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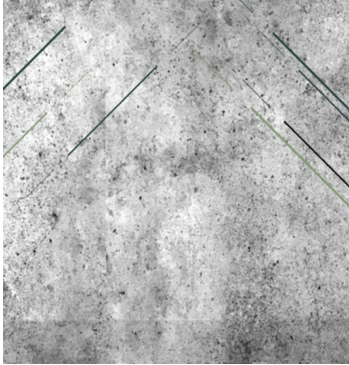


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Political Economic Analysis Of China's Foreign Policy Changes Towards Afghanistan From 2014 to 2023

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Abstract

China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the 2014-2023 period has changed in a more proactive direction. Moreover, when the Taliban succeeded in taking power in Afghanistan, China decided to maintain its concession with the country that had replaced the regime that has shown a significant change in its foreign policy towards Afghanistan, after previously freezing diplomatic relations with the country when the Taliban's first occupation occurred in the 1996-2001 period. Therefore, this research is held to determine the reasons for China's foreign policy changes towards Afghanistan from 2014 to 2023, in terms of political-economic analysis. The theory used is foreign policy, using the Goldmann model and the Holsti model approach to identify changes in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. The method used in this research is explanatory with data sources obtained through interviews and literature study. In the data analysis stage, the authors sort out information that is relevant to the research topic, followed by the process of presenting data and drawing conclusions. The final results of this research show that Xi Jinping is the main actor behind changes in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan since 2014. Securing China's economic interests in the development of Gwadar Port, a significant energy infrastructure project in BRI cooperation, became one of the main considerations for Xi Jinping to change China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; Political Economy; China; Afghanistan; Taliban

Introduction

China and Afghanistan have a long history of diplomatic relations that began as early as 1955 (Jureńczyk, 2022). The ups and downs of relations between the two countries began when the Saur Revolution occurred in Afghanistan on April 27 - 28 1978, which was led by the "Afghan People's Democratic Party" to overthrow the government of Mohammed Daoud Khan. China did not respond positively to the coup and considered the Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan a regional threat (Harris, 1980). After the collapse of the Soviet regime, there was a prolonged civil war in Afghanistan for power, which was finally won by the Taliban in 1996. China's response at that time was also not positive and it decided to close its embassy in Kabul and freeze all diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. (Zhang & Cox, 2022). As the group imposed harsh punishments like public executions and strict devotion to its version of Islam, the Taliban rapidly lost favor from the international community. The greatest level of international indignation happened when the Taliban were charged for shielding Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda who planned the terror operation to attack the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (Susilowati, 2022). After Operation Enduring Freedom by the US to overthrow the Taliban Regime, China officially normalized its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan in 2002, but for the following ten years, this country continued to have limited influences in Afghanistan (Zhang & Cox, 2022). As the group imposed harsh punishments like public executions and strict devotion to its version of Islam, the Taliban rapidly lost favor from the international community. The greatest level of inter-

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national indignation happened when the Taliban were charged for shielding Osama Bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda who planned the terror operation attack the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 (Susilowati, 2022). After Operation Enduring Freedom by the US to overthrow the Taliban Regime, China officially normalized its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan in 2002, but for the following ten years, this country continued to have limited influences in Afghanistan (Zhang & Cox, 2022).

However, since 2014, there has been a significant improvement in relations with the Afghan government through various state visits, increased aid, and economic development cooperation. Additionally, there are indications that China is beginning to acknowledge the Taliban as a significant political player in Afghanistan. Since 2014, Taliban leaders have visited China and the country has received these visits positively and recognized the Taliban as stakeholders in Afghanistan's domestic politics (Scobell, 2015). Not only building good relations with both parties, China is actively promoting reconciliation between Afghanistan and the Taliban. After the Taliban violated the peace agreement with the US and launched an attack to retake Afghanistan in 2021, China did not freeze its diplomatic relations with the country, as China did in 1996. On the contrary, China recognized the de facto Taliban government (Umami & Cipto, 2023) by continuing cooperation with the country that had changed regimes, even becoming the first country to officially appoint a new ambassador to Afghanistan since the Taliban occupation (Khan & Khan, 2024). Improving state relations can be categorized as a common thing, considering that China and Afghanistan have had diplomatic relations for a long time. However, increasing relations with extremist groups such as the Taliban, whose existence is currently met with opposition from many countries, is an interesting phenomenon to analyze. This research was carried out to understand the reasons for changes in China's foreign policy to become more proactive and positive in Afghanistan for the 2014-2023 period.

In research discussing China's foreign policy, several works examine the dynamics of the country's policies. Like the work of Ye (2019) which explains that the dynamics of China's foreign policy are determined by the material capabilities and responses of its neighboring countries. Regarding China's foreign initiatives in building diplomacy with Afghanistan, it is discussed in the work of Leandro & Duarte (2020) which explains that China participated in the establishment of the "Heart of Asia – Istanbul Process" forum, and used it to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, Afghanistan plays a marginal role in the BRI and this is unlikely to change in the future. In contrast, the work of Ali (2020) explains that despite several challenges, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan's cooperation in the BRI benefits mutual interests, and Afghanistan presents a new chapter in their relations. China's interest in economic diplomacy is explained in the work of Peyman (2018) which reveals that China, since its founding as a country, has never abandoned its interest in economic development. His ideas are rooted in experiences observed in developing countries to manage the economy and create sustainable systems. The authors also found literature written by Fauzi (2020), which analyzed China's interests behind Afghanistan's peace efforts with the Taliban in the 2016-2019 period.

From the existing literature, no one has specifically analyzed how China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan has undergone fundamental changes in the 2014-2023 period. Such work from Ye (2019) only presents a perspective from China without analyzing responses from China's neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan. Then, the work of Leandro & Duarte (2020) which assesses Afghanistan's role as marginal in the BRI, in contrast to the work of Ali (2020) which is optimistic about Afghanistan's role in the BRI, is also a research gap that requires further analysis. Furthermore, the work of Peyman (2018) only explains China's market economic interests and policies in general. Finally, the work of Fauzi (2020) has limited analysis in the 2016-2019 period, considering that the current situation changed when the Taliban reneged on the peace agreement and regained power in Afghanistan in 2021.

