

CHINA – TALIBAN UYGHUR *QUID PRO QUO*: LOGIC AND LIMITATIONS

JALEL BEN HAJ REHALEM*

Abstract. The Radical Taliban movement stunningly retook power in Kabul in August 2021 with a pledge to reinstate their “Islamic Emirate”. Given the Taliban old bonds with what Beijing has always dubbed as the Uyghur “terrorist organizations” that are training in and operating from Afghanistan, especially ETIM and TIP, we ask whether this twist of events has helped or distracted China’s dealing with its Uyghurs problem across its border with Afghanistan? And how Beijing has approached this issue in its interaction with the Taliban. We discuss the logic behind China’s “bribery” overture towards the Taliban in this regard.

Even though this paper is a policy research work and not a theoretical one, it adopts Kenneth Waltz’ neo-realist framework of States’ obsession with their own security. The analysis clearly shows the controversial nature of the China – Taliban relationship or what this paper calls China’s quid pro quo approach – cornering the Uyghur militants in Afghanistan would eventually gain the Taliban Beijing’s full diplomatic recognition. However, this *quid pro quo* approach has its own logistical and ideological limitations, as this paper questions the Taliban’ ability to crack down on anti-China Uyghur activities in Afghanistan, and even questions the Taliban’s “good faith” to live up to their vows in this matter. Moreover, the quid pro quo deal could even become counterproductive, as the Uyghur militants in Afghanistan, when pressured by the Taliban, are moving to even a more “attractive” alternative – the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKAP). Hence the China-Taliban quid pro quo conundrum.

Keywords: *The Xinjiang Security Challenge; The China-Taliban Uyghur; Quid pro quo Approach*

Introduction

Since August 15, 2021, when the Taliban stormed Kabul and retook power following the US historic fiasco in Afghanistan, except Russia on July 3rd, 2025, no country has *officially* recognized the Taliban government so far. Even worse, dozens of the Taliban leaders and members are on the terrorist lists by the United

* Dr., Scholar-in-residence on US foreign policy in East Asia at Riyadh University, KSA; email: jalelrehaem@gmail.com.

Nations, the United States and the European Union. China, however, was the first country to express its support for the new Taliban government in Kabul, and even came to the defense of normalizing the Taliban on the international arena. Hua Chunying, the Spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, argued that “some people always say that they do not trust the Taliban, but nothing in this world remains the same. We should not only look at the past, we should look at the current situation” (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on February 23, 2022)¹.

Beijing has always believed that instability in China’s Xinjiang was inextricably linked to the political turmoil in Afghanistan, revealing China’s obsession with its national security in relation to the Afghanistan situation, and validating Kenneth Waltz’ main argument that states’ prior concern is their own security and survival. As the Uyghur problem could very much be not only a security problem but also a survival concern for Beijing, given the Uyghurs separatist calls, facing this security/survival hazard has definitely necessitated a modicum of security cooperation with the new Taliban rulers. For Beijing, it is clear from the successive Chinese official declarations that China could not turn a blind eye to what is going on its western borders in Afghanistan. The need to step in to protect China’s national interests has never been in doubt, but the dilemma was how and when to do so; a dilemma about what to do with a post-America war-torn Afghanistan that could very much revert to a safe haven to terrorism, given the Taliban international isolation. From Beijing’s perspective, “Afghanistan’s diplomatic value has changed for China, growing in importance as Beijing expands its overseas investments, takes a greater role in global governance and tightens national security at home”².

Security stakes for China have kept getting higher and higher with the advent to power of the so-called “New Taliban” who now rule a fragmented country but highly significant in its geostrategic weight and dangerous with regard to the security void the 2021 US exit has created. Beijing’s security challenges in Afghanistan are now too high to ignore in view of the Taliban’s old bonds to a myriad of Uyghurs’ militant organizations, namely the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which used to train in Afghanistan and launch terrorist attacks against China from their training camps there. Historically, the Taliban’s-ETIM link was an iron-clad bond, as ETIM used to be “key operational arms of the Taliban in certain areas” in Afghanistan during the American occupation³.

However, the Taliban have gone more and more pragmatic since they regained power almost four years ago. In view of the international diplomatic boycott,

¹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202202/t20220223_10644886.html.

² Kinling Lo, “What is China’s relationship with Afghanistan, and how will it change once the US is gone?”, *The South China Morning Post*, July 18, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3140966/what-chinas-relationship-afghanistan-and-how-will-it-change> [Accessed on October 18, 2021].

³ Besmillah Taban & David O’Brien, “Are Uyghur Militants Becoming ISKP’s New Force?”, March 07, 2025, https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/are-uyghur-militants-becoming-iskps-new-force/?fbclid=IwY2xjawJzFwZleHRuA2F1bQIxMQABHqEVftrd2VXC6Zs_5iN7a6Dqj0OXt7j5FJtve8orrIy1runkS-zs6qsWY7gm_aem_DHJukm31_3a1MHqld_f_0w [Accessed on April 21, 2025].

the Taliban have repeatedly expressed their hope to develop more beneficial relations with China. They are now desperate to enter into a deal that earns them a Chinese diplomatic recognition⁴. As a matter of fact, the China-Taliban deal terms are not very complicated for both parties. A Taliban cooperation on the Uyghur militant organizations in Afghanistan, mainly ETIM and TIP, would eventually lead to a badly needed Chinese diplomatic recognition. But this *quid pro quo* is not risk-free, as cornering the militant Uyghurs in Afghanistan could eventually push them into the braces of the more radical *Islamic State Khorasan Province* (ISKP) which is “a staunch enemy of the Taliban. ISKP is keen to step in to bolster its own ranks with Uyghur militants”⁵. Hence the China-Taliban *quid pro quo* conundrum.

Indeed, Taliban’s spokesperson Dhabih Allah Chahid seemed to understand China’s *quid pro quo* approach well, or what this paper calls the “bribery” approach, when he said in October 2021 that “his movement was looking to China for support and cooperation”⁶. It is clear that in the post-US vacuum both Beijing and Kabul do need each other for a “win-win” cooperative security and political relationship. The Taliban are in a desperate need for China’s “support”; in return, China does need the Taliban’s cooperation on the Ughurs problem. Therefore, Beijing has decided to seize the opportunity of reaping security benefits in what seems to be a marriage of convenience with the Taliban. The chances of success and the risks of failure for the Taliban-China *quid pro quo* deal would largely depend on how hard the Taliban would go on the ETIM and TIP, and how soft the ISKP could be in alluring them into its ranks. And this is the gap in the literature about the “New” Taliban prospective posture this paper is seeking to fill.

Review of Literature

As a matter of fact, there has been quite a substantial literature about China’s Uyghur security problem with and inside Afghanistan, yet, there still are many lacunae to bridge, namely what this paper calls the logic and limitations to China’s *quid pro quo* approach to its security problem in and with Afghanistan. The relevant literature has varied from the historical context of the *Uyghurs issue in China’s Xinjiang* province and its vicinity in neighboring countries, especially in Afghanistan, to the Taliban’s ongoing efforts of closing down on the Uyghur training camps in Afghanistan, in an attempt to ingratiate themselves with Beijing in order to secure its desperately needed diplomatic recognition in return.

From a historical perspective, Graham E. Fuller and Frederick Starr explore, in their insightful work “The Xinjiang Problem”, the strategic importance to

⁴ Leslie Adam, “China’s recognition of the Taliban sets a dangerous precedent”, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), February 7, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-recognition-of-the-taliban-sets-a-dangerous-precedent/> [Accessed on January 3, 2025].

⁵ Besmillah Taban & David O’Brien, *art. cit.*

⁶ Ayeed Iftekhar Ahmed, “Can the Taliban Regime Stay Power?”, *The Diplomat*, October 09, 2021. https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/can-the-taliban-regime-stay-power/?fbclid=IwAR2PHYM4IoUY9ru91NuvBLY7sXLSKc4K3uEQft4h6P_AwJi6caNithBNqHc [Accessed on July 21, 2022].

