

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

China's and India's Realpolitik Relations with the Taliban Regime

By Vanda Felbab-Brown

Though the first year of the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has been characterized by a return to authoritarianism, a tanking economy and worsened relations with the West, two countries—China and India—have made the effort to position themselves closer to the new ruling regime. For China, this is a continuation of a long-standing policy that has seen relations steadily improve; for India, it is a surprising about-face. Both countries' engagement with the Taliban is principally driven by counterterrorism considerations, with much less focus on human rights and political pluralism than the West has emphasized. But even this realpolitik

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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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cont'd p2

approach is likely to generate only limited payoffs from the Taliban, even on counterterrorism issues.

China

Since 2001, China's policy in Afghanistan has **progressed** from a non-engagement "**observer**" policy (2002-2010), to an economics-centered agenda (2011-2017), to a security dominated agenda (post-2018). The security agenda has remained dominant even after the Taliban regained power in August 2021.

China's regional security agenda has focused on eliminating Uighur militancy and mobilisation in Xinjiang and preventing the flow of any external support to Uighur militants, such as from Afghanistan. This goal, coupled with the **struggles** faced by the anti-Taliban counterinsurgency, encouraged China to develop **strong relations with the Taliban** well before they returned to power—to the dismay of the Afghan government that had fervently hoped that Beijing would pressure **Pakistan to sever its relations with the Taliban**. While China preferred a stable Afghan government not dominated by the Taliban, it assessed that there was a substantial likelihood that the **Taliban would return to power** in some form, and therefore hedged its bets.

Equally disappointing to the Afghan government, China's economic investments in the country remained far below what the

administration of President Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021) had hoped. In 2016, China and Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that promised to fund \$100 million worth of projects in the country. However, **no concrete BRI investments have materialised** and Chinese resource extractions have remained minimal. In May 2008, the Chinese Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC)/Jiangxi Copper Company Limited (JCL) consortium won a thirty-year \$3.4 billion lease for the second-largest copper mine in the world—Mes Aynak in the Logar province of Afghanistan. But since winning the bid, the copper production has been minimal to nonexistent.

In theory, Afghanistan sits on some \$1 trillion worth of minerals, rare metals, oil, gas, precious stones, and other extractable resources. But developing them and bringing income to one of the world's most impoverished countries has been hampered by persistent instability and conflict, out-of-control corruption, inadequate infrastructure development, and since the Taliban seized power, by Western sanctions.

Although, like all other countries, China has not officially recognised the Taliban, it has positioned itself far closer to the new regime than the West has. Beyond keeping its embassy in Kabul open, China has repeatedly **denounced** the "political pressure and economic sanctions on Afghanistan imposed by non-regional

forces” and called for the **unfreezing of Afghan assets** held by the United States (US) and in Europe even before any progress is achieved on human rights and women’s rights in Afghanistan. However, China’s humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan remains a **small fraction of the aid supplied by the West** since August 2021.

Some Chinese state-owned enterprises have **hinted at the possibility** of (re)starting economic projects with the Taliban. In reality however, bilateral trade has remained very limited, amounting mostly to **pine nut exports** from Afghanistan to China. And despite imaginations of large potential sanctions-busting Chinese extraction of valuable commodities such as **lithium**, large Chinese economic involvement remains unlikely for the above reasons and **uncertainty** over whether the Taliban regime will survive more than a few years, given Afghanistan’s crippled economy.

On the most important issue—counterterrorism—China finds itself in a similar position as the US and much of the West vis-à-vis the Taliban. The Taliban has promised it will not allow Uighur attacks abroad into China or the flow of financial and material support to Uighur militants, but not anything beyond that. Various Chinese officials have **demanding that the Taliban cut ties** to other militant groups and act against the Uighur militants. But although the Taliban has **never criticised** China’s brutal repression of the Uighurs, its

actions against Uighur militants have been limited. At first, the Taliban **falsely claimed** that Uighur fighters had left Afghanistan. In fact, there remained Uighur fighters and commanders in northern Afghanistan commanding Taliban non-Uighur units. Then, in May 2022, it **relocated** some Uighur militants away from the Chinese border, but did not expel them.

