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The Evolution of Pakistan and China's Engagement with Afghanistan Since 9/11

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Abstract

This study examines how Pakistan's and China's interests toward Afghanistan have evolved since 9/11 in pursuit of their security and political and economic objectives. Existing scholarship tends to treat Pakistan–Afghanistan and China–Afghanistan relations separately and rarely trace continuity and change across the whole post-9/11 period. Using qualitative documentary analysis of national policy documents, trilateral diplomatic statements, Chinese primary sources, and Pakistani trade data, and guided by a brief theoretical framework, the study examines three phases: 2001–2013, 2013–2021 and 2021–2025. The analysis finds that security and reconstruction were pursued together from the outset. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) broadened the diplomatic agenda toward connectivity without displacing security. Furthermore, since the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, the language of trilateral cooperation has grown more specific. Overall, the study concludes that security and economic interests have advanced together rather than in sequence in Pakistan's and China's Afghanistan policies.

Keywords: Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, Geopolitics, Geo-economics, CPEC, Belt and Road Initiative.

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Introduction

Afghanistan has been a central concern of Pakistan's and China's regional policies since the September 2001 attacks and the U.S.-led intervention that followed. For Pakistan, instability in Afghanistan bears directly on border security, militancy, and refugee movements. For China, it raises concerns about terrorism, separatism, and the security of Xinjiang in its far west. Over the following two decades, the interests of both states have broadened. Security concerns were joined by diplomatic coordination and, after 2013, by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which brought trade, infrastructure, and regional connectivity into the picture. The study of China-Pakistan simultaneous concerns regarding Afghanistan is an important issue, as policy and media discourse on Pakistan–China relations frequently describe their relationship as an “all-weather” strategic partnership, a term that tells us little about the countries' wishes regarding a specific strategic space like Afghanistan. The label does not give as clear a picture as examining what both states have written and agreed to in the past. The study accordingly asks: *How have Pakistan's and China's interests toward Afghanistan evolved since 9/11 in pursuit of their security, political, and economic objectives?*

To answer this question, the study relies on qualitative documentary analysis of national policy documents, official trilateral statements, Chinese primary sources and Pakistani trade and transit data. This data is analyzed across three periods that correspond to significant changes in Afghanistan's strategic landscape: the initial post-9/11 period, dominated by security concerns (2001–2013); the period of geoeconomic expansion following the launch of the BRI and CPEC (2013–2021); and the period of recalibration after the U.S. withdrawal (2021–2025). The phases indicate shifts in the context of the development of Pakistani and Chinese interests and therefore offer the possibility of historical continuity and change analysis. Furthermore, the study analyzes the two states' actions through the prism of geopolitics and geoeconomics while also viewing the relationship between. The article proceeds as follows: a literature review, a brief theoretical framework, the material and methods used, the phase-by-phase documentary analysis, and a conclusion with recommendations.

Literature Review

The literature on Pakistan's and China's engagement in Afghanistan since 9/11 clusters around three interconnected concerns: security and geopolitics, political and diplomatic engagement, and economic connectivity and geoeconomics. Afghanistan's position at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the wider Eurasian region places it at the heart of Pakistan's immediate security environment and at the edge of China's wider regional strategy. Much scholarship examines Pakistan–Afghanistan and China–Afghanistan relations separately, while more recent work treats them together as part of CPEC, the BRI, trilateral diplomacy, and regional connectivity. Taken together, this body of work describes a widening security-focused engagement to one that combines security, diplomacy and geoeconomic concerns. As this review shows, a shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics is important.

The first phase (2001–2013) concerns security and geopolitics. Pakistan's focus during this phase was on cross-border militancy, refugee migration, and border management (Rafiq and Anwar, 2014, pp. 270–275), linked to the wider War on Terror and the strategic dynamics among Pakistan, Afghanistan, the United States. While China was not as definitive or aggressive as Pakistan, its stance was no less strategic. Beijing's concerns were driven by terrorism, separatism and instability in Xinjiang. Chinese used diplomacy and Pakistan as an intermediary with actors from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Clarke, 2016, p. 568; Encarnation and Fair, 2024, p. 592;

Ali, 2022, pp. 510–523). Toward the end of the period, uncertainty over future U.S. involvement pushed both states toward greater diplomatic coordination (Nadim, 2017, p. 9), though political mistrust and the unresolved Pakistan–Afghanistan border dispute limited how far this went (Zhang, 2022, p. 6).

