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China's Opportunity: Tunxi's Initiation of Economic Reconstruction and Practical Cooperation In Afghanistan 2022

Yusuf Raka Rifaldi¹, Mansur Juned²

^{1,2} Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta, Indonesia

Correspondence: Mansur Juned. Email: mansurjuned@upnvj.ac.id

Abstract

South Asia is a region with a high level of conflict. Disputes in the region are still a focus for the international community to resolve. Afghanistan is a country that stands in the South Asia region. The country's urgency has been apparent since the fall of the Ashraf Ghani government to the Taliban. Additionally, the withdrawal of foreign troops, including the United States, Britain, and their allies, has worsened the situation in the country. In this case, the Tunxi meeting tried to communicate with the parties interested in the matter. The Tunxi initiative was undertaken as a bridge to break the communication deadlock of the disputing parties. China led this meeting so that Afghanistan could rise again through economic reconstruction and practical cooperation in Afghanistan. Economic diplomacy is an analytical tool to see China's efforts in developing Afghanistan. The method used is qualitative to provide a clear explanation and more developed research exploration. As a result, China always uses the approach of being a mediating actor in every conflict so that the country can be accepted in almost all world countries. This provides excellent opportunities and benefits for China in securing its economy.

Keywords: South Asia, Conflict, Economic Diplomacy, Economic Reconstruction, Cooperation

1. Introduction

Development projections in Afghanistan are essential, given the government's fall under President Ashraf Ghani's leadership. This is important to discuss because the Taliban government took over the leadership. Some consider that the Taliban gained local legitimacy very quickly. This happened long before the Taliban seized Ashraf Ghani's power. All actors presented their existence at that time to gain legitimacy or recognition from all parties so that their interests and ideas could run well. The state structure consists of several actors involved in state administration. State actors in international relations are actors who interact in international relations, while non-state actors are actors who are outside the global system or state. Both aim to influence, gather strength, and mobilize others, including the Ashraf Ghani government, the Taliban, and other countries involved in the conflict (Margono, 2015).

According to Umarov's research (2017), China views Afghanistan as a strategic country in South Asia because of its position in the region's center. Afghanistan's strategic geographical position can benefit the Belt Road Initiative project. In addition, China's investment in Afghanistan is also considered to have an impact on controlling the Uyghur group in Afghanistan, which is regarded as separatist by the Chinese government. However, this research casts doubt on the success of China's economic diplomacy as it is perceived as not involving broader actors in the negotiations and the need for more cooperation between the Chinese government and Afghanistan.

The projection was initiated in the form of a ministerial meeting of Afghanistan's neighbours to rebuild the country. The third meeting of foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries was held on March 31, 2022, in Tunxi, Anhui Province, China. Foreign ministers or senior officials from China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan attended. The parties at the meeting stated that after years of war in Afghanistan, the country is now struggling with significant economic and existential problems and challenges in various fields. All parties pledged to support Afghanistan's economic reconstruction in humanitarian assistance, connectivity, trade and commerce, agriculture, energy, and Fields (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2022). The third meeting in Tunxi, China, issued an eight-point consensus statement that shared principles for environmental action and called on the Taliban to "cut ties with terrorist networks." (Zhou, 2022).

The Tunxi Initiative was established at the meeting, and financial commitments and aid packages from participating countries in Afghanistan were announced. To continue the work of the foreign ministers' meeting, regular negotiations were held between special envoys of all participating countries for Afghanistan, and three working groups for political and diplomatic issues were established for economic and humanitarian problems; and security and stability issues. China also held expanded troika meetings with Taliban officials on the sidelines of the Tunxi conference. The expanded Troika dialog format in Afghanistan includes China, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States, and first met in 2019 (Zhou, 2022)

To find out the projection of success, the author uses several theories, namely economic diplomacy, a mechanism of representation, communication, and negotiation carried out by states and other international actors, including entrepreneurs. This definition reflects a situation where many state and non-state international actors simultaneously engage in diplomatic engagement (Saner & Yui, 2003). In addition, *economic diplomacy* can also be defined as negotiations between states by state representatives to promote economic benefits and preserve resources, markets, technology, and capital (Chaziza, 2019). So, this is an opportunity for neighbouring countries to develop and have better connectivity with Afghanistan.

