



Eastern Europe Studies Centre
Est. 2006

DYNAMICS OF THE SINO-TALIBAN RELATIONS AND ITS REFLECTION IN THE CHINESE DOMESTIC MEDIA

RAIGIRDAS BORUTA AND JIABIN SONG

Introduction

Since 2001, Afghanistan has been one of the biggest geopolitical hotspots in the world. This is not just because the country was a major theatre for the United States' Global War on Terrorism, but also because Afghanistan's geographical location is a significant factor that amplifies the outcome of the US military campaign. For example, it touches upon the security concerns of the former Soviet Republic, as well as Russia's suspicions of the US intentions in its Central Asian backyard. It also affects Pakistan's interests after decades of involvement in Afghan affairs and, just like another neighbour of Afghanistan – Iran – it is concerned about its Shia minority in the country. All of these intricacies have inevitably turned Afghanistan into an arena for an intensive power competition.

RAIGIRDAS BORUTA

is an Associate Expert in the EESC China Research programme and a Doctoral student at the VU Institute of International Relations and Political Science. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Asia-Pacific Studies (Chinese) from the University of Central Lancashire (UK). In 2020, he completed a Master's degree in International Relations at Sichuan University (China).

JIABIN SONG

is a Master's student in the Diplomacy and International Relations programme at Vytautas Magnus University. He holds a Bachelor's degree in World Politics and Economy from Vytautas Magnus University.

Among all the Afghan neighbours, a rising great power – China – and its growing ambitions in the region have made this Central Asian country a salient place in its foreign policy agenda. In Beijing's view, the Taliban has become an unavoidable player in the geopolitical game in Afghanistan; hence, analysing the past 20 years of interactions between China and the Taliban can provide a perfect window for us to observe China's public and foreign policy operations.

In this analytical paper, the dynamics of China's foreign policy towards the Afghan Taliban are analysed, along with the synergies of the accompanying domestic cultural policy with changes in the country's foreign policy during the period of 2001 and 2021. The article consists of three parts: in the 1st part, a retrospective summary depicts the contours of the China–Afghanistan Taliban geopolitical context; in the 2nd part, China's domestic cultural policy on the framing of the Taliban's image is examined through the prism of a public communication perspective (i.e. the media agenda's role in creating public opinion); then, in the 3rd and last part, the analysis concentrates on the *raison d'état* behind the decision by China's policymakers for enhanced contact with the Taliban. This research shows the interconnections between the changes of the Taliban's power in Afghanistan politics and China's foreign and cultural policy toward the Taliban.

PART 1: Background of Sino-Taliban relations

Beijing's U-turns vis-à-vis its perception of the Taliban had been significant throughout the last two decades. Specifically, the once open hostility towards the Islamist group has gradually transformed into a surprisingly positive attitude and a willingness to cooperate. Such a stark contrast is a result of Beijing's use of a hedging strategy in its policy towards Afghanistan: China's willingness/unwillingness to communicate depends on Beijing's careful calculations and risk assessments, based on the actual political situation in Afghanistan.

1.1 2001–2014: Beijing's hostility toward the Taliban

Even before the events of 9/11 that soon led to the US "War on Terror", Beijing's negative attitude towards the Taliban was evident: after this Islamist group took power of the country in 1996, China suspended its diplomatic representation and refused to recognise the Taliban's rule in Af-

ghanistan (the Chinese Embassy only reopened in 2002). Throughout the 1990s, China, India, Russia and the United States had actively supported the United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan (an anti-Taliban movement also called the "Northern Alliance"), even though it posed a risk of damaging Beijing's ties with Pakistan, which was pro-Taliban. However, Beijing's careful calculations and pessimistic attitude toward Afghanistan without the Taliban resulted in a shifting attitude. Interestingly, a year before the US "War on Terror", there were some signs of efforts to establish closer ties. In December 2000, Lu Shulin (who was then Chinese ambassador to Pakistan) met with the Taliban's leader, Mullah Omar. He was assured that in exchange for China's political support, the Taliban would provide assurances that the Xinjiang terrorist groups will not be supported¹. In the same year, Beijing abstained from the UNSC sanctions resolution aimed at the Taliban; at the time, it remained neutral and did not veto the Taliban-related decisions.

Between 2001 and 2014, China’s diplomatic approach toward Afghanistan was relatively low-key. Beijing limited itself to maintaining minimal ties with the government, while providing some training and humanitarian aid. The situation was closely observed and minimal unofficial communication was maintained with diverse groups within Afghanistan. Until around 2012, China had no official contact with the Taliban; however, the growing problem of domestic terrorism and threats to China’s stability were constantly pushing Beijing to rethink its policy towards Afghanistan.

The year 2009 marked the highest point of the tensions between China and the Taliban. The security situation in Xinjiang significantly deteriorated and increased terrorist attacks throughout the country (see Figure 1) resulted in a heated debate within China² regarding a potential deployment of ground troops in Afghanistan, as well as the opening of the Wakhan Corridor supply routes for foreign forces.

However, as was stated by Swaine, Beijing ultimately rejected this idea based on the following counterarguments: a) the use of military means might result in a deterioration of Xinjiang’s security situation; b) China has a long-standing principle of not deploying its ground forces abroad; c) pessimism over the possibility of de-

feating the Taliban using military means; and d) an unwillingness to be associated with the US intervention in Afghanistan.³

Starting from 2012, Beijing struck a bold tone concerning the problem in Afghanistan. In 2012, the then security chief Zhou Yongkang visited Kabul, becoming the most senior Chinese leader to visit that country in decades⁴. As was stated by Ng in her 2010 Policy Outlook, China’s decision to take a more proactive stance was based on its increasingly divergent strategic perceptions compared with the US:

“While the United States prefers a decisive military victory and an Afghan government free from Taliban influence, China doubts that either is possible. (...) it prefers a peaceful negotiated settlement to the war in Afghanistan, and even if the final settlement includes or is controlled by the Taliban, China will likely accept and work with whoever holds power in Kabul.” (Ng, 2010, p. 4)⁵