Among the **principal reasons** for why the Taliban has been light-handed with the Uighurs, (or for that matter other foreign militants) is the need to preserve the inflow of foreign funds and maintain internal unity. Such funding is dependent on the Taliban not reneging on its broader jihadi commitments. The Taliban also has its familial connections to foreign terrorist groups. Crucially, the Taliban also fears that acting against external jihadist groups would weaken the Taliban’s internal cohesion and cause defections, such as to the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK), the Taliban’s principal armed rival. The only foreign fighters whom the Taliban did expel in the fall 2021 were the Baluchis, who target Pakistan and Chinese assets in Pakistan and whom Pakistan suspects of receiving assistance from Pakistan’s archrival, India.

India

Unlike China, India waited until the spring of 2022 before attempting even a modest rapprochement with the Taliban.

Throughout the 1990s, India was a staunch

supporter of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, and after 2002, of the Afghan Republic, providing economic and limited military assistance. Unsurprisingly, it opposed the restart of US negotiations with the Taliban that led to the signing of a peace agreement in February 2020.

Thus, New Delhi's decision to discuss the establishment of "diplomatic relations" with the Taliban and provision of limited humanitarian aid (like with China, a small amount of Western humanitarian aid) in June 2022, followed by the re-opening of the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2022, represent a major policy rupture for India. The Taliban provided security assurances to the Indian embassy (as well as to embassies and diplomatic staff of all countries that return), but the ISK attack on the Russian embassy in Kabul on September 5, 2022, may weaken any stock India places in such promises.

Principally (and accurately), India has concluded that the Taliban remains firmly in power in Afghanistan and that the various armed opposition groups, such as the National Resistance Front, do not pose a major challenge. Following the dictum of keeping one's enemies far closer than one's friends (the latter of which India has not kept particularly close, bucking US entreaties that India condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine), India has calculated that reopening the embassy in Kabul and developing a limited relationship with the Taliban gives it at least eyes and ears on the

ground in Afghanistan.

Like for China, security, principally counterterrorism considerations, have driven India's Afghanistan agenda. In 1999, Pakistani terrorists hijacked an Indian airliner with 160 passengers and flew it to Afghanistan where the Taliban protected it from an Indian rescue assault. Moreover, India does not want to see Kashmir- and India-oriented terrorist groups sponsored by Pakistan—such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)—to be given safe haven in Afghanistan.

The Taliban has given India the same promises as to everyone else: it will not allow terrorist groups to launch attacks from Afghanistan into other countries. But the Taliban's counterterrorism actions will likely remain the same as with the West and China: promising and perhaps even foiling attack ploys, but not rounding up or expelling these terrorist groups. Indeed, both the LeT and JeM retain a presence in Afghanistan.

By reestablishing a presence in Afghanistan, India has also enjoyed bursting Pakistan's hope to have its sole run of Afghanistan and potentially use Afghanistan as a place of strategic depth in military confrontations with India. Reportedly, the Taliban has expressed interest in sending some of its military units to India for training.

The Taliban has not lived up to Pakistan's hopes of taking close direction from

Islamabad and Rawalpindi (where Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence or ISI, key sponsors of the Taliban for three decades, are located). Even the Haqqani branch of the Taliban which is very close to the ISI has not shut down the anti-Pakistan terrorist operations of the Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP), but instead negotiated a series of **unsatisfactory ceasefires**. And like previous Afghan governments, the Taliban has challenged Pakistan over the demarcation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, even resulting in **armed clashes**.

India's limited engagement with the Taliban fits well with India's long-running ultra-realpolitik foreign policy. In Myanmar, where India has substantial economic and geopolitical interests, it has been unwilling to criticise the new military junta. Following the **overthrow of the democratic government** in February 2021, and more recently with the **execution of pro-democracy activists**, the most that New Delhi has been able to muster was to express its "deep concern". In fact, India has **positioned itself closely** to the Myanmar junta, even sending Indian diplomats to attend the **junta's military parades**.

Pluralism and Human Rights versus Limited Objectives

Only a limited focus on human rights, accountability, and pluralism animates India's and China's dealings with the Taliban. Both **China** and **India** have spoken

of support for an inclusive government that incorporates non-Taliban and non-Pashtun factions. But along with Iran and Russia, their definition of inclusivity is different from the West's, centering principally on the integration of key minority ethnic powerbrokers into the Taliban government, rather than true accountability and broad-based inclusivity.

Yet, the Taliban has not been willing to move even in that limited direction, running an exclusionary and Pashtun-centered government since its return to power. It has even marginalised its own ethnic minority commanders—Taliban Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara commanders—who were critical in the Taliban's takeover of minority-dominated areas in the country.

