



China's Geostrategic Response to U.S. Withdrawal: Redefining Regional Power Dynamics

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Abstract

The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a critical turning point in the strategic balance of power across Central and South Asia. This study explores how the People's Republic of China has responded to the emerging power vacuum, employing economic, political, and security tools to expand its regional influence. Drawing on Power Transition Theory, Geo-economics, and Realism, the research examines Beijing's strategic recalibration and its broader implications for regional order. Utilizing qualitative content analysis of official policy documents, leadership statements, and academic literature, the article identifies a dual strategy: advancing economic connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and increasing security engagement to stabilize its western frontier. Unlike the United States, China avoids direct military intervention, relying instead on geo-economics statecraft, strategic partnerships, and pragmatic diplomacy. The findings suggest that China's approach is incremental yet transformative, redefining power configurations and diminishing U.S. leverage in the region. This strategic shift highlights a new phase in great power competition, with China positioning itself as a stabilizer and key regional actor in post-U.S. Afghanistan..

Keywords: China, US. Withdrawal, Afghanistan, Power Vacuum, Geostrategic, BRI, Regional Order, Security.

Introduction

The hasty withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan in August 2021 represented far more than the conclusion of a prolonged military engagement; it was a geostrategic turning point that altered the entire architecture of power relations in Central and South Asia. For over two decades, the U.S. presence had acted as a stabilizing, though controversial, strategic anchor shaping the security environment, regional alignments, and geopolitical calculations of states surrounding Afghanistan. Zhang, F. (2022). Its abrupt exit created a strategic vacuum, forcing key regional powers to reassess their priorities and reconfigure their foreign policy orientations. Among these actors, People's Republic of China stands out as the most strategically positioned and diplomatically capable of expanding its influence in the aftermath of the U.S. retreat. Johnson, I. (2021). Unlike Washington, Beijing has not relied on overwhelming military force to



pursue its objectives. Instead, it has turned to economic statecraft, infrastructure diplomacy, and targeted security engagement to pursue its long-term strategic goals. China's western periphery—especially its border with Afghanistan—holds significant geostrategic value, as it is directly linked to the stability of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, the success of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its broader counterterrorism and regional connectivity objectives. The power vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal has offered China both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, Beijing has gained room to deepen its engagement without the overshadowing influence of a major Western military presence. On the other hand, it must navigate Afghanistan's persistent instability, the complex political landscape under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and the risks associated with transnational extremism. Murtazashvili, J. (2022).

China's approach can be best understood through the lenses of Realism, Power Transition Theory, and Geo-economics. From a Realist perspective, China's behavior reflects the rational pursuit of power, security, and strategic advantage in an anarchic international system. As the U.S. retreats, China fills the vacuum to prevent the emergence of instability that could spill over into its own borders and to enhance its regional standing. Rubin, B. R. (2024). Power Transition Theory explains this moment as part of a broader structural shift, where a rising power expands into spaces vacated by a declining or retreating hegemon, reshaping the regional order in the process. Geoeconomics adds a crucial layer, emphasizing how China uses economic instruments—rather than traditional military force—to project influence and build strategic depth. Zhang, F. & Cox, M. (2025). This includes infrastructure investments, trade agreements, mining projects, and integration of Afghanistan into BRI-linked networks through connectivity with China–Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Unlike the U.S., China's strategy is non-interventionist in form but strategic in substance. Beijing maintains diplomatic channels with the Taliban-led government, engages in multilateral security forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and emphasizes stability, counterterrorism cooperation, and economic development as the pillars of its engagement. This allows China to project influence indirectly, avoiding the costly military entanglements that burdened Washington for two decades. Stanzel, A. (2022). Furthermore, Beijing is keenly aware that instability in Afghanistan can undermine its security in Xinjiang and jeopardize major infrastructure projects. Thus, its geostrategic calculus is rooted in risk management as much as in power projection.

