



China's New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal

FENG ZHANG 

RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

China's historical relationship with Afghanistan is marked by three periods: estrangement during the Cold War (1955–1990), rising concern with Uighur terrorism emanating from Afghanistan (1991–2000), and evolving activism in Afghan affairs following the US invasion (2001–2020). Since the withdrawal of US forces in Afghanistan in August 2021, Beijing has formed a new, five-pronged engagement policy toward Afghanistan: pragmatically and cautiously accepting the Taliban's dominance in Afghan affairs, preventing the reemergence of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists, facilitating an inclusive politics in the country, demonstrating a greater degree of humanitarian concern, and shaming the US and the West for forfeiting their responsibility. Shaping this new policy are four factors that have affected and will continue to affect Chinese policy in the future: security and stability in Xinjiang and China's western border region, Afghanistan's place in China's overarching international strategy, great power politics involving the United States, and the economic value of Afghanistan.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Feng Zhang

Institute of Public Policy,
South China University of
Technology, CN

zhangfeng@ipp.org.cn

GUEST EDITOR:

Michael Cox

Emeritus Professor of
International Relations and
Founding Director of LSE
IDEAS, UK

m.e.cox@lse.ac.uk

KEYWORDS:

China's policy toward
Afghanistan; China-
Afghanistan relations;
terrorism; Uighur; Sino-
American relations

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Zhang F. China's New
Engagement with Afghanistan
after the Withdrawal. *LSE
Public Policy Review*. 2022;
2(3): 10, pp. 1–13. DOI: [https://
doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.52](https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.52)

The ignominious departure of the United States from Afghanistan in August 2021 after a 20-year intervention left China as the biggest regional country capable of playing a critical role in future Afghan affairs dominated by a resurgent Taliban. What is China's policy toward Afghanistan after the US withdrawal? To what extent will it seek to exercise its influence? I argue that China has formed a new, five-pronged engagement policy toward Afghanistan: (i) pragmatically and cautiously accepting the Taliban's dominance in Afghan affairs; (ii) preventing the reemergence of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists; (iii) facilitating an inclusive politics in the country; (iv) demonstrating a greater degree of humanitarian concern; and (v) shaming the US and the West for forfeiting their responsibility. However, although China's policy has certainly become more active and constructive, it is still hemmed in by major constraints, not least its misgivings about the Taliban and its growing rivalry with the United States.

I begin by sketching the historical background to Sino-Afghan relations, distinguishing three phases of this relationship from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the US withdrawal in 2021: (i) estrangement during the Cold War (1955–1990); (ii) rising concern with Uighur terrorism emanating from Afghanistan (1991–2000); and (iii) evolving activism in Afghan affairs following the US invasion (2001–2020). I then examine four factors that have affected and will continue to affect Chinese policy toward Afghanistan: (i) security and stability in the northwestern province of Xinjiang and China's western border region; (ii) Afghanistan's place in China's overarching international strategy; (iii) great power politics involving the United States; and (iv) the economic value of Afghanistan.

These factors determine the continuities and changes of Chinese policy after the US pullout. Afghanistan is likely to receive more attention from policymakers as a result of the priority of neighborhood diplomacy in China's overall foreign policy. But the precise degree of its rising importance will be determined by policymakers' perceptions of China's interests and its vulnerabilities in the country. Among its interests, security and stability in Xinjiang and along the wider western border region will continue to dominate economic considerations. Among its vulnerabilities, the most salient are the nature and competence of the Taliban regime and the strategic posture of the United States. China is acutely aware of the limits of external intervention in influencing the Taliban, so its future contribution to Afghan reconstruction, while it will undoubtedly grow, is going to be limited by such realism. China is critical of the US strategy of quitting Afghanistan so as to concentrate on competing with it in the Indo-Pacific, with China seething at both the mess that Washington has left in Afghanistan and its recalibration of strategic offensive against it. The surging rivalry between the two countries is preventing them from meaningfully cooperating over Afghanistan, despite the fact that cooperation is obviously needed and would, if successful, help to ease their rivalry.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Afghanistan established a formal diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China in January 1955, becoming one of the first few countries to recognize the new Communist-led government in Beijing. The relationship became more distant from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s, as Afghanistan fell under the Soviet sphere of influence and as China broke away from its alliance with the Soviet Union after the 1960s. During the 1980s, Afghanistan became a battleground, with China collaborating closely with the United States in a common effort to thwart the Soviet invasion of the country, and with additional help from Pakistan it provided Soviet-style arms to Afghan insurgents. The Sino-Afghan relationship during the Cold War thus was dominated by great power rivalry [1]. This became less so after the Cold War, although, as we shall see, great power rivalry—now played between China and the United States—has reemerged as a severe constraint on Chinese policy.

The evolution of the Sino-Afghan relationship in the post-Cold War period can be divided into three phases. In the first phase, from 1991 to 2001, Afghanistan did not play an intrinsic part in Chinese foreign policy making. At this time, Beijing's interest in Afghanistan was in terms of protecting Xinjiang against terrorist threats and developing relations with the post-Soviet Central Asian republics. Uighur terrorism acquired policy salience for the first time in April 1990, when a group of Uighur men conducted an armed uprising against Chinese police and security

forces in the township of Baren with the aim of establishing an “East Turkestan Republic [2 p568].” Meanwhile, Afghanistan was mired in a civil war between the regime of President Najibullah and various mujahideen units, forcing China to withdraw its embassy staff in 1993. In 1996, the Taliban took control of the country, but China refused to establish diplomatic ties with the new regime. The triumph of this fundamentalist Islamic movement greatly heightened Chinese anxiety, because it had no scruples about providing a safe haven for a variety of radical Islamists. These included not only the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that launched attacks mainly into Central Asian states, but also the Uighur-centered East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that demanded independence for Xinjiang.

