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The Political Relations between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and China: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The political relationship between China and Afghanistan has undergone profound transformations from 1950 to 2021, culminating in a significant shift following the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in 2021. As a neighboring state and a global power, China aims to leverage its diplomatic presence to expand its influence in Afghanistan. Adopting a cautious yet strategic approach, China considers its engagement with the Islamic Emirate indispensable for advancing its geopolitical, security, and economic priorities. This study examines the trajectory of political relations between China and Afghanistan through a descriptive-analytical lens, identifying strategic objectives in their respective foreign policies. It explores the opportunities presented by these bilateral relations and analyzes the challenges that impede their full potential. The research underscores that regional stability, counterterrorism cooperation, the mitigation of international isolation, and the enhancement of mutual security and economic partnerships constitute the core pillars of their engagement. The findings reveal that the evolving relationship holds substantial strategic and economic significance for both nations. China's policy of non-intervention, Afghanistan's economic-centric foreign policy post-U.S. withdrawal, and the imperative for investment in Afghanistan's abundant natural resources present pivotal opportunities. Nevertheless, critical challenges, including the absence of international recognition, regional geopolitical rivalries, and external pressures, require meticulous management to ensure sustainable collaboration. The article advocates for robust and proactive diplomacy, emphasizing the necessity for joint initiatives to fortify bilateral ties and optimize shared interests. Enhanced cooperation in economic development, security measures, and regional stability will serve as a cornerstone for mutually beneficial outcomes.

Keywords: Regional Stability, Belt and Road Initiative, Natural Resource Exploitation, Uyghur Issue, East Turkestan Islamic Movement

1. Preface

Afghanistan and China, with their rich cultures and ancient histories, occupy a distinctive position in the annals of human civilization. These two nations, witnesses to various historical epochs and civilizations, were connected as

early as 2,000 years ago by the legendary Silk Road. Initially designed as a trade route for goods, the Silk Road evolved into a cultural and linguistic bridge, facilitating exchanges among traders and civilizations from the region and beyond. Despite sharing only a 92-kilometer border, Afghanistan and China have historically demonstrated mutual friendship and cooperation. Their earliest documented relations date back to the 7th century CE, when interactions between the two nations began to take shape. Historical accounts suggest that "Zhang Qian," an envoy of the (Han) Dynasty, was appointed to the Kushan Empire of Afghanistan in 128 BCE, symbolizing the early diplomatic exchanges. Additionally, Xuanzang, a prominent Chinese monk and scholar, traversed Afghanistan during his journey to India, visiting Bamiyan and documenting the grandeur of the two colossal Buddha statues. His observations later proved instrumental in exploring the region's historical and cultural heritage. From ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Sumer, Egypt, Persia, Greece, and India to the Islamic Caliphates and European empires of the Middle Ages, societies have engaged in relations governed by defined principles to achieve mutual goals. Historically, war has not been a sustainable means of resolving international disputes, leading nations to adopt diplomacy as a more constructive and enduring solution. Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the world has been divided into distinct political entities. Today, nearly 200 sovereign states exist, each interdependent in fulfilling its citizens' needs, necessitating peaceful and active international relations.

Afghanistan is no exception. As a sovereign nation, Afghanistan has consistently sought to uphold its historical, cultural, and religious values, safeguard its national sovereignty, and promote economic development. By adhering to international standards and principles, Afghanistan has endeavored to foster active relations with regional and global actors. Among these is China, a neighboring country with which Afghanistan shares a history of fluctuating relations—at times warm and cooperative, and at other times marked by distance and challenges. Following the political transformation in Afghanistan in 2021 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan's foreign policy has witnessed significant changes. In this context, China, as a major regional and global power, has adopted a cautious yet opportunity-driven approach toward Afghanistan. While recognizing Afghanistan's complex and volatile environment—characterized by instability and prolonged internal conflicts—China has sought to balance its engagement through measured actions in security and diplomatic domains. China views Afghanistan's strategic location and vast natural resources as critical to its security and economic interests. Conversely, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan seeks to expand its ties with countries like China to gain international recognition, secure financial aid, and attract foreign investment. However, these relations are fraught with significant challenges, including Afghanistan's precarious security situation, global concerns over human rights, and the influence of extremist groups such as ISIS and TTP. Managing these dynamics remains essential for realizing the full potential of the Afghanistan-China partnership.

1.1. Significance of the Study

The political and diplomatic landscape of Afghanistan underwent substantial transformations following the establishment of the Islamic Emirate in 2021. Assessing the political relations of the new government with major powers like China is of critical importance for understanding Afghanistan's evolving foreign policy and the potential for new diplomatic and economic partnerships. China, as a dominant power in Central and South Asia, is actively seeking to expand its influence in the region. Understanding China's objectives and motivations in fostering relations with the Islamic Emirate provides valuable insights for Afghan policymakers and political analysts.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to analyze China's strategic goals in developing relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and to examine Afghanistan's objectives in fostering strong ties with China. Additionally, the research seeks to identify opportunities inherent in the political relationship between China and the Islamic Emirate. Furthermore, the study endeavors to highlight the challenges that could hinder the sustainability of these bilateral relations.

