

CPEC as a ‘Peace Corridor’: Revisiting ‘Indivisible Security’ Across the Durand Line

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In 2022, President Xi Jinping announced the ‘Global Security Initiative’ (GSI) at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, with ‘indivisible security’ as its core underlying logic. A 2023 concept paper on the GSI expands on this indivisibility, signifying both the non-zero-sum nature of security interests and the need to prioritize a holistic stability focus that integrates traditional and non-traditional security. Thus, Section II, point 4, of the GSI concept paper cites the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as ‘advocating the indivisibility between individual security and common security, between traditional security and non-traditional security, between security rights and security obligations, and between security and development.’ It follows that the escalation of tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan presents an opportunity to examine and realize the GSI’s core logic, with China’s role as a neutral facilitator prompting the exploration of both economic and security engagement. A key variable at play concerns the stability of the Afghan state under the Taliban regime, as the retreat of Western donors, compounded by pervasive sanctions, risks economic collapse.

Consequently, this essay highlights the logic of ‘indivisible security’ as premised on state stability and the need to address the legitimate security concerns of all countries. In doing so, it outlines the need for dialogue and sustained trilateral engagement between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in both economic and security domains, citing the peculiar nature of the borderland geography between Afghanistan and Pakistan as especially complementary with indivisible security. It follows that attempts to extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan present a prelude to long-term trilateral cooperation that envisages stability on both sides of the Durand Line, with China acting as a key facilitator.

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Prioritizing State Stability through Economic Engagement

Commenting on the Taliban's return to power, Wang Zhen, from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, highlights the stability the regime has brought to Afghanistan's tumultuous political landscape, with a reputation for political probity and efficiency that far exceeds that of the previous regime. Wang (2023) cites the Taliban's attempts to shift Afghanistan's economic structure from a high degree of dependence on foreign aid to self-reliance, while simultaneously cracking down on the drug economy. The impact of natural disasters, i.e., drought, as well as the sudden massive reduction of development and humanitarian aid, complicate this objective, potentially boosting the threat posed by the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) to the Taliban's governance.

Feng Zhang (2022) describes China's approach to Afghanistan as governed by a five-pronged engagement policy, chief among which is a pragmatic and cautious acceptance of the Taliban's dominance, followed by an emphasis on the prevention of the reemergence of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists, facilitation of an inclusive politics in the country, and demonstration of a greater degree of humanitarian concern. Zhao Huasheng (2021), writing for the Center for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University, emphasizes the economic fragility of Afghanistan as posing a significant challenge to the Taliban regime, with stabilization contingent on a gradual transition from an aid-based model to one that targets self-reliance. Commenting on the drastic reduction in Western aid to Afghanistan, Zhou, Su, and Yuan (2022) note that donor retreat signifies Western states' attempts to induce change in Taliban policies on gender equality and political inclusivity. The authors contrast this with Chinese officials' efforts to emphasize inclusivity while working within the particularities of Afghanistan's national conditions.

It follows that the Taliban's attempts to stabilize the Afghan state are subject to acute economic shocks, compounding the impact of natural disasters such as droughts, floods, and earthquakes in driving acute food insecurity, internal displacement, and widespread poverty. The World Bank's (WB) April 2025 update on the Afghan economy identified gradual but slow improvement amidst uncertainty caused by fiscal pressures, a widening trade deficit, persistent poverty, and food insecurity.³ According to a WB press release, the country's estimated real GDP growth was 2.5 percent in 2024, driven primarily by the agricultural sector, while manufacturing and services remained subdued.

Runde et al. (2024) situate this amid the impact of the immediate diplomatic and financial isolation foisted on Afghanistan in the aftermath of 2021, as nearly \$9.5 billion of the state's external reserves were frozen, effectively cutting off its central bank from the global financial system. The ensuing acute liquidity crunch compounded currency shortages, weakened purchasing power, and resulted in economy-wide price deflation, escalating a multidimensional crisis. Given this context, in February 2025, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reiterated the need for a 'Comprehensive Approach for Afghanistan,' i.e., a mosaic workstream aimed at addressing the issues identified in an independent review by the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Special Coordinator.

The framework encourages collaboration and engagement with the Taliban to seek joint solutions to practical problems, including counternarcotics, private-sector development, and counterterrorism. In 2025, Ambassador Geng Shuang, China's

Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, reiterated the call for dialogue and engagement with the Islamic Emirate's interim government, while acknowledging and supporting UNAMA's mosaic approach. The ambassador noted that major donors have drastically reduced their assistance amid a severe humanitarian crisis, emphasizing the need for bilateral, multilateral, and regional cooperation to enhance Afghanistan's indigenous development. References to financial reconstruction, counter-narcotics cooperation, and regional integration were paired with the need to strengthen counterterrorism efforts through regional coordination, underscoring the practical interplay between security and development.

