The Scientific Temper
Vol. 17, No. 11, November 2026: pp. 7155-7163
ISSN: 0976-8653, E-ISSN: 2231-6396
DOI: 10.58414/SCIENTIFICTEMPER.2026.17.11.2582
A Web Of Science Journal

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Geostrategic Reconfiguration of Afghanistan: China–Pakistan Convergence and Its Implications for India's Security

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ABSTRACT

The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021 ended two decades of Western-backed state-building and opened a contest over Afghanistan's external alignment. This study examines how China and Pakistan have coordinated their Afghan policies since 2021 and assesses what the resulting configuration means for India's security. The research employs a qualitative process-tracing design supported by structured analysis of official statements, multilateral monitoring reports and scholarly literature, interpreted through balance-of-threat theory, the security dilemma and regional security complex theory. Beijing and Islamabad have converged on four priorities: a stable authority in Kabul, suppression of transnational militancy affecting their own territories, economic connectivity through an extended China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and containment of Indian influence. The convergence is constrained by Pakistan–Taliban friction over the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the disputed Durand Line, and Chinese reluctance to commit capital under insecure conditions. For India, the main risks are lost strategic access, a permissive environment for anti-India militancy, and a two-front military dilemma; the main opportunities arise from Taliban autonomy-seeking and overlapping interests with Russia, Iran and Central Asian states. India is best served by calibrated, interest-based engagement with Kabul, sustained deterrence and diversified connectivity, rather than by treating the China–Pakistan–Afghanistan relationship as a fixed bloc.

Keywords: *Afghanistan; geostrategic reconfiguration; China–Pakistan relations; India's security; Taliban; China–Pakistan Economic Corridor; counterterrorism.*

INTRODUCTION

Background and context

Afghanistan occupies a position in Asian geography that has repeatedly outweighed its material power. It is landlocked yet adjacent to Iran, Pakistan, three Central Asian republics and, through the narrow Wakhan Corridor, China. It lies within a short distance of territory in Jammu and Kashmir that India claims in full, and it sits astride overland routes linking South

Received: 5th November, 2026 **Accepted: 7th November, 2026** **Published: 28th November, 2026**

Asia with Central Asia and the Eurasian heartland. Because of this position, outside powers have long treated Afghan politics as a means of shaping wider regional balances, a pattern examined at length in historical accounts of state formation and collapse in the country (Rubin, 2002).

The Taliban's seizure of Kabul on 15 August 2021 marked a decisive break in that pattern. The takeover followed the bilateral agreement signed in Doha on 29 February 2020 between the United States and the Taliban, which set conditions for the withdrawal of foreign forces (Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, 2020). The collapse of the republic that Western governments had financed for two decades left a vacuum that neighbouring states moved quickly to fill. No government extended formal recognition immediately, yet several opened or retained diplomatic channels. China accepted the credentials of a Taliban-appointed ambassador in early 2024, and Russia moved to formal recognition in 2025, a step that signalled how far the diplomatic isolation of the new authorities had eroded.

Within this changing environment, two relationships deserve particular scrutiny. Pakistan has been the most consequential external patron of the Taliban movement since the 1990s, having been among very few states to recognise its first government (Rashid, 2000; Coll, 2018). China, by contrast, historically held back from deep involvement, preferring commercial concessions and limited security cooperation to political entanglement. Since 2021 the two have increasingly acted in parallel, including through trilateral foreign-minister dialogues and a stated intention to extend the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghan territory.

For India, these developments carry unusual weight. New Delhi had invested heavily in the post-2001 order, committing development assistance widely cited as exceeding three billion United States dollars and financing the Afghan parliament building, the Salma hydropower dam and the Zaranj–Delaram highway. The return of a movement long associated with Pakistan's security establishment therefore looked to many Indian observers like a strategic reversal. The resulting question is not simply whether India has lost influence in Kabul, but whether a durable China–Pakistan–Afghanistan alignment is emerging that would alter India's security environment along its northern and western approaches.

