

CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA AND ITS IMPACT ON AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the contemporary India-China competition and its deeper meaning for Afghanistan, a nation whose geographical position between Central and South Asia puts it in the middle of this geostrategic competition. Although the world knows everything about Indian and Chinese border conflicts and business rivalry, not many are aware of how this competition goes beyond strictly bilateral animosity and shapes regional stability, especially post-2021 Afghanistan, after the American troops' exit.

The void left by the American withdrawal has forced India and China to reassess their strategies towards Afghanistan. India, previously heavily invested in Afghan development and reconstruction through investment in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, now has its activities curbed under the Taliban. On the contrary, China has taken a pragmatic and security-focused approach, negotiating with the Taliban to secure its interests, specifically to contain instability from spilling over into its vulnerable Xinjiang province. China also sees Afghanistan's vast mineral wealth as a profitable economic prospect.

Employing concepts from international relations theory, the paper discusses the strategic interests leading both India and China in Afghanistan. It examines how their policies influence Afghanistan's weak political system, wounded economy, and persistent security challenges. Additionally, the research accounts for the involvement of global and regional players, i.e., the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Russia, and the United States, in either minimizing or maximizing this strategic confrontation.

In the end, the paper emphasizes how India-China competition frustrates Afghanistan's quest for durable peace and development, but also presents avenues for cooperation. It maintains that regional peace is contingent on whether India and China are able to move beyond their competition and pursue cooperative approaches in security, economic interaction, and political discourse. Through a transition from competition to coordination, the two countries would be able to meaningfully advance Afghanistan's reconstruction and provide wider peace and prosperity throughout the region.

Keywords: India-China competition, Afghanistan, Belt and Road Initiative, Regional security, international relations, realism, diplomacy, economic development, Taliban, Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The competition between India and China has also grown fierce in recent years. They've fought their fair share of border battles, are cutthroat competitors in business, and both keep trying to outmaneuver the other politically. Though most

know about the recent tensions in the Ladakh region, this competition stretches far beyond that point. Afghanistan, which is sandwiched between South and Central Asia, has become a key battleground for the interests of both countries,

frequently resulting in conflicts. [Panda, Ankit. "Understanding the Doklam Standoff." *The Diplomat*, 2017.]

India has had a close relationship with Afghanistan for a very long time, supporting infrastructure such as roads and schools and offering security assistance. [Pant, Harsh V. "India in Afghanistan: A test case for a rising power." *Contemporary South Asia*, 2010.] India's motive is to have Afghanistan prosper in peace and stability and inhibit the power of terrorist groups in the region. China, however, looks at Afghanistan differently. It considers Afghanistan a crucial part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative aimed at boosting trade and infrastructure links across several countries. China is also worried about the security threats that may spill over from Afghanistan to its own Xinjiang province. The scene changed drastically in 2021 as the United States pulled out its soldiers from Afghanistan, giving the Taliban their reign back.

This was a major shift that changed the country's political and security landscape. China has ever since demonstrated a desire to deal with the Taliban, perceiving it as a way to protect its interests in the region. For example, China is interested in securing the borders of the country, especially against probable threats from extremist elements in Xinjiang. In addition, it is keen to venture into investment possibilities within Afghanistan's vast mineral wealth and construct infrastructure such as roads. Conversely, India has experienced significant hardships in ensuring its influence in Afghanistan after the Taliban took power. Most of India's past efforts to construct schools, hospitals, and roads have suffered greatly.

Research Questions:

1. What are the international relations concepts that best account for why India and China behave as they do in Afghanistan?