With regard to such practical cooperation, commentators such as Masood (2025) discuss the possibility of CPEC serving as a 'peace corridor,' given its potential to foster greater Pak-Afghan transboundary connectivity and economic cooperation. Masood quotes Ye Hailin, President of the Chinese Society of South Asia Studies in Beijing, as underlining the potential of Afghanistan to transform CPEC from a restrained bilateral to a regional cooperation framework. It follows that the pivot to 'indivisible security' under China's GSI underscores the risks posed by state instability to the broader region, with economic integration and regional connectivity presented as key means to mitigate these risks. In the context of Pak-Afghan relations, CPEC presents an opportunity for revenue and resource mobilization, allowing the Afghan state under the Taliban to consolidate control over a fragmented internal landscape. In the context of 'indivisible' security, an extension of the corridor has the potential to stabilize fractious bilateral ties, both by formalizing trade and by instituting sustained dialogue on joint border management and counterterrorism.

It can be argued that indivisible security, with its focus on state stability, complements the peculiar geography of the Pak-Afghan border. The GSI approaches 'border defense' through the logic of systemic stabilization, pivoting to a non-zero-sum integrative approach that addresses the porousness of the Durand as a rigid border across a socially fluid landscape. In doing so, it proposes a functionalist solution to both traditional and non-traditional security threats, premised on economic cooperation and sustained dialogue that ties the security of one state to that of its neighbor.

Operationalizing 'Indivisible' Security through Dialogue

From 2022 onwards, China's position on the Afghan issue has been outlined through adherence to the 'Three Respects' and 'Three Nevers,' i.e., respect for Afghanistan's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; respect for the independent choices made by the Afghan people, and respect for their religious beliefs and national customs, followed by a commitment by China to never interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs, never seek selfish interests in the country, and never pursue a policy of so-called spheres of influence. This has been coupled with an acknowledgment of the stabilizing role of moderate and prudent governance, pursued alongside friendly exchanges with all, especially neighboring countries. Reconstruction and development continue to be reiterated as priority aims alongside security, with a call for bilateral and multilateral efforts to fight terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

In the context of the GSI, the 'Three Respects' and 'Three Nevers' prioritize sustained engagement over coercive intervention, citing the need for dialogue through such mechanisms and platforms such as the Foreign Ministers' Meeting on the Afghan Issue among the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)-Afghanistan Contact Group, and the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue. It follows that the 'Three Nevers' elucidate an

approach to indivisible security premised on a respect for state sovereignty and the use of dialogic engagement to address ‘common’ security concerns.

This has a significant bearing on Pak-Afghan relations, following a spike in cross-border violence after 2021, with China acting as a third-party mediator, advising dialogic engagement to diffuse tensions. A February 2025 joint statement, released by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, saw Pakistan explicitly condemn terrorist attacks involving Chinese personnel, with the two states reiterating a commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations with a zero-tolerance attitude (point 7).

This statement served as a precursor to an informal trilateral meeting between Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan in May 2025, signaling the beginnings of a diplomatic thaw between Pakistan and Afghanistan following a period of heightened tensions since 2021. Security cooperation remained a persistent concern, although a key highlight was a shift toward enhanced economic engagement through the extension of the USD 62 billion CPEC to Afghanistan. The fourth of the seven key points emerging from the meeting addresses this extension, centered on strengthening regional connectivity networks. The sixth explicitly opposes all forms of terrorism and expresses an intention to conduct law enforcement and security cooperation, as well as joint combat against terrorist forces of concern to each side, while maintaining vigilance against external interference in the internal affairs of regional countries.

In August 2025, the 6th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue in Kabul reiterated the need for ‘cooperative and common security,’ citing the potential of development cooperation, trade, and investment alongside the need for a strengthened security dialogue mechanism. References to ‘steady and long-term development of trilateral cooperation among China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan,’ were coupled with the need to ‘uphold the principle of indivisible security.’

It follows that, from 2023 onwards, China has engaged pragmatically with the Taliban through a series of formal and informal ministerial dialogues and statements to promote regional stability. While prospects for trilateral economic cooperation have been broached through the possible integration of Afghanistan under CPEC, there is a need to examine and expand the logic of ‘common security’ through a sustained Sino-Pak-Afghan dialogue on counterterrorism and joint border management. Given the ‘open war’ rhetoric and mounting cross-border incidents, the state of Pak-Afghan relations affords an opportunity through which to operationalize the GSI’s logic of security as a non-excludable public good. It follows that the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan’s (TTP) continued presence in Afghanistan is a threat to Pakistan’s stability and security; similarly, an overtly kinetic response by Pakistan risks further destabilizing Afghanistan’s fractious economy.

Conclusion

In sum, the GSI articulates a logic of security that is especially pertinent for postcolonial states with porous borderland geographies, with ‘indivisibility’ less a diplomatic platitude and more of a geographic and sociological imperative. Given the emphasis on functional cooperation inherent in the GSI’s conceptual architecture, such indivisibility may take the form of enhanced infrastructure connectivity through roads, energy grids, and fiber optic cables under CPEC, as well as approaches to border management and counterterrorism that incorporate a holistic, technology-driven focus. An essential mechanism for both is dialogue, as emphasized in Section II, point 5, and again in

Section IV, point 2 of the 2023 GSI concept paper. The former stresses the role of ‘mutual security confidence’ and the ‘elimination of the root causes of crises,’ while the latter highlights the role of platforms and mechanisms of cooperation in enabling their achievement. Given the geography of the Durand, cross-border kinetic escalation is unsustainable in the long run, underscoring the need for dialogue under the GSI as a strategic imperative.

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