China's growing role is also redefining regional power dynamics. Its engagement has implications for other key players such as Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Russian Federation, and Republic of India, each of which is adjusting to a new strategic environment no longer dominated by U.S. military power. For Pakistan, China's involvement complements its own strategic interests and strengthens CPEC's regional relevance. For Iran and Russia, China's presence provides a counterbalance to Western influence and opens pathways for multipolar cooperation. For India, however, China's growing footprint represents a strategic challenge. Kugelman, M. (2022). The U.S. withdrawal has not simply left behind a vacuum; it has triggered a recalibration of power, with China emerging as a central actor in shaping Afghanistan's post-2021 strategic landscape. Beijing's strategy—anchored in economic connectivity, diplomatic pragmatism, and selective security engagement—marks a departure



from the U.S. model of dominance and represents a new mode of regional power projection. This evolving dynamic signals the emergence of a more multipolar and geoeconomically driven regional order, with China increasingly positioned as a stabilizer and shaper of the new strategic equilibrium in Central and South Asia. Rehaiem, J. B. H. (2025).

Literature Review

The concept of power vacuums has been widely studied in strategic and security studies, serving as a central theme in the realist school of thought. Realist scholars argue that when a dominant power retreats from a strategically significant region, the resulting vacuum invites other states to step in, balance power, and pursue their strategic interests. Erfani, S. T., & Alemi, S. M. (2022). Such moments of withdrawal often act as turning points in international politics, reshaping the balance of power and opening space for competing actors to assert their influence. Historically, power vacuums have rarely remained neutral or uncontested; rather, they become arenas of geopolitical maneuvering and strategic competition. The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan represents one such critical juncture, where the departure of a major external actor has triggered intense debates on the future of regional security and stability. Without the U.S. military presence that had long shaped Afghanistan's security architecture, new and old regional actors have sought to reposition themselves in the evolving landscape. Rashid, A., & Shaheen, S. (2025). Scholars like [Author, Year] emphasize that power vacuums tend to attract strategic competition, with states aiming to safeguard their borders, advance their influence, and shape the post-withdrawal political and security order. In this context, key regional powers such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of India, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and People's Republic of China have all emerged as active stakeholders in Afghanistan's future trajectory. Each of these actors approaches the Afghan vacuum with distinct strategic calculations: Iran focuses on border security and sectarian influence, India seeks to counter Pakistan and extremism, Pakistan views Afghanistan as part of its strategic depth doctrine, while China considers it both a security risk and a geostrategic opportunity. Yun, S. (2021). This convergence of interests creates a complex web of competition and cooperation, indicating that the vacuum left by the U.S. is not an absence of power but rather a shift toward a new, multipolar regional contest.

China's Interests In Afghanistan Security

Preventing militant spillover into Xinjiang has been one of the most critical drivers of China's engagement with Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal. The Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, located along China's western frontier, shares historical, cultural, and geographic linkages with Afghanistan, making it particularly sensitive to cross-border instability. Weitz, R. (2021). Beijing has long expressed concerns about the potential infiltration of extremist groups, especially those affiliated with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which China views as a direct threat to its national security and internal stability. The instability in Afghanistan, if left unchecked, could provide safe havens, logistical support, or ideological inspiration to separatist elements in Xinjiang. In response, China has adopted a multi-layered security strategy that emphasizes intelligence cooperation, border management, and counterterrorism



coordination with Afghan authorities. Ziad, M. (2024). Rather than deploying troops, Beijing prefers a preventive approach—engaging diplomatically with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, promoting regional security frameworks, and encouraging economic stability as a buffer against extremism. This aligns with China’s broader internal security strategy, which links external security threats to domestic governance priorities. By addressing the Afghan security environment, China aims to minimize risks of radicalization, prevent the formation of transnational militant networks, and safeguard its internal cohesion and development goals.

