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China's Accommodation of Taliban 2.0

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China has become a global power, but there is too little debate about *how* this has happened and what it means. Many argue that China exports its developmental model and imposes it on other countries. But Chinese players also extend their influence by working through local actors and institutions while adapting and assimilating local and traditional forms, norms, and practices.

With a generous multiyear grant from the Ford Foundation, Carnegie has launched an innovative body of research on Chinese engagement strategies in seven regions of the world—Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, the Pacific, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Through a mix of research and strategic convening, this project explores these complex dynamics, including the ways Chinese firms are adapting to local labor laws in Latin America, Chinese banks and funds are exploring traditional Islamic financial and credit products in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and Chinese actors are helping local workers upgrade their skills in Central Asia. These adaptive Chinese strategies that accommodate and work within local realities are mostly ignored by Western policymakers in particular.

Ultimately, the project aims to significantly broaden understanding and debate about China's role in the world and to generate innovative policy ideas. These could enable local players to better channel Chinese energies to support their societies and economies; provide lessons for Western engagement around the world, especially in developing countries; help China's own policy community learn from the diversity of Chinese experience; and potentially reduce frictions.

Evan A. Feigenbaum

Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Summary

After the U.S. withdrawal, China increased its involvement in Afghanistan under the Taliban 2.0 by pursuing both security and economic strategic objectives. This piece sheds light on the adaptive dimension of China's approach to Afghanistan under the Taliban. I argue that China's strategy is not limited to economic and diplomatic pressure but often relies on pragmatic, adaptive policies. Beijing is experimenting with new forms of engagement, an adaptive diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian approach, while avoiding overcommitment. By exchanging ambassadors, Beijing practices de facto recognition that preserves legal flexibility. This approach allows China to quietly normalize relations with the Taliban through steps such as multilateral inclusion, containing Uyghur militant threats, and integrating Afghanistan into its regional security and Belt and Road frameworks, all without large-scale investments or military involvement.

Introduction

Following the United States' military withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul and assumed comprehensive control of the country's internal affairs. As both a neighboring country and a global power, China, much like Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors—has been compelled to confront this reality of renewed Taliban rule.

Despite years of rhetoric, including a 2005 Shanghai Cooperation Organization statement calling for a "timeline" on U.S. and coalition military involvement in Afghanistan[1,] Beijing was not fully prepared for the speed and consequences of the United States' retreat from Afghanistan. However, China was better positioned for the change in power than other countries because it was among the few that elected to maintain its embassy and diplomatic presence in Kabul after the Taliban's seizure of power. China not only maintained formal and direct contacts with the Taliban, but also actively engaged with the broader Afghan society.

At one level, Beijing's active involvement in Afghan politics since the U.S. withdrawal reflects its own national interests, most notably to avoid potential threats that may emanate from Afghanistan, as Beijing believes they did in the past.[2] Yet China also accommodates the Taliban and adapts its approach to Afghanistan based on a broader acceptance of the peculiarities of the movement.

One Chinese expert has synthesized China's approach toward Afghanistan into two main pillars. First, China seeks to address its direct security concerns, particularly the potential threats radiating from Afghanistan toward the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Second, China aims to safeguard its economic interests in Central Asia, which it has carefully cultivated over decades and, it believes, necessitates working with the regime.3

China accommodates the Taliban and adapts its approach to Afghanistan based on a broad acceptance of the peculiarities of the movement.

Given these priorities, Beijing is willing to engage with whomever holds power or exercises functional control over Afghanistan or even parts of it, to Fensure stability on its borders and protect its strategic objectives. This has guided Beijing's outreach and accommodation of the Taliban.

Over the past twenty years, China simultaneously engaged with the United States,[4] the now defunct Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under two successive presidents, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani,[5] and eventually with the Afghan Taliban[6] by carefully avoiding any ideological or political constraints that might limit its flexibility to engage with all parties. China's sole guiding principle has been to pursue its own strategic priorities and to work within the framework of Afghan political reality.

Following the fall of Kabul, when the Taliban emerged as the only viable political force in Afghanistan's domestic arena, China pragmatically adapted to Afghanistan's political shifts. China's engagement in Afghanistan today reflects the grounded realities of Afghan politics and society. Understanding what the Taliban expects from and does with China is, therefore, a necessary framework for understanding Chinese policy, not the other way around.