1.3. Research Question

How does the political framework of relations between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and China contribute to achieving the strategic interests of both nations, and what challenges are associated with these relations?

1.4. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed descriptive-analytical research methodology. The data collection process is bibliographic, utilizing a diverse range of sources, including books, scholarly articles, research reports, joint declarations, and media interviews. By synthesizing these resources, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of the evolving dynamics between the two nations.

2. The Historical Background of China-Afghanistan Political Relations

Although formal diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and China date back to the late 20th century (1950–1960s), their trade connections can be traced as far back as the era of the Silk Road. Historically, relations between China and Afghanistan have been dynamic, evolving from ancient trade routes to modern political and economic collaborations. The two nations share a long-standing cultural and economic bond that predates modern diplomacy. Afghans have been familiar with China since antiquity. Political relations between the two countries began as early as 130 BCE when an envoy from the Chinese empire visited Afghanistan. Economically, the two nations became interconnected during the prominence of the famous Silk Road, which originated in China, passed through Afghanistan, and extended to Central Asia, Europe, and Africa. Religiously, during the Kushan Empire, Buddhism was propagated to China through Afghanistan, while Islam later reached Chinese Turkestan via Afghanistan. These historical interactions underscore the deep-rooted ties between the two nations (Khalil, 2017: 48–50).

During the late 19th century, Afghanistan became a battleground for the strategic rivalry between Britain and Russia, which sidelined its relations with China. At the same time, China was grappling with internal political turmoil, which limited Afghanistan's significance in its foreign policy. After the establishment of the new Chinese government in 1949, formal diplomatic ties between Afghanistan and China were initiated on January 20, 1955. Over time, these diplomatic relations witnessed numerous transformations, shaped by Afghanistan's internal political developments and external interventions. Unfortunately, the Soviet invasion in 1979 disrupted these relations, and during the Taliban's first rule (1996–2001), China refrained from recognizing the Islamic Emirate. However, following the establishment of a transitional government in December 2001, China recognized the new administration and reopened its diplomatic mission in Kabul. This marked the beginning of a renewed chapter in the bilateral relationship.

President Hamid Karzai made his first official visit to China in June 2006, during which he signed agreements to enhance trade and economic cooperation between the two countries. In June 2012, President Karzai visited China again, leading to a declaration of strategic cooperation that emphasized cultural exchange, education, healthcare, and media collaboration. His third official visit in September 2013 resulted in the signing of an economic and technical cooperation agreement (Sajadi, 2020: 301). On October 20, 2014, following the establishment of the National Unity Government, President Ashraf Ghani made his first official visit to China. Prioritizing strategic relations with Beijing, Ghani chose China as the destination for his first official foreign visit. During his discussions with senior Chinese officials, he emphasized expanding strategic ties, combating terrorism, organized crime, and narcotics, and strengthening economic cooperation. Four agreements were signed during this visit, including visa exemptions for political passport holders, humanitarian assistance from China, expanded technical and economic aid, and enhanced cooperation between Afghanistan's chambers of commerce and China's Federation of Industry and Commerce. In 2015, Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao led a high-ranking delegation to Kabul. During his visit, three memoranda of understanding were signed with the Afghan National Unity Government, focusing on security, infrastructure, and education. Additionally, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Chief Executive of the National Unity Government, visited China from May 15 to 18, 2016. During this visit, both sides stressed the importance of sustained cooperation, cultural exchanges, educational partnerships, and strengthening friendly relations between the peoples of the two countries (Fazli, 2021: 64). This historical overview highlights

the evolving nature of Sino-Afghan relations, shaped by shared history, strategic interests, and mutual aspirations for economic and political collaboration.

3. Political Relations Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and China

With the return of the Islamic Emirate to power in 2021, China emerged as a key regional player in Afghanistan. Although China maintained relations with the Islamic Emirate, it has not yet officially recognized it. China's strategy in Afghanistan focuses on political, economic, and security aspects, which are central to this study's exploration of the bilateral relationship, its objectives, opportunities, and challenges during this period. China has consistently aimed to expand its global relations, particularly in the economic sphere. A review of China's historical transformations in the 20th and 21st centuries reveals that its foreign policy is predominantly economy-driven. While the Chinese government has repeatedly stated that economic cooperation is separate from political relations, in practice, the two are deeply intertwined. To foster trade and economic ties, China often resorts to political initiatives. From China's perspective, regional instability is a significant barrier to economic cooperation, with Afghanistan being one of the primary examples. China is particularly concerned about potential security threats emanating from Afghanistan and views the growth of Islamist movements in Central, South, and West Asia as a direct threat to its internal security, particularly in Xinjiang. After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021, China expressed a willingness to cooperate with the Taliban-led Islamic Emirate (Zakeria, 2024: 6–7).

