

China-Afghanistan Relations and the Impact of Lithium Resources on it

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Abstract: In recent years, relations between China and Afghanistan have experienced significant growth due to geopolitical and economic interactions. China, as one of the world's leading economic powers, seeks to exploit Afghanistan's rich natural and mineral resources, particularly lithium. Lithium, which plays a key role in the production of rechargeable batteries for electronic devices and electric cars, is considered a vital strategic resource for China. This research examines the impact of Afghanistan's lithium reserves on strengthening and developing economic and security relations between the two countries. The results of this research show that economic cooperation between China and Afghanistan in the field of lithium extraction and exploitation can bring numerous mutual benefits to both countries. This cooperation can not only lead to the strengthening of bilateral relations but also help Afghanistan become an important player in the global strategic resource market. The present research also analyzes existing security and political challenges and provides solutions to overcome these obstacles. This analysis can help policymakers in both countries make strategic decisions and pave the way for improving bilateral cooperation.

Keywords: China, lithium, Afghanistan, economy and international relations

I. Introduction:

Relations between China and Afghanistan in recent decades have undergone significant changes due to political, economic, and security developments in the region. As a major economic and political power, China has always sought to expand its influence in Central and South Asia. Afghanistan, despite internal security and political challenges, has always attracted the attention of regional and global powers due to its strategic geographic location and rich natural resources, including vast lithium reserves.

Lithium, as one of the essential elements for the technology and new energy industries, plays a significant role in the global economy. With the increasing demand for electric batteries and electric vehicles, the strategic importance of this metal has become more apparent. Afghanistan, with its considerable lithium reserves, can play a key role in supplying this valuable material.

A lot of research has been done about China-Afghanistan relations and its various aspects have been examined, but in this research, no special attention has been paid to the role of lithium in the relations between the two countries. In this research, an attempt is made to explain Afghanistan's position in China's foreign policy and the role of lithium in the relations between the two countries.

II. Problem Statement:

The relations between China and Afghanistan, especially in recent years, have been influenced by Afghanistan's rich natural resources, including lithium reserves. Lithium is a valuable metal widely used in the production of electric batteries, particularly for electric vehicles and electronic devices. Given the increasing demand for these products, lithium has become a strategic commodity.

Afghanistan possesses significant lithium reserves, estimated to be worth billions of dollars. These reserves are mainly located in the central and western regions of the country. As one of the largest producers and consumers of

electric batteries in the world, China has a substantial need for lithium resources. The country is seeking secure and stable sources to meet its industrial needs.

China aims to invest in Afghanistan's infrastructure and mining sectors to facilitate access to the country's natural resources. Various projects, including railways and roads, can help achieve this goal. Additionally, by investing in Afghanistan's lithium mines, China can help Afghanistan become a reliable source for lithium supply.

Closer economic ties between China and Afghanistan could contribute to Afghanistan's economic stability and development. However, the unstable security conditions in Afghanistan and the presence of armed groups may pose challenges for Chinese investments. Both China and Afghanistan need to carefully manage these issues to achieve their economic, political, and commercial objectives.

Lithium extraction may have significant environmental and social impacts. Environmental issues related to mining include water pollution and ecological changes. Social impacts, such as the displacement of local communities and changes in the regional economic structure, are also important concerns.

In conclusion, the relationship between China and Afghanistan and the impact of lithium reserves on this relationship is a complex and multi-dimensional issue encompassing economic, political, security, environmental, and social aspects. This issue requires careful examination and management by both countries to effectively capitalize on opportunities and minimize challenges. Here, we have attempted to outline a framework for future researchers in this field.

