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## Executive Summary

- China is motivated primarily by security interests in Afghanistan. It does not want terrorism or extremist activity to spill over from Afghanistan into China. It wants to prevent terrorism from destabilizing the region.
- The primary security concern of China is potential threats from the relatively small East Turkistan Islamic Movement, a group that seeks to liberate Xinjiang Province and the Uyghur people from Chinese government control and impose an Islamic order.
- Russia and China have strong mutual security interests in Afghanistan in preventing terrorism and violent extremism. The credibility of Russia as a security partner, however, in the region is in doubt after its poor performance in Ukraine.
- The U.S. has limited policy options in this region given that it will not engage with the Taliban, has tense relations with China, and has sanctioned Russia. This is compounded by loss of U.S. credibility throughout the region due to the disastrous result of the U.S. war in Afghanistan.
- A potential solution to this impasse is for the U.S. to support greater economic support and tools of regional connectivity to achieve positive-sum outcomes as Afghanistan’s neighbors seek to balance the influence of China.

### 1. Chinese Interests in Afghanistan

The announcement of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in spring 2021 sped the collapse of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan led by President Ashraf Ghani. The de-Americanization of security in Central/South Asia has led to new opportunities for regional powers and Afghanistan’s neighbors to have more active security strategies in the region.

The collapse of the Afghan republic required urgency on the part of both regional countries and neighbors to deal with new authorities who had suddenly taken over Kabul. For China and other countries bordering Afghanistan, dealing with these new leaders, the Taliban, was not a luxury, but a necessity.

While China has engaged actively with the Taliban, this engagement should not be mistaken for support. Regional powers and Afghanistan's neighbors have little choice but to engage with the regime that is in place. The same could be said of other countries such as Russia and Uzbekistan, and to some extent Iran. These countries were aligned with and largely supported U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, especially in the early years after 2001. They supported the goals and objectives of the both the U.S. and the government in Kabul. None of these countries had any desire to see Afghanistan back in the hands of the Taliban, a movement they considered to be a supporter of terrorism and extremism

Despite this support, the U.S. failed to achieve its political or military objectives in Afghanistan. Instead, the U.S. presence and poor governance on the part of the Afghan government gave rise to the Taliban insurgency, which in turn wrought chaos and disorder in Afghanistan. The longer the U.S. was in Afghanistan, the more unstable the country became. It is hard to overstate the acute instability that existed in Afghanistan for many years, especially after 2014—the year the U.S. stopped military operations. The situation in northern Afghanistan became particularly challenging as upwards of one-third of the population migrated or became internally displaced before the collapse of the government. Violence skyrocketed in every corner of the country, especially in the north—a region that had not previously seen much Taliban presence. While conflict in Afghanistan was contained in the south and east for many years, its expansion into northern Afghanistan rattled its more powerful neighbors, especially China, Russia, Iran, and Uzbekistan.

Rather than bringing stability, over time, the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan spawned the growth of terrorist groups including Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). China saw this growing instability in the north as creating space for terrorist groups such as the Uyghur East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an organization it accuses of fomenting separatism and terrorist attacks inside of China.

Since August 2021, security and fear of violent extremism has defined China's policy towards the Taliban. China has one overarching goal in Afghanistan: preventing terrorism and violent extremism from destabilizing the region. Specifically, it is worried about potential spillover of Islamic extremism from Afghanistan into Western China and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. China also worries that a destabilized Afghanistan will provide fertile ground for the ETIM or other groups who wish to use Afghanistan as a basing territory.

While much has been made in the Western media about China's ambitions to wield significant influence in Afghanistan and secure investments in that country,<sup>1</sup> China understands that Afghanistan remains a risky investment proposition. China does maintain some investments in Afghanistan, but those projects have been plagued by problems and have mostly been on hold for years. The most notable of these was

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<sup>1</sup> Bloomberg News, "With Economic Assets to Secure, China Embraces the Taliban," August 17, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/8/17/with-economic-assets-to-secure-china-embraces-the-taliban>.

the Mes Aynak copper mine in Wardak Province, central Afghanistan, a project that was plagued by violence and instability for years. While the Taliban have been keen to reengage this project, China understands that restarting this project will require security. The ability of the Taliban to provide this, given the growth of IS-K and growing fissures within the Taliban movement, remains questionable.

## 2. China's Security Concerns in Afghanistan

China has four primary security concerns that drive its engagement in Afghanistan. China's overwhelming security interest revolves around the issue of foreign fighters and potential unrest from ETIM.

