
AFGHANISTAN AND THE U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY: 2021-2024

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to understand where Afghanistan stands in the United States-China rivalry after 2021, when the Taliban came to power. It is well understood that both China and the United States have been engaged in “competition” since at least the last decade. The Afghan Taliban came to power in 2021, and they have not yet decided in clear terms where they stand in the rivalry between the two major powers. This paper focuses around the question of their “position” between China and the United States. The study properly investigates and examines the statements of the Taliban’s foreign ministry and the spokesperson about the United States and China. The geographic location of Afghanistan has always attracted great powers’ competition in the region. Today, as the world is faced with another great power’s struggle for domination, it is important to

understand where the Afghan government stands. This study argues that the initial stance of each of these states decided the future journey with the Taliban. The United States has been pursuing a policy to keep the Taliban in control over the two main leverages, the economy and recognition. Their policy has been all about keeping them engaged, yet not doing what the Taliban need. China, in initial times, responded in a more receptive manner and remains the only major state to actively engage the Taliban and help them in the economy and diplomatic outreach. The Taliban, though, takes a neutral stance. They continuously talk about their “legitimate” relations with all. They want and pursue the policy to remain as neutral as possible if Afghanistan want to become prey to another, “New Cold War”.

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan, Sino, US, Rivalry, Taliban Government.

INTRODUCTION

The study initially discusses the responses of the United States and China, among other countries, to the rise of the Taliban to power. The paper argues that these actions decided the future trajectory of the interaction of these states with the Taliban. It means that they have laid the foundation of their relationship with the Taliban. The second section of the paper examines the rivalry between the US-China and the place of Afghanistan in their foreign policies. This section discusses the actions both China and the US took in or regarding Afghanistan after 2021. It also discusses the role of Afghanistan in the power politics of both rival states. It is argued that the geography of Afghanistan makes it important for these states to consider it while responding to each other's actions and policies/ The last and most important section discusses how Afghanistan, under the Taliban, responded to these actions. This section comprehensively discusses the stand Afghanistan is taking in the US-China rivalry, which might be intensified in the coming years.

As mentioned above, due to its geographic location, Afghanistan has always been a center of power struggle between the rival great powers in the region. For experts in the region, the “competition” or “rivalry” between China and the US is the start of a New Cold War. They have been engaged in the economic/trade war to technological competition, to struggle for soft power around the world since at least the last decade. After the rise to power, the Taliban have yet to clarify their “position” between the two states. Although they have been pragmatic in deciding

what to do on the foreign front, as no state in the world has formally recognized the government since 2021. They are pragmatically looking at the international scenario and making their case accordingly. This paper thus aims to understand the position Afghanistan under the Taliban has taken since 2021 and explore the future that lies ahead. The study properly analyses the statements and actions of the Taliban government after they came to power. They will provide a clue to understand what they are thinking or what might happen in the future.

TALIBAN CAME TO POWER

The Taliban came to power in a very dramatic way in 2021 because people did not expect the way they could hold power in Kabul. However, they were preparing themselves since the initial stages of the peace process they were involved with the United States, which ultimately resulted in the Doha Peace Agreement in 2020. After the Agreement, the United States had frozen the financial assets of the Afghan government to push them into crisis. All the states have “suspended” their diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, and they are yet to recognize the government of the Taliban. After they came to power, the Taliban have struggled hard to convince a bunch of countries to recognize their government or at least normalize the situation with them. They have been successful in the “normalization” efforts in countries outside the strong influence of the United States. Other states, such as European countries and other states that are under the influence of the US, have been radically opposed to the Taliban government. The Taliban have been reaching out to those who could be convinced to stay in touch with Afghanistan in terms of informal relationships and investment in the country. The Taliban have been treated more positively by China and countries lying in the opposite camp of the US. They have been successful in convincing these countries to invest in Afghanistan and normalizing informal engagements (Lakhdar, 2022).

The economic breakdown of the nation emerged after the Taliban seized power and U.S. forces left because international assistance stopped, and diplomatic recognition failed to materialize, causing the central bank reserves to become inaccessible abroad. A major humanitarian crisis began when Afghanistan lost its financial liquidity, and the currency plunged so that inflation skyrocketed alongside job losses. The U.S. government declared it would withhold Afghan central bank funds until the Taliban prove their political independence from the Taliban, establish money laundering prevention regulations, while adding an independent monitoring system (Afzal, 2022).”