III. Literature Review:

For study on the relations between China and Afghanistan and the impact of lithium reserves on these relations, you can refer to the following sources. These sources include scholarly articles, research reports, and geopolitical and economic analyses:

- "China in Central Asia: The Quest for Power and Influence" by Michael Clarke
 - This book examines China's role and influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan, including analyses of the region's natural resources. However, it does not extensively discuss Afghanistan's resources or provide an analysis of China-Afghanistan relations.
 - "Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict" by Michael T. Klare
 - This book explores the role of natural resources in global conflicts and can help in understanding the significance of lithium and Afghanistan's mineral resources. However, it does not cover recent or current Afghanistan-China relations.
 - "China's Engagement in Afghanistan: An Analysis of Evolving Interests and Influence" (Journal of Contemporary China)
 - This article examines China's interests and influence in Afghanistan and its strategic role in the region. However, it does not address lithium mining or its impact on bilateral relations.
 - "The Strategic Importance of Lithium in the Global Energy Transition" (Energy Policy Journal)
 - This article discusses the role of lithium in the global energy transition and its economic and geopolitical significance. However, it provides limited discussion on Afghanistan and does not address China-Afghanistan relations.
 - "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities" (International Affairs Journal)
 - This article explores China's Belt and Road Initiative in Afghanistan and its impact on bilateral relations. However, it does not cover recent relations between the two countries or discuss lithium.
- In this research, we will strive to achieve a comprehensive and accurate perspective on Afghanistan's lithium reserves and their impact on China-Afghanistan relations.

IV. Research Significance

The significance of researching China-Afghanistan relations and the impact of lithium reserves can be outlined as follows:

- Strategic and Economic: Considering that lithium is a key element in battery production and modern technologies, research in this area can elucidate the economic and strategic impacts of China-Afghanistan relations and help predict future changes in the global market.
- Geopolitical: This research can contribute to a better understanding of China's role in the region, its influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the impact of these relations on the balance of regional and global powers.
- Development and Reconstruction of Afghanistan: Examining the impact of Chinese investments in lithium extraction can help evaluate the opportunities and challenges facing Afghanistan's development and reconstruction, clarifying the role of these resources in the country's economic growth.

- Policy Making: The results of this research can aid policymakers in formulating appropriate strategies for managing international relations and optimizing the use of natural resources.

V. Research Objectives:

- To provide a brief discussion on Afghanistan-China relations.
- To explain Afghanistan's position in China's foreign policy.
- To clarify the factors influencing Afghanistan-China relations.
- To highlight the role of lithium in China-Afghanistan economic relations.

VI. Research Question:

How do Afghanistan's lithium reserves affect China-Afghanistan relations, and what will be the future implications?

VII. Hypothesis:

It seems that Afghanistan's rich lithium reserves have increased China's attention and investment in the country, accelerating and improving the political and economic relations between the two countries.

VIII. Research Methodology:

In this research, we will use the descriptive library method. This method will involve collecting, describing, and analyzing information to provide an accurate and comprehensive picture of the previous state of China-Afghanistan relations and the impact of lithium reserves. Additionally, this method will help us gather and analyze precise information to present a comprehensive and accurate picture of the current state of China-Afghanistan relations and the impact of lithium reserves on these relations.

IX. A Brief Review of China-Afghanistan Relations

According to general interpretations by foreign policy and international relations scholars, countries that share geographical proximity often have both old and new relationships. This concept applies to the relations between Afghanistan and China. Historically, Afghanistan, known as ancient Ariana, and ancient China were not only neighboring lands but also two magnificent civilizations that coexisted and had specific exchanges over the centuries. The Silk Road and mutual cultural and artistic influences are still considered significant symbols of these relations. Ariana served as a resting place for China's massive caravans traveling to Europe, and vice versa. The documented political relations between the two countries date back over two thousand years. In 130 BC, Zhang Qian, the first ambassador of the Han Dynasty, traveled to the northern lands of Ariana, beyond the Amu River, to the court of the Yuezhi. Conversely, ambassadors from the Kushan state frequently visited the Chinese emperors' court (Mal and Jiang Jie Qiang, 2012: 104).

In recent centuries, with the establishment of political stability in Afghanistan and the formation of a new government in China, the relations between the two countries took on a new form. In 1922, Mohammad Sharif Khan was appointed as the first representative of the Afghan government to Chinese Turkestan and was stationed in Kashgar. Although the diplomatic missions of the two countries were ceremonial at that time, the relations did not remain limited to this level. The governments of Afghanistan and China felt the need for increased cooperation and worked to strengthen it. Consequently, in 1933, Habibullah Tarzi was appointed as Afghanistan's Minister Plenipotentiary in Nanking, and in March 1944, the Treaty of Friendship between Afghanistan and China was signed (Afghanistan and the World, 2007: 231).