Literature and research gap

Scholarship on the China–Pakistan relationship generally treats it as a long-standing strategic partnership rooted in shared hostility toward India. Small (2015) traces how this partnership matured from Cold War convenience into an institutionalised axis spanning arms transfers, nuclear and missile cooperation, and infrastructure. Garver (2001) situates it within the longer Sino-Indian rivalry, while Pant (2012) argues that Pakistan operates as a persistent complicating factor in triangular relations among Beijing, New Delhi and Washington. Pande (2011) explains Pakistan's foreign policy as an effort to escape the structural asymmetry with India, an argument that illuminates why Islamabad seeks friendly governments on its western flank.

A second body of work concerns Pakistan's Afghan policy and the Taliban themselves. Fair (2014) examines the doctrine of strategic depth and the army's preference for pliable partners across the Durand Line, whereas Giustozzi (2019) documents the movement's organisational evolution and its capacity for relative autonomy from its sponsors. A third literature, represented by Doshi (2021), situates Chinese behaviour in Afghanistan within a broader long-term effort to reshape regional order.

Three limitations recur in this material. First, much of it predates 2021 and so cannot assess how the Taliban's return to office has changed the incentives of external actors. Second, analyses often assume convergence between Beijing and Islamabad rather than testing where it holds and where it fails. Third, relatively few studies connect the Afghan dimension systematically to specific security vectors facing India. This paper addresses those gaps by tracing the post-2021 evolution of China–Pakistan coordination on Afghanistan and by translating it into a structured assessment of consequences for Indian security.

Aims and research questions

The study pursues three aims: to document how China and Pakistan have aligned their Afghan policies since 2021; to identify the internal limits of that alignment; and to assess its implications for India's security and policy options. Three research questions follow. First, through which mechanisms and in which domains have China and Pakistan converged in Afghanistan? Second, what factors constrain or complicate that convergence? Third, which security risks and opportunities does the emerging configuration create for India? The guiding proposition is that convergence is real but partial, driven more by overlapping short-term interests than by a shared long-term vision for Afghanistan, and that India's strategic space is therefore narrower than before 2021 yet not closed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The study adopts a qualitative, single-case design with embedded comparison across three actors and four policy domains. Process tracing is used to follow the sequence of diplomatic, economic and security decisions from the 2020 Doha agreement through 2025, allowing causal claims about why alignment deepened at particular moments to be assessed against alternative explanations. The unit of analysis is the policy behaviour of China, Pakistan and, for the

consequence assessment, India toward Afghanistan. The setting is the wider South and Central Asian region.

Analytical framework

Three complementary theoretical lenses structure the analysis. Balance-of-threat theory holds that states align against the actor they perceive as most threatening, with perceived threat shaped by aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability and aggressive intent (Walt, 1987). It is preferred here to a pure balance-of-power account (Waltz, 1979) because the China–Pakistan partnership has persisted despite the large asymmetry in capabilities between its members. The security dilemma, as formulated by Jervis (1978), explains how measures intended as defensive by one state, such as building connectivity or securing a flank, can appear threatening to another and prompt counter-measures. Regional security complex theory proposes that security interdependence is strongest among geographically proximate states and that such clusters can be analysed as sub-systems (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Buzan et al., 1998). Together, these lenses allow the analysis to separate alignment motives from alignment outcomes and to treat Afghanistan as a node connecting the South Asian and Central Asian complexes.

Sources and data

Evidence was drawn from four source categories, each accessed through an identifiable medium. (a) Official statements, joint communiqués and ministerial briefings of the governments of India, China and Pakistan were taken from the English-language press-release and briefing pages of their foreign ministries (for India, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm), while statements of the Taliban administration were taken as reproduced by news agencies and by the Afghan outlet Pajhwok. (b) The periodic reports of the United Nations Security Council monitoring team on the Taliban sanctions regime were retrieved from the United Nations Digital Library, and the specific report used and its link are listed in the References (United Nations Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2023). (c) Scholarship comprised the following books and articles: Rubin (2002), Rashid (2000), Coll (2018), Fair (2014), Giustozzi (2019), Small (2015), Pande (2011), Garver (2001), Pant (2012), Doshi (2021), Brewster (2014) and Ganguly (2016), together with the theoretical works cited in Section 2.2. (d) News reporting was used only to date events and corroborate official accounts, and was limited to the newspapers and wire services named in the text and References: Dawn, Arab News, ThePrint and The Statesman. Claims that rest on a single press report are flagged in the text as reported rather than established. Primary materials in languages other than English were consulted only through the English versions published on the official websites and by the outlets listed above.

Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, a chronology of significant events from February 2020 to late 2025 was constructed and coded by domain: diplomatic, economic, security and normative. Second, each event was classified as indicating convergence, divergence or neutral activity in China–Pakistan behaviour. Third, the identified patterns were mapped onto threat vectors relevant to India. Each vector was assigned a qualitative rating of low, moderate or high on two criteria, namely likelihood of materialisation over a five-year horizon and potential severity for India's security. These ratings are structured analytic judgements rather than measured quantities, and they should be read as an organising device for comparison. Fourth, findings were checked against rival explanations, including the view that Pakistan–Taliban hostility makes a China–Pakistan Afghan strategy infeasible.

Validity was addressed through triangulation. Each major claim was required to be supported by at least two independent source types, for example an official statement and a monitoring report, and where sources conflicted the discrepancy is noted. Afghanistan after 2021 was selected as a critical case for testing claims about China–Pakistan alignment: if coordination were weak, it would be expected to fail visibly here, where Pakistan's relationship with the principal local actor has deteriorated, whereas strong coordination should survive that stress. The five-year horizon adopted for threat ratings corresponds to the typical planning cycle of defence and foreign-policy institutions and avoids speculation about longer trajectories.

No human participants, personal data or animals were involved, and ethics committee approval was therefore not required. All figures cited are drawn from the public record.

RESULTS

Chronology of convergence

The chronology yielded a sequence of milestones, summarised in Table 1. Activity clusters around three phases: an initial period of cautious engagement after the August 2021 takeover; a middle period in which Beijing normalised diplomatic and commercial contact; and a later period, from 2024 to 2025, in which trilateral frameworks became more explicit while Pakistan–Taliban relations deteriorated.

Table 1. Selected milestones in China–Pakistan–Afghanistan interaction, 2020–2025

Date	Milestone

Date	Milestone
Feb 2020	Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban sets the withdrawal framework.
Aug 2021	Taliban take Kabul; China and Pakistan keep embassies open and call for engagement.
Jun 2022	India reopens a technical team in Kabul to coordinate humanitarian aid.
Jan 2023	Oil extraction contract in the Amu Darya basin signed with a Chinese-linked firm.
Jan 2024	China accepts credentials of a Taliban-appointed ambassador.
Mar 2024	Attack near Dasu kills five Chinese engineers in Pakistan.
May 2025	India–Pakistan military conflict; Chinese-origin systems reported in use.
Jul 2025	Russia formally recognises the Taliban government.
Aug 2025	Trilateral meeting in Kabul discusses extending CPEC to Afghanistan.
Oct 2025	Pakistan–Afghanistan clashes; ceasefire talks; Taliban foreign minister visits New Delhi.

Domains of convergence

Diplomatic domain. China and Pakistan have consistently argued against isolating the Taliban authorities and have advocated engagement coupled with calls for inclusive governance and counterterrorism commitments. Both kept embassies functioning in Kabul after August 2021. Beijing's acceptance of a Taliban ambassador in January 2024 was the most visible instance of normalisation by a major power. The trilateral foreign-minister process, which had existed before 2021, resumed and, at its Kabul meeting in August 2025, produced a public commitment to explore extending CPEC to Afghanistan. Both governments also favoured regional formats, such as meetings of Afghanistan's neighbours, over Western-led diplomacy.

Economic domain. Chinese interest is anchored in resource access and in connectivity. Earlier concessions included the Mes Aynak copper project, awarded to a Chinese consortium around 2007–2008, and an oil-extraction contract in the Amu Darya basin, which was renewed with a different Chinese-linked firm in January 2023 after earlier arrangements lapsed. Implementation has been slow in both cases, a pattern consistent with security concerns and uncertain legal conditions. Pakistan's economic priorities centre on transit trade, access to Central Asian markets and the revival of overland corridors. The CPEC extension proposal bundles these interests, since it would link Chinese-financed road and rail concepts with Pakistani ports. The figure of roughly sixty-two billion dollars commonly attached to CPEC is a headline estimate of pledged investment and should not be confused with disbursed funds.