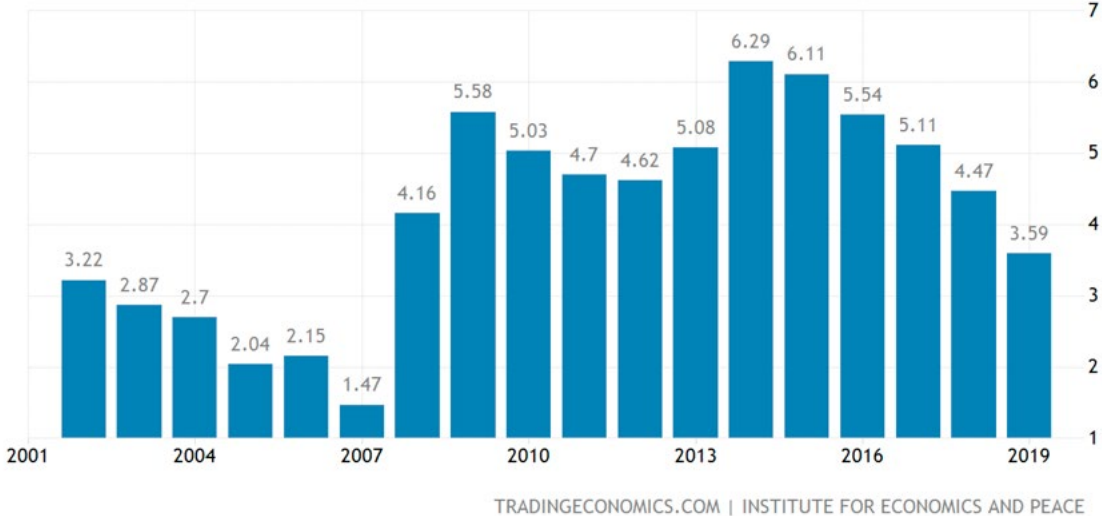


Figure 1 China Terrorism Index: a comprehensive analysis of the global trends and patterns in terrorism since 2000. The impact of terrorism is ranked as: (0-10), 0-2 (very low), 2-4 (low), 4-6 (medium), 6-8 (high), and 8-10 (very high). *Source:* Institute for Economics and Peace

1.2 2014–2021: A Gradual shift in Beijing’s policy toward the Taliban

Starting in 2014, Beijing’s policy toward the Taliban gradually shifted from the previous hostility to a position of tentative contact, by seeking to open a negotiatory channel with the group. What caused this notable change, which prompted China to divert from its foreign policy on this extremist group⁶ in China’s western neighbourhood?

From the perspective of international politics, the rationale behind China’s policy shift was twofold. First, as a repercussion against the “Arab Spring”, the rapidly rising ISIL (i.e. “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant”), formed from the remnants of the old Ba’ath nationalist regime, posed an increasingly serious challenge for the United States. This new terrorist organisation not only posed a massive risk to the Arab World, but their terrorist activities caused an influx of refugees to begin flowing toward European Union countries. Therefore, in 2011, when the Syrian Civil War erupted and caused unprecedented pressure due to the interminable European Migration Crisis, the new situation forced the United States to adjust its security agenda in order to stabilise the Transatlantic relationships and ameliorate the consternation of its European allies. Since then, the USA has changed its security policy priority from the Taliban to ISIL. Such a move meant that the Taliban became a secondary target for Washington’s military operation, which provided additional room for China’s diplomatic strategy to establish a certain degree of communication with the Taliban – due to the precedence created by the original approach of the US towards the Taliban.

Secondly, the growing capability of the Taliban forces, accompanied by the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2013, drastically altered the power balance in the Taliban’s favour inside Afghanistan (see the illustration in Figure 2 below).

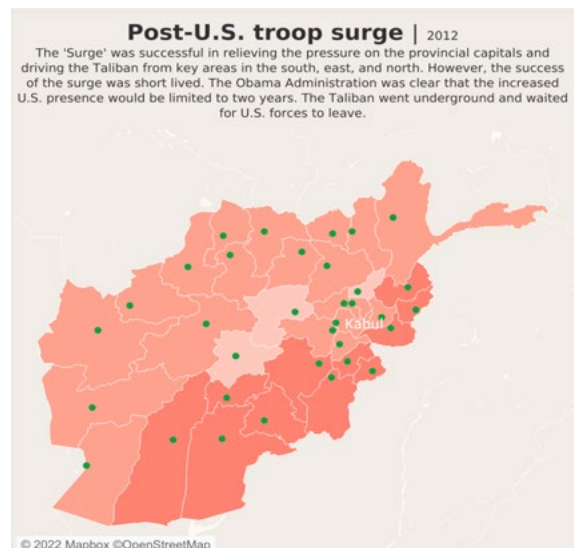
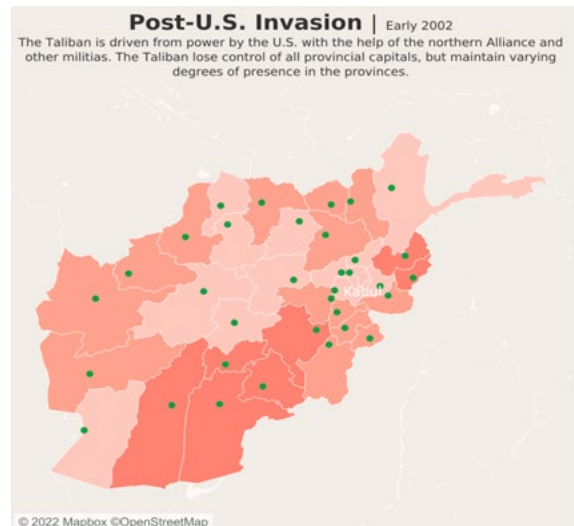


Figure 2 Change in the Taliban controlled territories between the years 2002 and 2012 (the colour ■ represents no or an insignificant Taliban influence in the area, the colour ■ represents a minimal Taliban influence of around 25% in the area, and the colour ■ represents a moderate Taliban influence of around 50% in the area). A clear trend is that the Taliban was revitalised over the years of guerrilla warfare. Source: FDD’s Long War Journal.⁷

This new reality forced China to reconsider its former preference regarding Afghan affairs. Before 2014, Beijing's policy toward the country was aimed at achieving "a government not dominated by the Taliban".⁸ Meanwhile, it simultaneously adopted a "catch-all" approach and maintained some degree of communication with most of the country's factions, in addition to Ashraf Ghani's government. By contrast, after 2014, China started gradually moving towards a Taliban-focusing policy. Nevertheless, at least until 2014, there was no clear sign of which side would be the ultimate winner in the Afghanistan conflict. Hence, China unofficially bridged the negotiations between the Taliban and Afghanistan government in November 2014 and May 2015 (see Table 1 in the Appendix); however, its policy was that of a two-sided bet.⁹

The final and fundamental change resulted from the peace deal between the United States and the Taliban on 29 February 2020, which was the ultimate move that *ipso facto* "declared" the end of the Afghanistan government not long afterwards. Beijing understood this well; it knows it must construct a stable relationship with the future ruler of Afghanistan. Furthermore, severe and callous security measures implemented by the CCP in its North-Western province of Xinjiang in recent years guarantee it possesses enough bargaining chips with this radical group. Indeed, Beijing treasures this periphery province as its pivotal link to the Belt and Road Initiative, through which it aims to connect to Western markets.

On the one hand, Beijing's new iron fist security policy in Xinjiang has made it extremely difficult for the Taliban to exert its leverage on the province, regardless of how adept it may be at doing this in the rest of the world. On the other hand, Beijing knows it possesses a bargaining chip that the Taliban wants – enabling it to gain international recognition¹⁰. Thus, the interactions between Beijing and the Taliban became much more intense and eventually culminated in Tianjin on 28 July 2021, when China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks with the Taliban representatives. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that China is the first country to have provided aid to the Taliban regime¹¹ since the latter took control of the country.

