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# Policy Brief

China's strategic  
involvement in  
Afghanistan–Pakistan  
relations

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On May 11th of this year, new skirmishes resumed along the Durand Line. It is evident that following the parliamentary elections, the Pakistani leadership decided to concentrate on the issue of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a terrorist organization that receives support from within Afghanistan and carries out attacks on Pakistani soil. In an effort to put an end to TTP activities, Islamabad has been conducting airstrikes in Afghan border areas without notifying Kabul, which has enraged the Taliban. These [border conflicts continued](#) until May 19th, but it is likely that such incidents will persist and tensions along the Durand Line will escalate. Nonetheless, the involvement of China may potentially mitigate the conflict and the ensuing crisis. According to experts, China has its own levers to influence the TTP through [the Taliban](#).

### **Strategic aspects of the conflict**

Since the Taliban's rise to power, Afghan-Pakistani relations have been evolving dynamically. Initially, they were quite close, but currently, the relations between the two countries are in a state of crisis. According to many experts, Kabul is distancing itself from Islamabad in its foreign policy and is increasingly cooperating with the terrorist organization Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is involved in disruptive activities in Pakistan. It appears that due to their close cooperation in the past, Islamabad desires a loyal government in Kabul. However, this loyalty may threaten Afghanistan's sovereignty. Consequently, the Taliban might be distancing itself from Pakistan and supporting a group hostile to it, given its historical dependence on Islamabad. As of today, Islamabad has completely ceased dialogue with the TTP and considers it the main threat to its internal security. Islamabad is skeptical of the Taliban's alliance with the TTP.

To address this issue, Islamabad is taking the following measures:

1. Closing border trade points;
2. Conducting airstrikes on Afghan territory to destroy TTP facilities.

In response, the Taliban maintains close relations with the TTP and seeks to avoid trade and economic dependence on Pakistan. To this end, Afghanistan is currently focusing more on developing trade with Iran and Central Asian countries. Additionally, Kabul is [actively engaging with Beijing](#). This indicates that the Taliban is striving to become a full-fledged actor in international relations. It follows that the Taliban seeks international recognition and does not intend to be a vassal of any side.

### **CPEC factor**

The crisis along the Durand Line has significant implications for the stability and security of the entire region. Additionally, interregional projects such as the Trans-Afghan Corridor, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are directly or indirectly dependent on the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In this context, it is likely that China will act as a mediator in the Afghan-Pakistani dialogue. The economic benefits of the CPEC project can serve as a basis for cooperation between Kabul and Islamabad. Afghanistan's integration into CPEC could further improve relations between the two sides. According to Pakistan's Minister of Planning and Development, Ahsan Iqbal, "China can persuade the Taliban to stop terrorists from using Afghan territory for attacks on Pakistan, which threatens the project". A. Iqbal noted that "Beijing has a certain influence on the Taliban, and they tend to [listen to it](#)". According to experts, China is pressuring the Taliban not to support the TTP in exchange for a flow of new investments. In this way, Beijing is using economic leverage to protect its interests and maintain stability along the [Afghan-Pakistani border](#).

These statements can lead to three main conclusions:

1. There is a possibility of further integrating Afghanistan into the CPEC project by China and Pakistan to reduce tensions between the parties;

2. China's relations with both Pakistan and Afghanistan are actively growing, and thus Beijing is becoming the main political and economic partner for both Kabul and Islamabad. Therefore, China can act as a mediator between the two countries;

3. The Afghan issue will largely reflect the Chinese factor. Following the NATO troop withdrawal in August 2021, a major question arose about the influence of major players on the country's situation. The United States decided to leave Afghanistan, and Russia, preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and its failed Afghan venture, is unlikely to focus on Afghanistan. Consequently, as anticipated, Beijing will be significantly involved in international affairs related to Afghanistan. In summary, while it initially appeared that China was developing only economic relations with Afghanistan, it is now becoming clear that Beijing will also play a political role in the Afghan context.