In this case, China's attitude towards world countries, especially developing countries, is an exciting form of economic diplomacy. Interestingly, China can promote any country, including the country's policies. However, China is reluctant to participate in conflicts in all countries. This shows that China's more humanist approach can accelerate its economic growth and expand its influence in various sectors and countries. In addition, China is known as a country that always represents the interests of its people living in conflict zones. However, the country is still given a place in a conflicted country. This is also done through partner countries so that China can provide financing and development assistance in their countries. China always offers its partners the best price in negotiations; military sanctions are rare. So that it attracts the attention of its partner countries. The Tunxi meeting is an excellent opportunity for China and its neighbours because Afghanistan needs assistance in reconstruction efforts in its country.

2. Method

The author uses a qualitative method to answer the research questions, where each problem discussed is responded to with a literature study of several journals, books, and previous research materials that observe the patterns of conflict occurring in Afghanistan. The author justifies this by saying that the qualitative approach has a unique way of handling data and is based on the problem of responding to textual data and images. To examine and understand the problem, qualitative research has many research models (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The author needs help collecting information through interviews or observing patterns related to the questions. The author used previous research and documents from other sources to answer questions about the Tunxi Encounter through the author's qualitative analysis. The researcher as an instrument to be validated must be considered according to the researcher's readiness to understand the subject, mastery of the issue, and willingness to enter the research object (Sugiyono, 2013). Therefore, researchers use the above methods.

Data analysis techniques allow researchers to make observations about the explored material. Essential or unimportant data is processed in the data analysis technique. In this section, the author wants to look deeper into the implementation of the Tunxi meeting to examine in more detail whether this meeting has a good effect on the tripartite and the effect on the world community.

3. Results

3.1. *Tunxi as an economic reconstruction measure*

Against the backdrop of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the third meeting of foreign ministers from Afghanistan's neighbours, held in Tunxi, east China's Anhui province, in late March, shed light on the gloomy international horizon. Foreign ministers or high-ranking officials from China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan attended the meeting. In addition, the "Afghanistan plus Afghanistan" foreign ministers' dialog and the "China-USA-Russia+" negotiating mechanism meeting on Afghan affairs also took place. The two sides drafted the "Joint Declaration of the Third Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighbours" and the "Tunxi Initiative of Afghanistan's Neighbours to Support Economic Reconstruction and Practical Cooperation with Afghanistan."

Based on the results, the meeting can be described as a joint demonstration that Afghanistan's neighbouring countries are doing their best, pooling their resources and coordinating their support and assistance to Afghanistan. After the United States and NATO successfully withdrew their troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, Afghanistan entered a transition period to end the chaos and resume governance. These efforts have nothing to do with America's massive nation-building campaign. Instead, Beijing aims to neutralize the damage done by its long-troubled neighbour and pursue more comprehensive measures such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to develop international infrastructure links, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a \$62 billion land project of transportation networks, energy infrastructure, and special economic zones to expand into Afghanistan (Bulos, 2022).

The eight-point consensus reached this time on the Afghan issue is a collection of all the measures, ideas, and proposals of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries to support the peace and reconstruction of Afghanistan. It reflects the general political position of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. All parties pledge to support Afghanistan's economic reconstruction in humanitarian assistance, connectivity, trade and commerce, agriculture, energy, and capacity-building (Jianxue, 2022).

They also announced the establishment of a mechanism for regular consultations between special envoys of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries and three working groups, namely the Political and Diplomatic, Economic and Humanitarian, and Security and Stability Working Groups, to follow the outcomes of the foreign ministers' meeting. Neighbouring countries, Afghanistan. This fully demonstrates the desire of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries for Afghanistan to return to the Asian family as an equal member of the international community (Jianxue, 2022).