The initial response of countries to the Taliban's capture of power decided the future trajectory of their relationship with the Taliban. Ebrahim Raisi announced Iran would use the US military's failure in Afghanistan as an opportunity to secure enduring peace in his nation. President Raisi expressed that Iran welcomes Afghan factions to form national unity while supporting regional stability as neighbouring and related countries. China announced the operation of its Kabul embassy while stating its readiness to assist the nation's recovery after the conflict (Al Jazeera, 2021). Over the past two decades, Iran supported the Taliban during their 1990s rule, yet they maintain their connections to the group through stressing the political inclusion of Persian-speaking Tajiks and Shia Muslim Hazaras. Before August 2021 the forming of an official governmental organization the Taliban conducted official diplomatic travel to Tehran, which continued until the present day. Economic and religious relations between Iran and the Taliban became more active after January 2022, when the acting foreign minister of the Taliban visited Tehran. According to Muraviev (2021), the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan declared that Moscow would establish the legitimacy of the new Taliban government through its direct actions. German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed concerns about both individual Afghan well-being and Afghanistan's national development on the day during a Monday press event. Ben Wallace, the UK Defence Secretary, declared that the global community's failure led to Taliban rule in Afghanistan, thus marking an incomplete Western involvement in Afghan affairs (Al Jazeera, 2021). American foreign policy toward Afghanistan undergoes continuous changes based on assessments of state internal policies and global dominance alongside geopolitical range of power and neighbor and competitor nation influences (Yawar, 2023).

Beijing has developed a new, five-pronged engagement strategy toward Afghanistan since the US withdrew its forces in August 2021: accepting the Taliban's authority over Afghan affairs in a measured and pragmatic manner; preventing Afghanistan from becoming a haven for terrorists; promoting inclusive politics in the country; exhibiting a higher level of humanitarian concern; and publicly criticizing the US and the West for abdicating their duty (Zhang, 2022). The US and other major countries have responded reluctantly and contradictorily to the situation in Afghanistan; in contrast, China is regarded as the most determined foreign actor, cooperating with Tajikistan and Pakistan to help restore stability. China has two interests in Afghanistan: geopolitical and economic, and security is the foremost. A strong Kabul government is expected to help achieve

these goals by strengthening and securing the Taliban's grasp on power in the nation. Because of this, it may be said that the Chinese quickly wrapped up their strategy in Afghanistan, despite American opposition (Miryousefi, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on the Taliban's foreign policy highlights divergent perspectives on its quest for international recognition following the 2021 takeover of Kabul. Scholars like Faheem & Khan (2022) examine the cautious responses of the international community, which remains divided into a U.S.-led bloc (prioritizing human rights and counterterrorism) and a China-Russia bloc (emphasizing pragmatic engagement). Anderson (2023) provides historical context, while Hasar (2024) analyzes the lack of clear legal criteria for recognition under international law, noting that states instead rely on strategic interests and principles like "effective control." Halimi & Jawad (2023) explore the Taliban's diplomatic efforts, though global recognition remains contingent on unmet conditions, including inclusive governance, women's rights, and counterterrorism guarantees.

The evolving relationship between China and the Taliban has been shaped by decades of strategic calculation and regional interests. Encarnation and Fair (2024) trace the roots of China-Taliban relations back to the 1990s Afghan Civil War, showing that China has consistently acknowledged the Taliban as legitimate political actors. The Taliban, in turn, view China as a valuable partner for both economic assistance and international political support. The study concludes by highlighting the significance of this growing partnership for the broader balance of power in South Asia. Fatima and Anwar (2022) argue that China has taken a pragmatic approach to the situation in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal, recognizing both risks and opportunities. While aiming to prevent instability that could spill over into Chinese territory or affect its interests, China is cautiously expanding diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. Although China's strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan are clear, particularly in light of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its involvement remains measured, given the Taliban's uncertain governance and internal instability. Helštýnová (2023) focuses on the economic and security dimensions of the bilateral relationship, emphasizing China's dual interest in investment opportunities and regional stability. Anjum et al. (2021) add that China views the U.S. exit as part of a broader geopolitical competition. They suggest Washington's chaotic withdrawal may have been aimed

at destabilizing Afghanistan to undermine Chinese interests. China remains particularly concerned about the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which it considers a security threat. Beijing hopes the Taliban will suppress ETIM activities in exchange for diplomatic and economic engagement.

Ibrahimi and Farasoo (2022) critically examine shifting U.S. policy toward the Taliban, presenting the group as a complex, networked movement rooted locally but tied to transnational jihadist networks and Pakistan's strategic agenda in Afghanistan. The authors highlight how U.S. policy discourses evolved, framing different aspects of the Taliban's identity to align with changing American strategic priorities. These shifting narratives often conflicted with local realities of violence and insecurity, contributing to strategic misjudgments. The study reveals that the contradictory U.S. discourse created confusion in both policy execution and public understanding, ultimately playing a role in the failure of U.S. objectives in Afghanistan. Snider (2022) explores these developments from the perspective of U.S. national security policy, analyzing the post-9/11 "grand strategy" that led to the invasion and prolonged occupation of Afghanistan. He identifies the internal and external drivers behind the eventual U.S. withdrawal and considers the long-term implications for American policy in the region. His analysis emphasizes how evolving strategic concerns and political fatigue reshaped U.S. engagement with Afghanistan. Yawar (2024) places these discussions in a broader historical context, arguing that Afghanistan has long been shaped by a cycle of insecurity, sectarian divisions, foreign interference, and underdevelopment. He stresses that the country has rarely served its national interests, often becoming a battleground for external powers. Yawar particularly emphasizes how the U.S. has continuously recalibrated its foreign policy toward Afghanistan based on its relations with other powers such as Russia, China, and Iran.

