



CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN AT THE PRESENT STAGE

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This article examines China's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan in the context of contemporary international relations. It examines China's main objectives in the region, including ensuring stability, fighting terrorism, protecting economic investments and promoting the One Belt, One Road project. It analyses China's strategic initiatives, its diplomatic engagement and its interaction with other key players such as the US and Russia. Special attention is paid to China's role in the country's reconstruction process.

The article uses data from a variety of sources, including official statements, analytical reports and expert assessments.

HOZIRGI BOSQICHDA XITOYNING AFG'ONISTONDAGI GEOSIYOSIY MANFAATLARI

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MAQOLA HAQIDA

Kalit soʻzlar: Afg'oniston, talibon hukumati, geosiyosiy manfaatlar, Xitoy.

Annotatsiya: Maqolada Xitoyning Afg'onistondagi geosiyosiy manfaatlari zamonaviy xalqaro munosabatlar sharoitida ko'rib chiqilgan. Unda Xitoyning mintaqadagi asosiy maqsadlari, jumladan barqarorlikni ta'minlash, terrorizmga qarshi kurash, iqtisodiy investitsiyalarni himoya qilish va "Bir kamar, bir yo'l" loyihasini ilgari surish kabi

manfaatlari ko'rib chiqiladi. Xitoyning strategik tashabbuslari, uning diplomatik aloqalari tahlil qilinadi. Xitoyning Afg'onistonni qayta qurish jarayonidagi rolga alohida e'tibor qaratiladi. Maqolada turli manbalardan olingan ma'lumotlar, jumladan rasmiy bayonotlar, tahliliy hisobotlar va ekspert baholari qo'llanilgan.

ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ИНТЕРЕСЫ КИТАЯ В АФГАНИСТАНЕ НА СОВРЕМЕННОМ ЭТАПЕ

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О СТАТЬЕ

Ключевые слова: Афганистан; талибское правление, геополитические интересы, Китай.

Аннотация: Статья исследует геополитические интересы Китая в Афганистане в контексте современных международных отношений. В ней рассматриваются основные цели Китая в регионе, включая обеспечение стабильности, борьбу с терроризмом, защиту экономических инвестиций и продвижение проекта "Один пояс, один путь". Анализируются стратегические инициативы Китая, его дипломатическая активность и взаимодействие с другими ключевыми игроками, такими как США и Россия. Особое внимание уделяется роли Китая в процессе восстановления страны. В статье используются данные из различных источников, включая официальные заявления, аналитические отчёты и экспертные оценки.

Introduction

During the nearly three years of Taliban governans, the security situation in Afghanistan has relatively stabilized, the current situation in the country is assessed positively: armed conflict in 2023 is decreased by 41% to compered to 2022, and no armed opposition has been able to cause serious problems for Taliban rule. The UN believes that this approach contributes to national reconciliation, establishing domestic legitimacy and ensuring an inclusive political process. According to the latest US State Department report on terrorism for 2022, for the first time Afghanistan was not among the top 10 countries for terrorist attacks and ranked 9th in terms of casualties (726 in 2022), an 88% decrease from 2021 [14,15] .

The global community has also noted the Taliban's positive efforts to combat opium cultivation in Afghanistan. Since coming to power in August 2021, the Taliban leadership has declared a determined fight against narcotics and its production, and some improvements are being recognized by the global community.

Despite conflicting reports and analysts' opinions, the situation in Afghanistan remains insufficient for several reasons. First, international terrorist groups remain in the country and there is a risk of their regional and global spread. Second, inadequate border control leads to incidents along the border areas. Thirdly, the slow formation of a government that does not include the representatives of all ethnic groups creates a potential for conflict and tension.

What are the PRC's interests in this situation?

First of all, it should be noted that the factors in the formation and realisation of China's heightened geopolitical interests in Afghanistan were two politically important events that significantly changed the strategic plans of international actors, including the PRC, with attitude to Afghanistan: the withdrawal of peacekeeping troops from Afghanistan and the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, which refocused Russia's attention and weakened its focus on Greater Central Asia.

