



CHINA'S AFGHAN POLICY: DE FACTO RECOGNITION OF THE TALIBAN REGIME

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Abstrak

Pada tahun 2021, pemerintah Cina menjadi satu-satunya negara yang terlibat aktif dengan rezim Taliban. Pendekatan proaktif Cina yang hanya memberikan pengakuan de facto dilihat sebagai sikap keberhati-hatian Cina dalam menghadapi Taliban menarik untuk dikaji secara rasional melalui analisis Rational Choice Theory. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pertimbangan-pertimbangan Cina dalam memilih pengakuan de facto sebagai solusi terbaik bagi kepentingan nasional Cina saat ini. Dengan metode eksplanatif-kualitatif dengan model studi kasus untuk mengkaji kepentingan Cina, tulisan ini menemukan bahwa pengakuan de facto sangat menguntungkan Cina antara lain mendapatkan jaminan perlindungan keamanan dan izin akses proyek eksplorasi SDA dari Taliban, mendapat kesempatan membentuk Citra saat Taliban terisolasi, kerjasama dengan AS perihal terorisme internasional dan memperkuat pertahanan keamanan dengan aliansi SCO. Sebaliknya, pengakuan de jure akan menimbulkan resiko berbahaya bagi kepentingan nasional dan global Cina.

Kata Kunci: *Afghanistan, Cina, kebijakan luar negeri, pengakuan de facto, Taliban*

Abstract

The Chinese government is the only country actively engaged with the Taliban regime. China's proactive approach that only provides de facto recognition is seen as China's cautious attitude in dealing with the Taliban and is interesting to be studied rationally through Rational Choice Theory analysis. This research aims to determine China's considerations in choosing de facto recognition as the best solution for China's current national interests. Using an explanatory-qualitative method with a case study model to examine China's interests, this paper finds that de facto recognition benefits China by providing security guarantees and access permits for natural resource exploration projects from the Taliban, forming an image when the Taliban are isolated, cooperating with the US on international terrorism, and strengthening security defenses with the SCO alliance. Conversely, de jure recognition would pose a dangerous risk to China's national and global interests.

Keywords: Afghanistan, China, de facto recognition, foreign policy, Taliban

Introduction

Since the US decided to leave Afghanistan, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, after 20 years, and China seems ready for this radical change. With far greater economic and political influence today than two decades ago, Xi Jinping wanted to make China a global power, and seeing an opportunity in the Taliban-friendly regime, China opportunistically built trust with the Taliban for regional stability to complete its mega project ambitions (Abbasi & Khatwani, 2021).

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's itinerant visit to South Asia on March 24, 2022, and meeting with Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi in Afghanistan, intensive formal meetings between the two either in China or in Afghanistan until the appointment of the Taliban ambassador to China replacing the previous Afghan ambassador further strengthened cooperation in terms of security and economy with the Taliban government as a normal government. However, it did not officially recognize the Taliban government (Tiezzi, 2022). Indirectly, China temporarily recognizes common interests where each party's role is crucial to the goal. China's stealthy approach during the US invasion of Afghanistan to assess the power of the most prominent actors successfully assessed the Taliban's power in Afghanistan. It recognized it as an important political force in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Wang Yi believes that the Taliban's military and political strength can aid Afghanistan's peace, reconciliation, and reconstruction, especially since the Taliban received official political party status in February 2020 after signing the Doha Agreement with the US (Attanayake & Haiqi, 2021).

China's motivations in Afghanistan have not changed since 2001; maintaining a strategic security alliance with Pakistan to secure Xinjiang from extremism due to war turmoil, separatism, and drug trafficking and hoping for a US military withdrawal in Afghanistan are crucial factors for China to establish relations with Kabul (Sharma, 2010). On the economic side, Fauzi's research shows that Afghanistan's strategic position as a key link to various countries and regions is a strategic opportunity for the Chinese economy. The success of BRI projects in South and Central Asia depends on the stability of Afghanistan (Fauzi, 2020).

Putting aside the Taliban's status as a terrorist organization by the West, China also provided some assistance to the Afghan people during the Taliban's year in power without

any de jure recognition and publicly urged international recognition and called for the disbursement of US-frozen Afghan funds and economic development in Afghanistan. China claimed its new neighborhood diplomacy prioritized neighborly relations (Huasheng, 2016). No country has recognized the Taliban regime because the group continues implementing brutal law enforcement policies and mistreating women and children. However, Chinese aid keeps coming and has refrained from harshly criticizing the Taliban. China instead took the opportunity to reach out to the Taliban to integrate Afghanistan into the BRI before Afghanistan fell into a failed state, and they also still want to strive to develop an economic partnership without the recognition of the United States (Teston et al., 2021).