Consequently, China took bilateral and multilateral measures. Bilaterally, it sought to deal directly with the Taliban through the intermediary of its long-time ally, Pakistan. Multilaterally, it found common cause with Russia and the Central Asian states to create a new regional security institution—the Shanghai Five—which was established in 1996 with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It expanded, becoming the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, with Uzbekistan as an additional member.

The second phase of China’s post-Cold War policy toward Afghanistan lasted from 2001, when the United States invaded Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to 2021, when, after a 20-year misadventure, Washington decided to entirely withdraw its troops from the country. For the first 10 years of this period, China adopted a largely reactive attitude toward the US intervention, offering limited engagement with the new US-backed Afghan government and rejecting any direct security involvement in the country. After the Obama administration made clear its intention to withdraw US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, however, China was forced to come to grips with the consequences of a post-US controlled Afghanistan.

So, after 2012, Beijing ramped up its diplomatic, security, and economic engagement with Kabul. It secured an observer status for Afghanistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and upgraded the bilateral partnership to a strategic and cooperative partnership in June 2012. In September 2012, Zhou Yongkang, a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo responsible for internal security, visited Kabul, an unmistakable sign that Beijing was seeking greater security and counterterrorism cooperation with the Afghan government to insulate Xinjiang after the US withdrawal [2 p572].

China greatly intensified its bilateral and multilateral diplomatic activities after 2014 when the United States withdrew the bulk of its combat troops. The year 2014 is seen by many observers as a crucial year in China’s policy evolution [3 p621, 4 p285]. In that year alone, two senior security officials—Minister of Public Security and State Councilor Guo Shengkun and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Deputy Chief of Staff Qi Jianguo—visited Kabul, while Afghanistan’s newly elected President Ghani visited China. Soon, security and intelligence cooperation between China and Afghanistan took concrete—and in some cases, publicly acknowledged—forms. China sent its People’s Armed Police troops to join their Afghan counterparts in patrolling the northeastern Afghan province of Badakhshan and offered to support a mountain brigade for the Afghan National Security Forces, while Kabul handed over Uighur detainees in an effort to persuade China to use its influence with Pakistan to help start negotiations with the Taliban. On the multilateral front, three trilateral mechanisms took shape during this period: China–Afghanistan–Pakistan, China–Russia–Pakistan, and China–Russia–India dialogues. In October 2014, China hosted the fourth ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process (also known as the Heart of Asia) on Afghanistan, attended by 46 countries and international organizations, with the United States participating as a “supporting nation” [5, p901–903]. Finally, and notably, China joined the Quadrilateral Coordination Group with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States in January 2016.

FACTORS AND CALCULATIONS

Before examining China’s policy changes after the August 2021 US withdrawal, it is useful to consider the main factors affecting Chinese policy toward Afghanistan. Three factors deserve particular attention: security and stability in Xinjiang and China’s western frontier region; Afghanistan’s place in China’s overarching international strategy; and great power politics involving the United States. The first two factors have remained more or less constant through 2021, so they impart a degree of continuity to Chinese policy. The third factor, however,

has undergone major changes and is mainly responsible for new shifts in Chinese policy. The economic value of Afghanistan, especially with regard to its natural resources, may be considered a fourth factor. But it is much less important than the first three factors and is far from a main driver of Chinese policy.

TERRORISM

The first and most important factor is Chinese concern with security. China is focused, above all, on the threat Uighur terrorism and separatism poses to the internal security and stability of Xinjiang province and the Chinese interior, as well as broader concerns with border security in the vast western frontier region. Xinjiang is China's biggest province by area, constituting one-sixth of the country's landmass, and borders Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Any one of these countries could become a breeding ground for Uighur terrorism. Afghanistan has emerged as a particular menace because, as noted earlier, the Taliban regime has previously accommodated Uighur terrorists, including the ETIM, and allowed them to join Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist camps.

Chinese authorities estimate that hundreds of Uighur militants underwent training in Afghanistan when the Taliban controlled the country from 1996 to 2001 [6 p13]. They were mostly forced out after the US invasion and fled to Pakistan. After their safe havens were squeezed by the Pakistani army, they returned to Afghanistan and maintained a crucial presence in the north of the country, including the Wakhan corridor, where the ETIM chief was believed to be operating. This was one of the main reasons for Chinese interest in patrolling Badakhshan and in supporting the aforementioned building of a mountain brigade for Afghan security forces. In the 2010s, Chinese authorities reported a number of Uighur terrorist attacks not only in Xinjiang but also in China's interior regions, including a suicide attack at Tiananmen Square in October 2013 and a mass attack at the Kunming Train Station in March 2014. Between 2010 and 2014, terrorist attacks either in Xinjiang or linked regions (such as the Kunming attack) claimed the lives of 468 people and injured 548 [2 p574].