The authors confidently choose a research topic about foreign policy shifting to address how the judgement towards foreign policy changes as commonplace, has made us passively accept these changes, because we may think that they will not affect the domestic dimension. For-

example, China's foreign policy change that encourages this country to be friend the "Taliban" which is considered by the western world as a confrontational act. It is very possible for a country like the US to use the "Taiwan" issue to put China in a difficult and desperate position, which will certainly have an impact on worsening tensions between China and Taiwan which will also affect the people of each country. Since long ago, Kalevi Holsti has been concerned about how in foreign policy analysis, studies that specifically discuss foreign policy changes have received little attention (Setiawan & Yani, 2019). In his book "Why Nations Realign: Foreign Policy Restructuring in the Postwar World", he highlighted how the lack of attention to the analysis of foreign policy changes has resulted in continuity in the foreign policy orientations of major powers appearing to be the "norm" (Holsti, 1982) and no one questioned these foreign policies, so that validating major power foreign policy changes, even radical changes, is "normal" without investigating the impact of these changes and what the basis of all these non-trivial foreign policy changes is.

As a pragmatic global player, China certainly has motivations that influence its foreign policy changes and the authors aware how it is common for a superpower country like China to shift its foreign policy towards other countries, but what makes the authors insist on carrying this research is because there has been changes of China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan, fundamentally. In its long history, Afghanistan itself has long been a victim of its geographic reality. The country has been extremely vulnerable to intervention by global powers, starting from the Great Game, Soviet Invasion, to the Operation Enduring Freedom. The country is well known as the "Graveyard of Empires", because none of the great powers managed to conquer Afghanistan (Hughes & Fergusson, 2019). After the third Anglo-Afghan War, Britain finally surrendered and declared its willingness to enter into a ceasefire agreement with Afghanistan (Bhat, 2020). Likewise with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which was one of the bloodiest tragedies in world history where the Soviets were finally defeated by guerrilla resistance from the Mujahideen group which was strongly supported by arms supplies from the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (Sahel, 2019). Finally, there was Operation Enduring Freedom by the United States in 2001 which finally met its end in 2020, when the United States decided to make peace with the Taliban through the Doha peace agreement, and then ordered its troops to leave Afghanistan. The decision to end this intervention proved to be a failure, with the Taliban's ambition to take over all of Afghanistan, especially the capital Kabul which happened on August 15, 2021.

Even the United States, the global hegemonic country, was unable to win and maintain its influence in Afghanistan. Therefore, the authors are curious to find out what makes a country like China, which is still considered a "new power" or "new global player" compared to the old great countries, want to try its fortune to win its influence in Afghanistan? Why does China, which since establishing diplomatic relations with Afghanistan in 1955 until 2012 tending to be apathetic and never see Afghanistan as potential, even more looking the country as an obstacle to the success of its foreign policy, suddenly see Afghanistan as important and significant in China's foreign policy, especially in the political economic scope? Thus, this research is presented to complement previous research with the title "Political Economic Analysis of China's Foreign Policy Changes towards Afghanistan from 2014 to 2023", particularly to analyzing how Afghanistan's position fits into China's foreign policy in the geoeconomic (geopolitic and economic) sphere.

The authors acknowledge that it is indeed important to learn about Afghanistan since this country is the "Center of Asia". Afghanistan is a crossroads for countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and East Asia. Therefore, it is also called the "Heart of Asia" as in Figure 1 which shows the connectivity of Afghanistan. However, the authors who studied international relations and foreign policy, are aware of the lack of literature in Indonesia that analyzes Afghanistan in foreign policy studies. The authors found that very few studies of Chinese foreign policy have made Afghanistan the object of analysis. If there is, the literature we found tends to choose Pakistan or India as the object of analysis and marginalizes Afghanistan in South Asia. In fact, Afghanistan is a country that directly borders Xinjiang, China's outermost province. If there is instability in domestic politics and security in Afghanistan, China will also be vulnerable to its impact, as happened with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union was a regional-

threat to China at that time because of the massive siege carried out by the country. China was very afraid that if the Soviets would also invade Pakistan, which was an old ally of China, the country's defense would be even weaker, which at that time was not a strong and high-profile country, like the China we know today. So, to avoid the Soviet invasion, Xinjiang received military assistance from the United States and China itself openly declared its support for the Mujahideen to fight the Soviets.

The lack of literature examining China's foreign policy has also led to several misperceptions, like what western politicians did, when they accused that China's proactive and dynamic change in foreign policy towards Afghanistan is part of China's grand plan to influence and rule Afghanistan based on political ideology. Many countries do not trust China's intentions to build diplomacy and provide a lot of economic assistance to Muslim countries, given how problematic the Chinese government is in discriminating against the Uighur Muslim community in Xinjiang. This was based on a global report led by the UK in 2021 condemning China's repressive policies in Xinjiang (House of Commons, 2021) received widespread support from Western countries but very few from Islamic nations. This highlights China's increasing diplomatic influence in the Muslim world (Harper, 2023). Besides, China's non-intervention policy was reaffirmed by Wang Yi during his visit to Afghanistan in May 2022 by stating that China would never interfere in the country's domestic political affairs. Thus, China's security presence in Afghanistan will be very limited (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022).

Figure 1. Afghanistan in the Heart of Asia Region



Source: Amazing Paper, 2021

Many also assume that China has an unusual closeness to the Taliban, which currently holds the regime, is only because of China's concern that the Taliban is involved as a sponsor in every incident and riot masterminded by ETIM, a separatist group in Xinjiang, considering how the Taliban did not hesitate to provide shelter for Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 incident. Like Murtazashvili (2022) who stated that hosting ETIM and other extremist groups gives the Taliban an advantage against neighboring countries, particularly China. The author argues that this kind of opinion has no strong data evidence, because Hasan Mahsum himself, the founder of ETIM, ever stated that the East Turkistan Islamic Party does not receive any financial assistance from Osama Bin Laden or his Al-Qaeda organization and didn't have any organizational relationship with the Taliban (RFA, 2002). Although China has experienced a number of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang or related to it, until today there is still uncertainty about aspects such as who is the main mastermind behind each riot. Several key questions, including the assessment of planning, identification of individual or group perpetrators, the level of organization in certain attacks, and links to internationally recognized terrorist organizations, often go unanswered, both by official Chinese government reports and international media coverage. On the contrary, in October 2021, the Taliban were known to have expelled Uighur militants from the area near the Afghan border with China (Standish, 2021). The presence of refugees will certainly only complicate the Taliban, because the economic conditions are still very weak, so they do not have enough resources to accommodate and facilitate the needs of Uighur refugees. The Taliban are also-

under pressure because of weak domestic legitimacy, especially international legitimacy, due to the large amount of international aid that has been stopped as a form of ejection by countries of the Taliban occupation.

