towards bolstering regional security (Elizabeth Wishnick, 2014).

The burgeoning relationship between China and Afghanistan underscores a notable increase in China's influence within Kabul. This evolving dynamic suggests a sustained pursuit of shared interests in economic and security domains. Predominantly shaped by economic imperatives and security considerations, the multifaceted relationship between the two nations warrants further examination in subsequent chapters (Johny and Stanly, 2022).

China's foreign policy framework prioritizes the promotion of stability and collaboration in countering terrorism and separatism. With a 70-kilometer border in Xinjiang's western region, Afghanistan's proximity to China's territorial expanse accentuates the strategic significance of their interaction. Notably, the presence of ethnic Uighur groups in Xinjiang poses a substantial challenge to China's stability, as these groups harbor active terrorist elements aspiring to establish an independent state in western China. Against the backdrop of Afghanistan's pervasive lawlessness and instability, these groups find refuge, sustenance, and training. Consequently, a

destabilized Afghanistan portends an escalation in terrorist activities, thereby imperiling Xinjiang and China at large (Dirk van der Kley, 2014).

Beijing has adopted a multifaceted approach, leveraging economic measures as a key tool in addressing the complex challenges of extremism, terrorism, and separatism in Xinjiang, with the overarching goal of fostering social stability. Recognizing the intricate interplay between economic development and social cohesion, the Chinese government has long prioritized economic growth as a means to mitigate social instability in the region. Over the decades, the implementation of development policies in Xinjiang has yielded tangible economic gains, particularly for Han migrants. However, this economic progress has been accompanied by a sense of marginalization and discontent among ethnic Uighurs, exacerbating underlying tensions within the region. Despite the emphasis on economic development, policymakers in Xinjiang acknowledge that addressing public grievances requires a more nuanced and comprehensive approach beyond economic measures alone.

In response to persistent challenges, Beijing has adopted a comprehensive strategy of suppression in Xinjiang, characterized by stringent security measures aimed at restoring stability and quelling dissent. This approach has culminated in the establishment of a pervasive security apparatus, transforming Xinjiang into a veritable security state. The intensification of security measures reflects Beijing's determination to assert control and maintain order in the face of perceived threats to social stability.

However, the heavy-handed tactics employed by Beijing have drawn criticism from international observers, who decry the erosion of basic rights and freedoms in Xinjiang. The mass detention of Uighurs in internment camps, widespread surveillance, and restrictions on religious and cultural practices have sparked concerns about human rights abuses and ethnic discrimination.

This setting has effectively discouraged acts of terrorism, but it has also generated a greater number of grievances. In Afghanistan, Beijing would not be able to project a force capable of carrying out congruent operations as it did in Xinjiang for three reasons:

1. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) lacks the capacity to carry out extended deployments.

2. China's neighbouring countries would perceive the deployment of PLA forces on an international scale as a concerning development.
3. Deploying troops to Afghanistan would infringe upon Afghanistan's sovereignty, contravene the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and tarnish China's reputation as a magnanimous global power. Instead of deploying a large police force, Beijing employs economic incentives to attract potential allies into agreements that are expected to back the current government and ensure stability (Hong, Z.2013).

Although stability may no longer be the sole linchpin of China's foreign policy, it retains its status as a pivotal element therein. The escalating domestic demand for natural resources within China has propelled its industries to extend their reach into distant territories, notably Latin America, Africa, and Central and South Asia. These regions are poised to serve as indispensable resource reservoirs vital for fueling the relentless growth of China's burgeoning economy (Small, Andrew, 2020).

Beijing has consistently employed a strategy of economic diplomacy in Afghanistan. Following the normalisation of relations in 2002, Beijing exercised caution and refrained from taking significant actions until the security situation had stabilised. In 2005, Beijing extended an invitation to Afghanistan to participate in the SCO summit meeting, signalling a cautious approach to diplomatic engagement. China initiated multilateral involvement with Afghanistan in 2005, during a period when it was still formulating its approach towards the country. Small, Andrew, 2020 The Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) is an international initiative aimed at prioritising the growth of the Afghan economy. It has convened on five occasions from 2005 to 2012.

The Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) has emerged as a pivotal platform for fostering collaboration and integration among regional stakeholders. The fifth meeting of RECCA, held in Dushanbe in 2012, underscored the growing momentum behind efforts to enhance connectivity and infrastructure development in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries.

With participation from a diverse array of stakeholders, including representatives from 70 countries and prominent regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Economic Cooperation Organisation, and the South Asian Association for Regional

Cooperation, RECCA has served as a catalyst for regional cooperation on a wide range of economic and developmental issues.

At the heart of RECCA's agenda lies a concerted effort to advance transportation networks, particularly railway and highway infrastructure, aimed at facilitating seamless connectivity between Afghanistan and its neighbors. Emphasis has also been placed on key projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which holds immense potential for regional energy cooperation and economic integration.

Furthermore, RECCA has been instrumental in promoting Afghanistan's integration into broader regional initiatives, including the development of electric power infrastructure spanning 34 regional networks. By aligning Afghanistan's development priorities with those of its neighbors, RECCA has helped lay the groundwork for sustainable economic growth and prosperity across the region. However, China has mostly prioritised the bilateral development of the Afghan economy. The said reference is given from Authors namely Christian Bleur and Reza Kazemi published their work in year 2014.

Following a substantial decrease in the United States' military presence in 2014, China intensified its diplomatic endeavours on both bilateral and international fronts. In this significant year, important exchanges took place, such as visits by senior Chinese security officials to Kabul and reciprocal trips by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to China. China has established concrete security and intelligence cooperation by deploying armed police troops to assist Afghan forces in Badakhshan region. Additionally, China has offered to help construct a mountain brigade for the Afghan National Security Forces. As a kind of reciprocity, Kabul transferred Uighur inmates to convince China to use its influence with Pakistan to facilitate negotiations with the Taliban. Three trilateral conversations emerged involving multiple countries: China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; China, Russia, and Pakistan; and China, Russia, and India. China sponsored the fourth ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan, which was attended by 46 governments and international bodies. The US participated in the conference as a supporting nation. China joined the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the US, in January 2016. (Small, Andrew, and Bonnie S., 2014).

China is widely acknowledged as a significant player in Afghanistan's future and has reportedly played a role in facilitating discussions between the Afghan government and Taliban

representatives in Beijing (Zabihullah Mudabber, 2016). The inaugural China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue took place in Kabul in February 2015, aiming to foster practical cooperation projects that enhance bilateral relations and collaboration between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Report by Safer World, 2015). President Xi Jinping emphasized a broader role for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in ensuring Afghan security, underscoring the organization's responsibility to safeguard regional stability, enhance stability maintenance capabilities, bolster cooperation on law enforcement and security, and refine existing cooperation mechanisms (Shannon Tiezzi, 2014).

In 2015, China entered into two separate Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) aimed at providing training, equipment, and arms to bolster the capabilities of the Afghan Police and Afghan National Army in countering terrorist threats. While the specifics of these MOUs remain undisclosed, they are anticipated to encompass provisions for vehicle components, weaponry, ammunition, and scanning technology (Ahmad Bilal Khalil, 2016). On the economic front, China stands out as a major contributor and investor in Afghanistan (Stanzel). Its financial interests span infrastructure development, socio-economic upliftment initiatives, and strategic engagement with Afghanistan's abundant untapped mineral and energy resources (Raja Muhammad Khan, 2015). Between 2001 and 2013, China extended approximately US \$240 million in developmental aid to Afghanistan before committing a substantial US \$80 million for 2014 alone. Additionally, in May 2016, the two nations sealed a Technical Cooperation agreement worth US \$76 million during Abdullah Abdullah's visit to China. (Stanzel)

During Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao's November 2015 visit to Kabul, discussions prominently revolved around enhancing Afghanistan's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Li Yuanchao underscored China's commitment to supporting Afghanistan in infrastructure development and security, clarifying that China did not intend to fill the void left by the withdrawal of most foreign troops from Afghanistan in 2014. Subsequently, Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou's 2016 visit welcomed Afghanistan into the BRI. Shortly thereafter, a Chinese firm, Xinjiang Beixin Road and Bridge Group, secured a contract from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to rehabilitate a segment of the Kabul to Jalalabad road, albeit facing challenges due to deteriorating local security conditions. (Lars Erslev Andersen and Yang Jiang, 2018).

3.1 China's Approach to Afghanistan post- US withdrawal

Prior to assessing China's policy adjustments following the US withdrawal in August 2021, it is prudent to analyze the primary factors influencing Chinese policy towards Afghanistan. Three key factors merit specific attention:

- 1.** Security and stability concerns in Xinjiang and China's Western frontier region: China's proximity to Afghanistan's border raises apprehensions about potential spillover effects, such as terrorism and separatist activities, impacting its Xinjiang province and the broader western frontier. Maintaining security and stability in Afghanistan is crucial for China's domestic security strategy.
- 2.** Afghanistan's significance within China's overarching international strategy: Afghanistan holds strategic importance for China's broader international agenda. Beijing aims to preserve influence in Afghanistan to safeguard its geopolitical interests, advance regional connectivity initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and assert itself as a key player in regional dynamics.
- 3.** Dynamics of great power politics involving the United States: The evolving dynamics of great power rivalry, notably between China and the United States, significantly influence China's approach to Afghanistan. As the US reduces its military presence, China must navigate its relations with Kabul and Washington while safeguarding its strategic interests in the region. While the first two factors have exhibited a degree of consistency in shaping Chinese policy towards Afghanistan, the third factor has experienced notable changes, leading to shifts in China's approach.
- 4.** Additionally, while the economic potential of Afghanistan, particularly its natural resources, may factor into Chinese policy considerations, it holds less weight compared to the primary drivers and is not a primary determinant of China's policy decisions in the region. (Lars Erslev Andersen and Yang Jiang, 2018).

3.1.1 Economics

Before delving into the new challenges posed by the Taliban, it is essential to underscore the significance of economic considerations in shaping China's approach to Afghanistan. Afghanistan's abundant reservoirs of valuable natural resources, including oil, natural gas,

minerals such as iron ore, gold, copper, cobalt, lithium, and other raw materials, are estimated to be worth nearly \$1 trillion (Andersen & Jiang, 2018).

China's strategic interest in Afghanistan's resources aligns with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), providing an opportunity to diversify its resource imports away from distant, politically unstable, or less favorable nations. By engaging in trade with Afghanistan, China stands to not only stimulate economic development in its Western provinces but also extend benefits to neighboring countries such as Pakistan and the Central Asian republics (Andersen & Jiang, 2018).

The vast potential of Afghanistan's natural resources presents an attractive proposition for China, offering opportunities for resource acquisition and investment. Moreover, the development of infrastructure and trade routes through initiatives like the BRI could enhance connectivity and facilitate economic cooperation between China and Afghanistan, as well as the broader region.

Careful evaluation of the economic benefits associated with engaging in commerce with Afghanistan is paramount, considering the accompanying expenses and potential risks. Despite Afghanistan's \$20 billion economy, which heavily relies on opium production, narcotics trafficking, and international aid, trade between China and Afghanistan remains minimal, amounting to a mere \$550 million in 2020. Afghanistan's inadequate political stability, domestic security, and economic infrastructure present significant barriers to creating a conducive environment for Chinese investment.

The enduring conflicts, internal disputes, pervasive corruption, and dilapidated infrastructure, among other challenges, inevitably deter substantial Chinese investments in Afghanistan. China's two largest investments in the country, namely the \$3 billion investment by the Metallurgical Corporation of China in the Aynak copper field and the investment by the China National Petroleum Corporation in the Amu Darya oil project, have encountered formidable obstacles and are yet to operate efficiently or generate profits. For example, the Aynak copper field, situated in Logar, one of Afghanistan's most tumultuous districts, is currently deemed an unsuccessful venture (Dalrymple, 2014).

As a result of such experiences, Chinese corporations have become increasingly cautious about assuming risks in Afghanistan, mirroring the prudence exercised by their Western counterparts. This cautious approach underscores the complex and challenging nature of Afghanistan's economic landscape, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive assessment of economic factors when considering engagement with the country.

3.1.2 Grand strategy

Before President Xi Jinping assumed office in late 2012, Afghanistan held minimal strategic significance for China, except during periods of immediate security threats, such as the Soviet invasion in the 1980s or when it harbored Uighur insurgents in the late 1990s. However, since 2013, two significant developments have increased Afghanistan's importance in Chinese strategy, albeit with certain limitations.

Firstly, China's growing economic interests in the region, particularly its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have prompted increased attention towards Afghanistan's strategic location and potential as a trade route connecting China with Central and South Asia. Additionally, Afghanistan's abundant reserves of valuable natural resources, such as minerals and energy, have further piqued China's economic interests in the region.

Secondly, the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, including the resurgence of the Taliban and the threat of terrorism, has heightened China's concerns about instability along its western border. This has compelled China to adopt a more proactive approach towards Afghanistan, including diplomatic engagement and efforts to promote peace and stability in the region.

Despite these advancements, Afghanistan's significance in Chinese strategy remains constrained by various factors, including ongoing security challenges, political instability, and the complex dynamics of regional geopolitics. Nonetheless, China's evolving interest in Afghanistan underscores the country's increasing role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of Central and South Asia.

Firstly, there has been a noticeable shift towards prioritizing neighborhood diplomacy in Chinese foreign policy. This change was highlighted by China's inaugural conference on periphery diplomacy in October 2013, where President Xi emphasized the necessity of fostering

positive regional relationships for China's development. This marked a departure from the previous strategy of "keeping a low profile" to one of "striving for achievement," indicating a shift in foreign policy approach away from the era of Deng Xiaoping. (Zhao Huasheng, 2016)

Secondly, the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in September-October 2013 has further shaped China's global strategy. The BRI aims to enhance connectivity across Eurasia and beyond, encompassing a vast network of countries and economies. While some speculate that Afghanistan could serve as a central hub in this initiative, its actual significance remains uncertain. Despite suggestions of its potential as a link between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan is bypassed by key BRI corridors, casting doubt on its strategic value. (Godement, F. 2015)

Furthermore, despite calls for increased attention to Afghanistan due to China's efforts to integrate Xinjiang and counter Uighur separatism and terrorism, Afghanistan's centrality to the BRI remains disputed. Prominent Chinese analysts argue that Afghanistan lacks economic significance within the BRI framework. Proposals to establish strategic corridors linking China with Iran through Afghanistan are met with skepticism due to the substantial costs and risks involved. (Zhu Yongbiao, 2014)

In summary, Beijing predominantly views Afghanistan through a lens of geopolitical and security concerns, regarding it more as a problem to manage rather than an asset to leverage in its global strategy.

3.1.3 Terrorism

China's main and most important priority is security, including addressing Uighur terrorism and separatism. This is crucial for maintaining internal stability, particularly in Xinjiang province, and for addressing broader border security challenges in the vast Western frontier region. Xinjiang, the largest province in China in terms of land size, encompasses one-sixth of the country's total landmass. It is situated adjacent to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Chinese authorities are significantly concerned about the possibility of any of these neighbouring countries becoming a fertile environment for Uighur terrorism. (Maffei, Lammers, 2022).

Afghanistan poses a distinct danger since it has historically provided shelter to Uighur terrorists, particularly during the Taliban administration, when organisations like the ETIM were permitted to operate within the nation and participate in training camps associated with Al Qaeda. According to Chinese estimates, a significant number of Uighur militants had training in Afghanistan while the Taliban was in power from 1996 to 2001 (Johny, Stanly, 2022). After the US invasion, a significant number of people were compelled to leave Afghanistan and seek shelter in Pakistan.