Afghanistan's neighbours, including China, blame the United States for creating a situation where about 90 percent of the Afghan population does not have enough food; according to the latest UN estimates, the meeting participants agreed to launch the "Tunxi Initiative" to end hunger and reduce local food shortages (Sheikh, 2022). This series of meetings includes features such as collaborative work, coordination and collaboration, openness and inclusiveness, addressing symptoms and root causes of problems, and pragmatism and

accountability. It effectively searches regional and international hotspots with complex historical backgrounds. It has nothing to do with geopolitical games and focuses only on pragmatic cooperation. He advocates equality and free will instead of confrontation. No nonsense, but practical results. It is not about dividing the world into camps but strengthening regional ties (Jianxue, 2022).

Logically, a stable and functioning Afghan government is essential to the international community's assistance to Afghanistan to address the humanitarian crisis, provide crucial public services to the Afghan people and start the national reconstruction process. The US and NATO have spent 20 years wreaking havoc in Afghanistan, leaving only a humanitarian disaster.

The international community should focus on resolving the humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan, initiating reconstruction there and preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for violent terrorist extremist groups, and enabling the Afghan interim government to serve the Afghan people to take responsibility for their future and explore development paths that fit the country's realities. Tunxi is undoubtedly an essential stop on Afghanistan's journey back to the mainstream of the international community and to resume peaceful development and good neighbourly relations.

3.2. Problems with Afghanistan's Public Facilities during Taliban Rule

Today, diplomatic recognition is a significant concern of the Afghan interim government and a shared problem of the international community. This is also one of the wishes of the Afghan people after years of war and chaos. As a friendly neighbour of Afghanistan, China has always believed that Afghanistan should not become a failed state, let alone be excluded from the international community. Afghanistan has suffered for many years and lagged behind the rest of the world in its development. This situation must not continue (Jianxue, 2022). Foreign aid and cooperation mechanisms are expected to have a good impact on the future of Afghanistan. Development continues to be carried out by the Taliban government and neighbouring countries.

The development includes schools, public facilities, access to clean water, and others. Schools are one of the primary sources of conflict in Afghanistan's history. The Taliban public policy system is mainly responsible for this problem. This issue has attracted the attention of international education development scholars and practitioners, resulting in numerous studies on the relationship between education and conflict over the past two decades. For a fragile state like Afghanistan, education will continue to be a source of conflict rather than unity, especially in educational institutions that house female students. Girls' schools are off-limits to conservative or rural communities, which believe girls should not be educated (Qargha, 2022).

On the other hand, schools are banned from existence because of the symbolic power of educational institutions. School students have become the most potent symbol of foreign domination through modernization on the one hand and globalization on the other. It is this power of thought that poses a threat to the Taliban. This tension is manifested in a continuous cycle of modern school expansion and subsequent violent conflict. Historically in Afghanistan, there have been stark differences between rural and urban communities and their attitudes toward schools and education. In general, students of the madrasa system (usually from rural communities) have cautioned that schooling is a mechanism for conflict mitigation. National and international education development efforts have focused almost exclusively on strategic approaches to expanding access to schooling without considering the relationship between schooling and conflict.

The education problem in Afghanistan results from a government system that needs to pay more attention to the importance of human resource development. The Islamic education curriculum has stayed the same over the years. The findings are discussed concerning education, gender, and globalization. Education in Islam, *tarbiyah*, is a lifelong process for every Muslim. This process includes reformation, development, and empowerment. The long history and the fact that structures and curricula remain practically unchanged in most Muslim countries are both assets and obstacles for contemporary Islamic education. Rational thinking and spiritual knowledge may be challenging to bring together. However, the idea of human reality as a social construction indicates that knowledge and reality differ according to the social context, whether Islamic or Western. Some educational

theories in Western thought, such as functionalist and utilitarian approaches, are still valid and applicable to the educational situation in Afghanistan (Karlsson & Mansory, 2007).

