

# CHINA'S POSTURE TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE TALIBAN'S ADVANCES IN AFGHANISTAN

Chinese foreign policy has put forward more assertive policies by highlighting great power competition. As a result, China's regional foreign policy has expanded and gained a global dimension. This opening in the foreign policy has developed in parallel with China's growing economic power.

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This article aims to provide an analytical assessment on China's foreign policy towards Central Asia, especially after Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. The main question that will be tackled with is whether there has been a change in China's foreign policy in the region with Taliban's advance. Therefore, China's regional policies before and after the advance of the Taliban will be examined in a comparative perspective. In general, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are named as the five Central Asian states. This study, however, regards Afghanistan also as a Central Asian state in reference to the definition of the UNESCO History of the Civilizations of Central Asia that was published in 1992. To avoid confusion, these five nations are referred to as 'post-Soviet Central Asian states.' This article consists of four parts. In the first part, China's relations with the Central Asian nations are discussed. Then, China's policies towards Afghanistan and especially the former Taliban administration are examined. This is followed by the scrutiny of China's relations with Afghanistan after the Taliban's advance. Lastly, the past and the present relations are compared and some forecasts for the future are presented.

### **Chinese Foreign Policy on Central Asia**

Chinese foreign policy is determined by the Chinese Communist Party and its General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Therefore, before mentioning China's policies on Central Asia, it would be appropriate to briefly introduce the changes that have taken place in Chinese foreign policy in recent years, especially with Xi's era. Chinese foreign policy has put forward more assertive policies by highlighting great power competition. As a result, China's regional foreign policy has expanded and gained a global dimension. This opening in the foreign policy has developed in parallel with China's growing economic power. The rise of China has become even more prominent when President Xi Jinping promoted the concept of the China Dream, which refers to the developmental goals of China that are expected to be realized by 2049 – the centennial of the republic.

While examining Chinese foreign policy, special emphasis should be put on Xi Jinping era because of his reforms and new attempts, inasmuch as he is considered as China's most influential leader after Mao. The goals of China under the China Dream, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the rapid economic development of the country, as well as the expansion of China's socio-cultural influence over the regions also other than the Asia-Pacific, all came into prominence with Xi's presidency. In 2017, "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" – commonly abbreviated as "Xi Jinping Thought" that encompasses President Xi's ideas, policies, and conceptualizations, was officially added to



the constitution.<sup>1</sup> The fact that “Xi Jinping Thought” was added to the constitution actually reveals the influence and dominance of Xi. Likewise, the course called “Xi Jinping Thought” was added into the national curriculum.<sup>2</sup> From this, it can be concluded that Xi is not limited to his own era, but also wants to influence future periods. The fact that he wants to raise future generations with the opinions he has turned into an ‘ideology’ under his own name can be interpreted as the desire to be remembered as an unforgettable leader.

The Chinese government, together with Xi, began paying more attention to the development of bilateral and multilateral relations with the principle of utilitarianism in its foreign policy and increased cross-regional diplomacy. With these developments, the country launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which has become a centerpiece of China’s foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the routes of the BRI passes through Central Asia, the BRI increased the geopolitical importance of the Central Asia for China’s global strategy. This led China

to strengthen its relations with these states and it can be cited as the first reason for China to convergence to the region. Secondly, the fact that the Central Asian countries are energy suppliers for China, whose energy needs increase significantly as its economy grows, China’s stakes in the region increases. In such a context, China’s approach to Central Asia has become more pragmatic, whereas economic and security interests has become more decisive in the course of relations with Central Asian countries.<sup>4</sup> An example of this is China’s trade data with post-Soviet Central Asian countries. The trade volume of China with the regional states, which was 527 million dollars in 1992, dramatically increased to 40 billion dollars in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

**Security concerns of China regarding the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) should be mentioned in order to understand China’s reasons to contact closely with the region.**

**China, at that time, proposed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for the solution of the Afghan problem. Although Afghanistan was not a member of the SCO, the intense instability it left in the region was one of the reasons for the establishment of the SCO.**