This question considers alternative approaches to explaining India and China's behavior. Realism maintains that states behave primarily to safeguard their power and security. (Morgenthau, 1948) Liberalism maintains that states also interact through trade and institutions. Constructivism argues that ideas, identity, and history count quite a bit as well, such as how China is concerned about its Xinjiang province,

or how India considers itself a democratic nation backing Afghan civil society. That explains why India and China act the way they do and what may come next (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

2. India and China balance their competition in Afghanistan with their wider regional and global goals, how?

India and China are two large neighbors with significant plans beyond Afghanistan alone. They both desire to be strong players, not just in their local corner but globally as well. Though they vie for one another in Afghanistan, they have greater ambitions that inform how they behave (Garver, 2001). To India, Afghanistan is significant as it wishes to maintain its presence in South Asia and prevent Pakistan, its arch-nemesis, from becoming too powerful. India wishes for Afghanistan to be stable and democratic because it makes the entire region secure for India. China, however, is mostly concerned with Afghanistan due to its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a gigantic project to link a lot of countries with trade and infrastructure (Rolland, 2017). Afghanistan is located on some of these trade routes, so China wants it to be stable for economic purposes. China is also concerned with security issues emerging from Afghanistan, particularly attacks on its Xinjiang region. Since both of them have such large plans, they attempt to balance competing against each other and remaining peaceful. They wish to advance their agendas, but without making things worse with themselves.

As an example, they could abstain from direct conflicts in Afghanistan even while attempting to exert influence there via investments, diplomacy, or security coordination. This judicious balancing indicates that India and China desire to preserve what they care about without compromising their larger regional and global interests (Garver, John 2001)

3. How has the rise of the Taliban to power transformed the strategic equation of India and China in Afghanistan?

When the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in 2021, it altered how India and China approach and think about the country. India had been backing the erstwhile Afghan government and had been contributing to the establishment of a stable and democratic

Afghanistan (Garver, 2001). The return of the Taliban makes India nervous because the Taliban has ties to Pakistan, India's competitor, and that could result in further security challenges. Due to this, India has had to re-strategize. Rather than openly endorsing the government, India has been more calculated. It attempts to maintain its influence by providing humanitarian assistance and quietly cooperating with other surrounding nations, but it does not formally recognize the Taliban government (Zhao, 2021). China has a different perspective. It is concerned about the security risks emanating from Afghanistan, but also perceives an opportunity to collaborate with the Taliban in securing its interests. China wishes that Afghanistan stabilizes so that it can continue its economic ventures, particularly those concerning the Belt and Road Initiative.

China has been more forthcoming in discussing and cooperating with the Taliban, providing assistance and attempting to ensure Afghanistan will not be a haven for groups that pose threats to China. The return of the Taliban has put China on its diplomatic toes, while India is taking its time to cope with the reality. Therefore, the return of the Taliban made both nations shift their plans and approach towards Afghanistan. (Article: "India's Afghanistan Policy After Taliban Takeover")

4. In what ways do India and China apply diplomatic, economic, and security tools differently to promote their interests in Afghanistan?

India and China apply different strategies to get what they desire in Afghanistan, depending on what is most important to them. Diplomatically, India has developed close ties with the Afghan government by endorsing democratic processes and through embassies and aid projects. India also collaborates with other nations such as the U.S., Iran, and Central Asian states to promote the stability of Afghanistan and to counterbalance China and Pakistan's influence.

China's diplomatic approach is softer and more pragmatic:

China emphasizes negotiating with the Taliban and with local allies such as Pakistan and Russia. China's primary objective is to maintain Afghanistan as stable and open for business, instead of being concerned about the political

setup. Economically, India spends a great deal on projects such as constructing roads, schools, and hospitals. This generates employment and goodwill and facilitates India's position in Afghanistan in the long run. These projects also enable India to tie up with Central Asia and beyond. China's investments are larger and connected to its Belt and Road Initiative.

China is interested in mining, energy, and transport ventures that fall into its vision to construct regional trade networks. China views economic investments as a means to acquire strategic advantages and long-term access to significant resources and corridors. On defense, India has given training and assistance to Afghan security forces to make them more robust against extremist movements. India attempts to stay away from direct military intervention but closely cooperates with the West in counter-terrorism measures. China, however, is more concerned with defending its borders and preventing threats from spilling over into its territory. China cooperates with other nations and operates through regional security organizations, rather than engaging directly in military endeavors to keep Afghanistan stable.