In 1950, Afghanistan was among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China, issuing an official declaration on January 20. In 1955, Sardar Mohammad Naim Khan, then Foreign Minister of Afghanistan and Deputy Prime Minister, met with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, where they announced direct relations between the two countries and opened permanent embassies (Mal, Diplomatic Relations between Afghanistan and China: 35, 2015).

On January 20, 1955, the Kingdom of Afghanistan and the People's Republic of China established political relations at the ambassadorial level. Abdul Samad Khan, the first Ambassador of Afghanistan to China, presented his credentials to Chairman Mao Zedong, and in return, Chinese Ambassador Ding Guoyu presented his credentials to King Mohammad Zahir Shah, formally starting official political relations between China and Afghanistan (Mal, Diplomatic Relations between Afghanistan and China: 57, 2015).

In 1973, a coup led by Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan overthrew the monarchy, and a republic was established in Afghanistan. China was the first to recognize the new Afghan republic in that same year. Due to the influence of leftists within Daud Khan's regime and his alignment with Moscow, the nascent Afghan republic approached issues related to China with caution. This cautious approach was reciprocated by China, although China had recognized the new Afghan republic from the outset.

Afghanistan's cautious policy towards China cooled following the communist coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978, influenced by the global rivalry between China and the Soviet Union. However, official courtesies between the two countries continued. In 1978, in response to a letter from the Revolutionary Council and PDPA leadership to the Chinese Communist Party leadership, requesting recognition of the new communist regime in Afghanistan and the resumption of diplomatic relations, China quickly recognized the government (Rahmani and Hosseini, 2012: 220).

On December 25, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, contravening all national and international norms, as part of its competition with the United States and its political goals. China viewed this action as an aggression against its national security, which hindered the normalization of relations with Moscow (Mal, *Diplomatic Relations between Afghanistan and China*: 126, 2015).

With the presence of Soviet forces in Afghanistan in 1978, and in reaction to a Beijing declaration condemning the Soviet invasion in the strongest terms, the Kabul government reduced its diplomatic relations with China. In response, China recalled its ambassador from Afghanistan and left its representation in a semi-active and symbolic state. In the 1980s, China was among the countries that supported Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet invasion. By joining the anti-Soviet front, China supported the Mujahideen against Kabul (Balkhi, 2012: 98). In 1988, an agreement for the withdrawal of Soviet forces was signed in Geneva, and after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, China's policy focused on a political resolution to the Afghan crisis.

Subsequent events in Afghanistan, such as the fall of Dr. Najibullah's regime in 1992, the rise of the Mujahideen to power, and the ensuing civil wars, led to a period of isolation in Afghanistan's foreign policy during the tenures of Sibghatullah Mojaddedi and Burhanuddin Rabbani. As a result, trade with China significantly decreased, and Beijing recalled all remaining staff from Kabul and suspended its embassy operations there. In 1996, the Taliban took power, marking a period of isolation in Afghanistan's foreign policy. During this time, the Taliban regime maintained diplomatic relations with only three countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

1-1 The Dynamics of China's Diplomacy towards Afghanistan

While Afghanistan was engulfed in civil war in the 1990s, the Taliban took control of the country in 1996, heightening security concerns in Xinjiang. China's main worry was the connection between the Taliban and terrorism, specifically the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. China was also concerned that the turmoil and instability from Afghanistan could spill over into Xinjiang. This led China to distance itself from the Taliban regime and sever diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. China did not recognize the Taliban regime and made no effort to improve relations with it.

After the establishment of the new Afghan government in 2002, Sino-Afghan relations changed, and the two countries resumed their ties. China strongly supported the new Afghan government and then-President Hamid Karzai, providing assistance and investing heavily in Afghanistan's economy. In 2012, Beijing agreed to Afghanistan's observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, significantly deepening Sino-Afghan relations and increasing Afghanistan's importance to China.

Afghanistan has always been keen on China establishing a direct road connection through the narrow China-Afghanistan border via the Wakhan Corridor. The Wakhan border, near the city of Kashgar and its economic zone, is crucial. China hopes to restore Kashgar's historical significance from the ancient Silk Road era, linking China to Central Asia, Europe, and the warm waters of the Persian Gulf via Afghanistan. In other words, Afghanistan offers a new land bridge for China in the global Silk Road framework.