The second phase (2013–2021) is considered a major expansion agenda after BRI and CPEC. Cai (2018, p. 832) and Beeson (2018, p. 243) see the BRI as extending China's use of financial and economic tools for geopolitical ends, and CPEC is described as merging the geopolitics and geoeconomics of South and Central Asia (Khan and Gul, 2024, p. 72; Jahanzaib and Ahmed, 2024, p. 157; Jamali et al., 2023, pp. 32–34). A common theme is that economic activity remained security driven: Afghanistan's stability was viewed as a prerequisite for CPEC (Jamali et al., 2023, p. 41; Khan and Gul, 2024, p. 74), and insecurity across Afghanistan was a direct reflection on the security environment of CPEC (Mushtaq and Shad, 2022, pp. 72–86). China's engagement also became more institutionalized through trilateral diplomacy, though persistent mistrust, border disputes and political uncertainty limited the pace of deeper engagement (Imran, 2019, p. 70; Jamali et al., 2023, pp. 41–42; Zhang, 2022, p. 3; Ali, 2022, pp. 508–509).

The 2021 withdrawal (phase three) generated a large literature on Pakistan's and China's responses to the Taliban's return, renewed security threats, and new economic opportunities. China's approach is described as pragmatic and diplomatically assertive, emphasizing non-interference alongside trilateral dialogue and economic initiatives (Zhang, 2025, pp. 11–13; Kaushiki et al., 2025, pp. 13–17). Afghanistan's location and mineral resources continue to attract Chinese interest, but insecurity, corruption and institutional weakness are seen as limiting actual investment (Encarnation and Fair, 2024, pp. 599–600; Kaushiki et al., 2025, p. 14). Afghanistan appears in this literature as a growing potential corridor rather than an established country. The overall strategy is one of recalibration and intensification of existing engagement rather than a change in strategic logic.

Research Gap

Above review explains that literature has expanded from security to a blend of security, diplomacy, and connectivity; and in all phases security has always been considered as a prerequisite and not a separate approach. The priorities of the two states, Pakistan and China, are also different. Pakistan is more concerned about militancy, border security, refugees and transit trade, while China is concerned about Xinjiang terrorism, regional stability, and very cautiously, large-scale investment (Rafiq and Anwar, 2014, p. 275; Ali, 2022, pp. 508–509; Rauf and Saud, 2020, p. 53; Hilali, 2019, p. 92; Siddiq, 2012, p. 10; Tahir and Hussain, 2021, p. 174). In this type of scholarship, however, the focus is on specific channels, policies, or turning points — 9/11, the BRI and CPEC, or the 2001 withdrawal — rather than systematically explaining continuity and change across them. This study addresses that gap by reading a series of official documents across the whole 2001–2025 period, taking the BRI's 2013 launch as the boundary at which connectivity gained analytical weight, emphasizing geoeconomics along with geopolitics.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs geopolitics and geoeconomics as complementary lenses through which to read and interpret the documents, as they show the state's interests. Geopolitics focuses on the relationship between geographical location, political power, territory, and state behavior, and is a study of geographical location as an opportunity or constraint (Agnew, 2003, p. 5–7; Scholvin, 2016, p. 14). Mackinder's Heartland Theory placed the Eurasian interior at the center of global

strategic competition (Mackinder, 1904, pp. 434–436), speaking directly to Afghanistan’s position between South Asia, Central Asia and western China, while Spykman’s Rimland theory shifted attention to access, coastal zones and the contest between land and maritime power (Scholvin, 2015, p. 11; Vladoš et al., 2019, pp. 65–66). The value of this lies in the explanation of how Afghanistan is important for its neighbors strategically; its weakness is the potential geographical determinism (geography determinates politics), which ignores political choices.

Geeconomics is based on the notion that economic instruments can be used for strategic purposes, that is trade, investment, finance and infrastructure, for geopolitical reasons (Luttwak, 1990, pp. 17–19; Blackwill and Harris, 2016, p. 20; Wigell, 2016, p. 137), with economic networks themselves becoming a source of leverage as interdependence deepens (Scholvin and Wigell, 2018, p. 75; Farrell and Newman, 2019). This is directly connected to the BRI and CPEC, in which roads, ports and transport networks are not just economic, but also security instruments; and Afghanistan is considered as a security context and economic space. One of its drawbacks is that it undervalues territorial security and political instability, which are factors on which economic projects in politically tumultuous areas rely.