Security domain. The principal shared concern is militancy. China is anxious about Uyghur militants associated with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement and its successor networks, and it has repeatedly pressed the Taliban for assurances. Pakistan's concern is the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), whose attacks inside Pakistan have risen sharply since 2021. Chinese nationals have also become targets in Pakistan, as illustrated by the March 2024 suicide bombing near the Dasu hydropower project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that killed five Chinese engineers. The monitoring-team reports of the United Nations describe a permissive environment for several groups on Afghan soil, including Al-Qaida affiliates, the TTP and, in smaller numbers, groups historically oriented toward India such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad (United Nations Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, 2021–2025). The reports also note that the Taliban authorities dispute or minimise some of these assessments.

Military and technological cooperation. Beyond Afghanistan itself, the sources document continuing depth in the China–Pakistan defence relationship, which forms the backdrop to their Afghan coordination. China has been Pakistan's leading supplier of major conventional arms for over a decade, and joint production of combat aircraft and cooperation on naval platforms are well established (Small, 2015). Beijing has also, at various times, placed holds on proposals at the United Nations to list individuals linked to Pakistan-based militant groups, a practice that ended in 2019 in the case of the Jaish-e-Muhammad leader. These patterns matter for the Afghan case because they supply the institutional habit of mutual support on which regional coordination draws, even though no source reviewed indicates a joint military presence in Afghanistan.

Normative domain. Both states endorse the principle that Afghanistan's governance is an internal affair, resisting the conditionality that Western governments attached to engagement on women's education and political inclusion. In practice China and Pakistan have nevertheless made private and public appeals on militancy, an issue that touches their own domestic security.

Constraints and points of friction

The evidence also shows substantial limits on convergence, summarised in Table 2. The most serious is the breakdown of trust between Islamabad and Kabul. Pakistan holds the Taliban responsible for sheltering the TTP, while the Taliban deny providing support and decline to confront a group with which they share ideological and personal ties. Cross-border violence escalated in 2024 and again in October 2025, when reported Pakistani air strikes in Afghanistan and armed clashes along the frontier were followed by a short-lived ceasefire brokered with Qatari and Turkish involvement, after which follow-up talks reportedly stalled. The Taliban, like all Afghan governments since 1947, have also declined to accept the Durand Line as a legitimate international boundary, and the border has been repeatedly closed to trade.

Table 2. Factors facilitating and constraining China–Pakistan convergence in Afghanistan

Dimension	Facilitating factors	Constraining factors
Diplomatic	Shared preference for engagement; trilateral format	Pakistan–Taliban estrangement; Taliban multi-alignment
Economic	Resource interests; CPEC connectivity concept	Slow implementation; security and legal risks
Security	Shared concern over militancy	Divergent priorities (TTP versus Uyghur militants)
Territorial	Common wish to stabilise borders	Durand Line dispute; frequent border closures

China's own behaviour reveals caution. Despite repeated statements of intent, major investments have been slow, and Chinese officials have emphasised security guarantees as a precondition. Beijing also appears wary of being drawn into the Pakistan–Taliban dispute, offering mediation in preference to taking sides. Moreover, the Taliban have diversified their partners, cultivating relations with Russia, Iran, Central Asian governments and Gulf states, and they have shown willingness to engage India.

The Taliban administration's diversification takes several concrete forms. It has sought electricity, transit and trade arrangements with Central Asian neighbours, and a proposed trans-Afghan railway involving Uzbekistan and Pakistan has attracted regional interest, while the Qosh Tepa canal on the Amu Darya has raised water concerns downstream. Relations with Iran combine cooperation on trade with disputes over Helmand River water, and contact with Gulf states has focused on finance, aid and mediation. Contacts with India have centred on humanitarian assistance, trade through alternative routes and assurances on security. None of these ties replaces the relationship with Pakistan, but together they reduce Taliban dependence on it and illustrate why Islamabad's leverage over Kabul appears weaker than in the 1990s.

Threat vectors affecting India

Mapping these patterns onto India's security concerns produced five vectors, rated in Table 3 according to the procedure described in Section 2.4.