However, John Fox and Daniel Korski in 202 alluded that due to the decrease in safe places in Pakistan, especially in the northern region, such as the Wakhan corridor, some individuals chose to return to Afghanistan. It was in this area that the leader of ETIM was suspected to be operating. Chinese interest in monitoring places such as Badakhshan and assisting in the creation of a mountain brigade for Afghan security forces has been motivated by this dynamic.

In the 2010s, Chinese authorities recorded multiple instances of Uighur attacks, occurring not only in Xinjiang but also in other parts of China. These included a suicide attack at Tiananmen Square in October 2013 and a large-scale attack at the Kunming Train Station in March 2014. From 2010 to 2014, acts of terrorism in Xinjiang or related areas, like as the Kunming attack, caused the fatalities of 468 people and inflicted injuries on 548 others. Oertel, Janka and Small, Andrew (2021).

China is apprehensive about the possible proliferation of Uighur terrorism and separatism from Afghanistan and Pakistan into Central Asia and the wider Middle East region, as this could disrupt its Western border. The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 heightened concerns, as the group openly stated its intention to extend its self-declared Caliphate into Xinjiang, thereby amplifying these apprehensions. Furthermore, certain individuals from Afghanistan who are affiliated with the Taliban have expressed support for the creation of a dictatorship in Afghanistan similar to that of ISIS. In February 2018, ISIS issued a direct threat to China by releasing a video in which Uighurs vowed to go back to their homeland and launch assaults. The possible alliance between Uighur individuals in Afghanistan and other factions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asian nations poses a substantial security apprehension for Beijing (Pandey, Shubhangi, 2020).

Chapter IV

4. Wakhan and its Strategic position

The Wakhan Corridor holds a unique geographical position as it intersects four countries: China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. Situated within the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan, this slender stretch of land extends southward, sharing a 300 km border with Pakistan. To the northeast and west, it borders Tajikistan for over 260 km, while a 74 km border separates it from China in the northwest direction. Serving as a vital connecting link between nations, the Wakhan Corridor features imposing mountain ranges that trace the ancient Silk Route.

Originally established in the 19th century, the Wakhan Corridor was strategically devised as a buffer zone between Britain and Russia amidst significant geopolitical maneuvers of the time. This geopolitical arrangement aimed to safeguard respective interests and prevent direct confrontation between the two colonial powers. Since its inception, the corridor has remained an integral part of Afghanistan, maintaining its role as a geopolitical entity within the region (Shahi, 2022).

The Wakhan Corridor stretches approximately 350 kilometers in length and varies in width from 16 to 64 kilometers. Functioning as a vital conduit between China and Afghanistan, it also serves as a natural boundary, delineating Tajikistan from Pakistan. The region is divided into two main parts: Lower Wakhan in the west and Upper Wakhan in the east.

Lower Wakhan, located in the western part of the corridor, encompasses the Panj River Valley. On the eastern side lies Upper Wakhan, which includes the Pamir River and the valleys of Wakhan along with their tributaries. As one traverses eastward through Upper Wakhan, they encounter the awe-inspiring spectacle of three immense mountain ranges converging at the Pamir Knot, colloquially known as Bam-e-Duniya (the Roof of the World) (Munir and Shafiq, 2018).

The Arabian Sea coasts serve as a vital connecting point of the Silk Route, allowing access to the Indian Ocean. Various external actions and events have shaped

the course of history, including the Great Game between Britain and Russia in 1838, the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and further invasions by the US, NATO, and coalition forces in Afghanistan since 2001. In reality, none of these advancements created a favourable atmosphere for regional connectivity. Additionally, the challenging topography and inadequate road network were contributing factors. Constructing new infrastructure will necessitate a substantial financial investment (Ahmed and Malik, 2021).

The Wakhan Corridor is poised to acquire significant geostrategic importance for Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan due to evolving regional alignments. The opening of the Wakhjir Pass from China is expected to enhance regional trade and foster closer relationships among the involved nations. However, India may harbor concerns regarding this development, as it establishes a direct route through the Wakhan Corridor connecting Afghanistan with China and Pakistan. This could potentially undermine India's efforts to connect Afghanistan to India through the Chabahar Port.

Given India's past opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it is likely to express apprehensions, particularly concerning the situation in Jammu and Kashmir. However, it is widely believed that India cannot afford to remain detached from the opportunities for regional connectivity presented by initiatives like the CPEC for an extended period. Ultimately, India may seek to join the CPEC, recognizing it as a significant initiative for the economic development of South Asia (Munir and Shafiq, 2018).

Leveraging its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), India can effectively harness the energy resources of Central Asia to propel its economic growth forward. The SCO membership mandates collaborative efforts among its members to achieve shared objectives of development, peace, and security (Umarov, 2017). Through active engagement within the SCO framework, India can strengthen its regional connectivity and leverage the economic opportunities arising from initiatives like the CPEC.

4.1 The Human Ecology of Wakhi People

The Wakhi and Kyrgyz people live in a place called the Wakhan Corridor, which is like a narrow strip of land. This area touches China on one side, Tajikistan on another, and Pakistan on the third side. These two groups of people have different ways of living based on what they do for a living (Karim-Aly S. Kassam, 2010).

The Wakhi folks are like settled farmers. They have homes and farms in the valleys, which are kind of like low areas between mountains. They grow things like wheat, barley, millet, peas, and even potatoes. But growing potatoes can be tough in the high villages like Sarhad-i-Broghil. Sometimes, the Wakhi families don't have enough grain to last the whole year. So, they have to choose whether to save the grain for the next planting season or eat it right away (Karim-Aly S. Kassam, 2010).

To add more variety to their diet, the people in the mountains often make soup using a plant called "chazg" in Wakhi and "thirich" in Shugni. But using this plant too much can make them tired, and it might not be good for them in the long run (Barfield 1981).

On the other hand, the Kyrgyz people are nomads, which means they don't have fixed homes. Instead, they move around with their animals. They have lots of sheep and goats because these animals are valuable for selling. They also have yaks for their own food and for carrying things, plus horses, donkeys, and camels for moving stuff around (Barfield 1981).

The Kyrgyz people are pretty clever about where they take their animals. In the spring and summer, they go to the high pastures up in the mountains. Then, in the winter, they head down to the lower areas for a little while. This way, they make sure their animals get the best food from different places (Altermatt, F. and D. Ebert, 2008).

The Wakhi people are more into farming and growing food. They make sure their animals have enough to eat during the winter, too. But in the summer, they use those high mountain areas as pastures for their animals. Since these two groups live close to each other, they need to agree on how to share these places and resources during different times of the year (Barfield, T. 1978).

To sum it up, the Wakhi and Kyrgyz people each have their own way of life in the Wakhan Corridor. The Wakhi folks farm and grow food, while the Kyrgyz people move around with their animals. But because their homes are close to each other, they have to work together and figure out how to share the land and resources depending on the season. The diversity in the Wakhan Corridor is quite intricate, not just in terms of the environment and how people make a living, but also in language and religion. The Wakhi people speak a language related to Iranian languages, while the Kyrgyz people speak a language related to Turkic languages. Additionally, the Kyrgyz follow Sunni Islam, while the Wakhi practice Shia Ismaili Islam (Karim-Aly S. Kassam, 2010).

The presence of both Kyrgyz and Wakhi in the Wakhan Corridor wasn't a random choice but resulted from historical events where different groups competed for control of important resources. Over time, the Shia Ismaili Wakhi Muslims have faced persecution from various Sunni groups that invaded and occupied the region. Similarly, the Kyrgyz experienced marginalization, first by the Mongols and more recently by the nation-state (Felmy, S., and H. Kreutzmann. 2004).

Historically, the Kyrgyz have had a flexible lifestyle, moving between nomadic and settled agriculture depending on political changes. The "Great Game" involving British and Russian colonial interests, followed by the influence of Western powers and the Soviet Bloc, led to closed borders that restricted movement and trade along the Silk Road (Holling, C. S. 1973).

Considering the backdrop of prolonged conflicts, the dominance of a narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam under the Taliban, limited arable land in mountainous areas, and differences in religion and ethnicity, one might expect this region to be prone to conflict. Surprisingly, it's the diversity itself that allows these two communities to maintain close relationships that ensure their mutual survival (Altermatt, F. and D. Ebert, 2008).

They support each other by helping tend to livestock and exchanging animals. For instance, some Wakhi provide their yaks and occasionally camels to the Kyrgyz for care during the winter season. These interactions build strong bonds between neighbors. Unlike what other studies have suggested, these findings indicate that

religious differences between the Wakhi and Kyrgyz don't lead to mutual disdain (Callaway, R., and L. Walker. 1997).

By specialising in their respective ecological responsibilities, these two Muslim cultures preserve resilience and promote the common welfare while still respecting their unique characteristics. When they are present in one another's domain, they exhibit hospitality, lodge in one other's residences, engage in trade of commodities, and procure provisions. The Kyrgyz and Wakhi individuals that frequently engage with each other have the ability to speak using each other's respective languages. They value the abundance of diversity in terms of religion, culture, and ecological functions.

According to Karim-Aly S. Kassam (2010), some Wakhi people have Kyrgyz names because they were born in close proximity to Kyrgyz pastures. In addition, both groups utilise religious sites, deriving inspiration and solace from their respective views of Islam. Although the Kyrgyz people adhere to Sunni Islam, they have historically endured persecution due to their non-conformity to orthodox doctrines. The Wakhi Ismailis, being Shia, have likewise faced persecution for their beliefs but prefer to reject extremist and literal interpretations of Islam. Both communities have utilised their natural surroundings and their religious and cultural variety to oppose external influences that seek to standardise them, instead depending on mutual dependency and largely harmonious coexistence (Barfield 1981).

4.2 History of Wakhan

The field of geopolitics has consistently been of great importance in world events (Saini and Dar, 2013). From the second half of the nineteenth century forward, Afghanistan displayed a growing receptiveness to other influences. Although it was a country without access to the sea, it had a crucial position at the intersection of various cultures. Simultaneously, it was also situated at a vital intersection of trade. The Wakhan Corridor played a significant role in connecting with its northern neighbours, especially the landlocked regions of Russia. As a result, the Russians developed a growing interest in these outlying territories. If there were any conflicts between the Chinese and the Afghans during this time, it may have been harmful to Russian interests, possibly resulting in their removal from the Hindukush region. The Russian foray into the Pamirs was spurred by this anxiety. The Russian military operation in the Pamirs region persisted for a

number of years, as the Afghan forces got support from the British. This situation evolved into a fierce competition between the Russian and British empires. An essential approach to alleviate the conflict between Britain and Russia was to gain control over the territory known as Afghan Turkistan or to form a neutral state between the British and Russian territories (Chahryar Adle, 2005). In the era of the Great Game, both empires competed for dominance over the area that extended across the Hindukush region. The present-day borders of Afghanistan are a direct result of the interventions by the British and Russian powers in the 19th century. The Great Game led to the political isolation of Afghanistan.

The Wakhan Corridor has played a pivotal role in Afghanistan's historical narrative, serving as a significant point of contention in conflicts between major empires. Dating back to 1838, it posed a formidable barrier separating Russia and British India. In 1872, an agreement was reached between these imperial powers, designating the Amu Darya River as the boundary between Afghanistan and Russia, with Badakhshan and Wakhan retained by Afghanistan under a subsequent 1873 agreement. This delineated the border along the Panj or Pamir Rivers, ensuring the Wakhan region remained within Afghanistan and preventing direct contact between the empires (Adle, 2005).

The demarcation of Afghanistan's north-western boundary commenced in 1885 with the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission, leading to a definitive boundary established in the northeast in 1891. The Pamir Accord of 1895 resolved the last territorial dispute with Russia, confirming a thin strip of land along the Wakhan region as a buffer zone (Mackerras and Clarke, 2009). This arrangement was reaffirmed by the Anglo-Russian treaty of the same year, solidifying Afghanistan's political frontiers accordingly (Shahrani, 1979).

By 1907, Russia acknowledged Afghanistan as beyond its sphere of influence, refraining from further expansion in Central Asia for decades (Adle, 2005). The Wakhan Corridor thus served as a political buffer between Russian Turkistan, British India, and China, as established by earlier agreements. The delineation of the Afghanistan-China border was formally established in 1963 by the 'Boundary Treaty' between the two nations, resolving territorial conflicts over the corridor located on the boundary between Afghanistan's Badakhshan region and China's Xinjiang Region (Saud and Ahmad, 2018).

Subsequently, the political geography of the region has seen minimal alterations, with the Wakhan Corridor retaining its significance amid changing geopolitical dynamics. The corridor's importance escalated notably following the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan in 1979, marking both continuity and change in recent years. Russia's establishment of a military outpost in the region underscored its strategic value. However, it was not until the US invasion of Afghanistan that the corridor's importance surged further, particularly during the subsequent American War on Terror in 2001 (Malik, 2014).

Recent events have amplified the strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor, notably in 2009 when the United States formally requested China's cooperation in providing access through the Wakhjir Pass, situated at the corridor's terminus. This request aimed to establish an alternative supply route for NATO forces engaged in operations in Afghanistan. Despite this appeal, China declined, citing its own strategic interests as the primary rationale for refusal. The corridor's strategic importance reverberates across neighbouring countries such as China, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics, influencing regional dynamics and alliances (Malik, 2014)..

The Wakhan Corridor occupies a distinctive geographical position, intersecting four countries: China, Pakistan-administered Kashmir (POK), Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. This strategic location imbues it with significant geo-economic, geopolitical, and geostrategic importance. Serving as a vital link between nations along the major mountain ranges of the Silk Route, the corridor facilitates direct commerce routes for China to access Afghanistan and for Pakistan to connect with Central Asia.

Central to the corridor's significance is the Wakhjir Pass, a prominent pass along the historic trade route, facilitating connections between China's Sinkiang (Xinjiang) province and Afghanistan's Wakhan valley. Establishing a border crossing between China and Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor would augment China's connectivity with Central Asia, Europe, and Gulf countries. Moreover, the corridor is intertwined with Hunza and Chitral in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (POK), with the Hindu Kush Mountains in Pakistan providing access through passes like Broghol, Isrhad, and Dilisang.

For Pakistan, the Wakhan Corridor presents substantial commercial advantages, particularly through its mountainous regions in the north, notably Chitral. These regions offer a

highly advantageous commercial route connecting Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian States via the corridor. Additionally, the geopolitical significance of Afghanistan would be significantly amplified by the establishment of the Wakhan Corridor, as it would serve as a supplementary route to neighboring countries, enhancing regional connectivity and trade prospects (Munir and Shafiq, 2018).

Moreover, the integration of the Wakhan Corridor with the Karakoram Highway will establish a direct connection to the Indian Ocean, significantly strengthening the strategic and cooperative alliance between Afghanistan and China. Historically, British viceroy Lord Curzon highlighted Gilgit as one of the northern entrances to India (Senge H. Sering, 2012). The territories of Kashmir under Pakistan's control lie in close proximity to the Wakhan region, especially in the northernmost part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region. Had these territories been under India's control, they could have potentially facilitated a direct link between India and the northern regions, offering India the most direct commercial route to access Afghanistan and Central Asia. Additionally, the Wakhan Corridor could have served as a viable link between India and the Caspian Sea Region, further augmenting regional connectivity and trade opportunities. The strategic significance of these connections underscores the potential for enhanced economic cooperation and geopolitical influence in the region.

