

# WEEKLY ANALYSIS

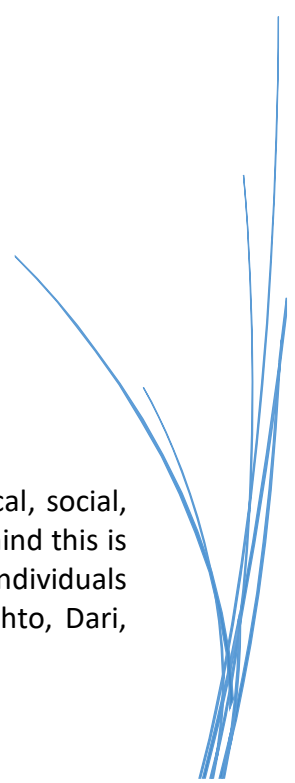
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**A LOOK AT THE AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN & CHINA TRILATERAL MEETING**

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Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.

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## A LOOK AT THE AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN & CHINA TRILATERAL MEETING

### Introduction

On May 9, 2025 (20th of Sawr, 1404 in the Afghan calendar), Kabul hosted the simultaneous visit of representatives from China and Pakistan. According to reports, the purpose of the visit by Yue Xiaoyong, China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan, and Mohammad Sadiq Khan, Pakistan's Special Representative for Afghanistan, was to attend a trilateral meeting hosted by Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

During this meeting, the three sides agreed to hold the sixth round of trilateral talks—at the level of foreign ministers—in Kabul in the near future. In addition, the Chinese representative formally invited the Afghan foreign minister to visit China soon.

Beyond the main event, other meetings took place, including talks between Sirajuddin Haqqani and trade ministry officials from the Islamic Emirate with the visiting Chinese and Pakistani delegations.

Given these developments, several important questions arise: When and how did these trilateral meetings begin? What are the stated and underlying goals of this platform? And what results have been achieved so far?

This article explores the origins, objectives, and outcomes of the Afghanistan–Pakistan–China trilateral platform and offers insights into the purpose and significance of this ongoing diplomatic engagement.

### BACKGROUND OF THE AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN, CHINA TRILATERAL MEETINGS

The recent trilateral meeting held in Kabul is part of a broader series of talks initiated by China. The first round of these high-level meetings, involving the foreign ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, was held in 2017 in Beijing, the capital of China. The second round took place in Kabul in 2018, followed by the third round in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital.

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the fourth meeting was held virtually under China's chairmanship. The fifth round was held in Islamabad in 2023. As mentioned earlier, during the recent discussions between representatives from Pakistan and China and the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, it was agreed that the sixth round would soon be hosted in Kabul by the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



It is important to note that the first four rounds of these meetings took place when the previous Republican government was in power in Afghanistan. The fifth round, held after the Islamic Emirate regained control, took place in Islamabad. The upcoming sixth round, which is expected to be held in Kabul, will be the first time the Islamic Emirate has hosted this platform since its return to power.

This round is seen as a significant step, not only for continuing the diplomatic dialogue among the three countries but also for reaffirming Afghanistan's role as an active partner in the region under the current government.

### **OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIC APPROACH**

Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of a Western-backed government, China initially welcomed the new political developments and viewed them as potential opportunities. However, despite its early optimism, China was unable to become deeply involved in Afghan affairs in a meaningful way. One of the main reasons was the broader strategic rivalry between the United States and China. As China emerged as a global economic and technological power, it was increasingly seen by Washington as a major competitor. This dynamic limited China's access to and influence in Afghanistan, a country that shares a small but significant border with it.

A striking example of these limitations was China's major agreement with the Afghan government to extract copper from the Aynak mine in Logar province. Although the contract was signed, the project was never implemented, largely due to indirect obstacles allegedly created by the United States.

After 2014, as the U.S. reduced its military presence in Afghanistan, the intensifying conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan and the overall escalation of war in the region became a growing concern for China. This instability posed direct threats to China's national interests. As a neighboring country, China was especially vulnerable to the spillover effects of war in Afghanistan, including the rise of extremist and terrorist groups that could potentially threaten China's security, particularly in its western Xinjiang region.

Moreover, China's ambitious economic initiatives—especially those related to trade, regional connectivity, and the extraction of natural resources—faced significant risks due to the fragile security situation in Afghanistan.



Faced with these challenges, China concluded that one of the primary causes of prolonged conflict and regional insecurity was the unresolved tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This understanding led Beijing to take a more proactive role in regional diplomacy. As a result, China initiated a trilateral dialogue involving the foreign ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. Through this platform, China sought to address the root causes of instability by facilitating dialogue and cooperation between its two neighbors, aiming to promote peace, security, and economic collaboration in the region.