PART 2: The Dynamics in Two Decades of Chinese Domestic Media Coverage of the Taliban

The role of the state-owned media in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes is often to act as spin-doctors. The public relations specialists in the Chinese propaganda system are among the top experts in the world in this regard. For any government, public support is considered vital for its foreign policy; therefore, the synchronisation of the media agenda with the foreign policy agenda provides a significant advantage for the policymaker, and is China undoubtedly in possession of this advantage. The CCP has two crucial advantages in contemporary domestic politics: 1) it controls the mass media; and 2) the access to information is highly restricted.

The method that the CCP adopts to rein in the private media, in order to limit the scope of its coverage of foreign affairs, is through a so-called cultural policy – the "CN Serial Numbering" regulation¹². Even those magazines (whether in paper or digital form) that are not state-owned must first apply for a "CN Serial Numbering" from the country's National Press and Publication Administration before legally operating their media publication. If a private publisher violates the official orientation principle (e.g. when Beijing criticises a particular foreign country or group, and a private publisher disputes this political discourse), or discloses some sensitive information regarding a social or political hotspot without obtaining the relevant permission in advance, the private publisher will lose its "CN Serial Numbering". Furthermore, as a result of this "CN" cultural control policy, Chinese private publishers tend to follow the CCP's propaganda approach and self-censor their content.¹³ Therefore, the capital interests and the Party's political interests converge, forming a propaganda alliance. Consequently, even though there is a vast private-media sector in China, the overall spectrum of their coverage of foreign affairs remains scarce.

In 2014, the China media reports regarding the Taliban started to change due to Beijing's shift in its foreign policy toward the Taliban. Of course, even as the experts in the CCP propaganda system, the coverage of the Taliban was a tricky task. The only feasible way was to use priming methods and framing the mass media, to gradually change the views of ordinary Chinese citizens toward the Taliban. With this strategy, Beijing could create an acceptable public opinion, in order to push forward its foreign policy agenda.

2.1 Taliban as a threat to regional and internal stability (2001–2013)

In 2001, when the United States' Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) started bombing the Taliban in Afghanistan, it was hard to deny that such a war was in Beijing's favour. It was a great relief in relation to Xinjiang's security situation, as well as offering a distraction from the US's ideological hostility toward China due to the pragmatic need for regional counter-terrorism cooperation. Therefore, even though the US presence in the country's Western proximity was a threat to China's security, the then Chairman Jiang Zemin affirmed his support for the US military campaign¹⁴. Moreover, as was shown in the analysis demonstrated in Part 1.1, following the US military campaign in Afghanistan, the terrorist activities in China (i.e. meaning those in Xinjiang Province) have been continuously decreasing, and this development is again no doubt in Beijing's favour.

Under this foreign policy, the Taliban's image in China's official media coverage (see Table 2 in the Appendix) throughout Jiang and Hu's reign (2001 to 2013) was depicted as a threat to regional and internal stability. Furthermore, this negative coverage culminated in the July 2009 Ürümqi riots, when countless, violent images flooded China's social media and were accompanied by the heating up of Chinese nationalism. At that time, the official media's negative coverage of the Taliban reached such an extent that the possibility of China deploying troops to Afghanistan was openly discussed.^{15,16} Through-

out these years (2001-2013), the discourse on China's official media on the Taliban encompassed the narrative of the "Xinjiang separatist movement's links with the Taliban" in portraying the Taliban's image.

2.2 Taliban as a political movement that is a key to regional stability (2014–2021)

From Table 3 (see the Appendix), it can be perceived that at the end of 2014 (i.e. more precisely, in December of 2014 – one month after the secret meeting with the Taliban delegates), China's state-owned media started to cultivate a shift toward ways to "understand" or "study" the Taliban's attitude. Meanwhile, the news coverage outlined in Table 4 (see the Appendix), clearly shows that in the same period, the Chinese private (local) media coverage of the Taliban was beginning to morph from a purely evil image into a relatively normal or neutral one. In other words, there was a synergy between the public discourse in the private or local media and the official discourse's argument on the theme of the Taliban.

As mentioned at the beginning of this part, the CCP's media agenda is strictly coordinated with its political needs. In this case, such needs come from its foreign policy agenda. The CCP wants its policy, whether in relation to domestic or foreign affairs, to gain support, or to at least eliminate resistance stemming from the Chinese public opinion; therefore, its propaganda department¹⁷ must use the media to achieve such a goal. Nevertheless, the problem is that the Party's central media sources, like the People's Daily or Xinhuanet (as mentioned in the table), are very influential. If they take a radical stance, the coverage is certain to achieve a better outcome than in the private media in China. By contrast, it will incur consequences from the international community for the same reason. Therefore, some alternative options are needed: to use the private media as a channel/tattler to provide more critical views, besides synergising with the official discourse and serving a role as an amplifier.

The media's agenda during the period of 2014-2021 was aimed at portraying the Taliban to the domestic public as an unavoidable party in the geopolitical game. Given the Taliban's continuously increasing power inside Afghanistan amid NATO's withdrawal from the country¹⁸ in 2014 and 2015, the CCP's official discourse remained cautious about the Taliban's intentions toward China. From the year 2016, accompanied by the developing outcomes of the negotiation with the Taliban's delegates and, more importantly, the results of the Afghanistan military conflict, the Taliban seemed able to dominate a large part of Afghanistan – if not completely take over the country. Hence, as the two media tables above demonstrate, the tone in both the official and private media descriptions of the Taliban gradually changed to neutral. The final stage of this socialisation change began in February 2020, when the USA-Taliban Peace Agreement dispelled the mist from the Taliban's status in Afghanistan's future. The CCP's central media then started accelerating the pace and intensity of its socialisation with a positive emphasis.

The chronological development of the Taliban's changing image in the two decades of Chinese media coverage clearly shows that Beijing's media agenda is strictly subjected to the needs of its public policy agenda. The Taliban's image, in the propaganda system's design, has constantly changed over time. Furthermore, a salient turning point was reached in 2014, when the need to strengthen the ties between Beijing and the Taliban increased.

