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China, Russia, Iran cement Kabul ties as US reenters Afghan game

With Washington seeking to reassert its Afghan presence, a new Eurasian alliance is investing heavily in Kabul and rearming the regional balance against US and Indian ambitions.

An unspoken alliance is quietly chipping away at the US-backed Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ([QUAD](#)), challenging India's influence across the Indian Ocean, the Asia-Pacific region, and particularly South Asia.

This alignment – comprising China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan – has emerged as a formidable counterforce, especially in the wake of the US President Donald Trump administration's attempts to sever Beijing's access to vital Afghan minerals.

China has already [invested \\$14 billion](#) into Afghanistan's mineral, petroleum, mining, and agriculture sectors. It has also revamped the Wakhan border with Afghanistan as part of a broader strategy that includes Iran's plans to build the Iran–Afghanistan–China corridor.

Since the US and NATO [withdrawal](#) from Kabul in 2021, Afghanistan has become a nucleus of intense regional activity. The Taliban-led government has welcomed billions in foreign investments in mining and communications, while its ties with China and Russia have deepened.

Beijing and Moscow's growing leverage over the Taliban has borne fruit: Afghanistan announced in May plans to join the de-dollarization drive and develop [local currency](#) trade mechanisms with both Eurasian powers.

Pakistan, a historic Taliban patron, was instrumental in providing logistics, arms, and training during the movement's two-decade fight to establish rule. Some even argue that Pakistan midwived the Taliban, with Quetta nurturing Mullah Omar himself. However, relations soured after the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – a Pashtun militant offshoot with Afghan sanctuaries – began [targeting](#) Pakistan.

China restores the regional equation

As tensions between Islamabad and Kabul peaked, China swiftly intervened to rebalance the regional equation. Just days after Pakistan–India [border skirmishes](#), Beijing summoned Afghan and Pakistani officials for talks.

On 21 May, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [hosted](#) an informal dialogue in Beijing between Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar and Afghanistan's interim Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. Both sides agreed “in principle” to reestablish diplomatic ties and elevate their bilateral relationship, according to a Chinese foreign ministry statement.

This initiative followed Pakistan's December 2024 [airstrikes](#) on TTP hideouts in Afghanistan's Paktika province, which killed approximately 50 people, and unfolded shortly after Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar [met](#) with Muttaqi – New Delhi's first senior-level contact with the Taliban since its US-mediated return to power in 2021. In short, China's diplomatic counterplay has rattled India.

Iran and Russia echo Beijing's Taliban overtures

Iran and Russia have mirrored China's Taliban engagement, with momentum for this realignment surging after Trump unveiled his Afghanistan policy.

In January 2025, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi made a [landmark visit](#) to Kabul, meeting Muttaqi and Taliban Prime Minister Hassan Akhund. The talks focused on Afghan migrants, [water disputes](#), border management, and trade.

Dr Ghulam Ali, deputy director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies, provides some context for the whirlwind of regional diplomatic activity to *The Cradle*:

“Iran's Rail Ministry has already shown its intention to build the Iran–Afghanistan–China corridor, likely through the Wakhan border. Stability in Afghanistan serves the neighbors' interests more than those of any other country.”

In February 2024, the administration of late Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi signed a [\\$35 million agreement](#) granting Taliban access to Iran's Chabahar Port, allowing Afghanistan to bypass distant transit routes. Talks on extending railway links followed, significantly boosting Iran–Afghanistan trade.

Last year, Iran and Afghanistan observed notable expansion in their bilateral trade as a result of these measures. The emerging political alignment has created a basis for improved economic cooperation.

Similarly, in March 2025, Russia's prosecutor general [petitioned](#) the Supreme Court to remove the Taliban from its list of banned organizations – a step foreshadowed by President Vladimir Putin's announcement last year naming the Taliban as a counterterrorism partner. The court [granted](#) the request just last month, in April.

Why Kabul matters to the quadrilateral bloc

Why is Beijing pushing Islamabad and Kabul toward rapprochement, despite rising tensions that nearly spiraled into war? The answer lies in strategic calculus.

First, Afghanistan is crucial for China's westward Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expansion. Second, the country's vast lithium, copper, and iron deposits are key to China's tech industry. Third, Beijing opposes any Indian foothold in Afghanistan. Finally, security interests compel China to engage the Taliban directly.

When Washington declared plans to reassert its Afghan influence in February, the quadrilateral bloc accelerated efforts to entrench itself in Kabul. This effort intensified after the US president [announced](#) plans to retake Bagram Airbase – strategically located an hour away from Chinese nuclear facilities.

Trump said his plans to establish a "small force" at Bagram were not aimed at Afghanistan, but rather, at curbing China's operational control of the base – a charge the Taliban has [vehemently denied](#).

The group's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told local media in March that Trump's allegations about China controlling the airbase were "an emotional statement based on unsubstantiated information," adding:

"Bagram is controlled by the Islamic Emirate [Taliban regime], not China. Chinese troops are not present here, nor do we have any such pact with any country."

Dr Ali tells *The Cradle* that Trump's sudden shift in US policy has actually contributed to catalyzing the deeper engagement from China, Iran, and Russia, and notes that these nations are now working to preempt US, western, and Indian efforts to reestablish dominance in post-NATO Afghanistan. But it is not an easy balancing act, he points out:

"This holds for Iran as well. Tehran might not see it as a concern, given India's investments in Iranian ports and its use of Iran and Afghanistan to establish connections with Central Asia, which, in certain ways, aligns with Iranian interests. The Pakistani military's primary concern is India's role in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the

Taliban exhibits a greater degree of independence. If the Pakistani military persists with its policy of interference in Afghanistan and attempts to utilize it as a ‘backyard’ or ‘strategic depth,’ it will have negative consequences."

Bagram Airbase redux and the new Great Game

Despite the US's draining engagement on two major conflict fronts – in Ukraine and Gaza – Washington continues to actively advance foreign policy moves to target Chinese resource supply chains and reclaim strategic footholds lost in 2021.

The reported US-Taliban thaw began following Trump's 2024 election. In March, a delegation led by US envoy Adam Boehler and veteran diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad [visited](#) Kabul to negotiate the release of detained American tourist George Glezmann.

The Afghan representative shrewdly conveyed to the US delegation that Glezmann was being released on humanitarian grounds and as a gesture of goodwill.

Washington's renewed focus on the country it occupied and destroyed for 20 years is, of course, far from humanitarian. So Iran, Russia, and China are fast-tracking ties with Afghan factions to foster stability on their terms. A key goal: sidelining the US and its allies in the region's newest geopolitical contest.

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