Both China and India have endorsed the return of girls to secondary schools in Afghanistan that the Taliban's top leader Haibatullah Akhundzada banned. But neither Beijing nor New Delhi has issued **strong or frequent** statements about the issue. In my interviews, I learned from Western diplomats that, along with Russia and Iran, China has indicated to the Taliban leadership that it should not feel compelled to yield to Western pressure on issues such as women's rights and that Beijing can act as an international interlocutor for the Taliban regime.

Divisions in the international messaging to the Taliban would weaken the capacity of the international community to shape the

Taliban's behavior regarding counterterrorism and domestic political dispensation. Already, the **Kandahar power center around Haibatullah** has been impervious to both external and internal inputs, including from other Taliban factions. The more internationally oriented segments of the Taliban, including the powerful terrorist commanders Mullah Yaqub and Sirajuddin Haqqani, are liable to calculate that they would unlikely be able to retain control of Afghanistan for more than a few years if the country's economy remains buckled. Yet persisting internal repression of women, minorities, and political critics that have characterised the Taliban's first year will, over time, likely jeopardise even Western humanitarian aid. There is little reason so far to believe that any future Chinese humanitarian and economic efforts in Afghanistan will offset the loss of Western development aid.

Equally, however, an isolation of the Taliban regime and persistent denials of development aid and financial liquidity are unlikely to alter its behavior either. Instead, they are more likely to drive it deeper into an inward- and afterlife-focused dogma, as well as likely into a civil war.

Yet a disintegration of the Taliban regime, leading to an Afghan civil war, remains even more contrary to international counterterrorism and humanitarian objectives. As things stand, the only

outcome of such a possible civil war would be a more fragmented and unstable Afghanistan.

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News Reports

Bilateral relations

Indian and Chinese troops disengage from Patrolling Point 15 in eastern Ladakh

The Times of India, September 12

Indian and Chinese soldiers have moved back from their frontline troops to the rear locations from the face-off site of Patrolling Point 15 in the Gogra-Hotsprings area in eastern Ladakh and dismantled temporary infrastructure there as part of a five-day disengagement process.

India issues advisory for medical students planning to study in China

Business Standard, September 11

India has issued a detailed advisory related to studying at Chinese medical schools as thousands of enrolled students continue to remain stuck at home amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

India carries out major works along contested border with China

South China Morning Post, September 4

The construction of surveillance facilities comes after the announcement of joint military exercises between India and the United States.

India launches new aircraft carrier as China concerns grow

Defense News, September 3

India commissioned its first home-built aircraft carrier Friday as it seeks to counter regional rival China's much larger and growing fleet, and expand its own indigenous shipbuilding capabilities.

China and India in the Region

Eye on China, Japan and India to boost defence ties

Indian Express, September 9

Both sides expressed their support for enhanced security and defence cooperation during the 2+2 ministerial meeting in Tokyo.

'Taiwan Strait militarisation' marks a first for India as Chinese 'spy ship' row festers

South China Morning Post, August 30

The Indian mission in Colombo has slammed an article by the Chinese envoy for allegedly connecting the "militarisation of the Taiwan Strait and visit of China's Yuan Wang 5 ship to Hambantota", amid a growing spat over the docking of the Chinese research vessel at the Sri Lankan port.

Russia drills set stage for China, India troops to meet amid tension

Nikkei Asia, August 29

The presence of both China and India would add additional drama to the drills, given the countries' icy border dispute in the Himalayas that sparked a deadly clash only two years ago.

China opposes external interference on border issue

China Daily, August 25

A spokesman for the Ministry of National Defense made the remarks after a 20-day joint exercise conducted by India and US special forces in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh in the southern foothills of the Himalayas.

Trade and Economy

India opts out of trade talks with US-led Indo-Pacific group

Business Times, September 10

India was the only participant in the 14-nation Indo-Pacific Economy Framework that didn't sign on to the group's negotiation track on trade, according to statements released after 2 days of meetings in Los Angeles.

China missing among nations driving India's foreign fund inflows

Business Standard, September 4

Foreign direct investment (FDI) into India stood at \$58.8 billion in 2021-22 with Singapore and the US being the top two major contributors among the list of 15 nations.

India agency searches payment firms in Chinese lending probe

The Straits Times, September 3

India's federal financial crime-fighting agency said on Saturday (September 3) it was searching the premises of online payment companies as part of an investigation of Chinese-controlled firms and individuals suspected of illicit lending practices.