PART 3: The Rationale behind the Chinese Decision to Strengthen its Ties with the Taliban

Through a geopolitical prism, it can be concluded that the *raison d'état* behind China's foreign policy on the Afghanistan Taliban has five primary goals – each of them containing both security and economic rationales:

- 1. Stabilisation of Afghanistan.** This goal mainly considers the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Without a stable neighbouring environment, it would not be easy to guarantee the international trade route through the Central Asian countries. It is therefore vital for Beijing's BRI strategy to avoid being interrupted by the activities of extremist religious groups. Moreover, cooperation with the Taliban regime is not just based on China's ability to ensure its investments in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries (e.g. since 2013, half of China's natural gas consumption – around 24.4 bcm – has come from Turkmenistan,¹⁹ and due to the recent disputes between China and Australia, the suspension of Australia LNG imports has led China to rely on this Central Asian country's natural gas even more. In addition, the major LNG infrastructure that includes Central Asia–China gas pipeline has a large section – 530 kilometres – that goes through Uzbekistan (which is the most unstable country among the “Stans” due to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)'s terrorist activities), so China must make sure that the regime's affiliations will not attack it. The Taliban can help China suppress the activities of other vital terrorist groups (e.g. ISKP – Islamic State Khorasan Province, and IMU – Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) within the region.
- 2. Xinjiang issue.** This goal is significant in regard to China's domestic security, involving a sensitive issue for Beijing about the shared religious, ideological connection between the Afghanistan Taliban and the East Turkestan Independence Movement



Figure 3 Distance from Gwadar Sea Port to the Strait of Hormuz is less than 650 km.
 Source: Google Maps

(ETIM). One of the key issues during recent China-Taliban negotiations has been that the Taliban must promise not to aid the ETIM or interfere in China's Xinjiang affairs.²⁰ Moreover, Xinjiang Province is a major geographical outlet for China's Belt and Road Initiative; if the turmoil (regardless of whether it stemmed from terrorist/separatist activities or the ongoing civil war between Taliban and ISKP) were to spread into Xinjiang, it would inevitably impede the BRI's continuous development.

3. Pakistan Taliban issue. In sync with the United States' policy, China has separated the Afghanistan Taliban from the Pakistan Taliban and has only designated the latter as a terrorist group. The primary concern regarding this terrorist group for China is its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, which connects West China with the new Gwadar Port in the south of Pakistan.²¹ Compared with the economic prospect, this geographic corridor has much greater strategic importance for China – that is, it can serve as an alternative route for the country's crude oil imports from the Gulf in a case where the Malacca Strait is blocked during a potential conflict (see Figures 3 & 4).

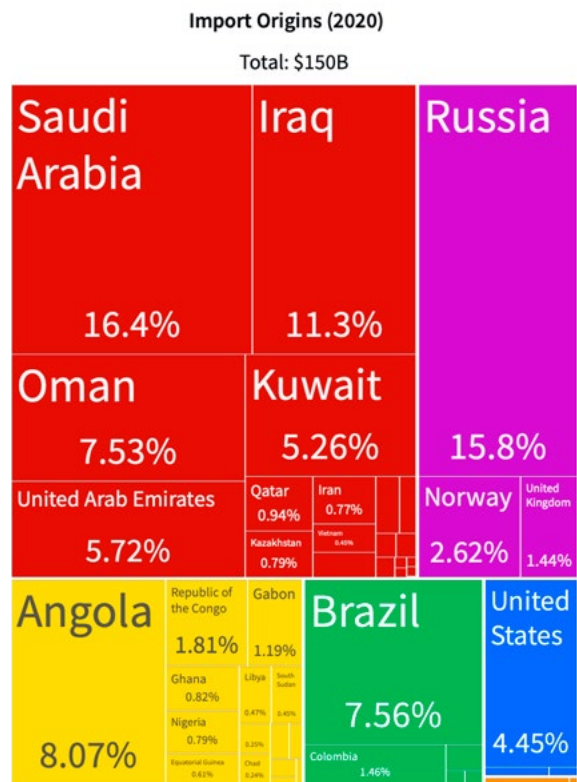


Figure 4 China's crude petroleum import origins in 2020.²²

In 2015, 53-58% of China's oil consumption depended on the Middle East, and all of it passed through the Strait of Malacca; hence, without an alternative route any interruption happening in the strait would strangle China's energy safety (see: Blumenthal D. "China, the United States, and the Geopolitics of Energy". Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 2015). As the world's biggest crude oil buyer, China has been trying to diversify its energy import structure (e.g. after establishing a contract with Russia and the relevant pipeline investment, Russia's share reached 15% of its total crude oil imports). However, according to the EIA, the Gulf as its major crude oil import source is still possesses 44% – the lion's share – of China's import portfolio. Furthermore, if we compare the figures in China's National Bureau of Statistics' data and the EIA's report,²³ they are little different in the volume scale; therefore, China's energy security still largely hinges on crude oil imports from the Gulf.

Unlike other forms of energy, like natural gas or LNG, crude oil is the primary source for refining petroleum. Hence, these oil imports are directly related to the PLA's military capability, as well as the ordinary energy security. Therefore, for China, protecting the safety of the CPEC's connectivity is *ipso facto* protecting its crude oil imports from the Gulf. In this case, China expects the Afghanistan Taliban regime to exert its influence on the Pakistan Taliban and make sure these non-state actors do not cause trouble in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Furthermore, Gwadar Port is one of the world's best deep-water ports – it not only imports oil from the Arabian Sea, but also possesses the potential to connect with the future Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. It also serves as a naval port for an aircraft carrier to dock.²⁴ In addition, all the goods exported from China to the port, just like the energy travelling from the port to China, must go through the corridor. This is another point that Beijing is taking into account in its negotiations with the Taliban.

4. **Drug problem.** Afghanistan is the biggest opium producer in the world; in particular, the lack of alternative economic options and a decades-long conflict has made the people there sustain their lives by planting opium. Although the Taliban regime has vowed to end the opium growth under its reign, in the situation with international sanctions and the need for hard currency to buy military equipment to continue its civil war against the other terrorist groups has made it very unlikely to give up the revenue obtained from the illicit drug exports.^{25, 26} Therefore, even though its "major market" is Europe through the Central Asia countries and Russia (see Figure 5 below for the Afghanistan drug trafficking destinations), Beijing still wants to ensure that the illicit drug trade will not increase.
5. **Natural resources.** It has been estimated that Afghanistan's natural resources are worth approximately \$3 trillion.²⁷ China, among other countries, is interested in the country's resources. Besides economic raw materials like copper, iron, coal, etc., and the military-related uranium and rare earths, Beijing is also very interested in strategic resources for the upcoming low-carbon era such as lithium, cobalt and graphite (i.e. the key elements for lithium-ion batteries) that Afghanistan could provide. In fact, Beijing has been trying to promote new projects and cooperation since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's government (e.g. a contract between the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) and the Jiangxi Copper Corporation Mes Aynak copper mine was sign with the Afghan government in 2008),²⁸ but there has been little progress due to the security and logistical issues.²⁹ Nonetheless,, Beijing has apparently not given up its interests in this particular sphere, and we can see that China's Sinoma International Engineering Co., Ltd. is one of the six companies that remain in the Taliban government's "Large Scale Mines Cement Projects" – a list of companies who showed an interest in cooperation.³⁰

