

**China's Prospects in Afghanistan: Opportunities
and Adversities**

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Abstract

The United States invaded Taliban-run Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and The Pentagon in Virginia. After staying in the country for 20 years resulting in 2,448 deaths of American service members and 3,846 (Knickmeyer, 2021) military contractors until April 2021, the United States has pulled back from Afghanistan and the Taliban is back in power in Kabul. Amid the United States troop pullout, the Taliban takeover, and the ensuing chaos in Afghanistan most countries started to evacuate their citizens and embassies, but there were exceptions in the name of China, Russia, and Pakistan whose embassies continued to function as normal. This paper aims to analyse China's interests in Post-American Afghanistan through the lens of Economic, Political, and Security interests. The paper will briefly trace the China-Taliban connections over the years, possible threats to China's internal security, and threats emanating to BRI projects in Central Asia and Pakistan.

Keywords: Taliban, BRI, China, Uyghur Separatism

Introduction

Before delving into China's interests it's important to discuss some key terminology briefly.

1. **Taliban:** The word 'Taliban' is a Pashto word meaning 'Students' plural of the word 'Talib' meaning student. Taliban was formed by Mohammed Omar, famously known as Mullah Omar, in 1994 in Kandhar. Taliban owes its origin to the Soviet-Afghan war and the ensuing civil war in Afghanistan after the Soviet pullout. Taliban's ideological leanings are found in Deobandi (an Islamic revivalist movement) within Sunni Islam (Frayer, 2021). In 1994, while addressing a group of religious students in Panjwayi, describing the civil war all around Afghanistan Mullah Omar said:

“The religion of Allah is being stepped on, the people are openly displaying evil, the people of [Islam] are openly hiding their Religion, and the evil ones have taken control of the whole area; they steal the people's money, they attack their honor on the main street, they kill people and put them against the rocks on the road, and the cars pass by and see the dead body on the side of the road, and no one dares to bury him[....]” (Kuehn, 2018).

After its formation, the Taliban became another militia operating in Afghanistan and eventually controlled almost 3/4th of Afghanistan from 1995 until 2001, imposing a strict code of Sharia in their controlled territories (HRW, 2020).

2. **ETIM:** East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is a Muslim separatist group founded by Uighurs, who are members of the Turkic-speaking ethnic group in northwest China's Xinjiang province. The group was reportedly founded by Hasan Mahsum and seeks an independent state called East Turkestan that would comprise parts of modern-day Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (henceforth Xinjiang) (Bajoria, 2014). According to experts, ETIM is comprised of various splinter groups that operate out of Pakistan and Central Asia. The group along with Turkestan Islamic Party took credit for series of attacks on several Chinese cities from 2001 to 2017. Since the crackdown on separatists in Xinjiang by China, the group has been largely dormant and has splintered into various cells hiding in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and CAR's. According to China, 1000 to

5000 ETIM extremists left China to join Islamic State in the past and some have even received shelter from Al Qaeda after pledging their loyalty (Times, 2021)

3. **Silk Road Economic Belt:** Silk Road Economic Belt is the Land Component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It consists of the proposed overland routes for railways and roads through landlocked Central Asia along the historical trade routes of the Xiyu (a name for eastern parts of Central Asia in Chinese chronicles) (Kuo, 2020).

China and Taliban Engagements

China has an extensive history of engagements with the Taliban pre and post 2001. The first point of contact between China and the Taliban was in 1998 when the Taliban sold China a Tomahawk missile that landed in its territory in a US strike (Blank, 2015). In December 2000, the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, travelled to Kandhar to meet Mullah Omar where Omar assured the ambassador that the “Taliban would not allow any group to use its territory” to conduct operations against China (Small, 2013). These contacts came to a halt after 2001 until 2007 when the UK government asked China, How Chinese-made weapons were being found with Taliban insurgents. Afghan government officials also confirmed that the Taliban had access to sophisticated Chinese weaponry which included Chinese-made surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft guns, landmines, rocket-propelled grenades, and components of roadside bombs (Danahar, 2007). The US administration found out that it was the Chinese weapons that were shipped to Iran and Iran was supplying them to the Taliban (Synovitz, 2007).

