



# Assessing the Feasibility and Impact of Extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor into Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** This study examines the feasibility and implications of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, focusing on its geopolitical, economic, and developmental impacts in the post-2021 Taliban-ruled era. Afghanistan's strategic position as a crossroads between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East positions it as a potential hub for trade, energy transit, and regional integration under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The analysis highlights Afghanistan's growing interest in CPEC as a pathway to economic recovery through infrastructure development, access to regional markets, and foreign investment. However, challenges such as ethnic fragmentation, security instability, governance deficits, and geopolitical rivalries (e.g., U.S.-India strategic interests and Russian caution) complicate implementation. The study advocates for a phased, modular approach prioritizing pilot projects in stable provinces like Balkh and Nangarhar, coupled with inclusive governance and multilateral cooperation to mitigate risks. While CPEC's extension offers transformative potential for Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction and China's BRI ambitions, success hinges on balancing infrastructure investments with diplomacy, security coordination, and community engagement.

**Keywords:** CPEC, BRI, Afghanistan Reconstruction, Regional Connectivity, Security Challenges

## I. Introduction

In the summer of 2021, global attention turned once again to Afghanistan as a pivotal moment in the country's modern history unfolded. After nearly two decades of military presence, the United States and NATO forces completed their withdrawal, bringing an end to what had become the world's longest-running war. The departure of the final U.S. aircraft from Kabul's Bagram Airfield on August 30 symbolized not just a military exit but the closing of a chapter marked by intense conflict, foreign intervention, and fragile political experiments. In the weeks that followed, the Taliban quickly consolidated power, eventually announcing the formation of an interim government under the name "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." While this transition marked the restoration of domestic governance, it also ushered in a period of deep uncertainty and a renewed effort to rebuild a war-torn nation [1].

Afghanistan's geographical location gives it immense strategic significance. Tucked in the heart of Asia, it borders six countries—China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—forming a natural bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. (Figure 1) Despite its relatively modest size—slightly smaller than China's Qinghai Province—the country's rugged terrain and mountainous landscapes have long posed challenges to infrastructure development and connectivity. Yet, this very geography offers a tremendous opportunity: to transform Afghanistan into a critical transit hub for trade, energy, and cross-regional cooperation [2].



Figure 1, Afghanistan's geographical location (Source: worldatlas.com)

This opportunity becomes particularly meaningful in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a sweeping global infrastructure plan launched in 2013. Among its most prominent components is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), officially initiated in 2015. With more than \$60 billion in investments focused on energy, transportation, and industrial development, CPEC has reshaped Pakistan's economic landscape. It has helped ease energy shortages, improved transportation links, created employment, and positioned Pakistan as a strategic gateway between Central and South Asia [3]. The corridor also stands as a symbol of the robust and enduring relationship between China and Pakistan, often described as an "all-weather strategic

partnership" [4].





Figure 2, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Source: World Bank)

In this context, Afghanistan has shown increasing interest in joining CPEC. Its leaders have voiced strong support for integrating into the broader Belt and Road framework and have taken part in multiple trilateral discussions with China and Pakistan to explore the extension of CPEC into Afghan territory. The Taliban has publicly acknowledged the extension as “very important” and expressed readiness to cooperate [5]. This extension is to offer Afghanistan access to regional trade routes, attract foreign investment, and help catalyze much-needed economic recovery [6]. Yet the path forward is far from straightforward. Security instability, political fragility, lack of modern infrastructure, and ongoing humanitarian challenges pose serious obstacles. Extending CPEC into Afghanistan raises legitimate questions about feasibility, risk, and long-term sustainability. At the same time, the potential strategic and developmental payoffs are too significant to ignore.