China's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan at the present stage are explained in a document such as "China's Position on the Afghan Issue", issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on 12 April 2002. It states that China and Afghanistan are regarded as close neighbours with a long history of friendship and, in the light of the current situation, it sets out China's position on the Afghan issue.

First, China upholds the principles of respecting Afghanistan's independence and sovereignty and non-interference in its internal affairs; expresses support for building an open and inclusive political system in Afghanistan and protecting the rights and interests of all citizens, including women and children. The PRC will continue to support Afghanistan's reconstruction, including cooperation in the economic, health and poverty alleviation fields. China also supports Afghanistan's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative and its integration into regional economic cooperation.

Second, while expressing strong support for Afghanistan in its fight against terrorism, Beijing calls for more effective measures to suppress all terrorist threats and ensure the security of its citizens and projects, as well as that of other countries in the region.

Third, the document also states that the international community should strengthen cooperation in countering terrorism in Afghanistan and provide necessary assistance to address the causes and consequences of terrorism in the country. China calls for strong support for

Afghanistan's fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism, including cutting off terrorism's financial channels and countering terrorist recruitment and movement. It believes that the US should honour its commitments to Afghanistan, including the return of Afghan overseas assets and the provision of promised humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of the Afghan people. Meanwhile, it stresses the need to oppose military interference in and around Afghanistan and double standards in the fight against terrorism, and supports multilateral coordination to resolve the Afghan issue.

Fourth, China will continue to provide assistance to Afghan refugees through bilateral and multilateral channels, and calls on the international community to continue to provide humanitarian assistance and development support to rebuild Afghanistan's economy. It supports the strengthening of Afghanistan's measures to combat drug production and trafficking, and pledges to strengthen the country's efforts to combat drug trafficking and narcotics [1].

The international expert community's perception of the PRC's interests in Afghanistan

Afghanistan, an underdeveloped country, is known to have vast natural resources including lithium, cobalt, copper, gold, natural gas, coal and oil. According to the US Geological Service (IOP, 2020), the country has significant natural resources such as 16 trillion cubic feet of gas, 500 billion barrels of liquefied natural gas and 1.6 trillion barrels of crude oil. The combined value of these resources is \$1 trillion, and experts say this could not help but attract China's attention after the US withdrawal, as with growing domestic energy demand and limited global supplies as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China has an interest in energy security and access to resources. Analysts say this is prompting it to look for new sources of energy to supplement its production with clean energy. In addition, Afghanistan represents a promising market for Chinese exporters, giving Beijing an additional incentive to increase cooperation with the country [2].

Many international experts have expressed their views and assessments of China's interests in Afghanistan. For example, Zafar Iqbal Yusufzai, author of "The Unquiet Triangle: U.S.-Pakistan Relations Under the Shadow of the Taliban" (Routledge, 2021), notes that Beijing wants to promote a more moderate Taliban in Kabul that will be able to effectively and efficiently manage the Taliban in Afghanistan. (Incidentally, the US and China have the same interests in this area) [3]. ... Afghanistan plays a key role in China's FPSO initiative because it lies at the crossroads of three regions: South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Beijing recognizes that its long-term strategic goals cannot be achieved unless Afghanistan becomes stable and peaceful, with a focus on economic development. Unlike the West, China does not

support democracy in Afghanistan, but shares the international community's interest in achieving stability in Afghanistan. Beijing recognizes that Afghan society is multi-ethnic and that an inclusive government with broad support from different ethnic groups is a prerequisite for stability [4].

Indian experts Vina Ramachandran and Amit Kumar have praised China's foreign policy pivot to Afghanistan. They believe that China's participation in Afghanistan's diplomatic processes is aimed at building confidence in the country's interim government. China's actions underline that its strategy is not about destabilisation, but about supporting consolidation and strengthening security in Afghanistan. The purpose of this approach, they argue, is to protect their own interests, including securing the Xinjiang region from terrorism and extremism. China also seeks to contain the spread of terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region with the help of the Taliban and Pakistan. Despite its lack of direct participation in NATO, China is seeking to form regional counter-terrorism initiatives with other countries and to support the One Belt, One Road Initiative in the region.