4.2.1 Chinese Geopolitics interests and Future of the Wakhan Corridor:

Wakhan is an extremely remote region in Afghanistan. Currently, there is a solitary road within the entire corridor that connects it to Wakhjir Pass. Presently, the condition of that road is exceedingly poor. However, its future outlook is highly promising since it will facilitate regional connectivity with China. Tajikistan lies to the north of the road, while Pakistan lies to the south. Pakistan and Tajikistan both have a strong collaborative relationship with China. China can strengthen its influence in the region by exerting control over the Wakhan corridor. In addition to obtaining economic gains, it can strengthen its geopolitical and geostrategic advantages, which it can leverage to bolster its relationships with Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. China maintains ongoing diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. It is accompanied by financial aid and investment in the construction of infrastructure in Afghanistan.

During Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's diplomatic mission to China in October 2014, he proposed to President Xi Jinping the establishment of a vehicular interface along the shared border within the Wakhan Corridor, aiming to foster enhanced connectivity and bilateral trade relations. This proposal, strategically aligned with Afghanistan's participation in China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), heralded new prospects for economic collaboration and infrastructural development between the two nations. As part of the BRI framework, China is actively strategizing the construction of a thoroughfare that would traverse the challenging topography of the Wakhan Corridor, ultimately linking Afghanistan with the Karakoram Highway. However, the formidable natural landscape of the corridor, characterized by rugged and unforgiving mountainous terrain, poses formidable obstacles to infrastructure endeavors. Seasonal snowfall renders the corridor impassable for up to five months annually, significantly impeding logistical operations and trade flows. Nonetheless, despite these formidable challenges, the strategic proximity of the Wakhan borders to the bustling city of Kashgar offers promising prospects for cross-border economic ventures.

The construction of this road network is poised to integrate seamlessly with Kashgar in Xinjiang, offering substantial potential as a pivotal energy corridor in the foreseeable future. As posited by Akram Umarov (2017), it holds promise as an alternate conduit for transporting vital energy resources, including gas and oil, to China through pipelines. China, with ambitions to reassert its historical influence along the famed Silk Road, envisions leveraging this corridor to establish a revitalized Eurasian Land Bridge, effectively rekindling the ancient trade routes that once thrived in the region (R Muhammad Khan, 2015). By fostering transportation links between the Wakhan Corridor, the resource-rich Caspian Sea Region, and Central Asia, the initiative seeks to breathe new life into the historical Silk Road, offering expedient access to China. The establishment of trade routes via the Wakhan Corridor stands to substantially benefit the economic interests of all regional stakeholders, including China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, while also presenting opportunities for Tajikistan and other Central Asian nations to partake in the region's economic landscape. This enhanced connectivity may further amplify the geo-economic significance of the

Karakoram Highway and Pakistan's Gwadar Port, thereby heightening the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the broader area (Ahmed & Malik, 2021).

In recent years, the Wakhan Corridor has increasingly garnered global attention, prompting significant developments in infrastructure and connectivity initiatives. China's notable endeavor to construct a road on its side of the corridor, despite halting approximately 10 kilometers short of the Afghanistan border, reflects a tangible commitment to fostering regional connectivity and development. This initiative underscores China's strategic vision for enhancing connectivity across South and Central Asia, positioning the Wakhan Corridor as a pivotal link in the broader geopolitical landscape.

Furthermore, the transformative impact of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has reverberated throughout the region, extending its reach to bolster connectivity to Afghanistan via the Wakhan Corridor. As a flagship project under China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC aims to create a network of infrastructure, including roads, railways, and energy pipelines, to connect China's western regions with the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar in Pakistan. The integration of the Wakhan Corridor into the broader framework of CPEC highlights its strategic importance as a key node in facilitating trade, investment, and connectivity between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The convergence of initiatives aimed at enhancing connectivity through the Wakhan Corridor underscores its evolving strategic significance in regional affairs. As a narrow strip of land wedged between the Pamir Mountains and the Hindu Kush, the corridor serves as a vital transit route linking Central Asia, South Asia, and China. Its geographical location makes it a natural corridor for trade and transportation, with the potential to catalyze economic development and regional integration.

Moreover, the Wakhan Corridor holds geopolitical significance as a buffer zone between Afghanistan, China, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, serving as a gateway for strategic maneuvering and engagement in the region. The increasing focus on infrastructure development in the corridor reflects broader geopolitical dynamics, including competition for influence and resources among regional powers.

In conclusion, the growing attention and investment in the Wakhan Corridor underscore its emergence as a crucial nexus in the evolving geopolitical landscape of South and Central Asia. China's infrastructure projects, coupled with the expansion of initiatives like CPEC, highlight the corridor's potential to serve as a conduit for economic growth, connectivity, and regional cooperation. As efforts to enhance connectivity in the region continue to unfold, the Wakhan Corridor is poised to play an increasingly pivotal role in shaping the future trajectory of regional affairs.

Chapter V

5. Afghanistan and BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative, initiated by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, has emerged as a monumental strategic development endeavor, aiming to enhance connectivity, foster economic integration, and spearhead infrastructure development spanning from Asia to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. This ambitious initiative has garnered substantial attention, reflected in the increasing volume of research studies, policy analyses, and journalistic coverage delving into its political, security, and strategic ramifications over the years (Jacob L. Shapiro, 2017).

This chapter will illustrate the position of Afghanistan in the context of the Road and belt Initiatives. The Strategic location of Afghanistan has the dimension that can connect the Southeast Asia with Central Asia and Middle East. This location in the core of the Asia, hints China to prolong their project of connectivity and infrastructure.

Before we go to the depth of the study, we have to know the strategic position of Afghanistan.

5.1 Road and Belt initiative and possibilities of Afghanistan

The Afghan government has prioritized its involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), presenting it as a platform for regional collaboration that offers mutual benefits to both Afghanistan and China in sectors such as natural resource extraction, energy development, and financial services. This commitment was underscored during a diplomatic visit to China in May 2016, during which Afghanistan's Chief Executive, Abdullah Abdullah, and his Chinese counterpart formally signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to enhance cooperation within the BRI framework. This agreement symbolized China's recognition of Afghanistan as a strategic partner capable of advancing its broader regional connectivity goals through the BRI (Safi and Alizada, 2018).

Mohammad Humayon Qayoumi, who was the Chief Adviser on Infrastructure and Technology to President Ghani, highlighted Afghanistan's unique advantages

within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), concentrating on three primary areas: the movement of goods, energy systems, and digital connectivity. For goods movement, the development of the Five Nations Railway is a key component of Afghanistan's connectivity plan, aiming to link China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. In the energy domain, significant projects include the TAPI natural gas pipeline, CASA-1000 (Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission project), TAP 500-kV, and various initiatives within the Kabul-Kunar River Basin. These projects are crucial for strengthening Afghanistan's energy infrastructure and regional connectivity. In terms of digital connectivity, Qayoumi emphasized the Digital Silk Road, particularly the fiber optic connection established with China through Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. This crucial link, formalized by an agreement in August 2017, serves as a vital connectivity point between the two countries (Qayoumi, 2017).

To realize its ambitious goal of serving as a pivotal regional nexus for economic trade and infrastructure development, China has delineated plans to establish three distinct corridors: northern, central, and southern. Of particular significance is Afghanistan's strategic position, poised to seamlessly integrate with the proposed southern corridor, which spans from China and extends to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. To materialize this vision, collaborative initiatives such as the Five Nations Railway Project, slated to connect China to Afghanistan via the Sher Khan Port, Corridor 3 of the Afghanistan National Railway Plan encompassing the Kunduz–Torkham railway, and the Digital Silk Road have been set in motion. These joint ventures underscore a concerted effort by Afghanistan and China to seamlessly integrate Afghanistan into the southern corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Notably, these endeavors not only augment Afghanistan's connectivity with regional partners but also hold the promise of catalyzing its economic development and fostering stability across the broader region (Qayoumi, 2017). By participating in the BRI, Afghanistan aims to leverage its strategic geographic location to become a pivotal player in regional trade and infrastructure networks. This integration is expected to facilitate economic growth, improve transportation and energy infrastructure, and enhance digital connectivity, thereby positioning Afghanistan as a critical hub in the broader Eurasian economic landscape.

Significant progress in bolstering logistical and trade connectivity between China and Afghanistan was realized through the implementation of the Sino-Afghan Special Railway Transportation Project. This transformative initiative aimed to link China to Afghanistan via the Hairatan port, a critical gateway for trade and commerce. The project achieved a noteworthy milestone with the inaugural arrival of its maiden freight train from Nantong, China, in August 2016. This historic event marked a tangible step forward in advancing transportation infrastructure and strengthening trade relations between the two nations.

Furthermore, the resumption of Kabul–Urumqi flights in mid-2016 served as an additional testament to the concerted efforts aimed at fostering closer bilateral ties and enhancing transportation links. The reinstatement of air connectivity between the capitals of Afghanistan and China not only facilitated passenger travel but also provided a vital avenue for the transportation of goods and services, further bolstering economic cooperation.

These developments, as articulated in the Ministry of Finance's "Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1," reflect a multifaceted approach to advancing cooperation in the realm of transportation and trade. As Afghanistan continues to position itself as a pivotal player in regional connectivity initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, these infrastructure developments hold immense promise for fostering economic growth, stability, and prosperity in the region.

Under the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the two nations, both governments pledged to promote cooperation within the BRI framework, aiming to achieve common development goals and capitalize on the advantages derived from political relationships, economic synergies, and cultural interactions. This MOU serves as a cornerstone for collaborative efforts, fostering a comprehensive partnership aimed at regional stability and economic growth. To advance these goals, a trilateral economic cooperation framework between Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan was established, emphasizing the strategic importance of regional cooperation.

Moreover, Afghanistan's attainment of permanent membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in October 2017 is anticipated to further

promote joint infrastructure development efforts between China and Afghanistan within the BRI and the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) frameworks. This membership is expected to provide Afghanistan with greater access to financial resources and technical expertise, facilitating the implementation of critical infrastructure projects. These projects are crucial for integrating Afghanistan into regional economic networks, thereby enhancing its economic resilience and connectivity (Safi and Alizada, 2018).

Through these initiatives, Afghanistan aims to leverage its strategic geographic location to become a pivotal player in regional trade and infrastructure networks. This integration is expected to facilitate economic growth, improve transportation and energy infrastructure, and enhance digital connectivity, thereby positioning Afghanistan as a critical hub in the broader Eurasian economic landscape. The concerted efforts to build robust infrastructure and strengthen economic ties reflect a shared vision for prosperity and stability in the region.

The RECCA-VII documents present three primary recommendations for strengthening Sino-Afghan relations within the BRI:

1. Building on the success of the new Trans-Asian Railway project and identifying further opportunities for BRI-related regional economic collaboration, particularly in energy development, natural resource extraction, and financial services.
2. Enhancing the trilateral economic cooperation framework under the BRI, highlighting the significance of regional partnerships.
3. Increasing efforts to position Afghanistan as a regional trade and transit hub by expanding current trade and transport agreements to the north and south, aligning with the rapidly expanding BRI corridors (RECCA Annual Review, 2017).

Over all, the active participation of Afghanistan in the Belt and Road Initiative reflects its commitment to fostering regional cooperation and leveraging its strategic location for mutual benefits. The BRI presents a framework for expanding connectivity in various sectors, offering opportunities for economic growth and development for both Afghanistan and China. Through collaborative efforts and the implementation of

key projects, Afghanistan aims to enhance its role as a vital transit and trade hub within the broader BRI network, contributing to regional stability and prosperity. (Mohammad Humayon Qayoumi Interview with authors, 2017).

5.2.1 Five Nations Railway

The Five Countries Railway Initiative serves as a testament to Afghanistan's strategic significance within the region. Envisioned as a transcontinental corridor that traverses Afghanistan, this ambitious initiative possesses the capacity to transport a substantial annual cargo volume, estimated between 20 million to 30 million tons. In 2009, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) acknowledged the project's potential by funding a railway development study centered on northern Afghanistan. This study aimed to evaluate long-term traffic demands and the sector's capabilities, providing insights through technical, social, environmental, financial, and economic assessments (Ministry of Finance “Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1).

The five country Railway Project is designed to promote and strengthen regional commercial relationships while contributing to regional stability. Spanning an impressive 2,100 kilometers, this vast undertaking isn't solely about connecting Afghanistan to Europe via Iran. It extends its reach to link Afghanistan with China through Central Asia, thus acting as a conduit connecting China to Iran. This expansive corridor's path includes Kashgar in China, Kyrgyzstan, Sherkhan Port (situated at the Afghan-Tajik border), and traverses through six Afghan provinces (Kunduz, Balkh, Jawozjan, Faryab, Badghis, Herat) before entering Mashhad and Tehran in Iran (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

The projected internal rates of return from investments in the Five Nations Railway are expected to range from 14 percent to 25 percent, or potentially even higher, benefiting not only Afghanistan but the entire region. This could significantly boost trade and transit, leading to unprecedented trade volumes and creating opportunities for investments in related and secondary projects. Mohammad Yama Shams, the Director General and CEO of ARA, states that the additional projects along different parts of the railway route might provide many job chances for local Afghans, especially the youth (Yama Shams, interview 2017).

The ADB will provide partial funding for the Afghanistan section of this railway. This project will facilitate Afghanistan's access to seaports in Iran, such as Chabahar and Port Abbas, significantly improving its commerce and transportation capacities. Various multilateral financial institutions may provide additional financial support. In addition, the creation of railway communities along the route has the potential to enhance commercial prospects, promoting the development of small and medium-sized firms along its path (Yama Shams, interview 2017).

Iran and China are the primary connection points along this railway, however there are additional secondary connection locations to take into account. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are poised to be linked to this railway corridor, enhancing the economic and transportation networks of the area. The ambitious Five Countries Railway Project aims to provide a direct railway connection between China and the Commonwealth of Independent States, with Iran and Turkey serving as crucial transit countries, ultimately linking these regions to Europe. Afghanistan, as the primary hub of this vital Eurasian rail corridor, has the potential to acquire substantial economic, political, and social benefits. The benefits encompass expanded commerce prospects, heightened political sway in the area, and enhanced social infrastructure resulting from the railway project's expansion and connectivity (Financial Tribune, 2018). The railway line is in complete alignment with Afghanistan's connectivity objectives with China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In July 2017, a contractor was selected to conduct a feasibility study for the railway route in Afghanistan. The study was projected to be finished within one year. The surveys and plans for 654 kilometres of the railway, which constitute a substantial portion of the 1,148-kilometer track planned in Afghanistan, have already been finished. Out of the six necessary feasibility studies, five have been completed. The remaining studies and initial design are mostly centred on the Sheberghan–Maimana–Qala-e-Naw Kushk stretch (FinancialTribune2018).

Since January 2018, no portion of the Five Countries Railway Initiative has been built in Afghanistan. However, Shams, the Director General and CEO of ARA, has stated that there is ongoing improvement. He specifically stated that the third

segment of the Khawaf-Herat line, which covers a distance of 62 kilometres, will be finished after 90 percent of the superstructure is done. The upper construction is expected to be completed soon after. An official from Iranian Railways has confirmed that the initial segment of the route, spanning from Khawaf to Sangan, was operational by the conclusion of 2016. Nevertheless, the second segment, stretching up to the Afghan border city of Shamtigh, and the third part, linking Shamtigh to the Ghoryan region of Herat, are now being built and have not yet been completed (Railway Gazette, 2016).