In 2022, Afghanistan experienced a devastating earthquake, and China responded by providing \$7.5 million in humanitarian aid to the affected communities. The Taliban publicly appreciated and acknowledged China's assistance during a press conference. In 2023, China became the first country to appoint a new ambassador, Zhao Sheng, to Kabul following the establishment of the Islamic Emirate. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs described this appointment as a testament to China's commitment to strengthening ties with Afghanistan. Ambassador Zhao received a warm welcome from Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, Acting Prime Minister of Afghanistan, and Amir Khan Muttaqi, Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs (BBC, 2023). Zhao Sheng also expressed his enthusiasm on his "X" account for building strong and deep political relations between China and Afghanistan, describing these ties as beneficial for both nations and their people. He commended the Islamic Emirate's successful campaign against ISIS, highlighting Afghanistan's capability as a responsible government to address regional threats. He reiterated China's interest in forging closer political and economic relations with Afghanistan. The ambassador also met with Sirajuddin Haqqani, Acting Minister of Interior, and emphasized China's policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs and respect for Afghan values. Zhao acknowledged Afghanistan's notable progress over the past two years and pledged China's genuine cooperation for further development (RTA, 2023).

On September 21, Ambassador Zhao Sheng met with Abdul Salam Hanafi, Afghanistan's Acting First Deputy Prime Minister, to discuss strengthening bilateral ties and expanding practical cooperation (RTA, 2024). In his "X" post, Zhao highlighted that Afghanistan is not a hub for terrorism, lauding the Taliban's efforts to neutralize significant threats like ISIS—achievements NATO forces failed to accomplish. He criticized misinformation campaigns by some regional and global actors regarding Afghanistan's security and called for support rather than undue pressure on Afghanistan. China, as a powerful neighboring country, not only maintained its diplomatic mission in Kabul after the withdrawal of foreign forces but also took three significant steps to strengthen bilateral ties, ensure political engagement, and provide humanitarian assistance. Sending its senior official (Foreign Minister Wang Yi) to Afghanistan, the Chinese Foreign Minister visited Kabul on March 24, 2022. This visit, under the leadership of the Islamic Emirate, was a significant diplomatic achievement for the Islamic Emirate, marking the visit of a representative from a powerful nation. The spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang Wenbin, described this visit as an important step toward maintaining regional peace and stability during a press conference on March 25.

In addition to the Foreign Minister's visit to Kabul, China hosted the third meeting of neighboring countries concerning Afghanistan's developments. This meeting took place on March 3, 2022, in Tunxi, eastern China, with the participation of representatives from the Islamic Emirate, China, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan,

Tajikistan, Russia, Indonesia, Qatar, and the United Nations. The conference emphasized sustainable peace in Afghanistan, the formation of an inclusive government, and the continuation of humanitarian assistance to the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The third milestone was the acceptance of the Islamic Emirate's diplomats. Wang Yi's visit to Kabul signaled greater diplomatic interaction and political relations between the two countries. On April 4, 2022, China agreed to accept the Islamic Emirate's diplomats in Beijing, becoming the first country to recognize Mr. Asadullah Bilal Karimi as the Extraordinary Representative and Senior Ambassador of the Islamic Emirate on January 30, 2024 (Azadi, 2023).

As mentioned earlier, in the modern era, no country can pursue and achieve its goals in isolation or seclusion. It is essential to establish formal relations with other nations. The priority of every country's foreign policy and diplomatic relations is fostering excellent ties and engagement with regional neighbors. Countries strive to interact with their neighbors in foreign relations to create opportunities for further cooperation. In global relations and the international system, nations in the same geographical region are affected by one another's developments and conditions. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and China are situated in a shared historical and geographical zone, and since 2021, their relations have been progressing positively. Despite the international sanctions and pressures on the Islamic Emirate, the reasons behind the strengthening of these ties are discussed below:

1. *China's Strategic Goals as a Regional and Global Power:*

As a regional and global power, China aims to ensure stability and security in its neighborhood, which is crucial for protecting its economic and political interests. China seeks to expand its major projects, such as the "Belt and Road Initiative," in a stable region. Afghanistan lies along the route of this strategic plan, making its stability and security vital for China. Being Afghanistan's neighbor, China is concerned about potential insecurity and instability in the country. If instability and security problems arise in Afghanistan, they could also threaten the security of China's western provinces (Xinjiang). Maintaining good relations with the Islamic Emirate reassures China that this government will help prevent security threats and instability. China believes that fostering relations with the Islamic Emirate can control potential threats (terrorist activities, drug trafficking, and organized crimes) that could arise from Afghanistan in case of instability (Wishnick, 2012: 86).

2. *The Islamic Emirate's Foreign Policy:*

The Islamic Emirate's foreign policy, based on principles of economic relations and focused cooperation, has significantly contributed to the expansion of relations between Afghanistan and neighboring countries, particularly China. This policy shifts away from political complexities, focusing solely on economic interests, offering two fundamental benefits for the Islamic Emirate:

- Strengthening relations with China, a strong economic power in the region, without political sensitivities and complex global issues.
- Enhancing Afghanistan's economy under the shadow of Chinese projects and benefiting from various economic opportunities. Through these economic relations, the Islamic Emirate has managed to create a positive and trustworthy environment for Afghanistan, especially in trade and investment. Increased trade relations have generated economic growth opportunities, improving the country's overall economy (Tasleem, 1403).