First, China wants to make sure that Afghanistan has a functioning government. Without a government in place in Kabul that can project its power throughout the country and maintain a monopoly on the use of violence, the Taliban will be unable to fulfill their security guarantees to China and other neighbors. This means that these countries will be vulnerable to potential instability from cross-border spillovers. The inability of the previous government to provide such order was a factor that encouraged China to begin negotiating with the Taliban in the first place. China has not recognized the Taliban as a government but has allowed them to occupy the Afghanistan embassy in Beijing, giving the Taliban de facto recognition.<sup>2</sup>

Second, China wants to ensure that its border with Afghanistan is secure to prevent violent extremists from entering its territory. To do this, Afghanistan is relying on the Taliban, but also is also leaning on security provisions of Tajikistan and Pakistan. China finds itself reliant on Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which operates a military base in southern Tajikistan. Russia established this base in Tajikistan to provide support for the nascent government of Emomali Rahmon as he sought to consolidate power during the Tajikistan Civil War (1992-1997). It has remained in place since that time. Russia says its troops are ready to respond to "potential threats and challenges emanating from Afghanistan...and to identify and neutralize extremist terrorist cells that are attempting to violate the borders of Tajikistan."<sup>3</sup>

Third, China aims to ensure that the Taliban are willing to eliminate Uyghur militant groups operating inside of Afghan territory. It is important to stress that China has exaggerated the threat and involvement of Uyghurs in terrorist organizations. It has used the specter of Islamic separatism to crackdown on and imprison millions of Uyghurs in China.<sup>4</sup> In July 2021, shortly before the collapse of the Kabul government, Taliban leaders promised China that it would not allow foreign fighters to use Afghanistan as a base to attack China.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Evansky, "China, Afghanistan's Taliban Forging a Closer Relationship, Former Diplomat Says," *Fox News*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/china-afghanistan-taliban-closer-relationship-former-diplomat>.

<sup>3</sup> "Russia's Military Base in Tajikistan Fully Equipped to Respond to Any Threats, Says Envoy," *TASS*, January 28, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1394749>.

<sup>4</sup> Sean Roberts, *War On The Uyghurs Chinas Campaign Again* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Shuli Ren, "How Afghanistan Snags China in a \$282 Billion Creditor Trap," *Washington Post*, accessed May 4, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/how-afghanistan-snagschina-ina-282-billion-creditor-trap/2021/08/18/0a5995b4-007d-11ec-87e0-7e07bd9ce270\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/how-afghanistan-snagschina-ina-282-billion-creditor-trap/2021/08/18/0a5995b4-007d-11ec-87e0-7e07bd9ce270_story.html).

In the months after coming to power, signs emerged that the Taliban took China's pleas to deal with Uyghur armed groups seriously by moving them allegedly from Badakhshan Province in the northeast (close to China's border) and relocating them to Baghlan and Takhar provinces in central Afghanistan as an effort to monitor the group's activities. There is no evidence, however, that Taliban leaders transferred any Uyghur fighters to Chinese custody. It is unclear if there has been a sustained effort to relocate or subdue these fighters after this initial move (but this is a very small group of allegedly several hundred fighters) or whether those movements were reported to get into the good graces of China. Furthermore, there are some reports that efforts to control the ETIM fighters inside of Afghanistan is pushing them closer to Taliban rival IS-K, and further out of Taliban control.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, China aims to protect its current investments and citizens that are working in Afghanistan. Although both parties hinted that there will be significant future investment by China in Afghanistan, few details have emerged. This is because without security, it is simply impossible for China to secure its own people working in the country. For example, in recent months, there has been an increase in terrorist attacks against Chinese citizens in Pakistan (see below). China will not want to take similar risks in Afghanistan until the Taliban is able to consolidate political and military control over the entire country for an extended period. Only this will give China some confidence that the Taliban can govern. Investments in the extractive sector, such as Mes Aynak, require security and stability. This remains a long way off in Afghanistan.

China will not make serious, long-term investments in Afghanistan until two things happen. First, the Taliban must demonstrate to China that they are reliable partners. This means that the Taliban must give up some members of ETIM to China and demonstrate that it is doing everything possible to quell extremist groups in the country. This is a difficult task when the Taliban itself used terrorism and violence for decades as it fought rivals, including the U.S. But weakening the ETIM and other extremist groups weakens leverage that the Taliban may have over China. Hosting groups such as ETIM and other extremist groups gives the Taliban some leverage vis-à-vis neighboring countries, especially China. Despite desires of China to have the Taliban suppress this group, China's own strategy incentivizes the Taliban to keep some violent extremists active to use as leverage over China should relations sour.

