



China's Response to the Expansion of U.S. Influence in Asia: The Intersection of Religion and Governance in Afghanistan (2011-2019)

Nazari Paryani¹, Gulab Mir Rahmany^{2*}

¹Mandegar Daily Newspaper, India

²Department of Sociology, University of Kerala, India

*Corresponding Author Email: gulabmir2014@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem: The article addresses China's concerns regarding the expansion of U.S. influence in Asia, particularly focusing on Afghanistan's strategic importance in the geopolitical competition between the two powers. The U.S. military presence and Afghanistan's religiously influenced governance pose a significant challenge for China, which must navigate both political and religious dynamics to secure its interests in the region. This research investigates how these factors shape China's foreign policy and its interactions with Afghanistan.

Research purposes: The study aims to explore how China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan has evolved in response to the geopolitical and religious landscape influenced by U.S. actions. Specifically, it examines China's strategic calculations regarding Afghanistan's religious governance and how this affects its efforts to engage with Afghan political actors, such as the Taliban, while maintaining its broader geopolitical and economic goals, including the Belt and Road Initiative.

Research methods: The research employs a historical and analytical approach, drawing on data from 2011 to 2019 to examine China's foreign policy shifts in response to U.S. actions in Afghanistan. The study relies on secondary sources, including policy papers, academic works, and governmental reports, to assess China's evolving role and strategies concerning the religiously influenced political structures in Afghanistan.

Results and Discussion: The findings show that China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is significantly influenced by its concerns over U.S. military presence and alliances in the region. China's engagement with Afghanistan has been shaped by the need to navigate the religious-political dynamics, particularly with the rise of religiously motivated actors such as the Taliban. China's strategic responses include strengthening diplomatic ties, economic investments, and engaging with both Afghan religious and political leaders to secure its geopolitical interests. The article discusses how China's secular approach to governance contrasts with Afghanistan's religious influences, affecting its foreign policy strategies.

Research Implications and Contributions: This study contributes to the broader understanding of how religion, politics, and governance intersect in Afghanistan's international relations, particularly with China. It provides insights into how China adapts its foreign policy to account for religiously motivated governance, while also pursuing its geopolitical goals in the region. The research offers valuable perspectives for policymakers and scholars on the interplay between religion, governance, and foreign policy in a strategically significant context like Afghanistan.

Keywords: China, America, Asia, Afghanistan, and Foreign Policy

INTRODUCTION

Understanding China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is crucial for shaping Afghanistan's foreign relations, particularly in the context of religious and governance dynamics. Over recent decades, China has sought to position itself as a rising global power, increasingly viewing Afghanistan as a strategically important player in its competition with the United States. Following the events of September 11 and

the subsequent U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, China established a diplomatic relationship with Afghanistan, which saw significant transformation after 2011. However, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how China's foreign policy adapts to Afghanistan's religiously influenced governance structures, particularly as the Taliban regained influence. Given these developments, it is vital for policymakers, governmental institutions, and academic entities to grasp the implications of China's evolving foreign policy, especially in response to U.S. influence in the region and the religious-political complexities of Afghanistan.

This research, employing a causal-analytical methodology, examines the primary factors driving China's foreign policy changes toward Afghanistan between 2011 and 2019. The focus is particularly on China's concerns regarding the growing U.S. influence in Asia and its adjustments in response to Afghanistan's governance, which is shaped by religious actors such as the Taliban. The lack of a strong civil society in Afghanistan (Nandy, 2020 a) makes external interventions and power struggles a common occurrence. This research emphasizes the importance of understanding how China navigates these dynamics, balancing its secular foreign policy with the religious governance structures in Afghanistan, and how this impacts the broader geopolitical landscape.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

China is Concerned about Expanding US Influence in Asia

China is increasingly concerned about the expanding U.S. influence in Asia, especially as it relates to Afghanistan's strategic role in this geopolitical competition. Following the Cold War, U.S.-China competition in Asia initially saw a temporary reduction due to the global war on terrorism. During this period, China and the United States briefly appeared to be on a cooperative path, with China participating in U.S.-led anti-terrorism efforts and advancing market-oriented reforms. This cooperation fostered a narrative of Sino-U.S. friendship, particularly as China opened its economy to global markets. However, as U.S. actions and policies in Asia evolved, they began to trigger significant apprehension in China. The expansion of U.S. military influence, particularly the proliferation of bases close to China's borders and the formation of alliances aimed at countering China, has led to a climate of mutual unease, despite previous strategic camaraderie.