This study aims to explore both sides of the equation. It examines the feasibility of extending CPEC into Afghanistan and investigates the broader implications of such a move—geopolitical, economic, and developmental. The research begins with an overview of Afghanistan's post-2021 political and economic realities, followed by a detailed look at the status of CPEC and its evolving scope. It also analyzes proposed corridor routes and discusses the risks and opportunities that may arise. Ultimately, this paper seeks to offer a balanced, evidence-based perspective on how cross-border infrastructure cooperation can support regional stability, economic integration, and sustainable reconstruction in a post-conflict Afghanistan.

## II. Historical Progress

The vision of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan is not a sudden development, but rather the result of years of diplomatic engagement, policy alignment, and regional aspirations. Since the mid-2010s, Afghanistan has consistently expressed interest in integrating into China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially by becoming part of CPEC. This desire stems from Afghanistan's strategic location and its hope to leverage infrastructure investment for post-conflict reconstruction and long-term development.

In 2016, Janan Mosazai, then Afghanistan's ambassador to China, publicly endorsed CPEC as a project of immense regional value, emphasizing that what benefits Pakistan could equally support Afghanistan's recovery and regional integration [7]. In the same year, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan's then-Chief Executive, visited China and reiterated Afghanistan's support for the BRI. He also signaled Kabul's intent to participate actively in projects under the initiative, highlighting shared economic interests and mutual respect between the two nations [7]. Momentum continued to build in the following years. In 2017, Afghanistan officially became a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a move that further aligned the country with China's multilateral economic strategy [8]. This institutional development provided Afghanistan with access to much-needed funding for infrastructure and connectivity initiatives aligned with the BRI vision.

In 2021, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the progress of CPEC and its regional implications. Spokesperson Zhao Lijian confirmed that China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan had been in ongoing discussions regarding the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan. He clarified that the project is purely for economic cooperation and does not infringe on the sovereignty or territorial interests of any third party [9].

The Taliban administration, after assuming power in August 2021, also voiced support for extending CPEC. In September 2021, at an international forum titled “Jointly Rebuilding Afghanistan,” Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid called the extension of the corridor into Afghanistan “very important” and emphasized that Afghanistan would ensure the safety of projects emanating from this cooperation [10].



Figure 3, Zabihullah Mujahid assured that extension of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by linking it with Afghanistan is very important. (Source: [https://dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/618114-CPEC-important-for-Afghanistan-Zabiullah-Mujahid?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/618114-CPEC-important-for-Afghanistan-Zabiullah-Mujahid?utm_source=chatgpt.com))

By 2022, high-level endorsements from Pakistan reinforced the momentum. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, in an interview with the *Global Times*, reaffirmed Pakistan's support for Afghanistan's reconstruction and stated that CPEC's benefits should extend to more regional partners, including Afghanistan [11]. This was followed by a joint statement between China and Pakistan, released during a diplomatic visit by Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in May 2022, which officially opened the door to including Afghanistan in CPEC under the principle of mutual benefit [12]. Diplomatic coordination continued in July 2022, when Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the acting Afghan Foreign Minister, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Tashkent. During the meeting, Wang Yi expressed China's willingness to support CPEC's extension into Afghanistan, underscoring the potential for economic opportunity and mutual development [13]. As of April 2023, China has further articulated its position on Afghanistan through a formal policy document titled "China's Position on the Afghan Issue." This statement reiterated China's commitment to Afghanistan's peace and reconstruction, emphasized non-interference, and promoted Afghanistan's transition from a landlocked to a land-linked country through participation in BRI projects such as CPEC [14].

### III. Impact to China

Extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan carries substantial strategic and economic significance for China. This integration has the potential to reshape China's regional diplomacy, economic interests, and security priorities in meaningful ways, offering not just geopolitical leverage but also long-term development dividends.