On the other hand, economic relations between Afghanistan and China also improved during these years. The trade volume between Afghanistan and China increased from \$19.99 million to \$715.70 million between 2002 and 2010.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Afghanistan is very attractive in terms of rare elements found in its territory. Afghanistan has an estimated 1.4 million tons of rare earth elements (REEs) and great potential for minerals important for renewable energy. This makes Afghanistan the main investment destination for China, the current leader of global REEs supply network.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, security concerns of China regarding the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) should be mentioned in order to understand China's reasons to contact closely with the region. Uyghurs and the XUAR issue have been a bone of contention about China's domestic and foreign policy for decades. When considering the Uyghur issue in the context of Central Asia, it is useful to underline that while Uyghurs meet with Afghanistan on the denominator of religion; they meet with the post-Soviet Central Asian states on a cultural and ethnic denominator in addition to religion. At this point, it is important to remember the Turkestan region in history in order to better understand the bond between the post-Soviet Central Asian nations and the Uyghurs. The historical Turkestan is the region that is mostly inhabited by Turkic peoples, covering parts of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Russia, Mongolia and China. The people of this region, thus, have similar socio-cultural and religious characteristics due to historical ties. It is even possible to say that they speak with the same words enough to understand each other at a basic level.

The 'Uyghur issue' converted into the 'Uyghur mobilization' and gained an organizational structure actually took place in the Central Asian states for the first time, not in the XUAR. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan host a considerable number of Uyghur people, as they border the XUAR of China. In the early years of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong's policies plunged the country into a great famine, resulting in the migration of large numbers of Uyghurs living in the

XUAR to the Soviet Union and its surroundings. Since then, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have been the countries with the highest Uyghur populations in the region. The fact that Uyghur immigrants met with their coreligionists in the region increased the awareness of the peoples. It is known that there are Uyghur-based organizations and political formations that aim to make the voices of the Uyghurs heard in the Central Asian nations.<sup>8</sup> For example, the group formerly known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan initially aimed to overthrow Karimov's government and establish an Islamic State in Uzbekistan. However, it later changed its name to the Islamic Party of Turkestan, adding the entire Turkestan region to its scope.<sup>9</sup> Also the Turkestan Islamic Party has operated in Afghanistan since 2006.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, it is possible to say that China does not have a good memory of the Taliban regarding the Uyghur issue. On July 5, 2009, the largest Uyghur uprising that the People's Republic of China has experienced since its foundation took place in Urumqi, the capital of the XUAR. This revolt corresponds to the years when the Taliban was effective in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> Since this major uprising coincided with the Taliban's great influence in Afghanistan, it can be inferred from that the Sunni Muslim-majority Uyghurs were emboldened by the Taliban – a radical Sunni organization, and their power. Since this great uprising has happened, the Uyghur issue has not yet been stabilized for China.

### **China's Relations with the Former Taliban Administration and Afghanistan**

China's policies towards Afghanistan and what is happening there have always been outside her interest. Thus, instead of coming to a decision on the Taliban related issues in Afghanistan on its own, China has always been on the side of the international community. China followed a policy that prioritized its own interests and did not interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. China established reasonably well balanced relations with the Afghan government and even supported the country with regular economic aid. China always stayed away from military intervention and remained silent about the US intervention in Afghanistan.

Despite its equilibrium policies towards the Afghan government, China has always been skeptical to the Taliban and clearly expressed its antipathy for this organization. China supported the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1373 in 2001 that approved military intervention against al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>12</sup> However, China has been cautious at the same that this decision never turns into a full-fledged confrontation with the Taliban. Although China mentioned its dislike of the

Taliban in its statements, the country also avoided making radical anti-Taliban statements on the subject. Moreover, China was a part of the “Six plus Two Group on Afghanistan,”<sup>13</sup> a model suggested by the United Nations in 1999 to rebuild Afghanistan and maintain peace. The reason why China took a role in this policy was its desire to act in parallel with the decisions of the international community mainly because of the security of the XUAR. Afghanistan, under Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001, had become a base for the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP), the organization of the Uyghur movement, which China labels as a terrorist organization. It was known that the Taliban provided weapons for the ETIP and served as a shelter for the Uyghurs fleeing from China.<sup>14</sup> China argued that also the Afghan Al-Qaeda provided military support to the ETIP. Therefore, it can be said that the security of the XUAR is at the top of China's priorities to determine its policies about Afghanistan and the Taliban. China was afraid of any separatist movements that would boost the instability in the XUAR; so, it followed a cautious policy by following the majority in its policies and wanted to minimize its responsibility.