While these studies focus largely on the United States, the present study shifts attention to how the Taliban government positions itself between the two global rivals, the United States and China, navigating their competition to extract political legitimacy and economic gains in a changing geopolitical landscape.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine Afghanistan's geopolitical position under Taliban rule within the broader context of China's rivalry. Given the limited accessibility to primary actors such as Taliban officials and the unavailability of credible policy documents in Afghanistan's current

governance structure, the research relies heavily on secondary data sources. These include news and media reports from reputable international and regional outlets, academic journal articles focusing on U.S. and Chinese regional strategies, and official speeches and statements from key policymakers in both Washington and Beijing. To systematically interpret the competing narratives and power dynamics embedded within these texts, the study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Aydın-Düzgit, 2014). CDA enables the researcher to unpack how language is used by both global powers to construct legitimacy, exert influence, and position Afghanistan within their strategic discourses (Jackson, 2015). Through this approach, the paper not only investigates policy directions but also deciphers the ideological underpinnings and rhetorical strategies that shape international engagement with Afghanistan.

This study employs Neoclassical Realism as its primary theoretical framework to analyze the foreign policy behaviour of the Taliban government amid intensifying U.S.–China rivalry. Neoclassical realism, as developed by scholars like Gideon Rose (1998), extends the classical and structural realist traditions by integrating both systemic-level pressures, such as the competition between major powers and domestic-level variables, including a state's internal political structure, regime interests, leadership perceptions, and institutional constraints. This dual-level approach is particularly useful in understanding the actions of weaker or non-traditional state actors, such as the Taliban, which do not operate within the same parameters as consolidated nation-states (Rose, G., 1998).

Afghanistan under Taliban rule finds itself at the intersection of competing geopolitical interests. From a systemic perspective, the U.S.–China rivalry exerts significant external pressure on Afghanistan, presenting both risks and opportunities. Rather than aligning strictly with one side, the Taliban have pursued a balancing strategy, simultaneously seeking economic investment, political engagement, and strategic cooperation with China, while also pursuing diplomatic recognition and sanction relief from the United States. Neoclassical realism provides a coherent lens to explain this behaviour by recognizing that foreign policy is not merely a function of external power dynamics but is also shaped by the perceptions, priorities, and survival strategies of domestic actors (Taliaferro, et al, 2009).

The Taliban leadership, facing internal legitimacy challenges, economic isolation, and limited institutional capacity, interprets great power rivalry as a strategic opportunity rather than a direct threat. Their engagement with China, particularly

through secure rare earth minerals, and promoting regional connectivity, represents an effort to attract investment and political support without being absorbed into a formal alliance. Simultaneously, by opening indirect dialogue with the U.S. through humanitarian intermediaries and signaling a willingness to curb terrorist activities, the Taliban seek to gain international legitimacy, access frozen financial assets, and soften sanctions that hinder governance. This behaviour illustrates the Taliban's pragmatic and adaptive foreign policy, grounded in the neoclassical realist understanding of how weak regimes operate under both external constraints and internal vulnerabilities (Rippsman. 2011).

Ultimately, neoclassical realism allows for a nuanced interpretation of the Taliban's position—not as a passive actor reacting to external pressure, but as a rational yet constrained regime, actively manoeuvring between rival powers to advance its survival, legitimacy, and state-building objectives. This framework enables the study to explore how the Taliban government constructs a foreign policy that is both reactive to geopolitical shifts and reflective of its unique internal challenges.

CHINA AND AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE TALIBAN

Since its strategic position, Afghanistan has continuously functioned as a location where global powers confront each other for influence. Chinese strain toward Afghanistan represents a shift in political influence between major powers in both Central Asia and South Asia since the arrival of US troops in 2001. Multiple dynamic changes have occurred in Chinese views about US and NATO involvement in the Afghan theatre. In the decade following the 2001 US invasion, Beijing maintained an expected wariness about American objectives because it supported its general belief of US plans to limit Chinese growth. Many within China's strategic community who work as police or soldiers tend to see the US military forces in Afghanistan as security risks that support America's containment strategy against China. The worldview of China regarding US motives led officials to disregard American requests, especially when asked to back the search for alternative delivery routes, that Pakistan's logistic system had become too unreliable (Dmitrieva, 2022).

China maintains an opposing standpoint from the United States and other Western countries regarding the Taliban's position as a key political force in Afghanistan and therefore chooses to stay neutral against the US-NATO positions. China's ability to secure a leading position in Afghan affairs remained unwavering throughout the 2021 summer when the Taliban seized power just as unexpectedly

as for the United States. The day before the Taliban seized control of Kabul State Councilor Wang Yi received Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and his high-ranking Taliban delegation in Beijing. Wang publicly declared the Taliban as a central player in Afghan military and political matters during this critical period (Ruttig, 2021).

