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**Afghanistan and Myanmar:  
similarities of two of China's  
strategic neighbours**

*Afghanistan and Myanmar: similarities of two of China's strategic  
neighbours*

*Abstract:*

*2021 has brought a new political reality for Afghanistan and Myanmar, with the entry to power of the Taliban and the coup, respectively. Despite the differences that can be found in each case, there are a number of similarities, mainly in the impact they have on neighboring China. The success or failure of an action undertaken by China in Afghanistan can serve to make a decision in Myanmar, so it seems logical to think that the relationship with the new governments will have an almost parallel management.*

*Keywords:*

*China, Afghanistan, Myanmar, BRI, Taliban*

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## Afganistán y Myanmar: similitudes de dos vecinos estratégicos de China

### Resumen:

El 2021 ha supuesto para Afganistán y para Myanmar una nueva realidad política, con la entrada en el poder de los talibanes para el primero y el golpe de Estado para el segundo, respectivamente. A pesar de las diferencias que se pueden encontrar en cada caso, existen una serie de similitudes, principalmente en la repercusión que tienen para su vecina China. el éxito o el fracaso de una posible acción emprendida por China en Afganistán le podría servir para tomar una decisión en Myanmar, por lo que parece lógico pensar que la relación con los nuevos gobiernos tendrá una gestión casi paralela.

### Palabras clave:

China, Afganistán, Myanmar, BRI, Talibán,

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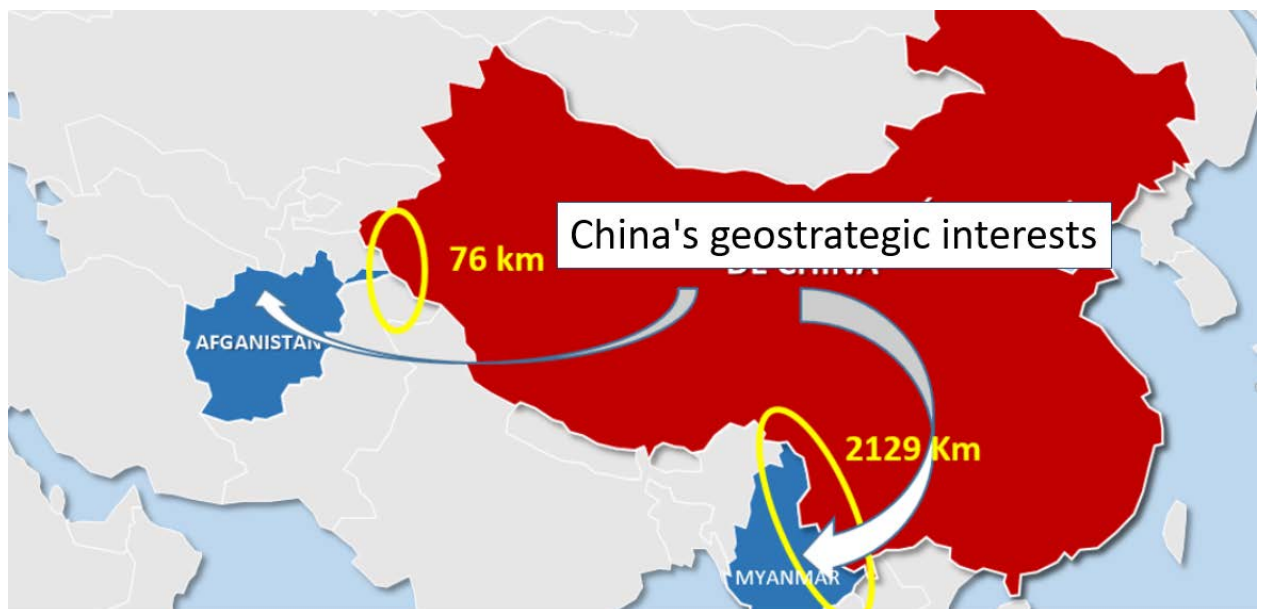
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## Introduction

The coming to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops and the military coup<sup>1</sup> on 1 February 2021 in Myanmar (formerly Burma) have placed these two countries in a situation of instability that affects the strategic interests of China, with which both countries share a border.