Experts see one of the main dangers for China in the possibility of violence and instability spreading from Afghanistan to Xinjiang province. At the same time, they say, China's contacts with the Taliban, both before and after the fall of Kabul, demonstrate the flexibility and wisdom of Beijing's foreign policy. Meanwhile, experts stress China's emphasis on diplomacy and economic development, which has led to a gradual increase in its presence and influence in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops. Beijing's main strategy is aimed at economic benefits for both countries, while taking into account China's security interests. Investment in various sectors of the Afghan economy can help create jobs and improve the socio-economic situation. Improving the living conditions of citizens can help strengthen state structures and reduce terrorism.

Indian experts are also convinced that Afghanistan's relations with its neighbours, including China, India and the Central Asian countries, will play a key role in its future. At the same time, they believe that the Chinese approach is one of cooperation and mutual growth rather than competition with other superpowers. Supporting the Taliban can stabilise the situation in the country and minimise the Taliban's ability to carry out terrorist activities, which will benefit both China and Afghanistan. It is predicted that successful cooperation with the Taliban on economic and counter-terrorism issues could enhance China's international standing and strengthen its position in confronting the United States [5].

Meanwhile, Russian expert K. Loginova believes that "China is most interested in Afghanistan's natural resources. The country has unique deposits of non-ferrous, ferrous and rare

earth metals. These include the extremely valuable and strategically important metal lithium, which is practically indispensable for the production of batteries and accumulators. However, Kabul not only lacks the resources and technology to develop these deposits, but has also been unable to attract the world's major mining companies, with the exception of China. China has begun exploration and mining operations in several regions of Afghanistan, including copper in Aynak, gems and gold in Badakhshan province, and oil in Sari Pul province. Early last year, the Taliban signed a 25-year agreement with China's Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas for oil production in the Amu Darya basin. The agreement calls for an annual investment of \$150 million, which is expected to reach \$540 million by the end of the three-year period [6].

Chinese interests in the construction of the Kosh-Tepa canal

Recently, the media have increasingly reported on the progress of the 285-kilometre-long Kosh-Tepa irrigation canal, which is expected to irrigate 550,000 hectares of land and divert 25% of the flow of the Amu Darya River to Afghanistan. Experts say it could become a "bone of contention" between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan. "Resolving the issue on a civilised level is further complicated by the fact that Afghanistan is not a member of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia (ICWC). It is this organisation that sets quotas for water extraction from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. In other words, there are no legal mechanisms to resolve such a contentious situation. It is impossible to include Afghanistan in the ICWC because the Taliban is a banned organization [7].

In January 2023, it suddenly became clear that the project was being actively implemented: the Taliban released a video. Since then, the Kosh Tepa canal, which could divert up to a third of the Amu Darya's water, has attracted international attention and concern. Citing Afghan sources, experts say that Qatar, the United States or Chinese capital may be involved in the construction of Kosh Tepa [8]. According to the Financial Times, lenta.ru reported that Beijing's motivation is explained by a desire to protect the One Belt, One Road Initiative economic project, which runs through neighbouring Pakistan and part of Afghanistan [9]. Amid reports that China has offered the Taliban cooperation in exchange for loyalty on the Uighur issue, including withdrawal of support for the Uighur "East Turkestan Islamic Movement" operating near China's borders [10], and speculation that "in exchange for Chinese aid and recognition, the Taliban have promised to begin rooting out Uighur terrorists, including the extradition of selected groups based in northeastern Afghanistan" [11]. The analytical predictions of James Durso [12] and other experts [13] raise speculation about Beijing's motives in its intention to participate in the construction of the canal.

It appears that China's desire to participate in the construction of the Kosh Tepa Canal may be due to several key factors.