Keeping Ties with Afghanistan

China's adaptation to the realities of Afghanistan's politics relates to ongoing security concerns. Shortly after the Taliban's resurgence in southern and southeastern Afghanistan during the first decade of the U.S.-backed Afghan Republic, China reestablished a network of contacts within the Taliban through Pakistani mediation.[7] As early as 2008, China had reframed its view of Washington's War on Terror by shifting its own focus toward Uyghur militant groups. The launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, led to heightened concerns over regional security, particularly along CPEC routes, which sometimes came under attack, especially in Baluchistan, Pakistan.[8] This prompted China to deepen its engagement with all parties along the actual and envisioned routes, which inevitably led its eyes back to the Afghan Taliban.

As the United States negotiated with the Taliban under the first Donald Trump administration, Beijing sought proactive involvement with both the Taliban and the Ghani government. On multiple occasions, members of the Taliban's office in Doha, Qatar, were invited to visit China. While these visits were not officially acknowledged by the Chinese government, they were reported by Afghan, Pakistani, and Western media outlets.[9]

While China engaged with both the Ghani government and the Taliban, it showed no interest in replacing the United States as a security provider in Afghanistan. After 2014, however, China became assertive in the diplomatic space. It hosted multiple rounds of dialogue with the Taliban and facilitated various communication channels between the Taliban and the Ghani government in Doha, Kabul, and Beijing.10 These efforts did not bring peace to Afghanistan, but provided China with an ideal opportunity to increase its direct engagement with the Taliban and to encourage its cooperation in countering Uyghur militant groups, offering economic incentives in return that provided a useful foundation once the Taliban had seized power in Kabul.

Meanwhile, China and the Ghani government engaged in limited cooperation in areas such as reconstruction and capacity building, which included training Afghan civil and military personnel and providing scholarships to Afghan students.11 These educational and cultural exchanges helped Beijing cultivate a pool of Chinese personnel proficient in Dari and Pashto and Afghans proficient in Chinese languages. China also established Dari and Pashto departments at leading universities to train Chinese experts on Afghan affairs and deepen understanding of Afghanistan's culture and society.

China Confronts the New Realities of Taliban Rule

After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, China adjusted its policy and became more deeply engaged in Afghan affairs. It increased its on-the-ground presence, extending activities beyond major cities, into rural areas and villages within the context of local Afghan society. Many Afghans witnessed more and more Chinese citizens visiting Afghanistan for various purposes, including investment assessments and tourism exploration.[12] However, the primary objective of Chinese engagement during this era of renewed Taliban rule has been to monitor the evolving domestic situation in Afghanistan by evaluating potential opportunities and risks, assessing the nature of Taliban governance, understanding the country's economic needs, and analyzing the internal power dynamics within the Taliban administration.

Beijing has nodded to Afghanistan's new political realities to a degree that other powers have not. It has invited Taliban officials to visit China on multiple occasions and allowed them to witness firsthand China's development and governance model. But adaptation matters because, during these visits, the Chinese side has shown *deliberate* respect for the Taliban's cultural and religious practices, including

As the United States negotiated with the Taliban under the first Donald Trump administration, Beijing sought proactive involvement with the Taliban.

traditional dress and dietary preferences. Taliban officials are hosted with Halal food and taken to mosques. To address concerns about religious freedom for Chinese Muslims under Communist rule, China maintains a limited number of actively functioning "official" mosques, which it has made a point of including in the itinerary for visiting Islamic delegations, including by the Taliban. Additionally, China has constructed small shopping malls and pedestrian streets with ethnic and Islamic cultural flair in cities like Kashgar and Khotan in Xinjiang. These sites intentionally showcase ethnic diversity and religious coexistence to Islamic visitors and China has sought to leverage this in its engagement with the Taliban.

Diplomatic Engagement

China has offered no conditional resistance to the Taliban in Afghanistan, nor has it imposed terms as the price of its engagement. Since 2021, senior officials from both sides have met at least ten times, in different countries. In July 2021, just one month before the Taliban assumed control of the country, a delegation led by Mullah Baradar, the Taliban's first deputy prime minister and a cofounder of the movement, visited Tianjin for talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.[13] The significance of this visit grew substantially after the Taliban's return to power. During the meeting, Wang Yi reiterated China's longstanding security concerns, particularly regarding Uyghur militants,[14] and Baradar pledged that the Taliban would take China's concerns seriously, form "an inclusive government," and "respect women's rights." Though these two things have not materialized, despite Baradar's pledge to China, it has not been a bar to further engagement. Instead, China has adapted to ignore Taliban's failure to fulfill these promises and accommodate Afghan realities as the Taliban chooses to impose them.