Leaving aside the different processes that have led to the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the military leadership in Myanmar, a number of similarities can be drawn in terms of the challenges faced by both countries and their involvement in China's geopolitical interests.



Source: Own elaboration

Uncertainty over future stability, lack of Western involvement, the support of China and Russia, the exploitation of natural resources, participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the ethnic complexity of Afghanistan and Myanmar are some of the factors both countries have in common and that will be analysed in this paper.

China's relationship with both Afghanistan and Myanmar are part of a global strategy to become the world's leading economic power. For this reason, the stability of both countries is increasingly important to China's interests given their strategic location. To achieve the stability necessary to achieve its trade and economic ambitions, China faces the challenge of successfully implementing its policy in Afghanistan and Myanmar based

<sup>1</sup> The Myanmar Armed Forces are referred to as the Tatmadaw.

on the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence': mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence<sup>2</sup>.

### **A hands-off West**

The Taliban takeover of Kabul on 15 August 2021, following the withdrawal of US troops, dashed hopes that Afghanistan would be governed democratically, under the presidency of Ashraf Ghani. After almost twenty years of conflict, the Taliban have restored the fundamentalist regime they had imposed before the US invasion following the attacks of 11 September 2001. A return to power that—although announced to be more moderate—has sown disillusionment and impotence in Western society.

The 'Agreement to Bring Peace to Afghanistan', as the Doha agreement between Donald Trump and the Taliban was called, has not yielded the expected result as Afghan security forces and tribal leaders been unable to take control of the situation, resulting in the Taliban's accelerated accession to power.

The US has withdrawn from a theatre of conflict that has cost it considerable economic and human resources and whose mission was to fight Islamic terrorism by establishing a democratic regime. But since President Obama's openly declared policy of pivoting to the Asia-Pacific arena, the stakes have shifted. Since then, the objective of all White House occupants has been to prioritise efforts to confront China, its economic rival. It is a strategic decision that many see as a US abandonment of its commitment to exporting Western democratic values and the fight against human rights.

This lack of interest in actively engaging in conflicts in defence of democracy and human rights by the US and Western countries can also be observed in Myanmar, where the coup d'état of 1 February 2021 has ended ten years of democracy. The military leadership's harsh crackdown on opponents of the regime has resulted in more than a thousand deaths<sup>3</sup> and the arrest of President-elect Win Myint and Nobel Peace Prize

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[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/t1179045.shtml#:~:text=The y%20include%3A%20mutual%20respect%20for,mutual%20benefit%2C%20and%20peaceful%20coexistence.](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1179045.shtml#:~:text=The%20include%3A%20mutual%20respect%20for,mutual%20benefit%2C%20and%20peaceful%20coexistence.)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/death-toll-since-myanmar-coup-tops-1000-says-activist-group-2021-08-18/>

laureate leader Aung San Suu Kyi has also caused concern in the West. But as in Afghanistan, and despite calls from the Burmese population appealing to the 'Responsibility to Protect'<sup>4</sup>, no Western military intervention is expected, as is clear from statements made by former US ambassador to Myanmar, Derek Mitchell: "there's little more that the West can do"<sup>5</sup>. Myanmar—like Afghanistan to some extent—can be seen as a decades-long US project to promote democracy<sup>6</sup>, but one that has not been consolidated.

### **The situation of the internal opposition in both conflicts**

The coup in Myanmar was consolidated on 1 August with the proclamation of General Min Aung Hlaing as Prime Minister of Myanmar's new government, which is intended to be interim as it has pledged to hold elections in 2023<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, ousted President Win Myint and leader Suu Kyi are under arrest awaiting trial on charges of illegal offences such as importing walkie talkies or holding meetings without maintaining anti-COVID-19 rules<sup>8</sup>.

The year 2021 has brought both Afghanistan and Myanmar an abrupt change of government towards more authoritarian regimes, opening the door to a new horizon of great uncertainty. In the coming months, both countries may find themselves with the presence of opposition groups leading to a situation of civil conflict similar Syria or Iraq.