Table 3. Assessed threat vectors to India arising from the Afghan configuration

Threat vector	Description	Likelihood	Severity
Anti-India militancy	Presence of India-oriented groups in Afghanistan	Moderate	High
Two-front pressure	Coordinated China–Pakistan military support	Moderate	High
Loss of access	Reduced Indian presence and connectivity	High	Moderate
Economic encirclement	CPEC extension reducing Indian options	Moderate	Moderate
Spillover instability	Refugee flows, narcotics, cross-border violence	High	Low

The highest-rated vectors concern militancy and the strategic geometry of a two-front problem. The first reflects reports that India-oriented groups retain a presence on Afghan territory, together with the history of Afghan-based sanctuaries being used against Indian interests, including the 1999 hijacking of an Indian airliner to Kandahar. The second reflects the demonstrated depth of China–Pakistan military cooperation. During the May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan, which followed the April 2025 attack on tourists at Pahalgam, Pakistani forces were reported to have used Chinese-origin combat aircraft and air-to-air missiles, and commentators in several countries noted the extent of Chinese systems in Pakistan's inventory.

The remaining vectors are more structural. Loss of access refers to the contraction of India's physical and informational footprint in Afghanistan, which sources describe as a consequence of the 2021 transition and of geography, since India has no land border with Afghanistan and Pakistan has historically restricted transit for Indian goods. Economic encirclement describes the possible effect of a CPEC extension on connectivity choices, although no source reviewed documents completed construction of the proposed extension. Spillover instability covers refugee movement, narcotics flows and cross-border violence associated with Pakistan–Taliban hostilities; it is rated as likely but of lower direct severity for India. International drug-control monitoring reported a sharp fall in opium cultivation after the Taliban's 2022 ban, though the durability of that decline and a possible shift toward synthetic drugs remain debated.

India's response repertoire

India has responded through incremental, non-recognition engagement. After withdrawing its embassy staff in August 2021, New Delhi restored a technical presence in Kabul in mid-2022 to coordinate humanitarian assistance, which has included wheat, medicines and vaccines delivered through multiple channels. It has participated in regional security dialogues on Afghanistan and has maintained contact with Taliban officials, culminating in a visit by the Taliban's foreign minister to New Delhi in October 2025, during which India reportedly announced the elevation of its mission in Kabul to embassy status.

India has also maintained its interest in the Iranian port of Chabahar as an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, though the project has been affected by shifting United States sanctions exemptions (Brewster, 2014, discusses the port's place in India's wider maritime strategy). Official Indian statements continue to stress that Afghan territory must not be used for terrorism against any country, and that the interests of the Afghan people should guide engagement (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2021–2025).

India's outreach has extended to the Central Asian republics. A summit-level India–Central Asia format was launched in virtual form in January 2022, and India has hosted or joined security-advisor-level meetings on Afghanistan in which Russia, Iran and several Central Asian states took part. These meetings produced shared language on terrorism, humanitarian access and the territorial integrity of Afghanistan. The record also shows limits: India lacks the border adjacency, the financial scale and, so far, the formal diplomatic standing that China and Pakistan enjoy in Kabul, and its ability to deliver projects depends on third-country transit.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the convergence

The results support the proposition that China–Pakistan convergence in Afghanistan is real but partial. Through the lens of balance-of-threat theory, the persistence of the partnership is best explained by shared perception of India as the principal competitor, not by symmetry of capability (Walt, 1987). Yet the Afghan case reveals a nuance: threat perceptions toward India are shared, but threat perceptions toward militancy are not identical. China regards the Uyghur-linked militancy as its priority, Pakistan prioritises the TTP, and neither can deliver the Taliban's cooperation on the other's concern without costs. Convergence therefore functions at the level of declared principles and diplomatic format, while implementation is hindered by diverging operational interests.

The security dilemma helps explain the trajectory. Islamabad's pursuit of a friendly government in Kabul, motivated in large part by the defensive aim of avoiding encirclement, was read in New Delhi as an offensive effort to deny India access (Jervis, 1978; Pande, 2011). India's reaction, which includes support for alternative routes and engagement with Central Asian states, is in turn read by Pakistan as confirmation of Indian encirclement. This spiral dynamic is amplified by the absence of any functioning India–Pakistan channel for managing Afghan questions.

Pakistan's calculus deserves separate attention. Islamabad faces a dilemma in which the outcome it long sought, a Taliban government in Kabul, has not delivered security. Coercion through border closures and air strikes risks pushing the Taliban toward other patrons, whereas accommodation risks emboldening the TTP. China benefits from neither extreme, which helps explain its mediating posture. From India's standpoint, this internal strain does not remove Pakistan's military capacity or its willingness to pursue anti-India objectives, but it diverts attention and resources and complicates any narrative of a unified western flank.

