



China and the Taliban

Friends with Benefits

Alessandro Arduino

Series Introduction

The Afghanistan Crisis: Anxieties and Trigger Points

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has prompted a geopolitical free-for-all situation in the country, with regional, if not, extra-regional implications. It ceded the country swiftly to Taliban control, with China, Russia, and Iran all poised to forge close relationships with the new Afghan government.

International players like Qatar, Turkey and Pakistan, which have had functional relations with the Taliban, have sought constructive engagement with the new government, to the extent of opening a pathway for them into the international system. Others, particularly the Central Asian states, the UAE and

Saudi Arabia, are disquieted by security concerns, terrorism-related or otherwise. In Europe, the immediate impact of events in Afghanistan is having to manage a massive refugee crisis.

This series of *Insights* examines the implications of the US disengagement from Afghanistan, ranging from strategic openings in interstate relations to ground-level anxieties.

Cover photo: Taliban fighters travelling on a pick-up truck along a road in Badghis province on 17 October 2021. Hoshang Hashimi/AFP.

China and the Taliban

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Alessandro Arduino*

China's pragmatic approach to the Taliban's capture of power in Kabul is a reflection of its concerns over Afghanistan's continuing instability and the possible spillover effects. China shares the fears of Afghanistan's other neighbours: the rise of Islamist terrorism, a new wave of refugees and increased narcotics trafficking. China's wait-and-see approach in response to Kabul's fall means that the Taliban's expectations that the Belt and Road Initiative will be extended into Afghanistan will not materialise any time soon.

Following the precipitous withdrawal of US security forces from Kabul and the tenuous security situation in Afghanistan despite the Taliban's swift return to power, China's anxiety over negative spillovers from Afghanistan is growing. China has taken a wait-and-see approach, withholding recognition of the Taliban. At the same time, however, China has been pragmatic, maintaining its diplomatic presence in Kabul in the hope of keeping a direct line to the Taliban and an intelligence-gathering presence on the ground. And, on 28 July, as the Taliban victory seemed imminent, China held a meeting in Tianjin with one of the group's top leaders.

Beijing's approach to the return of the Taliban differs substantially from its approach when the Islamist group first came to power in 1996. At that time China not only refused to recognise the

Taliban but also closed the Chinese embassy in the Afghan capital. Only in late 1998 did Beijing start to engage the Taliban through Islamabad's support. In 1999 China's ambassador to Pakistan met the then Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, and the following year a delegation from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), a leading think tank affiliated with China's Ministry of State Security, visited Kabul.

China's more pragmatic approach to Taliban 2.0 could be a product of its growing concerns that any spillover from the instability in Afghanistan could affect the security of its investments in neighbouring Pakistan, notably the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), considered one of the most ambitious projects in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The killing on 14 July of nine Chinese workers near Pakistan's Dasu power plant, not far from the Afghan border, demonstrated how violent spillovers from Afghanistan could derail Chinese investments in the region.

Stability is Key for China

China's wait-and-see approach will persist until the Taliban begins to achieve a modicum of stability.¹ The Taliban's grip on power in Kabul and long-term survival hinges on the caretaker government's ability to learn from the group's failed attempt to govern Afghanistan in the 1990s

¹ Alessandro Arduino, Raffaello Pantucci and Yue Xiaoyong, "What are the Implications of US withdrawal from Afghanistan?", National Committee on China, UK, September 2021, <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/de00d42f-877f-4d04-bf3a-320ffbed369c/UKNCC%20GCP%20September%202021%20Issue%205%20Combined-comp.pdf>

while facing new challenges arising from a more fluid and fast-changing security environment.

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For hundreds of years, Afghanistan’s political and security structure has revolved around decentralised militias and not a centralised state, making it unlikely that political arrangements forged in Kabul will survive over the long term. The recent international calls for the Taliban to form a more inclusive government that has representation for minorities and women fell short of recognising the compelling need to accommodate all the fighter groups that had delivered the Taliban’s victory, which the Taliban leadership in Kabul has failed to do. According to the Afghan expert Antonio Giustozzi,² the main fault line today lies between Mullah Haibathullah Akhunzada, the Taliban’s supreme leader, and key figures in the caretaker government such as its deputy leader, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, and acting defence minister Mohammad Yaqub, on the one hand, and the group’s top military leaders in the south, on the other hand. To complicate matters, the

² Terrorism Monitor, “Terrorism Monitor Interview with Dr Antonio Giustozzi”, *Terrorism Monitor* 19, No. 17, 7 September 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/terrorism-monitor-interview-with-dr-antonio-giustozzi/>

legacy of Afghanistan's 40 years of war is an economy based almost exclusively on the opioid trade as well as foreign aid. That external funding has now been interrupted, exacerbating an already critical humanitarian situation.

In the short term, the Taliban government is not likely to achieve international recognition, given not only its less than inclusive nature but also the remarkable number of internationally recognised terrorists within its ranks.