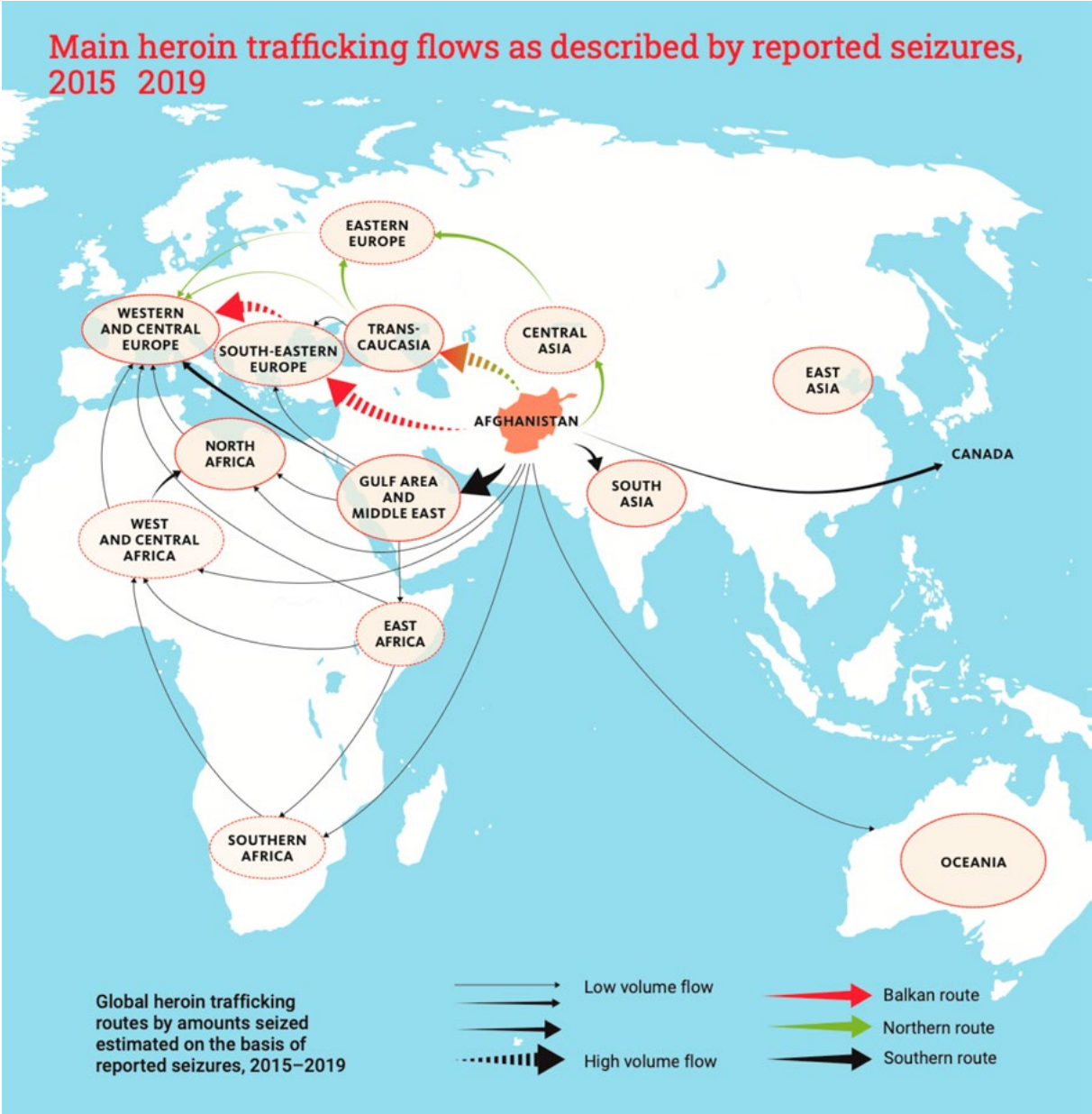


Figure 5 Main trafficking flows of opiates originated in Afghanistan, 2015-2019.
 Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)



Figure 6 Non-fuel mineral resources based on a preliminary assessment in 2007.³¹

Conclusion

Contemporary China's foreign policy is rooted in the principle of pragmatism. The discrepancy between China's ideological foreign policy in the Mao era and the pragmatic approach of present-day Beijing can be said to be similar to the difference in the Soviet Union's foreign policy of Lenin in the 1920s and that of Stalin in the later years after Trotsky's exile. In short, the foreign affairs in today's CCP playbook is entirely dictated by realpolitik.

If we perceive that Beijing is more inclined to cooperate with the authoritarian regimes, that is not because they have an ideological spectrum affinity, but due to the effectiveness of the engagement. Such effectiveness is not just about Beijing lowering the costs in settling some deals, but also about reducing the uncertainty of striking such a deal. It is a simple logic

(i.e. we can find similar cases in the activities of various multinational corporations) that it is much easier to buy from an autocrat and his coterie than to persuade a democratic foreign government and take a chance on their legislative processes. Even the most robust/professional lobbyist firm in Washington or Brussels cannot promise that a deal is 100% guaranteed; however, a dictator can always make a deal happen and get it done cheaper.

In the case of the present-day Afghanistan Taliban, it is undoubtedly crucial for Beijing, partially due to worries about China's internal centrifugal force in Xinjiang Province. This could be stirred up by the Taliban's support, partially because the geographic location of Afghanistan is a pivotal link in the Belt and Road Initiative that Beijing found itself cannot externally circumvent.

The shifting gears in China's Taliban policy are so dramatic that the CCP might bog itself down in a political predicament. However, the security and economic interests involved are enormous, and this ultimately outweighs the political image risks that eventually prompt Beijing to decide to strengthen its ties with the Taliban. Beijing is not just shifting gear on the Afghan domestic policy, but is also slowly reframing the Taliban's image in its media agenda. Reasonably speaking, China's principle of including a political orientation in its propaganda system has changed little in the past few decades. In Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, we can also clearly perceive that similar methods are being imposed on the Chinese domestic media discourse.

Furthermore, in the case of the Afghanistan Taliban, China's recent drastic diplomatic activities and rapid domestic socialisation demonstrate a fundamental change in Beijing's Taliban policy in relation to its Central Asia regional strategy. Moreover, the *raison d'état* behind these behaviours shows that nowadays, the CCP is not a bunch of hot-headed Castroists driven by revolutionary ardour. Instead, the case of the Taliban tells us that the CCP is a hard-nosed realist regime that takes every necessary precaution, calculated according to its own interests.

The Taliban faces significant challenge with regards to its own "internal legitimacy". The "internal legitimacy" described here is not about "domestic legitimacy" but the legitimacy among its religious followers. More and more signals are indicating that many radical members of the Taliban are very unsatisfied with the approach its incumbent leadership is taking toward China, besides the secular reform after it seized power in August 2020. Hence, the relationship between China and the Taliban will remain in a dynamic stage of development, even after the latter stabilises its reign in Afghanistan.