During former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's visit to China in October 2014, he proposed to Xi Jinping that both countries should work on creating a transportation route through the short border at the eastern tip of the mountainous Wakhan region. While the West only talks about regional strategy as key to Afghanistan's future, China is implementing it through extensive investments in infrastructure projects like high-speed rail. In the context of the new Silk Road initiative, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proposed restoring historical East-West connections and suggested substantial investments in the region, but this remained just talk. Connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia—via direct land links between China, Europe, and the warm waters of the Persian Gulf through rail and road routes—demonstrates that China is a serious and capable player in the region.

Since 2014, changes in China's political and military stances indicate a shift in China's goals or a multifaceted approach. China's growing interventions in political, security, economic, social, military, humanitarian, and strategic areas show its evolving political and military stance towards Afghanistan and the region. However, China officially claims that it only cooperates with Afghan military forces in joint counter-terrorism operations and combating cross-border organized crime. Nonetheless, this marks a change in China's political and military policy towards Afghanistan, which was not part of its strategy before.

With Donald Trump's announcement of his country's strategy in 2017, he considered China the most immediate and serious threat. Trump's policy of withdrawing American forces from Afghanistan, especially in 2017, is seen as part of the US's global strategy to shift focus from the war on terror in Afghanistan and the Middle East to East Asia and China. American strategists emphasized the need for the US to exit the Middle East and concentrate on China. Hence, the rising importance of Afghanistan in China's energy plans, given increasing US threats in East and South Asia, has steadily grown. Consequently, China perceived Trump's actions and policies as a threat and made significant moves in Afghanistan.

These significant moves by China in Afghanistan include regional alliances centered around Afghanistan, elevating Afghanistan's importance in achieving China's grand strategies, expanding China's geopolitical influence in Afghanistan, and increasing economic, cultural, and political activities. These developments are aimed at solidifying China's position in Afghanistan and integrating Afghanistan into a new phase of Chinese policy. China seeks to maintain its specific role in the Afghan peace process to leverage its relations with the US.

China is concerned about the presence or absence of the US in Afghanistan. The US presence in Afghanistan is viewed as a means for expanding US influence in Asia, in the strategic crossroads of Eurasia and the ancient Silk Road, which connects Asia and Europe. The withdrawal of US and NATO forces in 2014 and 2019 is seen by China as causing a security vacuum in the region, prompting China to manage these opposing concerns through its diplomacy in Afghanistan, hoping that China's rise as a major player in the region will capitalize on Central Asia's potential.

A stable and secure Afghanistan that does not have strong political and military dependence on Washington is a strategic goal for China. This goal is significant for three reasons: first, it saves China from the potential threat of terrorists entering from Afghanistan without significant financial and military costs; second, it facilitates large investments and rapid economic growth in the region for China; and third, it reduces the powerful US presence in the region, providing China with regional alliance opportunities and accelerating the achievement of China's ambitious global plans. This also helps China control any potential threats from its neighbors.

Additionally, China is keen on connecting to Iran and the Middle East through Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Afghanistan can benefit from this opportunity. On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha. This agreement was met with official optimism in the US, but China was less optimistic and had little confidence in the Afghan peace process, believing the American agreement would lead to further instability. Chinese official media compared the US-Taliban peace agreement to the "disgraceful" US exit from Vietnam in the 1970s. From China's perspective, the "peace" achieved by the US was peace for itself, not for Afghanistan or the region.

After the Doha peace agreement, China viewed its role in Afghanistan with caution and flexibility, considering its role in Afghan security in three ways: marginal, meaning it is not a primary party to the conflict; irreplaceable, meaning China is a significant neighboring power that cannot be ignored; and central, meaning China's investments are crucial for Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction and economic development. Based on this approach, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Taliban officials in Tianjin in late July, before the fall of Kabul, to discuss reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan. The Taliban agreed not to support Uyghurs and promised not to allow any forces to use Afghan territory against China.