The leadership of China has adopted an enhanced humanitarian approach as its new engagement policy, which emerges logically from previous engagement policies. China has routinely offered material assistance and other humanitarian aid programs since 2002 and eliminated all debt obligations that Afghanistan carried ahead of 2002. China intensified its financial support following 2014 so that the \$326.7 million sent between 2014 and 2017 surpassed the donations from 2001 to 2013 (Tahiri, 2017). China dedicated its support to both developing educational programs and hospital facilities and various prominent reconstruction projects while granting scholarships and delivering training initiatives to officials from different backgrounds. The post-2021 Chinese humanitarian approach demonstrates expanded interests in various humanitarian needs. China announced during early September 2021 that it would provide emergency aid, including goods valued at more than \$31 million, along with 3 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines and additional vaccine supply would follow as needed. The total amount of Western aid surpasses China's money, but Western countries encountered difficulties discovering methods to distribute funds outside Taliban control. China's emergency aid demonstrated profound shame to the Biden administration after they used \$3.5 billion in Afghan foreign bank assets to pay American 9/11 victims during February 2022 (Joe Cash, 2024).

China showed two divergent concerns about the US presence in Afghanistan since it feared both US military expansion toward China and uncontrolled US military withdrawal that could create a haven for terrorists. China changed its perspective on the United States from outrage to disdain after the materialization of concerns in August 2021. The way China viewed the ill-organized American withdrawal was marked by open contempt. During June 2021 Wang Yi predicted that the forthcoming US withdrawal would be managed properly and systematically to prevent terrorism from returning to Afghanistan along with deteriorating security conditions. He blamed the United States for the Afghanistan problems at the start of July and insisted on a proper transfer of Afghan responsibilities. Washington must avoid letting its departure cause disorder and civil unrest, according to him (Encarnation & Fair, 2024b).

China has grown more involved and helpful in supporting Afghan matters following the United States departure. The Chinese government supports the Taliban through cautious diplomacy while actively enhancing multilateral efforts to rebuild Afghanistan through new regional diplomatic bodies like the Foreign Ministers' Meeting of Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the organization faces critical boundaries when pursuing its goals. External opposition to the US resulting from the disastrous US mission in Afghanistan constitutes the main external aspect which constrains China's engagement with risks in Afghan affairs (C, 2022). Recently, Chinese President Xi Jinping verified the credentials of the new Taliban-appointed Afghan ambassador to China, that took place around late January 2024. The strategic move of Xi towards the Taliban stands as the most significant challenge against the U.S.-led global denial of diplomatic relations with the Afghan government. Following the meeting, China expressed through its foreign ministry spokesman that Afghanistan should be included in the international community (Asfandiyar Mir and Andrew Watkins, 2024).

China extended an invitation to Kabul's Taliban representative during the year 2023. China maintains a longstanding interest in Afghanistan because experts refer to the country as the "Saudi Arabia of lithium." Recently, the Taliban administration sent its official envoy to China. Taliban leaders, along with their supporters, reacted favorably to this development. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Wang Wenbin stated that welcoming Asadullah's credentials did not mean accepting official recognition of the Taliban government because no nation has done so thus far. Wang explained this gesture as an ordinary diplomatic standard practice while emphasizing that the Taliban leads an interim government currently. Wang expressed his belief that the process of resolving party interests would automatically result in diplomatic recognition of the Afghan government. The envoy expressed his belief that Afghanistan must avoid international social exclusion, yet maintained the need for Afghanistan to fulfil international community demands (Jalalzai, 2024).

Following the chaotic US withdrawal and the Taliban's swift takeover of Kabul, some analysts speculated that the withdrawal was planned to cause serious security issues for Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Iran. However, an examination of more formal and serious statements and texts from US think tanks suggests that, despite their predictions of a Taliban takeover, the Americans anticipated taking six months to a year to conquer Kabul following their withdrawal from Afghanistan. They also believed they would be able to negotiate with the Taliban and maintain

some leverage to mitigate the consequences of the pullout. Numerous think tanks believe that U.S. policy in Afghanistan following the troop withdrawal is characterized by a desire to remain engaged in the country and support the Afghan people while refraining from legitimizing the Taliban regime (Makoveeva, 2023). Representatives from the Taliban in Doha made an effort to show international involvement that they had evolved from their strict practices during their previous regime in the 1990s. Washington deployed a practical framework that incorporated aid for human needs together with measures to defend Afghanistan's fiscal system from devaluation. The main component of these policies was the general licenses from the Treasury Department that allowed partial transactions despite ongoing monetary prohibitions. Washington maintained behind-the-scenes dialogues with representatives of the Taliban regarding counterterrorism operations as well as humanitarian issues for both women and inclusivity. The United States failed to fulfil Taliban demands regarding diplomatic recognition or ending economic sanctions, or releasing Afghan central bank assets, which Washington had previously eliminated (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2023).