Therefore to solve the misleading perceptions and help scholars in understanding China's intentions of its foreign policy changes towards the "Heart of Asia" country, that makes the authors elaborate the political economy factor, especially in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), since political ideology factor is never proven. BRI is the most ambitious of China's economic foreign policy, as the strategic connectivity to strengthen its influence globally. Geographically, Afghanistan is a bridge for China to connect with Asian countries, especially countries in Central Asia, a region that is highly sought after by China for its abundant natural resources and as a way for the country to get closer to the Eurasian countries.

Method

This research uses explanatory qualitative methods. To explore and understand an issue or problem, qualitative research methods are considered the most appropriate because they have many research designs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative approach used is specifically explanatory qualitative. According to Ulber Silalahi (1999), explanatory research is a research method that functions to explain why a phenomenon occurs, by looking at the relationship between two or more variables. Research using this method will be used to explain the phenomenon of changes in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the 2014-2023 period, along with its causes.

To obtain primary data sources, the authors interviewed two sources, each of whom is an expert in the field of Chinese foreign policy and the field of international trade and investment. Apart from that, the authors also conducted a literature study from books, journal articles, government publications, and websites, to obtain secondary data sources (Ajayi, 2023). In the data analysis stage, the authors will carry out data reduction to sort out information that is relevant to the research topic. By reducing or editing the data, the authors could edit specific features of the data, typically the volume of data. According to Albalate (2007), a data reduction methodology is a method for lowering the amount of information in order to reduce memory and execution time during research. The author will reduce the data in the results and discussion sections after conducting an interview with related sources and searching for data relevant to the research topic in the form of studies from supporting data sources such as journal documents, ministry and agency websites, and current news, followed by the process of presenting and evaluating data, and drawing conclusions.

Foreign policy reflects subjective rather than objective national interests, where a country's foreign policy can experience transitions or changes as a strategic reaction of actors determining foreign policy to internal and external changes. Responding to the emergence of a new power like China relies on assessing the character of its policies to understand China's motivations for engaging with other countries. Despite stereotypes about authoritarian government, decision-making in China still involves a prolonged process of consensus among bureaucratic organizations representing functional, sectoral, and regional interests (Pekkanen, Ravenhill, & Foot, 2019). Based on those considerations, the author chose an analytical approach from the Goldmann (1988) model to analyze the role of actors and institutions in the process of change in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. As a continuation of the analysis of the role of actors, the authors also use the Holsti (1996) model to show that the phenomenon of changes in a country's foreign policy indicates a change in a country's goals which highlights a fundamental shift in the country's priorities and values. Holsti also emphasized that internal factors, such as changes in domestic government, and external factors, like changes in the international system or the opportunities for cooperation, play a major role in driving changes in a country's foreign policy.

Results

China's Foreign Policy Transition towards Afghanistan

To understand foreign policy, it is necessary to identify the personal characteristics and experiences of a leader in determining foreign policy choices (Mas'ood, 2020). In this section, the authors will compare the characteristics of China's foreign policy under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, the era when the Taliban first took over Afghanistan in 1996, with the leadership of Hu Jintao, the era after the normalization of China's diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, and the leadership of Xi Jinping, the era when The Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in 2021.

The Era of Jiang Zemin Leadership

Jiang Zemin is the supreme leader of the third generation who officially became the president of China from 1993 to 2003. President Jiang Zemin, adopted the "Tao Guang Yang Hui", which was first introduced by the revolutionary and supreme leader of the second generation in China, Deng Xiaoping. Tao Guang Yang Hui is widely interpreted as "hiding abilities and biding our time, but also getting things done" (Iqbal, 2016). One of the most striking characteristics of China's international behavior during the period from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin was the principle of caution in managing its international reputation, by adhering to a "victim-based" national identity (Withitwinyuchon, 2020). Jiang and the Chinese government at that time worked hard to convince the international community that despite China's material capabilities, China would still behave as a global citizen and responsible regional neighbor. The "Tao Guang Yang Hui" doctrine put China's foreign policy commitment to the test in 1999, when a US bomber bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo War. Internally, there is a dispute about whether the primary purpose of China's foreign policy should shift from "peace and development," which is centered on relations with the United States, to "countering US hegemony and oppression". In the end, China decided to stay on the path of "Tao Guang Yang Hui", to secure its national development. China also resolves land border disputes with its neighbors, which more often involve ceding rather than acquiring disputed territory (Pekkanen, Ravenhill, & Foot, 2019).

About China's relations with Afghanistan, Jiang Zemin has provided minimal assistance and cooperation to Afghanistan since 2001. Even after normalizing diplomatic relations in 2002, China took a less visible diplomatic approach towards Afghanistan, because it was concerned that the Taliban were still affiliated in Afghanistan, even though their rule had ended (Iqbal, 2016). Jiang is worried that this could provoke neighboring countries in Asia, especially the United States. Jiang Zemin certainly wants other countries to limit foreign trade and investment which are important for China's economic growth or even cause military conflict. The GWOT campaign initiated by the US under the leadership of George Walker Bush, with its call to all countries, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Jameela, 2016), had left China with no choice but to be on the US side, and oppose any country and party suspected of sponsoring terrorism. Jiang Zemin then founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on June 15, 2001, to restore relations with former Soviet colonies, such as Afghanistan and Central Asian countries (Akhtar & Javaid, 2024). Afghanistan finally joined as an observer country at the 2012 SCO Summit in Beijing (Andersen & Jiang, 2018).