Myanmar's self-styled National Unity Government (NUG)—an umbrella group of pro-democracy advocates—declared a 'people's defensive war' against the military junta on 7 September, inciting rebellion among the Burmese population and encouraging civil servants to abandon their jobs<sup>9</sup>, prompted by the international community's inaction in the face of the military junta's harsh reprisals<sup>10</sup>. As conflicts between this opposition and the military junta intensify, the country will move closer to civil war. In fact, the NUG

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/from-myanmar-to-afghanistan-are-we-seeing-the-end-of-western-interventions-1.1206940>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.csis.org/podcasts/chinapower/china-and-myanmar-after-2021-myanmar-coup-conversation-derek-mitchell>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.eurasiareview.com/01092021-a-burmese-perspective-uba-in-bipolar-world-oped>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmar-junta-promises-elections-by-2023/a-58720116>

<sup>8</sup> <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2021/02/03/963591913/myanmar-coup-suu-kyi-is-accused-of-illegally-importing-walkie-talkies>

<sup>9</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/07/asia/myanmar-nug-peoples-war-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/declaration-of-war-necessary-as-international-pressure-fails-myanmar-shadow-govt.html>

created its own militia in May 2021 and is calling for the support of ethnic groups that have been fighting the military junta for years for self-determination<sup>11</sup>.

In the case of Afghanistan, although the possibilities for opposition are more limited, insurgent movements such as ISIS-K have the potential to plunge the country into a new civil conflict<sup>12</sup> if they can increase their number of followers and expand their capabilities to carry out terrorist attacks. Bringing peace to Afghanistan and Myanmar will not be easy<sup>13</sup>.

### **Humanitarian aid without legitimising new governments**

Afghanistan and Myanmar also have similarities if one looks at the international response of no military intervention but providing humanitarian aid. Alleviating poverty in both countries and helping them fight the pandemic have become the main objectives in international fora as a matter of human rights compliance. However, this aid is difficult to channel without legitimising, to some extent, both governments.

In the case of Myanmar, the ASEAN summit in late April agreed on five points, including an immediate halt to violence and humanitarian assistance from ASEAN<sup>14</sup>. Members of the overthrown government were concerned that this negotiation would legitimise the new government.

In terms of representation within the UN, a campaign is underway to support Myanmar's permanent ambassador to the UN, U Kyaw Moe—who represents the ousted government—to remain the interlocutor within the organisation rather than someone appointed by the military junta<sup>15</sup>. This is a difficult decision for the UN, where the division between those who support the military regime, such as China and Russia, and those

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_myanmar-shadow-government-forms-militia-oppose-military-junta/6205497.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_myanmar-shadow-government-forms-militia-oppose-military-junta/6205497.html)

<sup>12</sup> <https://theconversation.com/afghanistan-the-warlords-who-will-decide-whether-civil-war-is-likely-167380>

<sup>13</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/afghanistan-myanmar-political-crisis-asean-nations-7290302/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2104915/asean-leaders-agree-5-point-plan-for-myanmar>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/burma/open-letter-in-support-of-ambassador-u-kyaw-moe-tun-as-myanmar-s>



who do not recognise the military junta's rule under any circumstances, such as the US and the EU, is once again evident<sup>16</sup>.

With regard to Afghanistan, in order to avoid a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe, the UN has managed to raise more than \$1 billion for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan<sup>17</sup>. Dialogue with the Taliban is necessary to channel this aid, but there is a risk that these negotiations will be used as a way for the international community to recognise the new government in order to gain the support of Afghan society. The UN has also been presented with this same problem with the Afghan representative and is considering how to try to prevent a Taliban-led government from taking the Afghan seat at the UN and what options exist for that purpose.<sup>18</sup>

### **Main supports: China and Russia**

Russia and China have become important supporters of the new governments in Afghanistan and Myanmar, while other powers such as the EU, the US and the UK have imposed sanctions<sup>19</sup>. Both maintain the same position of non-interference and opposition to the arms embargo, blocking UN attempts to enforce it.