With de facto recognition, there is a cautious attitude emphasized by the official think-tank of China's national security apparatus, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) said China will not be the first to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan until three countries, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran reach consensus (CNN Indonesia, 2021). So far, China's de facto recognition of the Taliban has been a hesitant assessment of the situation, with Beijing adopting a wait-and-see approach to de jure recognition. China's stance implies special considerations in the case of the Taliban regime. A similar of China's stance also happened in Myanmar where China gave implicit recognition by taking steps to give de facto recognition to the military junta and recognizing General Min Aung Hlaing as the leader of the military junta. Unlike Myanmar, where the military's status is very different from the Taliban as an Islamist militant organization, China doubts the Taliban's ability to manage the state and has international terrorism networks that threaten Western China's security. China's territorial security interests and the security of BRI investments from the threat of terrorism and dealing with the Taliban's erratic governance are points of interest in China's foreign policy in Afghanistan.

Therefore, using rational choice theory, this article examines China's consideration of the consequences associated with its recognition of the Taliban while emphasizing that China's choice to grant de facto recognition is the best for its current situation based on cost-benefit calculations and the most optimal in their bilateral relationship. The author uses an explanatory-qualitative methodology as the research design.

that specifically discussed the consequences faced by China regarding its recognition policy of the Taliban regime.

Foreign Policy as a Rational Choice Process

Rational Choice Theory explains China's de facto recognition of the Taliban. Recognition is not a problem in their relationship. China's reluctance to offer de jure recognition can be interpreted as a cautious approach based on the principle of non-interference. Therefore, China rationally took a de facto recognition stance towards the Taliban to avoid the calculated consequences and to maintain its primary objective as a regional power.

Foreign policy making requires rationality to eliminate options and make reasonable conclusions by weighing benefits and downsides. In a non-democratic country like China, foreign policy decision-making within the CCP is similar to that of other nations regarding rational thought based on domestic stability, as the Chinese public frequently asserts that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. The main focus of Chinese leaders tends to be seeking legitimacy and gaining lasting public support (Zhang, 2006). Securing assets and human resources at home and abroad is a top priority to maintain party legitimacy in light of the globalized scope of China's economic and political power.

In the field of foreign policy decision-making, China's foreign policy decision-making is difficult to study due to its history of secrecy and the complexity of domestic and international considerations (Zhang, 2006). However, China is a normal country that intends to maximize its interests regarding power or security in an anarchic international system (Feng & He, 2020). China as an actor can be rationalized as a unitary actor because China's foreign policy is obvious and easy to grasp, and all Chinese authorities and public media seem to follow the central government's foreign policy agenda.

To explain the best option chosen through rational calculation, Allison analyzes four aspects of Rational Choice Theory: goals and objectives, options, consequences, and choice (Allison, 1971). These components explain in detail why a state action can be said to be a rational choice. Goals and objectives can be interpreted as national interests that the state wants to achieve rationally. Then, options are choices of actions following the direction of the actor's main goal. The consequences are vital to reveal each option's

impact or profit and loss. If the decision maker incorrectly identifies the consequences, it will lead to great losses. The choice is the last stage for actors to choose the most profitable (value maximizing) option by their goals and objectives (Allison, 1969).

Method

This research uses a qualitative-explanatory methodology to explain why and thoroughly explain the dynamics of China-Taliban relations by observing and measuring certain parameters with a case study approach to understand China's background and reasons for dealing with the Taliban regime, which has only been in power for a few years. The case technique allows the author to analyze much data regarding China's interests in Afghanistan, which have yet to be recognized until now (Babbie, 2008). This approach allows the researcher to collect data on China's policy of not recognizing the Taliban by identifying China's key aims as a pattern guide to understand China's priorities with the Taliban government. Then, start analyzing the possible options considered by China through the framework of Rational Choice theory so that the discussion of the consequences of each option will bring out which choices are beneficial and which are not.

To answer the problems in this research, the author uses secondary data from reading materials in journals, scientific publications, and papers relevant to this article. The author also used data contained in treaties or agreements related to the recognition of the Taliban regime as well as official documents or official government and private websites. These data are useful to confirm the attitude taken by China towards the Taliban. In addition, research data and information were obtained from various sources, especially print and electronic news. Data collection was carried out systematically with stages such as researchers collecting data from various documents related to China and Taliban relations and then sorting and classifying the collected data based on a pre-made structure.

In addition to data collection, validation of findings through data triangulation procedures will also increase the credibility of the data that the author finds by checking data collaboratively and looking for the same information in other sources to minimize data deviation and deepen the analysis. Furthermore, concluding the data found is carried

out continuously until saturation to ensure the validity of the data needed. (Miles et al., 2014).

