



The Position of Afghanistan in China's Belt and Road Initiative Project

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Abstract

Afghanistan, neighboring China and located at the heart of Asia, holds significant transit advantages and economic, political, and security importance for all regional and extra-regional countries. Given its economic capacity, China aims to supervise and maintain trade relations with countries in South and West Asia and Europe through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Afghanistan's geographic proximity to surrounding territories offers an optimal route for implementing and consolidating China's economic, political, and security strategies. Moreover, China seeks an alternative to the Malacca Strait, which is largely monitored by India, a regional rival. This article explores the question of Afghanistan's position in China's Belt and Road Initiative through an analytical and descriptive approach. Given the security situation in Kashmir, the Indo-Pak conflict, and instability in Central Asian countries, China considers Afghanistan – despite its geographic challenges and proximity to the Middle East, Europe, and open seas – as a key strategic option in its long-term economic and political planning.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Belt and Road Initiative Project, China.

Introduction

The geopolitics of Afghanistan and its fundamental position as a corridor for geo-economics and geopolitical connectivity between East and West – along with its involvement in Central Asian electricity, gas, and oil transit projects – have made it strategically important to China. Afghanistan is considered a strategic border transit corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative that can provide a safer and more economical route for linking the Greater Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and even Europe. Given China's economic strategy in revitalizing the Silk Road under the new Belt and Road name, Afghanistan's role in advancing this project in its geography is significant. This article, using an analytical and descriptive methodology and credible academic research, examines Afghanistan's role and China's interest in this geography from economic, political, and security perspectives based on the Belt and Road Initiative.

One of the primary challenges for powerful economies is facilitating economic infrastructure and finding affordable and secure routes for easy commercial goods transportation, which greatly influences governmental decisions in economic and trade relations. This issue is critical for powerful economies like the People's Republic of China, which is reviving its regional and global influence. More than 60% of China's trade with Western and Greater Middle East countries currently passes through the Malacca Strait, directly monitored by India—a regional and international rival—leading to tensions. Therefore, China seeks a safer, alternative overland and rail route, similar to Western standards. In this context, Afghanistan is regarded as the best transit route and closest path connecting China to West Asia, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea basin, and Europe. Thus, this research investigates Afghanistan's role within China's Belt and Road Initiative project and how Afghanistan fits into China's long-term economic, political, and security strategy considerations.

Considering the prevailing security environment in Kashmir, ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan, and instability in southern Tajikistan, China views Afghanistan — despite its challenging topography and geographic conditions — as a strategic option in its long-term plans to approach the Middle East (the global energy center), Europe, and open seas. Afghanistan is assessed as more controllable and balanced compared to neighboring countries for implementing China's economic-trade, political, and security strategies within the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

Comprehensive research and studies have been conducted on China's economic and trade activities. The importance of this study lies in focusing specifically on Afghanistan's position within the large-scale Belt and Road Initiative project, one of the biggest current global programs.

Historical Background of the Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Silk Road in past centuries was not only a trade route but also a channel for the transfer of culture, religion, and technology. Afghanistan, especially during the Achaemenid, Kushan, and Timurid periods, held a pivotal place in this route. Its location connecting China to Central Asia and Iran made caravans and merchants cross through this land (Wang, 2019: p.22).

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative. This plan includes the "Silk Road Economic Belt" (land route) and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road." China's objective is to create an extensive network of railways, roads, ports, and energy lines covering 65 countries and more than 60% of the world's population (Rolland, 2017: p.18).

Program Proposal or Initiative: Over two thousand years ago, Emperor Zhang of China established the Silk Road, a route for trading Chinese goods from west to east. In the modern era, in 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed a complex transportation network comprising roads, railways, pipelines, and digital networks connecting China and Central Asia to West Asia and Europe, aimed at economic cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative, discussed at China's State Council in 2015, passes through approximately 65 countries across three continents, with an estimated trade volume of 21 trillion dollars (Sheida, 2019: p.5).