In a follow-up meeting in April 2022, Baradar and the Taliban's acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi assured Wang Yi that the Taliban would not allow any terrorist groups to use Afghan territory to threaten other countries.[15] In response to China's concerns, the Taliban have taken steps to exert greater pressure and control over Uyghur activities in Afghanistan.[16] In July 2021, China appointed Yue Xiaoyong as its new envoy for Afghan affairs, a position introduced in 2014 to deepen diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. Yue had previously served as China's ambassador to both Qatar and Jordan, signaling a subtle shift in Beijing's approach to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the U.S.-Taliban Doha Agreement. His appointment underscored China's intention to strengthen coordination with Qatar on Afghan-related issues.

China has offered no conditional resistance to the Taliban in Afghanistan, nor has it imposed terms as the price of its engagement.

Meanwhile, China did not close its embassy, keeping it open and active in Afghanistan through the turbulence of the takeover and into the new era of Taliban rule. The continuity of China's diplomatic presence allowed it to closely observe the internal power dynamics within the Taliban and smoothly adapt to the country's political changes. In January 2022, after the former ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to China Javid Ahmad Qaem resigned, the Taliban assumed control of Afghanistan's embassy in Beijing and subsequently, in December 2023, appointed Ahmad Bilal Karimi as Afghanistan's ambassador to China.[17]

This culminated in September 2022, when China became the first country to appoint a new ambassador to Afghanistan under Taliban rule, with Zhao Xing officially becoming the sixteenth Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan. Even though the website of the Chinese embassy in Kabul, which features photos of meetings between China and the Taliban, still bears the heading of embassy "in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan."[18] Reciprocally, in December 2023, China became the first country to formally accept a Taliban-appointed ambassador, with Bilal Ahmad Karimi becoming the thirteenth Afghan ambassador to China. China has, in effect, accepted and accommodated Taliban rule to a degree that almost no other country has.

China's Multilateral Acceptance of Taliban Rule

Chinese accommodation of the Taliban has extended to including the Taliban in multilateral dialogues and conferences on Afghanistan, including several that Beijing has hosted. These engagements often involve Afghanistan's neighboring countries, Arab states such as Qatar, and, in some cases, major powers including the United States and Russia. One notable initiative is the Afghanistan Neighborhood Dialogue Mechanism (ANDM), led by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The initiative brings together Afghanistan's six immediate neighbors and builds on an older process called the "Six Plus Two" that fell under United Nations auspices from 1997 to the birth of the republic in 2001.[19] On some occasions other stakeholders such as Russia, India, and Afghanistan itself have also participated in this more recent Chinese-initiated process alongside the six countries bordering Afghanistan. This multilateral approach helps China avoid direct conflicts of interest with other influential actors involved in Afghan affairs.

China was, in fact, the first country to invite the Taliban to a high-level international event. In October 2023, the Taliban were invited to attend the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation—signaling a new phase in Beijing's acceptance of the Taliban.[20] China has also supported the Taliban's inclusion in international forums, including within the United Nations Security Council.

Meanwhile, China has maintained cooperative dialogue mechanisms on Afghanistan with the European Union, Gulf States, India, United Kingdom, and the United States. However, following the U.S. pull out, Chinese dialogues with the European Union, India, United Kingdom, and the United States have largely stalled, while engagement with Qatar and Russia have intensified. China's limited cooperation with major powers portrays a new preference for dealing with the Taliban directly and weighing Taliban "asks" pragmatically. As a practical matter, China's interests in Afghanistan diverge from those of most of the mentioned actors. While Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-Khurasan Province (IS-KP) have been weakened in the past few years,[21] Uyghur militants have grown stronger.[22] Today Uyghur militants work as civil servants in the Syrian Arab Republic,[23] and perhaps in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Based on this, China has engaged directly to eliminate threats posed by Uyghur militants. For example, China launched the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan to strengthen border security through military cooperation and intelligence sharing against threats to Xinjiang.[24]

Where China does seek to leverage multilateral mechanisms, including those that it has itself initiated, is in weighing development and investment requests for Afghanistan. For example, the Tunxi Conference brought together foreign ministers and senior representatives from seven countries, including Afghanistan's six neighboring states and Russia.[25] During the meeting, China reaffirmed its commitment to providing development aid focused on grassroots-level projects and encouraged Chinese enterprises to invest in Afghanistan.[26] Particular attention was given to strategic projects such as the Mes-e Aynak copper mine and the Amu Darya oilfields—although all prospective investments are contingent upon prevailing security conditions.