The Era of Hu Jintao Leadership

After Jiang Zemin's leadership period ended, China entered its fourth generation of leadership under President Hu Jintao. Initially, in the first period of Hu's leadership (2003-2008), China was still consistent in continuing the foreign policy of its predecessors, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. However, China's self-esteem has increased, especially after the country managed to recover so quickly from the global monetary crisis that occurred in 2008. The strong economic stimulus managed to support demand in China and helped prevent a global depression, - Goldmann (1988) argues that changes in foreign policy can occur due to disagreements between

making it one of the world's leading exporters (Peyman, 2018). Goldmann (1988) argues that changes in foreign policy can occur due to disagreements between actors regarding the goals, methods, or values of policy. Kjell Goldmann's argument was proven correct because as China's self-esteem increased in international eyes, President Hu in the second period of his leadership had difficulty maintaining the main foreign policy of his predecessor and decided to no longer carry out a Chinese foreign policy based on "Tao Guang Yang Hui". On the contrary, China is becoming increasingly confrontational, especially towards countries considered as rivals, like the United States.

Instead of reassuring the US and its allies of friendly intentions, since 2008, China has signaled its resolve by taking risky actions. In March 2009, China created a dangerous maritime incident when they harassed the USS Impeccable, a US military operations ship that collects undersea information. China began to assert its right to exclude foreign military activities within the maritime and air distance of 12 nautical miles from China's attitude towards countries in Asia that are close to the US. In recent years, China issued strong criticism of the joint US and South Korean exercises, which were held after artillery attacks in the waters between the Korean peninsula and China. (Pekkanen, Ravenhill, & Foot, 2019).

Regarding its relations with Afghanistan under Hu's leadership, China had quite good relations with Afghanistan and never showed signs of resistance, as China did with Western countries. However, this does not indicate a significant improvement in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. On June 19, 2006, Hu Jintao met with Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai. The two reached a consensus for the establishment and development of a comprehensive cooperative partnership. However, after six years, Hu Jintao only signed the bilateral "strategic and cooperative partnership" agreement with Afghanistan, precisely in June 2012, five months before the end of Hu's rule in China. This agreement was signed on the sidelines of the SCO Summit, where Afghanistan was also officially invited by China as an observer country at the SCO (Andersen & Jiang, 2018).

The Era of Xi Jinping Leadership

Leadership milestone in China was then continued in the fifth generation. Hu Jintao's position as the president was taken over by his deputy, Xi Jinping, who officially served as President of China in 2013 (Le, 2023). Xi Jinping has taken a significant role in global and regional governance with a more confident, even more confrontational attitude towards any country that obstructs China's interests. Xi buried valuable coral reefs beneath tons of sand to construct military outposts in the South China Sea. Thus, it is impossible to believe that China will consider any compromise other than claiming the "nine-dash line" as its sovereign territory (Kusuma, Kurnia, & Agustian, 2021).

In the global governance agenda, China is no longer passively accepting the rules but is starting to implement them and assert its position as a contributor and decision-maker. Xi Jinping's governance has broken the traditional governance model, blurred boundaries, and paved the foundation for a new era of governance in a socialist country. Xi Jinping's innovation in this regard has provided great scope for future development. Thus, Xi Jinping consciously changed China's foreign policy doctrine to "Fen Fa You Wei", which is interpreted as the struggle for achievement, implying that China will take the initiative to shape the external environment according to its wishes (Withitwinyuchon, 2020). This was evidenced by the launch of Xi Jinping's One Belt One Road initiative in October 2013. This initiative aims to improve connectivity between China and Eurasia by transforming the region into a unified economic region through new infrastructure, enhanced cultural interactions, and more trade. The BRI has a northern route that crosses Central Asia, Russia, and Europe; a middle route that crosses Central Asia, West Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean; and a southern route that crosses Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean (Liu, et al., 2023). Considering it is geographically located at the intersection of Central.

Until 2012, Afghanistan was almost irrelevant to China's grand strategic thinking in its foreign policy. Proximity to Afghanistan has long been seen as only creating more complicated problems if it disturbs China's security. However, since Xi was appointed President in 2013, a new development has improved Afghanistan's position in China's foreign policy, namely "Neighborhood diplomacy" (Iqbal, 2016). In October 2013, China conducted its first diplomatic conference with countries on its periphery, which included Afghanistan. President Xi stressed the need to achieve success in neighborhood diplomacy to create a favorable regional environment for China's development. The conference was a huge step for China in elevating the profile of fringe diplomacy in modern Chinese foreign policy (Zhang & Cox, 2022). Xi prefers to build closeness with countries on the periphery bordering China, the majority of which are South and Central Asian countries, rather than with South Korea and Japan, where Xi tends to emphasize the power of his rivalry. The era of Xi Jinping's leadership emphasized a strategic change in China's foreign policy, which officially ended China's "Tao Guang Yang Hui" foreign policy doctrine (Withitwinyuchon, 2020).

Afghanistan's Position in China's Foreign Policy for the 2014-2023 Period

Afghanistan, which is located on the historic old Silk Road, is a country that is a bridge between Central Asia, South Asia, and Middle Eastern countries. However, Afghanistan has long been a victim of its geographic reality. The country has been extremely vulnerable to intervention by global powers. It started at the early 19th century, when Afghanistan was caught between the British and Russian empires fighting for power, known as "The Great Game". The British used Afghanistan as a buffer state to prevent Russia's approach to India and suspected that Russian influence was starting to enter Afghanistan, so there was a three-period "Anglo-Afghan War" (Bhat, 2020).

After Britain left Afghanistan, the country gained independence to pursue its foreign policy. The Soviet Union was the first to establish diplomatic ties with the country. However, in 1973, Daoud Khan, the authoritarian leader in Afghanistan, insulted the Soviets and refused to be their puppet. The Soviets finally sponsored the People's Democratic Party movement in the Saur Revolution to overthrow Daoud Khan's power (Sahel, 2019). After the Soviets left Afghanistan following their defeat by the US and its allies, a civil war broke out between Mujahideen factions to seize power in Afghanistan. In short, the Taliban won the battle and succeeded in controlling all areas of Afghanistan in 1996. However, the success of the coup was not followed by diplomatic success. Five years later, the US through Operation Enduring Freedom, overthrew the Taliban on suspicion of protecting Osama Bin Laden. Since the operation was held, US and NATO troops occupied Afghanistan until the following decades, when the US finally decided to leave Afghanistan and entered into the Doha Peace Agreement with the Taliban in 2020. However, the peace agreement was not taken seriously by the Taliban, who were just waiting for the time to take over again. The withdrawal of the British, Soviets, and the US from Afghanistan shows that no foreign power has yet been able to achieve military victory in Afghanistan (Hughes & Fergusson, 2019).