Economic

Expanding the BRI westward and tapping mineral resources has emerged as a cornerstone of China’s strategic calculus in post-withdrawal Afghanistan. Beijing views Afghanistan as a critical geographic node in advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in extending connectivity corridors from Central Asia to the Middle East. Hussain, T., & Akram, M. (2023). Afghanistan’s location provides a potential land bridge linking China to energy-rich regions and European markets, aligning with Beijing’s broader ambition of reshaping global trade routes through infrastructure-led integration. Beyond connectivity, Afghanistan’s vast untapped mineral wealth—including copper, lithium, rare earth elements, iron ore, and gold—offers significant economic incentives. These resources are essential for China’s high-tech industries and green energy transition. Li, M. (2023). Chinese companies have already expressed interest in reviving and expanding projects such as the Mes Aynak Copper Mine and exploring new investment opportunities under bilateral and regional frameworks. Unlike the U.S., which emphasized military stabilization, China leverages economic instruments such as infrastructure investment, concessional loans, and trade agreements to build influence. Small, A. (2022). This geo-economics approach not only promises economic returns but also aims to stabilize Afghanistan through development, thereby reducing the risk of insecurity spilling over into China’s western frontier. By linking Afghanistan to regional economic networks, China seeks both strategic depth and material gain.

Geostrategic

Countering U.S. containment and expanding regional influence is a central pillar of China’s post-2021 engagement with Afghanistan. Beijing views the U.S. military withdrawal not merely as a regional development but as an opportunity to challenge the strategic architecture that previously constrained its rise. Clarke, M. (2023). For years, China perceived the U.S. presence in Afghanistan as part of a broader containment strategy designed to project power into Central and South Asia. With that presence gone, China has moved to fill the strategic void by deepening ties with regional states, engaging the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and enhancing its role in multilateral security frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This geostrategic repositioning allows Beijing to project influence westward, secure its peripheries, and reduce the strategic encirclement it perceives from U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, Afghanistan’s position at the crossroads of Central, South, and West Asia gives China a unique opportunity to integrate the region into its connectivity and security networks, enhancing its leverage over critical trade and energy routes. Scobell, A., & Nader, A. (2022). Unlike Washington’s military-heavy approach,



Beijing relies on a mix of diplomacy, economic engagement, and soft power to entrench its influence. This strategy not only counters U.S. influence but also strengthens China's claim to regional leadership and reshapes the balance of power across Eurasia. Joshi, Y. (2024).

Existing literature emphasizes China's "non-interventionist but strategic" posture in Afghanistan, highlighting how Beijing has historically preferred to advance its interests without becoming entangled in direct military or political control. This approach reflects China's broader foreign policy principle of non-interference, coupled with strategic calculation to safeguard its security and economic goals. Haq, M. U. (2024). For much of the U.S. occupation period, China maintained a cautious stance—engaging economically while relying on the U.S. security umbrella to maintain basic stability in Afghanistan. Scholars describe this as "strategic free-riding," where Beijing benefitted from a stable environment without assuming the costs of military intervention. However, the post-2021 era represents a clear qualitative shift in China's engagement. The U.S. withdrawal and the rise of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan have prompted Beijing to play a more proactive role in shaping the regional environment. China has expanded its diplomatic outreach, engaging in formal dialogues with Taliban leadership and advocating for international recognition under specific conditions. Wu, B., & Li, H. (2023). Security dialogues have intensified, focusing on counterterrorism cooperation and border stability to safeguard China's western frontier. Economically, Beijing has accelerated discussions on infrastructure investment, resource development, and integration into the Belt and Road Initiative. This evolving posture underscores China's shift from a passive stabilizer to an active shaper of Afghanistan's future strategic landscape.

Theoretical Framework

The study applies three interrelated theoretical frameworks:

Realism

Realism provides a foundational lens for understanding China's strategic behavior in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Rooted in the assumption that the international system is anarchic, Realism posits that states prioritize power accumulation, security, and survival to protect their national interests. Within this framework, China's actions reflect a calculated response to an emerging strategic opening. The absence of U.S. military dominance has created a more fluid balance of power in Central and South Asia, enabling Beijing to expand its influence while minimizing direct confrontation. Rather than pursuing ideological or humanitarian goals, China's engagement is guided by rational cost-benefit calculations—aimed at securing its borders, expanding regional leverage, and countering rival influences.