China fears the potential of Uighur terrorism and separatism to fan out from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Central Asia and the wider Middle East region, destabilizing its western frontier. The emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a major regional force in 2014 deepened these anxieties, as the movement declared its aspiration to extend its self-declared Caliphate into Xinjiang, and with some Afghans associated with the Taliban calling for establishing an ISIS-style regime in Afghanistan [6 p18]. In February 2018, ISIS issued a direct threat against China, releasing a video in which Uighurs vowed to return home to carry out attacks [7 p3]. The joining of forces between Uighur terrorists in Afghanistan and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asian countries would constitute a security nightmare to Beijing.

Terrorism and instability in Afghanistan affect not only China itself but also the Central Asian frontier regions, whose states together share 2,300 kilometers of borders with Afghanistan and 3,300 kilometers of borders with China [5 p900]. The terrorist and extremist threats confronting Central Asia are both internal to regional countries, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and external, of which Afghanistan constitutes the greatest menace. If the Central Asian states are infiltrated by terrorists from Afghanistan, the threat may spill over from their long and porous borders into Xinjiang. Unlike the Wakhan Corridor separating China from Afghanistan, which is difficult to traverse due to its harsh climate and formidable topography, China's borders with Central Asian states cannot be closed. Beijing has thus pushed the agenda of countering the so-called "three evil forces" of separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism with Central Asian states, and with notable success.

Pakistan is a thorn in the side of China's fight against Uighur terrorism. A close ally of China's since both countries' founding in the late 1940s, Pakistan is notorious for providing a safe haven for Islamic extremists, including the Taliban and Uighur militants. In recent years, China has also fallen victim to attacks against its personnel and infrastructure by Pakistani extremists in Balochistan, where the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a flagship project of the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—is being developed. Beijing has tried to pressure Islamabad to repel Uighur militants based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan adjoining Afghanistan and to safeguard the security of Chinese projects inside the country. However, the repeated terrorist attacks in Balochistan and the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban have reduced Beijing's confidence in Pakistan's ability to do so.

The second factor affecting China's policy toward Afghanistan is the country's place in China's overarching international strategy. Before President Xi Jinping assumed office in late 2012, Afghanistan was barely relevant to Chinese grand strategic thinking. As noted above, it only mattered when it impinged on China's security, as when it was invaded by the Soviet Union in the 1980s and when it accepted Uighur militants in the late 1990s, but hardly more. Since 2013 however, two new developments have elevated Afghanistan's importance in Chinese policy, although still only to a limited degree.

The first, as the Chinese scholar Zhao Huasheng notes, is the rising prominence of neighborhood or periphery diplomacy (*zhoubian waijiao*) in Chinese foreign policy [5]. In October 2013, China held its first-ever conference on diplomacy toward countries on its periphery. President Xi emphasized the need to strive for achievement in neighborhood diplomacy so as to ensure a favorable regional environment for China's development. Attended by representatives from the party, local and central government, the military, state-owned enterprises, and the diplomatic corps, this conference was a milestone in raising the profile of neighborhood diplomacy in modern Chinese foreign policy. The distinguished Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong argues that it indicated a strategic shift in Chinese foreign policy from "keeping a low profile" to "striving for achievement." In his view, it put an end to the debate about whether Xi was following the approach of Deng Xiaoping, the mastermind behind China's reform-era foreign policy, in keeping a low profile and ushered in a new era of a more activist regional strategy [8].

The second development is the much-vaunted BRI, a globe-spanning connectivity program advanced by President Xi in September–October 2013, exactly at the same time as the new neighborhood diplomacy was announced. The Belt part of the BRI seeks to connect the whole Eurasian continent from East Asia to Western Europe, while the Road attempts to link the Western Pacific, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean. By one account, the BRI network encompasses 4.4 billion people (63% of the world's population), 64 countries, and a combined economic output of 21 trillion dollars (29% of global GDP), requiring a gigantic investment of 20 trillion dollars in its first 10 years [9 p120]. It is China's global economic strategy and is frequently asserted by observers as President Xi's grand strategy [10, 11].

Of these two developments, neighborhood diplomacy affects China's policy toward Afghanistan more than the BRI does. Once the leadership has determined that foreign policy must be more proactive on the regional front, the diplomatic establishment must find ways to implement this new directive. Such an imperative must have been filtered through the policy process to bear on Afghanistan, although, of course, the specific manifestations of a more activist Afghanistan policy are determined by practical conditions.

With respect to the BRI, however, the significance of Afghanistan is open to doubt. Some observers think that Afghanistan could be a central hub for the Belt linking Central Asia with South Asia, at least as it appears on the map [7 p2]. In 2016, officials from Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan mooted the possibility of extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan [12 p104]. As China seeks to integrate Xinjiang and utilize its geopolitical position to overcome Uighur separatism and terrorism while facilitating a China-centric Eurasian geoeconomic system, Afghanistan ought to receive greater attention from Chinese strategists [2]. Even if this is true, Afghanistan can by no means attain centrality to the BRI in Central and South Asia simply by virtue of its geography [13]. In fact, Afghanistan is bypassed by two corridors of the BRI to its south and north, respectively: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridor, which runs through the five Central Asian republics as well as Iran and Turkey. In other words, Afghanistan is dispensable in the whole scheme. A prominent Chinese analyst asserts that when it comes to economic significance Afghanistan is of no account to the BRI [14]. Those who tout the geopolitical value of Afghanistan and advocate the building of a strategic corridor linking China with Iran through Afghanistan overlook the massive costs and risks of doing so [15]. In terms of both geopolitics and security, Beijing considers Afghanistan largely in a negative rather than positive light: it is a problem to be managed and contained rather than an asset to be leveraged and exploited.