Result and Discussion

China's Key Interests in Afghanistan under Taliban Leadership

China's main interests in Afghanistan since 2001 have always stayed the same, but the order of priority has always changed according to the conditions in the conflict country. When the Taliban came to power in 1996-2001, China only had concerns about ETIM and other Central Asian militant groups that had training camps in Afghanistan with the approval of the Taliban. Based on security reasons in connection with the ETIM trying to establish an East Turkestan Islamic state in Xinjiang, China moved quietly to ask Taliban leader Mullah Omar for guarantees so that Afghanistan would not be used as a base by any group to carry out attacks on China (Maan, 2021). At this time, state security came first, followed by an MoU on economic cooperation by both parties.

China's foreign policy changed after the Taliban regime was overthrown; the Chinese government officially recognized the Afghan transitional government under Hamid Karzai and supported the US in eliminating the Taliban and terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Carefully, China applied the principle of non-intervention that both sides should respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Zhou et al., 2022). The principle of non-intervention is the quintessence of China's foreign policy to avoid precedents that could be used against China in the future regarding sovereignty (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2014). In support of the war on terror, China trained Afghan soldiers to fight ISIS and Al-Qaeda militants trying to infiltrate Xinjiang, which ultimately goes back to China's original goal of preventing terrorism from entering Xinjiang.

China relies on regional cooperation to address issues related to Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2011, China was seen co-chairing the Afghanistan Summit with regional neighbors and participating in pushing for peace negotiations (Iqbal, 2016). China avoids supporting the US-led ISAF initiative to avoid becoming a terrorist target. In addition, China supports the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime together with neighboring countries in Central Asia. In addition to the pressing security concerns of Afghanistan's instability, national security

threats in the natural resource sector, especially oil, are important to China's economic growth and need to be protected simultaneously by political and military means, e.g., controlling Central Asia through military cooperation can help China control Muslim separatist groups in the region while strengthening regional ties (Zhang, 2010).

Today, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, he is ambitious to expand China's global power, stating that foreign affairs provide important strategic opportunities for China (Umarov, 2017). To that end, China emphasizes that an effective way to achieve peace in Afghanistan is through economic development, improving local livelihoods, and enhancing the government's ability to be inclusive so that the political foundation is solid (Hong, 2013). Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) cooperation strategies are believed to deliver stability and security to Afghanistan (Andersen & Jiang, 2018). However, security barriers further discourage China's move.

Under the Taliban, China also has the same interests as the previous Afghan government, except that the priority of interests has changed because the security provided by the US security forces has left where internal and territorial security interests come first, followed by the security interests of Chinese investments and citizens in Afghanistan and Pakistan and finally economic interests. China has certain limits to deciding on its economic expansion, not at the expense of its internal and territorial security (Badu et al., 2022). The limits can be seen in China's BRI plans with Afghanistan, as no substantial projects have materialized, in this case China assesses Afghanistan in terms of regional stability rather than primarily in terms of bilateral relations (Ayotte et al., 2021).

It is because BRI projects in the region, especially CPEC projects, are vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Anti-Pakistan militants, TTP and BLA, are the culprits. A serious threat China is considering is the attacks on Chinese nationals and assets that have occurred in Gwadar and Karachi by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). The most recent incident was an attack on a bus carrying Chinese engineers in Pakistan, leaving nine dead. Since then, Chinese officials have attributed the incident to attackers operating from Afghanistan (Calabrese, 2021). Given this, China will likely minimize perceived security dangers from Afghanistan to South and Central Asia by giving development assistance rather than massive infrastructure projects.

China is skeptical about its economic interests in Afghanistan on large-scale extractive industry investments since all infrastructures are severely damaged and Taliban lacks technocratic ability to manage large projects. Therefore, Chinese business people exploring opportunities with local partners include relatively low levels. (Standish, 2022).

China's Consideration to Recognize The Taliban Regime De Facto

As with Allison's Rational Choice theory, the first step is to assess the Chinese government's goals in not recognizing the Taliban. China's main goals were to maintain its internal and territorial security so that its western region would not be volatile due to separatist acts, protect Chinese investments and citizens from extremist attacks, and protect its economic interests if the Taliban could be relied upon to foster investment development after the US left. China's support and assistance to the Taliban administration without de jure recognition raises the question of why China waits for Pakistan, Russia, and Iran to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government.

The second step is to reveal the Chinese government's options in dealing with the Taliban through the lens of the urgency of recognition. The author finds three possible options for the Chinese government; the first option is that China does not give any recognition to the Taliban. Given the Taliban's history of ties to extremist groups, this approach is perilous for regional stability. The second option is to give de facto or limited recognition to the Taliban. This option frees China from maneuvering its foreign policy if the Taliban cause chaos. The last option is to recognize the Taliban de jure. If power is not consolidated with countries that share China's concerns about Afghanistan's instability, this alternative allows international turbulence that disrupts China's global strategic objectives. The third step is to explain the costs and benefits of each identified option. Then, the last step is to explain the aspect of the choice taken by China. The author deliberately divides an option's benefits and consequences. That way, the author could identify the most beneficial option for China's interests in Afghanistan and the largest risk option to be chosen by the decision-makers.