China, at that time, proposed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for the solution of the Afghan problem. Although Afghanistan was not a member of the

SCO, the intense instability it left in the region was one of the reasons for the establishment of the SCO. On 7 January 2002, the SCO issued a statement identifying the Taliban as an organization that supports terrorism. While the fall of the Taliban with the US intervention was ratified, it was announced that the SCO recognized the new interim Afghan government. After this statement, the SCO took an active role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan by conducting a dialogue between the new Afghan government and its neighbors.

### The Relations after the Taliban's Advance in 2021

After twenty years of military presence, the US withdrew from Afghanistan by 31 August 2021. This decision was met with intense criticism. The biggest was the US' abandonment of Afghanistan to its fate while another was that the problems in the country could not be resolved peacefully despite the existence of the US for 20 years. Ultimately, on 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized the Afghan capital, Kabul. On 8 September 2021, the Taliban announced the interim government.

Negotiations between China and the Taliban begun before the capture of Kabul. In late July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted Taliban representatives in Tianjin, China. This meeting was important as the Taliban



tried to convince China that they posed no threat to its interests. It was reported that in this meeting Taliban representatives stated that: “The Afghan Taliban will never allow any force to use the Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental to China. (...) The Afghan Taliban believes that Afghanistan should develop friendly relations with neighboring countries and the international community.”<sup>15</sup> After this meeting, the dialogue between the two continued and Chinese authorities voiced positive statements about the Taliban. For instance, Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that nothing in the world remains stable, everything changes, and that China will only consider the current actions of the Taliban, not their past. She said: “...Some repeatedly stress distrust of the Taliban, but what I want to say is nothing in the world can stand still. I prefer to look at things dialectically, to see its past and present, and its words as well as actions... You won't be able to draw practical conclusions if you don't keep pace with the times and only keep a conservative and fixed mindset and ignore the development of the situation.”<sup>16</sup>