China's future regional and world preponderance⁷. Even though this study is more than twenty years old, some of its key points are still valid. One of the interesting arguments both authors advance is the paradoxical Chinese and Uyghur narratives regarding which side is a threat to the other. "The Uyghur and Chinese narratives differ fundamentally from each other, with the former asserting that Chinese control came late and as a result of colonial conquest, and the latter claiming Xinjiang as a core Chinese territory from time immemorial".

Fuller and Starr extensively studied the myriad of Uyghur extremist groups operating from Afghanistan. They mentioned the most dangerous ones, among which the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM), Islamic Movement of East Turkistan (IMET), the East Turkistan Party of Allah (ETPA), the Islamic Holy Warriors (IHW). The authors argue that since "there is a significant Uyghur diaspora across Central Asia, especially in Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan... China has long sought to get these states to prevent Uyghur citizens of their countries from supporting separatism in China". As early as 2003, Beijing concluded "that the general threat posed by Afghanistan's Taliban would foster cooperation among the member states...on diaspora Uyghur activities in these states".

Also, Michael Clarke studied a few years ago, in "China's Emerging Afghanistan Dilemma" published by *the Australian Journal of International Affairs*⁸, Beijing's approach to Afghanistan which was shaped by the desire to integrate Xinjiang and utilize this region's unique geopolitical position to facilitate a China-centric Eurasian geo-economic system according to President Xi Jinping's 'One Belt, One Road' strategy. This paper agrees with Clark's argument that Afghanistan is indeed crucial for Xi's ambitious mega project – One Belt, one Road, but it differs from his logic that Beijing believes the Xinjiang issue is a "geopolitical advantage". On the contrary, this work argues that China looks at Xinjiang as a security problem to address, and that the Taliban's badly needed "sincere" cooperation in taking concrete measures against the Xinjiang's separatist militants operating from Afghanistan are crucial not only for China's geopolitical preponderance but also even for its own territorial integrity.

Moreover, Andrew Small, author of *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics in 2015*⁹, "offers a detailed discussion on Islamist groups in Afghanistan and the transnational connections that these groups share with one another. There are sections in the book about the Taliban and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which poses not only a strategic but also an existential threat to China's territorial integrity, as the group calls for the resurrection of the short-lived breakaway *Islamic Turkestan Republic (ETR)* founded on 12 November

⁷ Graham E. Fuller et. al., *The Xinjiang Problem*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies the Johns Hopkins University, 2003. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30301/01_Xinjiang_Problem.pdf [Accessed on January 13, 2025].

⁸ M. Clarke, "One Belt, One Road" and China's Emerging Afghanistan Dilemma, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 2016; 70(5): 563-579.

⁹ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics in 2015*, Oxford University Press; 1st edition, February 13, 2015.

1933 in what is today a part of *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region*. It was primarily the product of an independence movement of the *Uyghur* population living there and more broadly of Turkic-ethnicity in character, including *Kyrgyz* and other *Turkic peoples*. And this substantiates this paper’s thesis that the Xinjiang issue has been a controversial headache for the Chinese since the people’s Liberation Army (PLA) rolled into the then Turkic Islamic Republic of East Turkestan (TIRET), which Mao Zedong called the “Peaceful Liberation of Xinjiang”.

Furthermore, Raja Muhammad Khan goes further to explore the China-Afghanistan equation in its broader global context. In his article “China’s Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan”¹⁰, Khan explores the growing relationship between China and Afghanistan in an international context. He explains that, while Afghanistan has traditionally been a regional partner of India and Pakistan, China is now increasingly engaging with Afghanistan through economic and diplomatic initiatives. Khan argues that while China’s involvement in Afghanistan is primarily motivated by economic considerations, it also serves as a strategic opportunity to expand its influence in Central Asia, which substantiates the *raison d’etre* of this work that seeks to explore the strategic importance of the Taliban “cooperation” on the Uyghurs problem to China’s regional and strategic calculations.

The question of China’s prospective role in Afghanistan is further elaborated by Abdalnaser Noorzad who, in his *Afghanistan’s Place in the New Great Game*¹¹, examines China’s stakes in Afghanistan in the post-US 2021 withdrawal and its implications for regional security. Kapur argues that China has become an increasingly influential player in Afghanistan’s complex geopolitical landscape. He explores how China has used its growing economic, diplomatic and military power to shape outcomes in the region. In addition, Kapur looks at how China is helping to promote stability in Afghanistan through dangling the diplomatic recognition card in front of an increasingly isolated Taliban. Finally, Abdalnaser Noorzad concludes that China’s presence in Afghanistan is part of a larger effort to establish itself as a major global power, but first it needs to solve its inherent security dilemma in Afghanistan of addressing the serious challenges the Uyghurs militants pose to Beijing, even by paying the ultimate political price of being the first and only country to officially recognize the Taliban in what this paper calls the China-Taliban hazardous quid pro quo deal.

The Beijing-Kabul purported *quid pro quo* deal is indeed not risk free. In a recent article in March 2025, in *The Diplomat*, “Are Uyghur Militants Becoming ISKP’s New Force?”, Islomkhon Gafarov¹² warns that pressuring the Uyghur

¹⁰ Raja Muhammad Khan, “China’s Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan”, *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, Special Issue, Summer 2015, https://sbbwu.edu.pk/journal/special%20issue/7._China_s_Economic_and_Strategic_Interests_in_Afghanistan.pdf [Accessed on May 11, 2023].

¹¹ Abdalnaser Noorzad, “Afghanistan’s Place in the New Great Game”, *East Studies Journal*, Institute for East Strategic Studies, 9 April 2023, <https://www.iess.ir/en/analysis/3432/> [Accessed on June 3, 2023].

¹² Islomkhon Gafarov, “Are Uyghur Militants Becoming ISKP’s New Force?”, *The Diplomat*, https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/the-talibans-struggle-for-legitimacy/?fbclid=IwY2xjawIqh6NleHRuA2FbQlxMQABHVs4qadn36oo1LJVJGO0Rh4LeBaZ0zx5OAjwiqMyO7LY56KPrSq7gD58FA_aem_aSSjJF0rqT5huRhIYypx2A [Accessed on March 22, 2025].

militants in Afghanistan too much could lead to more security challenges not only to China but also to the Taliban themselves. *The Diplomat* goes on to argue that the more the Taliban close down on the Uyghurs the more the latter find “refuge” in the *Islamic State Khorasan Province* (ISKP) which poses a serious security challenge to both parties.

Last but not least, the most recent piece of literature that has generally dealt with the China’s Taliban security approach is “Amity, Security, Influence: Explaining China’s Policy Toward Afghanistan, 1949–2024” by *Feng Zhang* in *China’s Contemporary Studies*¹³, journal published early in April 2025. Even though this is an extensively insightful coverage of China’s policy towards Afghanistan, it fits into the historically theoretical account of this policy over a very long and tumultuous span of time, as the title itself shows. The article divides China’s policy into three periods: the Cold War era (1949–1989), the post-Cold War period, and the latest phase since the Taliban have retaken power in August 2021, which is actually the focus of this paper, but from a more focused and policy research perspective.

Given this literature review, we can see that China’s security concerns in the Taliban Afghanistan have been addressed from different perspectives, but not from the “bribery-style”, *quid pro quo* angle of vision which ought to highlight the nature of the China-Taliban relationship not only in the post-2021 US withdrawal but also even during the American occupation years. This paper argues that it has always been a give-and-take relationship between Beijing and the Taliban, especially at times of reciprocal need for each other. In other words, Beijing has had the pattern of interacting with the Taliban with the mentality of bribing—whether it’s a financial, diplomatic and economic bribery; and this paper is seeking to fathom the diplomatic-security *quid pro quo* between the two sides as a form of diplomatic bribery. Beijing believes that growing ties between China and the Taliban may result in less support for Uyghur militant groups from the Taliban, thereby reducing the likelihood that these groups would target Chinese interests and territories.

Methodology

Methodologically, this paper adopts a neo-realist analytical framework that should address China’s national security concerns in Afghanistan in the 2021 post-US withdrawal era. As this work is about China’s power calculations and security stakes in Afghanistan, it follows the (neo)realist theoretical framework of Kenneth Waltz’s framework of the States’ quest for security as a priority over their insatiable appetite for power. The exercise of power by states toward each other, which is technically called *realpolitik* or power politics, shows that security is the ultimate concern of states interacting in an anarchical system of international relations. And this applies to the China case in relation to its security hazards in and with Afghanistan.