Endnotes

- ¹ Guoji Jinrongbao, “国际金融报：中国为何要当塔利班调停人？ [International Finance News: Why does China want to be the mediator of the Taliban?], 2015, http://m.haiwainet.cn/middle/3541003/2015/0123/content_28341832_1.html
- ² Huanqiu Shibao, “清华学者：中国贸然出兵阿富汗将导致新疆乱局” [Qinghua scholar: China’s rash dispatch of troops to Afghanistan will lead to chaos in Xinjiang], 2009, https://news.ifeng.com/mil/4/200912/1229_342_1491174_1.shtml
- ³ Swaine, M. D., “China and the “AfPak” Issue, *China Leadership Monitor No. 31*, 2010 <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CLM31MS.pdf>
- ⁴ Taylor, R., “Top China official visits Afghanistan, signs security deal”, Reuters, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-china-idUSBRE88M02C20120923>
- ⁵ Ng, T. P., “China’s Role in Shaping the Future of Afghanistan”, *Policy Outlook*, 2010, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/china_role_afghanistan.pdf
- ⁶ Surprisingly, the Taliban hasn’t ever been on the United States list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is included (i.e. it was designated on 1 September 2010) but not the Afghanistan Taliban, although the Taliban does appear on the UN’s United Nations Security Council Consolidated List as a terrorist entity that is being sanctioned. see: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism. *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*. Found at: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>; last accessed: 16/09/2021; and: United Nations. *United Nations Security Council Consolidated List*. See, <https://scsanctions.un.org/8q1z7en-all.html>. For China, the Taliban is also not included on the country’s list of terrorist groups (i.e. according to The Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China’s terrorist entity designation list on 15 December 2005, the four terrorist entities are: 1) East Turkestan independence movement, 2) East Turkestan Liberation Organization, 3) World Uyghur Youth Congress, and 4) The East Turkistan Information Center, see: State Council of the People’s Republic of China, http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-06/28/content_10520.htm), and in official occasion or similar documents, the Chinese government usually describe the Taliban as “塔利班政权(English: ‘the Taliban Regime’), “(塔利班政府English: ‘the Taliban Government’), “阿富汗塔利班(English: ‘the Afghanistan Taliban’)” or simply just “塔利班(English: ‘the Taliban’)”.
- ⁷ Source web address: <https://fdd-long-war-journal.github.io/2000-2020-Afghanistan/>.
- ⁸ Canyon D. & Sitaraman S. “China’s Global Security Aspirations with Afghanistan and the Taliban. Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies”. 1 Aug. 2020, p. 3. Found at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25711>; last accessed: 03/09/2021.
- ⁹ This policy actually lasted in Beijing until 2018 and, according to the Afghan researcher, China provided more than \$70 million in military aid to the Afghan government from 2016 to 2018. See: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-afghanistan/> .
- ¹⁰ Cordesman A. H. “Estimates of Military Balance and the Size of the Threat Show Little or No Progress in Defeating the Taliban”. *Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*. 2019. pp. 108-120, p. 109. Found at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep22583.10>; last accessed: 11/09/2021.
- ¹¹ “根据阿富汗人民的需要，中方决定紧急提供价值2亿元人民币的粮食、越冬物资、疫苗和药品。(English: ‘According to the Afghanistan People’s needs, China has decided to provide 200 million yuan in food, winter equipment, vaccines and medicines’)”. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 王毅出席首次阿富汗邻国外长会. 08/09/2021. Found at: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/t1905606.shtml>; last accessed: 16/09/2021.
- ¹² “中国标准刊号/国内统一连续出版刊号 (English: ‘China Standard Serial Number / Domestic Publication Standard Serial Number’), which is not a copyright procedure (i.e. like the ISSN – International Standard Serial Numbering)’ rather, it is a regulatory policy.

- ¹³ Due to this cooperative relationship, the Chinese private media is playing two roles in the CCP's media agenda to serve its foreign policy: 1) it is a tattler – to spread the “real rumour”, in order to use those words on the street – to cultivate a public understanding or to let the public be prepared before the relevant foreign policy is exerted; 2) it also can take an amplifier's role in order to synchronise with the CCP's state-owned central mass media, to synergistically promulgate the idea about the foreign entity according to Beijing's political needs.
- ¹⁴ “China consistently against all forms of terrorist activity and supports the counter-terrorist policy. Hard-hitting denotes hitting precisely, which it should avoid harming innocent civilians. China and United States can establish a long-term cooperative mechanism of counter-terrorist.” – Jiang Zemin, speech delivered at The Apec Economic Leaders' Meeting on 19 Oct. 2001. Found at: <http://www.cntv.cn/lm/808/-1/59718.html>; last accessed: 18/01/2022.
- ¹⁵ China News Service (CNS). *China will consider whether to send a peacekeeping combat force in the case of receiving a UN request.* 21/11/2009. Found at: <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2009-11-21/1026574644.html>; last accessed: 18/01/2022.
- ¹⁶ Global Times. *Afghanistan is a workshop for building a strategic cooperative partnership between China and United States.* 21/12/2009. Found at: http://www.fjse.com/i/2009-12/21/content_2530201.htm; last accessed: 18/01/2022.
- ¹⁷ The CCP's “中共中央宣传部” or “中宣部”, literally translated into English, the exact meaning is “Propaganda Department of Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party”.
- ¹⁸ It is necessary to mention that this geopolitical necessity was alluded to one week later, in another commentary article in the People's Daily. “Hence, the Taliban is very likely to take advantage of the ‘security vacuum’ caused by the NATO withdrawal, and to launch a vast attack”. People's Daily. *International View: Afghanistan War, the quagmire of the United States.* 17/12/2014. Found at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/1217/c83083-26223099.html>; last accessed: 20/10/2021.
- ¹⁹ Skalamera M. *The Sino-Russian Gas Partnership: Explaining The 2014 Breakthrough.* Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center. November 2014. p. 4.
- ²⁰ This is considered to be the bottom line for Beijing in its cooperation with the Afghanistan Taliban, and in fact, both parties have a clear understanding of this issue and they have reiterated their consensus many times; for example, on 9 September 2021, the Taliban Qatar office's spokesman, Suhail Shaheen, repeated that the Taliban would not allow ETIM members to continue their training, recruitment or fundraising in their country. Then one day later, during a regular press conference, the spokesman of China's MFA immediately echoed and stressed that China expected the Afghanistan Taliban to keep its word and sever their relations with the ETIM. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. *20210910 MFA Spokesman Zhao Lijian Hosts the Regular Press Conference.* 10/09/2021. Found at:
- ²¹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/fyrbt_674889/202109/t20210910_9710982.shtml; last accessed: 28/10/2021.
- ²² Unlike the situation in Afghanistan, the Pakistan Taliban's hostile activities against China nationals have remained severe in recent years, see: Shahzad A. “Pakistan says attack that killed Chinese was a suicide bombing”. *Reuters*, 12 August 2021. Found at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-min-says-bus-attack-that-killed-9-chinese-workers-was-suicide-2021-08-12/>; last accessed: 18/12/2021. Also, Rehman Z. U. “Islamabad deeply alarmed by rise in Pakistan Taliban terrorism”. *Nikkei Asia*, 28 September 2021. Found at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Afghanistan-turmoil/Islamabad-deeply-alarmed-by-rise-in-Pakistan-Taliban-terrorism>; last accessed: 18/12/2021. Source: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn#yearly-imports>.
- ²³ See: U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). *China Analysis.* 30/09/2020. Found at: <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN>; last accessed: 17/11/2021.
- ²⁴ Regarding the tremendous potential of Gwadar Port, see: Zaman A. S. “Geopolitical Significance of Balochistan”. *Strategic Studies.* Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, Autumn 2017. Vol. 37, No. 3, pp. 126-144.