Adaptive Economic Strategy

Indeed, Beijing is well aware of the Taliban's strategic economic vision for Chinese commercial and investment engagement. On August 19, 2021, Suhail Shaheen, the then Taliban spokesperson in its Doha office, told Chinese state media that the Taliban would seek economic cooperation with China.[27] The Taliban regime expects Chinese companies to invest in Afghanistan's mineral resources and contribute to the country's economic development and reconstruction. The Taliban, he added, hoped that China would open its market to Afghan goods after a Taliban takeover.

In this way, the Taliban has articulated a clear set of demands to China and a framework for aligning its economic objectives with its political strategy. By making clear that Chinese investment and purchases were expected, the Taliban raised the bar for Chinese engagement if Beijing hoped to have a productive relationship. It took a while, but in October 2024, three years after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, China initiated the process of granting zero-tariff treatment to the entirety of taxable Afghan exports, signaling a deepening

of bilateral economic engagement with the Taliban.[28] Chinese investment and aid to Afghanistan has so far focused primarily on copper, gas, and oil projects—extractive sectors that the Taliban hopes to develop. The Mes-e Aynak copper mine, valued at $4.4 billion, with a thirty-year contract set to end in 2038[29] is jointly operated by the Metallurgical Corporation of China Ltd. (MCC) and Jiangxi Copper Corporation Ltd. (JCC), who signed the agreement with the Karzai regime in May 2008. Together, they established the MCC Mes-e Aynak branch to manage the project, but progress had hitherto been faltering.

Ongoing political instability continues to discourage China from committing to large-scale projects. Nevertheless, investment remains one of the few viable channels for China to engage with Afghan domestic politics beyond the symbolic gestures of recognition and meetings. Following the Taliban's return to power and the imposition of international sanctions, particularly by the United States, large Chinese companies responded by setting up smaller, independent subsidiaries to continue their operations in Afghanistan and accommodate Taliban expectations for enhanced engagement. In some cases, they have transferred Chinese projects to smaller firms as a strategy to reduce the risk and impact of the sanctions, such as the Amu *Darya* oil field. By cutting the project timelines to a shorter period for implementation, China hopes to forestall any future risk from renewed political instability in the country.

Another notable example is the Amu Darya oil field in northern Afghanistan. According to the latest assessments by a Chinese company, the field is estimated to contain 250 million barrels of oil, with the potential for further discovery.[30] The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Watan Group (WG)[31] originally signed a 25 year contract with the Afghan government in December 2011 to develop the Amu Darya oil project (2012–37) but the contract was suspended in 2018. However, in December 2023, the Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co. (CAPEIC) signed a new 25-year agreement (2023–48) with the Taliban regime. Under the terms of the deal, CAPEIC would invest $150 million annually, with the total investment expected to reach $540 million over the first three years.[32] The Taliban administration would hold a 20 percent stake in the project, with the option to increase its share to 75 percent, a Chinese concession to the Taliban's desire to be a direct stakeholder and not the object of Chinese activity. The project was expected to create approximately 3,000 jobs,[33] making it the largest Chinese investment in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. There are several key distinctions between the original CNPC and the newer CAPEIC contracts:

1. CAPEIC is a smaller-scale company compared to CNPC;

2. CAPEIC is based in Xinjiang and primarily focuses on Central Asian countries;

3. CAPEIC concentrated its efforts in Afghanistan on the initial one to three years of project development;

4. The Taliban regime shared 20 percent of the stake, meaning it was directly involved with the project.

In July 2025, the Taliban terminated its deal with CAPEIC, citing the Chinese company's failure to fulfill its commitments.[34] The termination of this project did not affect the two counties› relationship. The project phasing and differentiation to short-terms help both sides to manage their interest. Even though these contracted projects ended prematurely, they show the effort made by China to collaborate with Afghanistan over time and adjust itself according to the political situation in the country.

