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Formally Join  
China's BRI,  
Pakistan's CPEC,  
Seeks Investment**

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## Taliban Wants To Formally Join China's BRI, Pak's CPEC, Seeks Investment

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/taliban-wants-to-formally-join-chinas-bri-paks-cpec-seeks-investment-101697715053436.html>

### Comments

#### Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), known within China as the One Belt One Road is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in several countries and international organizations. It is considered a centerpiece of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping's foreign policy. The BRI forms a central component of Xi's "Major Country Diplomacy" strategy, which calls for China to assume a greater leadership role for global affairs in accordance with its rising power and status. It has been compared to the American Marshall Plan. As of August 2023, 155 countries were listed as having signed up to the BRI. The participating countries include almost 75% of the world's population and account for more than half of the world's GDP.[1] The initiative was incorporated into the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017. The Xi Jinping Administration describes the initiative as "a bid to enhance regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future." The project has a target completion date of 2049, which will coincide with the centennial of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s founding.

Though Afghanistan has been inclined to join BRI for long but renewed diplomatic efforts have been made since Taliban came to power in August 2021. Immediate requirement of funds and development in strife torn country is a worthwhile reason for Taliban government to join BRI project in spite of debt trap experience of other countries.

#### Afghanistan Perspective

Afghanistan shares a 92 kms long border with China through the narrow Wakhan corridor, extending from Badakhshan to Xinjiang. While the corridor has three passes, their precarious geographical location deems any direct induction of Afghanistan into the BRI improbable in the short to medium term. The development of the existing Karakoram highway, which passes through the Khunjerab pass linking Peshawar

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[1] Belt and Road Initiative @ Wiki -- 05 Nov 23, Accessed on 06 Nov 23,  
URL : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt\\_and\\_Road\\_Initiative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt_and_Road_Initiative)

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with Kabul, is considered to be a feasible route to connect Kabul with the CPEC and ultimately with China. For a cash and influence starved Taliban, any infusion of investment in infrastructure and revival of the Afghan economy is welcomed. The group has been receptive to the idea of reopening the historical Silk Road trade routes through the Wakhan corridor to increase the level of trade with China. It has welcomed China's 'long-term political support' positively, hoping that Beijing will increase its investment in the country. Both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the IEA and the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Investment concede that the country's inclusion in the corridor will give it much-needed investment and support the 'iron and energy producing' sectors. It is also being perceived as enabling Kabul to become reliant on doles for economic development. [2]

## Will Afghanistan Gain Anything?

The key question here is will Afghanistan gain anything from this BRI project? The common Afghan people are unlikely to gain anything. Only the Taliban will get the required funds for their own operational activities. It is widely known that under the promise of infrastructure development and economic prosperity, the BRI has been used as a debt trap tool by China, example being the Sri Lankan economic crisis. We have witnessed how the Hambantota port has been leased to China over a period of 99 years in 2017. The BRI projects in Pakistan or Sri Lanka did not provide the desired job opportunities for the local people. Instead, the Chinese workers and companies only work in these projects to make profit. In most CPEC projects, the quality and feasibility of the projects like rail and road construction has been questioned.[3] On October 17 and 18, 2023, leaders, delegations and representatives from more than 130 countries gathered in Beijing for the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, also marking the 10th anniversary of President Xi Jinping's ambitious global infrastructure and energy initiative. Among the invited was a Taliban delegation from Afghanistan led by acting Minister for Commerce and Industry Haji Nooruddin Azizi. Azizi's brief was to attend the meeting and invite "large investors" to Afghanistan. Azizi also held discussions in Beijing on plans to build a road through the Wakhan corridor in northern Afghanistan to provide direct access to China. However, what is of prime importance to both countries are the possible extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan.

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[2] Shivam Shekhawat @ Raisina Debates, 07 June 2023, "Betting on connectivity: Afghanistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor ambitions" Accessed on 06 Nov 23, URL : <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/betting-on-connectivity/>

[3] Ajay Kumar Das @ USI, Jun 2023, "Implications of China's BRI Expansion in Afghanistan" Accessed on 06 Nov 23, URL : <https://www.usiindia.org/strategic-perspective/Implications-of-China-BRI-Expansion-in-Afghanistan.html>

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While all these projects look potentially promising, with the current state of affairs in the country, none are expected to come to fruition any time soon.[4]



Source: *The Express Tribune*

## Chinese Perspective

Historically Afghanistan is known as the 'Graveyard of Empires' and has been in a state of war for the past many decades. It is a hotbed of terrorist organizations. By far, Afghanistan's security situation remains a major challenge for China and its ambitions to connect South and Central Asia through the BRI. The threat of Islamic militancy from across the Afghan border has posed a very real challenge for Beijing.