Since the fall of Kabul, China has maintained a position of apparent approval of the Taliban victory with its now familiar argument of respect for the Afghan people's decision. In fact, before the Taliban came to power, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met in Tianjin on 28 July. During the negotiation, the Taliban showed their desire for closer relations with China while pledging not to pose any threat to their neighbour<sup>20</sup>. For its part, China publicly acknowledged that the Taliban were an important military and political force and could play a role in reconciliation and the reconstruction process to achieve peace in Afghanistan<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.justsecurity.org/77806/expert-backgrounder-how-can-the-taliban-be-prevented-from-representing-afghanistan-in-the-united-nations/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.france24.com/es/asia-pac/C3%ADfco/20210914-conferencia-de-la-onu-recolecta-m%C3%A1s-de-mil-millones-de-d%C3%B3lares-para-afganist%C3%A1n>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/27/afghanistan-taliban-economy-aid-sanctions-united-states-west/>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1895950.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1895950.shtml)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/chinas-embrace-of-the-taliban-has-a-painful-resonance-in-myanmar.html>

China's current stance of collaboration and recognition of the Taliban government has caused concern and unease in Myanmar. Since the military coup of 1 February, China has avoided using this term to refer to the political situation in its Burmese neighbour, and since August has begun to use 'the government' to refer to the military junta, without condemning violence against civilian opponents. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said that China will work with the international community to play a constructive role in achieving stability and resuming democratic transformation in Myanmar<sup>22</sup>, virtually the same speech as the one made with the Taliban a month earlier.

As with Afghanistan, China was the first to engage diplomatically with Myanmar's military junta, perhaps driven by the threat posed by the presence of conflict on Burmese territory to its economic interests, including trade routes and the gas and oil pipeline running through the country<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, China's show of support since the beginning of the military coup has increased anti-Chinese sentiment among the Burmese population, leading to demonstrations against the embassy and damage to textile factories around Yangon, causing losses valued at \$37 million. This dissatisfaction with China's support for the military junta has also been reflected in Burmese social media, where mockery of China has spread<sup>24</sup>.

Over the past few months, China has continued to liaise with the military leadership to ensure that trade routes put in place and the infrastructure running through Myanmar will not be disrupted<sup>25</sup>.

As far as Russia is concerned, Myanmar is "a reliable ally and strategic partner" as evidenced by the presence in Myanmar of Colonel General Alexander Fomin at the Armed Forces Day on 27 March 2021, as well as the close relationship with General Min Aung Hlaing since he was appointed Chief of the Armed Forces in 2012<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1644018>

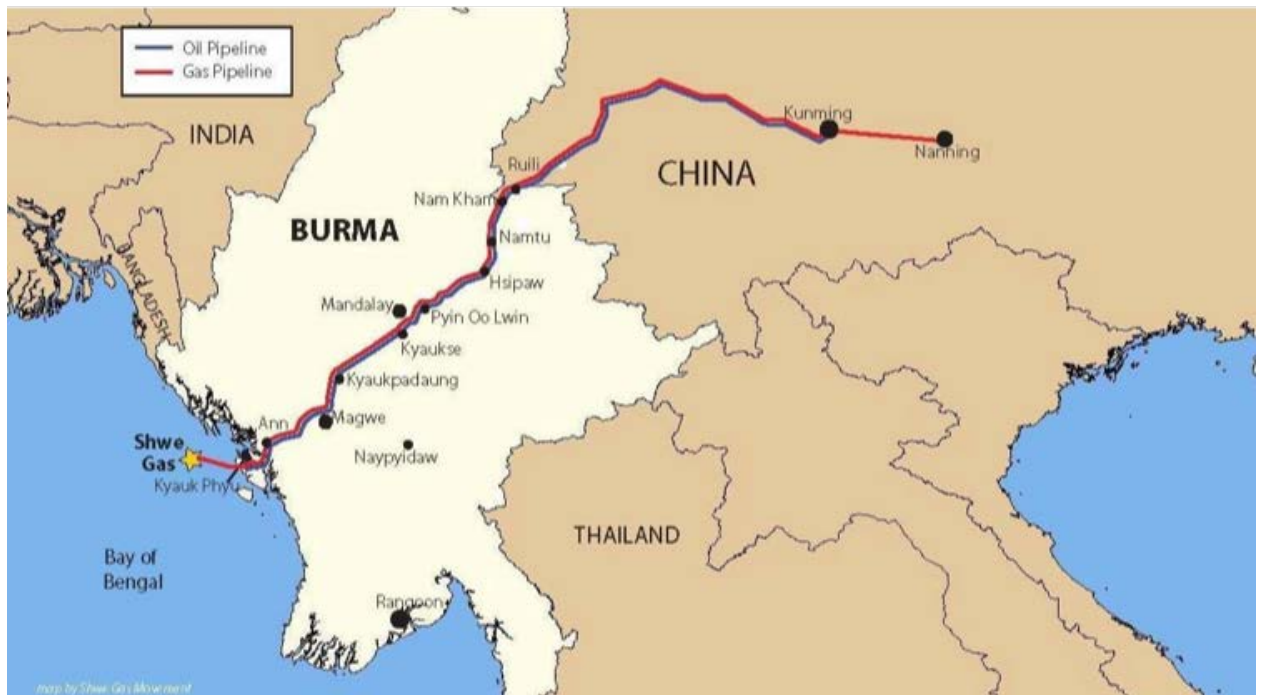
<sup>23</sup> <https://voi.id/es/economia/38333/china-pide-que-se-proteja-su-oleoducto-y-gasoducto-en-myanmar>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/chinas-embrace-of-the-taliban-has-a-painful-resonance-in-myanmar.html>