¹³ F. Zhang, “Amity, Security, Influence: Explaining China’s Policy Toward Afghanistan, 1949–2024”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2025, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2025.2471924>.

Waltz' neorealism argument is about security as the basic goal of states in an anarchic international environment. As the international system is anarchic, states are concerned with their own security and therefore operate with the aim of survival. Applying this neo-realist framework of security as the states' major goal does apply to the China's case study in Afghanistan because Beijing's ultimate objective is to secure its borders on the Uyghur Xinjiang side to prevent any security threats from the Afghanistan-based Uyghur separatist groups threatening not only China's security but also its very survival, for most of these groups are openly calling for independence from China.

Therefore, this model of qualitative and exploratory methodology, using a neo-realist approach to an international relations case study seeks to explain the factors and motives which account for how China will face off security threats in Afghanistan after the advent of the second Taliban rule in 2021 with respect to the Uyghurs security challenges along China's western borders. The analysis of these factors should at the end clarify how Beijing intends to address this existential issue.

The adoption of this (neo)realist concept is motivated by the fact that understanding China's own concept of its interests in Afghanistan fits into Waltz' definition of security as the states' ultimate interest. To achieve its ultimate security objective, China has sought to gain more political leverage on the Taliban by dangling the diplomatic recognition card, which serves well Beijing's security calculations to fail any potential Taliban collusion with the Uyghurs separatists operating in Afghanistan. In other words, China's tactic is clearly about adopting warm diplomacy in return for security gains simultaneously; in other words, a *quid pro quo* posture. This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the central question whether China would be able to tame the Taliban into going after the Uyghur militants scattered all over Afghanistan, and whether Beijing's *quid pro quo* overture toward the Taliban has its own limitations.

The Xinjiang Security Challenge

Xinjiang, the largest Chinese province, is bordered by eight countries including Kirgizstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Though it is home essentially to the Turkic-speaking Muslim Uyghur minority, Xinjiang is also home to mostly Muslim communities of Kazakhs, Mongols and Hui ethnicities. There are also smaller communities of other minorities such as Tajiks and Kyrgyz. In the 18th century, Xinjiang was eventually conquered by the Manchu Qing dynasty during the Dzungar – Qing Wars which took place between 1687 and 1758. More than one century later, and following the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877)¹⁴, the area was reconquered by the Qing dynasty, resulting

¹⁴ The Dungan Revolt was an ethnic and religious war that erupted in the 19th century in China between the Hui minority and the then-Qing army. The insurgency was sparked by ethnic Hui Muslims and other ethnic Muslims in China in the provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia and Senjan between 1862–1877 AD. The reason for the outbreak of the rebellion was the dispute over the price of bamboo sticks sold by the Hui to Han traders. The death toll was about 20.77 million in Shaanxi and Gansu, most of whom died of natural inheritance,

in the creation of Xinjiang Province in 1884. Even though Xinjiang experienced a brief period of independence in the 1940s, China soon regained control of Xinjiang, after the CCP took power in 1949, which became since then the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. But despite its strategic, economic and geo-political importance for China, Xinjiang has become a security challenge and a political headache for Beijing. As more and more separatist and allegedly terrorist indigenous movements are budding in Xinjiang, more and more allegations of what human rights Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) call Beijing's "gross human rights violations" that amount to "crimes against humanity" of the Uyghurs¹⁵.

More and more international accusations for the Chinese of committing ethnic cleansing and colossal human rights abuses against the Muslim Uyghurs are building up¹⁶, which China refuses to acknowledge and counterargues that all that it is doing with the Uyghurs is sending them to "vocational centers" (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 13, 2021)¹⁷. "The United Nations has [also] accused China of 'serious human violations and possible crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. China has denied the scale of the detentions but acknowledged that 'religious extremist' Uyghurs are undergoing re-education and resettlement"¹⁸.

As most of these "religious extremist' Uyghurs" are "sheltered" and trained in Afghanistan, given the ETIM-Taliban historical and ideological bond, a grave security challenge to China has been in the making. In view of the geographic proximity of the Xinjiang Province to Afghanistan and the history of the Taliban-Uyghurs special relationship, Beijing has long associated stability in Afghanistan with that in Xinjiang. As a matter of fact, China long-time interaction with the Taliban has most of the time revolved around the latter's ideological link with the Uyghur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM is the generic name used to describe an organization formed by Uyghur activists affiliated with the self-proclaimed Turkistan Islamic Party which in the 1990s. It had fled from China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to neighboring countries, mainly Afghanistan. Intelligence reports indicate that ETIM has been training and preparing attacks on China from Afghan soil for years¹⁹.

such as war-induced famine and most of whom were Han civilians. The insurgency broke out in the west bank of the Yellow River in Shaanxi, Gansu and Ningxia, and did not extend to Xinjiang province. The insurgency saw chaos, guerrilla wars and a lack of purpose among combatants, contrary to what is rumored as the rebellion against the Qing family, and they did not try to attack the capital Beijing, or even try to expel the Qing family. After the failure of the insurgency, the Dungan people emigrated to the territory of the Russian Empire.

¹⁵ Amnesty International Report, May 28, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/un-xinjiang-china-visit/>.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch Report, April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>.

¹⁷ https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202105/t20210513_9170743.html

¹⁸ BBC Website, *Country Profile, Xinjiang profile*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16860974> [Accessed on October 11, 2023].

¹⁹ Murray S. Tanner & James Bellacqua, "China's Response to Terrorism", The Center for Naval Analyses, Report sponsored by the U.S. – China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 2016, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism_CNA061616.pdf [Accessed on August 23, 2021].

For decades, the Afghan border province of Badakhshan, adjacent to the Chinese province of Shaanxiang, became a refuge for hundreds of ethnic Uyghurs Muslims who have been engaged in separatist activities since the first Taliban rule in the mid-nineties. Then, the Chinese Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang began to grow more and more militaristic and even separatist. The Uyghur militants crossed the border through the back roads and moved almost freely between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan, which posed a security tall order for Beijing²⁰. The most vulnerable security weakness across the China-Afghanistan border is the North Wakhjir or what is called the Tegermansu Pass in the Eastern end of the Pamir Mountain chain which ranges into the Chalachigu Valley in Xinjiang²¹.

To deal with the Uyghur security challenge, China had been in a constant contact with the Taliban long before the US quick exit in 2021, as they have always held the key to Xinjiang's security hazards²². On July 28, 2021, a few weeks before the US suddenly decided to quit, it was reported that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had already held talks with the Taliban religious leader Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin, China (Statement by the Chinese Embassy in Moldova, July 28, 2021)²³. Moreover, two weeks before the Wang-Baradar meeting, China's Foreign Minister had also met the then Afghan Foreign Minister Muhammad Hanif Atmar in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and stressed that Afghanistan must never again become a haven for Uyghur militants. This means that the Chinese had anticipated the US hasty withdrawal and had already started preparing for the security vacuum a potential US withdrawal would create, especially across the 57-mile section of the Wakhan Corridor with Afghanistan.

As Afghanistan is a critical area for western China, where the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is located, China's success in maintaining the security and stability of its western borders is one of the key gains of ingratiating itself with the Taliban, who have shown a great deal of "cooperation" with Beijing in this regard since they regained power in August 2021. In May 2023, for instance, the Taliban pledged not to allow ETIM to launch attacks against China; and they started acting accordingly. In an effort to assuage Beijing's concerns and monitor the activities of Uyghur militant groups, the Taliban moved anti-China Uyghur groups from the northeastern province of Badakhshan, which lies along the Chinese-Afghan border, to Baghlan and Takhar provinces in central Afghanistan.

As the Taliban succeeded in retaking Kabul much faster than anyone expected, Wang Yi was the first and only foreign minister to talk to the Taliban chief Mullah Baradar over the phone, and demanded that the Taliban decisively sever

²⁰ Siddique Abubakar, "The Limits of China's Budding Relationship with Afghanistan's Taliban", Radio Free Europe, June 04, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-china-taliban-uyghurs-security/32444038.html> [Accessed on August 13, 2023].