The interim Taliban government opened Afghanistan to Chinese investment in the post-American era. Given the Taliban's apparent commitment to securing Chinese-funded projects and their promise not to provide safe havens for Uyghur separatists, there appears to be potential for a win-win cooperation between China and Afghanistan, borrowing from China's foreign policy culture.

X. Taliban-China Relations: From Ideological Contradictions to Political Alignment Contrasting Ideologies, Political Allies

The Taliban and China possess fundamentally conflicting ideologies but have emerged as close political allies. Taliban officials, despite being on international sanctions lists, made multiple visits to China before the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, engaging in discussions about cooperation and interaction. The Taliban, an Islamic movement, and China, a country rooted in communist-Maoist ideology, are ideologically opposed.

However, their political alignment is driven by mutual interests. China sees significant economic and security benefits in Afghanistan, viewing it as a crucial transit hub between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Meanwhile, the Taliban need a major power for international and regional political and economic support. This mutual need has brought the two ideologically incompatible entities into political alignment. Additionally, both share anti-American sentiments, fear of ISIS, and opposition to the West, providing a foundation for their developing relations.

(<https://8am.media/fa/taliban-china-relations-from-ideological-contradictions-to-political-alignment/>)

2-1 Factors Bringing the Taliban and China Closer

Common Enemy

The United States is a common enemy for both the Taliban and China, fostering their closeness. Numerous claims suggest China, in collaboration with Pakistan, supported the Taliban in their fight against the Afghan government. After Kabul fell, China maintained its embassy and provided humanitarian aid to Afghanistan during the Taliban's dire times, promising financial cooperation. President Joe Biden's defense of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan highlighted this relationship, noting that the world is changing and the U.S. is engaged in serious competition with China. Consequently, China needs a regional ally to help implement its plans .

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2-1-2 Common Friend

Pakistan serves as a crucial link between the Taliban and China. During the Taliban's first regime, Pakistan was one of the three countries that recognized their government. After their defeat, the Taliban took refuge in Pakistan, receiving support to fight the former Afghan republic for twenty years. In the past two decades, China's view of Afghanistan has been heavily influenced by Islamabad's perspective. China values its long-term strategic and economic relationship with Pakistan, facilitated by substantial investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Both China and Pakistan share economic interests in the presence of the Taliban in Afghanistan .

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2-1-3 Common Threat

ISIS is a shared threat for both the Taliban and China. ISIS affiliates have attacked Taliban positions multiple times and threatened to continue fighting. In early October 2021, ISIS-Khorasan linked their suicide bombing at a mosque in Kunduz to the Taliban's close cooperation with China and mistreatment of Uighurs. This shared threat enhances the prospects for cooperation between the Taliban and China. The Taliban have assured China of their commitment to fighting ISIS and not supporting Uighur Muslims.

(<https://8am.media/fa/taliban-china-relations-from-ideological-contradictions-to-political-alignment/>)

2-1-4 China's Interaction with the Taliban as a Means of Securing Beijing and Islamabad's Interests

Although Pakistan has not officially recognized the Taliban's interim government, it has exerted significant diplomatic efforts alongside China to gain international recognition for the Taliban. The long-term economic and strategic ties between China and Pakistan underpin this effort. China's substantial investments in Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor highlight the stakes for China, as ongoing conflict in Afghanistan could disrupt these investments along the Durand Line. Furthermore, militant activities in the area bolster the Pakistani Taliban, posing threats to Chinese projects and personnel. Both China and Pakistan see a stable Taliban-led Afghanistan as beneficial, reducing militant threats and limiting India's influence in the region .

1- China's Economic Interests and Security Concerns in Afghanistan

With the West's absence, Afghanistan has become a potential sphere of influence for China in South Asia and Central Asia. Afghanistan's untapped natural resources attract Chinese investment, as China seeks opportunities free from U.S. presence. China is keen on developing the Wakhan Corridor and has invested nearly a trillion dollars in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, aiming to connect with seventy countries. Following the Taliban's capture of Kabul on August 15, 2021, Afghanistan likely lost many Western investors due to the Taliban's ideology conflicting with Western values. In such a scenario, countries prioritizing economic gains over governance standards, like China, can enter the Afghan market .