The primary declared objective of the trilateral dialogue among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China has been to facilitate mutual understanding and conflict resolution between Afghanistan and Pakistan through Chinese mediation. At the heart of this initiative lies China's intention to create a platform for constructive dialogue between the two neighboring countries, aiming to address longstanding disputes, particularly those concerning border demarcation, political tensions, and differing perspectives on armed groups operating within Afghanistan.

On a broader level, the second key objective of the dialogue has been to foster economic cooperation among the three countries. This includes initiatives such as expanding trade relations, forming transit agreements, and integrating Afghanistan into China's major regional infrastructure and connectivity programs, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A central component of this strategy involves linking Afghanistan with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In essence, China's strategy through the trilateral dialogue follows a three-stage approach: first, to mediate and reduce political tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan; second, to encourage bilateral agreements on disputed matters; and third, to develop joint mechanisms for regional security and economic integration. This approach is also designed to foster trilateral convergence on broader regional issues.

Afghanistan and Pakistan, after decades of conflict and strained relations that hindered opportunities for political and economic synergy, welcomed China's mediation. They viewed Beijing's involvement as a positive step toward minimizing tensions and unlocking mutual benefits. All three countries enthusiastically participated in five rounds of trilateral dialogue, and preparations are currently underway for the sixth round.



While the official goals of the trilateral process, conflict resolution, regional security, economic integration, and political convergence, have remained broadly consistent, the evolving political situation in Afghanistan, particularly following the collapse of the previous government and the rise of the Islamic Emirate, has necessitated a shift in mechanisms and approaches.

Under the former Afghan government, China's efforts primarily focused on bringing Kabul and Islamabad closer together by aligning their positions against armed groups and facilitating peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. These efforts were conducted in collaboration with Pakistan. However, following the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate, the issue of peace talks has largely been removed from the trilateral agenda.

In the current context, security cooperation is more narrowly focused on countering smaller militant groups operating in the region. Of particular concern are the presence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) in Afghanistan. These security challenges require all three parties to develop a shared understanding and coordinated responses.

On the economic front, China has refocused its goals toward integrating Afghanistan more directly into its Belt and Road Initiative through CPEC. This involves expanding Afghanistan's role in regional trade and infrastructure projects, despite the absence of formal international recognition of the Islamic Emirate.

Beyond the officially stated security, economic, and political goals, the trilateral process also reflects a set of implicit or strategic interests, particularly from China's perspective. Initially, China viewed the trilateral platform as a means to increase its influence in Afghanistan at a time when the United States maintained a strong presence there. Given its geographical proximity and the strategic implications of instability in Afghanistan, China sought to transition from a peripheral to a central actor in regional affairs. The trilateral dialogue served as a useful tool for this strategic shift.

Security concerns were a key motivation for China, both the threat of terrorist groups and the physical presence of U.S. forces in its neighborhood. Establishing the trilateral dialogue allowed China to monitor developments in Afghanistan more closely and shape outcomes in alignment with its regional interests.

Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, China gained greater freedom to engage with Kabul. One of the most viable approaches was to partner with Pakistan and continue to use the trilateral format to coordinate strategies. Now that the United States has stepped back from direct involvement in Afghanistan, India has been trying to expand its influence through economic engagement, including investments in Iran's Chabahar Port and the development of bilateral economic ties with Afghanistan. In response, China and Pakistan have been working together to counterbalance India's growing presence and to restrict it to the diplomatic sphere.

Another noteworthy development was the presence of Chinese and Pakistani envoys in Kabul shortly after a terrorist attack on Indian tourists in Pahalgam, in the Indian-administered region of Kashmir, which reignited tensions between India and Pakistan. While it is possible that China and Pakistan sought to secure Afghanistan's diplomatic support regarding the Kashmir issue, this appears to be a secondary concern. The primary reason for their presence was likely to continue planning the trilateral agenda initiated in 2017. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the delegations provided some advice or recommendations to the Afghan authorities regarding the Kashmir situation during their visit.

#### ACHIEVEMENTS

The outcomes of the trilateral dialogue between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China can be assessed from two perspectives. On the one hand, this series of meetings has not been successful in achieving its stated objectives; on the other hand, it can be regarded as a platform with the potential to yield tangible outcomes in the realms of economics, security, and politics in the future.