This was demonstrated by a wave of attacks carried out by Uighur militants in China's western Xinjiang province throughout the 1990s and 2000s, culminating in the 2014 Kunming knife attack, which killed 31 and injured 141 people. Attacks such as those at Kunming led to China's controversial and repressive policies used against Uighurs in Xinjiang. They also reinforced Beijing's fears of extremism spilling over the borders from Afghanistan. These would threaten Chinese interests in central Asia and China's western border regions, which have become pivotal for the BRI. The presence of the Taliban at the BRI summit can be seen as an example of how China hopes to create an ally in an attempt to shore up its political and economic interests.[5] China desires stability in Afghanistan to check the flow of militancy, radical ideologies, and narcotics into Xinjiang Autonomous Region. It also wants to gain access to the Indian Ocean & achieve regional connectivity through the BRI. China has invested in infrastructure projects across the Xinjiang region, which is a key connecting point for CPEC and BRI routes situated near the Wakhan Corridor & thus connects Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan with China. Closer to this route, Beijing wants to keep the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) away from this area, curtail ISIS-K gaining

[4]Shanthie Mariet D'Souza @ October 19, 2023, "China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Taliban's Economic Dreams" Accessed on 06 Nov 23, URL : <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-the-talibans-economic-dreams/>

[5] Tom Harper, University of East London @ Oct 29, 2023, "Taliban: why China wants them as a friend and not as a foe" Accessed on 06 Nov 23, URL : <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/world/taliban-why-china-wants-them-as-a-friend-and-not-as-a-foe-11620021.html>

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momentum inside Afghanistan, and is wary of TTP resurgence across Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas. Apart from the security perspective, China will most probably try to exploit the natural resources. Earlier on January 5, 2023, the Taliban regime signed an agreement with the Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company (CAPEIC), a subsidiary of the state-owned China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), for the extraction of oil from the Amu Darya basin. Under this treaty China will invest \$150 million annually for three years and increase it thereafter to \$540 million for the contract's 25-year duration. Then on April 13, 2023 Afghanistan's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum announced that the Chinese company Gochin had expressed interest in investing \$10 billion in Afghanistan's lithium reserves. Meanwhile, China is reported to be in talks with the Taliban regime over renegotiating the terms of a 2008 contract to mine copper from the Mes Aynak reserves in Logar province.[6]

Afghanistan's inclusion in the infrastructure initiative is beneficial for China, as the Central Asian country could offer an abundance of mineral resources. Reuters cited a "mines minister" claiming in 2010 that the country is home to "untapped deposits, ranging from copper to gold and lithium, worth between \$1 trillion and \$3 trillion." China is currently in talks with the Taliban about opening a huge copper mine in the eastern part of the country, which was initiated under the previous foreign-backed government. The Chinese Foreign Ministry is yet to comment on the matter. Officials from China, the Taliban and Pakistan said in May 23 that they would like the BRI project to include Afghanistan, and for the flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to be extended across Pakistan, to Afghanistan. Since the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban government has not gained formal recognition by any government. Despite this, China has continued to build a relationship with the regime, becoming the first country to appoint an ambassador to Kabul since the Taliban's seizure of government machinery, and also investing in mining projects. Last month, China's ambassador presented his credentials to the Taliban's acting PM. Meanwhile, other countries have either had their previous ambassadors hold their positions or appointed heads of mission in a charge d'affaires capacity, a move that does not require the diplomat to present their credentials to the government formally.[7]

China has been eyeing to include Afghanistan in BRI project much before US forces withdrew from Kabul. Resentment in populace of Balochistan towards CPEC, increased terrorist attacks against Chinese workers in Pakistan initiated with support of Afghan based terrorist groups, unexpected losses/lower rate of returns and overall slow growth of BRI projects have compelled China to address security concerns by roping in Afghanistan into BRI project. Also, maintaining good relations with Islamic nations by China is being viewed as outreach to establish BRI projects as well filling the void left by US in Central Asia.