Assessing The Decision of China's not Taking any Recognition on Taliban

If China allows a vacuum of great power existence after the US departure from Afghanistan and lets the Taliban leadership fend for itself amid diplomatic isolation, it

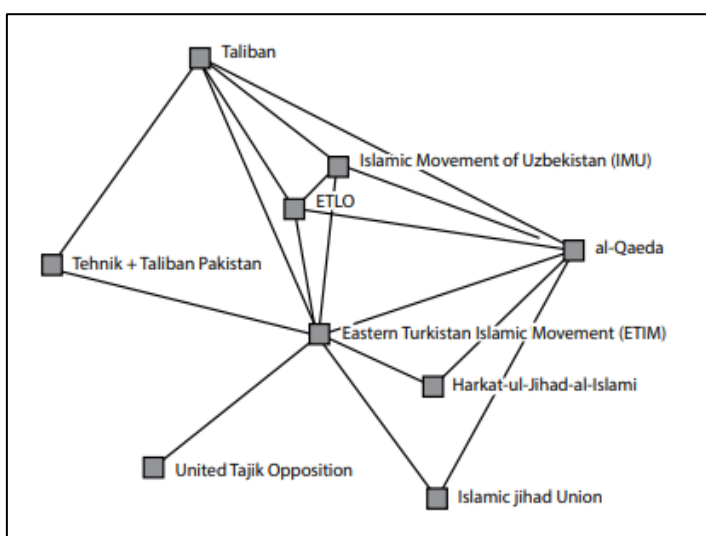
could pose a security threat in the Xinjiang region. The Taliban sympathizes with the Uyghurs and could increase support for the growing insurgency movement as they gain political power and influence in Afghanistan. Since 1949, there has been strong separatist sentiment among the population, leading to increased unrest in Xinjiang. Xinjiang's security has been a major concern for many years, with terrorist incidents dating back to the late 1980s by ETIM, which received ideological support from several terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda leaders, the Islamic State leaders entrenched in Afghanistan, and others (Kley, 2014). The Chinese government's National Security Commission added the Uyghur separatist issue in Xinjiang to its list of "The 5 Poisons" that could threaten the stability of the Chinese Communist Party's rule alongside the threats of Taiwanese and Tibetan separatists, Falun Gong practitioners, and democracy activists (Gordon, 2014). China is traumatized by incidents of deadly terrorist attacks. From 1990 to the end of 2016, thousands of terrorist attacks occurred in Xinjiang that are believed to have originated from Afghanistan's instability. Now that the Taliban is in power, its association with terrorist networks is a serious issue for China as it could pose a threat to Xinjiang's instability once again if China does not immediately approach the Taliban to ensure China's western security.

Although since 2017, there have been no attacks in mainland China attributed to Uyghur separatism, according to the Global Terrorism Database (Maan, 2021), due to a strict de-extremism implementation measure called "Re-education Center," China is increasingly worried about the existence of ETIM which has been removed from the Terror Exclusion List (TEL) by the US State Department because the group no longer exists (Soliev, 2021: 95). It means that SCO with its mandate to fight the 'three evils' of separatism, fundamentalism, and terrorism remains relevant in combating ETIM terrorism from the Afghan region (Potter & Wang, 2021). In addition, the spread of ETIM and Uyghur minority militants has spread to Central Asian countries bordering China, such as Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. However, the biggest external threat to Xinjiang's stability lies in the spreading of terrorist and religious propaganda into Xinjiang from training and organizing sites in Afghanistan that could spread to other countries in Central and South Asia (Zhou et al., 2022). It is difficult for China to stand guard in its border areas against groups with extensive international terrorism networks. The Taliban's challenge going forward is not only to cut ties with

ETIM and stop its integration with other groups operating in Afghanistan, including Al-Qaeda (Maan, 2021).

ETIM/TIP is known to have developed links with Al-Qaeda and Taliban-affiliated jihadi factions and actively engaged in collaborative terrorist activities across Asia, including South Asian countries putting them close to the core of international terrorist linkage networks and potentially enhancing attack capabilities (Potter, 2013).

Figure 2 Relationship among Regional Terrorist Organizations



Source: (Potter, 2013)

They are all allied with the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). The US intervention in Afghanistan indirectly led to the growth of terrorist groups, including the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K). The US departure led to internal security in China's far western region of Xinjiang being shaken by Afghanistan's instability creating space for ETIM. Therefore, the vacuum in Afghanistan could again become a fertile ground for extremism. Moreover, China fears that a Taliban victory in Afghanistan could inspire other Islamic extremist groups in Central and South Asia or in Afghanistan itself to fight for the rights of Uighur Muslims oppressed by China, as reported by Western countries, and destabilize Xinjiang, the cradle of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.