Under the Obama and Trump administrations, the U.S. shifted its global strategy from a focus on the Middle East to addressing China's rise in Asia. This shift, marked by restrictive measures against China, heightened concerns in Beijing about America's intentions in the region. China's leaders and analysts argue that the U.S. is unwilling to acknowledge or respect China as an emerging global power (Grossman, 2019). The sense of competition deepened as U.S. military strategies increasingly targeted China's regional influence.

The events of September 11, 2001, initially opened a new chapter in Sino-U.S. relations. While the U.S. temporarily diverted its attention to the Middle East, tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalated, prompting efforts to defuse regional conflicts. Some agreements were reached under the G-2 framework or through Common Sovereignty condominium discussions (Navabi, 2010). Despite these cooperative efforts, U.S. long-term strategies continued to focus on containing China's rise. The United States aimed to maintain geostrategic superiority, limiting China's influence and preventing its rapid progress, a strategy deeply rooted in Cold War thinking (Rafi, 2019, p. 83). Consequently, while the events of 9/11 temporarily reshaped Sino-U.S. relations, the growing American presence and influence in Asia ultimately posed a significant strategic threat to China.

This revised section aligns with the new focus of the article, highlighting both the geopolitical and governance-related concerns China faces in the context of expanding U.S. influence. The discussion also maintains the cited sources while providing clearer connections to the broader theme of China's strategic response in relation to Afghanistan.

US strategic turn in Asia and focus on controlling China - 2012

The decade of collaboration and mutual concerns between China and the United States culminated in the Barack Obama administration's strategic pivot toward Asia, initiated in 2012. This shift was primarily driven by U.S. efforts to curb China's growing influence in the region, particularly in Afghanistan, where religious and political dynamics played a crucial role in shaping governance. Militarily, the U.S. aimed to

position 60% of its naval capabilities near China by 2020 to increase pressure on Beijing, while politically, it sought to strengthen the economic power of China's regional competitors, including India and Indonesia (Smit, 2015, p. 237). This strategic pivot, articulated by President Obama in his 2012 address in Australia, became known as the "Asia Pivot." Its primary goal was to limit China's rise by altering the geopolitical and economic balance in the region, which was especially relevant given Afghanistan's growing importance in regional security and governance.

The initial phase of this strategy emphasized an explicit encirclement of China through an expanded U.S. military presence, signaling a clear intention to limit China's strategic reach. As part of this effort, the United States sought to develop distinct economic blocs to counterbalance China's influence. The broader objective was to compel China to align more closely with U.S. policies, with two key goals: transitioning China's public capitalist model into a neoliberal "private" capitalist framework similar to Indonesia, and encouraging China to adopt positions more in line with U.S. global strategies, much like Japan (Majdian, December 22, 2015).

Increase US actions in Asia to limit China

In response to growing U.S. actions in Asia aimed at containing its rise, China has become acutely aware of the imposition of strategic barriers to its growth. The United States has undertaken several initiatives, including the expansion of military installations near China's borders, efforts to dominate key energy supply routes, and political maneuvers to secure additional regional allies, all aimed at counterbalancing China's influence. This strategy has resulted in a significant U.S. military presence, with bases, missiles, bombers, and naval vessels encircling China, stretching from Australia through the Pacific and into Central Asia, including Afghanistan. As James Bradley (2016) noted in *The Sarah of China*, from Beijing, one can observe American naval forces in the Pacific, missiles in Guam pointed at China, and a concentration of U.S. weaponry in Korea targeting Beijing. Japan has also become a crucial player in this strategic confrontation between the U.S. and China (Bena, 2016).