Thus, the authors' attention turns to China, a country that is classified as a "new player" when compared to the US, UK, and Russia but has played an active role in Afghanistan with a different approach, because it rarely uses its military power. China and Afghanistan are close neighbors, sharing only a short border of 76 kilometers across high mountains and located far from city centers on both sides (Anis & Aquil, 2023). The Wakhan Corridor connects mainland Afghanistan with Kashgar, a prefecture in mainland Xinjiang (Sarbiland & Stanikzai). Afghanistan's geostrategic proximity makes it difficult for China to ignore it because it does not rule out the possibility that the conflict in Afghanistan will affect China. What most differentiates Jiang Zemin's and Xi Jinping's approaches to China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is their acceptance of the Taliban. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan for the first time in 1996, China under the leadership of Jiang Zemin refused to recognize Taliban rule and immediately froze its diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. However, when this incident happened again in 2021, China became

one of the few countries that has kept its diplomatic mission open in Kabul. Since then, China has decided to continue the relations with the new Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Intensive formal meetings between the two in both China and Afghanistan, up to the appointment of a new Chinese ambassador to the Taliban authorities in 2023, show that China de facto recognizes the Taliban's authority in Afghanistan. China recognizes mutual interests, where the role of each party is very important to achieve common goals. China's increased diplomacy with Afghanistan has succeeded in assessing the strength of the Taliban and recognizing it as an important force in Afghanistan to help the reconciliation process in Afghanistan (Umami & Cipto, 2023).

Since 2013, China has had the ambition to expand its global power and has shown that even foreign affairs with non-state actors will provide important strategic opportunities for China (Zhang, 2015). Therefore, when domestic changes occurred in Afghanistan and the Taliban became the party that has controlled this country since August 2021, China chose to recognize the Taliban de facto to give China flexible political economic maneuvering space for its long-term interests in Afghanistan (Umami & Cipto, 2023). It can be said that Afghanistan's position in China's foreign policy has experienced a significant increase in the 2014-2023 period. Meanwhile, the last in China's priorities in Afghanistan is the option of de jure recognition of the Taliban. This is an option that China is avoiding shortly, due to Afghanistan's very weak domestic legitimacy due to internal divisions within the Taliban faction, as well as against anti-Taliban groups. Concerns about the escalation of the Taliban's complicated internal conflict and the weak international legitimacy of this group have encouraged China not to go too far to be involved in the Taliban's matters (Umami & Cipto, 2023).

Overview of China's Foreign Policy towards Afghanistan for the 2014-2023 Period

Since the beginning of 2014, it is known that Chinese diplomacy has started to become surprisingly more positive, proactive, and dynamic (Huasheng, 2015) which increases China's potential to play a useful role in the political-economic prospects in Afghanistan. The following is a chronology of some notable relations between China and Afghanistan in the 2014-2023 period. In 2014, at the beginning of February, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Kabul and announced that China would assist Afghanistan in achieving development stability. In October, China held a meeting of foreign ministers as part of the "Heart of Asia - Istanbul Process", an international initiative to improve cooperation and coordination between Afghanistan and its neighbors. It was followed by a regular visit by Xi's diplomatic envoy to Afghanistan. In December, China hosted a Taliban delegation in Beijing, stating that it was eager to play a "constructive role" in promoting Afghan peace (Huasheng, 2015).

In 2015, China's year-long peace initiative in Afghanistan was finally supported by the US through the "Quadrilateral Dialogue" on December 9, 2015 (Khan, 2016). In 2016, precisely in May, Afghanistan signed an MoU with China to join the BRI (Leandro & Duarte, 2020). In 2017, China first held a practical cooperation dialogue with Pakistan and Afghanistan on May 27 2017 to further discuss the expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and fix the difficult relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan which frequently experience border closures. Then, in December, China created the forum "The 1st China - Afghanistan - Pakistan Foreign Ministers Dialogue Convenes" to discuss the Taliban's reconciliation agenda (Andersen & Jiang, 2018). In 2018, the US and the Taliban began holding meetings in Doha after Mullah Abdul Ghani, one of the founders of the Taliban, was released from a Pakistani prison on US orders (Ullah, Sultana, & Kokab, 2020). However, in 2019, the Taliban's relations with the US worsened. In response to the situation that occurred, on October 29-30, China took the initiative to hold an intra-Afghan conference in Beijing and invited the Afghan and Taliban delegations. The conference was separated from US and Taliban talks (Boni, 2020).

In 2020, China was recognized as Afghanistan's third-largest export market (Ming, 2022). On the other hand, the US and the Taliban finally succeeded in reaching the Doha Peace Agreement. The essence of the agreement is that the US is committed to withdrawing all of its allied military forces, on condition that the Taliban cut connections with terrorist organizati-

ons (Talmullah, et al., 2020). China also welcomed the US and Taliban peace agreement (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022). In 2021, Joe Biden was elected as the new US president and inherited the Doha agreement to continue the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan.

However, after the US left Afghanistan, the Taliban attacked all of Afghanistan until they succeeded in occupying Kabul (Talmullah, 2022). Despite admitting to being disappointed with the situation that occurred, China did not close its embassy in Kabul at the time of the incident, and instead offered financial assistance to the Taliban, including food supplies and COVID-19 vaccines (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022). In 2022, the Taliban authorized a Chinese investment project for an industrial zone outside Kabul, which includes trade in pine nuts, the basis of 80 percent of livelihoods in Afghanistan. The "Pine Nut Air Corridor" initiative was launched by China in January 2022, under which 1500 tons of Afghan pine nuts were exported by air. China also launched the Tunxin Initiative, precisely in April, to increase Afghanistan's capacity for independent and sustainable development (Zhou, Su, & Yuan, 2022). In 2023, precisely in September, China became the first country to officially appoint Zhao Xing, as its new ambassador to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. Until now, there's only China who has sent its new ambassador for Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (Khan & Khan, 2024).