<sup>25</sup> <https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/09/chinese-special-envoy-winds-up-unannounced-myanmar-trip/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.thinkchina.sg/russia-and-china-southeast-asia-pragmatic-cooperation-against-us-primacy>





Source: [https://www.chinacenter.net/2020/china\\_currents/19-3/a-relationship-on-a-pipeline-china-and-myanmar/](https://www.chinacenter.net/2020/china_currents/19-3/a-relationship-on-a-pipeline-china-and-myanmar/)

Russia and China have maintained a common position on the military coup in Myanmar, using the narratives of respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs and the non-existence of universal norms and values<sup>27</sup>. Russian and Chinese interests in Myanmar are almost identical but differ only in scale<sup>28</sup>. China is Myanmar's largest investor, largest trading partner and largest arms supplier. On the Russian side, the economic stakes are lower, even though Russia is the second largest arms trader to Burma.

For Russia, the coup in Myanmar may be an opportunity to expand its interests—mainly in the arms trade—in Southeast Asia<sup>29</sup>. This increase in Russian arms sales to Myanmar could help the junta consolidate its power, which will benefit China in achieving stability to safeguard its economic interests. Additionally, it will help to blur the Burmese people's negative image of China in relation to arms sales by ceasing to be their main supplier<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/unhrc-russia-china-still-dismiss-myanmars-military-coup-internal-affair.html>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_117.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_117.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.thinkchina.sg/russia-and-china-southeast-asia-pragmatic-cooperation-against-us-primacy>

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_117.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_117.pdf)

As long as the Chinese continue their expansion in South Asia, they will not have their eyes on Russian Siberia, where the ethnic Chinese population continues to grow by leaps and bounds like a geopolitical ticking time bomb with a nuclear weapons background<sup>31</sup>.

### **Natural resources: exploitation and stability**

China's interest in mineral resources is another common thread between Myanmar and Afghanistan. In 2010, the US<sup>32</sup> announced that Afghanistan had mineral wealth worth approximately \$1 trillion<sup>33</sup>, although according to estimates in the Mining Sector Roadmap<sup>34</sup> published in 2019 by the Afghan government's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, its value exceeds \$3 trillion<sup>35</sup>.

According to geological surveys, Afghanistan has significant mineral reserves of iron (2.2 billion tonnes), marble (3 billion tonnes), copper (30 million tonnes), rare earths (1.4 million tonnes) and 2.7 tonnes of gold<sup>36</sup>. Afghanistan is also known to be the Saudi Arabia of lithium<sup>37</sup>. And all this taking into account that these estimates have been made on 30% of the territory, leaving 70% without knowing what wealth it contains<sup>38</sup>.

The discovery of these reserves more than a decade ago suggested that they could influence Afghanistan's economy and also the development of the war. However, large-scale exploitation has encountered many difficulties due to problems of security, the use of resources necessary for extraction and the lack of adequate infrastructure.