### **Why does Beijing need peace?**

Following the launch of the massive Belt and Road Initiative, China's interests in Central and South Asia have significantly increased. China has invested over [\\$62 billion](#) in the development of the CPEC, which has become Beijing's primary route to the Indian Ocean. The BRI and CPEC are integral parts of China's global policy. Therefore, Beijing is highly invested in regional

stability and security. This leads to the following characteristics of China's foreign policy in the Afghan-Pakistani crisis:

**1. Economic Orientation.** Beijing adheres strictly to an economic focus. The internal security issues of South Asia concern Beijing primarily within the framework of its economic interests. Consequently, Beijing is likely to actively improve relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan to protect its economic interests under the BRI and CPEC.

**2. Strategic prioritization of CPEC and Pakistan.** In the South Asian direction, the CPEC project and cooperation with Pakistan hold primary importance. Currently, China is actively developing its relationship with Afghanistan. In February, Xi Jinping received the Taliban's ambassador; China is constructing a trade route through the Wakhan Corridor, which could create a China-Afghanistan-Iran dialogue; Afghanistan's involvement in the BRI is increasingly active; and economic cooperation between the parties is growing. Despite this, China has already made multi-billion dollar investments in CPEC. In 2023, China's exports to Pakistan amounted [to \\$17.3 billion](#), highlighting the primary role of the Pakistan factor in Beijing's South Asian foreign policy vector.

**3. Stability for transit.** Beijing likely considers Afghanistan's strategic location as a transit area for its overland trade routes across the Eurasian continent. In the case of Central Asian countries, which could potentially serve as a “bridge” between North and South, as well as East and West, Beijing will take Moscow's influence into account. As for Afghanistan, it lacks strategic influence from Washington, Moscow or New Delhi. Thus, China is likely the only partner for Kabul among the world's major powers. Based on this, Beijing might invest in Afghanistan as an important transit territory within its grand strategy for the Eurasian continent. Therefore, it is likely that China will be able to shift some of its trade routes through Afghanistan. However, it seems that the priority of Central Asian countries in this regard will remain Beijing's focus.

**4. Beyond economic interests.** In addition to its economic interests, China is deeply concerned about extremism and radicalization in the northern part of South Asia, which could impact the internal situation in its Xinjiang region. China is particularly wary of this issue and actively combats radicalization. For instance, within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China has promoted the principle of fighting the "three evils": terrorism, extremism, and separatism. Furthermore, since 2021, China has maintained a military base in Tajikistan along [the Afghan border](#). This base is presumably operational to monitor the situation in

northern South Asia, which could have repercussions in China's western provinces.

Additionally, following terrorist attacks by the TTP in late March of this year in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which resulted in [the deaths of five](#) Chinese nationals, it is expected that Beijing will intensify counterterrorism measures in northern South Asia. Therefore, the situation along the Durand Line directly affects China's security concerns.

### **Conclusion**

The May incident along the Durand Line has deep strategic roots in the relationship between Kabul and Islamabad. In Pakistan, there are emerging ideas about resolving tensions with the help of China, which has begun to play a significant role in the Afghan context following the NATO withdrawal. China is a close economic partner of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, making it a potential mediator between the two sides. There is a high probability that the CPEC project could become a platform for friendship between Kabul and Islamabad. Currently, both China and Pakistan are urging Afghanistan to cooperate within the framework of this project.

China's interests along the Durand Line are primarily economic, with Afghanistan emerging as a new trade and transit partner. However, economic cooperation with Pakistan, which has become Beijing's main economic and political ally in South Asia, holds primary importance. In addition to economic interests, China is concerned about issues of radicalization in the northern part of South Asia, which could affect its internal security, particularly in Xinjiang.

Considering these economic and political aspects, Beijing remains highly invested in stability and peace along the Durand Line. It is likely that China will use its diplomatic tools to maintain its course and policy in South Asia. Economic leverage, which Beijing has over both Islamabad and Kabul, could become a tool for ending border skirmishes and terrorist attacks in Pakistan.