#### 3.1 Promoting Regional Peace and Security

China sees Afghanistan's stability as crucial to maintaining peace in its western frontiers, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. For decades, Afghanistan has been marked by war, terrorism, drug trafficking, and fragile governance, all of which pose real threats to neighboring regions. With the Taliban returning to power and attempting to re-establish order, the possibility of long-term stabilization—albeit with significant challenges—has resurfaced. China's strategy of encouraging development through economic investment fits well into this narrative. With this extension, China can offer a path to peace rooted in infrastructure development, employment generation, and regional integration [15]. Economic inclusion may also play a preventive role by reducing the incentives for illicit activity. In Afghanistan, where opium production has been a cornerstone of the underground economy, poverty and lack of alternatives push many into the narcotics trade. Facilitating legitimate economic growth through Chinese-led projects could gradually diminish the socioeconomic drivers of instability [15], [16]. Strengthening Afghanistan's economic foundations is not only about fostering prosperity but also about removing the fertile ground where extremist ideologies often take root. These actions directly benefit China by reducing the likelihood of security spillovers across its borders.

#### 3.2 Enhancing the Belt and Road Initiative's Western Outreach

Afghanistan's geographical location gives it immense strategic value. Sitting at the junction of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, the country has the potential to serve as a critical transit point within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Extending CPEC across the Afghan border allows China to push its connectivity vision further westward toward Iran, Turkey, and even Europe. This makes Afghanistan an indispensable part of Beijing's larger ambition to create a

seamless overland trade network that complements its maritime strategies [17].

The infrastructural requirements to make this vision a reality are vast. Building roads, rail lines, border facilities, and digital networks would involve Chinese companies and generate new employment opportunities for Afghan citizens. Such development could also mitigate risks associated with maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. As China diversifies its trade and energy routes, having secure overland alternatives strengthens its resilience against global supply chain disruptions [16], [17]. These moves reflect a strategy rooted in long-term geopolitical foresight and economic pragmatism.

### 3.3 Boosting Sino-Afghan Economic Cooperation

Afghanistan's resource wealth remains one of its most underutilized assets. With an estimated \$3 trillion in untapped minerals—including lithium, rare earth elements, and copper—the country holds the potential to become a key supplier for the industries shaping the 21st century [18]. China's dominance in clean energy manufacturing, especially electric vehicles and battery technology, gives it a strong incentive to secure new sources of raw materials. However, Afghanistan's domestic limitations, including infrastructure deficits and security concerns, have stalled progress. Through CPEC's extension, Chinese enterprises could facilitate responsible resource extraction, offering both financial capital and technical know-how. Signs of this engagement are already visible. The Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Company has inked deals for oil exploration in northern Afghanistan, indicating the start of what could become a broader wave of Chinese investment in the Afghan resource sector [18]. Such cooperation promises mutual benefits. Afghanistan would gain much-needed infrastructure and employment, while China would secure access to strategic commodities essential to its economic and technological trajectory.

Beyond resources, Afghanistan represents an emerging export market for Chinese goods. While limited in current capacity, a stabilized Afghanistan would likely see rising demand for everything from consumer electronics to construction materials. China already stands among Afghanistan's top trade partners. In the 2020–2021 fiscal year, it accounted for over 7% of Afghanistan's total trade volume, with exports ranging from industrial goods to pharmaceuticals [19]. The mutual complementarity of goods—Afghanistan's raw agricultural products and China's industrial exports—suggests strong potential for a balanced trade relationship as Afghanistan's economy recovers.

### 3.4 Strengthening China's Geopolitical Influence

China's involvement in Afghanistan allows it to shape the post-conflict development agenda of the region. This role boosts its credibility as a constructive global power willing to invest in long-term peace and reconstruction. Infrastructure diplomacy becomes a soft power tool, enabling Beijing to present itself as a stable alternative to Western approaches that have often prioritized military solutions [16].

Working with all major stakeholders—including the Taliban-led government, regional players like Iran and Pakistan, and multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—demonstrates China's diplomatic dexterity. These efforts strengthen its role not just as a financier but as a convenor of regional cooperation. As Afghanistan's future unfolds, China's influence, built through roads and railways rather than weapons, could serve as a model of economic statecraft with far-reaching implications for its global standing.