Opportunities and Challenges in China's De Facto Recognition on Taliban

To minimize the threat from ETIM and extremist group attacks, China relied on the Taliban to protect its interests. Therefore, dealing with the Taliban as the new leader of Afghanistan is necessary. This option can at least restrain ETIM/TIP's aggressive actions against China as it did in 2008, as the group now has to balance its hostility towards Beijing with practical considerations involving their hosts, the Taliban (Rehman, 2022).

On the other hand, China's reliance on the Taliban's promises seems uncertain as they refrained from extraditing Afghanistan-based Uighur militants to China and instead moved ETIM/TIP from the Badakhshan region to Baghlan and Takhar provinces in Central Afghanistan to monitor their activities so as not to attack China (Zhou et al., 2022). This action has violated the Doha Agreement not to be a haven for militant extremist groups, and it is also known that the Taliban protects Al-Qaeda and its leaders. As a result of Taliban monitoring, ETIM fighters are reportedly closer to the Taliban's rival IS-K and out of Taliban control (Murtazashvili, 2022). The UN report highlighting the Taliban's denial of the existence of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) revealed that there are around 8,000 to 10,000 FTFs lodged in Afghanistan, mostly from the Central Asian region, the Caucasus, Pakistan and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in China (Mehra & Wentworth, 2021). So, recognizing the Taliban de jure is not the right decision, given the Taliban's stance of not cracking down on foreign fighters. China is well aware of the foundation of the Taliban regime, where the Taliban is known to be an Islamic fundamentalist movement that does not like secular notions of sovereignty and territorial integrity associated with the modern state. Therefore, China is not fully confident of its control over the Taliban regime (Zhang, 2022).

Despite that, China continues to trade with the Taliban despite threats from Afghan terrorist groups. China offers political and economic incentives to the Taliban to protect its investment in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. This measured move by China to manage threats targeting Chinese territory and projects in South and Central Asia. The need for sustainability in its rapidly growing industry has forced China to try various ways of extracting mineral raw materials to meet its energy needs. Thus, China is keen to maintain its foothold in Afghanistan's natural resource market, arguing that it is better to delay the economic projects than to end them completely. Today Chinese companies successfully resumed the contract for the Amu Darya oil project that the previous Republican government had failed with the Taliban regime. Details of the contract say

Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC) will invest US\$150 million annually in Afghanistan and increase to US\$440 million in three years over the 25-year contract (Putz, 2023). China hopes for an economic windfall, but it is wary that the challenges derailing previous projects remain relevant - the threat of new militant groups and the logistical difficulties that projects of this size always face.

To protect China's western border from the worst case scenario in Afghanistan's fragile socio-economic scenario, China strengthened defense and security with the SCO Alliance and also cooperated with the US on International Terrorism. The option to recognize the Taliban de facto provides China with flexible political maneuvering space for its long-term interests. China has repeatedly called on the international community, including the SCO and regional countries, to help Afghanistan. China's apparent prudence in not pushing for international recognition of the Taliban allows it only sometimes to engage and possibly back the wrong party. China's Afghanistan strategy uses the SCO alliance to disguise Beijing's anxiety about being at the forefront of the insurgents' view by combating the "three evil forces" of separatism, terrorism, and extremism. While anticipating the SCO's incompetence, China approached Iran to strengthen high-level security defenses. According to Iranian reports, China used the pretext of the Afghan crisis to secure Iran's entry into the SCO, explaining that the situation in Afghanistan required Iran's full cooperation to resolve it as Beijing believed Iran's Persian ethnic and historical ties with various tribes in Afghanistan made it influential in Afghanistan (Witte & Steiner, 2021).

Another political maneuver in China's favor is that the US is still visibly engaged by bringing in representatives to discuss security in Afghanistan. China is not seen as a competitor but as a US partner to maintain world stability, thus shifting India's role away (Adlakha, 2021). The two share the same goal of combating international terrorism. Their cohesiveness can be found on the UN stage, where they have brokered a deal to delay the decision on Afghanistan's representation at the UN. A stable Afghanistan is as much a goal for China as it is for almost any other country; hence, China has started rallying regional support through group meetings such as the trilateral talks between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the US. These countries joined the Extended Troika talks to facilitate peace talks, political settlement, and inclusive governance in Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2022). China has also hosted talks between regional countries

called 6+1 involving Afghanistan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and the US. Despite the expanding rivalry between the United States and China, their interaction in Afghanistan is proceeding quite well at the operational level.