The third factor affecting Chinese calculations toward Afghanistan is great power politics in Central and South Asia and, since 2001, Sino-American relations in particular. China’s perceptions of the role of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan have undergone several interesting shifts. For roughly 10 years after the US invasion in 2001, Beijing was predictably apprehensive of US motives, in keeping with its general suspicion of a US intention to constrain or even contain China’s rise. Hardliners in China’s strategic community, especially the PLA and security agencies, were apt to see the US military presence in Afghanistan as a threat to China’s national security and an instrument of America’s encirclement strategy toward China. Partly as a result of such thinking, Beijing ignored US requests for cooperation, such as entreaties to assist Washington in developing alternatives to the increasingly fragile supply routes via Pakistan for the delivery of materiel to US and NATO forces [2 p571]. As Washington decided to withdraw its forces, however, Beijing began to see the US presence in a more favorable light. It was no longer averse to the idea that the US presence might, after all, be in China’s interests, because it allowed China to free-ride on Western stabilization efforts. So Chinese officials started expressing concern that the United States should not leave too hastily [16]. Its anxieties about US encirclement were superseded by fears that Afghanistan might once again become a safe haven for Uighur militants and so destabilize China’s western frontier.

Underlying these changing perceptions is a conflicted mindset that simultaneously views the US containment of the Taliban as a positive outcome for Xinjiang’s security and the strategic and military presence of the United States in Afghanistan as a geopolitical threat to China’s national interest. As Andrew Small observes, China “wanted neither a Western victory that might entrench a US military presence in its backyard, nor a Taliban victory that would pose risks to Xinjiang and the wider region [17].” Consequently, between 2001 and 2014, it provided only tokenistic financial and political contributions to Afghanistan, aimed as much to avoid alienating anyone as to help rebuild the country. Such a conflicted mindset can only be resolved by a much greater willingness to intervene in Afghan affairs and to take matters into its own hands, or by the unfolding of one of the two dreaded outcomes— a US victory or a Taliban victory. As it turned out, it is the latter that Beijing now has to confront after the events of August 2021.

ECONOMICS?

Before moving on to the new Taliban challenge, it is important to clarify the significance of economic considerations in China’s policy toward Afghanistan. It is well-known that Afghanistan is richly endowed with a range of valuable natural resources including oil, natural gas, iron ore, gold, copper, cobalt, lithium, and other raw materials worth nearly \$1 trillion [18]. It is natural to think that if China could import these resources through the BRI, it will be able to diversify its imports away from more distant, volatile, or unfriendly countries. Trade with Afghanistan will also promote the economic growth of China’s western provinces as well as the neighboring countries of Pakistan and the Central Asian republics [6 p19].

These considerations of Afghanistan’s economic value must be weighed against the costs and risks of doing business with and in Afghanistan. The \$20 billion Afghan economy runs largely on opium production and narcotics trafficking, as well as international aid. Sino-Afghan trade is negligible in the context of China’s trade with its neighbors, amounting only to a meagre \$550 million in 2020 [19]. Afghanistan lacks the political stability, domestic security, and decent economic system necessary to create an adequate environment for Chinese investment. Its seemingly never-ending wars and civil conflicts, corruption, and decrepit infrastructure, as well as other problems, cannot but deter large-scale Chinese investments. It is instructive that China’s two biggest investments in the country so far—the Metallurgical Corporation of China’s \$3 billion investment in the Aynak copper field and the China National Petroleum Corporation’s investment in the Amu Darya oil project—have stalled, barely effectively running, let alone turning a profit. The Aynak copper field is located in Logar, one of Afghanistan’s most violent provinces, and is now widely seen as a failed investment [4 p288]. Lessons of this kind have taught Chinese companies to be as risk averse as their Western counterparts [6 p27].

The four factors examined above will enable us to develop a good explanation for the continuities and changes of China's policy after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. This policy may be described as China's new engagement with an Afghanistan that is once again governed by the Taliban. It consists of five main elements: (i) pragmatically and cautiously accepting the Taliban's dominance in Afghan affairs; (ii) preventing the reemergence of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists; (iii) facilitating an inclusive politics in the country; (iv) demonstrating a greater degree of humanitarian concern; and (v) shaming the US and the West for forfeiting their responsibility. The first four elements contain clear continuities from past policies, but all of them have been advanced with a greater degree of urgency. Shaming the United States was meant in part to vindicate China's longstanding criticism of interventionist US foreign policy, but also to prod Washington to bear responsibility for Afghan reconstruction after the withdrawal.

Although China did not establish official relations with the first Taliban government of 1996–2001, it established contact with the regime in the late 1990s and has maintained channels of communication ever since. A Chinese ambassador to Pakistan even met with the Taliban's leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, in November 2000 [17]. Unlike the United States and some other Western countries, China has long taken the view that the Taliban are and will remain a core political actor in Afghanistan, and it has tried to avoid antagonizing it by refusing to side openly with US and NATO positions [2 p573]. Although the Taliban's rapid seizure of power in August 2021 surprised China as much as it did the United States, Beijing had not doubted its ability to secure a prominent role in Afghan affairs. On 28 July, before the Taliban took control of Kabul, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi received a high-level delegation headed by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the deputy leader of the Taliban. Wang described the Taliban as "a pivotal military and political force in Afghanistan," thus offering, for the first time in public, China's acceptance of it as a legitimate and dominant player in Afghan affairs [20].