3. *China's Non-Interference Principle in Foreign Policy:*

China's foreign policy emphasizes non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. This principle allows China to stay away from political and military disputes, focusing on economic and trade cooperation instead (Institute, 2021). China's relations with the Islamic Emirate also expand under this strategic principle, emphasizing mutual economic interests and cooperation over direct involvement in Afghanistan's internal matters. This approach enables China to establish itself as a vital economic and trade partner with Afghanistan while avoiding sensitivities and political issues that may arise from interference.

China's approach has two main advantages:

- Strengthening its influence as a long-term economic partner with Afghanistan, as the Islamic Emirate benefits from China's support and investment in various sectors.
- Avoiding international criticisms and sensitivities arising from direct intervention in Afghanistan, enhancing China's regional credibility regarding Afghanistan and the region.

China formally enshrined this principle of "non-interference in internal affairs" in 1945 under the "Five Principles." These principles, introduced jointly with India, include respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefits, and peaceful coexistence. China reiterated this principle in the United Nations, advocating for international peace and order through non-interference. For instance, China refrained from intervening in Libya and Syria's internal crises in 2011, emphasizing that each country should determine its political future. Regarding Afghanistan, China has consistently supported the notion that the country should control its affairs independently, avoiding interference in the Islamic Emirate's internal matters while focusing on economic cooperation. This approach makes China's policy credible and reliable for the region's countries (Institute 2021 Weatherhead East Asian).

4. *Afghanistan's Strategic Location:*

Afghanistan's geographical position forms its fundamental strategic significance, as it lies at the crossroads of Central, South, and West Asia, connecting the three major economic markets of Asia. Afghanistan is located along several critical trade routes (Belt and Road Initiative, and the South and Central Asia energy corridor), which China aims to utilize for transit, trade, and energy transportation. This unique location allows Afghanistan to play a vital role in economic, political, and security interests of various international and regional nations. Afghanistan's position has made it a focal point for security challenges like terrorism and drug trafficking, affecting neighboring countries (China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan). Therefore, these nations, particularly China, seek a presence in Afghanistan (Khan, 2015: 5-6).

All nations pursue objectives in their foreign relations and policies based on their national interests. The political relations between China and the Islamic Emirate are no exception. This discussion explores the strategic goals pursued by these two countries in their political relations.

4. The Role of China in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

Due to its regional and global influence and substantial economic potential, China holds a special and key position in the foreign policy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. With the rise of the Islamic Emirate, Afghanistan's foreign policy has shifted, emphasizing national security within the country, ensuring that Afghan territory is not used against other nations, maintaining relations and positive interactions with all countries, cooperating with international organizations and institutions to achieve global peace and security, utilizing regional economic capacities for the development of Afghanistan and the region, leveraging Afghanistan's geopolitical capacity to connect regional and international economic plans and projects, and aligning its foreign policy with the principles of neutrality and independence (Mohammadi, 1402: 134) (Dolatzi, 1401: 24). Considering these principles, Afghanistan has made efforts to maintain strong relations with China. In the new relationship, Afghanistan and China have developed close cooperation in several areas of foreign policy, which are outlined as follows: expanding and strengthening bilateral relations, combating drug trafficking, enhancing cultural ties, expanding economic cooperation, playing a constructive role in regional economic opportunities, and ensuring coordination in these areas (Liaqat, 2023).

4.1. The Goals and Benefits of The Islamic Emirate from the Political Relations of The Two Countries

The benefits and objectives of political relations between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and China are based on several important factors, largely shaped by the political, economic, and security needs of the Islamic Emirate. As a major power, China can offer various advantages to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Here, we examine the goals of the Islamic Emirate and the benefits of political relations with China:

1. *International Legitimacy and Reducing Political Isolation:*

Although China has not yet officially recognized the Islamic Emirate, relations with this country provide a path toward gaining legitimacy. As a global power, China holds significant influence in international economic and political organizations. Support from China could send a message to other countries, encouraging them to recognize Afghanistan as a legitimate and recognized government. China's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council allows it to veto decisions, and its support in

international organizations may play a key role in reducing the Islamic Emirate's political isolation. For example, China has previously used its veto power to block international sanctions against countries like Syria, Iran, and Myanmar, to maintain its economic and political ties with them. The Islamic Emirate hopes that China will use its veto power to prevent additional sanctions in the future, such as those imposed on the travel bans of certain officials (e.g., Acting Minister of the Interior Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani, Political Deputy Mullah Abdul Kabir, Head of Intelligence Mullah Abdul Haq Wathiq, Acting Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs Sheikh Noor Mohammad Thaqib, etc.) (BBC, 2022). Moreover, China's broader influence in Central, South, and East Asia could encourage other nations in these regions to establish official relations with the Islamic Emirate if China recognizes it. China could also help lobby for Afghanistan's membership in international organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which the Islamic Emirate is eager to join (Liaqat, 2023).