Each lens has blind spots and is used together. Geoeconomic strategies are still integrated in broader geopolitical frameworks (Moisio and Paasi, 2013, pp. 267–268), and state behavior is increasingly the product of interaction between the two (Scholvin and Wigell, 2018, pp. 78–79). The possibilities for economic engagement are a function of geopolitical conditions, and economic capabilities offer new geopolitical opportunities, and insecurity can repel investments that would otherwise lead to interdependence. When applied to Afghanistan, it raises three questions that should be considered when reading these documents: 1) What does security mean in each period; 2) When economics and connectivity appear in the documents, do they extend the agenda, or do they take the place of earlier priorities; and 3) How do diplomatic mechanisms and planning documents relate to the two dimensions? In other words, the geopolitics–geoeconomics interests are not taken for granted but instead must be determined by the evidence.

Material and Methods

The study uses a qualitative, longitudinal, documentary analysis design, which is appropriate for examining the way in which state interests are expressed and furthered over the course of time. The design is based on the three analytical periods outlined above; for each, it compares and contrasts what Pakistan, China and Afghanistan have written, spoken and agreed upon in official documents. Where there are differences or no documents on a topic, this is treated as analytically meaningful as opposed to filling in a gap and explained away. There are three reasons why the Pakistan – Afghanistan relationship since the 9/11 has been selected for discussion. The case of Afghanistan is one of the scenarios for seeing geopolitics and geoeconomics play out, featuring both a heightened level of security concerns and increased connectivity relevance. The span covers meaningful change — U.S.-led intervention, BRI and CPEC, and withdrawal in 2021, enabling the design to reflect continuity and change. And Pakistan-China relations are often termed as close strategic partnership and Afghanistan provide a window to see if such close partnership is reflected in their documented interests.

Four types of sources make up the documentary corpus. Each state has its own priorities as outlined in various national policy and planning documents such as the national security policy and national development strategy of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the CPEC Long-Term Plan. Joint statements, dialogue communiqués, and press briefings by the three governments in the period from 2001 to 2025 show the evolution of the scope of cooperation over time. Pakistani government trade and

transit data provide an independent check on qualitative claims about post-2021 economic integration. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements through the entire period, including two Belt and Road Forum keynote speeches by Xi Jinping, provide a record of China's own statements independent of the joint statements. These are read in addition to secondary literature.

Documents were chosen if they included a formal expression of views on Afghanistan or views on Pakistan's or China's regional policy within or at the edges of the study period and then read comparatively across the series against three axes from the theoretical framework: security, diplomacy and economic and connectivity interests. For each document, the analysis noted if Afghanistan was mentioned and if any dimensions were highlighted. It was also analyzed if specific or concrete commitments were made. Where documents from different categories suggested different directions, both were noted, and the differences were analyzed as findings. The documents were purposefully selected for depth of analysis in a bounded case, which provided a window into what states have decided to say. China does not have one specific official Afghanistan policy document. Its own record is in the form of statements and readout by its ministers. Afghanistan is not represented by extensive documents of national planning, but by random documents and joint statements with Pakistan and China.

Analysis

This section presents documentary evidence for each phase considering the theoretical framework. This phased analysis is followed by a discussion which integrates these findings and connects them to the theoretical framework.

Phase I (2001–2013): Security Pursued Alongside Reconstruction

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a sequence of dated statements on Afghanistan across this period. Days after the fall of the Taliban, Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan told UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that the most urgent task was humanitarian relief and that "the UN should and can play a dominant role" on Afghanistan (November 2001). When President Hamid Karzai visited Beijing the following January, talks were organized around three aspects — bilateral relations, post-war reconstruction and anti-terrorism — and China pledged USD 150 million and restored its embassy in Kabul. When asked whether this assistance was linked to Afghan cooperation against ETIM, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson denied any connection "with great responsibility." At the Berlin conference on Afghanistan in March 2004, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing opened by declaring that "development and security are complementary and reinforcing to each other," organizing China's assistance under four heads: politics and security, development and infrastructure, trade and investment, and human resources. By the Paris conference in June 2008, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi explicitly welcomed the National Development Strategy "formulated by Afghanistan" and reported USD 170 million in assistance since 2002, with a further pledge that year.