A Political Signal in Earthquake Relief

Chinese aid to Afghanistan under Taliban rule has also subtly adapted to the country's political changes, although these shifts can often be difficult for observers to detect. A visible example of China's adaptation came when two earthquakes struck Afghanistan Paktia in 2022 magnitude 6.2 and Heart in 2023 magnitude 6.3, both cost a similar amount of casualties. Chinese government provided ¥50 million RMB (approximately $7 million USD) for Paktia case, additionally, the MCC Mes-e Aynak company provided $200,000USD in aid.[35] While for the Heart earthquake relief efforts, the Chinese government provided 30million RMB (Approximately $4.2 million USD), and the Red Cross Society of China contributed $200,000UDS.[36] Paktia is the Haqqani Taliban stronghold, while Heart is the primary Tajik ethnic area. Chinese earthquake aid was biased toward Paktia.

This discrepancy in size of aid suggests that China's humanitarian aid may be influenced by internal political considerations inside Afghanistan. In 2022, the earthquake that struck Paktia, Paktika, and Khost regions are strongholds of the Taliban's Haqqani Network, which represents the Haqqani family and affiliated tribal regions. So, in an effort to strengthen ties with this influential faction within the movement, Chinese aid to these provinces has been comparatively more generous. The MCC Mes-e Aynak company also appeared to use the occasion to build closer relations with the Haqqani Network by providing additional, targeted assistance.

In contrast, the 2023 earthquake that impacted Herat, Afghanistan's second-largest city by population, did not receive similar attention from MCC. The Chinese government's aid to Herat was 40 percent less than that provided to Paktia, underscoring China's calculated and interest-driven approach to humanitarian assistance.

China's Adaptive Future in Afghanistan

China's adaptive approach in Afghanistan is rooted in its pragmatic accommodation of the Taliban. In contrast to its own domestic policies toward Islam in China, Beijing has shown a notable willingness to engage with the Taliban's Islamic values and governance model in Afghanistan itself. Under new Taliban rule, China has prioritized small-scale and short-term investment projects that are better suited to the country's ongoing political instability. And these initiatives serve several strategic purposes. They allow China to build relationships with the Taliban leadership, including at the factional level. They also help China better understand internal power dynamics and engage with local communities.

By maintaining a presence on the ground, China gains insights into Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal structures, their interactions, as well as the geographic and infrastructural landscape of the country. Overall, China's current strategy in Afghanistan is adaptive but, in being so, serves its core pragmatic interest: preventing the rise of anti-Chinese forces within the country.

Security considerations are, of course, central to all Chinese investments in Afghanistan. China's insistence on favorable security conditions is closely tied to its strategic objective of pressuring the Taliban to eliminate Uyghur militant groups operating within Afghan territory. To pursue this goal, China has backed the Taliban in international forums, initiated multilateral dialogues with regional actors, and invited Taliban officials to visit China and observe its model of governance and development.

At the bilateral level, China has expanded its civil presence in Afghanistan by dispatching civil servants and encouraging Chinese businesspeople to visit. These efforts aim to monitor on-the-ground conditions and identify effective ways to implement China's strategic goals. Although China's investments and aid in Afghanistan remain limited, they are consistent. Unlike other global actors, China does not engage in proxy conflicts within Afghanistan. Instead, it leverages economic engagement and humanitarian aid with the Taliban to maintain influence while minimizing risk. While China may not derive significant economic benefits from its investments in Afghanistan, these engagements meet the Taliban's demands while enabling China to advance its security interests.

Chinese humanitarian assistance under the Taliban also follows this strategic logic. Aid is often directed toward regions where it is highly visible to Taliban leadership, helping to reinforce a positive image of China among Afghanistan's ruling class.

Security considerations are, of course, central to all Chinese investments in Afghanistan.

While China maintains an active and adaptive presence in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, it deliberately avoids becoming deeply entangled. Beijing is engaged yet keen to avoid alienating anti-Taliban factions or provoking opposition from the United States and its allies on the international stage.

About the Author

M. Ramin Mansoori is a research scholar at the Center for Governance and Markets at the University of Pittsburgh. He holds a PhD in comparative politics from Peking University. Mansoori's research primarily centers on China's foreign policy, the political dynamics of Central and South Asia, and Afghanistan nation-building and national identity. His current work investigates China's engagement with Afghanistan under the Taliban 2.0, and the Afghan (Durrani)–China (Qing) Rivalry in Central Asia during the mid-eighteenth century.

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