In conclusion, the Five Countries Railway Initiative signifies the pivotal role of Afghanistan in regional transportation and trade. With its extensive reach and connections to major players in the region, this ambitious initiative has the potential to transform not only Afghanistan's economy but also the dynamics of regional commerce. While there are challenges ahead, the groundwork has been laid, and progress is gradually taking shape, paving the way for Afghanistan to assume its central position as a key player in transcontinental trade and connectivity.

5.2.2 Afghanistan Rail Network

The Afghanistan Rail Network serves as a fundamental element of the Afghan government's strategy to improve connectivity in the region. It represents a paramount infrastructure project, positioned to establish Afghanistan as a pivotal regional transportation hub. This ambitious plan, outlined in the Afghanistan National Railway Plan (ANRP), assumes a central role in addressing the transportation needs of various sectors within the country (Afghanistan National Railway Master Plan 2016).

The objectives of the Afghanistan Rail Network are multifold. First and foremost, it aims to facilitate the transportation of industrial and construction goods and commodities. Furthermore, it envisions the efficient transport of Afghanistan's mineral resources to regional ports. Additionally, the network intends to streamline the movement of agricultural products, fostering economic growth. Moreover, it strives to create an extensive transportation framework for goods and, concurrently, foster interconnectivity among provinces and economic centers within Afghanistan. Lastly,

the ANRP foresees providing sustainable passenger services, catering to long-term transportation needs (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

The Afghanistan Rail Network, encompassing approximately 5,550 kilometers, is designed to materialize the vision of a Trans-Asian Rail Network. This extensive rail network has been meticulously planned to align with regional and international transportation initiatives. It harmonizes with strategic corridors like the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, while routes designated by the organization of economic cooperation. All these endeavors converge in positioning Afghanistan as a pivotal transport and transit center (CNBC, 2016).

Ultimately, the Afghanistan Rail Network lays the foundation for substantial regional transportation projects. Prominent among these is the Five Nations Railway, a grand undertaking aimed at bolstering commerce and communication among participating countries. The Lapis Lazuli route, another significant initiative, gains momentum through this network, facilitating trade routes connecting Afghanistan to Europe via Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan Rail Corridor, with its strategic significance, seamlessly integrates into the ANRP, opening avenues for regional cooperation. Furthermore, the integration of Afghanistan with Road and Belt Initiative is expedited through this network, forging vital connectivity links. (Tolo News, 2017)

In an interview Mr Humayon Qayuomi, the Principal counselor on Technology and infrastructure to Ashraf Ghani, emphasized the crucial importance of the Afghanistan National Railway Plan (ANRP). He highlighted that the ANRP is vital for connecting Afghanistan with numerous countries, including Iran, Central Asian nations, Russia, China, Pakistan, and potentially India. (Interview with Mohammad Humayon Qayoumi, 2017)

The Afghanistan National Railway Plan delineates four major corridors, each serving unique regional objectives. The West–North–Northeast corridors, referred to herein as the North–West and North–East lines, prioritize expansion of an existing 75-kilometer line connecting Herat to Mazar-e-Sharif. This rail network serves as a vital link

between the Republics of Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

The North to South lines include the South to East and South to West corridors, linking the southern regions of Afghanistan with Pakistan to the East and Iran to the West. These lines are pivotal for cross-border trade and connectivity. The East–North lines contemplate connecting the southwestern, southern, northeastern, and eastern regions of Afghanistan with neighboring countries like the Commonwealth of Independent States, Iran, China, and Pakistan. These corridors hold strategic significance in fostering regional cooperation. The Central Corridor, while a potential future route, is not yet defined in this study. It is envisioned to pass through central Afghanistan, connecting Herat to Bameiyan and subsequently linking the Heerat–Khawaf line with the Bameiyan–Torkhaam line (Railway Gazette 2016).

Afghanistan Rail Network’s impact on regional dynamics cannot be overstated. It offers the prospect of improved transportation efficiency, reduced trade costs, and heightened economic growth. The expansion of regional trade and cooperation is imminent, bolstered by the network’s potential to foster closer ties between Afghanistan and its neighboring nations (ITV Afghanistan, 2017).

Overall, the Afghanistan Rail Network, as outlined in the ANRP, is pivotal for the country’s economic development and regional integration. Its multifaceted objectives encompass facilitating the transport of various goods, connecting provinces, and providing passenger services. This expansive rail network aligns with regional and international transportation initiatives, positioning Afghanistan as a central hub. It serves as the linchpin for regional projects like the Five Countries Railway, the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan Rail Corridor, the Lapis Lazuli route, and integration with the Belt and Road Initiative. The network’s four main corridors address unique regional connectivity needs, promising enhanced trade, cooperation, and economic growth (Afghanistan National Railway Master Plan 2016).

5.2.3 North–East and North–West lines

The North to West and North to East segments together form a continuous railroad track. The North to East portion is anticipated that become operational by 2030, while the North to West section is scheduled to be in operation by 2020. This railway network includes various routes:

1. Konduz–Shirkhan Port, covering a distance of 87 kilometers.
2. Haeratan to Mazar e Sharif, spanning 75 kilometers.
3. Shabarghan to Andkhoey, extending over 100 kilometers.
4. Kashk to Torghundai, with a length of 47 kilometers.
5. The segments of third and fourth of the Khawaf–Herat railroad (Herat to Ghoryan to Chah-e-sorkh), totaling 49 kilometers.
6. Kunduz–Takhar–Badakhsan–Wakhan, encompassing an extensive 700 kilometers.

These segments collectively contribute to the creation of an extensive railway network in Afghanistan (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

5.2.4 North–East section

The North–East section is planned to cover a distance of 700 km, extending from Faizabad city in Badakhsan to Kunduz in, a and extending further to Qalae-e-Mafushaad in Badakhshan's Waakhan District. The North–East line, however, is a prospective future project. Despite being one of the initial corridors in the master plan, the development of the Waakhan Corridor is not currently financially viable for Afghanistan. The Five Countries Railway Initiative has already enabled the transport of goods between Kashgar, China, and Sherkhan Port in Kunduz Province, Afghanistan. Due to economic considerations, constructing the Wakhan Corridor in the near future is considered both inefficient and ineffective for Afghanistan.

President Ghani's focus was not on establishing a direct railway connection between Afghanistan and China. Alternately, the focus is on examining the potential of building a road to Badakhshan's Ishkashim District, which could eventually be extended to the

Wakhan District. Currently, the absence of essential transportation infrastructure isolates the Wakhan District from the remainder of the province and the country. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

Shams proposes that the National Civil Optical Fiber Cable Ring Network, a component of the Technological Silk Road initiative, presents the most appropriate platform for linking Afghanistan with China through their shared border. Initially, connectivity will focus on developing access routes via road construction, with the prospect of establishing a railway line in the distant future. While extending connectivity to the Wakhan District is an option, it is not an immediate priority and may be achieved within the next 10 to 20 years. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

5.2.5 North–West section

The North–West railway line covers a distance of about 450 kilometers, running from Herat through Qalaa-e-Naaw, Baadghis, Maeimana, Faryaab, Sheberghaan, Jaowzjan, Mazaar e Sharif, Balkh, and concluding at Sher Khan Port in Konduz Province. The Afghan Previous Afghan Administration has preference the development of North–West section over the North–East section, considering factors like the presence of existing economic and physical feasibility, railroad tracks, and the devotion of neighboring nations. This segment is anticipated to promote the Five Nations Trade and Transport Corridor, which has the potential to boost trade and connectivity among the participating nations. The North–West section enjoys strong institutional support from all involved countries, aiming to revive the historical Silk Road legacy (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

The North–West section will establish a connection between Sher Khan Port and Herat, facilitating the linkage of Tajikistan with Afghanistan and further connecting Afghanistan to Iran and eventually Europe. Additionally, the connectivity with Turkmenistan through Aqina, located near the Afghan-Turkmenistan border, through Turkmenistan to Afghanistan to Tajikistan railroad track, can provide Afghanistan with another route to Europe via the Caucasus.

The North to West division, also referred to as Corridor 1, is structured into two phases. Phase 1 includes the Sher Khan Port to Kunduz–Mazaar e Sharif–Andkhoey route, while Phase 2 encompasses the Andkhoey–Maeimana–Badghes–Herat–Shamtigh route, connecting to the Iran-Afghanistan border (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

5.2.6 Sherkhan Port–Kunduz–Mazar-e-Sharif–Andkhoy

Afghanistan's unique geography is characterized by its borders with six neighboring countries and the presence of river ports, providing it with a strategic advantage. This presents a valuable opportunity for not only Afghanistan's own economic development but also for its neighboring nations. Establishing ground connectivity between these countries would necessitate operating through Afghanistan. Accordingly, the investment in transportation infrastructure in Afghanistan is imperative for both its economy and its neighboring countries. (Ministry of Finance, Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1).

This initiative is a pivotal component of the Transport Strategy and Action Plan devised within the framework of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program. As trade volumes continue to surge between Afghanistan and its northern counterparts, with a projected annual growth rate of approximately 10 percent, the proposed construction of a new railway track stretching from Sher Khan Port to Andkhoey, spanning approximately 405 kilometers, holds immense potential. This strategic infrastructure project is poised to benefit key urban centers such as Sheberghaan, Mazaar e Sharif, and Kunduz, facilitating enhanced connectivity and trade opportunities.

Moreover, the envisioned railway line is expected to serve as a vital link to the abundant oil reserves of the Amu Darya Basin and the natural gas fields in the region. By providing a reliable and efficient transportation route for the extraction and distribution of these valuable energy resources, the railway project stands to catalyze economic development and prosperity in Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region. This assessment is outlined in detail within the Ministry of Finance's Concept

Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1, underscoring the strategic importance and potential benefits of this transformative infrastructure initiative

The Andkhoey–Konduz–Sher Khan Port railway will interlink with the extant rail networks of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This conduit will afford Tajikistan and Turkmenistan a more unmediated passage for the interchange of resources, particularly energy commodities, circumventing the economically unfeasible transit through Uzbekistan. Moreover, upon the integration of this railway corridor with other routes delineated in the overarching master plan, it will carve out intrinsic pathways within Afghanistan for the conveyance of goods and resources between Central Asian nations and South Asia. This development will markedly augment China's connectivity with Afghanistan, engendering substantial ramifications (Ministry of Finance, Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) endeavors pursued by the Afghan administration align closely with its comprehensive railway framework, aimed at facilitating both the BRI and the Afghanistan National Railway Plan (ANRP). This integrated approach emphasizes the establishment of two pivotal points of connectivity between China and Afghanistan along this corridor: Hairatan port and Sher Khan Port.

Hairatan port, established before the ANRP, serves as a testament to Afghanistan's ambition to reduce reliance on Pakistan's Gwadar port, as highlighted by Amanullah Ghalib, Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Energy and Water, in an interview with the authors in 2017. This strategic initiative underscores Afghanistan's strategic vision to diversify its trade routes and enhance its economic connectivity with regional partners, aligning with the broader objectives of the BRI and the ANRP.

The inaugural freight train transporting containers from eastern China, traversing Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, arrived at Hairatan in Afghanistan in September 2016, culminating a 7,300 km expedition in a mere 14 days. This represents a notable enhancement compared to the two to three months required for maritime transit. While the rail from China was initially expected to carry Afghan products like marble, saffron, dried fruits, and carpets back to China, it returned empty due to Uzbekistan's

concerns about cargo arriving from Afghanistan via the railway (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

The preliminary scheme to institute a weekly rail service between China and Afghanistan was impeded as Chinese enterprises involved cited a dearth of transit amenities and infrastructure for cargo handling. The ratification of a transit and trade accord with Uzbekistan at the close of 2017 was anticipated to ameliorate these impediments and facilitate exports to China via the rail corridor (Railway Gazette, 2017). Nevertheless, obstacles persisted, including the requisite for a customs to customs accord with China and the necessity for synchronization with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to permit the re-exportation of Afghan commodities to China via Hairataan. These complexities engendered postponements in the commencement of freight train operations. (Experts, Uzbekistan, interview by authors, December 11, 2016).

A Bilateral partnership accord between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, ratified in December 2017, alongside ancillary accords, endeavored to ameliorate these impediments. Through this pact, Afghanistan aspired to streamline the transit of goods via Uzbekistan to China, Russia, and potentially Europe. The scheme to initiate a weekly rail service by the end of 2016 was deferred owing to inadequate traffic volumes, further aggravated by the 2017 blockade (Afghan Customs Department, 2017).

As of 2017, the pre-feasibility and feasibility analyses for this corridor had been completed, marking a significant step forward in the project's progression. Plans for the design and construction phase were in motion, signaling a commitment towards the realization of the railway extension. However, despite these advancements, there was a notable absence of a concrete commencement date for construction. Moreover, the financing for the project was still under negotiation with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), introducing uncertainty regarding the timely availability of funds necessary for project execution. This information was reported in a 1TV Afghanistan Report in 2017.

5.2.7 Shabarghan–Maimona to Qalaa e Naw–Kushk (Herat)

Trade is burgeoning between Afghanistan and its neighboring nations, boasting an annual growth rate exceeding 10 percent and a combined volume of 2 million tonnes. In light of this, the Afghan government has devised an ambitious railway initiative aimed at enhancing connectivity within its urban centers and commercial hubs, as well as with neighboring countries. This expansive plan encompasses a 472-kilometer corridor extending from Shabarghan to Maimona, Qala-e-Naw, and ultimately to Kushk in Herat.

The primary objectives of this corridor are multifaceted. Firstly, it aims to enhance transportation links among Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Secondly, plans are underway to extend the Iranian railway line to reach Herat, thereby establishing a new rail route connecting northern Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Port Abbas on the Persian Gulf. This strategic endeavor, as highlighted by Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada in their 2018 article, holds immense potential to catalyze economic growth and regional integration while bolstering Afghanistan's position as a key transit hub in the broader Eurasian landscape.

Currently, the transportation of goods by train from the Uzbekistan border to Afghanistan is considered secure and holds promise for cost efficiency. Hairatan serves as Afghanistan's primary dry and river port, overseeing approximately 50% of the nation's total imports. However, challenges persist with the process of unloading and transferring cargo onto vehicles at the border. This method is not only costly and slow but also imposes limitations on the volume of traffic that can be accommodated.

The Afghan government is steadfast in its commitment to addressing this bottleneck by embarking on the construction of a railway track, as outlined in the Ministry of Finance's "Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1." By establishing a railway connection, Afghanistan aims to streamline the transportation of goods, enhance efficiency, and expand the capacity for handling imports. This strategic infrastructure project holds the potential to unlock new avenues for economic growth and development, facilitating smoother trade flows and reducing logistical hurdles for businesses operating in the region.

The implementation of the railway track aligns with Afghanistan's broader objectives of modernizing its transportation infrastructure and leveraging its geographical location as a gateway for regional trade and connectivity. As the government endeavors to overcome existing challenges and unlock the full potential of its transportation network, the construction of the railway track represents a pivotal step towards realizing Afghanistan's vision of becoming a hub for commerce and economic activity in the heart of Asia.

The railway line linking Sher Khan Port to Herat (Shabarghan-Kushk Herat) is poised to significantly enhance trade between Central Asia and South Asia, as well as facilitate commerce with the Caucasus and the Middle East. At the core of this initiative is the objective to streamline the transportation of substantial volumes of enduring commodities, spanning a diverse range including cotton, cement, bitumen, agricultural and construction machinery, oil, fuel, processed foods, and consumer products.