Second, the Taliban must demonstrate that they have a monopoly on violence in Afghanistan. This objective seems increasingly difficult at the current moment as the Taliban face increased threats from IS-K. The Taliban and IS-K are both Islamist movements, but they differ in their goals. The Taliban claim they are a movement with no aspirations beyond Afghan territory. IS-K has global ambitions and seeks to build a global caliphate. The Taliban have stated to neighbors and the U.S. that its primary goal is to create an Islamic emirate inside of Afghanistan alone, swearing off any global aspirations or ties to

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Security Council, "Letter Dated 3 February 2022 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council" (United Nations, February 3, 2022), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/416/14/PDF/N2141614.pdf?OpenElement>.

organizations that do have global ambitions. They have also promised repeatedly to China and the U.S. that they will not harbor international terrorists.

### 3. Taliban Attitudes towards China

The Taliban actively courts China for economic benefit. Afghanistan is under extreme economic duress. Chinese investment and economic support are one of the few economic opportunities Afghanistan has on the horizon, as aid flows from the United States and Europe have dried up. According to the Special Inspector General of Afghanistan Reconstruction, in April 2022, 24 million Afghanistan residents were in dire need of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, up from 18.4 million in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

This economic hardship is driven by three factors. First, 80% of budget support of the previous government came from foreign aid. Foreign support accounted for 40% of the country's gross domestic product. Most of that was from the United States. The collapse of the Afghanistan Republic led to a complete withdrawal of this foreign assistance, leaving millions of workers unpaid and driving enormous economic hardship, culminating in the complete collapse of the Afghan economy. Second, immediately after the collapse of the Republic, the U.S. and global partners seized Afghan central bank reserves and placed economic sanctions on the Taliban government. This move blocked Taliban access to \$9 billion in overseas currency reserves.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the region is experiencing effects of a devastating drought that has impacted local harvests and increased food insecurity. This food insecurity is further compounded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as so much humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan was drawn from wheat harvested in Ukraine and Russia.

The Taliban realize the formidable economic power of China. China was not a substantial player when the Taliban last ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s, but its strength has grown considerably since then. Unlike the Afghan Republic, which did not participate in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects or take loans from China, the Taliban have expressed interest in these activities. Both the Taliban and China say that Afghanistan will host BRI activities, but no formal announcements have been made as to the nature of any investments. Noted earlier, growing insecurity in Afghanistan make such announcements unlikely in the near term.

China is keen on luring the Taliban into cooperation with promises of economic development but understands that it clearly has the upper hand when it comes to this relationship. China has said that it hopes to bring Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and “replicate its success in

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<sup>7</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress” (Washington, D.C.: Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction, April 2022), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2022-04-30qr.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> David Wainer, “Afghanistan's Free Fall Sparks Accelerating Humanitarian Crisis,” *Bloomberg.Com*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-04/afghanistan-s-free-fall-sparks-accelerating-humanitarian-crisis>.

Afghanistan” to help bridge regional connectivity. Chinese government officials have said that it can “help Afghanistan turn its resource advantage into a development advantage.”<sup>9</sup>

While China is promoting greater economic support with the Taliban, it is aware of the risks that are involved with investments in Afghanistan. While China is promising significant economic cooperation with the Taliban in the long-term, China is also confronting the fact that its BRI initiative in neighboring Pakistan has come at significant financial cost. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is worth an estimated \$62 billion of the estimated \$282 China has lent throughout the world.<sup>10</sup>

CPEC has emerged as a risky investment for China for two reasons. First, it is a source of tremendous debt with returns that remain unclear. Second, the project has attracted the ire of extremists inside of Pakistan. Terrorist groups continue to target Chinese officials and workers inside Pakistan. In April, there was a high-profile attack that killed the head of the Confucius Institute in Karachi and wounded several others. Baloch militants took responsibility for this attack, claiming that China extracts resources from the region without compensating communities.<sup>11</sup> Despite these risks, Pakistani authorities are particularly keen on this cooperation because it provides the cash-strapped government significant resources and infrastructure. On the other hand, these investments look like significant liabilities for China.

