



RCAS Commentary

Afghanistan: The New Fault Line in China-Pakistan Relations?

Ghulam Ali

Deputy Director, The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS)

January 12, 2025

About RCAS

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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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Address: 1507B, EASTCORE1, No.398, Kwun Tong, Kooloon, Hong Kong
Ph: 00852 2397 7886|Email: hkrcas@163.com|Web: www.rcas.top

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In late December, when Pakistani jets and drones were pounding bombs on alleged hideouts of the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) in Afghanistan under the Taliban, China was dispatching equipment to Afghanistan via Iran's Port Bandar Abbas-not via Gwadar Port. These divergent actions of Pakistan and China reflect their contrasting approaches toward the Taliban and bear long-term repercussions.



▲ Afghan labourers shovel coal onto a truck bound for Pakistan, at a coal yard on the outskirts of Kabul on 6 January 2025. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP).

Pakistan's confrontational policy

On 26 December 2024, Pakistani jets and drone strikes in Afghanistan killed 46 to 71 people. Pakistan claimed that the victims were TTP terrorists involved in the killings of 16 security personnel in South Waziristan on 21 December. The Taliban rejected this claim, termed Pakistan's attack a barbaric act that primarily killed women and children, and vowed to retaliate. The fact that UN special rapporteur Richard Bennet "deplored" the Pakistani bombing and demanded an inquiry raised questions about the credibility of the Pakistani claim.

Most absurdly, Pakistan conducted its air strikes while its delegation led by Ambassador Mohammad Sadiq, special representative for Afghanistan, was in Kabul and had already held talks with the Taliban's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi,

Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani and Minister for Industry and Commerce Noorullah Azizi. This was the second air strike inside Afghanistan in 2024; Pakistan conducted the first in March.

The Pakistani airstrikes derailed the negotiation process that was started after 15 months of hiatus. A spiral escalation followed. Within days, the Taliban forces retaliated by attacking several Pakistani border posts and inflicting “heavy casualties” beyond the “assumptive line”, referring to the Durand Line. On 3 January 2025, Pakistani forces fired mortars inside Afghanistan, an act that is likely to provoke a reaction.

The Durand Line, the international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, was drawn during the colonial period, but no Afghan government accepted it. Afghanistan lays claim to large parts of the territories under Pakistan’s control. This is one of the major issues between the two countries.

China: bypassing Pakistan and scaling back on mediation

China’s engagement with the Taliban stands in sharp contrast to Pakistan’s confrontational policy. China’s shipment, which arrived in Afghanistan on 28 December, contained 1,000 tons of steel coils. Beijing transported it via the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and the railway network to the Rozanak station in Herat province, Afghanistan.

Intriguingly, China did not use Gwadar Port, which it controls and from which, it receives 90% of its revenue. In late November 2024, China sent a direct shipment to Afghanistan via Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. China’s bypassing Pakistan underscores growing lukewarmness and mounting concerns about the security conditions in Pakistan.

China’s optimistic outlook and desire to cooperate with the Taliban regime are reflected in its projection of the group’s positive image. A survey of Chinese media shows its reporting on the Taliban’s measures against drug dealers, facilitation of polio vaccination campaigns, establishment of rehabilitation centres for drug addicts, substantial reduction in poppy cultivation, initiation of development projects, and improvement of security situations. This image contrasts with the portrayal of the Taliban in most Pakistani and international media. In fact, Pakistani media have recently been overwhelmingly negative towards the Taliban.

Seemingly, China has also scaled back its mediatory role in Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions. This was evident, at least during recent clashes. On many occasions in the past, both during the Republic period (2004-21) and the Emirates (since 2021), China mediated between Pakistan and Afghan authorities. However, given China’s longstanding relationship with Pakistan, Beijing’s role was often viewed as an

advocacy for Pakistan's viewpoint. The Taliban became straightforward in expressing their dislike for such a role. The Taliban spokesperson openly accused the Pakistani military of attempting to "damage the trust between Afghanistan and China".

In November 2024, during his visit to regional countries, China's special representative for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong, sought to convey Pakistan's concerns about the TTP's presence in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, refused to meet with him. Yue only managed to meet with the governor of Kandahar, Mawlawi Shirin, and Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid. Since then, few Chinese mediation offers have appeared in the media. Perhaps China is distancing itself from being viewed as an advocate of the Pakistani military's viewpoint.

China did not endorse Pakistan's claim that the March 2024 attacks in northwest Pakistan, in which five Chinese were killed, were carried out by an Afghan national. Instead, China emphasised the need to apprehend the culprits. Similarly, China perceived the security failure and possibly an insider's job that led to the killings of two Chinese near Karachi airport in October 2024. Both countries also differ on the role of India in Afghanistan. China hardly considers it a matter of concern. For Pakistan, however, India's presence is a critical issue that dominates its strategy.

China getting regional countries on Taliban's side

Several regional countries are following China's lead in their policy toward the Taliban. Central Asian states have signed agreements worth billions of dollars. Iran is training Afghanistan's railway staff, expanding rail connectivity, and proposing direct trilateral connectivity involving Afghanistan and China. Russia is set to remove the Taliban from its list of terrorist organisations. The Saudi Arabian embassy has resumed full operations.

Unlike China, which devised its Afghan policy in such a way that relations would remain unaffected regardless of who ruled the country, the Pakistani military had a history of interference, attempted to install friendly governments, and regarded Afghanistan as its backyard. A Pakistani general who infamously termed Afghanistan a "strategic depth" reflects this mindset. The Pakistani military, actively involved in the US war against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, created the Taliban in 1996. Its double game during the US war on terror by supporting both the US and the Taliban simultaneously manifested its policy of interference.

China's proactive engagement with the Taliban is occurring alongside Pakistan's deteriorating relationship with the group. This is another sign of growing lukewarmness in a decades-old "all-weather" friendship. These diverging perspectives may delay, if not completely derail, the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan. Afghanistan was the only country to which CPEC

was officially extended and pursued since 2017. Given the Taliban's adamant position, China is unlikely to voluntarily offer a mediatory role. The evolving situation, if not handled properly, may lead to instability affecting regional connectivity.

The article was first published at Think China, Singapore, January.12, 2025, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/afghanistan-new-fault-line-china-pakistan-relationships>.

About Author



Dr. Ghulam Ali is currently Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. Before joining RCAS, he was Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, PR China. He obtained his PhD from Monash University in Australia in 2013 and his Postdoc from Peking University, China. He is the author, editor or co-editor of four books: *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics*(London: Routledge, 2022); *Perspectives on Contemporary Pakistan: Governance, Development and Environment*(London: Routledge, 2020); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer, 2022); *China-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Analysis*(Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017). His articles have been published in SSCI-and Scopus-indexed journals such as *Issues&Studies*, *The Pacific Review*, and *Pacific Focus*. Email: ghulamali74@yahoo.com.