Promises and Expectations

China's willingness to meet the Taliban in Tianjin³ demonstrated Beijing's realistic approach to the evolving security situation in Afghanistan: keeping communication channels open, promising aid and reconstruction assistance, and wangling a guarantee that the Taliban will not support terrorist attacks against China.

The meeting between Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi and Mullah Baradar formalised what was previously debated during closed-door meetings in Doha: Beijing's recognition of the Taliban's status in return for the Taliban promising that they will not train, fund or allow militant Uighurs from the Turkestan Islamic Party (also known as East Turkestan Islamic Movement, or ETIM) to carry out operations from Afghanistan against the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

³ China Global Television Network (CGTN), "China urges Afghan Taliban to fight against ETIM terrorists", CGTN, 28 September 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-07-28/Wang-Yi-meets-with-Afghan-Taliban-delegation-in-Tianjin-12grE7drmlW/index.html>

Like countries in other complex environments from the Middle East to North Africa, Afghanistan has unreasonable expectations of Chinese economic support. Baradar's declaration that Beijing is willing to provide capital and infrastructural assistance on short notice echoes the expectations of the Lebanese Hisballah movement, or even those of the Assad government in Syria, all of which look to China's BRI as a quick solution to a wide array of troubles.

Wang Yi's statement during the Group of 20 Foreign Ministers' video conference on Afghanistan on 23 September⁴ well summarised China's pragmatic position on the fast-evolving situation in Afghanistan. The statement articulated six points that are at the core of China's commitment to Afghanistan:

- (1) Humanitarian assistance needs to be provided immediately and redoubled. In this respect, China announced its decision to provide US\$31 million in humanitarian aid, including three million doses of COVID 19 vaccine.
- (2) All economic sanctions on Afghanistan should end and the country's foreign exchange reserves should be freed rather than be used as a bargaining chip to exert political pressure on the Afghan government. In place of sanctions, there should be a multilateral approach led by international financial institutions to provide financing support to Afghanistan. The statement made no mention of unilateral aid under the BRI or involving just the PRC-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, "Wang Yi attends the G20 Foreign Ministers' video conference on Afghanistan", 23 September 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1909122.shtml

- (3) The need for an inclusive political structure in Afghanistan. It must be noted here that China does not have the kind of compulsion that Iran or Tajikistan have to call for the inclusion of all ethnic groups, which would be critical for ensuring stability along their respective borders with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, cooperating with a government that is not composed exclusively of Taliban elements could make collaboration more palatable internationally for Beijing.
- (4) The need for the Taliban to honour their promise to make a clean break with and oppose all international terrorist forces. Here Wang Yi highlighted President Xi's notion of a "community with a shared future for mankind", which reminds the international community to "build a united front against terrorism, oppose double standards and selective counterterrorism". This point appears to be an oblique reference to the US State Department's decision to remove ETIM from its list of designated foreign terrorist organisations.
- (5) NATO should take the primary responsibility for dealing with the increasing wave of refugees from Afghanistan, the fundamental solution to which lies in participating in the economic reconstruction of the country.
- (6) The United Nations should act as the main channel for maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan and for offering humanitarian assistance but China also welcomes other multilateral mechanisms to pool their efforts and play their part as well. This point was effectively a statement of the Chinese vision for a new security architecture for the region, namely, one that is multilateral rather than unilateral.

Stepping into the Graveyard?

China had viewed the US military presence in Afghanistan with ambivalence. On one hand Beijing benefited from the stabilising effect of the American security umbrella, but, on the other hand, it was also concerned that a presence in Afghanistan allowed the US better intelligence capabilities against China and power projection in Central Asia. While the official narrative in Beijing is still centred on the fact that “the failure of the war on terror has taught us those countries should stop using anti-terrorism operations as a pretext to intervene in other countries (...) and the UN should lead the global war against terrorism”,⁵ Beijing is nevertheless concerned that the US ability to deal with the terrorist threat has now become severely limited.

Having lost two strategic military components in Afghanistan, any future US counterterrorism operations in the region are likely to be carried out in an over-the-horizon manner. This refers primarily to the use of combat drones and precision strikes launched from regional locations. It is worth highlighting that during a meeting with the Russian Chief of General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, raised the possibility of the United States using Russian bases in Central Asia to improve its ability to monitor the Afghan terror threat.⁶ President Joe Biden has used the notion of over-the-horizon capability to rebut criticism that the US pull-out from Afghanistan would encourage terrorists to gather there once

⁵ Fu Xiaoqiang, “A Tale of Two Anti-terror Modes”, *China Daily*, 16 September, 2021, <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/NEW/en-us/opinion.html?pid=4c004c98-a65f-4e29-a237-359d7b5e80c3>

⁶ Michael R. Gordon and Gordon Lubold, “US asked Russia about offer of bases to monitor Afghan terror threat”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-asked-russia-about-offer-of-bases-to-monitor-afghan-terror-threat-11632767164>

again and plan brazen attacks on US soil. Unfortunately, the promise of winning a war on terror in Afghanistan by employing only air assets with precision-guided munitions has been graphically deflated by the tragic mistake that cost the lives of 10 Afghan civilians during the botched US drone strike on Kabul on 29 August.⁷