The escalation of U.S. military influence, fueled by national interests and supported by the military-industrial complex, fits into the broader U.S. foreign policy framework, leading to a cold confrontation between the two powers in the Asia-Pacific (Araghchi, 2012, p. 39). U.S. military bases in Okinawa, Peace Island (South Korea), the Pacific, Australia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan have placed China under constant military scrutiny, with China viewing these bases as designed not to fight terrorism but to contain Chinese influence, particularly in strategic regions like Afghanistan (Rafi, 2013, p. 98). Beyond military encirclement, U.S. operations within China's economic zone pose a daily risk of potential military confrontation, further heightening China's concerns over the growing U.S. presence (Kashmiri, 2016).

The U.S. has strengthened military alliances with China's neighbors, including the Philippines and Vietnam, and increased cooperation to secure key maritime routes like the Straits of Malacca, critical for China's energy security. These moves, alongside the formation of regional security and economic pacts involving Japan, India, and Australia, reflect a broad U.S. effort to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative and maintain influence in Central Asia (Bena, 2018). The U.S. has also used various methods to destabilize China's western borders to hinder the progress of the Belt and Road Initiative, which, if successful, could shift global trade in China's favor for the next century (Kassinger, 2004, p. 215). In addition, stimulating border disputes between China and its neighbors has become another way for the U.S. to contain China and threaten its energy security.

Completion of the siege of China with the US presence in Afghanistan

In 2001, with the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Beijing immediately viewed U.S. military actions as a potential threat to its western regions, cautioning against the expansion of U.S. influence into areas critical to China's security. For Beijing, the primary concern was Afghanistan's potential to export instability to its neighboring countries, particularly those near China's sensitive western borders, such as Xinjiang (Sas Bil, 2017, pp. 24-57). Afghanistan's geographical proximity makes it a crucial gateway for China, further exacerbating Beijing's concerns about U.S. military and political influence in a region of vital importance to its long-term strategic interests.

The U.S. engagement in Afghanistan provided Washington with an opportunity to assert a more pronounced presence in a traditional sphere of influence dominated by China's geopolitical rivals,

ostensibly under the guise of fighting terrorism and promoting democracy. This move complicated the geopolitical landscape and led to increasing friction between China and the U.S. (Roshangar, 2017, pp. 170-171). Much like the Soviet Union's previous involvement in Afghanistan, U.S. intervention positioned China in a challenging and vulnerable spot, effectively encircling it with U.S. military forces (Mohanti Bysali, 2018, p. 142).

China's concerns over U.S. geopolitical ambitions in Afghanistan center on three main objectives pursued by Washington: the exploitation of Afghanistan's vast metal resources, the restriction of China's access to Central Asian oil and gas pipelines, and the establishment of bilateral alliances aimed at curtailing Chinese political influence in the region. By maintaining a strong military presence in Afghanistan, the U.S. aligns with Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski's geostrategic framework for managing Eurasia, focusing on enhanced U.S. access and influence in the heartland of Eurasia. This approach is designed not for cooperation but for containing China's rise and limiting its regional influence (Mohammad Khan, 2015, p. 87).

Increased US confrontation with China under Trump

According to the strategic framework outlined by the Trump administration and supported by American analysts, it became imperative to dismantle the anti-terrorism focus in the Middle East and redirect efforts toward countering China's growing influence, particularly in East Asia (Bena, 2019). After Trump's electoral success, the United States demonstrated a clear shift in priorities, moving away from counter-terrorism and emphasizing a strategy concentrated on China. This new approach included fostering a balance of power through stronger alliances with regional actors such as India, as well as forming broader regional coalitions designed to counterbalance and contain China's dominance. This containment strategy expanded to address various economic, political, and military dimensions across regional and global contexts (Navabi, 2010).