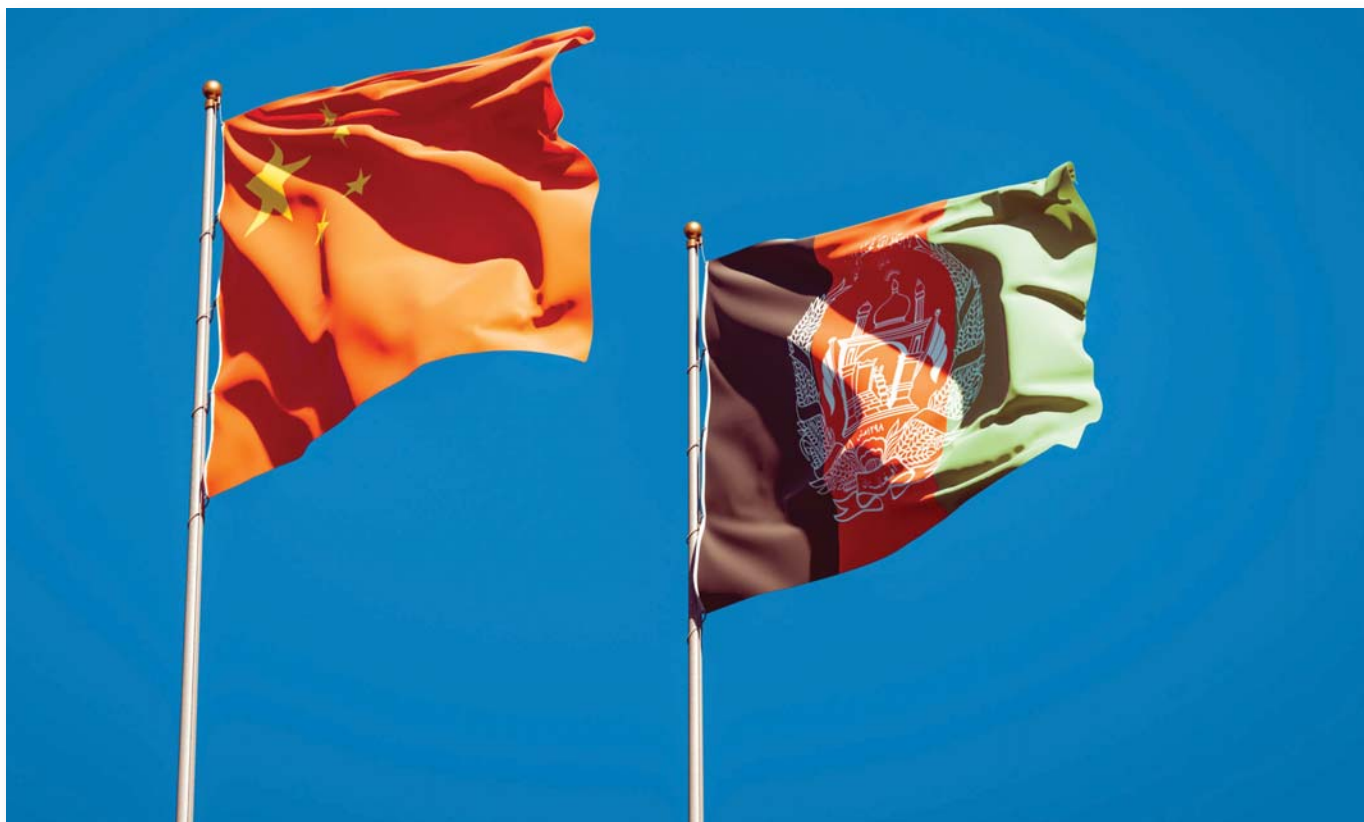
On the other hand, the Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen participated in the China Global Television Network (CGTN), a state-led and English spoken TV channel of China, for an interview. When the relations with Beijing was asked to him, Shaheen openly invited China to take a role in rebuilding Afghanistan saying that “China is a big country with a huge economy and capacity - I think they can play a very big role in the rebuilding, rehabilitation, reconstruction of Afghanistan.”<sup>17</sup> This open invitation from the Taliban indicates that the Taliban also have interests toward China. It is clear that the Taliban will need economic aid to establish a functioning order in Afghanistan. China, as the second largest economy in the world, is a perfect ally in this respect. At the same time, what the Taliban government needs is international legitimacy. In addition to being one of the five UNSC member countries, China is a powerful actor in the international arena as it can position itself against the US. It is certain that gaining recognition by China will increase the Taliban's legitimacy in the international arena.

**With the advance of the Taliban, terrorism-related security concerns of China have escalated, which can be counted as the second dimension of the relations after the Taliban's advance and as the fifth reason that determines China's policies in the region.**

Although the rapprochement between China and the Taliban is pragmatically plausible, it was met with surprise in the world. Inasmuch as, in the past, China accused the Taliban of having organic ties to the ETIM in the XUAR and voted against the Taliban in the aforementioned UNSC Resolution voting. However, today, China-Afghanistan (Taliban) bilateral relations are developing day by day. It is estimated that in the near future, China will be one of the first countries to recognize the new Afghan Taliban government.

**Then, what are the reasons for this change in China's stance towards the Taliban? The answer lies in China's interests in the region. As mentioned above, three of these were categorized in the previous section as geopolitical importance, possession of rich energy resources, and security concerns due to China's XUAR. Yet, after Taliban's advance, two new were added to China's three main regional interests. First one is the security of the BRI and the related investments. China attaches great importance to its economy and never compromises on the safety of its economic initiatives.** Ensuring their safety, together with the XUAR, has always been a top priority in negotiations with the Taliban. Since this is a new concern after the advance of the Taliban, it can be counted as a fourth reason that China has developed its policies towards the region.