On the Pakistan–Afghanistan side, the Afghanistan–Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), signed in 2010, established the legal transit regime — transport corridors, ports of entry, vehicle and licensing rules — that would later carry the trade and transit figures examined in Phase III. The Afghanistan–Pakistan Joint Statement of January 2011, issued after Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul's visit to Islamabad, reaffirmed the importance of implementing APTTA, named the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline and a Central Asian electricity transmission project as connectivity priorities. It welcomed the Afghanistan–Pakistan–United

States Trilateral Dialogue due in Washington the following month, and repeated the “Afghan-led, Afghan-owned” formula in connection with the newly formed High Peace Council. Security and connectivity already appear together in this one document, but the connectivity items are regional infrastructure projects with other backers, not anything resembling CPEC, which did not yet exist.

China and Pakistan’s security concerns overlapped without being identical during this period. China’s statements return repeatedly to Xinjiang-adjacent terrorism, while the Pakistan–Afghanistan record focuses on border management, militancy and the peace process. Overall, the diplomatic engagement was already substantial well before the 2013 BRI launch. Chinese ministerial statements across seven years, plus a bilateral Pakistan–Afghanistan agreement and joint statement reflect that. Connectivity language is present in this phase too, in the TAPI pipeline and APTTA, but it is multilateral and Central-Asia-facing rather than built around a bilateral China-Pakistan corridor. The baseline set here is one of active, security-conditioned engagement by both states, with connectivity present at the margins rather than absent, and with security and development treated explicitly as mutually reinforcing rather than sequential.

Phase II (2013–2021): CPEC, the BRI and Diplomatic Institutionalization

Just before the BRI’s 2013 launch, Premier Li Keqiang addressed the fourth Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan in Beijing (October 2014), announcing a new tranche of aid — RMB 500 million that year and RMB 1.5 billion over the following three years, on top of RMB 1.52 billion already committed since 2001. In his address, Premier Li Keqiang invited Afghanistan to “actively participate in China’s Silk Road economic belt initiative,” the precursor label for the BRI. This placed Afghanistan in China’s emerging connectivity vocabulary a year before CPEC’s launch. The trilateral mechanism was then built up in stages. An SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group at vice-foreign-ministerial level, chaired by China and established in 2005, met in Beijing in May 2018 alongside the newer bilateral mechanism. The first China–Afghanistan–Pakistan Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue (Beijing, December 2017) produced eight points of consensus: three cooperation pillars — political trust and reconciliation; development cooperation and connectivity; and security and counter-terrorism. Four goals included support for Afghan reconstruction and improved Afghanistan–Pakistan relations; a five-track Pakistani–Afghan Action Plan on Strengthening Unity; support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process; and endorsement of the BRI with a commitment to “actively discuss trilateral cooperation” under it. Furthermore, livelihood projects in Xinjiang; a pre-existing vice-ministerial counter-terrorism mechanism; and coordination between the two countries’ Ulema councils were agreed upon. At the same press conference, Wang Yi separately raised discussions on CPEC extension to Afghanistan “in a proper manner,” while stressing CPEC “shall not be politicized.” The second Dialogue (Kabul, December 2018) named the resulting design the “1+3” model — the Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue supported by a strategic dialogue, a counterterrorism and security consultation, and a practical-cooperation dialogue. Consequently, the three sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Anti-Terrorism Cooperation. By the third Dialogue (Islamabad, September 2019), the connectivity commitment had become concrete. The three sides agreed “to enhance connectivity by extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project to Afghanistan and jointly building a highway linking Kabul and Peshawar,” alongside specific livelihood projects at border crossings and a list of projects to implement the counter-terrorism memorandum. A fourth Dialogue, planned for China in 2020, did not convene until June 2021.