2- China's Economic Progress and Resource Needs

China's rapid economic development over the past decades has necessitated raw materials, and Afghanistan is viewed as a long-term source. Despite concerns over Uighur-related extremism, China prioritizes its economic interests in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, though one of the world's poorest countries, is rich in mineral resources, including hydrocarbons, lithium, lead, limestone, gemstones, copper, iron, gold, and rare earth elements. The Taliban control mineral reserves estimated between \$1 to \$3 trillion, with lithium being particularly attractive due to its use in batteries and electronics .

3- Global Demand for Lithium

Lithium, a critical component in batteries and electronics, is mainly produced in South America and countries like the U.S. and Australia. Afghanistan, with estimated lithium reserves of 21 million tons, could become a major player in the global lithium market. As the world moves towards renewable energy and carbon neutrality, the demand for lithium-ion batteries is surging. The global electric vehicle market, which saw sales rise to 6.6 million in 2023, relies heavily on lithium, with each EV battery requiring substantial amounts of the metal. As the demand for electric vehicles grows, lithium shortages loom, highlighting Afghanistan's potential as a key supplier . (<https://www.etilaatroz.com/134788/china-taliban-link-dream-of-an-alliance-for-afghanistans-lithium-productivity/>)

5-1 China's Dominance in the Lithium Supply Chain

China controls a significant portion of the electric vehicle and lithium-ion battery supply chains, producing 60% of the world's lithium chemicals and 80% of lithium hydroxide. As electric vehicles become more prevalent, battery recycling will play a crucial role, potentially alleviating some lithium shortages. However, the overall demand for lithium is expected to remain high, driven by the global shift towards renewable energy and electric mobility .

(<https://www.etilaatroz.com/134788/china-taliban-link-dream-of-an-alliance-for-afghanistans-lithium-productivity/>)

5-1-1 Need of china for lithium

China, as the largest producer of batteries for electric vehicles and solar panels, is also the world's largest importer of lithium. The rapid implementation of environmental initiatives and the accelerated adoption of electric vehicles have spurred the emergence of new industries related to lithium batteries. Consequently, alongside substantial investments in this sector, there has been a significant increase in the raw material costs of lithium. In just the past year, lithium prices in global markets have surged by up to 180%, akin to the impact of the crude oil price increase in the early 1970s, which triggered a major global economic crisis.

According to a study conducted last year by Macquarie Bank, global demand for lithium is projected to increase by 76% from 2022 to 2025, reaching 1.57 million tons annually. This translates to China's dependence on lithium imports potentially reaching 55%. With the rapid growth in electric vehicle production worldwide this year, these figures could change, possibly increasing China's reliance on lithium imports to 60%. This significant dependence on imports, akin to oil and gas, not only poses strategic challenges but also brings national security considerations into commercial spheres.

In 1995, global lithium production was only about 6,500 tons annually. By 2015, it had risen to approximately 32,500 tons per year. However, over the past five years alone, annual lithium production has increased tenfold, reaching around 345,000 tons in 2020. Given that lithium is one of the lightest metals, these figures are truly remarkable. It is expected that lithium production will increase to about 2 million tons annually in just the next decade to meet the growing demand from advanced technology and energy industries. Some experts even refer to lithium as the "new oil" due to its increasing demand alongside rapid technological advancements and rising demand for electric vehicles, highlighting the critical importance of Afghanistan's lithium reserves.

For this reason, China, as the world's second-largest economy and a leading player in the extraction of rare earth metals and one of the largest producers of lithium, is actively seeking extensive engagement with the Taliban. This is because the Taliban's control at such a crucial time for battery supply chains, like lithium, is crucial. The experience of Chinese companies investing in mining sectors in countries such as Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo shows that political challenges and post-war reconstruction difficulties in Afghanistan cannot prevent their entry into the country's mining sector. The initial political steps taken to extend a hand to the Taliban regime by China support this notion. (Geological Survey of Lithium in Afghanistan: Implications for Economic Development)