At the same time, as the world turns away from the Taliban, China is gaining momentum to justify its domestic stance that it is indeed policing the Uyghurs as a counter-terrorism effort to gain the support of regional countries by exaggerating its national threat and the involvement of Uyghurs in terrorist organizations to make it more difficult for the ETIM movement to create problems in Xinjiang (Murtazashvili, 2022). Moreover, engaging more closely with the Taliban gives China the space to expose itself as a regional power responsible for helping vulnerable Afghans and stabilizing Afghanistan's regional security. At the same time, behind this narrative, China seeks to achieve its economic and political interests with its neighbors (Huasheng, 2016). Aid for Afghanistan continues to flow unmitigated; Chinese military planes also transported aid to Afghanistan. This fact was reaffirmed by Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao on Twitter, who said "Two military planes showed up at Kabul airport, one taking life and the other carrying hope. This is perhaps the biggest difference between China and the US" (Yau, 2022). It is an attempt for China to portray peaceful collaboration and satirize US military aircraft that destroyed Afghanistan.

How Will China's De Jure Recognition on Taliban Affects Its Global Strategic Interests?

The last option is de jure recognition of the Taliban. It is the last option in China's order of priority regarding its national interests since it is dealing not only with Taliban's weak legitimacy but also undermining western efforts to hold the Taliban accountable on governance, human rights and terrorism.

Three major factions within the Taliban are under scrutiny: Doha, Kandahar, and Haqqani. First, the Doha faction is the most moderate based in Doha, Qatar. They are actively involved in all kinds of negotiations on the international stage. Second, the Kandahar radical faction, also known as the military wing, has military control and Taliban bases in rural Afghanistan. Third, the Haqqani faction, a trusted ally of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), is the most radical and independent in the Taliban. It has a strong position due to its 20 years of service in the war against the US (Rahman, 2021).

Within the Taliban's internal environment, there are dominant factions, so an inclusive government is unlikely to happen. The dominance of Pashtun ethnicity further accentuated the friction of group unity when former Pashtun Taliban deputy defense minister Mullah Mohammad Fazl arrested popular Uzbek Taliban commander Makhdoom Alam in January 2022, resulting in four violent deaths during a liberation demonstration (Motwani, 2022). Even the internal strife that emerged between the military, political, and Haqqani wings argued for power. In the end, the military wing dominated their first cabinet. In addition, extremist Taliban with close ties to the ISI and the Pakistani government also sought to undermine the Taliban nationalists' international recognition efforts (Amini, 2022). As a result, there is an inevitable rivalry within the Taliban.

In addition to internal factions, Kabul's Pashtun leadership faces opposition from former government factions, ethnic Uzbek Taliban, Hazara, and other nationalities (EUAA, 2022). The Taliban regime has gained authority over the country but needs more legitimacy, experience in governance, and international support. Concerns about the Taliban's weakening hold on power in Afghanistan have prompted China not to go too far with the Taliban.

The Taliban's crackdown on residents, particularly punishing ethnic, tribal, and religious groups suspected of backing rebels or anti-Taliban sentiment, sparked other resistance. In addition, skirmishes have occurred as the Taliban have attempted to combat groups with unauthorized control of natural resources, opposition groups (NRFs), criminals, and Taliban insurgents, and attacks by NRFs, which are groups loyal to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and oppose Taliban rule, have increased in frequency beyond IS-KP attacks (Crisis Group, 2022). Without gaining domestic legitimacy, China's leaders recognize the security risks posed by an unpredictable Taliban leadership on the Wakhan Border, in wider Central Asia, and Xinjiang. Due to the Taliban's internal divisions, it is not wrong to conclude that the Taliban's leadership may have an unpredictable direction in the future.

In addition to internal divisions, the Taliban must deal with internal attacks against their leadership. IS-KP has 1,500 fighters, the National Resistance Front (NRF), Haqqani Network (Al-Qaeda and Taliban link) has 3,000-10,000 fighters, Pakistani Taliban has over 6,000 fighters, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has around 700 fighters, 400

fighters from ETIM, 150 from Khatiba Imam Al-Bukhari Group (KIB) and over 100 from Islamic Jihad Group (Teston et al., 2021). The Islamic State Khorasan (IS-KP) group made its presence known by attacking the evacuation operation and declaring war on the Taliban after 47 attacks on Taliban fighters. Internal attacks remain a major security threat, and investors remain wary of infrastructure development and worker safety.

Such attacks also target the Chinese government. China's greatest project, Mes Aynak, was attacked approximately 19 times, and Chinese engineers were threatened with kidnapping, compelling them to flee (Iqbal, 2016). The ISKP is a real threat to the Taliban after consolidating power due to the mass escape of hundreds of IS-KP prisoners during the seizure of power. The ISKP claims the Taliban have abandoned Jihad in for negotiations. The ETIM and the ISKP have a close relationship today due to their common goals. The ISKP wants to fight the Taliban and other stakeholders who support them, while the ISKP's goal is to collaborate with the ETIM to disrupt China (Barrech et al., 2021).

