



# RCAS Commentary

## China Deepens Its Engagement With Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan?

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## About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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## China Deepens Its Engagement With Taliban-Ruled Afghanistan

*Ghulam Ali*

On November 23, 2024, a train with 55 carriages carrying tons of cargo arrived in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. The train began its journey in Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China, and passed through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, taking 22 days. This was the first direct train between the two countries after the COVID-19 pandemic, and on its return journey to China, the train will carry Afghan goods.



▲ The first train arrives at Naibabad Station. Inset: Afghan Deputy Public Works Minister Mangal with the team at the station. Source: ADB Afghanistan Resident Mission.

Afghanistan-China economic relations are expanding. Two-way trade in 2023 reached \$1.3 billion, a 125 percent increase from previous years. Under an agreement signed between the two countries, from December 1, 2024, Afghan products have 100 percent duty-free access to the Chinese market. This will provide war-torn, impoverished Afghanistan with the opportunity to expand its exports.

While the train was en route, China dispatched its special envoy for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong, to consult Islamabad, Kabul, and Dushanbe. On November 19, Yue held meetings with Pakistani officials. The meeting came at a time of tense relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan over accusations of cross-border terrorism. As in the past, China tried to ease the tensions between its two neighbors.

In Afghanistan, Yue met with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's acting foreign minister. Yue also invited Afghanistan to a meeting of foreign ministers from neighboring countries, which Uzbekistan would organize.

China was the first country to send its ambassador to and receive an ambassador from Afghanistan, although it has not yet formally recognized the Taliban regime. Yue Xiaoyong's interview with Tolo News, an Afghan news agency, implied that China's recognition of the Taliban government would hinge on regional consensus and the Taliban's satisfactory elimination of terrorist groups from Afghanistan's territory.

Along with China, other regional stakeholders such as Russia, Iran, and India have also increased their engagement with the Taliban.

These countries aim to secure their interests in anticipation of unexpected shifts in U.S. Afghanistan policy under incoming President Donald Trump. During its first term (2017-2021), the Trump administration signed a peace deal with the Taliban to ultimately withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban's guarantees that non-state actors would not be allowed to use Afghan territory against others. Later, Trump slammed the way the Biden administration withdrew U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 as the "most embarrassing moment" in U.S. history.

The impact of Trump's second term may raise concerns in some countries. However, China's Afghan policy is expected to remain unchanged, as it was during the seismic events of August 2021, when the Taliban overthrew the U.S.-installed government and renamed the country from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

China's key interests in Afghanistan are security related. It aims to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists who threaten its interests and those of its partners in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In particular, China wants to ensure that Uyghur separatists do not find sanctuaries in Afghanistan.

Additionally, China intends to extract Afghanistan's untapped resources and expand its geopolitical influence. As a neighbor and rising power, China also wants to make an economic contribution to improving the living standards of the Afghan people.

Most importantly, China recognizes that Afghanistan's geostrategic location is crucial for implementing the BRI. Two of the six corridors developed under the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, run through countries neighboring Afghanistan. In pursuit of these interests, China's Afghan policy has displayed five trends.

First, China has abandoned its decades-old, hands-off approach toward Afghanistan and has started engaging with its neighbors substantially and on a long-term basis.

Second, China is not only willing to engage Afghanistan, often called the “graveyard of empires,” but also any group that rules it, be it Western-installed governments or the conservative Taliban, who are severely criticized for their approach toward women and girls’ education.

Third, China has indicated an incremental shift in its focus from Pakistan to Afghanistan and Iran as the pivot of its regional connectivity. China’s deliberation for the development of the Wakhan Corridor, which transits the common border between the two countries in the northeast of Afghanistan, and Iran’s initiatives to enhance road and railway connectivity with Afghanistan, against the backdrop of burgeoning China-Iran relations, are signs of this shift. An Iranian official suggested the idea of Iran-Afghanistan-China connectivity and proposed a trilateral meeting to discuss it. Some analysts rule out the possibility of opening the Wakhan Corridor anytime soon due to rugged terrain and inhospitable weather conditions. However, China possesses the experience, technology, and investment to build it should overall security conditions in Afghanistan improve and both countries develop a political consensus. China’s building of the Karakorum Highway with Pakistan during the 1970s, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, and the Three George Dams are only a few examples of its capacity to build gigantic projects in difficult conditions. Following the withdrawal of the U.S. forces, both sides have expanded their deliberations to materialize the plan in the future.

Fourth, and linked to the previous point, China is developing its Afghan policy independently of Pakistan, which it largely relied on until the early 21st century. Pakistan’s troubled relations with Afghanistan and the disputed border between the two countries make it challenging for China to devise a common policy toward both countries.

Fifth, China will continue its efforts to advocate for the Taliban at various international forums while privately persuading the group not to allow non-state actors to use Afghan territory and to moderate its governance style. At China’s urging, the Taliban delegation participated in the third round of the “Doha process” held in May 2024 and attended by 25 countries and regional organizations, including the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China. China termed the U.S. seizure of Afghanistan’s \$7 billion in central bank reserves tantamount to “robbery” by a “bandit” and urged on several occasions to lift the freeze. Chinese state-controlled media’s positive coverage of Afghanistan reflects Beijing’s favorable attitude.

In conclusion, Afghanistan has gained considerable attention in China’s regional strategy. This attention stems from Afghanistan’s geostrategic location in relation to

the BRI, security concerns, and economic logic. China's resultant policy is based on a long-term vision. External imperatives, including Trump's second term, are unlikely to result in any major changes in this policy. The train that has set off will continue its journey.

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## About Author



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