²¹ Franz J. Marty & Ted Callahan, «Tilting at Windmills: Dubious US claims of targeting Chinese Uyghur militants in Badakhshan», Afghanistan Analysts Network, March 19, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/tilting-at-windmills-dubious-us-claims-of-targeting-chinese-uyghur-militants-in-badakhshan/> [Accessed on March 3, 2020]

²² Yaroslav Trofimov & Chao Deng, "Afghanistan's Taliban, Now on China's Border, Seek to Reassure Beijing", *The Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistans-taliban-now-on-chinas-border-seek-to-reassure-beijing-11625750130> [Accessed on November 28, 2021].

²³ http://md.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202107/t20210729_8986490.htm.

ties with Uyghur terrorist organizations, especially with ETIM, as the most trained and heavily armed Uyghur separatist group. During the Wang-Baradar phone call, Mullah Baradar reassured Wang that his new government would not harm China's interests. In return, the Chinese extended the olive branch to the Taliban. Only one day after the US sudden exit from Afghanistan, China's Foreign Affairs Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said on August 16, 2021 that "on the basis of fully respecting the sovereignty of Afghanistan and the will of all factions in the country, China has maintained contact and communication with the Afghan Taliban and played a constructive role in promoting the political settlement of the Afghan issue"²⁴. Following the August 15, 2021 political and strategic fait accompli in Kabul, engaging the Taliban was not only the best but also the only option for the Chinese to move forward and try to secure their 57-mile border with Afghanistan.

However, "despite Beijing's belief that it can engage with Afghanistan on its terms and at arm's length, it's likely that China will soon find itself deeply entangled in post-US Afghan affairs. For Beijing, the security challenge which the Xinjiang-Wukhan borders pose not only to China's wellbeing but also to its future territorial integrity outright, is a serious matter. To deal with such a challenge, Beijing seemingly has two choices, not three. Either to keep its distance from the Taliban regime and join the international community in boycotting the Taliban and refrain from offering them any legitimacy branch. The purported consequences for such a posture would highly likely elicit a stronger interaction between the Taliban and ETIM and therefore more potential Uyghur terrorist attacks inside China. Or to engage the Taliban, lure them into cooperating with Beijing with regard to border security challenges, and create economic and diplomatic stakes for them to abandon their relationship with secessionist Uyghur movements, primarily ETIM. "The security, economic and humanitarian vacuum left by the end of the US occupation has significant implications for China's interests in the country and the wider region – in terms of both challenges and opportunities"²⁵.

Indeed, these very "challenges", which are the major focus of this paper, are at the heart of the China policy in the post-occupation Afghanistan. Even though "China seeks to downplay its military role [in Afghanistan] and focus on capacity building and counterterrorism efforts, its ultimate goal is to eliminate training bases of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement in the Wakhan Corridor and prevent jihadist infiltration into Xinjiang"²⁶. What the Chinese are expecting from the Taliban since their comeback to power in 2021 is a modicum of Taliban coordination and cooperation with regards to the ETIM training camps in Afghanistan." ETIM is a terrorist organization that operates in China and the border regions of

²⁴ Reid Standish, "Explainer: What Does China Want from Afghanistan After the Taliban Takeover?", Radio Free Europe, August 20, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-china-goals/31420549.html> [Accessed on November 18, 2021].

²⁵ Jiayi Zhou, Fei Su and Jindong Yuan, "Treading lightly: China Footprint in a Taliban-led Afghanistan", SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No. 2022/08 November 2022, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/sipriinsights_2208_china_and_afghanistan_2.pdf [Accessed on December 11, 2022].

²⁶ Sahar Liaqat et. al., "Afghanistan in China's Grand Strategy", *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/afghanistan-in-chinas-grand-strategy/> [Accessed on November 8, 2022].

Afghanistan...[it] enjoys support from the Taliban in the mountains of Badakhshan, so hitting these Taliban training facilities and squeezing the Taliban's support networks degrades ETIM capabilities" said Air Force Maj. Gen. James B. Hecker, commander of NATO Air Command Afghanistan, back to 2018²⁷.

Now, as the United States is no longer there to bomb the Taliban-ETIM training camps, China's security free ride in Afghanistan is no longer possible. Beijing needs to step in to fill in the security vacuum the US withdrawal has left behind along the Afghanistan-China border. At this juncture, Beijing might ironically regret criticizing the US/NATO military presence in Afghanistan. "While often criticized by the Chinese government, the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military presence in Afghanistan in effect served to manage the threat of the ETIM/TIP on China's behalf"²⁸. As the US/NATO are no longer there, China has to take matters into its own hands to "manage" ETIM's separatist activities inside Afghanistan and into China across the borders. But this is only feasible through engaging the new rulers in Kabul, the Taliban, with whom the Chinese had a long and complex quid pro quo relationship at best, and a political bribery connection at worst.

As a matter of fact, even during the 20-year American occupation, the China-Taliban intelligence coordination with regards to the Uyghurs militants operating on Afghan soil went unabated. The Uyghur Project for Human Rights²⁹ revealed that by June 2021, a couple of months before the US fled Afghanistan, nearly 400 Uyghurs had been deported, extradited or transferred to China. Intelligence and press reports confirmed that the operation had begun in the year 2000 after a secret meeting that brought together the then Chinese ambassador to Pakistan Lochlin and Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar in the Afghan city of Kandahar³⁰. During this meeting Beijing asked the Taliban to deal with the Uyghurs' training camps in Afghanistan, and offered economic and investment stakes in return³¹, which amounts to what this paper calls an old-new Chinese bribery policy towards the Taliban for security gains in return.

This China-Taliban "win-win" relationship during the late 1990's was interrupted by the American occupation of Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001, which toppled the Taliban regime in October of that year. China did not participate in any way in the then international alliance, but it kept monitoring the situation in Afghanistan. For Beijing, the paramount concern was the inextricable link between the instability in Afghanistan and the security

²⁷ US Department of Defense, February 7, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1435247/us-forces-strike-taliban-east-turkestan-islamic-movement-training-sites/>.

²⁸ T. Moon Cronk, "US Department of Defense (DOD), 'US forces strike Taliban, East Turkestan Islamic Movement training sites'", DOD News, 7 Feb. 2018.

²⁹ The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) promotes the rights of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim peoples in East Turkistan, referred to by the Chinese government as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, through research-based advocacy. UHRP was founded in 2004 as a project of the Uyghur American Association and became an independent nonprofit organization in 2016 (<https://uhrp.org/about/>).

³⁰ Congressional Research Service (CRS), "Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress", November 2, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46955> [Accessed on March 13, 2021].

³¹ *Ibidem*.

challenge in Xinjiang, which necessitated more security cooperation between Beijing and Hamid Karzai's new regime in Kabul in 2001. A new era of Sino-Afghan relations seemed to begin after Hamid Karzai assumed the presidency of the country in December 2001. Beijing soon recognized the Karzai government and reopened its embassy in Kabul in 2002 after a 9-year closure.

A few years later, President Karzai paid a fruitful state visit to the People's Republic of China from June 18 to 21, 2006, at the invitation of the then Chinese President Hu Jintao. Beijing issued a statement in the aftermath of Karzai's visit saying that "both parties agree to intensify cooperation in infrastructural areas such as natural resources development, power generation and road construction. To help increase Afghanistan's export to China, the Chinese side announced that it would grant zero-tariff treatment to 278 items of Afghan exports to China as of 1 July 2006" (Joint Statement between The People's Republic of China and The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, June 20, 2006). The advent of the Hamid Karzai administration after the Taliban were gone in October 2001 brought about the need for more Sino-Afghan security coordination in order to be able to reap the economic and trade opportunities which Karzai's visit created. Reaping those opportunities was indeed incumbent upon addressing China's security concerns along their common borders, mainly through the controversial Wukhan Corridor.