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In the case of Russia, the military bases in Central Asia that it inherited from the Soviet period provide Moscow with timely intelligence on Afghanistan. These include the Kant Air Base near the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, and the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, which is an encompassing label for a group of bases and outposts that sprawl from the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, to the border with Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the conduct of occasional joint military drills between Russian forces and those from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan means Moscow has a rapid reaction force in close proximity to Afghan borders if the need for intervention arises. However, direct military intervention in

⁷ Alessandro Arduino, “Kabul drone strike exposes myth of Joe Biden’s ‘over the horizon’ war on terror”, *South China Morning Post*, 29 September 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3150563/kabul-drone-strike-exposes-myth-bidens-over-horizon-war-terror>

Afghanistan is unlikely, given the Soviet Union's disastrous 10-year experience in the country beginning with its invasion of December 1979.

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Beijing, for its part, maintains a little-known military base in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan province, near the Wakhan corridor, the 92 kilometres of border that China shares with Afghanistan. The base was previously devoted to the training of Afghan mountain forces and to joint training between Tajikistan's border guards and China's People's Armed Police. But deploying the People's Liberation Army or even sending the People's Armed Police into Afghanistan is not an option for Beijing. This is not just a matter of China's decades-old principle of non-interference; Chinese government officials and analysts⁸ are adamant that Beijing will not step into the “graveyard of empires.”⁹ In July, just before the Taliban's swift advance, Wang Yi travelled through Central Asia, and during bilateral talks in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan that focused on border security he promoted the idea of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution.

⁸ Zhang Jiadong, “China will not fall into ‘Afghan trap’ as other powers have bitterly learned”, *Global Times*, 6 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1227992.shtml>

⁹ Chan Kung, “China's Tang Dynasty and Afghanistan: The Graveyard of Empires” *The Diplomat*, 28 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/chinas-tang-dynasty-and-afghanistan-the-graveyard-of-empires/>

Nevertheless, Afghanistan's proximity to China will force Beijing to take steps to protect its BRI-related investments in the region. One question that one might ask is whether China is likely to deploy Chinese private security companies (PSCs) into Afghanistan as a proxy for direct military involvement.

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Chinese PSCs have a modest footprint in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which is related to protecting Chinese mining operations in the region in the presence of moderate risk but their presence does not constitute a grand strategy on Beijing's part of using PSCs as a proxy for a military presence. This is not because of a lack of willingness but mainly because Chinese PSCs lack combat experience. This is unlike Russia, which has private military companies with battle-tested combat capabilities, such as the Wagner group. Although highly unlikely, Moscow could well deploy these in Afghanistan to allow itself some degree of public deniability while avoiding another entanglement in an Afghan quagmire.

In China's case, however, if it begins to invest in Afghanistan in a big way in future, it may have to deploy Chinese PSCs to protect its investments.¹⁰ Chinese state-owned enterprises already operating in Afghanistan could embark on modest expansion, drawing on the security services provided by a selected number of Chinese PSCs in the region,

¹⁰ Author's interview with Chinese PSC contractors, 25 September, 2021.

probably the ones that are already operating in Pakistan from Islamabad to Lahore. But these will adopt the same modus operandi that is applied throughout the BRI, being limited to a few unarmed Chinese security managers who operate as links between locally contracted armed militia and Chinese workers housed in gated compounds. Their footprint will be even smaller than that in Central Asia.

That said, the prospect of the BRI reaching Afghanistan in the short term is unlikely. The increasing attacks against Chinese workers and infrastructure related to the CPEC expose how uncertainty and insecurity cannot be tamed simply by throwing money at the problem. The security problems likely to be encountered in a full-fledged involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan will be ten times more than those already encountered along the CPEC.

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But the promise of future economic development could buy Beijing some goodwill and time in dealing with the Taliban. Like several countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, Afghanistan has high expectations of Chinese support for bailing it out of its desperate situation. At the same time, substantial amounts of financial support from Beijing could compromise the Islamist credentials of the Taliban leadership and will probably also come with the kind of bill that Beijing

has been presenting from Turkey to the Far East:¹¹ the repatriation of the Uighurs to China. ◆

* ***Dr Alessandro Arduino** is Principal Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore.*

¹¹ James M Dorsey, “Initial Taliban moves fail to convince Afghanistan’s neighbours”, China-India Brief No. 188, 28 August–14 September 2021, available via [www.academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu/52275036/Initial_Taliban_moves_fail_to_convince_Afghani_stans_neighbours_and_near_neighbours), https://www.academia.edu/52275036/Initial_Taliban_moves_fail_to_convince_Afghani_stans_neighbours_and_near_neighbours



29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Block B #06-06
Singapore 119620
Tel: +65 6516 2380; Fax: +65 6774 0458
Email: contact.mei@nus.edu.sg
www.mei.nus.edu.sg