Of particular significance is the anticipated enhancement in the efficiency of oil and fuel transportation, with the establishment of a rail terminus adjacent to Mazar town. This strategic positioning will obviate the need for oil-carrying vehicles to traverse the 56 kilometers to Hairatan for loading or unloading purposes. Instead, these vehicles will be rerouted to the loading and unloading facility near Mazar town, thereby reducing transit distances by 37 kilometers in one direction. This measure is expected to yield substantial energy savings, as articulated in the Ministry of Finance's "Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1."

The international commerce division of the Afghan Ministry of Industry and Commerce has brought to light a concerning trend: due to the porous nature of the border with Uzbekistan and inefficient trade facilitation procedures, only half of the actual truck traffic crossing the border is officially documented. Presently, a staggering 1,073 trucks are engaged in the daily transportation of goods between the two nations. However, as outlined in the Ministry of Finance's "Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1," there is optimism regarding the transition of a substantial portion of trucking operations to rail transportation. Projections indicate that such a

shift could result in a significant reduction of transportation expenses, estimated at 50%. Remarkably, it is anticipated that as much as 97% of trucks could be redirected to railway operations, signaling a potential transformation in the logistics landscape.

This shift towards rail transportation aligns with Afghanistan's broader objectives of enhancing trade facilitation, improving efficiency, and reducing logistical challenges associated with cross-border trade. By leveraging railway infrastructure, Afghanistan aims to streamline the movement of goods, reduce transit times, and lower transportation costs for businesses engaged in international commerce. Moreover, the transition to rail transportation holds the potential to enhance the competitiveness of Afghan goods in regional and global markets, thereby stimulating economic growth and fostering greater integration into the global economy.

As the Afghan government moves forward with the implementation of the railway project, it underscores a commitment to modernizing its transportation infrastructure and unlocking the full potential of its trade corridors. By investing in railway connectivity, Afghanistan seeks to capitalize on its strategic location as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, positioning itself as a key player in regional trade and economic cooperation. Ultimately, the transition to rail transportation is expected to yield long-term benefits for Afghanistan's economy, facilitating sustainable development and prosperity for its people

By 2017, the pre-feasibility assessment for this corridor has been concluded, with funding allocated by the Afghan government for the feasibility study. Nevertheless, the meticulous planning and construction of the corridor are still in the nascent stages, and the procurement of funds for its realization remains pending (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

5.2.8 Torghundi–Herat Airport

Torghundi serves as a critical shared border entry point between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, complementing the Aqina border crossing located in Faryab Province. In close proximity to Torghundi lies Serhketabat, situated within

Turkmenistan, connected to Torghundi via both roadway and railway infrastructure, as highlighted by Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada in 2018.

On the Afghan side, a technical analysis conducted by Rail Canada in 2016 explored the feasibility of a 173-kilometer railway link connecting Torghundi to Herat Airport. The potential realization of this railway connection is expected to generate an estimated mean revenue of \$1.78 million in the inaugural year of operations through the transportation of freight, as reported by the Pajhwak Afghan News Agency in 2016.

The railway infrastructure serves as an indispensable artery within the Lapis Lazuli route, a pivotal corridor poised to connect Afghanistan to Europe via Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Presently, Torghundi manages approximately 730,000 tonnes of inbound shipments annually and facilitates the transport of 12,000 tonnes of outbound shipments yearly, as documented by the Ministry of Finance. Notably, the existing freight flow stands at an impressive scale of roughly 1 million tonnes per annum. Of this, the majority, around 900,000 tonnes, traverses from Torghundi to Herat, with the remaining 100,000 tonnes making the return journey from Herat to Torghundi. These figures underscore the substantial volume of cargo currently being transported through this route.

Forecasts suggest that the entirety of this traffic will predominantly comprise containerized cargo, necessitating specialized wagons capable of accommodating double-stack containers. However, it's important to note an inherent directional imbalance in this flow of goods. While outbound shipments from Torghundi to Herat are robust, the return journey often involves the transportation of empty containers and rail wagons. This asymmetry in traffic patterns warrants consideration in the planning and operational phases of the railway project, as outlined in the Ministry of Finance's "Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 1."

Ultimately, this railway network will intersect with the Khawaf–Herat line. By 2017, the preliminary and comprehensive examinations for this corridor have been finalized, and the meticulous blueprinting and construction preparation phases are in

progress, with financing secured from the Afghan government. Constituting a constituent of the Five Nations Railway initiative, this route will forge a linkage from Iran to Kashghar, China, transiting through Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

5.2.9 Section four Khawaf to Herat

In 2006, the Afghan and Iranian administrations reached a mutual accord on a railroad corridor scheme extending from Khawaf–Sangaan–Shamatigh–Rozenak to the Airport of Herat, incorporating linkages to industrial zones (Pajhwak Afghan News 2016).

According to the Memorandum of Understanding, the 191-kilometer Khawaf–Heraat railroad track was delineated to be constructed in 4 segments. The first and second segments, encompassing 76.8 kilometers, are situated within Iran, stretching from Khawaf to Shamatigh, located at the Iran-Afghanistan frontier in Heraat. The segments number 4 and 3, spanning 114 kilometers, lie within Afghanistan, extending from Shamatigh to Rozenak to the city of Herat, and this section is presently being constructed. Iran concluded the study of feasibility for this corridor in 2006. (Herat-Torghundi Railroad, Technical Study, 2016)

The 2006 Memorandum of Understanding initially prioritized the construction of three segments of the principal corridor, financed by the Iranian government. The inaugural segment of the route is operational, whereas the second and third segments remain incomplete. A fourth segment, connecting Rozenak to Herat city, was conceived independently of the MOU. Nonetheless, upon the formulation of the Herat master plan and the Afghan National Railway Plan (ANRP), the designated route for the fourth segment diverged from the MOU stipulations, necessitating revisions in concert with the Afghan government. (REECA Annual Review, 2017).

The Afghan administration is presently reassessing its blueprint for the fourth segment, with a resolute commitment to expedite its completion within the ensuing one to three years, as part of the Five Nations Railway initiative. Italy will allocate \$65 million, while the Afghan government will contribute \$6 million towards its

construction. These four segments are also pivotal to the CAREC corridor and will facilitate a direct railway linkage between Afghanistan and Iran (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018). In July 2017, Iran and Afghanistan formalized another Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to further develop their rail networks, underscoring the urgency to expedite the line's completion and enhancing bilateral collaboration. Initially, the railway will facilitate freight transit, with the potential to incorporate passenger services in the future. (Mehr News Agency, 2017).

The Director of Managing Railways in Iran Saeid Mohammadzadah accentuated the strategic import of this corridor for Iran, emphasizing that the accomplishment of the Khawaf–Herat line represents merely one component of a more expansive initiative. He referenced the five countries Railroad track, declaring, with the establishment of the East to West corridor, Iranian railways will possess the capacity to convey over Hundred million tons of goods through the country within the next decade (Mehr News Agency, 2017).

This corridor is projected to markedly diminish import expenses for Afghanistan, potentially by up to 40%, while augmenting the nation's access to Iranian ports such as Chabahar and Bandar Abbas, thereby offering broadened trade prospects and route diversification. It will also expedite India's exports to Afghanistan, enabling smoother access via the Bandar Abbas and Chabahaar ports. Indian vessels can offload cargo at these ports, which will then be transported to Khawaf via the Bandar Abas to Bafgh railway line and subsequently conveyed to Afghanistan for debarkation in Herat (Ministry of Finance).

Moreover, given Herat's prolific natural resources, including the Shaeda copper deposit, Chisht gold deposits, Al abaster quarry, Sabzaak coalfield, iron ore deposits, and Chesht-e-Sharif marble, the establishment of this railway line will be vital for the efficacious conveyance of these resources to Iranian ports. According to records from the Afghan Ministry of Finance, the Khawaf–Herat railway initiative was originally scheduled for completion in 2010, yet certain segments of the project remain incomplete (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

5.3 North to South lines

This pathway will forge a linkage between Iran and southern Afghanistan and Pakistan, akin to its already operational railway freight corridors with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The route is segmented into three parts. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2017) The initial segment will extend from the Airport of Herat to Farrah Province, the second will encompass the pathway from Farrah, Ameraan (Zaranj), Zaranj District of Nimroz Province, Lashkargah of Helmand Province to Bahram Chah and the third will traverse from Spin Boldak District of Kandahar Province to Chamen (the border of Pakistan). The Heraat–Dalaram–Zarenj segment is scheduled for completion by 2025, while the Dilaram–Bahram Chah section is targeted for completion by 2030 (Afghanistan Railway Authority). This corridor will establish a rail link between Afghan and Pakistani nation inaugurally. To the Pakistani flank, there already exists a 128-kilometer railroad track between Quitta and Chaman, ensuring the feasibility of the rail connection. Extending the Chamen and Spen Boldek Route into Qandahar will create opportunities for transit routes involving SAARC Organization. Although this part of the corridor was expected to complete in 2020, it has not yet been finalized (Ministry of Finance).

5.3.1 West to South: Corridor 2A: Airport of Herat –Shendand–Farrah

The Herat Airport–Shendand–Farrah pathway, extending over 216 kilometers, constitutes an integral segment of the broader Herat–Kabul railway alignment. Presently, the preliminary feasibility examination for this pathway has been concluded, and the Afghan government is poised to finance the comprehensive feasibility analysis, initially slated for 2017. This route will directly link Herat Airport to Farrah Province in the south. However, construction on this specific segment of the railway has yet to commence (Afghanistan Railway Authority Concept Note on the Afghanistan Railway Project Corridor 2).

5.3.2 Farrah–Zarenj–Ameran–Lashkarga–Behram Chah

This proposed railway line from Farrah to Behram Chah covers a substantial distance of 675 kilometers, starting in Farah, passing through Zarenj, Ameran,

Lashkarga, and ending at Bahram Chah (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018). In the year 2017, the Afghan administration had appropriated resources for this endeavor that was anticipating proposals. This pathway holds significant importance as it aims to create a crucial railway link between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the potential for future connectivity to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Rahimullah Yusufzai, 2017). The section of the railway from Spen Boldak to Cheman in Pakistan, over 11 kilometers, is constructed by the government of Pakistan, while the Afghan government is responsible for constructing the 95-kilometer portion from Kandahar to Spin Boldak (Rahimullah Yusufzai, 2017).

In the foreseeable future, the Farrah-Zeranj-Ameran segment of the railway could offer Afghanistan an additional link to the Chabahar port in Iran through the Iranian railway line in Zabul city, situated within Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province (Muhammad D. Fazil, 2017). An agreement for this route and other initiatives near the Pakistan border was formalized during the 10th session of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Economic Commission in November 2015. During this session, a Pakistani delegate suggested that if the Afghan government conducted the initial feasibility study for the Bahram Chah-Lashkargah railway route and took tangible steps towards its construction, Pakistan would establish a connection between Gwadar and Bahraam Cheh. However, progress on these endeavors has been uncertain due to frequent postponements of the Joint Economic Commission meetings. The 11th session, initially scheduled for September 2017, was canceled due to deteriorating diplomatic relations and a decline in bilateral trade (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

The Afghan government's exploration of alternative commercial routes, including the one through Chabahar, has resulted in a reduction in trade with Pakistan. Trade between the two nations decreased from \$2.4 billion in 2010-2011 to \$1.43 billion in 2015-2016. The potential impact of the Farah-Iranian border railway line on the already strained business relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan remains unclear. Nevertheless, this route holds significant importance in the development of regional and global transportation systems, including the Transport Corridor Europe-

Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and the Lapis Lazuli routes (Yama Shams Interview, 2018).

Gwadar, situated in Pakistan, emerges as the proximal warm-water seaport to Afghanistan, strategically nestled on the Arabian Sea. It enjoys adjacency to Karachi, the Iranian border, and the Chabahar port. Positioned in close proximity to pivotal oil transportation routes in the Gulf of Persia, Gwadar finds itself encompassed by a region boasting two-thirds of the globe's confirmed oil reserves. The port commenced operational activities in 2008 and underwent official transfer to the China Overseas Ports Holding Company Ltd in 2013, currently overseeing all operational facets. China's substantial investments in augmenting the Gwadar port, as an integral component of its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative, encompass the establishment of specialized industrial zones housing manufacturing facilities, logistics centers, warehouses, and exhibition venues. This expansion has prompted Central Asian countries to plan the construction of railway lines from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan, eventually connecting to China and Pakistan's coastline. Such endeavors will necessitate the construction of a railway junction in Afghanistan (Gwadar Port Handed Over to China, 2017).

The proposed railway extension from Bahram Cheh to Lashkarga presents a promising prospect for fostering substantial economic expansion and bolstering railway infrastructure within Afghanistan. This initiative is poised to optimize the movement of commodities between Central Asia and Pakistan, primarily facilitated through Farrah Province and extending up to Torghundie in Herat Province, which acts as a pivotal border hub between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Additionally, there's potential for establishing a linkage to Herat, thereby tapping into the North-West-North-North-East Corridor, traversing provinces like Badghes, Faryaab, Jawzjan, Mazar e Sharif, Konduz, and interfacing with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Moreover, this expansion could fortify the connection between Qandahar and Spen Boldak, fostering ties with Pakistan, while also establishing a vital link with Kabul through Zabul, Ghazni, and Wardak provinces. Leveraging existing road

infrastructure for a considerable portion of its trajectory, this corridor offers avenues for seamless integration with neighboring nations. Herat, in particular, is poised to emerge as a key facilitator for fostering relations with Iran and northern Turkmenistan, with prospects for forging a new connection with northern Uzbekistan.

Furthermore, there's a proposition for a novel railway passage extending from Kabul towards the east, intersecting with an existing railway link from Kandahar to Pakistan. The prioritization of these railway expansions will hinge upon the transportation requisites for both cargo and passengers, as well as the diplomatic dynamics with neighboring states. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada)

5.3.3 Lashkarga–Bahram Cha–Kandahar–Spen Boldak -Chaman

The Lashkarga–Bahram Chah–Qandahar–Spen Boldak–Chaman Pathway, covering a distance of 241 kilometers, had its budget allocated by the Afghan government in 2017, and they were awaiting bids for its construction (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018). This Pathway epitomizes one of the inaugural initiatives targeted at forging a railway connection between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with prospects for eventual integration into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. (Interview of Yama Shams, the Director of Afghanistan Rail Authority, 2017). Pakistan is responsible for developing the corresponding railway section from Spen Boldak to Chaman, spanning 11 kilometers, while the Afghan government is constructing the 95-kilometer segment from Kandahar to Spin Boldak (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

5.4 East–North lines

The CAREC Vision blueprint incorporates this passage as an integral component of its expansive network, encompassing diverse pathways such as the Lapis Lazuli route, CAREC Corridor 3 (interlinking Russia with the Middle East and South Asia via Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), CAREC Corridor 5 (bridging East Asia with the Arabian Sea via Central Asia), and CAREC Corridor 6 (establishing connections between Europe and ports along the

Arabian Sea in Karachi, Gwadar, and Bandar Abas, Iran). (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018)

A preliminary pre-feasibility analysis for this passageway has been concluded, with the comprehensive feasibility examination still pending. The projected timeline for the culmination of this corridor is set for 2025. (Yama Shams Interview, 2018). The Afghanistan Railway Authority (ARA) proposal for CAREC Corridor 3 delineates myriad benefits. Initially, it will inaugurate a high-throughput transport pathway, augmenting the nation's economic and societal advancement. Additionally, it will engender revenue-generating prospects for indigenous handicraft industries and modest to moderate-sized businesses in regions traversed by the corridor, comprising Konduz, Samangan, Parwan, Nangarhaar, Noristan, Konar, Balkh, and Maidan Wardak (Afghanistan Railway Authority).