Chinese officials have consistently expressed growing concerns about U.S. actions and their potential impact on China's territorial integrity, particularly regarding sensitive issues like Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. These regions have been focal points of China's anxieties, with escalating tensions between the two nations, as noted by Chinese leadership (Sas Bil, 2017, p. 38). During a visit to Nepal in November 2019, the Chinese president issued a stern warning against any attempts to fragment China, indicating the deepening concern within Chinese leadership about foreign interference and U.S. actions in these regions (Bena, 2019). This reflects China's broader apprehension toward increasing U.S. geopolitical maneuvers in the region, which target China's perceived vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, the Pentagon has recognized that countering China's rise is likely to become a central objective of U.S. military strategy in the coming decades (Grossman, 2019). Trump himself expressed strong opinions on China, famously stating in 2016 that "China has invaded the United States," underscoring the adversarial posture adopted by his administration (Bena, 2019). The media, particularly in 2018 and 2019, frequently highlighted Trump's critical stance on China, including coverage of sensitive topics such as China's treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang.

In 2019, China sought to incorporate its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into a United Nations resolution to formalize economic collaboration with 123 countries and 29 international organizations. However, this effort faced opposition from the United States, reflecting a continuation of the U.S. strategy to contain China's global influence (Rahimi, 2019). As a result, the "policy of restraining China" has emerged as a pragmatic and central approach within U.S. strategic thinking.

Changing China's Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan

In response to U.S. actions in Asia, particularly Afghanistan, it is essential to analyze China's evolving strategic approach to the region. Since the events of September 11, 2001, and particularly from 2011 onwards, Afghanistan's role as a key security partner for China has become increasingly apparent. Afghanistan, with its religiously influenced governance and geopolitical significance, now plays a crucial part in China's broader regional strategy. The Deputy Foreign Minister of China highlighted that "China occupies a distinctive role in its foreign policy," reflecting China's intent to establish a closer partnership with Afghanistan. This shift was further cemented during a meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, marking a new phase in Sino-Afghan relations characterized by mutual cooperation and growth (Mohammad Khan, 2017, p. 88).

China's Opportunistic Agreement with U.S. Presence in Afghanistan (2001–2011)

Following the 9/11 attacks, China initially aligned itself with the United States, enhancing its diplomatic efforts concerning Afghanistan. The presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan offered China a strategic opportunity to combat terrorism while safeguarding its western borders, including the Xinjiang region, which has been a source of religious and political tension. Despite China's cooperation with the U.S., Beijing harbored concerns about American military presence and its long-term geopolitical implications. For instance, despite multiple U.S. proposals to use the Wakhan corridor as a northern distribution network, China refrained from offering a definitive response, reflecting its desire to maintain a degree of separation from U.S. influence (Suzlik Tatar, 2017, p. 135).

Over the first decade of the global counter-terrorism campaign, China cautiously engaged with Afghanistan through economic investments and political support. However, from 2011 onwards, China's involvement intensified. In that year, China secured a contract for oil extraction in the Amu Darya basin, signaling a deeper economic commitment. Moreover, China began increasing its political engagements in Afghanistan, fostering relations with the Taliban and participating in multilateral discussions with the Afghan government (Sirate, 2011; Azimi, 2019).

Signing of the China-Afghanistan Strategic Memorandum and New Bilateral Relations (2012)

In 2012, the signing of the China-Afghanistan Strategic Memorandum marked a pivotal moment in the bilateral relationship, opening new opportunities for cooperation. Both nations agreed to enhance collaboration on international security challenges, particularly those affecting China's security interests in the region. Afghanistan's support for China on sensitive issues, such as the situation in Xinjiang, reflects a growing alignment between the two nations. Afghanistan endorsed China's stance against the "Three Evil Forces"—terrorism, extremism, and separatism—demonstrating its commitment to strengthening security ties with Beijing (Vishnik, 2017, p. 61).