Although China is dangling economic incentives in front of the Taliban, it does so to extract security guarantees while seeking to ameliorate development challenges in Afghanistan for fear that poverty may drive instability. If Afghanistan can demonstrate its ability to deliver on security promises, more cooperation may emerge. But having a foreign power, such as China, seen as having so much sway over domestic matters and dictating terms of engagement with fellow Muslims (such as ETIM) is risky for the Taliban. While there are no significant fissures among Taliban leaders with relation to China right now, there could be in the future should this relationship grow closer. Groups like the Haqqani faction of the Taliban, which have taken a harder line with regards to religious issues and have opposed the return of girls to school, could hold a similar hard line regarding China, should it put too much pressure on the Taliban to crackdown on Uyghurs in Afghanistan. Just as the Taliban pushed back on U.S. requests to have older girls return to school for fear of being seen as giving into U.S. demands, China could face the same fate should it put too much pressure on the Taliban to crackdown on Uyghur or other Muslim groups.

The more China demands the Taliban denounce other Islamist groups, the more vulnerable the Taliban become to propaganda from IS-K and other global jihadi groups who wish to portray the Taliban as ‘sell-outs’ to neighboring countries. They can show that the Taliban have given up religious purity in exchange for economic benefit. Thus, Taliban willingness to cooperate with Chinese authorities to isolate Uyghurs

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<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi Holds Talks with Acting Deputy Prime Minister of Afghan Interim Government Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar,” March 24, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics\\_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202203/t20220325\\_10655539.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202203/t20220325_10655539.html).

<sup>10</sup> Ren, “How Afghanistan Snags China in a \$282 Billion Creditor Trap.”

<sup>11</sup> Ali Siddiqi, “Attack on Chinese Workers in Pakistan Challenges New Government,” VOA, n.d., <https://www.voanews.com/a/attack-on-chinese-workers-in-pakistan-challenges-new-government/6547926.html>.

inside of Afghanistan may weaken Taliban claims to be a truly Islamic movement and not a ‘pawn’ of foreign actors—an accusation they used against the previous Afghan government quite effectively.

Although the Taliban have made overtures to China, this alliance will be inherently unstable due to fissures within the Taliban movement itself. An Islamic movement will have a hard time justifying a long-term relationship with a country that has persecuted millions of fellow Muslims. This will be a harder sell if significant economic assistance does not arrive. The Taliban have justified this close relation by stating that China does not interfere in its domestic affairs, but that justification may not last long as the Taliban feel pressure and competition from IS-K, who take much firmer stance against China.

#### **4. China-Russia Dynamics**

China and Russia have strong mutual interests in Afghanistan. Both countries are focused on security issues in Afghanistan and share concerns about violent extremism and terrorism. China is worried about this spilling over into its eastern Xinjiang Province and fomenting unrest there. Russia is concerned that such violence could spillover into Central Asia, a region it considers its ‘near abroad’ and its exclusive sphere of influence. China has also been clear that it will not recognize the Taliban government without agreement from Pakistan, Russia, and Iran.<sup>12</sup> Both China and Russia have pressed the U.S. to lift economic sanctions against the Taliban. Russia and China have both criticized the U.S. and European focus on human rights and democracy in Afghanistan. Both have tried to scale down expectations that the Taliban can create an inclusive government.<sup>13</sup>

China and Russia share similar concerns that “their enemies could find a safe have under the Taliban rule.”<sup>14</sup> They are both putting pressure on the Taliban to crack down on extremist groups. Russia asked the Taliban to call for the elimination of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and has long-standing concerns about drug trafficking and opium addiction in Russia. The Taliban ceded to Russia’s request to ban opium cultivation, at least in theory.

Both countries have opposed the unilateral economic sanctions that the U.S. and Europe have put on Afghanistan. Unlike the U.S., which has been very vocal about creating a government more inclusive of Afghanistan’s ethnic and religious minorities and the return of girls to high school as a condition for aid and cooperation, Russia and China have encouraged this, but not demanded it. In March, the Chinese foreign minister visited Kabul and said that it opposes “forces outside the region to wantonly impose economic sanctions on Afghanistan and hopes that the Afghan caretaker government will establish an

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<sup>12</sup> Yew Lun Tian, “China Will Not Be the First to Recognise Taliban Government, Scholar Says,” *Reuters*, October 30, 2021, sec. China, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-will-not-be-first-recognise-taliban-government-scholar-says-2021-10-27/>.

<sup>13</sup> Vinay Kaura, “China Draws Closer to the Taliban as Regional Foreign Ministers Prepare to Meet in Beijing,” Middle East Institute, March 24, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-draws-closer-taliban-regional-foreign-ministers-prepare-meet-beijing>.