2. *Economic Support and Investment:*

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan faces a challenging economic situation, exacerbated by international sanctions. Expanding political relations with China offers a significant opportunity to benefit from Chinese investments and financial support. China has shown interest in Afghanistan's mining and natural resource sectors, and the Islamic Emirate could leverage this to extract its natural resources. However, to prevent China from exploiting these resources unfairly, the Islamic Emirate would need to establish a strong legal framework, improve monitoring and transparency, and create specialized teams and institutions. Encouraging the participation of various stakeholders and preventing monopolies would be crucial. Furthermore, supporting private domestic sectors in mineral investments and ensuring transparency in international contracts would help improve Afghanistan's economic situation. Joining China's "Belt and Road Initiative" could provide another economic opportunity, potentially generating income through trade and transit routes (Amin, 2017).

3. *Security Cooperation and Counterterrorism:*

The Islamic Emirate seeks security and military cooperation, aiming to attract China's assistance in providing military equipment and training programs. Although no formal security agreement or treaty exists between China and the Islamic Emirate, both countries have held informal bilateral discussions and meetings on security cooperation (International Crisis Group, 2022: 29). These efforts focus on enhancing Afghanistan's military capabilities and preparing for potential threats. Under this cooperation framework, Afghanistan seeks to acquire various security equipment, participate in training programs for Afghan forces, and explore further military cooperation possibilities, which would improve Afghanistan's ability to counter security challenges effectively.

4. *Humanitarian Assistance:*

Afghanistan is grappling with a severe economic crisis and humanitarian disaster due to political and economic changes. The Islamic Emirate is working to secure international aid through expanding political and economic relations. China's increasing support through humanitarian assistance over the past three years has been a notable sign of deepening relations. Receiving humanitarian aid can improve the economic and social conditions of the people, in turn strengthening the internal legitimacy of the government. While such aid is vital for short-term stability, long-term reliance on external assistance can have negative consequences. Therefore, focusing on domestic production and economic growth is essential for sustainable development, reducing dependency on foreign aid and strengthening the national economy (Umami, 2023: 68).

5. The Place of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in China's Foreign Policy

As we mentioned the place of China in the foreign policy of the Islamic Emirate, it is essential to examine the place of the Islamic Emirate from the perspective of China's foreign policy and consider the depth of the relations between the two countries. Afghanistan holds strategic importance for China. As a neighboring country in Central Asia, Afghanistan acts as a bridge between China and the region (Central Asia and Pakistan), providing transportation links due to its central location in the global transit routes (Wakhan, CPEC, Afghanistan-Central Asia route, East-West, and international trade networks). Additionally, Afghanistan, due to its unique geographical location, can assist China in achieving its political-security goals in the region (regional cooperation, combating terrorism, trade and transit security, regional stability, the creation of security agreements) and its economic

objectives (investment opportunities, trade development, transit and logistics opportunities, and the implementation of infrastructure projects). Afghanistan, with its rich natural resources and strategic geographic location, can play an important role in the development of industry and trade in the region. The place of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in China's foreign policy is primarily concerned with the security of Xinjiang, economic issues, the exploitation of natural resources, and transit benefits (Sharan, 2021: 2-3). China is concerned about the security of Xinjiang and the activities of extremist groups, and thus the maintenance of stability in Afghanistan is very important for China. Important indicators of Afghanistan's place in China's foreign policy can be identified in the principles of China's foreign policy, which are as follows: realistic neighborhood based on traditional values, historical commonalities, geographic location, and mutual support; support for Afghanistan's unity; support for a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Afghanistan; the need for regional agreements to solve Afghanistan's problems; combating drugs and terrorism in Afghanistan; prioritizing Afghanistan's social reconstruction through humanitarian aid and the transfer of China's experiences; considering Afghanistan as the gateway to South and Central Asia; ensuring regional stability; economic projects, investment, and competition with the West. Based on these principles, the relations between the two countries can be assessed in the short-term, medium-term, and long-term (Weatherhead East Asian Institute, 2021). Due to its strategic and geo-economic importance, Afghanistan occupies a special place in China's foreign policy.