One of the primary focal points of U.S. policy in Afghanistan post-troop withdrawal is the humanitarian sphere. The United States aims to avert a potential humanitarian catastrophe and assist Afghan citizens in meeting their essential needs, including food and healthcare. However, the aid provided thus far is insufficient to address the humanitarian challenges and stabilize the Afghan economy. Consequently, the United States is collaborating closely with the United Nations and other organizations to establish an effective mechanism for providing humanitarian assistance to the Afghan populace. To maintain its policy of non-recognition of the Taliban government, the United States has declined to unfreeze the Afghan government's accounts and the foreign exchange reserves of the Central Bank of Afghanistan (Dealing, 2023).

The U.S. Department of State ordered the closure of U.S. Embassy Kabul operations for August 31, 2021, then established the Afghanistan Affairs Unit (AAU) in Doha, Qatar, which serves as the American diplomatic mission to Afghanistan. The AAU functions as the diplomatic channel for US interactions with Afghanistan through its responsibility to administer consular tasks and humanitarian aid distribution while coordinating joint strategies with partners to deliver messages to the Taliban. Qatar operates as the United States' diplomatic representative to Afghanistan to provide consular assistance and related diplomatic services to U.S. citizens there since December 2021. The Afghan Embassy, as well

as two consulates in the United States, terminated operations on March 23, 2022 (Affairs, 2022). March 2022 marked the time when the Taliban imposed their ban on girls' secondary school education, thus beginning the sequence of events which disrupted meaningful diplomatic discussions. The alarming school closure decision by the Taliban stood as an opposite action to Doha representatives' original statements and destroyed possibilities that primary school education goals would advance, thus creating serious doubts about future collaborations. No significant communications passed between high-level officials during this period since Washington wished to demonstrate its firm stance on the school closure matter. The US resumed negotiations with the group in July but limited its interaction to only partial involvement. During his meeting with the group, Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West focused on “earthquake relief, economic stabilization, terrorism, [and] counter-narcotics” matters while addressing human rights issues. A US drone attack which killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri within the Kabul city centre, severed this dual approach adopted by the US, only four weeks after the new diplomatic path started. President Biden described the drone attack as evidence of US long-distance counterterrorism operations, but it became clear through the revelation of 9/11 plotter Ayman al-Zawahiri's residence in Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani's guesthouse that terror connections between the two groups remained active. Washington criticized the Taliban for betraying their Doha Agreement responsibilities, while the Taliban organization claimed ignorance about al-Zawahiri's Kabul residence (Fatima & Anwar, 2022b).

President Joe Biden signed an executive order in 2022 to divide \$7bn frozen Afghan funds held by the US into two portions for humanitarian relief for Afghanistan and future seizure potential by victims of the September 11 attacks. The frozen money is allocated to move funds away from the Afghan government so they can reach civil society organizations, along with humanitarian agencies working within Afghanistan. The official meeting between US officials and representatives of the Taliban took place on July 31 2023, to establish future diplomatic relations between the two parties as well as discuss Afghan state asset releases (Baheer, 2023). If the global community decides to stop recognizing the Taliban government, Washington would have to navigate an intricate diplomatic challenge because it still handles Taliban assets and sanctions control (Elizabeth Threlkeld and Sania Shahid, 2024). The November 2024 presidential elections in the US will likely support either minimal dialogue between the United States and Afghanistan, which depends on Taliban behaviour under a Biden or perhaps no exchange at all under

another Trump administration. The policy would combine less interest in humanitarian assistance and reduced interaction, with reduced attempts to manage Afghan central bank funds. A future Trump administration might choose to focus on economic benefits from Afghanistan by acquiring mineral resources despite possible negative consequences on counterterrorism initiatives and human rights compliance. A second Trump administration under similar circumstances would show diminished interest in Afghan cooperation with international partners, resulting in expanded diplomatic chaos. The Taliban have yet to show evidence regarding their consideration of US political timelines while evaluating their negotiation approach and its probable effects. Political turbulence in Washington between now and November 2024, together with afterwards, will make engagement more challenging (Joe Cash, 2024).

The main point of the discussion shows United States aims to control Taliban government operations while containing its activities. The formal negotiation between their governments remains contingent upon how well the Taliban follows its political mandates for inclusivity and female rights. The Taliban remain unable to follow policies as expected by the United States and its Western coalition members. The Biden administration chose to release frozen funds, which would be used differently than giving them directly to the Taliban. The United States brokered formal talks with the Taliban in Doha just before this point, showing their reluctance to let the Taliban disappear. As they remain trapped in their current situation, the Taliban continue to participate in this ongoing cycle. The Taliban's continued dependence on US funding manifests through "humanitarian assistance", but they also seek American recognition of their government. Through its exclusive power over the Taliban, the United States retains the only strength to push the Taliban into desired actions in Afghanistan and the neighbouring region (Helštyňová, 2023b).