This agreement, formalized during a visit by the Chinese intelligence chief, signaled China's increasing influence in Afghanistan, particularly as NATO began its withdrawal. The memorandum also paved the way for formalizing Sino-Afghan strategic relations (Aziz, 2018, p. 90). Following the memorandum, Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to Shanghai in 2012 solidified this growing partnership through further discussions with Chinese President Hu Jintao (Aziz, 2018, p. 110).

Increasing China's Focus on Afghanistan (2013)

China's commitment to Afghanistan's stability became even clearer in 2013 when President Hu Jintao underscored the need for China to independently manage its influence in the region, free from external disruptions. He emphasized the importance of China's involvement in Afghanistan's reconstruction efforts, aimed at fostering long-term peace in the country (Mohammad Khan, 2017, p. 87). During a four-day visit to China in September 2013, Afghan President Hamid Karzai formalized three significant agreements with China, further deepening bilateral ties (Khalil Ahmad, 2017, p. 131).

China's increasing engagement with Afghanistan is part of a broader regional strategy. China has initiated bilateral discussions with key regional actors, such as Russia and Pakistan, while engaging with major global players, including the United States and India. Additionally, China has participated in international forums on Afghanistan in cities such as Moscow and Istanbul, alongside trilateral discussions involving Afghanistan, Russia, and Pakistan. China has also advocated for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to play a leading role in addressing Afghanistan's security challenges, including combating terrorism and drug trafficking (Vishnik, 2017, p. 61).

2014: China's Independent Entry into Afghanistan

In 2014, following Barack Obama's strategy for U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, China began its independent and more assertive engagement in the region. This marked a significant shift in China's foreign policy, as Beijing sought to establish itself as a key player in Afghanistan's future. China's dispatch of special envoys to Afghanistan, along with its involvement in peace negotiations, particularly with the Taliban, highlighted Beijing's new approach. This initiative, beginning with the appointment of a special envoy, produced positive outcomes during informal peace discussions between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government in Urumqi in May 2015 (Chenna, 2018, p. 54). The establishment of a Special Representative for Afghanistan underscored China's increased focus on Afghanistan's strategic

significance post-U.S. withdrawal.

Changing China's Political and Military Stance on Afghanistan After 2014

Since 2014, China has transformed its political and military posture toward Afghanistan, reflecting a shift in its multilateral strategy. China's increasing involvement spans political, security, economic, and military domains, signaling a strategic pivot to dominate regional affairs. Officially, China asserts that its collaboration with the Afghan military is limited to counter-terrorism and combating organized crime, yet this represents a substantial shift from its earlier hands-off approach (Azimi, 2019). The implementation of a strategy of "offensive attractiveness" (Suzlik Tatar, 2017, p. 138) illustrates China's new proactive role, including participation in Afghan peace negotiations, strengthening ties with the Taliban, and providing military aid to the Afghan government.

China's independent actions have brought Afghanistan into its broader development agenda, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). During multilateral peace discussions in Moscow, where India was notably excluded, China played a leading role in mediating with the Taliban while reinforcing its relationship with the Afghan government (Mohanti Bysali, 2018, p. 150). Moreover, China's increased military involvement, including intelligence support and the establishment of a military base in Wakhan, signifies an escalation of its military engagement in the region. A Pentagon report from June 2017 indicated that China allocated \$85 million to establish an Afghan army battalion in northeastern Badakhshan province to strengthen border security and safeguard its regional economic interests (Grove and Nelson, 2019).

China's Big Steps in Afghanistan

China's growing role in Afghanistan is part of a broader strategy to increase its geopolitical and geo-economic influence in the region. This includes establishing regional alliances such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's focus on Afghanistan, the Pamir Alliance involving China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and the China Counter-Terrorism Alliance with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. China's strategy is not limited to bilateral relations; it extends to trilateral and multilateral frameworks like the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Memorandum of Understanding and the China-India-Afghanistan trilateral cooperation. These frameworks focus on economic development and counter-terrorism, positioning Afghanistan as a central player in China's regional strategy (Derkley, 2018, p. 25).