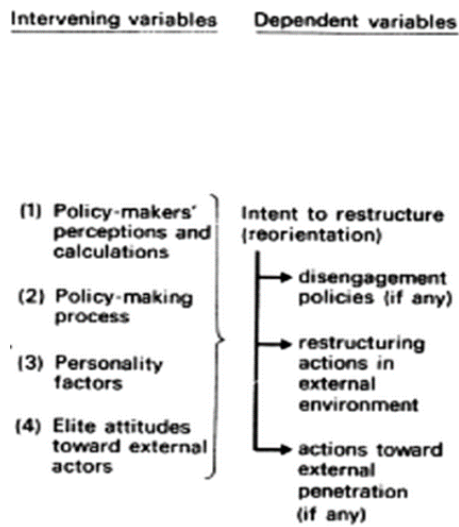
Discussion

In foreign policy analysis, the Holsti model put forward four concepts that can help, namely role performance (actions taken by the government), national role conception (internal factors), role prescription (external factors), and nation's status or position. Every country has high complexity in determining foreign policy, like the neoclassical realism assumption that the idea of a nation's status in international politics, which is used as a stratification that reflects the power of a country, is based on the economy, military, prestige, and other power factors. Countries that have "power", such as China, tend to have higher freedom in determining foreign policy. In contrast to countries that have less "power", such as Afghanistan, which tend to have narrower freedom of behavior in the realm of international politics. Although they are still free to determine, the policy can be rejected by actors who have greater power (Darmawan, et al., 2023). Because international status is important in making a country's foreign policy, the authors agreed to situate China's foreign policy as the subject analysis considering that China holds higher international recognition and power resulting in the country's unimpeded foreign policies and Afghanistan at the other side as the object of our analysis of China's foreign policy shifting.

As stated by Holsti (1996), behind the fundamental changes in a country's foreign policy, there are both internal and external factors. The author identifies that the most striking intervening variable behind changes in foreign policy are the perception and personality factors of the decision makers as in Figure 2 which was an improvement and refinement of the Goldmann model which emphasized mostly on the role of actors or institutions in the process of changing foreign policy. Goldmann does have a subjective tendency in observing changes in foreign policy because he prioritizes a behavioral approach that emphasizes the role and character of actors who control "change". Thus, Holsti model tries to create his model to improve and perfect Goldmann's model, especially by including external factors that underlie changes in foreign policy, although the external factors referred to by Holsti are still based on the perception of "human agency" as the main agent who has character, perception or opinion in seeing external factors and responding to them through decisions to change their foreign policy.

The priority of a country in its national interests is a collection of subjective preferences of policy-making actors that can shift and continue to change (Frankel, 1970). Therefore, Holsti and Goldmann are reasonable approaches to explain the phenomenon of foreign policy change. In fact, the Holsti and Goldmann models are way more adaptive for improvement, especially to analyze changes in Chinese foreign policy, where so far the majority of studies examining China and its foreign policy have dominated by realism approach whose scope of analysis is limited to the country level and less on analysis towards certain group or individual roles.

Figure 2. Intervening and dependent variables of foreign policy changes according to Holsti model



Source: Holsti, 2016

However, the variable of a country's material capabilities (economic and security) cannot be translated directly into foreign policy behavior, because those who have material capabilities do not necessarily play a role as leaders in international politics (Wei, 2023). Examples are countries in Europe, such as Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, which are mostly developed countries and of course have economic and security capabilities. However, none of the countries mentioned have created a global initiative to increase their influence internationally, as China has done through ambitious projects in its BRI. The choice of actions to be taken in a country's foreign policy can only be made by government officials because they are "individuals" who have perceptions and opinions in the policy-making process, not only from the quantity of material capabilities owned by a country (Mas'oed, 2020). By using the Goldmann model, the authors can eventually identify that there has been a significant increase in the presence of Chinese state actors in Afghanistan from 2014 to 2023, both for diplomatic affairs and economic cooperation and development at the bilateral to regional levels.

To understand China's foreign policy in the Goldmann perspective, we need to know that the highest domestic legitimacy in the country is held by one political party institution called Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From the first to the current fifth generation of leadership in the Chinese Communist Party, the leader of the party will be the supreme leader of the country (Lo, 2021). Changes at the internal and external levels, especially in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan since 2014, occurred after Xi Jinping served as leader of the CCP, rising to become president in 2013 when his leadership entered its third term. In contrast to Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao who were less firm in maintaining their authority and credibility in leading the party, Xi Jinping showed his strong personality in leading China and used nationalism to strengthen his authority in the CCP (Sorensen, 2015). The Chinese Dream is a vision for China that he has promoted since becoming party secretary general at the 18th CCP Congress in November 2012. For him, China's national interests will be achieved if there is greater reform and modernization in China (Xinmin, 2017).

In addressing China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan by using the Holsti perspective in "elite attitudes toward external factors" (figure 2), the authors identified that Xi Jinping seems to always order his government officials, especially the CCP to embrace Afghanistan. Although China is actively improving its ties with Afghanistan's legitimate government, Xi is also sending a strong signal that they treat the Taliban as part of domestic politics in Afghanistan, on par with the legitimate government. Apart from Xi Jinping and the CCP, foreign minister Wang Yi is also very

minister Wang Yi is also very active in promoting China's foreign policy as a superpower that pursues a path of peaceful development but remains independent and will not tolerate interference by foreign powers in any of its diplomatic decisions. Since the beginning of his term of office, Wang Yi has been regularly sent by Xi Jinping to visit Afghanistan and actively dialogue with the Afghan government or the Taliban (Jaknanihan, 2022). Using the Goldmann model, the authors identify that there has been a significant increase in the presence of Chinese state actors in Afghanistan from 2014 to 2023, both for diplomatic affairs and cooperation at the bilateral and regional levels. Changes in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan have shown that there has been a change or shift in the objectives of China's national interests in that country. Apart from using the Goldmann model, the Holsti model helps the authors to pay special attention to the shift in priorities in China's national interests in Afghanistan so that Xi Jinping can make fundamental changes in his foreign policy towards that country in the 2014-2023 period.