Lithium resources in Afghanistan were first discovered by Soviet mining experts in the 1980s. However, they kept it confidential until 2004, when a team of American geologists stumbled upon a set of old charts and data in the library of the Afghanistan Geological Survey in Kabul. Using these old Russian charts, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) initiated a series of aerial surveys of Afghanistan's mineral resources using advanced gravity and magnetic measurement equipment attached to P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft. In 2007, they utilized a British bomber equipped with tools providing three-dimensional characteristics of subsurface mineral deposits. By 2009, as a Pentagon task force that had developed commercial trade initiatives in Iraq was transferred to Afghanistan, mining experts were brought in to validate the findings of these surveys. In a survey conducted in 2010, geologists and researchers working for the U.S. military estimated Afghanistan's lithium resources, spread across Ghazni, Herat, and Nimroz, to be worth \$3 trillion. (Lithium Reserves in Afghanistan: Resource Potential and Development Prospects)

Disproportionate dependence of China on lithium imports has severely exposed its downstream battery and electric vehicle industries to global lithium price fluctuations and supply assurances.

In the past two years, China has invested over \$4.5 billion in lithium extraction, with a significant portion of this capital directed towards African countries like Namibia.

With lithium reserves in Afghanistan, China has entered into agreements with the Taliban to study and potentially exploit two promising mines in Afghanistan, actively conducting field operations in the country.

According to reports cited by Independent Persian, the Taliban claimed Afghanistan's lithium reserves to be worth \$1 trillion, citing an estimate from a U.S. source in 2010. They alleged that China is prepared to invest \$10 billion in these mines, a figure notably large considering China's investments in established lithium mines. (Afghanistan's Lithium Resources: A Potential Economic Game-Changer)

For countries aspiring to lead in the rapidly growing electric vehicle sector, ensuring uninterrupted lithium supply chain security is not just a strategic choice but a fundamental necessity. Analogous to a potential Cold War trade, complexities of geopolitics intertwined with lithium resources are underscored. China's dominant position in the electric vehicle market places it in a pivotal role, enhancing its precise grasp of global lithium resources. Against this backdrop, Afghanistan's lithium reserves gain greater geopolitical significance, as nations strive to maintain their positions in the evolving landscape of clean energy. Afghanistan's narrative as a potential hub for lithium extraction introduces a new dimension to international competition for sustainable resources, emphasizing the intricate interplay between geopolitics, energy transition, and lithium's vital role in shaping future transportation. According to Americans, the Afghan government before the Taliban could achieve self-sufficiency through the sale of lithium, which is a valuable resource, and thus create a sustainable economic model. (<https://www.globalaffairs.ch/2023/04/13/afghanistan-s-lithium-riches-more-mirage-than-windfall/>)

Lithium extraction is just one area of investment and efforts towards clean power generation and accessing renewable energy sources. China's investment in research and clean energy production in 2019 amounted to \$83.4 billion USD, with the United States following at \$55.5 billion USD and Japan at \$16.5 billion USD, respectively, in second and third places.

This gap has been maintained in subsequent years, underscoring China's need for diverse measures across all political, military, and economic domains to safeguard its substantial investments.

The global competition for lithium, a vital component in electric vehicle (EV) batteries, has drawn attention to Afghanistan, often referred to as the "Saudi Arabia of lithium." With China's dominance in the electric vehicle market, Afghanistan's extensive lithium reserves have become a geopolitical focal point. Following the United States' withdrawal, China swiftly moved in, exploring economic benefits amidst Western sanctions against the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. The strategic importance of lithium has intensified competition, turning the region into a battleground for economic and geopolitical maneuvers. The complex interplay between geopolitics, clean energy transition, and lithium's crucial role in shaping future transportation is vividly apparent in this narrative.

Speculations are growing that China will capitalize on the power vacuum created by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, aiming to dominate the country's mineral resources, especially its lithium reserves. These resources play a key role in global energy transition away from fossil fuels towards renewable sources. China's potential activities in Afghanistan, given its global role in exploiting vital minerals, pose security challenges and concerns over good governance for the West.