5.1. The Goals and Interests of China in Political Relations with Both Countries

China's objectives in its political relations with the Islamic Emirate have several aspects, considering China's national interests at economic, security, regional, and international levels. Due to Afghanistan's strategic location and the political changes in the region, China seeks to achieve the following goals in managing its political relations with the Islamic Emirate:

1. *Regional Stability and Security Interests:* Within its strategic framework, China views regional stability as a critical and vital necessity. Stability in the region is a strategic and security requirement for China. As the world's second-largest economy, China needs regional stability to maintain and advance its economic growth. Instability in the region negatively impacts investment, trade, and the implementation of infrastructure projects. The country relies on energy imports, particularly oil and gas resources from the Middle East and Central Asia, for its economic development and strengthening. Instability in these regions threatens China's energy security and safety. Therefore, China aims to have economic cooperation and partnership projects to maintain its energy security. Additionally, China needs regional stability to reduce security risks along its borders, particularly in the Xinjiang region, where preventing terrorism and extremist groups' activities is crucial. An unstable Afghanistan or neighboring countries could create safe havens for these groups, posing a serious threat to China's internal security. China's active role in ensuring regional stability enhances its global status and influence. It also seeks to present itself as a positive global player, cooperating in solving regional issues and facilitating economic progress. Through these efforts, China aims to counter its international competitors (such as the United States) and build a strong and reliable partnership for its deepening economic and security influence (Khan, 2015: 5). These are the primary goals China focuses on for regional stability, and thus it strives to ensure security and stability in its neighboring areas to safeguard its national interests and strengthen its position regionally and globally.

China aims to increase its influence in the region and the world based on a global strategy (such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the development and establishment of international financial institutions). The stability of the region provides China with the opportunity to play an active role in global affairs. If regional countries are relatively stable, China can further focus on global leadership. Stability in the region allows China to center its foreign policy efforts on global issues like climate change, the global economy, and cooperation within the UN Security Council. With a stable region, China expands its strategic influence and emerges as an effective player in making key global decisions. Regional stability also enables China to strengthen its contribution to international security issues. In a stable region, China can actively participate in peacekeeping and conflict resolution processes, establishing its global standing as a credible and peaceful power. Stability provides China with the opportunity to compete with its rivals (such as the United States) and other Western countries on the international stage. In a stable region, China can rapidly expand its economic and political influence and stand as a key player in shaping the

global order (Du, 2016: 36-37). Through the development of cultural and diplomatic relations, China also increases its soft power, using stability in the region as an opportunity to project a positive image through humanitarian aid, cultural exchanges, and educational programs (Qanit, 2024: 661).

Instability in the region is an obstacle to China's increasing global influence, especially terrorism, extremism, and chaos. The Chinese state has a political strategy to influence the region that includes (security cooperation, economic investment, diplomatic relationship development, support for humanitarian and developmental projects, resolving existing conflicts, and maintaining global influence). A key part of China's strategy is ensuring regional security and expanding its influence in neighboring countries, which is essential for safeguarding and expanding China's economic, political, and strategic interests. In this context, Afghanistan plays a central role as it is located between Central, South, and Western Asia and is a critical transit route for the region. The stability and security of this country can help China safeguard its economic routes and transport networks from risks (CLARKE, 2008: 273-274). Due to its unique geographical position and complex security situation, Afghanistan has always been a competitive field for global and regional powers. The insecurity and instability in Afghanistan pose a significant challenge for regional and global powers, making efforts to combat extremism, terrorism, and the spread of drugs essential. For China, this situation is not only vital for safeguarding internal security but also crucial for protecting its international economic and strategic interests. To address these phenomena, achieve its fundamental goals, and ensure regional stability, China is taking significant steps to establish strong relations with the Islamic Emirate (Alves, 2016: 14)

2. *Security of Xinjiang and the Uighur Muslim Issue:* The Uighur Muslims are a Turkic-speaking ethnic group residing in the autonomous Xinjiang region in western China. The Uighur Muslim population is estimated to be nearly 14 million, with the majority following Sunni Islam. This group has historical, cultural, and linguistic ties with Central Asia, and they have been settled in the Xinjiang region of China for centuries. The Chinese government is deeply concerned about terrorism, extremism, and separatism in this region and claims that certain extremists and terrorist groups, particularly the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), are active in Xinjiang, posing a threat to China's security. In response, China has set up re-education camps in Xinjiang, which it asserts are centers for combating extremism and providing vocational training. However, international human rights organizations and Western media argue that these camps are, in fact, detention centers for the forced imprisonment of Uighur Muslims, severely restricting their religious and cultural freedoms. China is also worried that Uighur armed groups, like the Islamic Movement of Turkistan, might use Afghanistan as a base for their operations (BBC, 2022). As a result, China seeks to use political and security cooperation to ensure that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan prevents any links between Uighur jihadist groups and Afghanistan, taking serious measures against such groups. The development of political and security cooperation between China and the Islamic Emirate can effectively address these issues, ensuring the protection of China's security interests in Afghanistan (Surosh, 1402).
3. *Economic Benefits and Afghanistan's Natural Resources:* A key goal of China's political relations with the Islamic Emirate is to invest in the extraction of minerals in Afghanistan and benefit from these resources to meet its economic needs. Afghanistan has vast deposits of various minerals, including copper, coal, iron, niobium, cobalt, gold, molybdenum, silver, aluminum, fluorite, uranium, beryllium, talc, and lithium. The country also holds significant oil and gas reserves, mostly in the north, which are vital for China's industrial growth. Afghanistan offers China an accessible, affordable, and secure market for these essential resources. China has a strong interest in investing in these resources, and for achieving these goals and gaining control over Afghanistan's mineral markets, it is crucial for China to maintain a political presence in Afghanistan and develop close relations with the Islamic Emirate (Amin, 2017).
4. *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Development:* The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, is a massive infrastructure and economic development project designed to enhance global trade and connectivity. This initiative has wide-ranging impacts on international commerce and relationships, covering Asia, Europe, Africa, parts of the Americas, and Afghanistan. The goal of BRI is to revive the ancient Silk Road and strengthen connectivity and economic growth. China aims to use Afghanistan's strategic location to advance this project. Afghanistan, due to its unique geopolitical position, is recognized as a key transit hub for regional trade. Although Afghanistan is landlocked and has no direct