## IV. Challenges and Pressure

Extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan is not without significant obstacles. Despite initial expressions of interest and political gestures, the practical implementation of such a project faces deeply rooted ethnic, religious, and geopolitical challenges that could hinder or delay progress. Afghanistan's ethnic and sectarian landscape is exceptionally complex. The country is home to more than 30 ethnic groups, with the Pashtuns being the largest, followed by Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. These communities are not only geographically dispersed but also differ in political influence, religious adherence, and historical grievances (Figure 4). A substantial portion of the population follows Sunni Islam, while a significant minority adheres to Shi'a traditions. Intersecting ethnic and sectarian loyalties often outweigh national identity, creating persistent internal divisions [20]. The Taliban, primarily composed of Pashtuns, has struggled to win the trust of other ethnic groups. The failure to establish an inclusive government exacerbates the existing tensions and casts doubt on the country's political stability, a necessary precondition for any large-scale foreign infrastructure project like CPEC [21].

Factionalism is deeply entrenched in Afghan society. Even within ethnic groups, tribal and clan affiliations dictate political alignment and resource distribution. This decentralized and often conflicting power structure poses risks for corridor development. Without a strong central authority or reliable local governance, infrastructure initiatives could be delayed or sabotaged by rival factions. Resistance movements such as those led by Ahmad Massoud, a prominent Tajik figure, continue to operate, especially in regions like Panjshir. Their opposition to Taliban control further complicates the already fragile peace process and increases the risk of internal conflict flaring up in areas through which the corridor might pass [21].

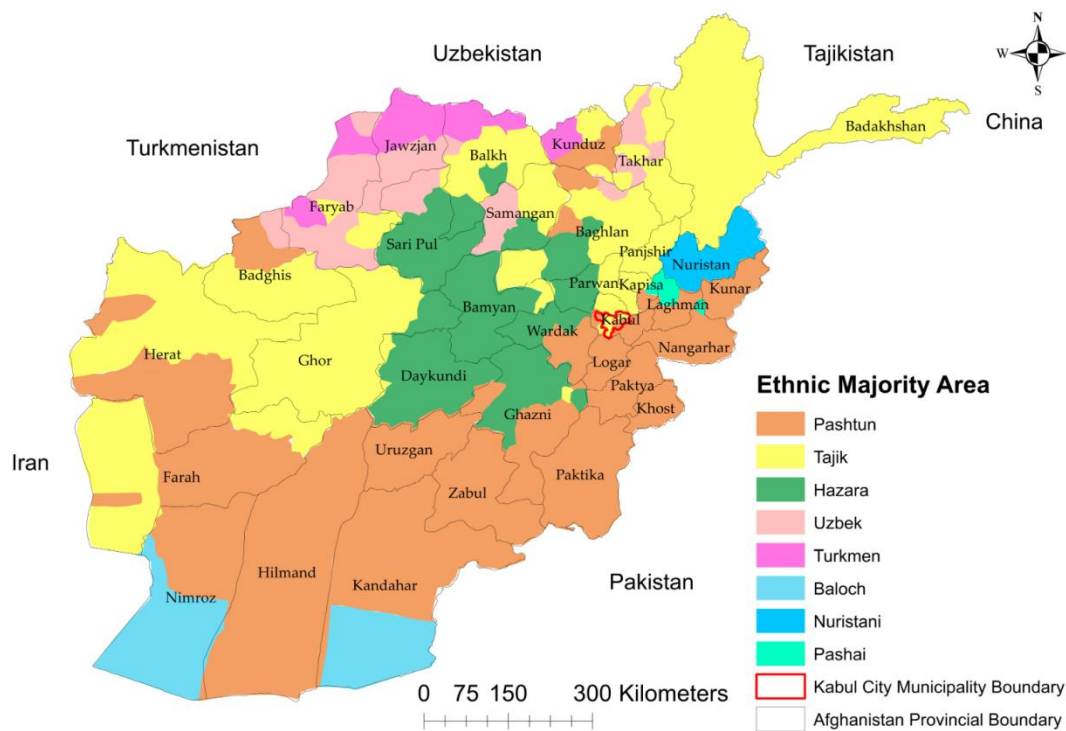


Figure 4, Afghanistan's ethnic map (Source: Sarwari, F., & Ono, H. (2023). A Study on Urban Ethnic Segmentation in Kabul City, Afghanistan. *Sustainability*, 15(8), 6589. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15086589>)