CONDITIONALITY

Such acceptance, however, is made on pragmatic grounds and seems to be conditioned on the expectation of the Taliban's willingness and ability to combat terrorism and forge a viable political settlement, the second and third elements of China's new engagement policy. After all, the Taliban is an Islamic fundamentalist movement with no intrinsic respect for the secular notions of sovereignty and territorial integrity associated with modern statehood. Beijing's caution is manifest in the fact that, at this writing in February 2022, it has withheld official recognition of the new Taliban government. As no other country around the world has done so, China is obviously in no hurry. But recognition may have also been held up as a leverage against the Taliban over issues of major concern, especially counter-terrorism and political stability.

China's concern with Uighur terrorists and separatists operating from their bases in Afghanistan was heightened by the US withdrawal. In all of their public pronouncements about Afghanistan in 2021, Chinese officials never failed to point out the Taliban's responsibility to cast aside the ETIM and other forms of terrorism on Afghan soil. In the 28 July meeting with Mullah Baradar mentioned earlier, Wang Yi managed to elicit a pledge that Afghan territory will not be used by any forces to harm China [20]. In late October, meeting with Baradar again in Doha, Wang stated in unmistakable terms that China wanted the Taliban to completely sever ties with the ETIM; in response, Baradar repeated the promise of never allowing any forces to use Afghan territory to do things that will harm China [21].

Chinese officials are likely to take such promises with a pinch of salt, because they have been given several times before. Beijing knows precisely what the Taliban's track record on this actually amounts to—limiting ETIM activities somewhat but still providing them with a protected environment—and now it wants more. Therefore, in addition to directly pressuring the Taliban, China has made a renewed appeal to regional multilateralism, particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and various coordination mechanisms with neighboring countries, including Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian republics. In late October, Wang Yi declared that these countries need to form an "anti-terrorism united front [22]." It is not clear to what extent China would enlist the United States in this endeavor, but any assistance Washington could render in counter-terrorism would be welcomed by Beijing, whatever their differences in other areas.

FACILITATOR

Chinese efforts to facilitate an inclusive political process in Afghanistan began long before the final US withdrawal. Before the Taliban's triumph, however, it was framed as a "reconciliation" between the Taliban and the US-backed regime in Kabul. In 2010, Beijing stated for the first time that the Afghanistan reconciliation process needs to be "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned." In 2014, it began to bring the warring parties together for talks, with the hope of achieving inclusive political reconciliation, enhancing counter-terrorism capability, and maintaining communication and coordination with the United States [3 p623]. It was not, however, truly able to take on a mediation role, owing to a lack of in-depth knowledge about the actors and issues involved.

Since August 2021, China has continued to espouse the "Afghan-led and Afghan-owned" principle, except now that the Taliban's dominant position is accepted as a *fait accompli* [23]. Accordingly, Beijing no longer sees its role as a quasi-mediator but rather as a facilitator who will help orient and urge the Taliban to take political reconstruction seriously. Chinese officials emphasize in particular the need for the Taliban to create a broad and inclusive political framework, to adopt moderate domestic and foreign policies, to disown and combat terrorists, and to develop friendly relationship with neighboring countries [24]. These messages are clearly geared toward protecting China's security interests in Xinjiang and the wider western border region, as elaborated earlier.

China's discourse also exhibits interesting continuities and changes. The continuities reflect longstanding foreign policy principles as applied to Afghanistan. These include respect for the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan; support for the Afghan people's choice for their development path; and non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Starting in mid-2021, however, Beijing began to promise that it has no geopolitical designs on Afghanistan and that it will seek neither "private gains" nor a sphere of influence in the country [21]. This was clearly meant to preempt a possible outside suspicion that China would fill the strategic vacuum left by the US withdrawal.

AID AND ASSISTANCE

The fourth element of China's new engagement policy is greater humanitarianism, and this too flows naturally from earlier policies. China has provided Afghanistan with material aid and other kinds of humanitarian assistance since 2002, as well as waiving all of the country's earlier debts. Initially modest, China's financial contribution dramatically increased after 2014, with the total amount between 2014 and 2017, valued at \$326.7 million, exceeding the total of that given between 2001 and 2013 [4 p286]. In addition, China supported the building of hospitals, schools, and other high-profile reconstruction projects, as well as providing educational scholarships and training the country's officials in diverse areas.

China's post-2021 humanitarian approach is notable for its wider range of concerns. In early September 2021, Beijing announced that it was giving emergency aid of goods worth more than \$31 million, as well as donating 3 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, with more to come as required [24]. By contrast, Western countries were struggling to find ways to channel funds in ways that would circumvent the Taliban, even though the total volume of Western aid still dwarfed that of China's. Chinese aid threw a shameful spotlight on the Biden administration's February 2022 decision to use half of Afghanistan's foreign reserves (\$3.5 billion) frozen in US banks to compensate American victims of the 9/11 attacks [25].

China has not limited its aid to material goods. It has begun to emphasize the rights of women, children, and minority groups inside Afghanistan as well as the proper handling of refugees [26]. These belong properly to the realm of human rights, an area in which China has been repeatedly criticized by the West.

THE UNITED STATES

The final, inescapable aspect of China's new policy concerns the United States. As we have seen, between 2001 and 2020 China's attitude toward the US role in Afghanistan reflected two distinct kinds of worry—an initial worry about an entrenchment of the US presence that would "encircle" China and a later worry about a premature or disorderly US withdrawal that

would threaten China's security by allowing terrorists to regroup. As the latter worry became real in August 2021, China's perception of the United States turned into a mix of scorn and indignation.