Comparison with prior scholarship

The findings agree with Small (2015) that the China–Pakistan relationship is institutionally deep and that Beijing is willing to underwrite Pakistan's regional position. They differ in one respect. Small's account emphasises the strength of the axis, whereas the post-2021 Afghan evidence shows a domain in which the partnership is strained by a third party that neither can control. This supports the view in Giustozzi (2019) that the Taliban are capable of relative autonomy and cannot be treated as a proxy. The result also qualifies the strategic-depth interpretation of Fair (2014): Pakistan's long investment in the Taliban has not produced the compliance that the doctrine presupposed, and the movement's return to power has instead intensified Pakistan's internal security burden.

The findings also relate to Garver's (2001) argument that Chinese policy toward South Asia has long balanced the objective of limiting Indian regional primacy against concerns over broader stability. Chinese caution on investment, together with its offer of mediation between Islamabad and Kabul, suggests that stability remains a priority alongside any wish to constrain India. Finally, in terms of Doshi's (2021) interpretation of Chinese strategy as incremental displacement of existing order, Afghanistan appears as an opportunity pursued at low cost rather than as an arena of heavy commitment, which accords with the slow pace of implemented projects.

Implications for India's security

Four implications follow. First, India's strategic access has narrowed. The loss of ground presence, intelligence networks and development partnerships built over two decades has reduced New Delhi's ability to monitor and shape Afghan developments, and the geographic obstacle of Pakistani territory prevents direct overland access. The CPEC extension, were it to materialise, would deepen the economic integration of Afghanistan with China and Pakistan and could make Indian alternatives comparatively less attractive.

Second, the militancy risk requires continuing attention but should not be overstated. Reports that India-oriented groups retain a presence on Afghan soil are serious, but the Taliban's own incentives are mixed. Their dependence on Pakistan has diminished, they face competition from the Islamic State Khorasan Province, and they are seeking international legitimacy. Those incentives provide space for

engagement on counterterrorism assurances even though they provide no guarantee of compliance.

Third, the two-front dilemma has a distinct Afghan dimension. A hostile or unstable Afghanistan could tie down Pakistani resources on its western border, which is a relief for India, but a friendly Afghanistan would release them for the eastern front. The current Pakistan–Taliban hostility therefore carries a partly favourable implication for India, although it also increases the likelihood of spillover violence and refugee pressures. India's military planners must consider both outcomes, along with China's capacity to support Pakistan with surveillance, logistics and technology, as the 2025 conflict suggested.

Fourth, the configuration is more fluid than a bloc framing suggests. The Taliban's outreach to Russia, Iran, Central Asian governments and India indicates that they are pursuing multi-alignment, and the Pakistani–Taliban estrangement shows the fragility of assumptions about Pakistan's leverage. India's analytic and policy mistake would be to treat the China–Pakistan–Afghanistan relationship as fixed.

A fifth implication concerns diplomatic leverage. India and China share a formal concern about militant groups operating from Afghan territory, yet cooperation is hindered by bilateral mistrust and by differences over how terrorism is defined and which groups merit international listing. Within multilateral forums, India can nonetheless anchor its Afghan policy in principles that other regional states endorse, such as the non-use of Afghan soil for terrorism, which reduces the room for China and Pakistan to present Indian engagement as a purely competitive project.

Policy options

Several options emerge from the analysis. A first is continued calibrated engagement with Kabul, combining humanitarian assistance, development projects that benefit ordinary Afghans, and a regular dialogue focused on counterterrorism commitments, without extending formal recognition until the Taliban meet broader international expectations. Sustained engagement would also preserve information channels that are otherwise lost. A second is diversification of connectivity, including investment in Chabahar and the International North–South Transport Corridor, and deeper partnerships with Central Asian states, in order to reduce dependence on routes through Pakistan. A third is regional coordination. Russia, Iran and the Central Asian republics share India's concern about militancy and about excessive concentration of influence, and they offer platforms for dialogue on a collective approach to Afghanistan.