Five Chinese nationals were wounded in a surprise Islamic State attack on the Longan Hotel in Kabul's Chinatown, housing a flood of Chinese business people since the Taliban took over the country (Greenfield & Yawar, 2022). These attacks deter foreign investors and partners interested in working with the Taliban. Poor security reduces investment. A few years back, the threat of ISIS attacks became real when they declared their aspiration to expand the caliphate to Xinjiang and issued a direct threat to China through the release of a video in 2018 in which Uyghurs vowed to return home to carry out attacks (Zhang, 2022).

Besides, China's growing relationship with the Taliban undermines US efforts to pressure and sanction the extremist group because it legitimizes Taliban control over Afghanistan. As a result, China's support for the Taliban and the Taliban's fierce refusal to reform has prompted the US to revive the discourse to include the Taliban in the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list as a threat (Zovak, 2022). The US threat can disrupt China's long-term interests. If Beijing unilaterally recognizes the Taliban, it could further strain the US-China relationship. It is also possible that the US will interfere with China's interests in sensitive Chinese issues such as the proximity of the US and Taiwan. It is hard to imagine that China will also have to deal with militants in Afghanistan due to the uncertainty of security guarantees by the Taliban.

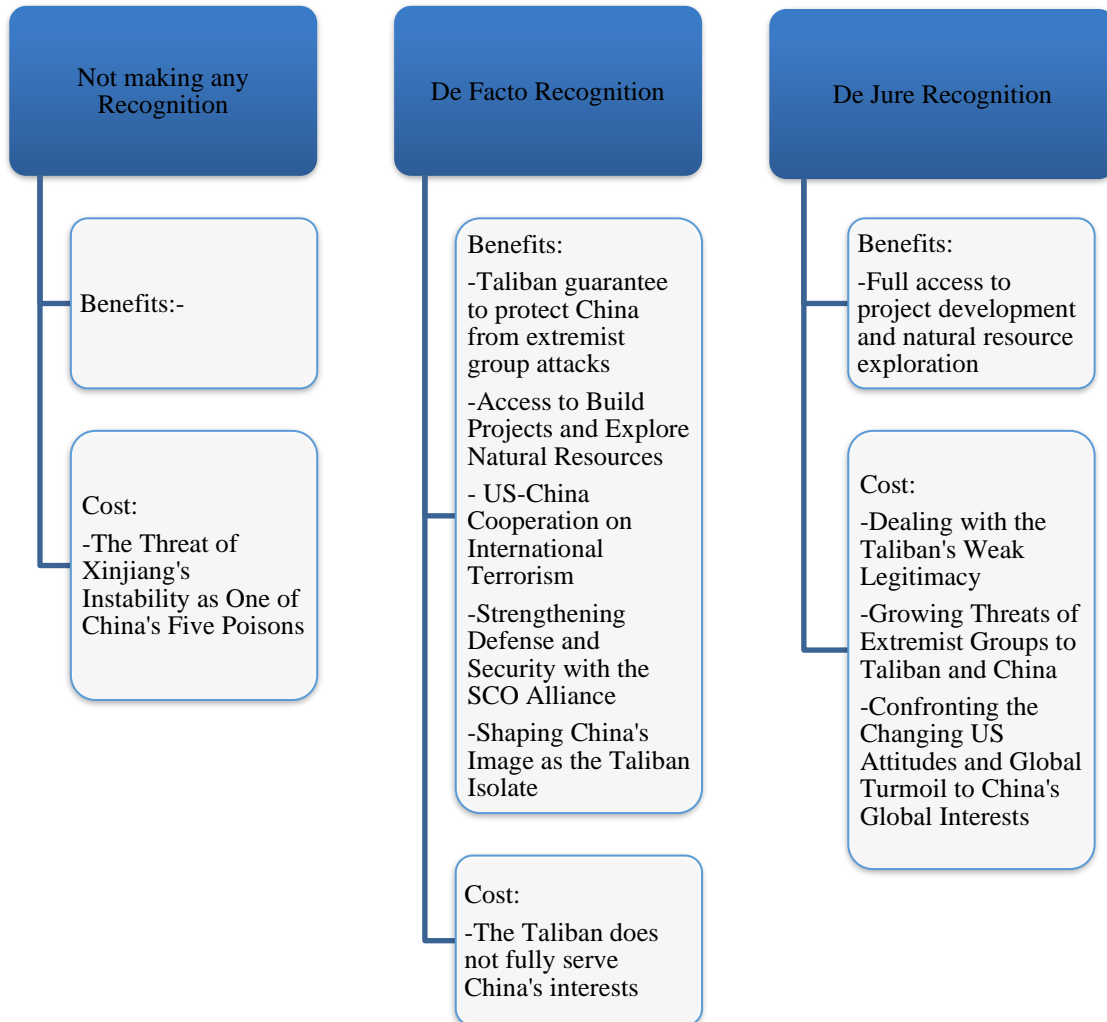
China is cautious about recognizing the Taliban in Afghanistan for strategic reasons, including the survival of the BRI, and China is always on the side of the international community. Taliban is still considered an extremist group with unpredictable policies and complex relationships with other extremist groups. China's neighborhood diplomacy (Huasheng, 2016), relations with the SCO, BRI plan a partnership with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to promote safety and peace and anticipate threats in Asia (Mekhdiev et al., 2019), and collaboration with Pakistan to address Beijing's concerns about Uighur separatists and other issues show its skepticism about Taliban-led Afghanistan threatening strategic projects. If China decides unilaterally, it means that China is considered to have supported terrorist groups and betrayed the SCO and the Doha Agreement. Also, its cooperation with its most important Central Asian partners through the SCO to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism, which is the basis of the 2001 Shanghai Convention, will be tarnished.