The Taliban government has sentiments against education because it is perceived as spreading values and ideologies that threaten their interests and erode Islamic heritage. Nevertheless, on the other hand, the Afghan Ministry of Education does not consider mosque schooling as education either. Almost all children attend mosque schools to learn about Islam and Islamic values, practice Islamic rituals, and achieve essential reading and arithmetic skills. The children are taught by mullahs, Taliban, or imams, none of whom have ever attended or been offered teacher training. The textbooks are inappropriate for the children's level and have stayed the same for centuries.

Afghanistan under Taliban rule is in crisis due to the deficient quality of governance and the inability of the state to function correctly in all services and sectors, including water. The ongoing water crisis in Afghanistan has only worsened under Taliban rule. This is just one of the many challenges facing the Afghan people, including lack of access to water and sanitation, mismanagement of already scarce water resources, and the government's inability to respond to water disasters and the impacts of climate change. Afghanistan faces an unprecedented economic and humanitarian crisis, with nearly 30 million people, two-thirds of the population, urgently needing humanitarian assistance.

The international community's engagement with the Taliban has primarily focused on addressing humanitarian challenges and the rapidly deteriorating socio-economic situation. This situation makes the Taliban's efforts to gain legitimacy among the Afghan people even more difficult. Managing water resources, especially the Helmand River, has become very important. Since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, several clashes have occurred despite Iran and Afghanistan's previously relatively good relations. In 2022, residents of Iran's Zabul province attacked Afghan merchant trucks near the border during a demonstration demanding more water supplies from the Helmand River. The water shortage was partly due to delayed rainfall in the upper part of the valley but also due to the diversion of most of the water from Afghanistan's Kamal Khan Dam to the Goud-e-Zele wetlands. The dispute was resolved shortly after a meeting between the two foreign ministers and a visit to Afghanistan by Iran's Minister of Waters in August 2022. These included increased rainfall, a very long monsoon season in eastern and central Afghanistan in the second half of 2022, and improved political relations. These issues are among the factors contributing to social and political stability. Despite public opposition, the Taliban allowed water from Kamal Khan to Iran (Faizee et al., 2023).

Since the Taliban took power in August, water officials from both countries have yet to reach an agreement in three rounds of talks. At its last meeting in Kabul in May 2023, the Iranian delegation called for a visit to the Kamal Qandam and Kayaki dams to check the Taliban's claims of subsidence dams on the river. The Taliban rejected the request. However, the Iranian news agency said it had released satellite images of the Kayaki Dam and the water behind the Kamalkan Dam.

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3.3. China's contribution to economic reconstruction in Afghanistan through the Tunxi Initiative

After 20 years of war in Afghanistan, the United States and its NATO allies have entirely failed the Afghan people and refused to maintain constructive communication with the Afghan interim government, frozen and seized the assets of the Afghan people, and tried to shirk their responsibilities for peace and security, reconstruction in Afghanistan. Such behavior is utterly indefensible from both a moral and international legal standpoint. Some American politicians have even boldly claimed that the United States left Afghanistan and did not fulfill its commitments because it needed to stop the bloodshed and preserve its national power to focus more of its energy and resources on containment to focus on China. This selfish geopolitical calculation has shattered the image of the United States as a "benevolent power" advertised by politicians (Jianxue, 2022).

In April, China led the Tunxi Initiative, which forced Afghanistan's neighbours and Russia to support reconstruction and economic aid in the war-torn country. In the summer, tariffs on 98 percent of Afghanistan's imported goods were eliminated. Air cargo services resumed last month, delivering pine nuts - Afghanistan's main export - to China, bringing \$800 million a year into Kabul's coffers (Bulos, 2022).

The recent hotel additions in the Afghan capital include Kabul Long, which is now Chinese owned; Customers pay bills and buy Chinese food at the ground floor grocery store using Chinese payment systems such as WeChat or AliPay as Western credit cards, and other free payments have been suspended in Afghanistan (Bulos, 2022). Then there is Yu. Standing on a rock eight kilometers northeast of Kabul, near shepherds tending their sheep, he is happy with the new Chinatown Industrial Park he opened six months ago.