The scorn was manifest in its censure and mockery of the chaotic US withdrawal. In June 2021, when the Biden administration was planning the withdrawal, Wang Yi expressed hope that it be carried out in a responsible and orderly manner to prevent the worsening of Afghanistan's security situation and a relapse into terrorism [27]. In early July, he blamed the United States for causing problems in Afghanistan and pressed it to ensure a stable transition of Afghan affairs. Washington, he averred, should not allow its withdrawal to breed chaos and conflict [28]. In early September, as the debacle of the US pullout shocked the world, Wang pinned Washington down for its "inescapable responsibility for the peaceful reconstruction of Afghanistan," all the while admonishing it not to create new problems for the country or to cause new instabilities that would harm the interests of Afghanistan's neighboring countries [29]. China's rebuke carried a clear double message—a triumphant pummeling of the failure of the US policy of armed intervention and nation building as well as a forceful exhortation for Washington to fulfil its post-withdrawal obligations to Afghanistan. The latter may be seen as a variant of the Chinese belief held after 2014 that some US presence in Afghanistan in fact serves China's interests.

More important, China's position revealed a strong sense of indignation about the United States that went far beyond the mere fact that Washington had left a total mess in Afghanistan for China and other regional countries to clean up. There was also fury that the Biden administration justified its Afghanistan exit on anti-China grounds, a fury that would severely constrain its activism toward Afghanistan and limit its cooperation with the United States over Afghanistan. On 4 September, in a telephone call with the Iranian foreign minister, Wang Yi noted the US assertion that the purpose of its withdrawal from Afghanistan was to better concentrate on the challenges from China and Russia. Not only was this an attempt to find an excuse for its failure in Afghanistan, Wang protested, but it once again exposed the nature of US power politics around the world. If the United States did not learn lessons from Afghanistan and completely change its foreign policy approaches, it was bound to suffer even greater defeats in the future [29].

"Great defeats" was no doubt intended as a warning against the US strategy of competition toward China that was spearheaded by the Trump administration and has been adopted in large measure by the Biden administration [30, 31]. Two schools of thought have emerged regarding Washington's position on Afghanistan in the context of its relations with China. One school holds that the fiasco of the US withdrawal demonstrated once more—after the Iraq War, the global financial crisis, and a string of other policy failures over the past 20 years—the decline of US power and competence. According to this thinking, a strategic opportunity has opened up in Afghanistan, and China should fill the vacuum with alacrity. In particular, China needs to scale up the BRI by using Afghanistan to link up Central and South Asia, so as to achieve a better balance in the western and eastern elements of the strategy [32].

The second, opposing school of thought is nowhere near as sanguine. Instead, it presents a foreboding analysis that posits an insidious anti-China US agenda. This view holds that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was a deliberate step in Washington's overall grand strategic shift from focusing on the Middle East to targeting China in the Indo-Pacific region. What is especially insidious in the US move is that by leaving Afghanistan, Washington was intentionally creating a gap to entice China to move in and devote more resources to its western borderlands. In effect, Washington was setting up a strategic trap by which to lure and ensnare China in the west so as to subvert its strategy on the eastern maritime front [33]. Thus, the Biden administration was believed to be trying to lull China into a false cooperation with it over Afghanistan by talking up China's responsibility for Afghan transition. The obvious conclusion of this analysis is that China should not take the US bait. Rather than falling into the US trap and foolishly shifting its strategic resources to the west, China should instead compete even harder with the United States in the east.

In all likelihood, the second view had the upper hand in 2021 and may well continue to dominate policy debates in the near future. There was no evidence of China actively taking up the US place in Afghanistan in the second half of 2021. It is true that Chinese officials mentioned the prospect of greater economic relations, including assisting Afghanistan to participate in the BRI [22]. But despite this rhetoric, there were no specifics about how that might be done, and all the questions about extending the BRI to Afghanistan raised in the previous section remain outstanding.

China has certainly become more active and constructive in Afghan affairs since the US pullout. Bilaterally, it has renewed a cautious engagement with the Taliban; multilaterally, it has taken a leading role in regional multilateralism to facilitate Afghan reconstruction, including building new coordination mechanisms, such as the Foreign Ministers' Meeting of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan. But its activism still has major limits. Apart from its misgivings about the Taliban and Afghanistan's notoriety—proved once again by the failure of US intervention—as the “graveyard of empires,” rivalry with the United States is the most important external source of these limits.

Beijing's traditional vigilance toward the United States, now heightened under the new condition of strategic competition between the two countries, constrains the degree to which it can cooperate with Washington over Afghanistan. In the 2010s, China cooperated with the United States over capacity-building programs in Afghanistan, including police training and demining [34]. Into the 2020s, Beijing certainly will not reject communication with Washington or rebuff US counter-terrorism efforts, but any great degree of joint intervention in internal Afghan affairs, especially of the armed kind, will be out of the question. In the 1980s, when the two countries collaborated closely on military and intelligence matters over Afghanistan, they successfully thwarted the Soviet invasion. Now, if they could inaugurate a new round of cooperation, they may well pull off Afghan reconstruction. Alas, such is their surging enmity that this is all but impossible [35].