In 2007, Chinese state-owned company MSC China signed a concession with the Afghan government to operate the Mes Aynak copper mine southeast of Kabul. The project came to a standstill, as did construction of the associated infrastructure. China is not willing to repeat this failure and will probably not start exploiting new resources without adequate security conditions. For their part, the Taliban have shown their interest in exploiting the country's rich resources—such as rare earths and lithium—and are willing to support

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2100228/chinese-russian-far-east-geopolitical-time-bomb>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14minerals.html>

<sup>33</sup> Equivalent to one trillion US dollars

<sup>34</sup> Available at: <https://momp.gov.af/sites/default/files/2020-07/MoMP%20Roadmap-1-merged.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Equivalent to three trillion US dollars

<sup>36</sup> Information contained in the 'Mining Sector Roadmap' publication mentioned in the text.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14minerals.html>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-mining/afghanistan-to-develop-3-trillion-in-mining-potential-idUSTRE69O3JP20101025>

infrastructure projects and investments in mineral extraction in the country. In return, they would have to commit to ensuring the country's stability and not turn it into a sanctuary for the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), composed of Uighur fighters who oppose Chinese repression in the north-western border region of Xinjiang, as this group poses a threat to China's national security and integrity<sup>39</sup>.

In Myanmar, the military controls much of the economy, mainly the extractive industries such as oil, gas, copper and jade. Relatives of military junta members also have businesses in construction, pharmaceuticals or entertainment<sup>40</sup>.

China relies on Myanmar for more than half of its domestic imports of heavy rare earth concentrate such as terbium and dysprosium. The prospect that these supplies could be disrupted as a result of instability caused by the coup—and the resulting price increases—is of great concern to China<sup>41</sup>.

Opium is another natural resource that is an important economic source for Afghanistan and Myanmar, as the world's number one and number two producer respectively. Opium is a crop associated with poverty and subsistence strategy, which allows for higher profits than other types of crop. Sanctions imposed on both countries will aggravate poverty and therefore opium cultivation will be an important source of income for farmers in both countries.

In the case of Myanmar, most of the drugs come from Shan State, located in the so-called golden triangle where Myanmar, Thailand and Laos meet. Since the coup was established, opium trafficking from the country has increased as police forces have been focused on countering the regime's opposition movements, weakening their ability to prevent drug trafficking. From a security perspective, opium revenues are the source of funding for ethnic militias, enabling them to increase their capacity to fight either on behalf of the military junta or its opponents<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/does-the-belt-and-road-have-a-future-in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2178499/revealed-the-craven-corruption-behind-the-myanmar-coup>

<sup>41</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/China-worries-over-rare-earth-supply-disruption-from-Myanmar-coup>

<sup>42</sup> [https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_myanmar-economic-meltdown-likely-push-opium-output-says-un/6206434.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_myanmar-economic-meltdown-likely-push-opium-output-says-un/6206434.html)

China has always been concerned to avoid an escalation of violence on its borders and has campaigned to replace opium cultivation with other crops such as rubber<sup>43</sup>. According to World Bank data, Myanmar's economy is likely to shrink by 10%, making opium cultivation likely to drop. However, with trade projects underway, China is likely to boost the shift from opium cultivation and support for Burmese farmers.

In relation to Afghanistan, in 2020, opium poppy was cultivated on some 224,000 hectares, an increase of 37%, one of the highest levels of opium cultivation<sup>44</sup>. As in Myanmar, the sanctions imposed make it difficult to lower these production levels given the profitability for farmers and the poverty of the population. However, some experts see the Taliban's ban on opium cultivation as a first step in the country's development in which Chinese companies can assist in this process of agricultural transformation<sup>45</sup>, as in the case of Myanmar. But just as with mineral extraction, China will not embark on such projects without a guarantee of political stability and security in the country.

### **Myanmar and Afghanistan: key pieces of connectivity**

In order to become the world's leading economic power, China needs to secure supply chains and consolidate its trade expansion in the 21st century. To this end, the route of the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)—its great commitment to trade connectivity—runs through countries or areas that offer security guarantees. Under this premise, China sees connectivity as a tool to resolve regional conflicts<sup>46</sup>.