Beijing's long-term goal is to ensure that Afghanistan does not disrupt the rest of the region or create problems for itself. Maintaining economic engagement will help China achieve that goal without bringing the same severe problems as Pakistan. However, financial opportunities do not necessarily mean stability. Beijing only has to look at what has been attempted in parts of Pakistan's Balochistan region to see the anger it can cause with tragic consequences (Pantucci & Waziri, 2022).

China's approach to Afghanistan in 2022 broadly follows Beijing's approach in previous years. Anyone expecting China to fill the void left by the US withdrawal will be disappointed. The economic downturn resulting from Covid policies combined with unprecedented nationwide public protests means China primarily focuses on maintaining internal stability. This also helps explain China's key security concerns about Afghanistan in many ways. The main problem of Beijing policymakers and many of their counterparts in the region is that the Afghan region will become fertile ground for groups whose main target is China, especially its westernmost region, Xinjiang. Although the Taliban have assured China that they will not allow their territory to become a base for militants to organize and operate against other countries, there are signs that Uyghur militants will continue to have a presence in Afghanistan. (Boni, n.d.). So this encourages China to make more efforts to protect its country's security from various sectors, including the economy.

4. Conclusion

Afghanistan's change of government from the rule of President Ashraf Ghani to the hands of the Taliban opened up opportunities for economic cooperation for surrounding countries. Among the countries with strategic interests is China, which utilizes the post-war situation in Afghanistan to expand its economic diplomacy. This made China play an essential role in the development of Afghanistan during the Taliban rule through the Tunxi Initiative. China led the Tunxi Initiative to reconstruct Afghanistan's socio-economic order through humanitarian assistance, connectivity, trade and commerce, agriculture, energy, and development. The economic aid provided

by China through the Tunxi Initiative shows that China's more humanist approach can accelerate the country's economic growth and expand its influence in various sectors and countries. China always offers its partners the best price in negotiations; military sanctions are rare. Thus attracting the attention of its partner countries.

The meeting of the China-backed Tunxi Initiative showed that Afghanistan's neighbours play an essential role in the country's post-war reconstruction efforts. They pooled resources and coordinated support and assistance to Afghanistan. As a realization of cooperation, tariffs on 98 percent of Afghanistan's imported goods were removed, and air cargo services were resumed to deliver pine nuts. The development also continues to be carried out by the Taliban government in collaboration with China and other neighbouring countries. The product includes schools, public facilities, access to clean water, and others.

The Tunxi meeting initiated by China is also one of the strategies for China to develop its economic projections for developing countries. These efforts are not only done as assistance. However, another picture is to create practical cooperation between China and countries in South Asia. China has solid economic diplomacy skills in dealing with conflict countries under the pretext of being a mediator. Regarding aid and trade, China always prioritizes cooperation and negotiations rather than imposing sanctions on conflicting countries. Not only that, China succeeded in encouraging representatives of other countries to make a declaration of economic reconstruction in Afghanistan. This is a form of China's contribution to the development of Afghanistan.

These dialogues help clarify and coordinate the positions of neighbouring countries and unite their voices in a way that can put more pressure on the Taliban regime than individual countries can. All countries and organizations interested in the future of Afghanistan share a common interest and position, both regionally and externally. No one wants to see an unstable Afghanistan that poses a threat to global terrorist groups like ISIS or Al-Qaeda. Moreover, all parties call for a more inclusive Taliban government, although their definition of inclusiveness may differ.

However, progress depends mainly on the Taliban themselves, who, for various ideological reasons, continue to follow principles that are primarily undesirable for the international community. Moreover, there remain significant differences between the interests and positions of Afghanistan's neighbours and between them and other international and multilateral actors, with the latter placing more emphasis on normative gender equality, human rights, and democracy. These differences are essential and cannot be ignored.

There is no alternative to international cooperation with the Taliban. Europe, the United States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have shifted their focus from Afghanistan to Russia's war in Ukraine. Afghanistan's regional neighbours have no such luxury for apparent reasons. Therefore, all efforts by Afghanistan's neighbours to deal with Taliban-led Afghanistan conditionally and responsibly can be the best hope for finding a path to sustainable peace and development for Afghanistan and the region.

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