Power Transition Theory

Power Transition Theory offers another critical perspective on China's response to the U.S. withdrawal. This theory suggests that when dominant powers decline or retreat, rising powers often step in to fill the vacuum, leading to a reconfiguration of regional or global order. The U.S. exit from Afghanistan can be interpreted as part of its broader strategic recalibration, creating space for China to project power westward. As a rising global power, Beijing views this moment as an opportunity to consolidate its regional position, strengthen strategic



partnerships, and reshape the balance of influence in its favor without overtly challenging the international order.

Geo-Economics

Geo-economics provides a complementary framework that highlights how China leverages economic tools—such as infrastructure investments, connectivity projects, and trade corridors—to achieve strategic objectives. Unlike traditional great powers that rely heavily on military intervention, Beijing emphasizes economic statecraft as a primary means of influence. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative serve as vehicles to integrate Afghanistan into broader regional networks, secure access to resources, and establish long-term strategic footholds. This approach allows China to project power and shape outcomes while avoiding the political and financial costs associated with military deployment. Collectively, these three frameworks—Realism, Power Transition Theory, and Geo-economics—offer a comprehensive understanding of how Beijing blends economic pragmatism with strategic positioning in post-U.S. Afghanistan. They reveal that China's strategy is neither purely economic nor purely political but a calculated fusion of both, aimed at advancing its national interests while maintaining stability along its western frontier.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze China's evolving geostrategic role in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal. The methodology emphasizes content and discourse analysis, which is particularly suited for examining policy narratives, strategic signaling, and the underlying meanings embedded in official and scholarly texts.

Data Sources

The research draws on a diverse set of primary and secondary sources to ensure both depth and reliability. Primary sources include official Chinese foreign policy statements issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, strategic white papers, and speeches by top Chinese leadership, including those by Xi Jinping and the Foreign Minister. Additionally, BRI project reports, academic publications, think tank analyses, and regional media coverage from 2021 onward provide valuable insights into the external framing of China's strategy. By integrating theory-driven analysis with a robust qualitative methodology, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how China blends economic, diplomatic, and security tools to fill the power vacuum in Afghanistan and reshape regional power dynamics.

Analysis

Economic Leverage through BRI

Afghanistan's geographic position at the crossroads of South, Central, and West Asia makes it a natural connectivity hub in regional trade and transit networks. Recognizing this strategic value, China seeks to integrate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enhancing regional interconnectivity and economic integration. This vision is closely linked with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which could extend its routes through Afghan territory. Infrastructure development in energy, transportation, and mining sectors forms the backbone of this strategy. Through such investments, China



aims to transform Afghanistan into a bridge linking Asian markets and foster long-term regional stability. Ahmed, N. (2022).

Security Calculus & Counterterrorism

China faces significant security challenges from transnational extremist groups that may use Afghanistan as a base to threaten regional stability and China's western regions, particularly Xinjiang. In response, Beijing has adopted a proactive approach to counterterrorism through regional cooperation and intelligence coordination. Zafar, S., & Qureshi, A. (2025). Its collaboration with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) partners plays a central role in strengthening border security and monitoring cross-border militant movements. This multilateral framework enables China to share intelligence, conduct joint exercises, and promote regional counter-extremism initiatives. Through the SCO, China seeks to ensure Afghanistan's stability while safeguarding its own national and regional security interests.

Strategic Balancing vis-à-vis the U.S.

Beijing views the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as a sign of Western strategic fatigue and declining commitment to regional stability. Seizing this moment, China positions itself as a dependable and pragmatic regional actor capable of filling the power vacuum through diplomacy and development. Rafiq, A. (2022). Unlike the United States, China pursues influence without military intervention, relying instead on economic engagement and infrastructure-driven diplomacy. Its approach emphasizes partnership, reconstruction, and mutual benefit rather than coercion or occupation. Goh, E. (2023). Through this strategy, Beijing aims to strengthen its image as a stabilizing force and expand its long-term geopolitical footprint in Afghanistan and beyond. Khan, A. M. (2024).