Xi Jinping's rationality in the Chinese Dream, which is based on reform and modernization to pursue China's national interests, originates from an idea or ideology known as "Pan-Asianism". Xi Jinping is a staunch supporter of this ideology. He believes that "Asia is only for Asians with its cultural norms and traditions" (Akhter, 2021). This is what explains why Xi doesn't like it when Asian countries like Japan align with the US. The closeness of these two countries is also an irony for Xi because the idea or ideology of "Pan-Asianism", which he upholds, was first created by Japan (Shahabuddin, 2024). The change in China's foreign policy specifically towards Afghanistan is in line with Xi's increasing awareness of increasing China's political and economic influence throughout Asia, which is motivated by the idea of "Pan-Asianism". Xi Jinping believes that China is the strongest country in Asia and deserves to be the political economic power that is relied upon in the region, not from countries outside Asia (Bayok, 2017). This has proven that intervening variables like the process, perceptions, and personality of policy maker perceptions are variables that intervene the ideas of domestic and external factors for the country in order to rethink the nation's interest toward Afghanistan, resulting in changes in the nation's foreign policy changes.

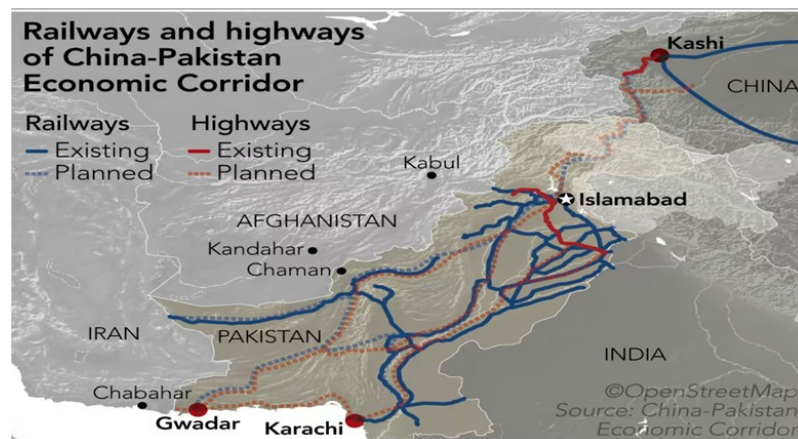
In the authors' views, Xi Jinping's actions reflect that the best way to further increase China's political economic presence in Asia is to create "economic interdependence" through connectivity that will connect it with the rest of Asia, and it is this rationality that prompted Xi to create the BRI global initiative. China's Silk Road Economic Belt strategy in the BRI is China's economic expansion effort to connect Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and East Asia, through the construction of railways and highways. Afghanistan is located in the geographical center of the four Asian regions, so this country has earned the "Heart of Asia" title, and is the right choice for China as a bridge that will connect it more closely with the whole Asian countries (Zaki, Tian, & Amini, 2023). This is based on the statement of the expert who studied international trade and investment, to find out China's short-term and long-term plans in Afghanistan in the economic sector. According to the interviewee's view, in the short term, China wants to deepen cooperation on natural resources, considering this country's natural resources have not yet been fully explored, and develop railway and road infrastructures in Afghanistan. These short-term plans certainly have the aim of realizing China's long-term plans which want to dominate natural resources throughout Asia and because of Afghanistan's strategic location, China will use Afghanistan as a bridge to Central Asia, an area with abundant natural resources and geographical location in the heart of the Eurasian continent. However, because Afghanistan is at the crossroads of Asia, this country became one of the landlocked countries. Thus, Afghanistan does not have access to the ocean and is very dependent on neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, for access to trade using sea transportation routes (Rahim, 2018). Even though Afghanistan does not have sea routes or maritime economic resources that are useful for China's BRI, in 2023 this country decided to expand CPEC to Afghanistan and make this country a third party (Zhang, 2023). This raises questions about China's true motivations for improving relations with Afghanistan.

The BRI's emphasis on boosting trans-Eurasian connectivity serves China's global foreign policy interests, demonstrating how ambitious Xi Jinping is, in promoting China's political econo-

mic growth. The BRI aims to boost trans-Eurasian connectivity by establishing six economic corridors (Zhou, et al., 2023). Of the six existing corridors, three of them pass through Xinjiang, one of which is CPEC which connects Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gwadar in Pakistan, as in figure 3 below which shows a map of the Gwadar port construction route. Gwadar is a coastal region in Pakistan, precisely in the province of Balochistan. The construction of the Gwadar port is the epicenter of the multi-billion dollar CPEC. The location of this port is very important because of its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, an oil chokepoint and the most significant maritime trade route as a third of all maritime transport passes through it, which will attract trade from Central Asia. China wants to move oil and gas from the Middle East by land to Xinjiang, an area that has no sea ports. China chose to dredge the port in Gwadar, and then build energy infrastructure in the form of a gas pipeline to Xinjiang. CPEC was inaugurated in 2015, and since then, Gwadar Port has been officially a flagship project under CPEC (Kalim & Syed, 2020).

Afghanistan, which is a landlocked country, is a strategic country with the shortest land route to Xinjiang. With this consideration, China and Pakistan chose Afghanistan as a transit trade area (Kalim & Syed, 2020). In October 2019, the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul expressed optimism that the Gwadar-Chaman route would be the most efficient means of shipping products to Afghanistan's two main cities, Kabul and Kandahar. Sending goods through Gwadar also provides an opportunity to integrate Afghanistan in the CPEC (Aamir, 2020).

Figure 3. CPEC Gwadar Port Development Route



Source: Aamir, 2020

On January 14, 2020, Gwadar Port handled cargo bound for Afghanistan for the first time, officially marking the start of the "Afghan transit trade". The Diyala cargo ship, in figure 4 below, has been included in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). The cargo contained bulk cargo and chemical fertilizers which were transported from Gwadar to Xinjiang, via the Chaman border with Afghanistan. Using Gwadar port for transit trade within APPTA gives Afghanistan the right to import duty-free goods through Gwadar port. Afghanistan gained benefits, so this country agreed to accept the Gwadar project in APPTA and contribute to its development (Aamir, 2020).

A month after the Diyala Cargo from Gwadar arrived in Afghanistan, the Doha Agreement was officially signed by the US and the Taliban, as a peace agreement between the two parties. However, the Taliban violated the peace agreement and decided to regain power in Afghanistan. Chaman, the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan which is the main commercial artery for the continuity of the Gwadar gas pipeline construction project with China, has experienced several closures since the Taliban seized the Wesh border in Afghanistan (Khalid, Hussain, & Mahmood, 2023).