In addition, some SCO member states such as Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan proposed criteria for recognizing the new government in coordination with Afghanistan's neighbors, including an inclusive government, human rights guarantees, and the principle that Afghan territory is not used for terrorism against other countries (Bateman et al., 2021). Although China did not declare the same criteria at the same time, China will certainly be on the side of the SCO and the international community, especially with the five Central Asian Republics (CARs), rather than the Taliban because of some of China's vital interests, such as the smooth implementation of SREB, preventing radicalism from entering Xinjiang, cooperation on energy pipelines in Central Asia, which is famous for its energy resources of oil, natural gas, coal, and other materials for the survival of Chinese industries (Desmiari et al., 2018).

The sole benefit China would obtain if it unilaterally recognized Taliban de jure is full access to economic projects and natural resources exploration. China's diplomatic recognition of Afghanistan is indeed important as a legitimizing basis to consolidate Taliban rule and benefit from wider economic access as well as further smoothen diplomacy. It is in line with the main goal that China has wanted to achieve in Afghanistan long ago if Afghanistan succeeds in providing fairly solid state stability under the leadership of the Taliban. The relationship between the two is predicted to be closer in terms of their economic interests, where China's will as a priority for the Taliban as a

form of repayment for helping the Taliban in times of crisis than other countries that are likely to develop cooperation with the Taliban.

Figure 3: How China Deals with Taliban Regime Recognition Based on the Rational Choice Model



According to Allison’s cost-benefit analysis, the aforementioned description aims to pre-determine the level of risk and benefit associated with each option in order to identify the future potential of the available alternatives. This kind of consideration helps the state in optimizing the benefits of the selected option and act rationally to maximize its efficacy. So de facto recognition does not harm China much that it holds security advantages and aligns with the stated objective of promoting regional stability. It can be seen from the figure presented above that of the three options, China stands to gain a greater advantage by only recognizing the Taliban de facto primarily due to extensive political maneuvering with minimum consequences. In contrast to the potential threat to

China's national interests in the long term if China does not recognize the Taliban at all and if China recognizes the Taliban de jure. For this reason, the second option in the form of China recognizing the Taliban de facto is a decision that benefits it more than other options. The advantage of China only giving de facto recognition is that it gets support from the Taliban, such as security guarantees to protect China from being attacked by extremist groups and gain access to build projects and explore natural resources, as well as the help of the international community which is in line with China's national interests to fight the forces of separatism, terrorism, and extremism stemming from the instability of Afghanistan led by the Taliban as erratic governance given its internal factions.

Conclusion

Based on Allison's Rational Choice Theory analysis, recognizing the Taliban de facto is a rational choice for China now compared to not giving any recognition and giving de jure recognition. Even without de jure recognition, China gets the Taliban's guarantee to protect its borders from extremist groups, especially ETIM. However, the disadvantage lies only in the Taliban's refusal to crack down on foreign fighters as requested by China fully. In addition, China's proactive approach allowed it to establish projects and explore Afghanistan's natural riches. When the Taliban remains isolated, China can present itself as a responsible world power, unlike the US, which likes to leave chaos. Meanwhile, the international community supports China's involvement in Afghan affairs, where the US still wants to work with China to fight international terrorism, and China can use the issue to strengthen security defenses with the SCO alliance.

While the first option, China's choice not to give any recognition, and the second option, giving the Taliban de jure recognition, are very risky options for the security of regional stability. By not giving any recognition, Xinjiang's instability as one of China's Five Poisons becomes the biggest concern since China cannot control hardline organizations that would freely grow in Afghanistan. This possibility is the most frightening specter for China's territorial security. Another risk will also strike China if China takes steps to recognize the Taliban de jure. Although with official recognition China will have full access to increase economic cooperation to a higher level, it is not worth the losses China will face, such as dealing with the legitimacy of the weak Taliban government; extremist groups will continue to attack the Taliban, who cooperate with

China, and worse, China will lose the support of the international community and face changes in US attitudes that will affect China's global strategic position.

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