Amid these speculations, Beijing kept constant ties with the Taliban. The next big point in their ties was in October 2014, when China organised the Istanbul process in Beijing for the reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In the talks, Beijing formally extended to act as a facilitator for reconciliation talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban (Ali, 2020).

With the U.S presence in Afghanistan, China faced a double-edged sword. On the one hand, in case of US victory, China feared the United States will build permanent bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia which would lead to the United States encircling China as the US already had a military presence to the east of China in Japan and South Korea and Guam in the South-East. But, on the other hand, if the United States failed to curb the Taliban insurgency, there was a real possibility of groups

like ETIM and Turkestan Islamic Party getting active in Xinjiang and reinvigorating the separatist movement which had intensified in the first decade of the 21st century.

China and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-2021)

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was formed in 2004 in the aftermath of the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the overthrow of the Taliban. After overthrowing the Taliban, Afghanistan's interim Administration was formed under Hamid Karzai, and United Nations Security Council formed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to provide security to the Karzai administration (UNSC, 2001). After the September 11 attacks, Beijing permitted the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to open a Beijing office in 2002 to enhance anti-terrorism cooperation with the United States (West, 2021). Meanwhile, China refused to participate in any international military presence in Afghanistan and did not allow coalition forces to operate out of Chinese bases or airspace. China's actions may have stemmed from their assessment of the effect of their military presence in Afghanistan. Engaging militarily against the Taliban could've led to the Taliban providing refuge, training, and weapons to Uyghur separatists, that could have flared up the already worsening situation in Xinjiang.

China initially followed a policy of non-intervention vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (henceforth Afghanistan) and its engagement with Afghanistan was mostly aid. China allocated US \$4 million of humanitarian aid for Afghanistan in 2001 followed by an additional US \$1 million at the Tokyo donor conference in 2002. In the same year, China announced an aid package amounting to the US \$ 150 million (China, 2002).

In December 2002, China along with other countries bordering Afghanistan i.e., Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) signed the Declaration on Good-Neighborly Relations (UNSC, Afghanistan Good Neighbourly Relations Declaration, 2002). In 2006 China and Afghanistan signed the Treaty of Good-neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation. In the treaty, the two sides decided to sign the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation and establish a joint economic and Trade Committee. Chinese government further granted zero-tariff on 278 items of Afghan exports to China as of July 1, 2006 (PRC, 2006).

The 2006 treaty opened avenues of Chinese investment in Afghanistan. For example, in 2008 Chinese company Jiangxi Copper pledged to invest approximately US \$4 Billion to acquire 100 percent of the rights to mine copper in Mes Aynak. Complimentary to this project China also committed to building a thermal power plant with a capacity of 400 megawatts, a hospital, and a mosque.

In 2009 Chinese government provided aid worth US \$75 million. China actively started engaging with Afghanistan after 2010. In 2011 the Chinese government wrote off US \$19.5 million of Afghan debt and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a 25-year contract for oil extraction in the northern provinces of Farvab and Sar-e-Pol in the Amu Darva Basin (Harooni, 2011).

In 2012 China and Afghanistan signed a joint declaration on establishing Strategic and Cooperative Partnership (PRC M. , 2012). The stated aim of the joint declaration was Peaceful Co-existence, in line with the purpose and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, international law, and the principles enshrined in the 2006 Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation.

China's prospects in post-American Afghanistan

The United States completed their troop's withdrawal on August 30, 2021 (Nikkei, 2021), marking an end to a 20-year war. The US intelligence in June 2021 concluded that it would take the Taliban six months to conquer Afghanistan (Lubold, 2021), that assessed timeline kept getting shorter and shorter and the Taliban knocked on the gates of Kabul a full two weeks before the August 30 deadline of U.S. troop pull-out. Fast-forward to today and the Taliban has consolidated power in virtually the whole of Afghanistan (except parts of Panjshir), abolished the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, restored the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and announced a new government headed by Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund.

The withdrawal of the United States has led to an unprecedented situation for China. During the US withdrawal, various analyses and reports started coming in of China's economic ambitions in Afghanistan which included extrapolating a Trillion-dollar worth of Natural Resources, building a pipeline from Iran through Afghanistan to China (to secure energy security) which if envisaged by

China in the future would be the highest pipeline ever built (Records, 2010) and an engineering feat to overcome the mountains around the narrow Afghan-China border. Some analysis even stated that China might even try to fill the power vacuum left by the United States in Afghanistan and may send in troops to secure its investments made during the previous government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Some of these analyses may prove to be right in the long term but they sure are not China's immediate goals.