Against this diplomatic record, the planning documents on every side are strikingly quiet. CPEC’s own Long-Term Plan (2017) does not mention Afghanistan at all, and Pakistan’s Vision 2025

(2014) mentions it only twice. Afghanistan's own five-year plan for this period, the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF, 2017–2021), does not mention CPEC once in over fifty pages. Its only connectivity references are to the TAPI pipeline and a Central Asian electricity project, both predating the trilateral dialogue. Xi Jinping's keynote speeches at the first (2017) and third (2023) Belt and Road Forums — China's own most authoritative statements on the BRI, spanning nearly all of the Phases II and III — do not mention Afghanistan. The 2017 speech names CPEC only once among several corridors, and the 2023 speech, a ten-year review of the BRI's achievements, does not name Pakistan, CPEC or Afghanistan. The gap between diplomatic language and planning substance thus appears on all three sides' own flagship documents at once. The joint dialogue statements, however, grew steadily more specific about connectivity — from an aspiration to discuss extension (2017) to a named highway (2019) to the fuller package of projects seen in Phase III.

Read through the theoretical framework, economic and connectivity objectives entered the diplomatic vocabulary early in this period and grew more specific, but alongside, not in place of, security concerns, which remained a standing pillar of every dialogue. The second phase is best described as strategic expansion in discourse and in the naming of specific projects, consistently ahead of its translation into national and corridor planning on every side.

Phase III (2021–2025): The U.S. Withdrawal and Its Aftermath

The fourth Foreign Ministers' Dialogue (June 2021), held shortly before the U.S. withdrawal was completed, discussed cooperation in “peace, political, economic, connectivity, security, counter-terrorism and other areas” and commended “the progress made by Afghanistan in... connectivity and... trades through Gwadar Port” — combining security, political and economic concerns in a single formulation that anticipates the language of the later statements. Overall, the year 2021 marked a change in the regional situation rather than a rupture in the language of cooperation. A bilateral document between the fourth and fifth Dialogues adds a further data point. The China–Pakistan Joint Statement of February 2022, issued during Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Beijing, runs to thirty-three paragraphs on the full bilateral relationship, of which only two (28 and 29) concern Afghanistan — yet those two paragraphs already record an intention to discuss extending CPEC to Afghanistan and note the two sides were “ready to discuss with Afghanistan the holding of the China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue,” confirming the mechanism had lapsed since the fourth Dialogue and needed reviving.

The scope of cooperation then widened. The fifth Dialogue's Joint Statement (May 2023) contained an explicit, detailed commitment. The three sides reaffirmed trilateral cooperation under the BRI and agreed “to jointly extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan,” naming CASA-1000, TAPI and the Trans-Afghan Railways, “hard” and “soft” connectivity, and enhanced transit trade through Gwadar Port. China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson described this as the resumption of the trilateral mechanism after the 2021 change in Afghanistan's situation. At the informal trilateral meeting of May 2025 in Beijing, Wang Yi summarized seven outcomes, the fourth of which was to “deepen Belt and Road cooperation, promote the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan,” alongside Afghanistan's and Pakistan's agreement in principle to exchange ambassadors. At the sixth Dialogue (Kabul, August 2025), the three ministers reviewed prior sessions and focused on “political, economic, and transit” cooperation and welcomed the elevation of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations to the ambassadorial level. The available record does not repeat the explicit CPEC-extension wording of 2023 and 2025, though it falls within the same pattern of activity. At this meeting, Foreign Minister Muttaqi stated that

Afghanistan has pursued an “economy-centered foreign policy” since the Islamic Emirate’s establishment, aimed at recasting the country from “the narrative of security challenges” to “a crossroad of regional connectivity,” and stressed that “economic issues should not be linked with other matters” — an explicit Afghan-side push to delink economics from security.

Yet Afghanistan occupies far less space in the bilateral document that followed. The China–Pakistan Action Plan 2025–2029 is more detailed and concrete than any trilateral statement, but mentions Afghanistan in only one clause, setting out far more comprehensive commitments on trade, defence, technology and cultural exchange in which Afghanistan does not figure. The contrast between the wide-ranging language of the trilateral statements and Afghanistan’s marginal position in the bilateral plan echoes the gap found in Phase II between diplomatic language and planning substance. Pakistani trade data provide a more tangible view. In 2024–25, Pakistan’s exports to Afghanistan increased to USD 1.34 billion, compared to USD 1.02 billion in 2020–21, whereas imports from Afghanistan decreased from USD 577.5 million to USD 37.9 million during the period, resulting in a trade surplus of USD 1.3 billion for Pakistan. Transit trade, though, did not rise steadily, dropping from 153,480 TEU in 2022–23, when there were reports of closures in some borders, to 73,974 TEU in 2023–24, before recovering partially to 137,868 TEU in 2024–25. These figures indicate volatility and growing autonomy, not consistent integration.