China's stance from the very beginning is very welcoming. They held high-level meetings with the Taliban's officials in China, Afghanistan and Pakistan. They tried hard to remain as close as possible to the Taliban. The only issue China is concerned about is security. The Chinese government provided whatever the Taliban needed at the time, from economic assistance to investments and diplomatic outreach. They have been engaged with the Taliban as much as the other countries, such as Pakistan, Turkey or Iran, have been since 2021. In major powers, such as India, European countries or the United States, China is the only state to provide multiple political and economic opportunities to the Taliban. This section highlighted the

fact that China is more open to the Taliban than the United States. It has invested in the country, in multiple sectors, allowed the Ambassador of the Taliban to hold office in China and provided opportunities to pursue the struggle for recognition. While the US, on the other hand, want to contain the Taliban by using whatever they have at their disposal as leverage. All this is done because Afghanistan holds a central position in the struggle for hegemony in the region between the United States and China (Faheem & Khan, 2022b).

US-CHINA RIVALRY

The US-China competition now stands at a stage where experts define the situation as a “New Cold War” between the United States and China. Trade competition, along with technological and geopolitical disputes between the United States and China, resulted in a new global conflict. Two global superpowers are currently navigating a growing intense fight to claim leadership supremacy throughout the world. Alan Dupont from Hinrich Foundation and Cognoscenti Group identifies the U.S.-China tension as a simmering rivalry, yet states this condition provides no basis for relaxation. The United States and China have continuously struggled against each other throughout all major global regions since their initial interactions began. Since the "pivot to Asia" under President Obama more than a decade ago, China has transformed from an important strategic ally into either an open global adversary or an ongoing strategic competitor. The diverse disputes between China and the USA about the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, intellectual property theft and Uyghur human rights violations and 5G technology progression can escalate into misjudged military conflicts (Dupont, 2023).

Worsening tensions between the United States and China in their trade and technical warfare will force the breakup of unfavourable supply chains while decreasing worldwide cooperation and intensifying protectionist policies, and creating new battlegrounds for disputes. The economic recovery remains at risk, together with the possibility of creating another global recession or depression. Multiple obstacles, including disbelief between parties and divergent worldviews, exist alongside system dynamics and domestic politics, which create barriers to avoid the most destructive consequences of the New Cold War (Verma, 2023).

Political scientist Graham Allison's "Thucydides Trap" hypothesis has become pervasive in discussions about US-China relations because it claims hegemonic conflicts involving rising and declining powers always spill into international system instability, leading to violent clashes. (Allison, 2017). The United States

consider China as an existential threat to the liberal world order, while China is defensively growing its influence and presence in Asia and African countries. That is why Kevin Rudd, in his book “The Avoidable War”, defines the next ten years as “the decade of living dangerously.” The rivalry between the two nations will only increase, shifting the global balance of power frequently and unstably (Rudd, 2022). The United States is going to encircle China with its presence around China. As Antony Blinken, US Secretary of State, said that the US should seek to “shape the strategic environment around Beijing” by investing in America’s technological-military capabilities and mobilizing US allies. Aaron Friedberg, in his recent book (Friedberg, 2022), explains that the United States’ bipartisan post-Cold War engagement approach demonstrated how China surprised everyone by shifting from market liberalism to state capitalism, especially under Xi’s leadership. China never acknowledged openly the US’s role in promoting its integration into the World Trade Organization and the global economy, even as it enjoyed unrestricted access to international markets. And now, the slight liberalization carried out by his predecessors has been undermined by the Communist Party of China (CPC) under Xi, who has solidified authoritarian authority once more (Campanella, 2022).

The regional hold of this competitive conflict continues to grip the Asia-Pacific area even after other evaluations. The great power status regained by China and concurrent disputes regarding international order governance principles have restored international political competition between America and China. Asia serves as the central point for global power dynamics, demonstrated through the existing rivalry between the BRI initiative and FOIP structures, which affect Asian states that must find ways to handle the US-China competition. The analysis within the hedging discourse explores Pakistan’s «hedging dilemma» by analyzing the relationship dynamics between the United States and China. Data collection through archival findings and interview results confirms Pakistan faces reduced hedging flexibility because Beijing implements the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor while the US completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan and shifts strategic focus to compete against China (Boni, 2024).

The Chinese government avoids accepting any position held by the United States while engaging with the current Taliban leadership. The Taliban seeks “friendly and cooperative relations with China”, so Beijing acknowledged the Taliban’s government in exchange for their commitment to stop Islamic unrest in Xinjiang. Chinese officials had already encountered the Taliban before signing diplomatic agreements in 2000 and 2001 regarding economic cooperation and Taliban support

in Xinjiang. The Chinese government perceives Afghanistan as a dangerous geopolitical complex which produced many difficulties for other leading powers. The Chinese government shows no interest in taking part in the "Great Game" for Eurasia's control. The U.S. government continues seeking alternative methods to control the Taliban government through managing the unclear areas of imposed sanctions. Due to sanctions from afar, trading activities and investment ventures need to obtain approval from the U.S. Treasury via licensing systems (Islamoglu, 2023). The Taliban government, like other third world countries, have to decide whether it wants to be on the Chinese side or the other, the United States. The next section examines the official stance of the Taliban to argue that the Taliban have been largely engaged with China, but they have been neutral, at least in their political rhetoric.