China's immediate interest in Afghanistan is security which works in tandem with its economic and political interests. China has followed a realist policy in Afghanistan since 2001 and has kept engagement with the Taliban open. One can say the Chinese government hoped for the best of a stable democratic government in Kabul but also prepared itself for a Taliban takeover. China's immediate concerns regarding the Taliban is its internal security pertaining to Xinjiang. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi hosted a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (head of the Afghan Taliban Commission) on July 28, 2021, in Tianjin. The Chinese Foreign ministry readout regarding the meeting stressed on the Chinese principle of respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. The readout also stated that China has adhered to non-interference in Afghanistan's internal matter. Along with the usual discussions Minister Wang Yi also talked about China's internal security. The minister said 'the ETIM is an international terrorist organisation designated by the UN Security Council that poses a direct threat to China's national security and territorial integrity. Combating the ETIM is a common responsibility for the international community. We hope the Afghan Taliban will make a clean break with all terrorist organisations including the ETIM and resolutely and effectively combat them to remove obstacles, play a positive role and create enabling conditions for security, stability, development, and cooperation in the region (PRC, 2021).

China's fears regarding the ETIM are not unfounded. Since 2014 there has been a significant reduction in attacks related to ETIM or its splinter groups like the Turkestan Islamic Party or lone-wolf attacks. According to the Global Terrorism Database which is maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism, there has been no attack in the Chinese mainland attributed to Uyghur separatism since 2017. ETIM has had refuge in Afghanistan under the Taliban before, as stated in elsewhere in the paper when the

Chinese ambassador to Pakistan met Mullah Omar in 2000 to convince him to pull back support from ETIM. Though Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen emphatically stated in an interview with the Global Times, ETIM members have been told to leave Afghanistan and made it clear that Afghanistan territory can't be used to launch attacks against any other countries (Wenting, 2021). The real challenge before the Taliban is not to break ties with ETIM but to stop its integration with other groups operating in Afghanistan, including Al Qaeda (GT, 2021) and ISIS-K.

Terrorism Incidents in China perpetrated by Uighur Separatists (2001-2019)

Date	City	Group
14/02/17	Pishan	Separatists (Suspected)
28/12/16	Karakax	Separatists
28/04/16	Xi'an	Separatists
18/09/15	Terek	Separatists
22/06/15	Kashgar	Separatists
17/06/15	Xian	Separatists
26/05/15	Zawa	Separatists
12/05/15	Hotan	Separatists
11/05/15	Hotan	Separatists
22/04/15	Pishan	Separatists
12/03/15	Kashgar	Separatists
09/03/15	Hotan	Separatists
08/03/15	Yarkant	Separatists
06/03/15	Guangzhou	Separatists
13/02/15	Hotan	Separatists
12/10/14	Bachu	Separatists
21/09/14	Luntai	Separatists
30/07/14	Kashgar	Separatists
		Turkestan Islamic
28/07/14	Huangdi	Party
18/07/14	Akatokay	Separatists

12/07/14	Aksu	Separatists
15/06/14	Hotan	Separatists
22/05/14	Urumqi	Separatists
06/05/14	Guangzhou	Separatists
		Turkestan Islamic
30/04/14	Urumqi	Party
01/03/14	Kunming	Separatists
30/12/13	Yarkand	Separatists
		Turkestan Islamic
28/10/13	Beijing	Party
29/06/12	Hotan	Separatists
28/02/12	Yeching	Separatists
31-07-11`	Kashgar	Separatists (Suspected)
30/07/11	Kashgar	Separatists (Suspected)
		Eastern Turkestan
12/08/08	Yamanya	Islamic Movement
		Eastern Turkestan
10/08/08	Kuqa	Islamic Movement
		Eastern Turkestan
04/08/08	Kashgar	Islamic Movement
		Turkestan Islamic
21/07/08	Kunming	Party
		Turkestan Islamic
21/07/08	Minshan	Party
		Eastern Turkestan
05/05/08	Shanghai	Islamic Movement
05/01/05	Usu City	Separatists ^{1w}

For full statistics including casualties and targets click [here](#).