Discussion

The documents collectively offer a three-fold interpretation. During the initial phase, there has been a clear convergence in the Chinese statements and the Pakistan–Afghanistan record regarding a simultaneous approach to security and reconstruction. Issue of regional connectivity is there—although it is multilateral and marginal. The trilateral Dialogue became increasingly specific about connectivity in the second phase of the process, starting from an aspiration in 2017 and culminating in the naming of the highway and the extension of CPEC in 2019. A similar trajectory was not seen in the case of Afghanistan in Pakistan’s planning documents, in Afghanistan’s own national connectivity framework, or in China’s BRI speeches. During the third phase, the language of the trilateral cooperation was even more extensive and explicit, and one Afghan foreign minister went so far as to openly advocate for separating economics from security. The bilateral Action Plan and trade and transit statistics also indicate that real integration is still limited, uneven and fragile.

The three phases are had different trajectories. Security is a constant throughout, explicitly mentioned in the 2004 wording, in the 2008 strategy, and a “standing pillar” of the 2017–2021 trilateral Dialogues and even named in the 2021 statement as an area of cooperation. Both China and Pakistan faced different threats, namely militants and refugees and border security issues for Pakistan, and Xinjiang-related terrorism for China. Diplomacy was already considerable in the first period (four Chinese ministerial statements, APTTA and contact group of the SCO) and was finally institutionalized from 2017 onwards, progressing via the “1+3” format to a series of regular dialogues, which culminated in dialogues in Kabul in 2025. The economic and connectivity language has become more specific over time, starting with multilateral pipelines (2011), to an aspiration to discuss CPEC extension (2017), to a named highway (2019), to a package of named projects (2023–2025), but without any real mention in the planning and flagship documents of either side, and with a highly variable trade volume throughout. The dimensions are therefore not moving in step: diplomatic and economic language has grown steadily more specific, while security remains the constant condition on which the other two depend.

Table 1: Summary of documentary evidence by phases

Phase	Security	Diplomacy	Economics and connectivity	Main observations
I (2001–2013)	Dominant in Chinese statements (2001–08) and Pakistani record; “development and security... complementary” (Li Zhaoxing, 2004)	4 Chinese FM statements (2001, 2002, 2004, 2008); APTTA (2010); Pakistan–Afghanistan Joint Statement (2011)	Present but secondary and multilateral: APTTA transit regime, TAPI pipeline — no bilateral corridor yet	China welcomes Afghanistan’s 2008 National Development Strategy by name; aid denied any link to ETIM cooperation (2002)
II (2013–2021)	Standing pillar of every Dialogue; anti-terrorism MOU (2018); vice-ministerial security consultation	2015 informal meeting; SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group (2018); Dialogues of 2017 (“1+3” model), 2018, 2019	2017: Aspirations to discuss CPEC extension. 2019: named Kabul–Peshawar highway + CPEC extension agreed	CPEC Long-Term Plan (2017) and Afghanistan’s own ANPDF (2017–2021) both omit CPEC entirely; Vision 2025 mentions Afghanistan twice; Xi’s 2017 BRI speech omits it
III (2021–2025)	Named alongside economic cooperation in the 2021 Dialogue statement; Afghan side (Aug. 2025) argues economics should be delinked from security	Dialogues of 2021, 2023 and 2025 (the last in Kabul); informal Beijing meeting of May 2025; ambassadorial exchange agreed	Explicit commitment to extend CPEC to Afghanistan (2023 Joint Statement; Wang Yi’s 2025 seven points); trade and transit volatile and asymmetric	Feb. 2022 China–Pakistan statement mentions Afghanistan in 2 of 33 paragraphs; Action Plan 2025–2029 mentions it in one clause; Xi’s 2023 speech omits Pakistan, CPEC and Afghanistan