As noted earlier, China's foreign policy, diverging from the Cold War ideology of Marxism-Leninism and Maoist interpretations, has risen chiefly in opposition to international norms, confronting the United States and seeking an independent global identity since the 1960s. Accordingly, China desires a more independent, cost-effective

commercial and military passageway, and Afghanistan's adjacency makes it a vital transit option for this massive initiative (Sazmand, 2013: p.90).

For more historical background and related topics, readers are referred to "China's Belt and Road Initiative" by Wenxiang Zhang, Allen, and Christoph Lautmann.

Afghanistan and Major Regional and Transregional Projects: The Belt and Road Initiative connects China to Europe and Africa through a network of roads, railways, power lines, ports, pipelines, and fiber optics requiring \$8 trillion in investment. This ambitious plan covers two-thirds of the world population and about 65 countries, attracting U.S. opposition due to economic rivalry. The U.S. proposed a competing "New Silk Road" initiative with limited details. The Chabahar port project, involving India, Afghanistan, and Iran, operational since late 2018, links Afghanistan to open seas. The "Lapis Lazuli Route," initiated by Afghanistan with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, opened in 2018, reduces Afghanistan's reliance on Pakistani ports, providing access to European markets. Though initially excluded, Afghanistan expressed interest in joining the BRI, with China and Pakistan aiming to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan. Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry leadership has discussed infrastructure development and trilateral cooperation within the BRI framework.

Material and Method

This article employs analytical and descriptive methods, utilizing credible research books and articles to examine Afghanistan's position within China's Belt and Road Initiative project.

Political-Security Context

Afghanistan has endured decades of conflict, ranking as the second most insecure country globally in 2018 after Syria (GPI). Post recent political changes, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan pledged comprehensive security, opening avenues for economic and political projects under Islamic law and national interests. Afghanistan's BRI participation could promote economic growth, reduce poverty and unemployment, and restore stability. Friendly China-Pakistan relations may help ease Kabul-Islamabad tensions and reduce Pakistan's interference and support for extremist groups in Afghanistan. Amid global Sino-American rivalry, Afghanistan can use an active, realistic foreign policy to leverage China as a counterbalance to the U.S., enhancing its independence. The increasing strategic importance of the Malacca and Hormuz straits accentuates Afghanistan's and Central Asia's importance to China. With full U.S. troop withdrawal, Afghanistan faces a power vacuum, urging the Islamic Emirate to strengthen ties with regional powers like China, Russia, and India and engage via institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on political, security, anti-drug trafficking, and migration issues. Afghanistan is currently an SCO observer; its full membership is hindered mainly by the previous NATO and U.S. military presence. Post foreign troop withdrawal, Kabul must play a stronger role in regional integration and demonstrate autonomy.

Economic Goals

Afghanistan suffers from poor infrastructure, lacking national railways, insufficient road and air transport, landlocked geography, poor electricity, urban and rural water and

sewage systems, traditional agriculture, drug production, energy shortages, and an unindustrialized economy—major obstacles to development and economic growth. Infrastructure improvement requires foreign and domestic investment, challenged by the lack of official recognition of the Islamic Emirate. China currently leads with \$100 million investment, a modest sum relative to Afghanistan's economic crisis. The BRI offers an opportunity to develop Afghanistan's infrastructure, based on roads and railways, enabling standardized international transport and fostering economic growth.

Afghanistan's economic goals within the BRI are summarized as: becoming a Central Asian international transit hub, leveraging abundant water resources mainly from highland sources to generate hydroelectric power (as in CASA-1000 project exporting electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan), exploiting vast untapped natural resources (gas, oil, precious stones, lithium, rare metals, coal, freshwater, uranium) worth estimated \$1-3 trillion, recently attracting Chinese investment in northern oil and gas sectors, and boosting agricultural productivity by improving water infrastructure, rehabilitating agricultural lands, promoting export crops instead of opium poppy, and replacing imports to bolster the economy.