First, China's ambitions in the construction of the Kosh Tepa Canal may be related to its desire to strengthen its role as a global actor, using its economic power to forge partnerships and establish a strategic presence in the region of Afghanistan.

Second, investment in the canal project is not only an economic benefit for China, but also an instrument of geopolitical influence, especially in the context of gaining Kabul's loyalty and accommodation through China's increased influence due to large financial investments.

Third, the possibility of using advanced Chinese technology and equipment in the construction of the canal is in line with China's strategy of promoting its infrastructure and development interests.

Fourthly, the involvement of Chinese specialists in the construction of the canal and related infrastructure, who are experiencing employment problems [9].

Fifth, access to natural resources and geological research in Afghanistan is not only an economic benefit for China, but also of strategic importance for China to secure its resource needs and diversify its sources.

Sixth, the trade perspective, i.e. China's participation in the construction of the canal will open access to new markets, including the consumer goods market, which is in line with its strategy of economic expansion and diversification of trading partners.

Seventh, strengthening China's position in Afghanistan by participating in the construction of the canal will not only increase its influence in the region, but also serve as a means of deterring competitors and strengthening its geopolitical position in Central Asia.

In general, China's entrenchment in Afghanistan is a deterrent factor competing with power for influence in the region and in Afghanistan in particular.

Based on the above, China's main geopolitical interests in Afghanistan are as follows:

- Supporting stability and development, as China favours the preservation of Afghanistan's independence and sovereignty, as well as an inclusive political system that protects the rights of all citizens, including women and children. This is to ensure stability in the region, which is an important prerequisite for trade and economic cooperation;

- Security and counter-terrorism, as China actively supports Afghanistan in combating this scourge that threatens China's national security;

- engagement in regional economic cooperation with a focus on access to energy resources, as China supports Afghanistan's participation in the One Belt, One Road Initiative and its integration into regional economic cooperation, which is linked to China's strategic interests in

ensuring its energy security and expanding its influence and building economic partnerships in the region;

- The willingness to provide humanitarian assistance for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, including cooperation in the economic, health and poverty alleviation sectors, which can help the PRC strengthen its position in the region by creating a favourable image and improving relations with the local population.

China's overt interests are thus expressed through cooperation in economic, trade and infrastructure projects. China is interested in opportunities to invest in the extraction of Afghan natural resources such as oil, gas and minerals. It also seeks to establish trade routes and expand its influence in the region through infrastructure projects such as roads and railways.

However, like other states, China has both explicit and implicit interests in Afghanistan. China's geostrategic goal appears to be to include Afghanistan in its zone of influence. Achieving this goal, however, requires first and foremost the creation of a "security belt" around China, an important part of which is Afghanistan, which it wants to turn into a factor that does not affect the security of China's borders and territories. This is the reason for its desire to ensure stability on the border with China in order to prevent the spread of extremism and terrorism through this area.

Overall, China's interests in Afghanistan are multifaceted and include both economic and strategic aspects.

Conclusions

In summary, the analysis of China's geopolitical interests in Afghanistan has contributed to the following conclusions.

1. China is interested in preventing the spread of terrorist threats from Afghanistan to its territory, the region and the world at large, and understands that success in this area provides security and stability not only for Afghanistan, but also for neighbouring countries and the global community.

2. The stabilisation of Afghanistan to prevent instability from spilling over into neighbouring regions such as the XUAR is another objective in China's strategic plans, as manifested in its involvement in humanitarian and economic aid, as well as diplomatic efforts to find a political solution to the conflict.

3. The PRC is interested in Afghanistan's economic development and its integration into the global economy, which implies actively developing its economic and diplomatic ties in the region through the One Belt, One Road Initiative, investment in infrastructure, natural resource

extraction, and the development of trade and economic relations. However, maximising its economic projects under this initiative may conflict with the interests of other countries.

4. China has an interest in preventing other states or non-state actors from increasing their influence in the Afghanistan region that could disrupt its own geopolitical interests, but tends to take a more cautious approach and maintain military neutrality.

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