Cultural and ideological differences also create friction. The Taliban leadership remains divided between hardliners who advocate for a strictly theocratic state governed by Sharia law and moderates who recognize the need for international cooperation and reconstruction. These internal debates affect governance decisions and the Taliban's willingness to comply with international norms. If hardliners dominate, the risk of international isolation could deter foreign investors and raise reputational risks for China. A lack of secular governance structures makes it difficult to guarantee the transparency, legal consistency, and investor protection necessary for the CPEC's success [22].

Geopolitical rivalries cast a long shadow over Afghanistan's potential integration into CPEC. The historical Great Game among empires has transformed into modern-day competition among regional and global powers. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan did not eliminate American interest in shaping regional dynamics. U.S. strategic pivots toward the Indo-Pacific region and strengthened partnerships with India indicate a broader containment approach toward China. India's objections to CPEC on grounds that it passes through disputed territories spill into its stance against the corridor's extension to Afghanistan. Indian policymakers view the expansion as a strategic encroachment and a challenge to New Delhi's influence in the region [23].

Russia is also recalibrating its approach. While it has expressed support for a stable Afghanistan, it remains wary of increasing Chinese influence so close to its traditional sphere in Central Asia. The Kremlin's hosting of Taliban representatives in multilateral talks reveals its desire to stay involved, yet its long-term intentions may not fully align with China's strategic calculus. Pakistan, on the other hand, stands to gain the most from an expanded CPEC but also faces internal instability and complex relations with both the Taliban and militant groups within its borders [24].

China's engagement in Afghanistan is guided by both opportunity and caution. Public statements from Chinese officials emphasize support for a peaceful, inclusive Afghan government and call for Taliban cooperation on counter-terrorism. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which China regards as a direct threat to its Xinjiang region, remains a focal concern. Any sign of Taliban support or tolerance toward extremist elements risks derailing China's involvement [25]. Chinese humanitarian assistance, infrastructure donations, and diplomatic visits reflect a soft-power strategy that aims to stabilize Afghanistan through non-military means. Yet these efforts must contend with a volatile security environment, logistical barriers, and shifting political dynamics.

Persistent challenges involving illicit economies, including narcotics trafficking and arms smuggling, further complicate the regional security landscape. Afghanistan has long been a major producer of opium, and these networks often operate outside of any central authority. The presence of these black-market structures not only undermines economic legitimacy but also threatens infrastructure with risks of criminal interference and instability.

Economic fragility also remains a severe constraint. Afghanistan's economy is in a state of prolonged crisis, with high unemployment, inflation, and limited industrial capacity. These conditions pose practical hurdles for project implementation, such as the inability to maintain supporting infrastructure, limited local technical expertise, and insufficient financial systems to manage investment inflows and disbursements efficiently. Human capital flight, especially among educated professionals, further diminishes institutional capabilities necessary for stable cooperation.

Extending CPEC into Afghanistan holds transformative potential, but the current challenges—ranging from deep ethnic fragmentation and ideological rigidity to regional power rivalries and economic instability—impose serious limitations.

Addressing these challenges will require more than infrastructure investments. It demands sustained diplomacy, security coordination, economic support, and a nuanced understanding of Afghanistan’s internal complexities and external entanglements.