Theoretical Framework:

Realism: Understanding India and China's Involvement in Afghanistan from a Realist View

Realism is a method for explaining how nations behave in the world. Realism states that each nation is primarily concerned with taking care of itself. Since there is no one power to protect all nations, they attempt to become powerful and take care of their interests. Nations do not completely believe in other nations, so they compete to increase power and security. Hans Morgenthau. When we examine India and China's interest in Afghanistan through this perspective, it makes it easier to understand why they act as they behavior. Afghanistan is a highly significant nation due to its geographical location between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The fate of Afghanistan is very significant to both India and China because it plays a critical role in their security and influence in the region. India's Strategy: Securing Borders and Halting Competitors

India's activities in Afghanistan perfectly match this realist line of thinking. India is highly concerned about militant groups, and many of

those are backed by Pakistan. Because India and Pakistan have a strained relationship, India views Afghanistan as a prime location to prevent such militant groups from becoming powerful closer to its borders. India has invested money in constructing roads, schools, and hospitals in Afghanistan. It also assists the Afghan government to assist in creating a friendly and stable environment. That is India's attempt at curtailing Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and safeguarding its borders.

India, meanwhile, desires to decelerate China's increasing might. China is growing stronger in Asia, and India regards this as a threat. Afghanistan is significant because if China becomes stronger there, it would be able to command vital trade routes and alliances. India desires to maintain its influence in Afghanistan to ensure China does not become too powerful. India's primary objective is security – it is more concerned with safeguarding itself than with other issues like whether Afghanistan is well and truly democratic or clean from corruption. The priority for India is to keep its nation secure and to counterbalance China.

China's Strategy: Developing Economically and Securing Borders

China's approach to Afghanistan is also a matter of defending itself and taking control, but it appears slightly different from India's. China's largest interest in Afghanistan results from its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). That is China's grand scheme to tie itself to many nations via the construction of roads, rails, and pipelines. Afghanistan is significant because it sits in a strategic location. China seeks to make its economy bigger by investing in the roads and mines of Afghanistan, where it can extract valuable minerals. Such minerals, for example, rare earth elements, are extremely crucial for various industries globally. By investing in such projects, China wishes to grow richer and more powerful in the region.

China also has security concerns. It is concerned about extremist elements in Afghanistan who may lend support to extremism in its own Xinjiang province, where Uyghurs reside in large numbers. China wishes to keep Afghanistan stable so these extremist threats don't spill over into its own country. Therefore, China's primary objectives are to ensure its borders and develop

its economic influence. It will cooperate with the Taliban administration in Afghanistan because it concerns itself with pragmatic collaboration, not ideology. This keeps China engaged in Afghanistan regardless of whoever is politically in control.

Despite having different priorities and means, India and China have similar fundamental ends from a realist point of view. They aim to augment their power, exert greater influence, and secure their nations. Both consider Afghanistan a vital piece of the greater regional power puzzle. India wishes to secure the border, end Pakistan-backed militants, and restrict China's influence. China wishes to link Afghanistan to its grand economic schemes and end threats from crossing its borders. Both realize that whoever has greater influence in Afghanistan will have a better place in regional politics.

Why India and China Don't Fully Trust Each Other?

The realist perspective also accounts for why India and China don't cooperate readily in Afghanistan. Because they are vying for influence, they don't trust each other's motives. India distrusts China's proximity to Pakistan and the Taliban. It fears that China's increasing power will damage India's interests. China, on the other hand, views India's backing of forces against the Taliban as a means of restraining China's influence. Such a mutual distrust continues to ensure the competition remains robust, and peace and collaboration are more difficult to come

by.
https://southasia.com.pk/2024/08/29/tryst-with-the-taliban/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

How does This Rivalry affect Afghanistan?