- ²⁵ Regarding the drug situation in Afghanistan, see: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Drug Situation in Afghanistan 2021 – Latest findings and emerging threats. *UNODC Research*, 2021. Found at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_brief_Nov_2021.pdf; last accessed: 27/11/2021.
- ²⁶ Also see: Khan A., "Afghanistan and the Drug Trade". *Strategic Studies*. Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. Autumn 2005, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 162-182.
- ²⁷ Reuters. *Factbox: What are Afghanistan's untapped minerals and resources?* August 2021. Found at: [https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-are-afghanistans-untapped-minerals-resources-2021-08-19/#:~:text=Afghanistan%20is%20rich%20in%20resources,%2C%20travertine%2C%20gypsum%20and%20marble](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/what-are-afghanistans-untapped-minerals-resources-2021-08-19/#:~:text=Afghanistan%20is%20rich%20in%20resources,%2C%20travertine%2C%20gypsum%20and%20marble;); last accessed: 22/04/2022.
- ²⁸ A detail that needs to be explained here that due to the features of copper, it is uneconomical for China to transport it as a raw ore from the mine to its homeland. The only feasible solution is to build a copper refinery plant near the mine, as well as making a considerable investment in the region e.g. power plant, road, truck maintenance factory, etc., before shipping the final Grade A copper cathodes to China or other end market customers. This means that the investment risks would increase and, given the worsening security situation over time, eventually this project would be made in vain.
- ²⁹ The Chinese companies also have their concerns regarding such a vast investment. See: Downs, E. (2012). "China Buys into Afghanistan". *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 32(2), 65-84.
- ³⁰ Source: https://momp.gov.af/sites/default/files/list_of_companies_who_showed_their_interest.pdf
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Appendix

Table 1: Significant Chinese diplomatic activities in Afghanistan affairs in recent years

Date	Location	Activities	China's role and method	The Taliban power dynamics in Afghanistan
Before 2015	-	-	Until 2012, China's role in Afghanistan was mainly that of a bystander. China's foreign policy started changing after the then Chinese security chief Zhou Yongkang's official visit to Kabul. In relation to the Taliban, the unofficial meeting with its delegation in November 2014 (with the location unknown) marked the resumption of the interaction between the Taliban and Beijing.	In the year 2014, along with NATO and the US's withdrawal processes, the activities of the Taliban's force were no longer limited to the Pushtun Mountain area, but started a vast offence that took control of four of Afghanistan's 373 districts and directly threatened 41% of the country's remaining districts.
21-22 May 2015	Urumqi	A formal meeting between Afghanistan's High Peace Council and Taliban delegates, headed by Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai	Bilateral, with China as the third-party host	2015 Afghanistan government de facto effectively controls 72% of the country's territory.
7-8 July 2015	Murree	Start of the 2+2+1 Murree Peace Process	Multilateral, with China as an observer	
9 December 2015	Islamabad	The "Heart of Asia" Ministerial Conference, with a discussion about the possible period for Taliban and Afghanistan government talks	Multilateral, where China was a significant participant (the Taliban did not take part in the process)	
11 January 2016	Islamabad	The first meeting of Afghanistan-Pakistan-US-China in the framework of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG)	Multilateral, where China was a significant participant (the Taliban did not take part in the process)	2016 Afghanistan government de facto effectively controls 52% of the country's territory.
27 December 2016	Beijing	Russia, China and Pakistan Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan, about facilitating the peace talks by removing certain Taliban members from the sanctions lists	Multilateral, where China was a significant participant (the Taliban did not take part in the process)	
14 April 2017	Moscow	Moscow six-party talks about ways to revive peace	Multilateral, where China was a significant participant (the Taliban did not take part in the process)	In 2017, the Taliban's activities spread throughout Afghanistan; the country's northern strategic city Mazar-i-Sharif incurred its first attack since 2001.

Date	Location	Activities	China's role and method	The Taliban power dynamics in Afghanistan
6 June 2017	Kabul	Kabul peace process, about the first Afghan peace initiative	Multilateral, where China was a significant participant (the Taliban did not take part in the process)	
June 2019	Beijing	Taliban's official first visit, led by Abdul Ghani Baradar who met with Chinese officials	Bilateral, with China as the host	
September 2019	Beijing	Taliban's official second visit, led by Abdul Ghani Baradar who met with Chinese officials	Bilateral, with China as the host	
29-30 October 2019	Beijing	Two-day intra-Afghan conference in Beijing	Multilateral, with China as the host	
18-19 March 2021	Moscow	"Troika Plus" conference	Multilateral, with China as a significant participant	
April 2021	Doha	"Troika Plus" conference	Multilateral, with China as a significant participant	After the United States formally announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan on 13 April 2021, the Taliban started an overwhelming offensive, rapidly taking over the country.
21 July 2021	Tianjin	Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar	Bilateral, with China as the host	
24 March 2022	Kabul	Wang Yi Meets with Acting Deputy Prime Minister of the Afghan Taliban's Interim Government, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar	Bilateral, with the Taliban as the host	