**With the advance of the Taliban, terrorism-related security concerns of China have escalated, which can be counted as the second dimension of the relations after the Taliban's advance and as the fifth reason that determines China's policies in the region.** According to experts working on China,<sup>18</sup> there are three main groups – the ‘three evils’ in other words that are considered China's nightmare: terrorists, extremists and separatists. Mentioning about terrorism is inevitable when it comes to the Taliban, because the United Nations still recognizes the Taliban as a terrorist organization. In particular, with the attack that took place in Kabul on August 26, 2021, security concerns regarding terrorism in neighboring countries dramatically grew. More than 150 people lost their lives in the explosions while more than 170 people were injured.<sup>19</sup> The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), a branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), claimed the responsibility for the attacks. The regional countries are now more concerned about the terrorist organizations that have separated from the Taliban and became their own like the ISIS-K, rather than the Taliban itself. As a result, most post-Soviet Central Asian countries increased their military deployment on their border with Afghanistan with the advance of the Taliban. Besides, major powers such as China and Russia are concerned about the awakening of ‘sleeping cells’ which refer to minority groups with the potential to radicalize within their own borders, particularly Muslims in this case. In the sim-



plest example, it is known that there are Uyghurs, Huis, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz among the ISIS-K militants.<sup>20</sup>

For these five interests, China is determined to get along well with all the countries in the region. The fall of the government in Afghanistan and the formation of a new government, even if this is a Taliban government, are not enough for China to dissuade its pragmatic foreign policy.

### Conclusion

Central Asia region appears in the literature with many different descriptions and scopes. The definition of Central Asia in this article has been expanded a little, with the addition of Afghanistan to the five post-Soviet Central Asian countries. The reasons for the convergence in the regional policies of China, one of the biggest neighbors of these six Central Asian countries, were examined with a special emphasis on the Taliban. Turning back to the starting question of this article, whether there has been a change in China's foreign policy regarding Central Asia with the advancement of the Taliban has been answered: Yes, while China's stance to the Taliban made a 180 degree turn, two more reasons have been added to the three main

reasons that currently affect its tendency towards the region.

**With respect to China's interests in Central Asia in the light of the developments in its foreign policy in recent years, three main topics were identified as pushing factors for China's interest in the region. First**, the Central Asian countries increased their value in the eyes of China, especially because they are located on the routes of the trade projects and they are the stations on China's access to Europe as its western neighbors. **The second** is that they are the closest and one of the few energy-rich countries in the world to meet the increasing energy needs of China. **Third**, Central Asian states have linkages to one of China's most sensitive subjects, the Uyghur issue.

**With the advance of the Taliban, China has changed its stance towards the Taliban almost completely, and two more reasons have appeared why China is eager to maintain relations with the Central Asian states.** The security of the BRI routes **—as the fourth reason**, was China's another interest for rapprochement with the region. **The fifth reason** is related to terrorism caused by the advance of the Taliban. **These two additional concerns enhanced China's current convergence policies towards Central Asia.** Compared to the past, China is far more interested

in Central Asia and the region will most probably keep its priority in Chinese foreign policy for a while.

China will likely recognize officially the Afghan Taliban government soon and take an active role in rebuilding Afghanistan compared to the previous passive stance.<sup>21</sup> The fact that playing a role in rebuilding Afghanistan under the Taliban rule can be interpreted as China's desire to establish a control mechanism over the Taliban so that its interests in the region are not harmed. For this reason, China not only does it want to keep friendly relations with the regional countries, it tries also to increase its influence on them due to its desire for con-

trol. It is also one of the expected results that China will call for the SCO to play an active role in the new Afghanistan in the near future.

Central Asian countries and Afghanistan will seem to be on the world agenda for a long time. The Taliban announced the new Afghan government recently, so the greater regional powers will be heavily influenced from this as well. The advance of Taliban will also fuel the conflict for India and Pakistan, especially over Kashmir. Therefore, the resurgence of Taliban Afghanistan and its effects on these countries may be the subject of future studies in order to provide a greater regional analysis.

## Endnotes

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