CONCLUSION

In terms of the future role Afghanistan is likely to play in Chinese foreign policy, its importance is likely to rise further, owing to the priority that neighborhood diplomacy has been receiving from decisionmakers since 2013. But the precise degree of its rising importance will be determined by policymakers' perceptions of China's interests and vulnerabilities in Afghanistan.

As we have seen, China's predominant interest in Afghanistan is ensuring its own security and stability—above all in the restive Xinjiang province but also in its vast western border region abutting Central and South Asia. Combatting Uighur and other associated forms of terrorism, separatism, and extremism must and likely will remain a central goal of its Afghanistan policy. The severity of these threats and the effectiveness of the Taliban regime in controlling them will, to a large degree, determine the tempo and substance of Chinese policy. In contrast, despite the popular hype, China's economic interest is far less prominent, and certainly not one that will plunge it into the war-torn country. At any rate, China's assessment of the economic value of Afghanistan is intimately bound up with the internal stability and security of the country, and it will commence large-scale investment, BRI-related or otherwise, only after Afghanistan has achieved more or less the same degree of tranquility as in Pakistan or the Central Asian republics.

China's security interests in Afghanistan generally call for a more activist approach toward the country, but perceived vulnerabilities are likely to constrain such activism. Two dominant vulnerabilities are the nature and competence of the Taliban regime and the strategic posture of the United States. China's pragmatism toward the Taliban, as we have seen, is mingled with great caution and conditioned by the future direction of the Taliban's internal and external policies. Above all, China wants a moderate Taliban government that will maintain domestic stability and will forge friendly relations with neighboring countries. But it is acutely aware of the limits of external intervention in influencing the Taliban. Herein lies a great difference between its approach to Afghan reconstruction and that of the United States. The forceful, root-and-branch US approach of armed intervention, democracy promotion, and nation-building is anathema to China. China will be compelled to be more active and constructive in Afghan affairs as its interests dictate, but it will never opt for interventionism of the US kind. We are likely to see greater Chinese contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, but only as much as Beijing feels comfortable with.

China has always worried about the US presence in Afghanistan. In early years following the US invasion, it feared that Washington's dominance of Afghanistan might help it to complete its strategic encirclement of China in the west; later, it fretted that a premature US pullout might give terrorists a new lease on life. The vulnerability it felt after the US withdrawal in 2021 is that Washington is scheming to adjust its strategic focus and to compete with China in the Indo-

Pacific by leaving a mess in Afghanistan for China to clean up—and perhaps also by creating a vacuum to entice and suck in China’s strategic resources.

The tragedy of Afghanistan is that it has been racked by continuous wars and conflicts for the past forty years, whose prospects of peace and prosperity are often at the mercy of the great powers. The tragedy of Sino-American relations with respect to Afghanistan is that their new rivalry is preventing them from launching meaningful cooperation over a country where cooperation is obviously needed and which, if successful, would help to ease their rivalry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Andrew Small for his incisive comments and suggestions, Zhu Yongbiao for his observations about China-Afghanistan relations, and Xing Jiaying for her research assistance.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Feng Zhang is Professor of International Relations and Executive Dean of the Institute of Public Policy at the South China University of Technology in Guangzhou. He is the author of *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford, 2015) and, with Richard Ned Lebow, of *Taming Sino-American Rivalry* (Oxford, 2020) and *Justice and International Order: East and West* (Oxford, 2022).

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Feng Zhang  orcid.org/0000-0002-6758-4333
Institute of Public Policy, South China University of Technology, CN

REFERENCES

1. **Garver JW.** *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2015; 416. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190261054.001.0001>
2. **Clarke M.** “One Belt, One Road” and China’s Emerging Afghanistan Dilemma. *Australian Journal of International Affairs.* 2016; 70(5): 563–579. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1183585>
3. **Hirono M.** China’s Conflict Mediation and the Durability of the Principle of Non-Interference: The Case of Post-2014 Afghanistan. *The China Quarterly.* 2019; 239: 614–634. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741018001753>
4. **Zhu Y.** China’s Afghanistan Policy since 9/11. *Asian Survey.* 2018; 58(2): 281–301. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2018.58.2.281>
5. **Zhao H.** Afghanistan and China’s New Neighborhood Diplomacy. *International Affairs.* 2016; 92(4): 891–908. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12654>
6. **Weitz R.** *China and Afghanistan after the NATO Withdrawal.* Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation; 2015.
7. **Stanzel A.** *Fear and Loathing on the New Silk Road: Chinese Security in Afghanistan and Beyond.* Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations; 2018.
8. **Yan X.** From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement. *Chinese Journal of International Politics.* 2014; 7(2): 153–184. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pou027>
9. **Zhang F.** China as a Global Force. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies.* 2016; 3(1): 117–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.115>
10. **Wang Y.** Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China’s New Grand Strategy. *The Pacific Review.* 2016; 29(3): 455–463. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1154690>
11. **Fallon T.** The New Silk Road: Xi Jinping’s Grand Strategy for Eurasia. *American Foreign Policy Interests.* 2015; 37: 140–147. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920.2015.1056682>
12. **Roy MS.** Afghanistan and the Belt and Road Initiative: Hope, Scope, and Challenges. *Asia Policy.* 2017; 24: 103–109. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2017.0027>
13. **Zhu Y, Wei L.** Afuhan anquan xingshi jiqi dui sichou zhilu jingji dai de yingxiang (Afghanistan’s Security Prospects and Implications for the Silk Road Economic Belt). *Nanya yanjiu (South Asia*