Table 2 Chinese media coverage during 2001-2013

Year	Medium (Chinese name)	Topic (issue date)	Salient content
2001	Guangzhou Daily (广州日报)	Revelation of the Taliban's forcing teenage girls to be sex-slaves atrocity (26/12/2001)	"1,000 women were kidnapped by the Taliban – some of whom were kept as mistresses or sold to Arabs as 'sex slaves' by Al-Qaeda."
2002	Yangcheng Evening News (羊城晚报)	The Taliban executed her – the story of "the most miserable woman in Afghanistan". (17/10/2002)	"That woman thus becomes the symbol of all Afghanistan women's misery under the Taliban's reign."
2003	Beijing Morning News (北京晨报)	Mullah Omar "echoes" Osama bin Laden (18/02/2003)	"Mullah Omar 'echoes' Osama bin Laden and summons Afghanistan to start a Jihad against America."
2004	Shanxi Evening News (山西晚报)	Taliban sabotages the Afghanistan election (09/08/2004)	"... two election UN staff were killed during the attack."
2005	China News Service (中国新闻社)	Taliban declared they had prepared 45 "human bombs" for devastation at any time (29/09/2005)	"... the parliament election had been relatively stable; however, the violence also started to escalate (i.e. by the Taliban) because of the election."
2006	China News Service (中国新闻社)	Taliban murders innocent women and children in Afghanistan on the pretext of "spying" (10/08/2006)	"... they brutally shot and killed a woman and a child before hanging their corpses on a tree."
2007	China Daily (中国日报)	Taliban has kidnapped 23 South Korean citizens, including 15 women (21/07/2007)	"They (the victims kidnapped by the Taliban) were planning to participate in a voluntary service in Kandahar's hospital and kindergarten."
2008	Henan Commercial Daily (河南商报)	Taliban: girls who go to school will be executed. (27/12/2008)	"From January next year, no woman is allowed to study in school; the penalty of those who violate this decree is death."
2009	Global Times (环球时报)	Afghanistan is a workshop for building a strategic cooperative partnership between China and the United States (21/12/2009)	"(China intervenes in Afghanistan) to satisfy American's demand for 'China's strategic reassurance' and dissolve the scepticism that is deeply rooted in the bilateral relationship."
2010	China Daily (中国日报)	American troops take out the Taliban's lair, seizing the militants' important documents and photographs (20/02/2010)	"... (the US troops) successfully stormed and occupied Taliban's headquarters in the southern Afghanistan Helmand Province's Marjah District."
2011	China Daily (中国日报)	The Taliban trained five-year-old "child soldiers" to shoot with a gun and become a human bomb (11/07/2011)	"The Taliban is more and more frequently using children as suicide bombers or making them act as 'human shields'."
2012	Phoenix Television (凤凰卫视)	Taliban has destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan – the whole world is appalled (13/03/2012)	"In the face of the international community's shock and appeals, the Taliban are not just unmoved; instead, they have become more arrogant and defend their madness in every way."
2013	People's Daily (人民日报)	China was in contact with the Taliban for 12 years in order to prevent the Xinjiang separatists from accumulating their force in Afghanistan (25/06/2013)	"... present-day China's priority in its negotiations with the Taliban was focused on China's domestic security instead of Afghanistan's peacebuilding."

Table 3 Chinese official media coverage A (2014-2021)

Year	Medium (Chinese name)	Topic (issue date)	Salient content
2014	People's Daily (人民日报)	Chinese version and translation of the book Taliban is published – it elaborates the historical facts and present situation of the Taliban (04/12/2014)	"In 2014, with the tortuousness of the US military's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's increasing attacks day after day, the global society is worrying about the future of Afghanistan."
2015	Xinhuanet (新华网)	Taliban is coming back – the worrisome Afghanistan situation (05/10/2015)	"Therefore (i.e. referring to the conflict between ISIL and the Taliban), the Taliban is also putting its hope on increasing its offence to take over more territories, to demonstrate its power and deter the Islamic States' influence in the country."
2016	Xinhuanet (新华网)	Discussion – will the Taliban remain calm and talk peacefully? (05/01/2016)	"The Islamic State's militant outreach permeates Afghanistan, whereas the Taliban is seemingly reluctant to deter them."
2017	People's Daily (人民日报)	When will the dawn of Afghanistan come? (24/08/2017)	"The US policy (i.e. to increase the military deployment) will provoke the Taliban's counterattack. The Taliban has repeatedly emphasised that the prerequisite for them to negotiate with the Afghanistan government is that the United States withdraw its troops from the country."
2018	People's Daily (人民日报)	The inextricable dilemma in the Afghanistan peace process (01/05/2018)	"In the Taliban's recent announcement that they ascribe the 'US military deployment (i.e. in the country)' as the reason for being unable to attain peace in Afghanistan. <...> An analysis points out that the present-day difficulty in Afghanistan is unresolvable; NATO's military campaign impedes the country's peace process <...>."
2019	China News Service (中国新闻社)	China's delegate advocates that the United States continue pushing forward in its negotiations with the Taliban (11/09/2019)	"He (i.e. Zhang Jun, China's delegate to UN) advocated for the United States to continue its negotiations with the Taliban. He hopes that all the factions, including the Taliban, can give weight to their country and people's interests, thereby starting domestic negotiations to quickly achieve a consensus for the future political framework."
2020	Xinhuanet (新华网)	Taliban reaffirms that they will honour the USA-Taliban Peace Agreement (21/06/2020)	"On 19 June, the Taliban reaffirmed that they will honour the Argument and their promise to Western countries including the United States that they will not fall under 'the threat from Afghanistan'. <...> Our country will not be used against anyone. They should not worry."
2021	Xinhuanet (新华网)	Afghanistan Taliban has a quick win – the fiasco of the US foreign policy comes under criticism (16/08/2021)	"... (i.e. the Taliban) ensures security and bring welfare to the (i.e. Afghan) people."

Table 4: Chinese private (local) media coverage B (2014-2021)

Year	Medium (Chinese name)	Topic (issue date)	Salient content
2014	Sina (新浪网)	The Afghan Taliban accuses Pakistan Taliban of killing students: they are hooligans (18/12/2014)	"The killing (i.e. the Pakistan Taliban's Peshawar school massacre) of innocent women and children violates the moral code of Islam."
2015	The Paper (澎湃新闻)	The Rise of Omar and the Taliban (29/07/2015)	"In this desperate moment, Omar received the revelation of God. The prophet's spirit instructed this ordinary village mullah to bring peace to his country. "
2016	Interface News (界面新闻)	Taliban Representatives "secret visit" to China? Global Times: if so, it should be good for the peace (2/08/2016)	"The Taliban is considered an organisation representing the largest ethnic group – the Pashtun's – interests in Afghanistan. <...> proved the Taliban is an unavoidable force in the Afghan peacebuilding."
2017	Interface News (界面新闻)	Seeking legitimacy? The leader of the Taliban advocates "afforestation and beautification of the earth" (27/02/2017)	"(Habitullah Akhundzada, leader of the Taliban): 'Tree planting plays an important role in environmental protection, economic development and the earth's beautification.' "
2018	Reference News (参考消息)	Foreign media claim that the Taliban is storming the ISIL and vow to eliminate this "scourge" from Afghanistan (13/08/2018)	"Hundreds of Taliban militants were moving into the Nangarhar Province to launch a large-scale operation against the Islamic State's stronghold."
2019	Tencent (腾讯网)	"Why can't the American army annihilate the Afghanistan Taliban? On the contrary, it becomes more and more strong. There are four reasons behind this." (28/08/2019)	"The organisation possesses an inherent advantage: the Taliban governed the country for five years; and the people's support is strong."
2020	The Observer Net (观察者网)	Weekly Military Commentary: how does the Taliban rebuild its military strength that will eventually "force" the USA to "accept peace"? (01/03/2020)	"As it is being treated as a peer at the negotiation table (i.e. with the world's Superpower the United States) – the Taliban has reached its political goal."
2021	Baidu Space (百度空间)	Chinese Scholar's fieldwork in Afghanistan report: the Taliban's governance (27/12/2021)	"After the Taliban took over power, the security in Kabul has significantly improved."