Figure 4. Diyala cargo from Gwadar transited Afghanistan on January 14, 2020



Source: Aamir,2020

The construction of Gwadar Port is one of China's important projects in the energy sector. China does not want any obstacles that will result in losses in the process. If it had to take an approach with the Taliban to ensure the sustainability of its economic development, China was willing to do so. This is what is known as economic security, where rationally, Xi Jinping is trying to secure his country's economic interests, by ensuring the sustainability of the billion-dollar gas pipeline construction project. Just as security is understood in the language of "insecurity", economic security is also understood by China in the language of insecurity. China makes the economic sector the core of its national security. They will only feel safe if their economic development abroad does not encounter opposition or interference from conflicting parties along the development path.

The Chinese government's attention, which has long focused on socio-economic welfare, is now expanding to a larger goal, namely energy security or "economic energy security" (Rizaldi, Idris, & Nurbaiti, 2023). China's BRI proposal provides an opportunity to overcome the energy crisis, through cooperation with member countries to collaborate on energy supplies on a broad and strategic basis, which can increase the efficiency of energy development and accelerate investment turnover (Madani, 2021). Under the BRI strategy framework, the Gwadar Port project becomes a forum for pluralistic economic cooperation in the energy sector (Madani, 2021). Xi Jinping has ambitious plans to connect Xinjiang to global markets through Pakistan's Gwadar port to boost its economy. Xinjiang is a "geographical advantage" that can facilitate China's openness to the west, so Xi Jinping is trying to make Xinjiang the main center of China's economic connectivity (Hayes, 2019), as evidenced by the existence of three of the six BRI economic corridors passing through Xinjiang, including the construction of ports Gwadar which connects Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gwadar in Pakistan, and Afghanistan as a route.

Geographically, Xinjiang is a region of China that directly borders Afghanistan. These two regions are known to be prone to conflict which could disrupt China's economic interests, especially in the process of building the Gwadar port. However, Xinjiang province is still an area under Chinese sovereignty. Meanwhile, Afghanistan is not part of China at all or has any territorial disputes with it. Therefore, China ultimately preferred a peaceful approach with influential authorities in Afghanistan, both the Afghan government and the Taliban. China's main aim in changing its foreign policy in Afghanistan is to ensure that the Gwadar port development project runs smoothly and effectively without any opposition from the Taliban. By securing its land route Afghanistan, China does not have to navigate the sea route, which can be time-consuming and expensive and carries greater risks than building on land. China only cares about its economic interests, especially ensuring the continuity of cooperation in energy.

This is a more reasonable reason to see why China's governments are very adamant about stabilizing Xinjiang. China has been a net oil importer since 1993, and as long as its economy and population continue to grow at their current rate, so will its energy sector. As a result, China is increasingly dependent on Xinjiang for its energy needs (Takrim, Kamran, & Mumtaz, 2022). This dependence is actually the main reason for maintaining Xinjiang. Thus, China views the inclusion -

inclusion of Uyghurs into the Chinese national family as essential to Xinjiang's stability. The Chinese government has reconfigured the discourse on Xinjiang and Uyghurs to reflect the contemporary international focus on extremism by radical Islamic groups, in order to gain international recognition for its "legitimate" fight against terrorism (Clarke, 2018), lest China lose its authority to maintain Xinjiang within its sovereignty. Because China initiated this "counter-extremism" scenario, international attention shifted to the Taliban group in Afghanistan, which geographically borders Xinjiang, and many people misunderstood that China was worried about the Taliban's interference in Xinjiang as the main reason for China's change in foreign policy in Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, there is no concrete evidence to reveal the Taliban's involvement in ETIM, which was even directly denied by the founder of ETIM himself.

China's actions in securing its economic strength are perfectly in line with the implementation of the International Political Economy (IPE) of geoeconomics, where there is political-economic and strategic value of geographical space. Geoeconomics engages in a required conversation between the political and economic imperatives of the international system, which is integrated into IPE (Jaeger & Brites, 2020). Blackwill & Harris, (2016) in "War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft", explained that geoeconomics is the use of economic instruments to advance and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical outcomes. International economic and political relations among countries in the strategic environment are greatly influenced by activities/events occurring in the region. The development of current geoeconomic views shows that there has been a re-mixing of economic and geopolitical interests that are identical to security interests that were previously seen to be separated since the end of the world war and the cold war (Kennedy, 2022). The narrative that China has built around the BRI, deliberately depicts it as a regulated structural interconnection in the region of Asia and Eurasia, and China typically playing a significant role due to its position, economic heft, unquenchable need for energy, and growing geopolitical advantages (Clarke, 2016). China is the most obvious example of a country using geoeconomics as a driver and basis for establishing political-economic dominance, by making BRI an instrument to influence the world communities which will make them dependent on Chinese goods and services (Lipkan, Kuznichenko, & Ivanov, 2023). According to the expert who studies China's foreign policy, Xi Jinping takes a different approach, compared to leaders of western countries who tend to be firm in imposing sanctions and punishments on the Taliban. In international studies, there is a type of diplomacy that China prefers to give "the gifts", rather than "the punishments" to the Taliban. The Taliban authorities value economic assistance from China, so they will not hinder China's BRI project by unnecessary conflict.

Conclusion

Using the Goldmann model, the authors find that Xi Jinping is the main actor who is the catalyst in making decisions and determining the agenda for changes in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the 2014-2023 period. The authors also use the Holsti model to analyze changes in priorities or objectives in China's foreign policy, where Afghanistan's position since 2014 has become significant in China's foreign policy. Both Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping place the economy as a priority in China's national interests. What is different is that Jiang and Hu never saw Afghanistan as an economic potential in China's foreign policy. Meanwhile, Xi is optimistically increasing China's political economic interests to a higher level, characterized by the vision of the Chinese Dream and BRI as his global initiatives. Relations with any country, including Afghanistan, are important for him to secure China's economy. Afghanistan is the closest and strategic bridge for China to connect with Asian countries, especially Central Asia as well as Pakistan, China's long-standing ally. President Xi Jinping does not want the ambitious project he created, especially the Gwadar port project with Pakistan, to experience obstacles along the way that could cause huge losses to China. This is one of the political-economic considerations that led to changes in China's foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the 2014-2023 period.

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