This passageway bears substantial significance for China as it has the capacity to potentially intersect with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and streamline the exportation of copper from the Aynak mine, which has been under the stewardship of two Chinese state-owned enterprises since 2008. (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, 2013). Furthermore, it will catalyze the advancement of Afghanistan's mineral assets, including the Aynak copper deposit, which is in close proximity (41 km) to the Torkham–Kabul–Hairatan railway route. This linkage is an integral component of the Afghanistan Resource Corridors Project, a prominent undertaking of the Afghan administration. (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, 2013). Moreover, the Haji gah iron ore deposit in Bamyaa Province harbors the potential to reap rewards from this expansion of resources. The Afghan administration endeavors to bolster the mining industry by enhancing both tangible infrastructure such as roads, railways, and power facilities, and the intangible infrastructure requisite for resource extraction and conveyance to global markets. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018).

Furthermore, it will expedite the establishment of a meridian-oriented transport conduit traversing Afghanistan, enabling seamless commerce with adjacent states. Additionally, it will bolster interconnection with the Commonwealth of Independent States and SAARC nations, owing to planned desiccated ports along the corridor,

encompassing those in Torkham, Khost, and the transit nexus in Jalalabad (Afghanistan Railway Authority).

Finally, it will engender myriad employment prospects within Afghanistan, particularly for the younger demographic. The advancement of resource conveyance along the railway passage will precipitate both direct and indirect job opportunities and income generation. Lessons gleaned from other nations suggest that the mining industry can engender five to ten ancillary positions through agreements with diverse small enterprises and service providers aiding mining activities. These positions, in turn, contribute to fiscal revenues and economic advancement (Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, 2013).

5.4.1 Kabul–Jalalabad

The proposed Kabul–Jalalabad Corridor spans a distance of 95 kilometers and is poised to traverse the formidable Hindu Kush Mountains, a historically significant pathway along the ancient Silk Road. This railway project aims to establish a linkage between Jalalabad and various provinces, including Baghlan, Parwan Bamyaaan, and Konduz, by passing via Kabul. It will navigate through ravines, valleys, and approach the Band E Amir Lake before reaching the operational Salang highway tunnel, inaugurated in January 2004. Furthermore, this corridor will intersect areas abundant in mineral wealth, such as the iron ore reserves in the Hajigak region. Upon traversing the Salang tunnel, it will arrive at Kunduz and the Shir Khan Port, facilitating the movement of commodities and resources to and from Tajikistan and potentially China via Kyrgyzstan. The principal challenge in constructing this corridor lies in the arduous mountainous terrain and valleys. (Afghanistan Railway Authority)

To date, the sole advancement regarding this corridor has been the initiation of a feasibility study, originally scheduled to commence in 2017. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada, 2018)

5.4.2 Jalalabad–Torkham

The 75-kilometer Jalalabad–Torkham Corridor is set to establish a railway connection between Pakistan and Afghanistan. (Mariam Safi and Bismillah Alizada,

2018) The preceding administration of Afghanistan has earmarked financial resources for the execution of a feasibility examination within the nation's borders. Within the ambit of the CAREC framework, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have pinpointed the Sherkhan–Ninjpayan border route as an indispensable trade thoroughfare. Concurrently, Pakistan is actively engaged in fortifying the railway connectivity with Afghanistan to bolster bilateral trade relations. Within Pakistan, there are strategic blueprints underway to refurbish the time-honored British-era railway infrastructure spanning from Peshawar to Landi Kotal, encompassing a stretch of 52 kilometers.

The historic railway line, constructed during the period spanning from 1901 to 1925, holds significant reverence as a vital conduit for connectivity, lauded by merchants on both sides of the Durand Line as a dynamic facilitator of reciprocal trade endeavors (Safi & Alizada, 2018). The Ministry of Railways in Pakistan has embarked on an extensive feasibility analysis aimed at exploring the feasibility of establishing a railway link from Peshawar to Jalalabad via the Loi Shalman Valley, thereby forging a direct connection between the two cities. Notably, Afghanistan and Pakistan have jointly ratified an agreement pertaining to the development of the Jalalabad–Torkham Corridor (Afghanistan Railway Authority). This agreement underscores the collaborative efforts between the two nations to enhance regional connectivity and trade infrastructure.

5.5 Trade Diplomacy

Over the past decade, China has adeptly employed trade diplomacy as a highly effective policy tool, particularly during Afghanistan's turbulent period of war. Throughout this time, the trade relationship between Afghanistan and China experienced fluctuations, marked by varying degrees of growth and decline. Notably, electronic devices and technology emerged as critical imports from China into Afghanistan. (Lars Erslev Andersen and Yang, 2018).

Afghanistan and China have not yet established any official free trade agreements (FTAs) or double taxation avoidance agreements (DTAs) between them, which is worth mentioning. Nevertheless, the two countries have established the China-Afghanistan Joint Committee on

Economics and Trade (JCET) in 2010, 2015, and 2017 to foster economic cooperation (Tahiri, 2017).

An important milestone in this trade partnership took place in August 2014 when China and Afghanistan signed Exchange Notes that provided zero-tariff privileges to specific Afghan exports to China. This action represented a significant advancement in the reduction of trade restrictions, as it granted a tariff-free status to 97 percent of commodities originating from Afghanistan upon their entry into the Chinese market. In addition, China restated its dedication to the tariff reduction effort on December 1, 2022, by expanding zero-tariff treatment to 98 percent of the tax items that come from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Afghanistan imposes very high tariff rates on the importation of raw materials, which can have an influence on the cost efficiency of specific trade transactions (NSIA, 2022).

In summary, trade diplomacy has been a highly effective strategy in China's approach to its relationship with Afghanistan, resulting in significant reductions in tariffs for Afghan goods entering the Chinese market. Despite the absence of formal FTAs or DTAs, the establishment of the JCET and the Exchange Notes have played pivotal roles in shaping this trade dynamic (China and Afghanistan: Bilateral Trade Relationship and Future Outlook, 2022).

The new Afghan administration has been engaging in discussions with China to revive the historic Silk Road trade routes, with a particular focus on the Wakhan Corridor. This corridor is an Afghan valley route that separates China and Tajikistan, providing a 98 km-wide strip of land connecting China to Afghanistan (China and Afghanistan: Bilateral Trade Relationship and Future Outlook, 2022).

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), the governing authority in Afghanistan, has expressed its readiness to open the Wakhan Corridor and has sought cooperation from China. Their goal is to enhance trade between the two nations and establish a dependable route for the transit of goods (Afghan Ministry of Commerce, 2022).

The Wakhan Corridor project is a substantial undertaking that could play a pivotal role in Afghanistan's reconstruction and transition from a conflict-ridden nation to one capable of producing goods and maintaining peace. The construction of this corridor is anticipated to incur

costs in the tens of billions of dollars, with additional funding required for security, essential transportation infrastructure, and logistical services (D. K. Shahi, 2022).

One key aspect of China's growing interest in the region along its western border is the trade of pine nuts between China and Afghanistan. In 2018, an air freight route known as the "pine nut air transport corridor" was established between the two countries to support Afghanistan's pine nut industry. Within the initial four months of operation, this corridor generated \$15 million in revenue for the local population (NSIA, 2023).

Annually, between 3,000 and 5,000 tons of pine nuts are transported to China through this corridor, benefiting both nations and fostering bilateral cooperation. Afghanistan produces approximately 20,000 tons of pine nuts each year, with an export value of around \$800 million. The corridor has the potential to create over 100,000 jobs for local residents (NSIA, 2022).

Despite the successes of the pine nut trade, Afghanistan faces challenges in its pine nut market due to inadequate transportation infrastructure and years of conflict. The lack of equipment and authorization for pine nut processing has led China to become the primary destination for value-added processing, displacing Pakistan in this regard.

On January 5, 2022, the Afghan administration, which is currently under Taliban leadership, entered into a notable agreement with a Chinese corporation. The purpose of this agreement is to collect oil from the Amu Darya basin and build an oil resource in the Sar-e Pul province located in northern Afghanistan. This signifies the initial significant energy extraction agreement with a foreign corporation subsequent to the Taliban's assumption of power in 2021. According to an interview with the Director of Aynak Copper Mine in 2023, China intends to allocate a yearly investment of up to \$150 million, with the amount expected to rise to \$540 million within a span of three years.

Afghanistan is estimated to have natural resources with a total worth above \$1 trillion, which includes copper, rare earth elements, and natural gas. Nevertheless, as a result of the extended instability in the nation, a significant proportion of these deposits has not been utilised. Furthermore, a different Chinese state-owned business is currently engaged in negotiations with the Taliban-led government regarding mining operations at the Mes Aynak copper mine located near Kabul. This statement refers to a continuation of a contract worth \$3 billion that was signed

for a duration of 30 years in 2008 during the previous government. The information is sourced from an interview with the Director of Aynak Copper Mine in 2023. Ultimately, the current Afghan government is aggressively seeking alliances with China in order to rejuvenate trade routes such as the Wakhan Corridor and exploit Afghanistan's plentiful natural riches. These efforts have the capacity to fundamentally transform Afghanistan's economy, generate employment opportunities, and foster regional stability. Nevertheless, they also pose significant logistical and security obstacles that must be resolved in order to achieve successful execution.

The following chart illustrates the trade dynamics between the two countries.

NO	Year	Import from China	Value in US \$
1	2014-2015	109	1038198468
2	2016-2017	152 items	1092707519
3	2018	256 Items	1,165,931,753
4	2019	584 Items	1,156,685,791
5	2020	686 Items	986,508,283
6	2021	651 Items	811,123,203
7	2022 – 2023	639 Items	1,272,405,462

(NSIA, 2023)

5.6 The Scholar's perspectives on China's Engagement in Afghanistan

This chapter of my research involves conducting face-to-face interviews with experts in the field of Afghan-China relations. These interviews will be focused on gathering analytical insights and perspectives regarding the relationship between Afghanistan and China. The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of bilateral relations between the two countries and to explore potential avenues for future collaboration and cooperation. To achieve this objective, it is important to gather expert opinions and insights through the use of face-to-face interviews, as this will enable a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in this relationship.

Interview 1

1. What do you think are the key drivers behind China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how does this fit into China's broader foreign policy objectives?

In the second decade of 21st century president Xi Jinping has announced his new vision for the future of China in the world. Based on the concept of rejuvenation of China, neighborhood diplomacy has its own particular and significant place in the foreign policy of China as a world power. I think Afghanistan lies in the core of Chinese neighborhood policy. China seeks to give hand to Afghanistan to overcome the future economic, security and political challenges as in Chinese thinking these challenges directly effects China. The key driver of current Chinese engagement in Afghanistan is based on securing its borders and seeking a stable Afghanistan that is in peace with itself and with the region. Connecting two OBOR projects in Central and South Asia is another factor of future opportunity for China to connect the region.

2. Based on your knowledge and experience, what specific economic projects and initiatives has China undertaken in Afghanistan, and how have they been received by the Afghan government and people?

With the change of the regime in Kabul, China has signed only one deal with the current government of Afghanistan which is Qashqara oil extraction. China has Mes e Aynak and other projects signed with the previous regime which are not being activated until now. The Afghan government and people welcome Chinese investment in Afghanistan.

3. In your opinion, how does China's approach to economic diplomacy in Afghanistan compare and contrast with that of other major international actors, and what are the implications of these differences for the country's economic development and stability?

China, in contrast, does not focus on much of aid diplomacy in Afghanistan as it sees Afghanistan its neighbor that should be stable economically and politically. In Chinese thinking this is only possible with the win-win long-term solution for Afghanistan that is embedded in more investment and long-standing effects on the country's future. I think the main difference is that China does not deal like westerners where they make a country more reliable on foreign aids. The implication of such approach is more positive compared to the western short-term approach.

4. From your perspective, what challenges has China faced in implementing its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how have these challenges been addressed or overcome?

In the time of previous regime, the main challenge was the presence of western forces in Afghanistan and the effect of NATO and its allies in the Afghan politics. China slowly and silently worked on its soft power and maintaining engagement in this phase of the Afghan history. Those challenges were difficult to overcome but as we haven't seen Chinese being successful in its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan. Now, with the change in the government, I think there are more opportunities and less challenges for Chinese to pursue its economic diplomacy.

5. In your view, how has China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan impacted the political and economic landscape of the wider region, and what are the potential implications of these developments for other major global powers?

In my view, there were no major effects of Chinese economic diplomacy in Afghanistan for the 20 years during the western occupation in Afghanistan. Now, with the change in the government, I think there is a chance for China, Afghanistan, and the region to work on utilizing Afghanistan as a connecting point between three different regions. I think, the potential implications for other major powers are either to come and compete China economically in Afghanistan or loose Afghanistan.

6. What lessons do you think can be drawn from China's experience in pursuing economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how might these lessons inform China's future foreign policy towards other countries in the region or beyond?

China believes in economic integration of regions and countries. It does not enforce political systems, ideologies or whatsoever. I think China is quite successful in pursuing its foreign policy goals via its economic engagement in other countries.

7. Finally, based on your expertise and knowledge, what are the key opportunities and challenges facing China in its economic engagement with Afghanistan, and how do you think China can best navigate these to achieve its strategic objectives?

China has good opportunities in investing in Afghanistan's mining sector, agriculture, and infrastructure. The main challenge might be security and the perception that China won't be sincere in investing in Afghanistan without debt trap diplomacy behind it. China has to overcome these challenges. China can grab the opportunities more prudently to achieve political and economic stability in Afghanistan. Such pragmatic engagement can help China to overcome its challenges as well as achieve its strategic objectives.

Thank you.

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Interviews 2

1. What do you think are the key drivers behind China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how does this fit into China's broader foreign policy objectives?

China wants to expand its economic influence and become an economic superpower, for this, they are trying to have wide access to international markets and resources and to eliminate the obstacles to its economic development:

Afghanistan is one of the countries that is full of investment opportunities and natural resources.

This is the reason why Afghanistan is special in China's economy and policy. In general, it can be said that the important factors of China's economic policy in Afghanistan are economic benefits, eliminating concerns about regional stability, geopolitical ambitions, implementing projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, and preventing the expansion of American influence. They want to achieve it by participating in economic growth projects and strengthening stability.

2. Based on your knowledge and experience, what specific economic projects and initiatives has China undertaken in Afghanistan, and how have they been received by the Afghan government and people?

China's biggest project in Afghanistan is the copper mine, which it has renewed its contract with the current government. Moreover, China wants Afghanistan to become a part of the CPEC project. The project Belt and Road also passes through Afghanistan.

The government and people of Afghanistan also want to attract Chinese investment in different areas, but China is taking some cautious steps considering the conditions of Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan, looking at some of the countries (which are facing or are facing economic collapse due to various factors despite China's extensive investment), want the government to proceed cautiously with China in the economic field.

If the Chinese government and people can be assured that their investment in Afghanistan is beneficial to Afghanistan compared to other investors, then there is a good opportunity for China to go one step ahead of its competitors in this field.

3. In your opinion, how does China's approach to economic diplomacy in Afghanistan compare and contrast with that of other major international actors, and what are the implications of these differences for the country's economic development and stability?