TALIBAN BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

The Taliban seems to be remaining neutral in the upcoming “New Cold WAR”, between China and US US-led Western countries. We can also say that they will remain neutral as much as they are dependent, both economically and diplomatically, on the United States. The Taliban's systematic building of relations with other states, reducing dependence, and gaining recognition, does imply that the Taliban leadership have learned lessons of the past and acted strategically. Their international relations moves during the past decade or longer also offer some indicators as to their views on foreign policy in broader terms. The Taliban itself has not come out with anything like a ‘white paper’ on foreign policy, and documented utterances on the issue are limited. The Taliban appear dedicated to a non-interference and neutrality-focused foreign policy stance. This commitment is based on a review of Afghanistan's past, where a guiding concept was maintaining a balance between the influence of numerous alliances, global powers, and neighbouring powers. The Taliban believe that remaining out of global power struggles is crucial, but they also see the need to interact with these powers; their agreement with the US, for instance, is driven by their desire to secure an orderly military exit and gain international recognition, as well as their desire to maintain US economic support going forward. These factors, along with the 40 years of violent Afghan history, first with the Soviet occupation of the 1980s and then with what they perceive to be a US-led occupation from 2001 to the present, must be understood in the context of their views on neutrality as an ideal (Harpviken, 2021).

The Taliban's rhetoric, the statements of the Spokesperson and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. On an occasion in Qatar, Amir Khan Muttaqi, the acting foreign minister for the Taliban, stated, "We want positive relationships with the whole world. We support diplomatic ties that are in balance. We think that kind of balanced connection may prevent unrest in Afghanistan," Muttaqi stated. This statement primarily highlights the fact that the Taliban have learnt that being neutral is more profitable and in the interests of Afghanistan than being aligned with any of the two archrivals. In the initial times, The Associated Press was informed by Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi that the Taliban administration has no problems with the US and seeks good ties with all countries. The Taliban government time and again mentions the US to reiterate their position in the international sphere. He called on Washington and other countries to unfreeze money worth over \$10 billion that was put on hold when the Taliban came to power. The primary issue in these times was economic. As mentioned, the Muttaqi struggled for the unfreezing of the money the US had blocked from being released to the new Taliban government. U.S. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, on that occasion, told the AP that since U.S. soldiers departed Afghanistan in late August, the militant group al-Qaida had expanded marginally within the country. Muttaqi responded angrily to this statement. McKenzie is the senior military commander for Washington in the Middle East. In addition to promising not to target American and NATO personnel during the last stage of the retreat, which concluded in late August, Muttaqi stated that the Taliban had fulfilled their promises. "Unfortunately, there are (always) allegations against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, but there is no proof," Muttaqi stated. "McKinzie needs to produce whatever evidence he may have. I can state with certainty that this is an unfounded accusation." He did, however, voice optimism that, given enough time and proof, "America will slowly, slowly change its policy toward Afghanistan" to benefit from a country run by the Taliban that can stand on its own. "My last point is to America, to the American nation: You are a great and big nation and you must have enough patience and have a big heart to dare to make policies on Afghanistan based on international rules and relegation, and to end the differences and make the distance between us shorter and choose good relations with Afghanistan." (Press, 2021). Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi of the Taliban government declared financial instability as the principal issue facing Afghanistan because American authorities hold the frozen assets of Afghan citizens. He made this statement in his 2021 open letter. The letter calls for both American financial cooperation and Asset release

from the Afghanistan Central Bank while requesting that banking sanctions to ended. Muttaqi discussed numerous political matters during the first face-to-face meeting with America held in Doha. According to him, the Taliban explained strongly that any international efforts to destroy Afghanistan and weaken its government would benefit no party involved. According to him, the parties reached an agreement for ongoing negotiations. The statement reveals that the Taliban foreign minister held a positive outlook on American relations with the Taliban. The Taliban aim to win support from the United States for the resolution of their short-term problems during discussions. Two meetings between American top officials and Taliban representatives occurred in Doha following July 2022, when the US killed the al-Qaeda leader (Al Jazeera, 2022). At the meeting, the Afghan delegation expressed their “anger” at the violation of Afghanistan’s Aireal sovereignty, but they reiterated the hope for engagement and interaction ahead.

The Taliban in Afghanistan have claimed that the US is impeding their efforts to get worldwide acceptance for the newly established government in Kabul. When asked if the policies of his group or any other nation was to blame for the delay in gaining legitimacy, chief Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid responded, "As far as recognition by foreign countries is concerned, I think the United States is the biggest obstacle." He declared, "It [America] has not taken any steps on this count either and does not permit other countries to move in this direction." According to Mujahid, the Taliban had complied with "all the requirements" for foreign recognition of their administration (Gul, 2022). They feel that the US is doing everything not to lose the leverage of diplomatic recognition. Although they remain still and in their position, not to side with any of the rival states.