India overtakes UK to become fifth largest economy in the world

Business Today, September 2

The size of the Indian economy in 'nominal' cash terms in the quarter through March was \$854.7 billion while the UK was \$816 billion.

Energy and Environment

China earthquake toll rises to 46, India offers condolences

India Today, September 6

Official media reports quoted local officials as saying that at least 46 people were killed and over 50 others injured.

India says it will look carefully at Russian oil price cap, rejects moral duty to boycott Moscow

CNBC, September 5

Indian Petroleum Minister Shri Hardeep Singh Puri on Monday (September 5) said the country will carefully assess whether to support a G-7 proposal to impose a cap on the price of Russian oil.

China heatwave hits industrial production, bleak economic outlook on the cards

Channel News Asia, September 2

The Sichuan provincial government ordered factories to stop production for 11 days from Aug 15 to 25 to prioritise power for households.

India Bursts Into A Market Once Dominated By China

NDTV, September 1

India has emerged as a key buyer of Russian energy in the wake of the invasion, scooping up millions of barrels of discounted crude shunned by Europe and the US.

Analyses

[The Russia-India-China Trilateral After Ukraine: Will Beijing Take the Lead?](#)

China Brief, September 9

By Jagannath Panda, Head of the Stockholm Centre for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs; and Wooyeal Paik, Associate Professor at Yonsei University

How far will emerging and developing nations with a distaste for the West favor China as an international leader?

[Will India walk out of IPEF?](#)

China Daily, September 7

By Swaran Singh, Professor of International Relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University

More than the RCEP, the IPEF has added knots to be untied: Washington wishes to explore avenues for cheap manufacturing for its high-end designs and yet has not been able to trust recipients with its advanced technology.

[Japan is recasting its national security vision in face of an aggressive China. India must inject strategic content into ties during 2+2 dialogue](#)

Indian Express, September 7

By C. Raja Mohan, Senior Fellow, Asia Society Policy Institute, New Delhi

There is deep political resistance and bureaucratic inertia against any effort to recast defence policies in both capitals. There is much that Delhi and Tokyo could do together in meeting their common security challenges.

[Can ASEAN and India Share a Common Outlook and Approach in the Indo-Pacific?](#)

ISEAS Perspective 2022/87, September 2

By Joanne Lin, Lead Researcher in Political-Security affairs at the ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

ASEAN and India may find convergence in four aspects, namely, upholding common values; seeking balance in the Indo-Pacific and maintaining neutrality; broad and pluralistic approaches to engagement; and issues-based cooperation which may result in strategic alignment.

[Why India is crucial to Russia and China's goal of countering US influence in Indo-Pacific](#)

South China Morning Post, September 2

By Danil Bochkov, Russian International Affairs Council

In a bid to oppose Washington's diplomatic and military advances in the Indo-Pacific, Moscow and Beijing are seeking stronger ties with New Delhi.

Books and Journals

[India-Japan-ASEAN Triangularity: Emergence of a Possible Indo-Pacific Axis?](#) Routledge, August 2022

Edited By Jagannath P. Panda

This book focuses on the scope, potential and future of the India-Japan-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) trilateral. Through this book, contributors examine the strategic and global partnership between

India and Japan and the collaboration with ASEAN. Analysing contemporary strategic issues in the Indo-Pacific, the book takes up the complex link between security and economics. It offers a thorough understanding on how the major Asian powers, India and Japan, cooperate and coordinate with the ASEAN. It delves into few critical questions: Is there a scope for India-Japan-ASEAN triangularity in the Indo-Pacific? Can a formal or institutional cooperation be forged between these three actors? What specific cooperation could India and Japan forge with ASEAN as an institution? To what extent can each ASEAN member independently become a partner with India and Japan?

A novel assessment of the post-pandemic economic and political balancing and restructuring, this book will be of interest to Asian politics, international relations, strategic studies, regional organizations in Asia and think tanks specializing in foreign policy, security studies, international trade and economics.

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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *Failure to launch? Indonesia against China's Grey Zone Tactics* by Evan Laksmana (IDSS Paper No.37)
- *Remodelling Indonesia's Maritime Law Enforcement Architecture: Theoretical and Policy Considerations* by Evan Laksmana (Contemporary Southeast Asia 44(1), 2022)
- *India-Australia-Indonesia Maritime Partnership: Shared Challenges, Compelling Opportunities* by Premesha Saha, Natalie Sambhi, and Evan Laksmana (ORF, 2022)
- *India Versus China : Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



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