China continued its luring policy of economic gains in return for security cooperation from Karzai's government. Between 2002 and 2010, the volume of China's economic aid to Afghanistan was of \$205.3 million. The then China-Afghanistan Economic Commission recommended Chinese investments in agriculture, infrastructure, hydropower and natural resources. Moreover, the Chinese telecommunication companies, namely Huawei and Zeei, converted 100,000 phone lines in Afghanistan to digital technology³². China has sought to strengthen its economic ties with Afghanistan in an effort to help stabilize the country and thereby mitigate the domestic security risks arising from the continuation of conflict there³³.

Moreover, the China-Afghanistan relationship cooperation started having a military facet during Achraf Ghani's presidency (September 2014 – August 2021). In a statement in August 2018, the Afghan embassy in Beijing confirmed that China had helped establish a mountain brigade to counter possible attacks by al-Qaeda and Islamic State. The statement expressed the Afghan government appreciation China's assistance and that the countries' militaries were working in close coordination. "China's assistance" took the form of setting "up a mountain brigade in Afghanistan's north to boost counterterrorism efforts, but there were no Chinese military personnel of any kind on Afghan soil at any time"³⁴.

³² Barbara Kelemen, "China's Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan", Middle East Institute, January 21, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-economic-stabilization-efforts-afghanistan-new-party-table> [Accessed on July 3rd, 2020].

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Minnie Chan, "China is helping Afghanistan set up mountain brigade to fight terrorism", the South China Morning Post, August 28, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161745/china-building-training-camp-afghanistan-fight> [Accessed on December 3, 2021].

China's engagement of Achraf Ghani, which was perceived by the United States as a strategic asset to help pacify the war-torn Afghanistan, won Beijing a badly-needed political legitimacy with regards to its controversial policies and practices towards the Uyghurs both inside and outside Xinjiang, especially the Uyghur militants based in Afghanistan. To engage the Chinese in the reconstruction of the war-torn Afghanistan during the 2000s, the United States officially designated the Uyghur ETIM group as a terrorist organization. As a consequence, China's fight against separatist forces in Xinjiang won international recognition as part of George W. Bush's "global war on terror"; a "war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them" (President George W. Bush, October 11, 2001, George W. Bush Presidential Library)³⁵. In return, China supported the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and even provided aid for Afghanistan's reconstruction³⁶.

Meanwhile China's strategic interests continued to grow, as more and more security challenges kept rising, mainly after the Taliban unabated guerilla warfare efforts against the US forces started gaining momentum. *The Diplomat* indicates that "China's involvement in Afghanistan significantly increased particularly in 2012. After initially maintaining a low profile, China's involvement in Afghanistan grew considerably due to concerns over instability in Central Asia and its potential impact on *the security of China's western provinces*, especially Xinjiang"³⁷. From the Chinese perspective, Beijing's strategic and economic interests, such as the BRI and the CPEC project with Pakistan, cannot be protected without addressing the security threats emanating from ETIM and its Uyghur separatist affiliates operating from Afghanistan. Actually, Chinese involvement in Afghanistan is believed by some observers to be driven more by *security concerns* than economic interests³⁸, which supports this paper's main argument that China's primarily driving motif in Afghanistan has always been its security challenges along the Xinjiang border.

Historically, Beijing's relationship with the then hiding Taliban continued to develop behind the scenes. Starting from 2007, the China-Taliban relationship gradually returned to normal through Pakistan mediation. By conducting a double-faced policy in Afghanistan, the Chinese tried to kill two birds with one stone. First, they sought to secure their investments in Afghanistan by discouraging the Taliban from targeting them through economic bribery. Second, China did not want to rely entirely on the Americans to secure its western borders with Afghanistan. There were many stories about China bribing the Taliban and offering them economic incentives not to target Chinese interests in Afghanistan in return³⁹. Mubeen Sheikh, an expert on counter-terrorism in Afghanistan,

³⁵ <https://www.georgewbushlibrary.gov/research/topic-guides/global-war-terror>.

³⁶ Congressional Research Service, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy", July 18, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45818> [Accessed on October 29, 2021].

³⁷ Saher Liaqat & Abu Hurairah Abbasi, *The Diplomat*, August 04, 2023.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Kjeld Van Wieringen, & Claustre Julie, *Future of Sino-Afghan Relations Impacts on EU Interests and Strategic Autonomy*, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), Policy Foresight Unit, July 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747434/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747434_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747434/EPRS_BRI(2023)747434_EN.pdf) [Accessed on March 11, 2024].

substantiated the fact that the Taliban were very careful not to confront the Chinese, and the movement focused its attacks entirely on NATO and American targets in the first place. “We did not hear about attacks on Chinese investments because their relations with China [were] very good and very strong”⁴⁰.

As a matter of fact, the China-Taliban *modus operandi* during the two-decade American occupation evolved into a *quid pro quo* relationship after the Americans exited Afghanistan in August 2021. Since then, China has opted for a different approach towards the old-new rulers of Kabul; an approach based on both soft power and political bribery as the only realpolitik option to secure its interest in Afghanistan, essentially Beijing’s security challenges relating to the Taliban’s old links to ETIM. “Presenting a heightening security challenge for Beijing, ETIM used in the past the Afghan territory as a base to launch attacks inside China” (Mehrddad, *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2021)⁴¹. ETIM allegedly perpetrated more than 200 terrorist acts in the Xinjiang region in the past twelve years, resulting in a total of 166 deaths and more than 440 injuries⁴².

In the context of China’s political bribery of the Taliban, China’s foreign Minister Wang Yi was the first foreign minister ever to pay a surprise visit to Kabul just months after the Taliban regained power and at a time they were begging for international recognition. In March 2022 Wang Yi met with the Taliban acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Kabul “to discuss various issues, including the extension of political relations, economic, and transit cooperation”⁴³. The visit was largely regarded as a Chinese political and diplomatic bribery for the Taliban in order to secure their cooperation regarding the Uyghurs training camps in Afghanistan. “Wang [wa]s one of the highest-level visitors to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover...and Afghans familiar with past talks between the Taliban and Chinese officials say Beijing wants Taliban commitments to prevent Uyghur militants from setting up operations in Afghanistan” (ellipsis added)⁴⁴ So now we are in a situation where the Taliban who are desperate for China’s political support and therefore doing their best to court Beijing’s trust and cooperation, and at the same time we have a China that is trying to bribe the Taliban into taking nascent measures against all the Uyghur militants operating from Afghanistan, especially ETIM which recently aligned itself with the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan. For Kabul, “Beijing is probably the best shot by which the Taliban could obtain international legitimacy

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Mehrddad Ezzatullah, “Did China Build a Spy Network in Kabul?”, *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/did-china-build-a-spy-network-in-kabul/> [Accessed on August 28, 2021].

⁴² Jayshree Bajoria, “The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)”, Council on Foreign Relations, September 4, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim> [Accessed on March 6, 2023].

⁴³ Kathy Gannon, “China’s Foreign Minister Makes Surprise Stop In Afghanistan”, *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/chinas-foreign-minister-makes-surprise-stop-in-afghanistan/> [Accessed on May 11, 2022].

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

and recognition. The history of the Taliban-China *pragmatic relationship* serves as a useful basis for their developing ties⁴⁵. Indeed, international recognition is the Taliban's ultimate goal for the last two years, as no country has officially recognized the Taliban government so far.

For both Beijing and Kabul, these ties are a win-win relationship which should serve all sides' interests; and it seems that it has been the case, especially when we see the Taliban having gone a long way from harboring ETIM and its associates in the 2000s to having their acting Foreign Minister Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi declaring that any terror threat to China "is challenge to our own" and pledging "effective guarantee" of Chinese nationals' safety in the country. Speaking to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Niyingchi, Tibet, Muttaqi said that "we have done a lot of work to combat terrorism and we take security threats against China like a challenge to our own", according to a foreign ministry statement⁴⁶. This was on the sidelines of the third meeting of the Trans-Himalaya Forum meeting, when Amir Khan Muttaqi met with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Tibet after Beijing invited the Taliban to the Belt and Road Forum, signaling the continuation of China's old-new policy of engaging the group economically and financially in order to extract security gains from them in return.