From the first perspective, as previously mentioned, the trilateral meetings have yielded limited practical results. Politically, even though five rounds of talks have taken place—three under the former Afghan government and two under the Islamic Emirate—they have not succeeded in establishing a reliable atmosphere of trust between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In terms of security, the meetings failed to foster a shared understanding between Afghanistan and Pakistan regarding the definition of destabilizing groups and the means for coordinated action against them. Similarly, in the economic domain, these dialogues did not contribute to resolving economic issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly with the transit of Afghan goods through Pakistani territory. Agreements reached in prior meetings were often revisited in subsequent ones without



any meaningful implementation, rendering the talks repetitive and ineffectual. In effect, the most significant outcome of each session was the agreement to hold the next round of talks.

Nevertheless, a key positive aspect of these meetings is their continuity. Despite profound political, security, and economic tensions—both historical and ongoing—between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the trilateral dialogue has continued without any formal declaration of failure. This continuity alone provides a degree of optimism, indicating that all parties remain convinced that dialogue is a viable means of resolving their differences.

Beyond this, there are additional factors that reinforce a more optimistic outlook for the future of this trilateral engagement. First, the most significant impediment to the success of this dialogue in the past—the involvement of the United States—no longer poses the same disruptive influence on China's role in Afghan and Pakistani affairs. Second, China, as a global power, not only plays the role of mediator but also potentially acts as a third-party stakeholder in resolving disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. With its considerable influence over Pakistan, China is well-positioned to persuade Pakistani officials to adopt a more conciliatory stance toward Afghanistan. Concurrently, China's strong and expanding relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan enable it to exert influence over Afghan authorities to pursue measures aimed at reducing tensions with Pakistan.

Taken together, China's participation as one of the three core actors in this dialogue increases the likelihood of future success. Third, both Afghanistan and Pakistan require substantial foreign investment, particularly for large-scale infrastructure development, and China remains a primary candidate for such investment. This mutual dependency obliges both countries to be receptive to China's guidance. Notably, China is eager to integrate Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative by linking it to the large-scale China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Such a strategic vision demands the establishment of stable, tension-free relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the trilateral dialogue serves as a potentially effective mechanism for facilitating this objective.



## CONCLUSION

The trilateral meetings between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China were initiated at a time when tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan had reached a peak, and armed conflict within Afghanistan was intensifying. These dialogues, aimed primarily at reducing bilateral tensions and conflicts through the resolution of border disputes, fostering coordinated efforts against destabilizing groups, and advancing economic cooperation, have so far resulted in five rounds of talks.

Although these meetings have not produced tangible or significant outcomes in terms of achieving their stated goals, the initiative, championed by the powerful state of China, holds potential due to China's substantial capabilities, its deep and far-reaching influence over Pakistan, and its cordial and constructive relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Given these dynamics, the trilateral framework could serve as a valuable mechanism for resolving disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan and for enhancing trilateral cooperation, particularly in the economic sphere.

However, for the intended objectives of these dialogues to be realized, in addition to China's diplomatic efforts, both Afghanistan and Pakistan must engage in practical, confidence-building measures. As two countries in urgent need of economic development, much of which depends on the normalization of bilateral relations, Afghanistan and Pakistan must take concrete and effective steps toward resolving their disputes.

It is also important to acknowledge that while there is optimism regarding China's mediation between Afghanistan and Pakistan, this optimism should be tempered with strategic caution. China's engagement is, in part, motivated by its interest in sidelining geopolitical rivals in Afghanistan. Therefore, Afghanistan must adopt a prudent approach: while taking advantage of China's resources and support, it should also remain vigilant to avoid being drawn into China's strategic designs. Failure to do so could risk transforming Afghanistan once again into a theater for negative geopolitical competition, this time between China and its regional rival, India, or its global competitor, the United States.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:



1. Given the long-standing strained relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the trilateral dialogue, spearheaded by China, presents a valuable opportunity. Both countries should leverage this platform to address and resolve their bilateral issues more effectively.
2. In cooperation with China, Afghanistan and Pakistan are positioned to access significant economic opportunities. To fully benefit from such prospects, both nations must prioritize the restoration and improvement of their bilateral relations.
3. While China has proven to be an effective mediator, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must exercise caution to ensure that Pakistan does not exploit China's mediating role to impose its will on Afghanistan under the guise of diplomatic engagement.
4. Despite the commendable efforts of China in mediating disputes between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Islamic Emirate should remain vigilant and avoid becoming unilaterally dependent on China's influence, which could potentially provoke negative reactions from other major powers.
5. India remains one of Afghanistan's key economic partners. Therefore, Afghanistan must carefully manage its increasing proximity to China and Pakistan to avoid undermining its existing and strategically important relations with India.

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