



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 30, 2023

## Taliban Arrests Chinese Nationals for Stealing Afghan Lithium

SINGAPORE — Taliban terrorists detained three Afghans and two Chinese citizens suspected of trying to smuggle lithium across the Chinese border, the Afghan news outlet *Khaama Press* reported.

Various Afghan and foreign reports about the incident failed to name the men in question, and did not detail any more information about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s possible culpability in either the smuggling or the arrests. One report, quoting local Taliban "authorities," said that the men were caught with 1,000 metric tons of rocks with lithium. The incident took place in Jalalabad, on Afghanistan's eastern border with China.

Lithium is a vital metal in producing electric vehicles and other batteries, and is regarded as a vital part of efforts to "transition" into a "green" economy. About 90 percent of lithium produced today hails from Australia, Chile, and China, and China is the world's largest manufacturer of lithium-ion batteries.

Although presently not a crucial player in the lithium market, Afghanistan has been said to have some of the world's largest lithium supplies, as well as reserves of other rare-earth minerals, fossil fuels, and natural resources generally.

The Taliban has tried to harness these resources since taking power in August 2021, and Taliban jihadists have been involved in deals with the Chinese government to build factories and explore for natural-resource wealth. Taliban leaders have also indicated interest in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which offers predatory loans to poor countries to construct infrastructure projects that could leave recipients in a debt trap.

According to reports from *Voice of America*, Taliban official Mohammad Rasool Aqab of the Mines and Petroleum Ministry confirmed the arrest and said that the smuggled rock was ore containing "up to 30 percent" lithium, unlawfully taken from Afghan soil.

"Taliban intelligence personnel said Chinese nationals in collaboration with their Afghan partners wanted to transport the precious stones to China via Pakistan while arrested," *Khaama Press* reported.

Many believe that Afghanistan has over \$1 trillion in rare-earth mineral resources, as years of surveys and studies have revealed. Although lithium is among the most valuable, observers contend that the



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country can enjoy lucrative returns in copper, gemstone, and iron resources as well.

Hence, the Middle Eastern country has been a hotbed of illegal mining and smuggling for years. The government of then-President Ashraf Ghani in 2016 estimated that Kabul was forfeiting millions in profits by permitting illegal operations to mine and sell the minerals rather than the government benefiting from them.

Back then, the Taliban was one of the major beneficiary organizations from illegal mining, just as it also had a stake in the nation's unlawful opium cultivation and production. So far, no evidence has shown that Taliban jihadists were directly involved in the mining, yet terrorist leaders have demanded payment for the safe transfer of smugglers through their areas.

"Mining is a big area of focus for the Taliban," mining expert Jawed Noorani explained at the time, based on a report by *The New Indian*, which quoted Noorani as estimating that the Taliban was making "more than \$1 billion in taxes on minerals."

Moreover, the Taliban's current "interior minister," the al-Qaeda-linked jihadist Sirajuddin Haqqani, is regarded to have been among the top beneficiaries of mineral smuggling before the jihadists took control in 2021.

"Afghan and U.S. industry sources say the Taliban are essentially strip-mining the country's mineral wealth," the *Financial Times* claimed in July. "There is little governmental expertise available to develop a soup-to-nuts mining industry that could include mineral extraction, processing, and higher-value exports."

No conclusive evidence has shown that the CCP was directly embroiled in the suspected lithium operation that was repressed recently, although Beijing has been keen on Afghanistan's resources and deposits.

"While much uncertainty remains, given the fluid situation in Afghanistan, there are huge opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries, especially in sectors such as utilities and mining," the Chinese government newspaper *Global Times* declared in August 2021, days after the Taliban conquest, suggesting "more win-win cooperation between China and Afghanistan" under the Taliban.

The *Times* hailed the Taliban's return to power as a "sunny day in Kabul." The Taliban, in return, discussed with representatives of Chinese regime-friendly companies in November 2021 about their "strong interest" in harnessing Afghan mineral wealth.

This month, the Taliban-led administration also expressed plans to sign a contract with a Chinese company to extract oil from the Amu Darya basin in the country's north, the acting mining minister said.

The contract is poised to be signed with Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co (CAPEIC), officials told a news conference in Kabul. It will be the first significant public commodities extraction deal the Taliban administration has inked with a foreign company since taking power in 2021. The proposed deal reflects China's economic clout in the region, even though the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militant group has targeted its citizens in Afghanistan.

"The Amu Darya oil contract is an important project between China and Afghanistan," China's ambassador, Wang Yu, told the news conference.

Although China has not formally acknowledged the legitimacy of the Taliban administration, it has



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major interests in the country as the latter is located at the center of a region significant for the Chinese BRI projects. The Chinese company will invest \$150 million annually in Afghanistan under the contract, the spokesperson for the Taliban-run administration, Zabihullah Mujahid, declared on Twitter. The firm's investment would rise to \$540 million in three years for the 25-year contract, he added.

Additionally, the Taliban-run administration will have a 20-percent partnership in the project, which can be raised to 75 percent.

In 2012, China's state-owned National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) had also signed a contract with Afghanistan's previous, U.S.-backed government to extract oil at the Amu Darya basin in the northern provinces of Faryab and Sar-e Pul. Back then, up to 87 million barrels of crude were estimated to be in Amu Darya.



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