However, with all the Taliban's "good faith" in trying to live up to their security vows to combat any separatist and terrorist infiltration into China, one should ask whether they are really in a position logistically and militarily to be able to honor these security commitments towards China. Even though the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 when they were toppled by an American-led coalition in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, ruling the country in 2021 after a 20-year American occupation has been quite challenging, as times have radically and rapidly changed. Afghanistan is now completely fragmented politically, economic, socially and even geographically, rendering the Taliban's attempts to bring the whole country under control a quite tall order, which makes their ability to secure their borders with China probably a wishful thinking.

It's imperative to point out that the Taliban aren't the only security drivers in Afghanistan. The country's border peripheries with neighboring countries, such as Pakistan and Tajikistan, pose a serious challenge for the Taliban. Groups such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Khorasan Islamic State are said to have developed "brotherly" relationship with the Uyghur ETIM and have vowed time and time again to attack Chinese interests in the region in both in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Liaqat & Abbasi, *The Diplomat*, August 04, 2023). China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reminded the Taliban a few months ago that "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is a terrorist organization listed by the UN

⁴⁵ Barbara Kelemen, "How the Rise of Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan Feeds Uyghur Militancy", *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/how-the-rise-of-islamic-state-khorasan-in-afghanistan-feeds-uyghur-militancy/> [Accessed on March 13, 2023].

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

Security Council and designated by the Chinese government in accordance with law⁴⁷. The ETIM forces in Afghanistan pose a severe threat to the security of China, Afghanistan and the region”⁴⁸.

Conversely, China’s security challenges emanating from Afghanistan don’t come only from ETIM, but also from other separatist Uyghur groups not less dangerous than ETIM. The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), another Uyghur separatist group, is a vivid example of the nature of security challenges Beijing is facing across the Afghan border. As early as January 2002, Beijing issued a long statement denouncing TIP and “exposing” its separatist intentions and deeds. China State Council’s statement reads that “Over a long period of time, especially since the 1990s, the “East Turkistan” forces inside and outside Chinese territory have planned and organized a series of violent incidents in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China and some other countries, including explosions, assassinations, arsons, poisonings, and assaults, with the objective of founding a so-called state of ‘East Turkistan’”⁴⁹.

The Diplomat magazine indicates that “in January 2002, the China Internet Information Center (kind of a state-owned Wikipedia) claimed that the TIP had received Taliban support⁵⁰. *The Diplomat* substantiates the TIP-Taliban link by citing Andrew McGregor, managing editor of the Jamestown Foundation’s Global Terrorism Analysis, [who] wrote that in Afghanistan, Uyghur militants undoubtedly joined the Taliban”⁵¹, which, highlights the significance of the Taliban’s cooperation in addressing the TIP militants, especially after they took part in Syria’s Civil War and acted as an affiliate of ISIS there. Long before 2002, the Taliban-Uyghurs connection had been stronger than ever., The Taliban leader Mullah Omar in 2001 told the then China’s Ambassador to Afghanistan, Lu Shulin, who met him “to express concern about the likely spread of terrorism to the volatile Xinjiang region....that any Uyghurs who may ha[d] joined the Taliban would not be removed”⁵². Now after those TIP militants have acquired new war skills and terrorism know-how in Syria, the TIP threat is now more serious than it was in 2002⁵³.

⁴⁷ People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “China’s Position on the Afghan Issue”, April 12, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html#:~:text=China%20respects%20the%20independence%2C%20sovereignty,and%20national%20customs%20of%20Afghanista [Accessed on December 23, 2023].

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Information Office of State Council, January 21, 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Jan/25582.htm> [Accessed on January 8, 2023].

⁵⁰ David Volodzko, “China’s New Headache: Uyghur Militants in Syria”, *The Diplomat*, March 18, 2006, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/chinas-new-headache-uyghur-militants-in-syria/> [Accessed on February 12, 2023].

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Ryan Clarke, “Does China Have Unique Advantages in Afghanistan? Risks and Opportunities for Beijing’s Long Game”, East Asia Institute, National University of Singapore, No. 36, 30 September 2021, <https://research.nus.edu.sg/eai/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Eaic-36-20210930.pdf> [Accessed on October 27, 2023].

⁵³ Caleb Weiss, “Turkistan Islamic Party continues to train children in Syria”, *Long War Journal*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/turkistan-islamic-party-continues-to-train-children-in-syria.php> [Accessed on October 11, 2022].

Moreover, the al-Qaeda/ISIS threats seem to be reviving after their tenuous efforts to rebuild their respective bases in Afghanistan. The United Nations panel of experts called the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, issued its *latest report* on Afghanistan on January 23, 2024. The committee recently presented a 23-page report to the UN Security Council, asserting that the relationship between the Afghan Taliban rulers and al-Qaeda remains “close”⁵⁴. The UN committee’s report said that al-Qaeda has improved its media output, which appears to be aimed at “restoring the credibility” of the extremist group [and] attracting recruits”⁵⁵.

The report, which covers the period until December 16, 2023, also indicates that the biggest threat inside Afghanistan “continues to come from Daesh with its ability to expand within the region and beyond”⁵⁶. The report goes on arguing that the threat posed by al-Qaeda, ISIS and affiliated groups “remains high” in conflict zones in Afghanistan”, as *Al Qaeda alone has managed to open eight new training camps and five madrasas* in Afghanistan. “The eight Al Qaeda camps have been opened in the provinces of Ghazni, Laghman, Parwan and Uruzgan.... In the central province of Panjshir, the former bastion of the anti-Taliban National Resistance Front, Al Qaeda has established a new base ‘to stockpile weaponry’”. Al Qaeda is also operating five madrasas, or religious schools, in Laghman, Kunar, Nangarhar, Nuristan and Parwan provinces”⁵⁷.

Actually, the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team report not only demonstrates that the security situation in Afghanistan is considerably precarious, it also highlights that “the relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaida remains close” (Vanessa Frazier, Chair of the Security Council Committee). As such, one should ask whether the Taliban are in a position to provide security inside Afghanistan let alone across its borders with China. Therefore, it is highly likely “that China will play a more direct and influential role in Afghanistan’s future security” in order to secure its own borders and avert all potential Uyghur threats across the Afghanistan’s border⁵⁸. The purported direct role China likely intends to play in Afghanistan was evoked during the significant surprise visit by Wang Yi, China’s Foreign Minister to Kabul, and his meeting then with Amir Khan Muttaqi, acting foreign minister under the Taliban regime, on March 24, 2022. During the Wang-Muttaqi

⁵⁴ Letter dated 23 January 2024 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/431/79/pdf/n2343179.pdf?token=tJXGFpyG845o7cjdk&fe=true>).

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ Bill Roggio, «Al Qaeda opens 8 new training camps, 5 madrasas, and a facilitation network to Iran in Afghanistan», *Long War Journal*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2024/02/al-qaeda-opens-8-new-training-camps-5-madrasas-and-a-facilitation-network-to-iran-in-afghanistan.php> [Accessed on February 08, 2024].

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ Connor Dilleen, “Will China Be the Great Power to Fail in Afghanistan?”, *The National Interest*, July 17, 2021, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/will-china-be-great-power-fail-afghanistan-189820?fbclid=IwAR2cLfv08foWXYgIYnmDzCCuJBqjnci7ABFpTKUctp7aeoK_VdpibRtwM68 [Accessed on December 8, 2021].

meeting, the latter reassured Wang that “Afghanistan is confident of further improving its security environment, stabilizing and controlling the situation, and ensuring the security of foreign institutions and personnel in Afghanistan”⁵⁹. *Security* is clearly China’s number one concern in Afghanistan—particularly preventing the ETIM and TIP resurrection in Afghanistan.

Whether the Taliban will be able and intend to honor their commitments to China’s border security is yet to be seen. For Beijing, it definitely expects to see deeds not words from the Taliban. Wang himself implicated Beijing’s eagerness to see concrete measures when he told Muttaqi that “China hopes that the Afghan side will earnestly fulfill its commitment and take effective measures to resolutely crack down on all terrorist forces, including the ETIM”⁶⁰. For his part, Muttaqi reassured Wang that “Afghanistan is highly vigilant against the resurgence of terrorism and will take resolute and effective measures to eliminate terrorist forces in Afghanistan with all-out efforts. The Afghan Taliban fully understand China’s concerns and will never allow any force to use the Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental to Chinese friends”⁶¹. These Taliban vows, however, were almost two years ago. Only two months ago, however, the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Committee found out that not only the Taliban failed to live up to their anti-terrorism commitments, but also the report illustrates an unwavering Taliban-Al-Qaida “close” relationship.