- Studies*). 2017; 3: 100–116.
14. **Mei X.** Dui houmeiguo shidai afuhan jingji buke mangmu kuanghuan (Do Not Blindly Revel in Afghanistan's Economy in the Post-American Era) [Internet]; 2021 Aug 18 [cited 2022 Feb 10]. Available from: <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/128108.html>.
 15. **Zhu Y.** Professor of Lanzhou University. Author Interview. January 2022.
 16. **Small A.** *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2015: 160. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190210755.001.0001>
 17. **Small A.** From Bystander to Peacemaker: China, the Taliban, and Reconciliation in Afghanistan. *Berlin Policy Journal*; 2015 April 27.
 18. **Risen J.** U.S. Identifies Vast Mineral Riches in Afghanistan [Internet]; 2010 June 13 [cited 2022 Feb 07]. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14minerals.html>.
 19. China's Ministry of Commerce: zhongguo-afuhan jingmao hezuo jiankuang, 2020.01–12 (Brief Introduction of China-Afghanistan Economic and Trade Cooperation, January to December 2022) [Internet]; [posted 2021 May 03; cited 2022 Feb 07]. Available from: <http://yzs.mofcom.gov.cn/article/t/202103/20210303042321.shtml>.
 20. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi huijian afuhan taliban zhengzhi weiyuanhui fuzeren Baradar (Wang Yi Meets with Baradar of the Afghan Taliban's Political Committee) [Internet]; [posted 2021 July 28; cited 2022 Feb 07]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202107/t20210728_9137717.shtml.
 21. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi huijian afuhan taliban linshi zhengfu daily fuzongli Baradar (Wang Yi Meets with the Acting Deputy Prime Minister of the Interim Government of the Afghan Taliban Baradar) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Oct 26; cited 2022 Feb 07]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202110/t20211026_10035260.shtml.
 22. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi chuxi dierci afuhan linguo waizhanghui (Wang Yi Attends the Second Foreign Ministers' Meeting of Afghanistan's Neighboring Countries) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Oct 28; cited 2022 Feb 07]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202110/t20211028_10348761.shtml.
 23. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Xi Jinping chuxi shanghai hezuo zuzhi he jiti anquan tiaoyue zuzhi chengyuanguo lingdaoren afuhan wenti fenghui (Xi Jinping attends Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization Leaders' Summit on Afghanistan) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Sep 17; cited 2022 Feb 08]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202109/t20210917_9604460.shtml.
 24. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi guowu weiyuan jian waizhang zai afuhan linguo waizhanghui shang de jianghua (State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Speech at the Conference of the Foreign Ministers of Afghanistan's Neighboring Countries) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Sep 08; cited 2022 Feb 08]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202109/t20210908_9604940.shtml.
 25. **Detsch J.** 'Not His Money': Biden Splits Afghanistan's Reserves [Internet]; 2022 Feb 11 [cited 2022 Feb 13]. Available from: https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/11/biden-afghanistan-currency-taliban/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Editors%20Picks%20OC&utm_term=39415&tpcc=Editors%20Picks%20OC.
 26. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi chuxi zhongbeyi siguo afuhan wenti feizhengshi huiyi (Wang Yi Attends China-Russia-Pakistan-Iran Informal Meeting on Afghanistan) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Sep 17; cited 2022 Feb 09]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202109/t20210917_9883084.shtml.
 27. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi zhuchi zhonggaba sanfang waizhang duihua (Wang Yi Chairs China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Jun 06; cited 2022 Feb 08]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202106/t20210604_9175321.shtml.
 28. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi tan afuhan wenti (Wang Yi on Problems in Afghanistan) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Jul 03; cite 2022 Feb 09]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202107/t20210703_9175385.shtml.
 29. Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Wang Yi: meiguo ruguo buneng chedi gaixiangengzhang, jiu shibi cong zai afuhan de shibai zouxiang gengda de shibai (Wang Yi: the United States Will Suffer Even Greater Defeat than Its Defeat in Afghanistan If It Does Not Completely Change Its Approach) [Internet]; [posted 2021 Sep 04; cited 2022 Feb 09]. Available from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/xghd_673097/202109/t20210904_9175495.shtml.
 30. The White House: United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China [Internet]; [posted 2020 May 26; cited 2022 Feb 10]. Available from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf>.
 31. The White House: Interim National Security Strategic Guidance [Internet]; [posted 2021 Mar 03; cited 2022 Feb 10]. Available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2>.

pdf.

32. **Zhou B.** In Afghanistan, China Is Ready to Step into the Void [Internet]; 2021 Aug 20 [cited 2022 Feb 10]. Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/opinion/china-afghanistan-taliban.html>.
33. **Zhang J.** Meiguo liuxia afuhan “sida” xianjing (The United States Has Left Four Major Traps in Aghanistan). *Shijie zhishi (World Knowledge)*. 2021; 8: 70–71.
34. **Sun Y.** China’s Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan [Internet]; 2020 Apr 08 [cited 2022 Feb 13]. Available from: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-afghanistan/>.
35. **Zhang F, Lebow RN.** *Taming Sino-American Rivalry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2020; 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197521946.003.0001>

Zhang
LSE Public Policy Review
DOI: 10.31389/lseppr.52

13

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Zhang F. China’s New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2022; 2(3): 10, pp. 1–13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.52>

Submitted: 12 February 2022

Accepted: 25 February 2022

Published: 02 May 2022

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LSE Public Policy Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.