Both Afghanistan and Myanmar are key players in China's BRI structure. The first to reach Europe, the second to access the Indian Ocean. China's trade and supply connectivity with the rest of the world will depend on the stability of both countries.

China needs a stable border in Myanmar to advance its economic corridor from the Indian Ocean to Yunnan province, which is the most convenient route for China to access the Indian Ocean and avoid the Strait of Malacca.

The corridor connects a sea route, a road route and a rail route linking the logistics routes of Singapore, Myanmar and China. From Singapore, goods arrive by ship via the

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.tni.org/files/download/brief33.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/May/afghanistan\\_-37-per-cent-increase-in-opium-poppy-cultivation-in-2020--while-researchers-explore-novel-ways-to-collect-data-due-to-covid-19.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/May/afghanistan_-37-per-cent-increase-in-opium-poppy-cultivation-in-2020--while-researchers-explore-novel-ways-to-collect-data-due-to-covid-19.html)

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1232984.shtml>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/the-belt-and-road-initiative.html>

Andaman Sea to the port of Yangon. From there they are transported by cart to Lincang, a prefecture in Yunnan province on the border of the Burmese city of Shwe Haw in north-eastern Shan State. Finally, the railway section inaugurated on 25 August 2021, running between Lincang and Chengdu, completes the corridor<sup>47</sup>. China has thus realised one of its greatest trade aspirations since the late 1980s: to enable the development of the south-western provinces and avoid the Strait of Malacca<sup>48</sup>.

From a strategic point of view, this corridor is key to the negotiations between Myanmar's military junta and China and is a clear example of Chinese 'win-win', as it provides Myanmar with relief from the sanctions imposed by Western powers by providing it with a new supply route.

In relation to Afghanistan, negotiations between China and the Taliban may boost BRI development across the country. The first MoU between Afghanistan and China on BRI was signed in 2016, but very few projects have been implemented due to security concerns and the country's difficult climate and terrain. From the inland province of Xingiang, Afghan territory can be used to head south via two communication corridors to the Iranian port of Chabahar or the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi.

On the other hand, Afghanistan's stability is a prerequisite for the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and for the development of the port of Gwadar, which could become an energy hub for gas from Central Asia via Afghanistan<sup>49</sup>. However, it should be noted that direct connections between Pakistan and China are difficult as they have to cross the Himalayan mountain range via the Karakorum route, the highest paved road in the world. Another aspect to be taken into account is that the route crosses the controversial Kashmir region<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.civildaily.com/news/china-myanmar-new-passage/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/chinese-high-speed-rail-network-reaches-myanmars-border/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/does-the-belt-and-road-have-a-future-in-taliban-ruled-afghanistan/>

<sup>50</sup> [http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2018/DIEEEEA29-2018\\_Lineas\\_Terrestres\\_Comunicaciones\\_Afganistan\\_JICT.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2018/DIEEEEA29-2018_Lineas_Terrestres_Comunicaciones_Afganistan_JICT.pdf)



Source: Own elaboration

### Islamic and Buddhist fundamentalism on China's doorstep

There are more than 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar, with Buddhism being the dominant religion. Maintaining the unity of the country in the face of possible separatist movements has been one of the main arguments put forward by the military for its near perpetual rule in Myanmar.

The coup d'état may lead to the aggravation of ethnic and religious conflicts as, on the one hand, it opens up the possibility of a unification of ethnic groups against military leadership in response to the ethnic cleansing of ethnic minority groups such as the Shan, Kokang and Rohingya Muslims carried out by General Min Aung Hlaing<sup>51</sup>. On the other hand, the release of radical Buddhist monk Wirathu—known as the Burmese Bin Laden<sup>52</sup>—by the military junta<sup>53</sup> may lead to an increase in Islamophobia and ethnic tensions in Myanmar. The monk had been imprisoned in November 2020 on charges of sedition by the overthrown government. This hatred of Muslims by Burmese Buddhists, which has materialised in the persecution of the Rohingyas, was fostered in 1996 when the Taliban destroyed the iconic Buddhas of Bamiyan.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.strifeblog.org/2021/08/31/military-mayhem-in-myanmar-the-end-of-a-democratic-experiment/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.eurasiareview.com/01092021-a-burmese-perspective-uba-in-bipolar-world-oped/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.efe.com/efe/espana/mundo/la-junta-militar-birmana-libera-al-polemico-monje-radical-wirathu/10001-4623863>



China—which has shown its support for the Taliban—has the threat of radical Islamism on the border with Afghanistan with the presence of the ETIM group. In this situation, China will find it very difficult to deal with two opposing situations in Afghanistan and Myanmar in relation to its support for both governments and will have to use all its diplomatic tools to achieve its famous win-win, this time on three sides.