That is why Beijing is still hesitant whether to be the first major country to give the Taliban a *de jure* recognition and therefore win their “allegiance” for the foreseeable future. Beijing’s dilemma was not whether but how to engage with the Taliban but how to extract security assurances from them in relation to the Uighurs militants’ underground activities in Afghanistan. Security is the main driver for China, as it has serious concerns of terrorist threats on its border with Afghanistan, especially through the Wukhan gorge.

As a matter of fact, China’s first step towards a *de facto* recognition of the Taliban regime took place in March 2022 when the Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid a quick visit to Afghanistan, the first visit by a Chinese high-level official since the Taliban took power in August of the previous year. Wang’s visit was of great significance for both parties who were seeking a “win-win” relationship in the post-American hectic withdrawal in August 2021. But a win-win relationship could only be achieved if Afghanistan sees a modicum of stability, and “China has significant strategic, security and economic interests in the region that give it a stake in Afghanistan’s future stability”. That is why Foreign Minister Wang said during his meeting with the Afghan Taliban’s interim government’s acting Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, that “China would carry out mutually beneficial cooperation under the premise of respecting Afghanistan’s sovereignty in an orderly manner to help the country realize independent development”⁶².

⁵⁹ Shannon Tiezzi, March 25, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/china-signals-its-back-to-business-as-usual-with-taliban-government/>.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

Beijing, however, does have a Plan B, should the Taliban fail to restrain ETIM or TIP alleged terrorist activities across the Afghanistan border. Even though “China’s military role in Afghanistan is expanding, with reports that it is establishing a military base in *Badakhshan province* and financing an Afghan mountain brigade”⁶³, it is unlikely that Beijing will intervene directly in Afghanistan’s affairs, for “it is mindful of the country’s historical reputation”⁶⁴. *The Diplomat* hypothesizes that China would opt for “a multilateral approach, favoring a U.N. peacekeeping mission with Chinese troop involvement” for example. And if the UN-based approach fails, China might explore another multilateral force to intervene and pacify the situation in Afghanistan through the involvement of The *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO), even just “to provide political legitimacy and regional endorsement” for any direct intervention in Afghanistan⁶⁵.

As the Chinese President Xi Jinping has espoused the slogan of the Chinese national rejuvenation in an attempt to recall and resurrect the old Chinese empire, China cannot afford to fail in Afghanistan. *The National Interest* magazine had asked the pertinent question “Will China Be the Great Power to Fail in Afghanistan?” even before the American withdrawal of August 2021. It said that “Beijing may be watching recent events [in Afghanistan] with *some apprehension*”; not only political and security apprehensions but also strategic ones. The risk of failing and eventually meeting the same destiny of its peers among the international great powers, whose respective fiascos are quite revealing case studies in history literature, is a haunting hazard for China.

Finally, testifying to the inextricable link of all Chinese economic projects to the security situation in Afghanistan, “China’s economic ambitions [there] have faced challenges due to the country’s poor security situation”, *The Diplomat* reported. To emphasize the business-security link, even China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a strong statement on this matter back to April 2023. Under the title “China’s Position on the Afghan Issue”, the statement reiterates that on the one hand, “China will continue to do its best to help Afghanistan with reconstruction and development, make plans with Afghanistan and fulfill its assistance pledges, promote steady progress in economic, trade and investment cooperation, and actively carry out cooperation in such fields as medical care, poverty alleviation, agriculture, and disaster prevention”⁶⁶. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ communique reiterates that “security is the foundation and prerequisite of development”⁶⁷. So far, China is seeking to convey to the Taliban that its “trusts” their security guarantees, purportedly believing that the best way to make someone trustworthy is to trust him, or at least to make him believe that you are trusting him.

⁶³ Liaqat & Abbasi, “Afghanistan in China’s Grand Strategy”, *The Diplomat*, August 04, 2023.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “China’s Position on the Afghan Issue”, April 12, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html#:~:text=China%20respects%20the%20independence%2C%20sovereignty,and%20national%20customs%20of%20Afghanista [Accessed on December 23, 2024].

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to explore the inherent security dilemma China has been facing in a war-torn Afghanistan since the 2021 US withdrawal. Historically, Beijing had already had a disturbing security relationship with Afghanistan, especially during the first Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001. Then the Taliban opened the door for anti-China separatist Uyghur militant groups, such as ETIM and TIP, to build training camps in Afghanistan and launch terrorist acts across the China-Afghanistan 57-kilometer Wukhan Corridor as well as inside China. Diplomatically cornered and politically isolated, Beijing is concerned that the Taliban could renew their old ideological bonds with the Uyghur separatist movement, which poses a serious security challenge to China's western borders along the Uighur Xinxiang region where the Uyghur 20-million population has been living in a highly controversial situation. To avoid a Taliban-ETIM regrouping, Beijing has been made the Taliban understand that their "cooperation" on this matter could earn them a badly-needed diplomatic recognition in return, which fits what this paper has tried to advance that China's approach to the Taliban is basically about bribing them diplomatically to secure their cooperation on the Uyghur militant groups still operating in Afghanistan.

The Taliban in their turn are desperate for China's diplomatic recognition at a time of their increasingly political isolation. While no single country has recognized the Taliban rule so far; except Russia on July 3rd, 2025, a Chinese recognition could do a great deal of impact regarding this matter. Therefore, both parties have purportedly entered a *quid pro quo* *modus operandi* that is dubbed by the Chinese as a "win-win" relationship, which goes down to diplomatically bribing the Taliban in order to secure their pledge to expel the Uyghur militant groups operating in Afghanistan or at least relocate them far from the Afghanistan-China border for the time being.

As this work is politically qualitative in nature, so is its theoretical framework. Kenneth Waltz' neorealism does explain both China's major security concerns in Afghanistan in the post-US clumsy withdrawal in August 2021. Since this paper is about China's approach to its security stakes in Afghanistan, it has adopted Waltz's theory of states' security obsession, for China's obsession with the Uyghurs' threat emanating from their training camps in Afghanistan is indeed a serious security hazard. This model of qualitative and exploratory methodology, using a neo-realist approach to international relations, aims at explaining the key variables which account for how China will face off its security dilemma in Afghanistan after the advent of the second Taliban rule in 2021. The central question this paper has tried to address, therefore, is whether Beijing's *quid pro quo* approach to Taliban could help resolve China's Uyghur headache. Thus, making the Neo-realist approach fit in this case study of China's security obsession in the post-US-occupation Afghanistan, as Beijing has opted for a politically pragmatic approach with the Taliban: the *quid pro quo* of a diplomatic recognition in return for the Taliban closing down on the Uyghur militants in Afghanistan.

China's security and strategic interests in Afghanistan are clearly about preventing it from becoming again a safe haven for extremist groups, such as the Uyghurs' ETIM and TIP organizations which found in the Taliban rule a "strategic" ally for their anti-China activities. The Uyghurs' training camps in Afghanistan in relation to the security challenge they pose to China's Xinjiang are a major concern for Beijing, which China has been approaching through a pragmatic, though controversial, *quid pro quo* manner with the Taliban.

This paper has demonstrated that China has not changed its "bribery" overture with the Taliban, whether they were in hiding or when they are in power. The China-Taliban *modus operandi* during the two-decade American occupation evolved into a *quid pro quo* relationship after the Americans exited Afghanistan in August 2021. Since then, we have been in a situation where the Taliban are desperate for China's political and economic support and therefore doing their best to court Beijing's trust and cooperation, and at the same time we have a China that is trying to bribe the Taliban into taking nascent measures against all Uyghur militants operating from Afghanistan, especially ETIM which recently aligned itself with the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan. In other words, Beijing is dangling the diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul for concrete security gains on the Xinjiang border.