India and China's rivalry affects Afghanistan in a lot of practical ways: India's construction projects in Afghanistan were attacked at times because certain groups do not welcome India's presence. China's investment in mines and infrastructure provides Afghanistan with new possibilities, but also brings up the issue of who owns the country's resources. Both nations collect intelligence and collaborate with various Afghan factions to advance their interests, which at times raises tensions or results in short-term alliances. Due to this, Afghanistan is a venue where larger powers clash over dominance, which can further

destabilize the country's already precarious situation.

The Influence of India-China Competition on Afghanistan: An In-Depth Overview:

Political Influence:

India-China competition has profoundly impacted Afghanistan's political landscape in ways that are intricate and widespread. For many decades, India and China have had profoundly different policies towards Afghanistan, guided by their distinct strategic interests and historical backgrounds. India's involvement in Afghanistan dates back to the 1990s, when it backed the Northern Alliance – an alliance of Afghan factions against the Taliban regime. India's assistance was not merely military or political but also extensive humanitarian and developmental assistance. India viewed Afghanistan as a key ally in preserving regional stability and fighting terrorism, to keep Pakistan-backed forces at bay, as Pakistan has been a traditional rival and an ally of the Taliban. India's vision for Afghanistan was a stable, democratic, and friendly nation that would serve as a buffer against extremism and hostile forces in South Asia. China took a more pragmatic and less dynamic approach.

For most of the last twenty years, China maintained a low profile in Afghanistan's political chaos. Rather than supporting one faction or another, China concentrated on defending its security interests, particularly those related to the Xinjiang province, from where it fears Uyghur separatists. Since the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the quick resurgence of the Taliban regime, China has become more openly involved with the leadership of the Taliban. China realized that cooperating with the Taliban was indispensable if it was to defend its security and economic interests, and it wanted to open diplomatic relations with the new government. This difference in approach has borne heavy costs. The influence of India in Afghanistan has tumbled dramatically since the Taliban seized power.

India shut down its embassy in Kabul and retreated from its development programs due to security concerns. Conversely, China's diplomatic leeway has enabled it to move into a more central position, securing influence in negotiations with the Taliban and positioning itself as a major player in Afghanistan's future.

This realignment of influence is politically significant because the Taliban regime, still fighting for international legitimacy, needs to juggle competing pressures from India, China, Pakistan, and other regional players. For Afghanistan, it implies that its political environment is more complex than before. Taliban rule is precarious, and the government has great pressure upon it to uphold legitimacy as it tries to avoid the conflicting agendas of outside powers. India's absence could push voices that spoke up for democracy and inclusivity to the periphery, while China's endorsement of the Taliban may inspire hardline forces and lower incentives for political moderation. Afghanistan's internal fault lines – ethnic, ideological, and regional – could deepen under these circumstances and make political reconciliation and peace more difficult to attain.

Economic Impact:

The economic competition between India and China has reshaped Afghanistan's path of development, and in many instances, with destabilizing effects on common Afghans. India has been one of Afghanistan's largest donors and development partners over the past two decades. Indian-funded projects, which amount to over \$3 billion, have included building vital infrastructure such as roads, power plants, schools, and hospitals. These investments were aimed at fostering goodwill and helping Afghanistan build a stable foundation for economic growth. India's involvement in Afghanistan was also about establishing long-term connections – by assisting in the development of Afghanistan's economy, India intended to establish a relationship that would enhance regional security and balance out Pakistan's influence.

But the Taliban's return in 2021 cut short most of these initiatives. The security situation prompted Indian workers and contractors to leave, and numerous development projects have been halted or abandoned. India's smaller presence has diminished its economic clout in Afghanistan, reducing its capacity to determine political evolution through soft power and foreign aid.