### **A COVID-19 that gives no respite: a chance for China**

The COVID-19 epidemic is out of control<sup>54</sup> in Myanmar and it is estimated that half of the population could soon be infected. In addition to a crippled economy, Myanmar also faces the problem of health facilities, with some 40% of medical staff having left their jobs in opposition to military junta rule. The situation is so serious that even opponents have accused the military government of using COVID-19 as a weapon against the population, who, for fear of becoming infected, prefer to stay indoors<sup>55</sup>, making it difficult to hold demonstrations in favour of the overthrown government.

The distribution of vaccines is an emergency issue and countries would have to find ways to deliver such aid without legitimising the junta government. China could take a leading role in this by donating vaccines through collaboration with the military junta government. This could reduce the poor image the Burmese have of China for its support—or rather its ‘non-condemnation’—of the coup d'état.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also led to a 17% increase in poverty in Afghanistan, highlighting the mismanagement of the Ghani government, which has failed to deliver aid received from other countries and the World Bank<sup>56</sup>.

As with Myanmar, China has announced that it is sending three million doses of vaccines and medicines to Afghanistan<sup>57</sup>, demonstrating its support for the Taliban in the fight against the pandemic, while the Taliban are gaining public support and underpinning their government's moderate rhetoric. And again, all in exchange for guaranteeing the

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/press-release/2021/07/myanmar-covid-19-surges-overwhelming-shattered-healthcare-system/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.france24.com/es/asia-pac/C3%ADfico/20210801-myanmar-golpe-estado-militar-aniversario>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/clash-of-contagions-impact-covid-19-conflict>

<sup>57</sup> [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/14/c\\_1310185912.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/14/c_1310185912.htm)

country's stability in order for China to achieve its economic and commercial goals. Again, an example of win-win.

## Conclusions

For Afghanistan and Myanmar, 2021 brought a new political reality, with the Taliban coming to power and the coup d'état, respectively. Despite the differences that can be found in each case, there are a number of similarities, mainly in relation to how China is managing both cases as they are strategic neighbours. The success or failure of an action taken by China in Afghanistan can be used to make a decision in Myanmar and vice versa, so it seems logical to think that the relationship with the new governments—not yet recognised by the international community—will be managed almost in parallel.

The main similarity found in the current situation in Afghanistan and Myanmar is that we may be witnessing the beginning of the end of Western military interventions abroad to impose democracy in ethnically and religiously complex regions of the world with widespread corruption within government institutions.

Contrary to the sanctions imposed by Western powers, China, far from condemning the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the coup in Myanmar, has pursued a non-aggressive policy based on two priorities: stability and non-interference in the internal affairs of its neighbours. Both the Taliban in Afghanistan and the military junta in Myanmar seek legitimacy for their governments, and support from China and Russia in international fora is a decisive factor in achieving this.

Meanwhile, China has to contend on its own border with countries whose stability hangs by a thread but which are key to achieving the grand BRI project and the exploitation of natural resources. China's strategy for now is based on non-interventionism—at least not military—in the internal affairs of both Afghanistan and Myanmar.

Stability in Afghanistan and Myanmar is increasingly important to China's interests given their strategic location. China seeks to ensure the stability of both countries by following the principles of peaceful coexistence and through its bilateral *win-win* strategy, putting at the centre of its interests the connectivity provided by the BRI, the exploitation of natural resources and energy infrastructure, in exchange for investment and collaboration with the political power in government, be it the Taliban or a military leadership.

Over these months meetings have been held between Chinese government representatives and both the military in the Myanmar government and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Negotiations are likely to be different in one case and in the other, but both will have the common denominator of seeking stability in two countries that are of vital importance to China due to their geographic location.

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