Challenges and Obstacles

Despite vast opportunities, Afghanistan faces many hurdles: security issues from terrorist activities and lack of full governmental control deter Chinese investments; rapid political changes and weak institutions erode investor confidence; complex geopolitical competition involving the U.S., Russia, India, and Iran sometimes conflicts with Chinese interests; Afghanistan's war-torn infrastructure increases BRI participation costs.

China's Benefits from Afghanistan's Participation: China's recent economic growth has concentrated in its eastern and southeastern regions, whereas western areas like Xinjiang, Tibet, and Qinghai lag in development and suffer poverty, fueling separatism and extremism (e.g., Uyghur Muslims). The BRI aims to develop western China and alleviate Beijing's concerns. Economic progress in Afghanistan and Pakistan can restore peace and security, mitigating threats. Afghanistan's geostrategic location links two key corridors—China-Central Asia-Middle East and China-Pakistan—drawing strong Chinese interest. Afghanistan's rich, untapped mineral and oil fields can supply raw materials for China's industries and BRI infrastructure. The resource base also makes Afghanistan an attractive market for Chinese investment. Recent increased tensions in the South China Sea with Southeast Asian countries and military maneuvers by the U.S., UK, and Australia underscore the region's geopolitical sensitivity. Approximately two-thirds of global shipping and 17 million barrels of daily oil needed by China and East Asia traverse this area. Persistent conflicts in the Malacca and Hormuz straits threaten China's energy security and economic growth. Unrest in these waterways could be exploited by rivals such as the U.S. To counter this, China aims to diversify energy supply routes, currently largely dependent on overland imports from Russia, with Central Asia and the Caucasus also capable of supplying oil and gas. Middle Eastern oil and gas may be delivered via pipelines, too.

China's BRI objectives include

economic goals (access to natural resources and new markets in Central Asia and the Middle East), geopolitical aims (expanding influence in Eurasia and diminishing U.S.

dominance), security goals (stabilizing Xinjiang and neighboring areas through economic development), and cultural-soft power (strengthening cultural ties and China's global image).

Afghanistan can play a key role as a strategic link between China and South and West Asia.

Conclusion

For over two millennia, China's Silk Road facilitated trade, culture, and technology exchange. Afghanistan's location as a neighbor of China and a transit route through Central Asian energy hubs, adjacent to Iran, and connecting to the Middle East and Caspian Sea, makes it vital for China's BRI. Afghanistan's severely underdeveloped infrastructure—lack of nationwide railways, weak road and air transport, landlocked status, electricity deficits, and non-industrial economy—poses major barriers to its development, which the BRI aims to alleviate. Politically, the BRI helps address Chinese concerns regarding unstable and impoverished western provinces like Xinjiang due to separatism and extremism, offering a solution through regional economic integration. Afghanistan's geostrategic position in linking China with Central Asia and the Middle East draws increased Chinese focus.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Regional Connectivity:** Afghanistan government, with the help of experts in this field, from university professors to professionally experienced individuals, should actively negotiate with China and neighboring countries to ensure inclusion in key BRI corridors, especially rail and road projects, to reduce its isolation and enhance its role as a transit hub.
2. **Prioritize Security Guarantees:** A stable security environment is essential to attract Chinese investment. Afghanistan must strengthen internal security measures and seek regional security cooperation to ensure safety for infrastructure projects.
3. **Develop Infrastructure and Institutional Capacity:** The Afghanistan government should focus on modernizing railways, roads, and energy networks, while also building institutional frameworks that can manage large-scale BRI investments transparently.
4. **Leverage Natural Resources Strategically:** Afghanistan's vast mineral and energy resources should be developed in partnership with China under mutually beneficial terms, ensuring local value addition and preventing resource exploitation without sustainable economic growth.
5. **Adopt a Balanced Foreign Policy:** To maximize benefits and reduce risks from great-power rivalries (U.S., Russia, India, Iran), Afghanistan must pursue a balanced, multi-vector foreign policy while engaging with China, ensuring that BRI participation strengthens national sovereignty and long-term development.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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