Beijing perceives the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as a clear indication of Western strategic fatigue and diminishing influence in the region. Capitalizing on this geopolitical shift, China seeks to portray itself as a stable and reliable partner committed to Afghanistan's reconstruction and regional stability. Panda, A. (2023). Unlike Washington's militarized approach, Beijing's strategy centers on economic engagement, investment, and development assistance. Wang, Y. (2024). It uses trade, infrastructure, and diplomacy as tools to build influence without direct military involvement. This approach allows China to project soft power while positioning itself as a leading regional actor offering sustainable alternatives to Western interventionism.

Findings & Discussion

Shift from Military to Geo-economics Power

China's strategy in Afghanistan and the wider region emphasizes infrastructure diplomacy and economic engagement over military dominance. By investing in roads, railways, energy projects, and resource development, Beijing seeks to build long-term economic interdependence and regional connectivity. This approach aligns with its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) vision, which prioritizes development-led stability instead of force-based control. Through economic partnerships and investment-driven influence, China aims to foster goodwill and secure its strategic interests peacefully. Ultimately, its strategy underscores a preference for soft power projection and cooperative regional integration rather than coercive military presence.



Regional Order Recalibration

China's expanding footprint in Afghanistan has significantly altered regional alignments, strengthening ties with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. Through economic cooperation, security dialogues, and multilateral platforms, Beijing has fostered a network of partnerships that collectively diminish U.S. influence in the region. This emerging bloc supports China's vision of a multipolar order centered on regional self-reliance and connectivity. Enhanced collaboration with these states also facilitates China's broader Belt and Road objectives by ensuring stability along key trade corridors. Consequently, Beijing's rise as a central player in Afghanistan's future has strategically eroded Washington's traditional leverage in Eurasia.

Security Pragmatism

Beijing's engagement in Afghanistan reflects a calculated and pragmatic strategy centered on safeguarding its borders and securing its growing investments rather than pursuing ambitious nation-building efforts. Unlike Western interventions, China's approach emphasizes stability through economic incentives, diplomacy, and limited security cooperation. This cautious engagement allows Beijing to protect its western frontier, particularly Xinjiang, from extremist threats while expanding its regional influence. By avoiding deep military involvement, China minimizes risk and financial burden, ensuring a sustainable presence. Its focus on infrastructure projects, mining ventures, and trade connectivity strengthens both economic interdependence and geopolitical leverage. Through these indirect but highly effective tools, China shapes regional alignments in its favor without overt confrontation. Partnerships with Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states further consolidate this influence. As a result, Beijing emerges as a stabilizing force and strategic balancer in the post-U.S. regional order. These developments collectively signify a shift toward a multipolar power structure in Eurasia. Ultimately, China's strategy underscores a new model of influence—rooted in pragmatism, restraint, and economic statecraft rather than occupation or coercion.

Conclusion

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a structural power vacuum that, rather than descending solely into chaos, has opened new geopolitical space for emerging powers to influence the regional order. China has adeptly capitalized on this opportunity through geo-economics expansion, strategic diplomacy, and pragmatic security engagement. By emphasizing development partnerships and infrastructure connectivity instead of military dominance, Beijing positions itself as a constructive alternative to Western interventionism. This approach, though less overtly forceful than Washington's, is equally transformative in its capacity to reshape regional alignments. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road and cooperation with Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states, China strengthens its influence while constraining Western leverage. Yet, its strategy faces considerable challenges, including Afghanistan's persistent instability, rival regional agendas, and the risk of strategic overreach. These dynamics could test Beijing's ability to sustain its growing influence. Ultimately, China's evolving role in post-U.S. Afghanistan represents both an opportunity and a trial for its long-term regional ambitions. Future research should critically assess the durability of this model and its broader implications for the regional



security architecture.

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