The United States and its allies are concerned about China's potential pressure on Afghanistan's mining sector. However, China is diplomatically and commercially prepared to expand its actions in Afghanistan. Beijing is well-positioned to negotiate mining contracts with the Taliban. The country has continued its diplomatic mission in Kabul, hinting at possibly recognizing the Taliban government officially and declaring its opposition to international sanctions against Afghanistan, though it has stopped efforts to repeal them. Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister, even made an unexpected visit to the country in late March, the highest-ranking foreign official to do so among countries other than Pakistan and Qatar following the Taliban's rise to power. He condemned "political pressure and economic sanctions imposed on Afghanistan by non-regional forces." (. Geological Survey of Lithium in Afghanistan: Implications for Economic Development)

China's mining deals with Afghanistan are theoretically rational and have a profound impact on the relationship between the two countries because Chinese mining companies can provide the necessary cash to the Taliban to mitigate the crippling impact of international sanctions, which has sparked an economic and humanitarian crisis. In return, Beijing gains access to a new and rich source of minerals vital for its ongoing carbon reduction efforts.

On the other hand, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the freezing of the country's assets by the US and international institutions like the International Monetary Fund have severely pushed the economic situation towards crisis. This could lead to long-term devaluation of the Afghan currency, increased unemployment, poverty,

and rising prices of essential goods—a clear sign of the crisis. The Taliban are seeking alternative Western partners to counteract sanctions and govern the country, where China's role is prominent.

The interaction between China and the Taliban is a win-win game for both governance entities, and their efforts to enhance comprehensive economic and commercial cooperation have gained momentum, highlighted by the groundbreaking ceremony at the shared border at Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan, started in May this year, with a strong likelihood of completion within the next two years.

4- Challenges and Obstacles

Security and Political Stability: Afghanistan's unstable security situation and the presence of semi-military groups and terrorists are among the main obstacles for foreign investments. Mining projects require security and political stability, which are currently lacking in Afghanistan.

Infrastructure: The lack of adequate infrastructure for mining and transportation of minerals is another major challenge in exploiting Afghanistan's lithium resources. Developing necessary infrastructure requires substantial and time-consuming investments.

International Competition: Other countries such as the United States, India, and Russia also have an interest in Afghanistan's lithium resources. This international competition can lead to geopolitical tensions and disputes, presenting China with new challenges.

Local Rights and Social Issues: Natural resource extraction in Afghanistan can lead to local protests. The local community may be sensitive to the presence of foreigners and the environmental and social impacts of these projects. Ignoring local rights and social issues can lead to internal conflicts and unrest.

5- Opportunities

Economic Development of Afghanistan: Chinese investment in the mining sector can contribute to the economic development of Afghanistan. Creating jobs and developing infrastructure can help improve the living conditions of local people.

Enhancing Bilateral Relations: Economic cooperation can strengthen political and diplomatic relations between China and Afghanistan. These relations can contribute to stability and security in the region.

Access to Vital Resources: With access to Afghanistan's lithium resources, China can meet the needs of its industries and reduce dependence on other suppliers.

6- Discussion

The relations between China and Afghanistan have developed significantly in recent years. Various studies on these relations have not specifically addressed the role of lithium. Lithium is a rare and strategic element that China urgently needs for the development of its electric vehicle industry. Afghanistan also has vast and untapped reserves of this strategic element. Therefore, lithium plays a significant role in the relationship between the two countries.

This study attempts to explain the impact of lithium on the relations between China and Afghanistan. However, given the existing political, economic, and security challenges, both countries need to address these issues through the trade of lithium and other natural resources, considering their mutual interests, to expand their bilateral relations. The study faced challenges such as the lack of reliable data. Therefore, there is an urgent need to explain and clarify the role of lithium in the China-Afghanistan relations to gain a better understanding of the future of their relationship.

XI. Conclusion

Despite ideological differences, the Taliban and China have established a political alliance based on shared interests. Common enemies, friends, and mutual threats, along with China's economic ambitions and Afghanistan's potential resources, form the basis of this unique relationship. With continued pursuit of its economic interests in the region, Afghanistan's role as a key supplier of strategic minerals like lithium increasingly gains significance. The relations between China and Afghanistan, influenced by rich lithium reserves, have high potential for development. China can use its financial and technological resources to assist in exploiting these resources while contributing to Afghanistan's economic development. However, security, infrastructure, and social challenges remain serious obstacles. Success in this cooperation requires a comprehensive strategy and close collaboration between the two countries to capitalize on existing opportunities and minimize challenges.

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