The following two points follow the theoretical framework. First, the evidence indicates that the transition from geopolitics to geo-economics was not so straightforward. Security remained a precondition in the 2008 strategy, in the security-conditioned reading of CPEC, and in the 2021 formulation that linked the security and counter-terrorism dimension to the economic and connectivity dimension of CPEC. In other words, the economic goals were attached to the strategic environment without displacing security concerns. Second, geography remained the framework for the strategic thinking – the Afghan position between South Asia, Central Asia and western China was equally important to both Pakistan and China all along, but this standing did not necessarily extend to connectivity plans or investments. The disconnect between the statements of

Pakistan, China and Afghanistan, and their planning documents is the most regular trait throughout all three phases and is evident in the Pakistani and Chinese planning documents.

Conclusion

This study asked how Pakistan's and China's interests toward Afghanistan have evolved since 9/11 in pursuit of their security and political and economic objectives. It explored this development through three stages using qualitative documentary analysis of the relevant national policy documents, the trilateral statements, Chinese primary sources and trade data from Pakistan. These documents were analyzed from the theoretical framework geopolitics and geo-economics. The two sides have handled security differently from the beginning. Pakistan was much more affected by militancy, influx of refugees and border troubles, while China remained focused on Xinjiang and terrorism. During the first phase (2001-2013), the two sides viewed security and reconstruction as the same, with China's Foreign Ministry repeatedly emphasizing that development and security are complementary and reinforcing aspects of the same problem. There was already some connectivity in place, but as a multi-lateral track, not a tri-lateral track. It was especially focused on the Central Asian region (APTTA - the TAPI pipeline). During the second phase (2013 onwards), the trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue was institutionalized in stages – political pillars in 2017, a '1+3' model in 2018, a named highway and CPEC extension in 2019 – but Afghanistan was not mentioned in keynote speeches for the CPEC Long-Term Plan or Pakistan's Vision 2025. During the third phase (2021-2025), the trilateral statements became more general and the Afghan foreign minister explicitly stated a desire to 'delink' economic cooperation from security issues, while the bilateral China-Pakistan Action Plan lacked an Afghan clause. Furthermore, Pakistan's trade and transit data revealed volatility and increased imbalance of integration with Afghanistan.

The core finding of this research is that the security and economic interests have not followed one another but have also been intertwined. Security still had its influence on a strategic frame that was now shaped by economic and connectivity concerns. Security influence remained felt in a strategic frame that was now shaped by economic and connectivity concerns. The most uniform and clearly visible shift is between the language of cooperation and the content of planning, which is evident on both the Pakistani and the Chinese side. It was not a recent development, but was found at an early stage. These results also have implications for the notion of an "all-weather" partnership. While the documents indicate a form of cooperation regarding Afghanistan with regular discussions, there is no evidence of Afghanistan as a common priority in the national and bilateral planning documents analyzed here. Hence, in diplomacy the partnership is more apparent than in planning.

Recommendations

The main recommendation of this research is that Pakistan and China should turn the language of trilateral cooperation into planning commitments. The documentary record shows that connectivity is repeatedly named in dialogue statements but rarely given a place in national planning documents or in the bilateral Action Plan. Where Afghanistan is intended to be part of CPEC, that intention should be reflected in the planning documents that govern investment, transit, and infrastructure. Second, because economic engagement continues to depend on security conditions, cooperation on counterterrorism and border management should be treated as part of, and not separate from, the economic agenda. Both states have long identified insecurity in Afghanistan as a limit on connectivity; addressing it directly is a condition for progress on the projects they announce. Third, Pakistan should work to make transit trade more stable. The fall in

transit volumes in 2023–24 during a period of reported border closures, and the growing imbalance between exports to and imports from Afghanistan, show that trade is exposed to political and security shocks. Predictable border management and transit arrangements would reduce this exposure. Fourth, both China and Pakistan should keep the trilateral mechanism institutionalized and regular, since it has continued through changes in the regional environment, and should record its outcomes in more concrete and measurable terms so that progress can be assessed. Fifth, both governments should review how Afghanistan is treated across their planning documents at regular intervals, so that the distance between announced intentions and planned commitments can be tracked over time. Finally, researchers should extend documentary analysis to further Afghan and other regional sources, so that claims about how the three-sided relationship has changed since 2021 can be tested directly.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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