## **V. Prospects and Strategies**

### **5.1 Prospects for Integration**

The strategic rationale for extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan is compelling and multifaceted. As a landlocked country with underdeveloped transport, energy, and digital infrastructure, Afghanistan stands to gain significantly from integration into regional connectivity initiatives. By joining CPEC, Afghanistan could accelerate its transition from a conflict-affected, isolated state into a vital trade and transit hub—connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. Access to international corridors, modern infrastructure, and cross-border energy flows would not only support Afghanistan’s reconstruction but also unlock new sources of revenue, employment, and foreign investment.

The incentives are equally strong for China and Pakistan. For China, extending CPEC into Afghanistan represents an opportunity to expand the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) westward, enhancing its geopolitical influence while also securing access to strategic resources and trade routes. It offers a shorter, more secure overland alternative to maritime supply chains, thereby reducing dependence on vulnerable chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. For Pakistan, a stable and economically integrated Afghanistan could strengthen its own security, expand regional trade, and reinforce trilateral cooperation with China. The convergence of political will—evident in trilateral dialogues, multilateral forums, and public endorsements—has laid a promising foundation for deeper collaboration.

Nevertheless, immediate full-scale integration is not realistic. A phased and modular approach offers a practical pathway forward. Initial efforts should focus on pilot projects in more secure provinces such as Balkh, Nangarhar, or Herat, where existing infrastructure and relative political stability provide a more conducive environment. Infrastructure investments such as road upgrades, customs modernization, and the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) at key crossings like Torkham and Spin Boldak can serve as test cases. These projects would demonstrate tangible benefits to local populations, build confidence among stakeholders, and provide replicable models for nationwide rollout. Such gradual integration allows stakeholders to manage risks more effectively while maintaining strategic momentum.

The long-term prospects hinge not only on infrastructure but also on inclusive governance and community engagement. A participatory approach that involves tribal elders, local leaders, and civil society actors in planning and implementation is essential. These networks hold significant influence in Afghanistan’s socio-political landscape and must be seen as partners, not obstacles. Coupled with targeted investments in public services—such as healthcare, energy access, and vocational training—this approach can generate public goodwill, reduce the appeal of insurgent narratives, and strengthen the corridor’s legitimacy from the ground up. If guided by strategic foresight, regional cooperation, and adaptive planning, the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan could become a transformative engine for peace, stability, and prosperity across the broader region.

### **5.2 Strategic Recommendations**

To effectively extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan, a phased and adaptive implementation strategy must be adopted, one that balances ambition with realism. Rather than launching comprehensive national infrastructure plans from the outset, stakeholders should focus on a step-by-step model that prioritizes politically stable and logistically viable regions such as Nangarhar, Kandahar, or Balkh. These provinces, owing to their relative calm and proximity to existing trade routes, are ideal for launching pilot projects such as road upgrades, border customs modernization, and small-scale logistics centers. These “proof of concept” projects can demonstrate early success, build local confidence, and serve as practical templates for future expansions deeper into the Afghan interior. Furthermore, implementing “Special Economic Zones” (SEZs) at key border crossings, like Torkham and Spin Boldak, could stimulate cross-border commerce and attract both Afghan and foreign investors. A modular, localized approach also allows for flexible adjustments in response to evolving security or political conditions—minimizing investment risks while gradually building momentum.

Security remains the most formidable barrier to realizing the corridor extension, and it necessitates a robust, multilayered security architecture grounded in both regional cooperation and local engagement. Afghanistan’s internal instability, coupled with external threats such as insurgent attacks or cross-border smuggling, poses serious risks to infrastructure and personnel. To address this, China and Pakistan should seek to engage regional platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to coordinate multilateral peacekeeping efforts or project-specific protection frameworks. Additionally, a security protocol modeled on “economic corridor security units,” already used in Pakistan, could be extended to Afghanistan, integrating trained Afghan forces and local militias into protection tasks. Importantly, local community involvement is vital—projects that offer employment, training, and services to nearby populations are less likely to be targeted by spoilers. Building local ownership not only reduces the threat of sabotage but also empowers communities to act as stakeholders in a collective peace-through-development process.