China's approach to economic diplomacy in Afghanistan differs in certain aspects from that of other major international actors. Here are some points of comparison and contrast, along with the implications for Afghanistan's economic development and stability. China emphasizes infrastructure development as a key component of its economic diplomacy such as the Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC, and so on. Moreover, China adheres to a principle of non-interference in a country's internal affairs, including political and governance issues. However, some Western actors have a policy of interference.

In addition, China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan includes investments in resource extraction, such as the Mes Aynak copper mine. Other major international actors do not have eager to invest in such areas.

4. From your perspective, what challenges has China faced in implementing its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how have these challenges been addressed or overcome?

Security concerns and concerns about the stability of the new government are the biggest challenges that China faced in implementing its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan. The success of China's economic diplomacy will depend on its ability to adapt to evolving circumstances, engage with diverse stakeholders, address concerns, and collaborate with international partners to navigate the complex landscape of Afghanistan's political, security, and governance challenges.

5. In your view, how has China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan impacted the political and economic landscape of the wider region, and what are the potential implications of these developments for other major global powers?

China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan includes Trade and Regional Connectivity, it may be improved through China's investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure, including energy and transportation projects. By promoting trade and economic cooperation, these projects can aid in the integration of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. The creation of transportation corridors and energy networks has the potential to alter regional economic dynamics and open up new opportunities for regional actors, such as nearby nations and powerful international players.

And its implications for other major global powers are: China is able to increase its geopolitical influence in the region through its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan. China can have a stronger impact on influencing regional dynamics and decision-making as it deepens economic links and expands its presence in Afghanistan. Other powers that have historically had key involvement in the region, including the United States, may find it challenging as a result. The existing balance of power in Afghanistan may be threatened by China's expanding influence, forcing other world powers to reconsider their regional policies and commitments. Moreover, China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan may lead to rivalry with other powers on a global scale. There may be more rivalry for access to Afghanistan's resources and markets as a result of China's engagement in infrastructure development, trade routes, and resource extraction. To remain competitive and make sure their interests are safeguarded, other powers, especially those with strategic interests in the region, may need to reevaluate their economic engagement and relationships.

6. What lessons do you think can be drawn from China's experience in pursuing economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how might these lessons inform China's future foreign policy towards other countries in the region or beyond?

All the investing countries of the world including China are trying to get much profit. China is trying to use the contracts to its own advantage.

As well as China's rival Countries, especially the United States, which dominates the global economy, are trying to scare other countries by creating the economic collapse of those countries in which China has invested. Afghanistan should use China's economic policy in such ways to get many benefits and not fall prey to the policies of China's rival countries.

7. Finally, based on your expertise and knowledge, what are the key opportunities and challenges facing China in its economic engagement with Afghanistan, and how do you think China can best navigate these to achieve its strategic objectives?

China has several opportunities for economic engagement in Afghanistan. Firstly, resource extraction can provide mutual benefits, with Afghanistan's untapped mineral resources and China's demand for raw materials. China should invest responsibly and sustainably, ensuring fair distribution of benefits and addressing environmental concerns.

Secondly, China can contribute to Afghanistan's infrastructure development, such as road networks and energy projects like producing electricity from coal stone, enhancing connectivity and stimulating economic growth. Prioritizing investments that align with Afghanistan's needs and promote regional integration is essential. Additionally, China's economic engagement can support regional connectivity through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, strengthening economic influence and fostering cooperation in the wider region.

However, China also faces challenges in its economic engagement with Afghanistan. China has concerns about security situation, it considered risks to investments. China should work closely with the Afghan government and regional partners to enhance security cooperation and develop risk management strategies. Political instability, governance issues, and corruption present additional obstacles, requiring dialogue, support for governance reforms, and institutional capacity-building. Considering concerns about the environment, labor conditions, and equitable distribution of benefits. Local engagement, respect for cultural diversity, and corporate social responsibility initiatives can help foster positive relationships and gain local acceptance.

To navigate these opportunities and challenges, China should adopt certain strategies. Conducting comprehensive risk assessments that consider security, political, and social factors is crucial for identifying and mitigating potential challenges. Collaboration with the Afghan government, regional partners, and international stakeholders can address challenges collectively and promote stability. China's long-term commitment to Afghanistan's development, characterized by sustained investments, capacity building, and inclusive development, is essential. Adhering to international best practices in environmental sustainability, labor standards, and corporate social responsibility will mitigate risks and demonstrate a commitment to responsible economic engagement.

Thank you

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Interview 3

1. What do you think are the key drivers behind China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how does this fit into China's broader foreign policy objectives?

In China's foreign policy since 2012, good neighborhood diplomacy is widely recognized. China prioritizes its neighborhood over other regions due to its economic development, but Afghanistan has remained on China's diplomatic periphery for the past four decades.

- Natural resources: Afghanistan is rich in natural resources, many of which have yet to be exploited. Mining extraction and access to natural assets may be facilitated by Chinese investments in Afghanistan.
- To maintain its influence: On the one hand, China seeks to improve economic development in Afghanistan; on the other, China seeks to increase its influence while avoiding India's footprint.
- Regional stability: Afghanistan's stability may depend on multiple factors, but economic development can play a crucial role in delivering peace to the war-ravaged nation. Thus, China is endeavoring to establish stability in its neighborhood, which will pave the way not only for the implementation of its projects within the country but throughout the region as a whole, as regional stability is intrinsically linked to Afghanistan's stability.

It is relevant to point out that China's foreign policy is economically oriented, with a focus on the growth of the local economy. As a result, China needs to foster regional security and prosperity through FDI and the execution of projects that promote so-called well-being.

2. China has invested economically in Afghanistan over the past two decades despite lingering security concerns. China joined as an economic partner rather than a security one.

China has consistently stated that it respects Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity and does not wish to interfere in internal matters. Due to the US presence in Afghanistan during the previous two decades, China has not been heavily involved in Afghan issues. China was not a security partner to the former Afghan government since China focused on national reconciliation. The major purpose for China's economic engagement was

to create a stable environment, but decades of insecurity have instilled a dread of being pragmatic and careful in its actions. However, Chinese enterprises were reluctant to take financial risks. China has taken on several projects in Afghanistan, including the Mes Aynak, and Amu Darya Basin Oil Extraction.

Additionally, BRI's future in Afghanistan is still uncertain because the projects that were supposed to connect Afghanistan to CPEC have not yet materialized. The former Afghan leadership was also unable to create an atmosphere that was conducive to the execution of the aforementioned initiatives.

3. In your opinion, how does China's approach to economic diplomacy in Afghanistan compare and contrast with that of other major international actors, and what are the implications of these differences for the country's economic development and stability?

Afghanistan's proximity to China affords both nations an abundance of opportunities. China's neighborhood diplomacy in 2012 and the BRI action plan distinguish China's neighborhood from its outer region. Due to its investments and BRI platform, China's approach to Afghanistan differs significantly from that of other key international actors. Afghanistan has historically been a strategic location for the export of Chinese products to South Asia and Europe, particularly to Italy. Afghanistan receives little attention in China's 2013 new Silk Road, and all BRI corridors bypass the country. China proclaimed \$46 billion for CPEC, which has since risen to \$65 billion, and \$31 billion for the Central Asia-West Asia corridor. However, the Chinese government has only announced \$100 million for BRI projects in Afghanistan, which is unfair given China's neighborhood diplomacy. Strategies would have negative effects on the country's economic growth and bilateral relations as well. China's minuscule contribution to economic development in Afghanistan is insufficient to stabilize the country; regional rivalries will inevitably increase, and China will be surrounded by an unstable Afghanistan.

4. From your perspective, what challenges has China faced in implementing its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how have these challenges been addressed or overcome?

China has faced several obstacles in undertaking economic diplomacy in Afghanistan.

- Insecurity and instability in Afghanistan: Instability and insecurity have plagued Afghanistan for the past four decades. Recently, Afghanistan has seen security across the country, but Chinese firms are hesitant to invest there due to the country's conservative nature.
- Lack of continuity in regimes: As a result of regional rivalry and stakeholders' competing interests in Afghanistan, the country has seen a variety of regimes without focusing on national interests; as a result, China has been reluctant to engage in an unstable country.
- China's periphery diplomacy: Afghanistan has long been a part of China's periphery diplomacy. Although Afghanistan serves as a center for regional transport, China has not shown a strong interest in investing there because of its fragile economy.

China has always taken decisive action to neutralize threats to its national or transnational interests in Afghanistan. China supported the withdrawal of Soviet soldiers from Afghanistan in the twentieth century, and it supported the withdrawal of US forces in the twenty-first century, but history shows that China was unable to forge regional agreement on Afghanistan's political stability and economic growth.

5. In your view, how has China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan impacted the political and economic landscape of the wider region, and what are the potential implications of these developments for other major global powers?

China's economic engagement in Afghanistan has had little impact on the region's political and economic situation. The projects that China has promised to carry out in the country are yet to be carried out. Furthermore, Afghanistan has not yet been fully connected to CPEC. stability is anchored in Afghanistan's economic developments; yet, regional powers, notably China, have contributed less to the country's economic development; instead, regional powers have pursued regional rivalry rather than economic cooperation.

6. What lessons do you think can be drawn from China's experience in pursuing economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how might these lessons inform China's future foreign policy towards other countries in the region or beyond?

Afghanistan has been on the diplomatic periphery of China for a very long time. As China is well-known for its economically oriented approach to foreign countries, now that security has been restored in Afghanistan, China can change its decades-long policy and begin a new active approach to Afghanistan to construct infrastructure, attract FDI, and industrialize the country. China has prior experience investing in insecure societies in Africa and Asia; as a regional power, China must work to establish mechanisms for insecure countries regarding their ongoing conditions, in order to eradicate conflicts through economic engagements and investments.

7. Finally, based on your expertise and knowledge, what are the key opportunities and challenges facing China in its economic engagement with Afghanistan, and how do you think China can best navigate these to achieve its strategic objectives?

China, as a global power, faces both possibilities and problems because of its proximity to Afghanistan.

Regional peace is rooted in Afghanistan's stability and economic progress that China's FDI in Afghanistan provides this possibility. To be on the same footing with the US, China must implement regional initiatives as well as BRI; thus, it requires an economically developed Afghanistan in its neighborhood. Furthermore, Afghanistan is rich in natural resources, making it an important supplier of raw materials for China. Furthermore, Afghanistan serves as a regional transit center, connecting China to Iran and the rest of the Middle East, particularly through investments in the Wakhan corridor.

To summarize, insecurity and regional rivalry are significant barriers to Chinese economic engagement in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is well-positioned as a platform for China's strategic goals to be realized through a stable Afghanistan. Geographically, China and Afghanistan will always be neighbors; so, both must cooperate and coordinate, serve each other's demands, and China must create infrastructure and invest in Afghanistan.

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Interview 4

- 1- What do you think are the key drivers behind China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how does this fit into China's broader foreign policy objectives?

China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan is primarily driven by its aim to enhance connectivity between the Middle East, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. This involves establishing transportation links from Central Asia and the Middle East to Afghanistan and Iran, including access to the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman through the Chabahar Port. This initiative aims to provide China with a strategic foothold, with Chabahar Port becoming its second port after Gawadar. The plan encompasses the development of road and rail networks stretching from Kashgar to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, connecting to the Hairatan Port and other regions within Afghanistan. Additionally, it includes routes to Herat, Chabahar, and Iran.

Another key driver behind China's economic strategy in Afghanistan is its need for raw materials and markets. This includes sourcing materials like minerals, iron, copper, as well as hydrocarbons such as oil and gas, which Afghanistan possesses. China aims to access and develop these resources to support its industries, as it relies on importing such materials and energy resources to fuel its economic growth. These objectives align neatly with China's broader Belt and Road Initiative, as they seek to expand connectivity and secure access to crucial resources globally.

- 2- Based on your knowledge and experience, what specific economic projects and Initiative has China undertaken in Afghanistan and how have they been received by the Afghan government and people?

China is keen on developing Afghanistan's mining and resource industries, particularly focusing on energy resources such as hydrocarbons, gas, and oil, alongside minerals like iron, copper, lithium, and others. China aims to prioritize the development of Afghanistan's mines and raw material resources sectors. Additionally, China will concentrate on enhancing transportation infrastructure, including roads and railway lines within Afghanistan, to facilitate the transportation of these raw materials to

China. Furthermore, these transportation routes will enable China to export its industrial products to Afghanistan and other countries in the Middle East, such as Iran.

- 3- In your opinion, how does China's approach to economic diplomacy in Afghanistan compare and contrast with that of other major international actors, and what are the implications of these differences for the country's economic development and stability?

China's approach to international development differs significantly from that of the USA and its allies. China typically provides direct investment to governments and government entities globally to achieve development objectives, such as constructing infrastructure like roads, airports, railways, and ports. In contrast, the USA and its allies, primarily led by the USA, prefer to fund projects through the private sector. During the USA's involvement in Afghanistan over the past two decades, they established NGOs and pursued economic development through them. However, China disregards this approach and engages with both private and public or governmental agencies for business dealings. This stark contrast in approach is evident in how China operates compared to Western countries and institutions like the World Bank and IMF.

- 4- From your perspective, what challenges has China faced in implementing its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how have these challenges been addressed or overcome?

China faces challenges in Afghanistan regarding how to navigate its relationship with the Taliban-led government. Historically, China has been concerned about terrorism in Afghanistan, particularly groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which operated sympathetically towards China's Xinjiang province. One of China's dilemmas is how to combat terrorism while simultaneously cooperating with the Taliban, given their past affiliations with groups like ETIM during the two-decade conflict against the previous Afghan government. Now that the Taliban is in power, resolving this issue won't happen overnight. China aims to build rapport with the Taliban through its economic focus in Afghanistan, hoping that by providing infrastructure and economic opportunities, it can foster a cooperative relationship. The ultimate goal is for the Taliban to take

proactive measures in preventing the spread of Islamic jihadist activities from Afghanistan to China.

5- In your view, how has China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan impacted the political and economic landscape of the wider region, and what are the potential implications of these developments for other major global powers?

China's involvement in Afghanistan poses challenges for other global powers such as the USA, which may seek to hinder China's development efforts, particularly its Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia extending from Afghanistan. A significant Chinese presence in Afghanistan would undoubtedly influence American foreign policy in the Central Asian region.

6- Finally, based on your expertise and knowledge, what are the key opportunities and challenges facing China in its economic engagement with Afghanistan, and how do you think China can best navigate these to achieve its strategic objectives?

With the absence of other superpowers such as the USA, Russia, India, and European countries in Afghanistan, China finds itself in a significant position to engage in economic activities within the country. However, China remains wary of the presence of terrorist activities and groups in Afghanistan, despite Taliban denials. Balancing economic pursuits with security concerns is paramount, particularly regarding how the Taliban interacts with the government and exercises authority while China pursues its economic objectives in the region.

Thank You

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Conclusion

This research, employing qualitative methodologies encompassing a diverse array of data collection techniques, offers an in-depth exploration into the intricate dynamics characterizing the relationship between Afghanistan and China. Afghanistan's tumultuous history, marred by internal strife and external interventions, has rendered it a nation profoundly shaped by its domestic challenges and its interactions on the global stage.

The study uncovers compelling historical evidence highlighting China's enduring pursuit of stability in Afghanistan. Despite periods of upheaval, China consistently maintained diplomatic relations with all relevant stakeholders. Notably, during the Dawood Khan era, China fostered close ties with Afghanistan, resulting in numerous diplomatic exchanges and agreements. Despite refraining from recognizing the Communist regime initially, China eventually acknowledged it when circumstances warranted. Conversely, China distanced itself from Soviet-backed communist regimes, indicating a nuanced approach to regional geopolitics.