A fourth option concerns deterrence and resilience. Because Afghanistan's evolution cannot be controlled, India's security depends on maintaining credible conventional and counterterrorism capabilities, strengthening border and internal intelligence systems, and preparing for coordinated China–Pakistan pressure (Ganguly, 2016, discusses the deterrence dynamics that shape India–Pakistan crises). Finally, India should avoid the temptation to cast Afghanistan principally through the lens of rivalry with Pakistan. A policy anchored in the interests of the Afghan population would be more sustainable and better received than one defined by opposition to other actors.

4.5 Alternative explanations and scenarios

Alternative explanations merit consideration. One holds that China's Afghan policy is primarily commercial and that India's security is incidental to it. The evidence is consistent with this for resource contracts, yet it does not explain the security and diplomatic dimensions, where Chinese policy is plainly shaped by concern for Xinjiang and for the safety of CPEC assets. A second explanation treats Pakistan–Taliban hostility as a temporary quarrel that mediation will repair. History offers some support, since relations have recovered after earlier crises, but the structural features of the dispute, particularly the TTP and the border, remain unresolved.

Three stylised scenarios can be drawn from the findings, although they are illustrative rather than predictive. In a consolidation scenario, Pakistan–Taliban relations stabilise through Chinese mediation, the CPEC extension proceeds, and India faces a more tightly integrated western neighbourhood. In a fragmentation scenario, hostility between Islamabad and Kabul persists, Chinese investment stalls, and the main Indian concern becomes militant spillover and instability rather than encirclement. In a multi-alignment scenario, the Taliban continue to balance among several patrons, creating openings for Indian engagement but also for competitive interference. The evidence reviewed best matches the third and, in some respects, the second, with consolidation the least supported at the time of writing. Because the scenarios are not mutually exclusive over time, Indian policy should be robust across them, prioritising flexibility, information access and resilience.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how China and Pakistan have aligned their policies toward Afghanistan since the Taliban's return to power and what the resulting configuration means for India's security. The analysis shows that convergence exists in four domains: diplomatic normalisation of engagement, economic connectivity under the proposed CPEC extension, shared concern about militancy, and a common wish to limit Indian influence. It also shows that the convergence is shallow in important respects. The Pakistan–Taliban confrontation over the TTP and the Durand Line, the Taliban's multi-directional diplomacy, and China's cautious approach to

investment prevent the formation of a coherent and durable bloc.

The scholarly contribution of the study is threefold. It updates the literature on the China–Pakistan axis with post-2021 Afghan evidence, it demonstrates the value of combining balance-of-threat, security-dilemma and regional-complex perspectives to separate motives from outcomes, and it links the regional configuration to a structured assessment of vectors affecting India. The practical contribution is a set of policy orientations: calibrated engagement with Kabul without recognition, diversification of connectivity beyond Pakistan-dependent routes, regional coordination with Russia, Iran and Central Asian states, and continued investment in deterrence and counterterrorism capacity.

Several directions for future research follow. Scholars could trace whether the proposed CPEC extension moves from declaration to construction and financing, and measure Chinese security spending in Afghanistan. Comparative work could examine whether India's approach to Kabul converges with that of other regional actors. Interviews with practitioners, if access allows, would strengthen the evidentiary base. As conditions in Afghanistan remain volatile, these questions merit periodic reassessment rather than a single definitive answer.

LIMITATIONS

The study has methodological, sample and data limitations. Methodologically, process tracing with a single regional case limits generalisation, and the qualitative threat ratings in Table 3 involve judgement that other analysts might weigh differently. The sample of sources is restricted to openly available material in English, which excludes internal government deliberations and non-English primary sources. Data on militant presence, Chinese investment and Pakistani decision-making are contested or opaque, and several recent events rest on press reporting that may be revised. The research period ends in late 2025, and the situation continues to evolve; readers should verify more recent developments against current sources.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the open scholarly and institutional resources that made this study possible.

Funding statement: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Author contributions: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, writing – original draft, and writing by Akhilesh Mishra review and editing Sanjeev Kumar and Satinder Singh.

Data availability: No new datasets were generated. All sources analysed are publicly available and listed in the References. The coded chronology can be provided by the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical compliance: The study involved no human participants, personal data or animals. Ethics committee approval and informed consent were therefore not applicable.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no financial or personal interests that could have influenced the work reported.

AI use disclosure: An AI language model, Grammarly, was used to assist with the grammatical correction and language refinement of the text. The author reviewed, verified, and edited all content and takes full responsibility for the final version. No AI tool is listed as an author.

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