A further recommendation centers on institutional strengthening and inclusive governance, which are indispensable for the sustainable management of CPEC-related investments. Afghanistan’s current governance structures lack the transparency, regulatory clarity, and professional capacity needed to support large-scale foreign investment. To bridge this gap, a dedicated “CPEC Afghanistan Authority” could be established, staffed by technocrats and supported by international advisors, to coordinate planning, licensing, and dispute resolution. Simultaneously, the Taliban-led administration must be strongly encouraged to broaden its political base and incorporate minority groups and regional

leaders into decision-making processes. Without political inclusivity and social legitimacy, any economic gains risk being undermined by factional resistance and public mistrust. China and Pakistan, in cooperation with international institutions, can promote capacity-building initiatives in areas like customs enforcement, environmental management, and infrastructure maintenance—laying the administrative foundation for long-term corridor sustainability.

Lastly, economic incentives and diplomatic engagement must go hand in hand to support Afghanistan's integration into CPEC. Given the scale of the investment needed, attracting private sector participation is crucial. Afghanistan should introduce targeted incentives such as tax exemptions, subsidized land leases, and simplified customs processes to reduce entry barriers for foreign firms, particularly in construction, logistics, and energy. Chinese and Pakistani enterprises could establish joint ventures with Afghan partners to foster technology transfer, training, and job creation. In parallel, China must maintain a balanced and diplomatically neutral posture, engaging constructively not only with the Taliban government but also with neighboring powers such as Iran, Russia, and India. The formation of a "CPEC+Afghanistan Working Group," with multilateral representation and observer status for concerned nations, could serve as a platform to coordinate development plans, manage geopolitical frictions, and ensure that Afghanistan's participation in the corridor is viewed as a collective opportunity rather than a zero-sum competition. Through this coordinated strategy—rooted in pragmatism, inclusivity, and multilateralism—the vision of a connected, economically revitalized Afghanistan can begin to materialize.

### 5.3 Vision for the Future

The long-term vision of integrating Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is as much about regional transformation as it is about rebuilding a war-torn nation. If implemented strategically and inclusively, this initiative can contribute to stabilizing Afghanistan, catalyzing regional trade, and advancing China's broader connectivity goals. Success will not come overnight—but with incremental progress, sustained commitment, and careful management of risks, Afghanistan can become a bridge between regions rather than a barrier, and CPEC can evolve into a truly transregional corridor for peace and prosperity.

## VI. Conclusion

The proposed extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan stands at the crossroads of opportunity and complexity. As this study has demonstrated, Afghanistan's geographic location offers substantial strategic value, positioning it as a potential conduit for trade and connectivity across Central and South Asia. If successfully integrated, Afghanistan could transition from a landlocked, conflict-affected nation into a pivotal economic bridge within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For China and Pakistan, this expansion aligns with broader geopolitical and economic goals—enhancing trade routes, securing access to resources, and contributing to regional stability. For Afghanistan, it presents a rare chance to attract foreign investment, improve infrastructure, and stimulate economic recovery. However, these opportunities are counterbalanced by significant risks including political instability, fragile governance, security threats, and the lingering effects of decades of conflict.

Realizing this vision will require more than infrastructure; it demands a comprehensive and inclusive strategy grounded in phased implementation, multilateral cooperation, and local ownership. Success will depend on the willingness of all parties to invest not only capital but also trust and long-term commitment. Regional actors must prioritize stability and transparency, while local communities must be engaged as stakeholders rather than bystanders. If approached with strategic foresight, cultural sensitivity, and a flexible diplomatic framework, the CPEC extension into Afghanistan could become a catalyst for peacebuilding, economic integration, and sustainable development across the broader region. The road ahead is uncertain—but with persistence, pragmatism, and cooperation, it holds the promise of transformative change.

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