access to the sea, its location connects the economic circles of Central, South, Western, and Eastern Asia. Afghanistan played a significant role in the ancient Silk Road, with two major branches passing through the region, linking China to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Afghanistan can regain its historical importance and position in the new Silk Road (BRI). Given that Afghanistan is situated along two of the three key routes of BRI, its role in this project is crucial. One route connects China through Central Asia (Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) to Russia, Europe, and North Africa, while another connects through Afghanistan and Turkmenistan to Iran and the Gulf, linking the region to Persia, Turkey, and the Mediterranean. China aims to develop Afghanistan as a key transit hub under the BRI framework. To achieve this, political relations and security cooperation with the Islamic Emirate are essential, allowing China to secure its trade routes through Afghanistan, expand its projects in Central and South Asia, and enhance its economic influence (Wei, 2018: 361-362; Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023).

6. Opportunities and Challenges in the Political Relations between China and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

The political relations between China and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan present significant opportunities and challenges based on the national interests and strategic goals of both countries. China, as a major political and economic power in the region and the world, and the Islamic Emirate, as a new government in the region, both have unique opportunities and challenges in developing their relations. The following outlines the key opportunities and challenges in their political relations:

6.1. Opportunities in the Political Relations between the Two Countries

1. *Political Support:* China is making significant efforts in line with its strategic policy to recognize the Islamic Emirate. This support is crucial for the development of Afghanistan's international relations and for altering the political and economic situation in the region. By seeking formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate, China aims to aid in strengthening its ties with other countries, using its support as an example to encourage recognition from other states. China could work to gain support for the recognition of the Islamic Emirate from international organizations, such as the United Nations. This would be an important step toward strengthening Afghanistan's international relations and enhancing its cooperation with the global community. China also plays an important role in strengthening Afghanistan's regional relations, as improved China-Afghanistan ties could benefit Afghanistan's relations with neighboring countries (Umami, 2023: 70-71).
2. *Economic Cooperation:* The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers a significant opportunity for both countries, focusing on infrastructure development, strengthening trade relations, and increasing investment opportunities to drive Afghanistan's economic growth. Through this initiative, China can invest in the construction and development of roads, railways, and airports in Afghanistan. These projects are crucial for strengthening trade links and expanding markets. Afghanistan can become a vital part of the transit route between China, Central Asia, and Europe. This will facilitate the export and import of goods, enabling Afghan products such as agricultural products and mineral resources to access markets in China and beyond. The BRI project not only strengthens relations between China and Afghanistan but also helps expand ties with neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and Turkmenistan (Wei, 2018: 363).
3. *Security Cooperation:* Security cooperation between China and Afghanistan is of significant importance in the development of their political relations, as it directly impacts the national interests of both countries and the improvement of their security situations. The fight against terrorism and extremism is a key component of this cooperation. Afghanistan serves as a critical region for terrorist groups (such as ISIS and other extremist factions), and China is particularly concerned about the security of its border regions in the face of these groups' activities. China and Afghanistan could enhance their security capabilities through information sharing in the fight against terrorism. This cooperation would help in identifying and mitigating security risks. To strengthen border security, China could invest in the training and equipping of border patrols and military forces. This would be an essential aspect of both countries' collaboration

to secure their borders. Furthermore, through enhanced security cooperation, China and Afghanistan can develop joint strategies to prevent narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, and other criminal activities. China could also seek support from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and other regional security organizations to bolster Afghanistan's security efforts. These organizations could help strengthen cooperation between regional countries in combating terrorism, extremism, and security challenges (Qanbarloo, 2013: pp. 133-140).