Finally, this work has argued that regardless of the question whether the Taliban would act in good faith, their logistical and intelligence capabilities would hardly secure their own rule in Kabul, let alone securing the China borders. Moreover, this paper has shown that China might be outwitted by the Taliban because a recent United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team's report of January 23, 2024 substantiates the allegations that the relationship between the Afghan Taliban rulers and al-Qaeda remains "close". Therefore, this paper argues that China may be seeking to convey to the Taliban that it "trusts" their security guarantees, at least to make them believe that they are "trustworthy", and consequently encourage them to act accordingly. Concepts, like "trust" and "encouragement", however, are not compatible with interstate relations that are basically conducted on the basis of pragmatic tangible policies, rather than on intentions and good vs bad faith.

GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abubakar, Siddique, "The Limits of China's Budding Relationship with Afghanistan's Taliban", Radio Free Europe, June 04, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-china-taliban-uyghurs-security/32444038.html>;
- Adam, Leslie, "China's recognition of the Taliban sets a dangerous precedent", Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), February 7, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-recognition-of-the-taliban-sets-a-dangerous-precedent/>;
- Amnesty International Report, May 28, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/un-xinjiang-china-visit/>;
- Bajoria, Jayshree, "The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)", Council on Foreign Relations, September 4, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/background/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim/>;

- BBC Website, *Country Profile, Xinjiang profile*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16860974>;
- Chan, Minnie, “China is helping Afghanistan set up mountain brigade to fight terrorism”, *The South China Morning Post*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2161745/china-building-training-camp-afghanistan-fight>;
- Clarke, M. “One Belt, One Road” and China’s Emerging Afghanistan Dilemma, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 2016; 70(5): 563–579;
- Clarke, Ryan, “Does China Have Unique Advantages in Afghanistan? Risks and Opportunities for Beijing’s Long Game”, *East Asia Institute, National University of Singapore*, No. 36, 30 September 2021, <https://research.nus.edu.sg/eai/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EAIC-36-20210930.pdf>;
- Congressional Research Service (CRS), “Taliban Government in Afghanistan: Background and Issues for Congress”, November 2, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46955>;
- Congressional Research Service, “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy”, July 18, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45818>;
- Cronk, T. Moon “US Department of Defense (DOD), ‘US forces strike Taliban, East Turkestan Islamic Movement training sites’”, *DOD News*, 7 Feb. 2018;
- Dilleen, Connor, “Will China Be the Great Power to Fail in Afghanistan?”, *The National Interest*, July 17, 2021, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/will-china-be-great-power-fail-afghanistan-189820?fbclid=IwAR2cLfv08foWXYgLYnmDzCCuJBqjnci7ABFpTKUctp7aaoK_VdpibRtwM68;
- Ezzatullah, Mehrdad, “Did China Build a Spy Network in Kabul?”, *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/did-china-build-a-spy-network-in-kabul/>;
- Fuller, Graham E. et. al., *The Xinjiang Problem*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies the Johns Hopkins University, 2003, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/30301/01_Xinjiang_Problem.pdf;
- Gannon, Kathy, “China’s Foreign Minister Makes Surprise Stop In Afghanistan”, *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/chinas-foreign-minister-makes-surprise-stop-in-afghanistan/>;
- Human Rights Watch Report, April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>;
- Iftekhar Ahmed, Ayeed, “Can the Taliban Regime Stay Power?”, *The Diplomat*, October 09, 2021. https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/can-the-taliban-regime-stay-power/?fbclid=IwAR2PHYM4IoUY9ru91NuvBLY7sXLsKc4K3uEQft4h6P_AwJi6caNithBNqHc;
- Information Office of State Council, January 21, 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Jan/25582.htm>;
- Kelemen, Barbara, “How the Rise of Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan Feeds Uyghur Militancy”, *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/how-the-rise-of-islamic-state-khorasan-in-afghanistan-feeds-uyghur-militancy/>;
- Kelemen, Barbara, “China’s Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan”, *Middle East Institute*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-economic-stabilization-efforts-afghanistan-new-party-table>;
- Liaqat, Sahar et. al., “Afghanistan in China’s Grand Strategy”, *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/afghanistan-in-chinas-grand-strategy/>;
- Lo, Kinling, “What is China’s relationship with Afghanistan, and how will it change once the US is gone?”, *The South China Morning Post*, July 18, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3140966/what-chinas-relationship-afghanistan-and-how-will-it-change>;
- Marty, Franz J. & Ted Callahan, «Tilting at Windmills: Dubious US claims of targeting Chinese Uyghur militants in Badakhshan», *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/tilting-at-windmills-dubious-us-claims-of-targeting-chinese-uyghur-militants-in-badakhshan/>;
- Noorzad, Abdalnaser, “Afghanistan’s Place in the New Great Game”, *East Studies Journal*, Institute for East Strategic Studies, 9 April 2023, <https://www.iess.ir/en/analysis/3432/>;

- People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China's Position on the Afghan Issue", April 12, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html#:~:text=China%20respects%20the%20independence%2C%20sovereignty,and%20national%20customs%20of%20Afghanistan](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230412_11057785.html#:~:text=China%20respects%20the%20independence%2C%20sovereignty,and%20national%20customs%20of%20Afghanistan;);
- Raja, Muhammad Khan, "China's Economic and Strategic Interests in Afghanistan", *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, Special Issue, Summer 2015, https://sbbwu.edu.pk/journal/special%20issue/7._China_s_Economic_and_Strategic_Interests_in_Afghanistan.pdf;
- Roggio, Bill, «Al Qaeda opens 8 new training camps, 5 madrasas, and a facilitation network to Iran in Afghanistan», *Long War Journal*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2024/02/al-qaeda-opens-8-new-training-camps-5-madrasas-and-a-facilitation-network-to-iran-in-afghanistan.php>;
- Small, Andrew, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics in 2015*, Oxford University Press; 1st edition, February 13, 2015;
- Standish, Reid, "Explainer: What Does China Want from Afghanistan After the Taliban Takeover?", Radio Free Europe, August 20, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-china-goals/31420549.html>;
- Taban, Besmillah & David O'Brien, "Are Uyghur Militants Becoming ISKP's New Force?", March 07, 2025, [https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/are-uyghur-militants-becoming-iskps-new-force/?fbclid=IwY2xjawJzFwZleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHqEVftrd2VXC6Zs_5iN7a6Dqj0OXt7j5FJtve8orIy1runkS-zs6qsWY7gm_aem_DHJukm31_3a1MHqld_f_0w](https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/are-uyghur-militants-becoming-iskps-new-force/?fbclid=IwY2xjawJzFwZleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHqEVftrd2VXC6Zs_5iN7a6Dqj0OXt7j5FJtve8orIy1runkS-zs6qsWY7gm_aem_DHJukm31_3a1MHqld_f_0w;);
- Tanner, Murray S. & James Bellacqua, "China's Response to Terrorism", The Center for Naval Analyses, Report sponsored by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 2016, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Chinas%20Response%20to%20Terrorism_CNA061616.pdf;
- Trofimov, Yaroslav & Chao Deng, "Afghanistan's Taliban, Now on China's Border, Seek to Reassure Beijing", *The Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistans-taliban-now-on-chinas-border-seek-to-reassure-beijing-11625750130>;
- US Department of Defense, February 7, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1435247/us-forces-strike-taliban-east-turkestan-islamic-movement-training-sites/>;
- Van Wieringen, Kjeld, & Claustre Julie, «Future of Sino-Afghan Relations Impacts on EU Interests and Strategic Autonomy», European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), Policy Foresight Unit, July 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747434/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747434_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747434/EPRS_BRI(2023)747434_EN.pdf);
- Volodzko, David, "China's New Headache: Uyghur Militants in Syria", *The Diplomat*, March 18, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/chinas-new-headache-uyghur-militants-in-syria/>;
- Weiss, Caleb, "Turkistan Islamic Party continues to train children in Syria", *Long War Journal*, March 7, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/turkistan-islamic-party-continues-to-train-children-in-syria.php>;
- Zhang, F., Amity, "Security, Influence: Explaining China's Policy Toward Afghanistan, 1949–2024", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2025, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2025.2471924>;
- Zhou, Jiayi Fei Su and Jindong Yuan, "Treading lightly: China Footprint in a Taliban-led Afghanistan", SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security, No. 2022/08 November 2022, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/sipriinsights_2208_china_and_afghanistan_2.pdf.