<sup>14</sup> Kathy Gannon, “China’s Foreign Minister Makes Surprise Stop in Afghanistan,” AP News, March 24, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-business-china-economy-kabul-93160766eb7288c59d5673c712876092>.

inclusive political structure, implement prudent policies and make active efforts to serve the interests of the Afghan people.”<sup>15</sup>

An informal division of labor between Russia and China has emerged vis-à-vis Afghanistan in the shadow of U.S. withdrawal from the country, with Russia taking the lead on security issues and China more involved in economic concerns. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 did not lead to a security vacuum in the region because of Russia significant military presence of more than 8,000 troops in Tajikistan as well as a military base in Kyrgyzstan.

Over the years, China understood that it could not rely on Russian or U.S. security guarantees alone to protect its frontier with Afghanistan. In 2017, it began constructing military installations in Tajikistan near the Wakhan corridor.<sup>16</sup> These installations served several purposes. First, they helped protect Chinese investments in Central Asia. They also provided China with an extra layer of security on its border with Afghanistan. China constructed these bases in anticipation of U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While these outposts may not be significant in size or scale, they take on greater significance since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. While Central Asian republics, China, and even the Taliban may have viewed Russia as having a formidable presence in Tajikistan, Russia’s war in Ukraine demonstrated the weakness of the Russian military. The heavily losses accrued by the Russian military also create uncertainty about the number and quality of Russian troops that are guarding the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border. There has been no public reporting as whether Russia’s war invasion of Ukraine has affected its troop levels in Tajikistan.

Russia’s military weakness and China’s security fears in Afghanistan from a rising tide of terrorism from IS-K in Afghanistan, could give China a greater incentive to become more involved in security matters in the region in ways they had not been in the past.

## 5. Recommendations

The U.S. has lost enormous credibility in Central and South Asia after its twenty-year engagement in Afghanistan. While the messy withdrawal captured public imagination, the prolonged conflict exposed enormous weakness in the ability of the U.S. military and civilian agencies to deliver on promises. It exposed a paradox of largesse combined with carelessness and lack of strategy.

The U.S. has few options in the region right now in this region than it has at any time in recent history. U.S. has placed limitations on its willingness to engage with Afghanistan based on the unwillingness of the Taliban to allow girls to attend high school and university and their unwillingness to include ethnic

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<sup>15</sup> Gannon.

<sup>16</sup> Gerry Shih, “In Central Asia’s Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html).



and religious minorities as well as women in their government. Similarly, U.S. relations with China and Russia are at a nadir.

Although the U.S., China, and Russia share common goals of fighting terrorism and violent extremism in Afghanistan, the tactics used by China and Russia make it impossible for the U.S. to cooperate on these issues. With the war in Ukraine, cooperation with Russia is now out of the question. Like China and Russia, the U.S. seeks to prevent terrorism and dampen the growth of violent extremism in Afghanistan. In the case of China, it becomes even more challenging because the result of their efforts to fight terrorism culminated in what President Biden has called the genocide of the Uyghurs in China.

**While the U.S. can promote its effort to drive accountability and conditionality with the Taliban, this must be met by a broader strategy that recognizes the importance of regional connectivity and economic support as a path towards longer-term stability in the Afghanistan and the region.**

The U.S. will face continued challenges driving positive change in Afghanistan because of its strained relationship with the Taliban and the sanctions that are in place. U.S. strategic objectives remain even more elusive as Chinese outreach and engagement with the Taliban weakens U.S. efforts to isolate the regime in Kabul.

The U.S. strategy of isolating the Taliban with sanctions and punishing them to specific outcomes does not seem to be working. This strategy is weakened by the engagement China and Russia should focus its strategy on this region by looking at Afghanistan's neighbors and working with them to develop a strategy for the region from the bottom-up.

With a distracted Russia and the de-Americanization of the region, countries in the region have greater agency than at any time in recent history. Thus, a path towards greater U.S. engagement in the region could be through Afghanistan and China's neighbors who are looking for another party that will allow them to continue to play larger powers off against one another. This would help build autonomy of local actors and recognize their increasingly independent foreign policies.

Engagement on issues of regional connectivity are shared interests of every country in this land-locked region. The U.S. should diversify its tool kit and identify positive-sum solutions that go beyond Taliban conditionality and sanctions to one that incentivize countries in the region to find ways to cooperate over economic region.