China's engagement with Afghanistan during the Mujahidin government was marked by significant diplomatic gestures, exemplified by the invitation extended to President Rabbani to visit Beijing. However, the emergence of the Taliban regime introduced complexity into the relationship. While some nations decried the Taliban's human rights violations, others, including China, engaged in diplomatic interactions. Despite refraining from formal recognition of the Taliban regime, China maintained close ties at the embassy level in Islamabad. Concurrently, China grappled with concerns regarding Uighur Muslims and the rampant issue of narcotics smuggling, further shaping its stance towards Afghanistan.

Through meticulous analysis of historical events and diplomatic engagements, this research sheds light on the multifaceted nature of China's relationship with Afghanistan, offering valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of regional politics and international relations.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, China saw an opportunity to re-establish diplomatic and economic relations with Afghanistan, recognizing the potential for stability and economic growth in the war-torn nation. This re-engagement was accompanied by active participation in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts, including infrastructure projects and aid initiatives. Presidents Karzai and Ghani, while leading Afghanistan through tumultuous periods, navigated

varying degrees of engagement with China, often balancing between regional dynamics and international pressures, particularly from Western powers.

The return of the Taliban to power in 2021 marked a pivotal moment in Afghanistan's political landscape. Despite uncertainties surrounding the new government, China opted to maintain its embassy operations in Kabul and appointed a new ambassador, signaling its commitment to sustaining diplomatic ties and potentially formalizing recognition of the Taliban-led administration.

China's involvement in Afghanistan since 9/11 has been multifaceted. Beyond economic engagements, China has actively advocated for Afghanistan's participation in regional initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moreover, China has emphasized Afghanistan's role in counterterrorism efforts, viewing stability in the region as crucial for its own security interests, particularly regarding its restive Xinjiang province.

Looking to the future, the researcher highlights the importance of further exploration into the evolving partnership between Afghanistan and China. Given Afghanistan's strategic location, there is immense potential for robust relations, especially considering the geopolitical significance of the region. The proposed development of the Wakhan Corridor, a mountainous passageway connecting Afghanistan with China's Xinjiang region, holds promise for enhancing regional connectivity. If materialized, this corridor could significantly reduce transportation distances, offering China a more efficient route to access the Middle East and establish connections with the Gulf region, further solidifying the Afghanistan-China partnership.

In conclusion, this research extends an invitation to fellow scholars to embark on a deeper exploration of the multifaceted Afghanistan-China relationship. Within the intricate geostrategic context of the region, there lies the promise of a future characterized by strengthened bilateral ties and enhanced cooperation. Given the evolving dynamics and geopolitical shifts, there is a compelling need for further inquiry into the nuances of this complex partnership.

By delving into the historical, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of Afghanistan-China relations, scholars can unearth valuable insights that contribute to our understanding of regional dynamics and global politics. Moreover, such research endeavors hold

the potential to inform policy formulation, promote stability, and foster constructive engagement between these two pivotal nations. As the international community grapples with pressing challenges in the Afghan landscape, including post-conflict reconstruction, counterterrorism efforts, and regional integration, a deeper comprehension of the Afghanistan-China relationship becomes increasingly imperative. Therefore, this study advocates for continued scholarly engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration to unravel the complexities and potentials inherent in this vital relationship. Through rigorous academic inquiry, we can pave the way for a more informed and nuanced approach to diplomacy, thereby facilitating a path towards sustainable peace and prosperity in the region

Research Findings and Discussions

1. Historical Fluctuations in Sino-Afghan Relations:

China's interests in Afghanistan have varied significantly over time, reflecting a pattern of intermittent engagement and disengagement. From ancient times to the second Taliban regime, China has approached its relationship with Afghanistan pragmatically, prioritizing its own strategic interests.

2. China's Desire for Stability in Afghanistan:

A central aspect of China's policy towards Afghanistan is the desire for a stable and peaceful environment, free from the presence of active terrorist and insurgent groups, which China views as critical for regional security.

3. Variability in Economic Diplomacy:

China's economic diplomacy with Afghanistan has experienced significant fluctuations. Periods of close economic ties have alternated with times of minimal engagement, influenced by broader geopolitical considerations and domestic priorities.

4. Strategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor:

The development of the Wakhan Corridor is of strategic significance for China, as it would provide a direct route to Central Asia and the Middle East, enhancing trade connectivity and regional integration.

5. China's Gradualist Political Strategy:

China employs a cautious and long-term approach to its foreign policy, preferring incremental and deliberate actions over hasty decisions. This strategic patience allows China to navigate complex international issues effectively.

6. China's Concerns Over ETIM:

China has consistently urged the Afghan government to take firm actions against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) militants operating within Afghanistan. This includes

demands for either controlling these militants or extraditing them to China, reflecting China's security concerns over separatist threats.

7. Afghanistan's Suitability for the OBOR Initiative:

The current situation in Afghanistan is perceived as favorable for the implementation of China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. The internal political stability, coupled with regional legitimacy, provides a conducive environment for fostering a secure and peaceful Afghanistan.

8. Security Guarantees from Afghanistan:

Afghanistan has provided assurances to China that its territory will not be used for activities detrimental to Chinese interests. This guarantee aims to foster mutual trust and enhance bilateral security cooperation.

9. Investment Opportunities in Afghanistan:

Given the prevailing conditions, China recognizes a significant opportunity for investment in Afghanistan. The country offers a promising landscape for economic ventures, underpinned by the prospects of regional stability and development.

10. Strategic Land Routes for Chinese Trade:

In the context of contemporary geopolitical dynamics, China is seeking secure land routes for its cargo shipments. Afghanistan presents a viable option, offering a cost-effective and efficient passageway for Chinese goods, thereby facilitating enhanced trade connectivity.

Recommendations

Here are some recommendations for both the Afghan and Chinese sides based on the research:

For the Chinese Side:

1. China's strategic investment in Afghanistan holds significant implications for long-term stability in the region. A stable and developed Afghanistan not only serves as a buffer against extremism and terrorism but also contributes to China's security interests. By fostering economic growth and infrastructure development in Afghanistan, China can mitigate security threats emanating from the region, safeguarding its own interests while promoting regional stability.
2. The extension of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to Afghanistan presents a mutually beneficial opportunity for both nations. As Afghanistan seeks to rebuild its economy and infrastructure, China's BRI offers a framework for infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and connectivity enhancement. By integrating Afghanistan into the BRI network, China can tap into Afghanistan's strategic location as a gateway to South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, while Afghanistan stands to benefit from increased investment, trade opportunities, and improved connectivity with regional markets.
3. The construction of a road linking Faizabad to the Chinese border at Wakhjir Pass would significantly enhance regional connectivity and trade routes. This infrastructure project would create a vital link between China, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, traversing through Afghanistan. By investing in this road network, China can bolster its economic ties with neighboring countries and expand its trade routes, while Afghanistan stands to gain from improved infrastructure, increased trade opportunities, and enhanced regional integration.
4. Afghanistan's integration into the historic Silk Road presents an opportunity to revive ancient trade routes and enhance economic cooperation between China and Afghanistan. Building upon the agreement signed during Ashraf Ghani's tenure, China can play a pivotal role in strengthening this connection, facilitating trade, investment, and cultural exchange along the Silk Road corridor. By revitalizing these

- historical ties, both nations can capitalize on shared cultural heritage and foster greater economic cooperation and mutual understanding.
5. Pursuing Afghanistan's inclusion as a new participant in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) reflects a strategic opportunity for enhancing regional connectivity and economic integration. Active engagement from both China and Pakistan is essential in realizing the full potential of CPEC, with Afghanistan serving as a crucial link connecting China to the Arabian Sea and beyond. By extending CPEC to Afghanistan, China can further solidify its economic foothold in the region while contributing to Afghanistan's economic development and stability.
 6. China's influential role in Afghan foreign policy necessitates a balanced approach grounded in close bilateral relations, non-interference in internal matters, and goodwill. While China holds significant sway over Afghan affairs, its involvement should prioritize mutual respect, cooperation, and support for Afghanistan's sovereignty and self-determination. By fostering trust and cooperation, China can leverage its influence to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan and the broader region.
 7. Initiating people-to-people diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and offering scholarships to Afghan students represents a meaningful strategy for strengthening the bonds between China and Afghanistan. By fostering mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation at the grassroots level, both nations can cultivate enduring ties and promote goodwill among their respective populations. These initiatives not only contribute to bilateral relations but also lay the foundation for long-term friendship and cooperation between the peoples of China and Afghanistan.
 8. As a key member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China has a responsibility to assist Afghanistan in gaining membership and support its participation in regional initiatives. By advocating for Afghanistan's inclusion in the SCO, China can facilitate greater regional cooperation, dialogue, and security collaboration among member states. Afghanistan's participation in the SCO would enhance its diplomatic standing, promote regional stability, and contribute to collective efforts in addressing common security challenges.

9. Ensuring long-term stability in Afghanistan requires China's recognition of the current Afghan government and active engagement with the international community. By acknowledging the legitimacy of the Afghan government and participating in diplomatic efforts to address the country's challenges, China can contribute to peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Through constructive dialogue and cooperation, China can play a constructive role in supporting Afghanistan's transition to stability and prosperity.
10. Regarding the Uighur Muslim issue, it is imperative for China to refrain from using force to influence religious convictions and respect the human rights and freedoms of all individuals, including Muslims. Afghanistan can provide assurances to China that it will respect its internal affairs while advocating for the protection of religious rights and cultural diversity. By promoting dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect, China and Afghanistan can address sensitive issues constructively and strengthen their bilateral relations on the basis of shared values and mutual interests.

For the Afghan Side:

1. Afghanistan's adherence to a traditional policy of neutrality in international affairs can serve as a strategic approach to safeguarding its sovereignty and promoting peace and stability in the region. By maintaining a neutral stance, Afghanistan can avoid entanglement in external conflicts and foster diplomatic relations with a diverse range of nations, thereby enhancing its diplomatic autonomy and positioning itself as a trusted partner for dialogue and cooperation.
2. Recognizing China's status as the world's second-largest economic power and its continued presence in Afghanistan, building and maintaining strong relations with China is imperative for Afghanistan's economic development and security interests. Given China's growing influence in the region, Afghanistan can benefit from strategic partnerships with China in various sectors, including infrastructure development, trade, investment, and security cooperation.
3. Active negotiation to bring the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into Afghanistan is essential to capitalize on the economic opportunities offered by China's flagship infrastructure development program. By aligning with the BRI, Afghanistan can

- access much-needed investment, technology, and expertise to accelerate its economic growth and connectivity with regional and global markets. Ensuring China's satisfaction with this decision through transparent and mutually beneficial negotiations is crucial for fostering long-term cooperation and partnership.
4. Afghanistan must unequivocally refrain from providing shelter to any terrorist groups on its soil to uphold its international commitments and maintain regional security. By taking decisive action against terrorist organizations and their supporters, Afghanistan can demonstrate its commitment to combating terrorism and extremism, thereby enhancing trust and cooperation with its international partners, including China.
 5. Afghan authorities must demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that Afghan territory will not be used as a base for launching attacks against neighboring or other countries. By strengthening border security, enhancing intelligence cooperation, and implementing effective counterterrorism measures, Afghanistan can mitigate security threats and contribute to regional stability, thereby fostering confidence and trust among its neighbors, including China.
 6. Pursuing a balanced foreign policy that accommodates the interests of various countries is essential for Afghanistan to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics and maximize its diplomatic leverage. By engaging with a diverse range of partners, including China, Afghanistan can diversify its diplomatic ties, promote regional cooperation, and advance its national interests on the global stage, while avoiding over-reliance on any single ally or patron.
 7. Promoting measures that facilitate Afghan product access to Chinese markets is crucial for enhancing trade development and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and China. By addressing trade barriers, improving trade infrastructure, and enhancing market access, Afghanistan can capitalize on its competitive advantages and export potential, thereby boosting economic growth, creating jobs, and reducing poverty.
 8. Exploring opportunities for sustainable energy cooperation, including renewable energy projects, should be a priority for Afghanistan to address its energy needs and promote environmental sustainability. By collaborating with China on renewable energy initiatives, Afghanistan can harness its abundant natural resources, reduce

- dependence on fossil fuels, and promote clean energy development, thereby contributing to climate change mitigation and energy security.
9. Afghanistan should establish transparent legal frameworks and investment policies that protect the rights of Chinese investors while safeguarding national interests and promoting sustainable development. By providing a conducive investment environment and ensuring rule of law, Afghanistan can attract foreign investment, stimulate economic growth, and create employment opportunities, thereby contributing to poverty reduction and socioeconomic development.
 10. Encouraging public-private partnerships is necessary to efficiently mobilize resources for infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. By fostering collaboration between government agencies, private sector stakeholders, and international partners, Afghanistan can leverage diverse expertise, financing, and resources to accelerate infrastructure development, improve service delivery, and enhance the quality of life for its citizens. Ensuring transparency, accountability, and good governance in public-private partnerships is essential to maximize their effectiveness and promote sustainable development outcomes.

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Appendix-I
Questionnaire for Interviews

Topic

**China's Economic Diplomacy towards Afghanistan:
Since 2014-2022**

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This chapter of my research involves conducting face-to-face interviews with experts in the field of Afghan-China relations. These interviews will be focused on gathering analytical insights and perspectives regarding the relationship between Afghanistan and China. The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the current state of bilateral relations between the two countries and to explore potential avenues for future collaboration and cooperation. To achieve this objective, it is important to gather expert opinions and insights through the use of face-to-face interviews, as this will enable a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in this relationship.

- 1- What do you think are the key drivers behind China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how does this fit into China's broader foreign policy objectives?

- 2- Based on your knowledge and experience, what specific economic projects and initiatives has China undertaken in Afghanistan, and how have they been received by the Afghan government and people?
- 3- In your opinion, how does China's approach to economic diplomacy in Afghanistan compare and contrast with that of other major international actors, and what are the implications of these differences for the country's economic development and stability?
- 4- From your perspective, what challenges has China faced in implementing its economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how have these challenges been addressed or overcome?
- 5- In your view, how has China's economic diplomacy in Afghanistan impacted the political and economic landscape of the wider region, and what are the potential implications of these developments for other major global powers?
- 6- What lessons do you think can be drawn from China's experience in pursuing economic diplomacy in Afghanistan, and how might these lessons inform China's future foreign policy towards other countries in the region or beyond?
- 7- Finally, based on your expertise and knowledge, what are the key opportunities and challenges facing China in its economic engagement with Afghanistan, and how do you think China can best navigate these to achieve its strategic objectives?

Appendix- II

Interview Schedule Guide

SR. No.	Name	Designation	Mode of Interview and Duration	Date & Place
1.	Dr. Abdul Hai Qanit	Chargé d'Affaires of Afghanistan for Malaysia	Personal Interview (60- minutes)	May, 4, 2023 Kabul
2.	Asst. Prof. Noorullah Noori Mujadedi	Lecture at Nangarhar Univerity, Department of Politics and International Relations	Emailed Interview	May, 11, 2023.
3.	Associate Prof. Mohammad Imran Zakria	Member of Academy of Science, Institute of Southeast Asia	Emailed Interview	May 25, 2023.
4.	Dr. Noor Ahmad Khaledi	Advisor for the Queensland State of Australia	Personal Interview (55- minutes)	June 22, 2023.