¹ Table made using data from Global Terrorism Database,
<https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?search=&sa.x=54&sa.y=3>

Threat to CPEC and Silk Road Economic Belt

Along with internal security, China also faces external security threats due to the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban. These threats affect China's economic interests in Pakistan and Central Asia and emanate from Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) Pakistan (also called Pakistan Taliban) in Pakistan and from Turkestan Islamic Party, ETIM, and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which has ties to TTP (Ahmad, 2018).

TTP and CPEC

TTP poses a mortal threat to CPEC and Chinese interests in Pakistan. During the Afghan takeover, the Taliban released Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, the former deputy chief of TTP. In its most recent attack, the TTP targeted the Chinese ambassador in a hotel in Quetta (France-Presse, 2021). The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has reinvigorated TTP and filled it with a new purpose. Zhang Jiadong, a professor at the Center for South Asian Studies, Fudan University, argues that the TTP hopes to benefit from the Taliban's takeover as they are both Pashtuns and the Afghan Taliban's victory represents a victory for Pashtuns and Islamism. The TTP was also involved in the shuttle bus explosion in July in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa which claimed the lives of 14 Chinese nationals working Dasu Hydropower Project (Shahzad, 2021).

ETIM and the Silk Route Economic Belt

Although the Taliban claims to have cut ties with ETIM, ETIM still has a presence in Afghanistan. According to a report from the UN Security Council released in May 2020, the ETIM is located mainly in the Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Takhar. "Approximately 500 fighters of the group operate in the north and north-east of Afghanistan, primarily in Raghistan, Wardu and Badakhshan, with financing based in Raghistan" and as they are being squeezed, they are moving to neighbouring countries including Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (GT, 2021). China has significant investments in Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan which includes railway, roadways, pipeline, and energy projects (O'Reilly, 2015), and as ETIM flee to these parts, they may target these assets after regrouping.

China's Economic and Political Interests in Afghanistan

Taliban's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid on 2 September 2021 told an Italian newspaper that 'Taliban will rely primarily on financing from China in its fight for an economic comeback in Afghanistan' (Jazeera, 2021). China already has two significant investments in Afghanistan: the Mes Aynak copper mine and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) 25-year contract for oil extraction in the northern provinces of Farvab and Sar-e-Pol in the Amu Darva Basin. The status of both these projects is in limbo due to the prevailing unstable situation in Afghanistan. However, the Chinese government, while negotiating with the Taliban, will surely look to restart both projects.

Natural Resources in Afghanistan

There have been several reports that Afghanistan currently sits on a goldmine of Natural resources, including rare-earth metals and minerals. The US Geological Survey preliminary assessment is that Afghanistan harboured mineral wealth estimated at more than US \$ 1 Trillion, surveying Afghanistan in 2004 and in 2007. These resources consisted of vast deposits of copper, gold, iron ore, molybdenum, lithium, and cobalt. Unfortunately, the Taliban doesn't have the technological know-how and capital to extract these resources, pushing the Taliban to rely on China for monetising these resources.

BRI and Afghanistan

China and Afghanistan share a narrow and rugged border. Connecting Afghanistan and China directly under the aegis of BRI may prove cumbersome. There are three passes between Afghanistan and China namely the Chalachigu valley, The Wakhjir pass, and the North Wakhjir (Tegermansu) pass. The passes pose extreme engineering and construction challenges to make viable for either road or railways. The Pamir Mountain range is unstable and prone to landslides and the Karakoram highway is regularly disrupted due to rockfalls. Also, from October to March, winter render these passes inoperable due to extreme conditions. Developing the North Wakhjir pass is a possibility as the Chinese military has built an access road from

the Karakorum Highway along an 80km route to within 6km of the border, where it becomes passable by smaller vehicles only (Briefing, 2021).

There are other alternatives to Afghanistan-China connectivity through Tajikistan and Pakistan. Therefore, the most viable and economically prudent thing to do for Afghanistan-China connectivity would be to extend CPEC to Afghanistan through Quetta as it'll also provide a sea link through Gwadar port.