In recent years, Afghanistan has also emerged as a critical component of China's energy strategy. For instance, China proposed a pipeline connecting Turkmenistan to China via Afghanistan, signaling a shift toward leveraging Afghanistan for energy security. Concurrently, China's investment in the Amu Darya oil field underscores its long-term commitment to economic and security cooperation with Afghanistan. Another major initiative involves the construction of a supply route linking Gwadar Port to Xinjiang through Afghanistan, aimed at reducing China's dependency on the Tanga Malacca route, controlled by the U.S. Navy (Muzalvesky, 2010). This project forms part of the Belt and Road Initiative, through which China plans to integrate Afghanistan into its regional corridors, thereby restoring the historical significance of the Silk Road (Sing, 2019).

China's development of new roadways connecting Balochistan to Kandahar further highlights Beijing's ambition to enhance connectivity between Central Asia and East Asia (Aziz, 2018, p. 95). These developments, alongside China's military and economic investments, indicate a significant shift in Beijing's foreign policy toward Afghanistan, reflecting a broader strategy to counterbalance U.S. influence in the region (Suzlik Tatar, 2017, p. 140). As a result, Afghanistan plays a growing role in China's strategic calculations, solidifying its position in Beijing's vision for regional dominance.

China's Concerns About Expanding U.S. Influence in Asia and Changes in Its Foreign Policy Toward Afghanistan (2011-2019)

China's foreign policy toward Afghanistan from 2011 onward has been heavily influenced by the increasing U.S. presence in Asia and its strategic actions in Afghanistan. The rise of U.S. influence in the region—following its military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia—has played a crucial role in shaping China's geopolitical stance. The encirclement of China, combined with U.S. control over key energy routes and interests, has forced China to reassess its approach. China's goal has been to find a way to balance or counter American power in Asia without direct confrontation. Afghanistan, located at

a strategic crossroads, has emerged as a vital platform for China's reactions and geopolitical ambitions, allowing it to engage effectively in this "game" of influence in Asia.

September 11 and China's Agreement with the U.S. Presence in Afghanistan

The aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent global war on terrorism, led by the United States and NATO, placed China in a complex position. While NATO's expansion into Central Asia raised concerns, China found itself aligning with U.S. counterterrorism efforts, although with reservations. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan and its implications for Central Asia were perceived as a threat to China's western borders, particularly Xinjiang. Despite these concerns, China pursued economic investments in Afghanistan while maintaining diplomatic relations with the Taliban. China was careful not to openly oppose U.S. anti-terrorism initiatives but instead focused on securing its own interests (Nandy, 2024). From 2001 to 2011, China cultivated strategic relations in Afghanistan while watching U.S. actions cautiously, understanding the long-term implications for its regional strategy.

U.S. Strategic Pivot in Asia and China-Afghanistan Strategic Memorandum

The U.S. "Pivot to Asia" under the Obama administration in 2012 marked a turning point in U.S.-China relations, particularly in Afghanistan. The shift in U.S. focus away from the Middle East and toward Asia to contain China's rise prompted Beijing to formalize a strategic partnership with Afghanistan. This move effectively ended the cooperative framework between China and the United States in Afghanistan, as China sought to manage the region autonomously (Mohammad Khan, 2017, p. 87). By signing the China-Afghanistan Strategic Memorandum in 2012, China committed to deepening political and security ties with Afghanistan, underscoring its intent to counterbalance increasing U.S. influence in the region.

Increased U.S. Actions in Asia and China's Focus on Afghanistan

The implementation of the U.S. pivot to Asia in 2012 triggered heightened military activities in the region, including expanded joint exercises and alliances with China's neighbors. This strategic shift pushed China to increase its focus on Afghanistan as a critical element in its regional strategy. Afghanistan became a focal point for China's broader ambitions in Central and South Asia, where Beijing sought to create a regional balance centered around Afghanistan to mitigate U.S. influence. China viewed Afghanistan as essential for securing its future energy needs and regional influence, particularly in light of U.S.-India partnerships that shared similar goals in Southeast Asia (Mohammad Khan, 2017, p. 101). Afghanistan also became a critical platform for China to address the growing influence of the U.S. in Central Asia and its broader "containment" strategy.