The current stance of the Taliban spokesperson requires special attention. The representative restates the stance articulated by Afghanistan’s foreign minister. Mujahid aimed to demonstrate to US leadership and the complete global community that worldwide separation cannot be maintained by any nation. Through his statement, Mujahid emphasized that political collaboration with the Taliban serves the best interest of all nations, including America. Official discussions about "the grievances" the Taliban face can commence through this solution. Mujahid pointed out that Taliban officials seek strong diplomatic relations with the United States based on their February 2020 agreement reached in Doha, Qatar. According to his views, Washington must develop closer ties between Kabul and Washington (Matthieu Aikins and Jim Huylebroek, 2021). The Taliban continues to express their desire to maintain a connection with the United States

despite its third-country engagement stance toward them. The leadership of Afghanistan emphasizes continued US-Taliban dialogue even though Washington has refused to acknowledge the government.

In another interview, he said that ‘As long as the United States controlled Afghanistan, we were at war with it and its opponents.’ They now understand that international relation is carried out without the previous negative engagements. You have to seek new opportunities and engage the actor in a new way. Abdul Qahar Balkhi, a spokesman for the foreign ministry, also said that ‘The conflict is finally over.’ He also assesses that "Minister Muttaqi added, in a delegation with the US representatives, that the security brought about by the new (government) lays the foundation for foreign investment, including for China, in Afghanistan that ensures their interest besides cooperating with Afghans in economic growth & stability with the full support of the new government," It means that the foreign minister indicated the obvious that China is investing in the country and what the US, its archrival needs to do is to engage with the Taliban.

Despite the fact that the Taliban want the US to engage them, they have expressed their positivity regarding the Chinese practical engagement in the form of investment and diplomatic help. However, this positive note did not mean the Taliban had joined the Chinese side of the conflict. They are not in a position to do so because they are still hung up on the diplomatic recognition and internal problems of the economy. Zabihullah Mujahid told the Italian newspaper that with China's help, the Taliban will fight for an economic comeback in Afghanistan. “China is our most important partner and represents a fundamental and extraordinary opportunity for us, because it is ready to invest and rebuild our country,” the Taliban spokesperson was quoted as saying in the interview (Seçkin, 2021). The Taliban often proudly express their gratitude to China because of the opportunities they have when they are engaged with China. This is the reality that China is the most important partner today.

As far as the issue of funds is concerned, the Taliban are struggling to get it into their pockets. “The Taliban has repeatedly called on the US and other governments and institutions to release the funds, saying they were needed to stabilize Afghanistan’s ravaged economy and prevent a humanitarian crisis. The theft and seizure of money held/frozen by the United States of the Afghan people represents the lowest level of human and moral decay of a country and a nation,” Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem said on X (Twitter). The current stance of the Taliban spokesperson requires special attention. The representative restates the

stance articulated by Afghanistan's foreign minister. Mujahid aimed to demonstrate to US leadership and the complete global community that worldwide separation cannot be maintained by any nation. Through his statement, Mujahid emphasized that political collaboration with the Taliban serves the best interest of all nations, including America. Official discussions about "the grievances" the Taliban face can commence through this solution. Mujahid pointed out that Taliban officials seek strong diplomatic relations with the United States based on their February 2020 agreement reached in Doha, Qatar. According to his views, Washington must develop closer ties between Kabul and Washington (Matthieu Aikins and Jim Huylebroek, 2021). The Taliban continues to express their desire to maintain a connection with the United States despite its third-country engagement stance toward them. The leadership of Afghanistan emphasizes continued US-Taliban dialogue even though Washington has refused to acknowledge the government.

CONCLUSION

The Taliban want to be neutral in the "New Cold War". They want it because they know the cost of band wagoning in international politics. They have been more engaged with China because China is giving them space, and the US wants to pressure them to do what the West want them to do. Both China and the United States have responded differently when the Taliban came to power in 2021, and that decided what is going to come next. The Chinese government had a soft image even before the Taliban came to power, and from the very beginning, when they came to power, they engaged them in economic and diplomatic engagements. The US, from the very beginning, was skeptic about the future of Afghanistan under the Taliban, and they responded with no clear stance. They had to satisfy their populations with the mess they created for the 20 years in Afghanistan. After the Taliban came to power and left the country, the US government had two things to pressure the Taliban on. The one was the previous government's billions of dollars in the US, and the second was the issue of recognition. The first one is justified based on the Taliban's "illegitimate" government, and the second is through its hegemonic position to force countries not to engage with the Taliban. Although China is reaching out to Afghanistan. The primary factor, this paper argued, is that China wants Afghanistan to be on its side. It must be said that the Chinese government also want to exploit the natural resources, but the primary factor behind this is the Chinese government's fear of American encirclement. The Taliban want to be neutral at any cost. The statements and rhetoric of the foreign policy

establishment, including the foreign minister, the Taliban spokesperson and others, have reiterated that they want a “constructive” relationship with all. They want to be independent in its foreign policy when it comes to siding with either of the two rivals.

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