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[6] Ajay Kumar Das @ USI, Jun 2023, "Implications of China's BRI Expansion in Afghanistan" Accessed on 06 Nov 23, URL : <https://www.usiofindia.org/strategic-perspective/Implications-of-China-BRI-Expansion-in-Afghanistan.html>

[7] Statecraft Staff, Oct 16, 2023, "Taliban to Participate in China's BRI Forum, Could Join Beijing's Mega Project", Accessed on 06 Nov 23, URL : <https://www.statecraft.co.in/article/taliban-to-participate-in-china-s-bri-forum-could-join-beijing-s-mega-project>

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## Pakistan's Perspective

However, Pakistan continues to play dubious role in whole episode. Ever since August 2021, Taliban-Pakistan relations have been worsening rapidly. Pakistan's recurring accusations that the Taliban harbor the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) on Afghan soil, and its attempts to fence the international boundary on the Durand Line, have annoyed the Taliban. Pakistan's recent announcement to deport thousands of undocumented Afghans refugees back to Afghanistan and subsequent forced deportation have sparked a major diplomatic tussle between the two countries. Such vicious and unsettled bitterness is bound to find its way to disrupt any plan to extend CPEC into Afghanistan. Further, with CPEC projects encountering enormous implementation issues within Pakistan itself, the feasibility of the project's extension is inevitably suspect. Pakistan's hopes of retaining its strategic depth in the country after the Taliban's return were shattered soon after. The bilateral relationship has been disastrous with the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) severely destabilising the law and order in the country. In this context, for Beijing, ensuring that the two neighbours have a modicum of stability between their borders is essential to ensure the security of its hinterland. [8]

## Implications for India

On the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Foreign Ministers' meeting in Goa, Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, restated India's principled opposition to the CPEC, highlighting how connectivity cannot violate a country's territorial integrity or sovereignty. India's opposition to the CPEC in general, irrespective of its extension into Afghanistan, rests on two scaffoldings - strategic and sovereign. Strategically, an increased Chinese presence in the Khunjerab pass area will reduce India's strategic space while further securitising the region. The CPEC also passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which is why India considers the project 'illegal, illegitimate, and unacceptable'. [9]



Source: *The Hans Indian*

Proposed BRI expansion into Afghanistan can have serious strategic implications for India, in case it fructifies. More Chinese investments in Afghanistan and Pakistan through CPEC and BRI, the more these regions will rely on China for their economic sustenance. Increased connectivity and integration of CPEC and BRI routes from Central Asia to South Asia via Afghanistan could increase China's

[8] Shivam Shekhawat @ Raisina Debates, 07 June 2023, "Betting on connectivity: Afghanistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor ambitions" Accessed on 06 Nov 23, URL : <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/betting-on-connectivity/>

[9] Ibid

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reliance on Indian Ocean routes for its energy and trade needs which may further lead to geo political imbalance in IOR. Also since the CPEC passes through Indian Gilgit-Baltistan territory under occupation of Pakistan, an extension of CPEC to Afghanistan could be interpreted by Taliban and China that CPEC doesn't violate Indian sovereignty. Moreover, all countries of CAR seem to be aligning with China on BRI. Further inroads being made by China in Afghanistan could lead to serious strategic/diplomatic hurdles for India. India should therefore, continue to support the people of Afghanistan and address their humanitarian and developmental needs.

## **Way Ahead**

Majority of the economic challenges being encountered by the Taliban regime are the legacy issues of a conflict-ridden country. However, many are its own creations. The regime is hoping to substitute the void left by US, with the hypothetical compassion of China. Afghanistan under the Taliban seems to getting progressively sucked into the Chinese trap. But Beijing's record of generosity towards any nation in the long run is doubtful; Afghanistan will certainly take note of this. Also, Afghanistan continues to remain under financial sanctions imposed by the West, post withdrawal of US in Aug 2021, due to non formation of an inclusive government. Such a scenario may lead to investments by China alone, with no support from the host government. This is bound to make implementation more critical and any success/fructification of the ambitious project appears doubtful.

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