China's economic strategy is more centered on Afghanistan's mineral resources and infrastructure potential. Afghanistan is endowed

with vast amounts of untapped natural resources, such as rare earth minerals, lithium, copper, and iron ore – minerals that are pivotal to high-tech industries across the globe. China has shown keen interest in extracting these minerals under its overarching Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to establish a vast web of trade corridors and infrastructure stretching from China through Central Asia and the Middle East to Europe.

Chinese businesses have also made preliminary deals with the Taliban regime and associated groups to study mining prospects and construct infrastructure projects like roads and railroads. Although these transactions are at a preliminary stage and encounter numerous obstacles, they demonstrate China's desire to be the leading economic force in Afghanistan.

The increasing Chinese presence has implications for Afghanistan's economic future. It may, on the one hand, introduce desperately needed investment, employment, and infrastructure development into a nation in dire need of these. It may, on the other hand, expose Afghanistan to becoming economically beholden to Beijing, which lessens Afghanistan's capacity for independent policy or diversifying alliances. The diminished role of India results in the economic equation within Afghanistan tilting toward China, possibly intensifying geopolitical rivalry and affecting Afghanistan's sovereignty.

In addition, economic competition between China and India also affects regional connectivity projects. As an instance, India has been keen to link Afghanistan to the sea via Iran's Chabahar port, opening up trade routes that do not go through Pakistan. By contrast, China's BRI investment prefers routes via Pakistan (such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor). These rival projects demonstrate greater strategic agendas and affect Afghanistan's economic direction and regional integration.

Security Impact:

Security Impact One of the most sensitive and demanding aspects impacted by India-China competition in Afghanistan is security. Both nations are seriously concerned with the possibility of Afghanistan being used as a base by extremist groups and violent movements that would spill over into their domains. India looks askance at China's increasing reach in Afghanistan, particularly since China is so close

to Pakistan – India's arch-nemesis – and is dealing directly with the Taliban. India is concerned that militant groups based in Afghanistan would attack Indian-held Kashmir and beyond, fueling an already charged and bloody conflict in the region. India's security issues are also entwined with the larger issue of Islamic terrorism and extremism, which it sees as backed indirectly by Pakistan from proxies. China is primarily concerned with stemming the flow of extremist violence into its far-western Xinjiang province, where it has continuing conflicts involving Uyghur separatists and Islamist militants. Afghanistan, with its open borders and insecure security situation, directly threatens China if extremist elements establish a foothold there.

In response, China has stepped up intelligence exchange and participated in regional security mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to collaborate on counterterrorism. Both nations have limited but important security engagement with Afghan groups. India has long assisted Afghan security forces and offered training and aid against terrorism, but this contribution has been reduced following the Taliban coup. China, although shunning direct military intervention, has attempted to establish contact with the Taliban and support stability through diplomatic efforts and sharing intelligence. This fine balance between cooperation and competition in security generates a volatile situation. Any miscalculation or escalation would unleash proxy wars or exacerbate militant activities in Afghanistan and the region. It also complicates global efforts at counterterrorism, as the distrust between India and China complicates cooperation.

Social and Humanitarian Impact:

Apart from politics, economics, and security, the India-China competition has had deep repercussions for the daily lives of Afghan civilians. The conflict and geopolitical rivalry have exacerbated an already desolate humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. The 2021 Taliban takeover was preceded by economic meltdown, sanctions, and disruption of foreign aid. India's diminished presence and China's reluctant engagement have left international humanitarian assistance sparse and uneven. This has exacerbated poverty, food scarcity,

displacement, and denial of access to health and education. The people of Afghanistan are in the middle of this game of geopolitics. The rivalry between China and India does not translate into concrete improvements for the majority of Afghans. Rather, economic instability and political uncertainty have pushed millions into poverty. Food insecurity is prevalent, particularly in rural areas, and numerous families are at risk of starvation or forced migration.

Healthcare facilities are unable to meet increased demand, and schools, particularly girls' schools, are threatened with closures or restrictions under the Taliban. While India's efforts at humanitarian aid and China's are not absent, they are restricted by political limitations and security considerations. India has dispatched humanitarian aid without formally recognizing the Taliban regime. China has some aid and medical equipment, but is not eager to become deeply involved under international scrutiny.