U.S.-China Confrontation and China's Changing Stance After 2014

With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the U.S. adopted a more confrontational stance toward China, reshaping its military and political strategies in Asia (Navabi, 2010). The Trump administration's reduction of commitments in Afghanistan, combined with its pivot toward focusing on China as a key threat, forced Beijing to reassess its involvement in Afghanistan. After 2014, China modified its political and military strategies in response to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, implementing what has been termed "aggressive attractions" to secure alliances and counterbalance U.S. policies (Mohanti Bysali, 2018, p. 150). This shift allowed China to increase its presence in Afghanistan while maintaining minimal financial or military burdens.

U.S. National Security Strategy 2017 and China's Major Steps in Afghanistan

In 2017, Trump's administration declared China as the principal threat to U.S. national security (Grossman, 2019). As a result, U.S. strategists advocated for disengaging from Afghanistan and redirecting focus toward East Asia and China. This U.S. withdrawal further heightened Afghanistan's significance for China. In response, Beijing made substantial advances in Afghanistan, recognizing the strategic value of the country for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and broader energy programs. China's efforts to establish regional alliances centered around Afghanistan, including its collaboration with Pakistan and Central Asian countries, have increased (Nandy, 2014).

China's major steps in Afghanistan include regional alliances, expanded geopolitical influence, and economic integration through the BRI. These initiatives highlight China's ambitions to stabilize

Afghanistan and integrate it into its broader strategic vision for Eurasia (Mohanti Bysali, 2018, p. 147). China views a secure Afghanistan as essential for linking Eurasia to its economic corridors and minimizing U.S. influence in Asia. By promoting stability in Afghanistan, China aims to access vital energy resources and secure trade routes that would enhance its geopolitical standing (Aziz, 2018, p. 97).

CONCLUSION

The transition in U.S. strategic priorities toward Asia during the Obama, Trump, and early Biden administrations has heightened U.S. military engagement and strengthened alliances aimed at countering China's influence in the region. In response, China has recalibrated its foreign policy toward Afghanistan, particularly from 2011 to 2019, by pursuing independent political, economic, and military initiatives, including the China-Afghanistan Strategic Agreement. This has positioned Afghanistan as a critical arena in the strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China. Afghanistan's central geopolitical location has increased its importance for China's Belt and Road Initiative and broader regional ambitions. As China aims to counterbalance the U.S. presence in Asia, Afghanistan has become a key battleground for influence, allowing Beijing to extend its political, economic, and military reach from Western China to Central and South Asia. This study concludes that China's apprehension about the growing U.S. influence in Asia has directly influenced its policy shift towards deeper involvement in Afghanistan. For Afghanistan to capitalize on this, it must recalibrate its foreign policy to adapt to the evolving dynamics of this strategic competition.

Additionally, the evolving geopolitical dynamics between China, the United States, and Afghanistan carry significant religious dimensions, given Afghanistan's deeply rooted Islamic identity. China's foreign policy in Afghanistan must navigate the complex intersection of religion, governance, and security. Afghanistan's political landscape is heavily influenced by religious actors, particularly the Taliban, whose Islamic ideology shapes governance and policies. China's engagement with religiously motivated groups like the Taliban reflects a pragmatic approach. Despite its secular Communist governance, China recognizes the necessity of engaging with Afghanistan's religiously influenced actors to achieve stability and secure its broader strategic objectives, such as safeguarding the Belt and Road Initiative and ensuring regional security. Furthermore, China's internal religious concerns, particularly in Xinjiang, where the Muslim Uighur population presents a domestic challenge, further motivate its foreign policy. Balancing secular governance with Afghanistan's religious realities is crucial to China's broader geopolitical strategy in Asia.

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