6.2. Challenges in the Political Relations between the Two Countries

1. *Presence of Security Risks:* Terrorism and extremism are serious threats in Afghanistan and the region, which not only concern the Afghan government but also the global community and China. The presence of these threats creates challenges and precautions for the safety of China's investments and projects. ISIS and other terrorist groups play a significant role in the deterioration of Afghanistan's security situation. The activities of these groups, which pose a threat to Afghanistan's internal stability, represent a grave danger to China's security interests and investments. Extremist ideologies, which provide fertile ground for recruiting terrorist groups, are also considered a threat to China, as the spread of extremism and terrorism could endanger China's borders and security. The existence of these security risks may hinder China's investments, and China may be reluctant to invest in certain areas of Afghanistan, which could negatively impact the country's economic development. Due to these security threats, China may make urgent decisions regarding its long-term projects, which could lead to obstacles in investments and economic cooperation (CLARKE, 2008: 281).
2. *International Pressures:* The Islamic Emirate is not recognized by the international community, which is a significant obstacle in the cooperation processes between China and Afghanistan. The Islamic Emirate faces severe criticism from the international community, particularly regarding human rights, women's rights, and restrictions on freedoms. These criticisms create barriers in international relations and narrow the scope for enhancing China's cooperation. The restrictions on women's rights imposed by the Islamic Emirate have raised widespread concerns within the international community. China is one of the countries that acts cautiously in response to international pressure on human rights. The lack of formal recognition of the Islamic Emirate not only creates obstacles for economic and security cooperation but also for humanitarian assistance and other forms of cooperation. Due to international pressure, China may be reluctant to engage in direct cooperation with the Islamic Emirate. The Islamic Emirate faces difficulties in gaining support from the United Nations and other international organizations, which complicates China's cooperation processes, as China must align with the international community (Veretilnyk, 2022: 205-206).
3. *Impact of Regional Rivalries:* Relations between Afghanistan and China are influenced by regional rivalries, particularly the competition between India and Pakistan, which has significant implications for Afghanistan's stability and the safety of China's investments. India has a long-standing history, culture, and political ties with Afghanistan, while Pakistan is a major player in Afghanistan's wars and security issues. The rivalry between these two countries creates obstacles for Afghanistan's national interests and challenges China's influence. India seeks to strengthen its historical ties with Afghanistan and expand its influence against China's presence. The expansion of India's influence could create barriers to China's cooperation, particularly in establishing and securing projects. If India seeks to increase its influence in Afghanistan, China may take precautionary measures to safeguard its investments, which could disrupt economic cooperation and developmental projects. In the case of India's increased influence, China may also have concerns regarding border security. Furthermore, deteriorating relations between India and China could create further barriers to addressing Afghanistan's situation (Akhtar, 2023: 111-112).

7. Conclusion

In the past three years, political relations between China and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan have made unprecedented progress, creating a new environment of trust and cooperation. This research indicates that the primary factors driving the development of these strong relations is China's interest in expanding its political and economic influence in Central and South Asia, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China aims

to strengthen its diplomatic ties with neighboring countries and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to increase its global influence. Afghanistan's strategic geographical location and its role in regional stability have led China to focus on fostering strong political ties with the Islamic Emirate. China is particularly concerned with the security of its western borders, especially the Xinjiang region, which shares borders with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Due to security concerns related to terrorism and extremism in Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, China perceives serious threats to its internal stability. Strengthening relations with the Islamic Emirate offers China an opportunity to reduce the influence of extremist groups like ISIS and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, paving the way for enhanced security cooperation and support.

Additionally, Afghanistan's natural resources, especially minerals, oil, and gas, are another reason for strengthening these relations. Afghanistan, due to its rich and underutilized natural resources, presents a lucrative opportunity for significant Chinese investment. After years of conflict, Afghanistan needs international support and foreign investment to rebuild its economy. Attracting financial and technical support from China is part of this need, as Chinese investments can help Afghanistan's development and reconstruction in various sectors. These investments not only boost Afghanistan's domestic economy but also create broad job opportunities and contribute to improving the social situation. For the Islamic Emirate, reducing international isolation and gaining global legitimacy is a key strategy, which it can achieve by strengthening its political relations with neighboring countries, global powers, and China, thereby solidifying its position on the global stage. The Islamic Emirate's moderate stance on human rights and its adherence to international standards play a vital role in the development of these relations. The Islamic Emirate must take advantage of China's political, economic, and security opportunities to become part of the BRI and other major projects, which will help develop the country's resources and reduce unemployment. In this context, the Islamic Emirate needs to address China's security concerns, increase security cooperation and monitoring along border areas, and employ professional and specialized diplomats to enhance bilateral relations. Caution is required in dealing with China on mining and contract issues, ensuring transparency and a robust legal framework for mining activities. Afghanistan remains a strategically competitive region for both global and regional powers. Therefore, it is crucial for the Islamic Emirate to adopt a balanced foreign policy centered on economic development, paying careful attention to relations with regional and global powers, and positioning itself strategically in alignment with the country's national interests.

8. Suggestions

1. The Islamic Emirate should prioritize and develop positive bilateral relations with China through active state-to-state diplomacy.
2. The Islamic Emirate should initiate efforts in informal diplomacy and work towards creating a positive image of Afghanistan within Chinese society.
3. Instead of fully relying on China for economic and political support, the Islamic Emirate should pursue a strategy of multilateral relations in its foreign policy.
4. The Islamic Emirate should aim to strengthen its position in various international and regional organizations with China's support.
5. The Islamic Emirate should establish a clear framework for intelligence cooperation with China, enabling both countries to address concerns regarding terrorism, trafficking, and organized crime, while positioning Afghanistan as a responsible and collaborative nation in the region.

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