The consequence is that Afghan civilians bear the brunt of this competition, with competing political agendas overshadowing acute humanitarian requirements. The weak recovery process is undermined by inadequate international coordination and sustained competition for influence between India, China, and other regional players.

International Response:

The response of the international community towards the India-China competition in Afghanistan has been diverse but mostly subdued. The United States, even with its military withdrawal, remains vigilant about Chinese expansion into and India's diplomatic moves across the region. Russia, as a central SCO member state, aims to balance relations with both powers and ensure humanitarian influence in Central Asia. Multilateral organizations such as the United Nations have made appeals for inclusive control and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan and asked regional powers to collaborate. Regional nations, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian republics, are also adjusting their policies, looking to gain from or avoid the brunt of the increasing India-China rivalry. This tangled regional network makes it difficult to stabilize Afghanistan and underscores the necessity of united international diplomacy.

Conclusion:

The long-standing conflict and competition between India and China play a large role in Afghanistan's tenuous political environment, its attempts at rebuilding the economy, and the general security of the country. India and China each have national ambitions and regional aspirations, and they engage with Afghanistan in rather dissimilar fashion. India typically emphasizes assisting in the creation of democratic institutions, supporting project development, and financing groups that align with its vision of regional stability.

China, however, prioritizes a pragmatic approach through heavy investment in Afghanistan's economy as well as prioritizing security issues, particularly to secure its western borders. Too often, Afghanistan finds itself in the middle of this game of power, threatening the country's independence and long-term peace. For Afghanistan to be able to enjoy enduring peace and actual development, India and China must rework their rivalry and attempt to collaborate more. It's not about giving in to what they desire in the region, but discovering methods through which they can cooperate that will assist Afghanistan and the region. Regional and international bodies can facilitate this by creating impartial venues for negotiations and cooperation.

Organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the United Nations, and other regional organizations may assist in getting India and China on board to establish trust and coordinate actions. Their collaboration should concentrate on several key items. To start with, they must cooperate to counter terrorism. Both India and China wish to prevent extremist organizations from having Afghanistan as a haven to strike elsewhere. Through information sharing, border security coordination, and joint training, they might be able to better secure the area against terrorist attacks. Cooperating on this would be more productive than if they were to do it alone and maybe end up worsening the situation.

Second, they ought to collaborate in Afghanistan's economic development. Afghanistan is rich in natural resources and strategically located to link various regions of Asia. India and China could collaborate in developing roads, power generation, and

communication infrastructure to enable Afghanistan to trade with neighboring countries and develop its economy. This would generate employment and enhance people's livelihoods, which is crucial to prevent youths from becoming part of extremist forces. Third, both India and China need to support the political process in Afghanistan in a manner that involves all and respects the independence of the nation. It is crucial that political parties, civil society, and all ethnic groups are heard. Inclusive government of this sort assists in establishing trust and preventing divisions from being exacerbated. India and China must not support one another and instead work towards assisting Afghanistan towards peace and unity. If India and China keep competing in this way without collaboration, things could get pretty bad. Their competition could destabilize Afghanistan by promoting extremist groups, more political conflicts, and slower economic recovery. This destabilization wouldn't remain within Afghanistan—it would spill into surrounding countries and produce more problems. Due to Afghanistan's strategic location, continued anarchy there would impact global trade routes, lead to further migration, and undermine international efforts at maintaining peace. In summary, though India and China have rival interests in Afghanistan, it is necessary and important that they collaborate for the country's future and peace in the region. By establishing trust, converging interests, and collaboration through international bodies, Afghanistan can transition from a conflict zone to an opportunity

and stability zone. The international community must promote this collaboration and assist Afghanistan in resolving its problems so that it can develop into a peaceful and successful nation in the middle of Asia."

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