China's Political Interests in Afghanistan

To realise its security and economic interests concerning Afghanistan, China needs a politically stable Afghanistan. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has a history of destabilisation. Achieving political stability in Afghanistan might be easier said than done. The Pashtuns are inclined not to accept any form of strict authority, even at the cost of discord and insecurity (Tanner, 2009). This was seen in the post-Soviet withdrawal in the 1990s when opposing factions in a quest to rule engulfed Afghanistan in a bloody civil war. Although the Taliban is a pretty tightly knit group at least at the top, signs of the rift are already visible. This is evident of the alleged quarrel between Mullah Baradar (deputy to the Prime Minister) and Khalil Haqqani (Minister of Refugees) that prompted Baradar to leave Kabul for Kandhar (Najafizada, 2021).

Afghanistan and the Great Power Rivalry

The U.S-China relations have been on a rapid decline since Donald Trump became president. However, with Joe Biden becoming president, the relationship has not improved. Biden's administration shares the same thinking on China that the Trump administration had. The showdown between Chinese and United States' diplomats in Anchorage (Quinn, 2021), sanctions on officials in Xinjiang (Rauhala, 2021) (a move done in consonance with EU, Canada, and Britain), engaging more actively with QUAD with the first-ever leaders' summit, and the formation of AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and United States) alliance are all evident of Biden's administration's thinking of containing China.

China and the United States are currently in a great power competition which has been termed as ‘Cold War 2.0’ by many. But unlike the ‘Cold War’ both countries have more or less the same economic order i.e., ‘capitalism’ but both countries have conflicting political order i.e., Democracy and Authoritarian.

One of the goals of the United States after invading Afghanistan was to provide it with a ‘democratic government’. Afghanistan’s first democratic government was formed in 2004 with Hamid Karzai as the President but as soon as the United States started withdrawing in 2021, the provincial governments in Afghanistan began to fall like a deck of cards and Taliban captured Kabul even before the United States could complete troop withdrawal. That the Taliban captured almost whole of Afghanistan and overturned nascent democratic system even before U.S could leave is nothing but evidence of US failure of ‘Nation Building.’

The US failure also serves up as an opportunity for China in its narrative of ‘flawed model of western democracy.’ In response to a question at a press conference on the release of a key publication titled "the CPC: its Mission and Contributions," Liu Jianchao, deputy director of the Office of the CPC Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission, lashed out at the US for having no clue of what true democracy is. He further added that ‘there should not be only one model of democracy in the world; it is against the principle of democracy for a country to impose its own order on other countries and it’s up to the country itself, and its people to make a choice.

As far as narrative goes the US failure in Afghanistan is a win for China and if China is successful in keeping Afghanistan politically stable along with economic and infrastructural development, it will be a big shot in the arm for China’s system of ‘model and governance’ as Li Haidong, professor at the Institute of International Relations at China Foreign Affairs University said “the idea and governance system of China which has proven to be more effective in handling crisis will be learned by more countries, and for the elites of the US and some western countries, this situation is embarrassing, painful and unacceptable.” (GT, 2021)

Conclusion

Afghanistan has come full circle since 2000. It went from being the Taliban ruled Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to being the democratic Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and back to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Although this time, the Taliban wants recognition not just from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates but from the whole world. It looks like China is also leaning towards recognising Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan mainly due to its strengthening partnership with Pakistan and strong economy through which China hopes to secure its security prospects and in turn economic prospects.

China, in the current situation, is facing both opportunities and adversities. On the one hand, if China can keep the Taliban together, it has substantial economic gains to achieve, and on the other hand, if the Taliban disintegrates and starts fighting, it may have a spill over effect in Xinjiang and BRI for China. The Taliban wants to rebuild Afghanistan and has openly called for China's help for economic development, seeing as China is the only country capable of doing that in Afghanistan's immediate neighbourhood. But China can use its leverage over the Taliban to gain concessions in mining and exploration and persuading and if need be, coercing the Taliban to cut ties with terrorist organisations such as Al Qaeda and ETIM and not let its territory be used to perpetrate an attack on her territory.

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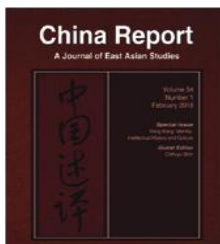


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