

"What are the implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan?"

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China's wait and see approach to Kabul's fall.

The UK National Committee on China (UKNCC) Guest Contributor Programme highlights contrasting responses, by leading authors, to key questions posed by the UKNCC. The programme is designed to stimulate a deeper exploration of China related issues; drive curiosity; and test conventional wisdom.

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The writing is on the wall; the speed of the Afghan government's collapse was not a surprise, except for the US and its allies. At the same time, when President Biden was talking to the nation shifting the blame to the Afghan government for being unable to stop the Taliban advance, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson tweeted, "China hopes to see these remarks implemented to ensure a smooth transition in Afghanistan, keep at bay terrorism and criminal acts, and make sure that the Afghan people stay away from war & rebuild their homeland."

Following the Taliban's return to power in Kabul, the highly fluid situation presents several degrees of anxiety for Beijing. China shares the same fears of Central Asian countries neighbouring Afghanistan, namely the rise of Islamic terrorism, a new wave of refugees, and increased narcotics trafficking.



The truth of the Taliban's real intentions, which will unfold in the coming months, will reveal whether the regime will be able or even willing to avoid acts of violence against the population. A broad range of scenarios on the country's future stem from two extremes: the Taliban building a functional Islamic Emirate and a looming humanitarian crisis. In this respect, that the Taliban ruled until 1996 is a harbinger of a bad omen for the future. Nevertheless, today's Taliban are not the same as 20 years ago, and something very similar may be said for the 3 million Afghans living in Kabul with a young population that grew up in the American dream. Nevertheless, the question on the possibility of a stable Afghanistan remains identical after two decades: How can a country ravaged by 40 years of war get back on track?

With the economy based almost exclusively on foreign economic aid and opioids' trade, and the political and security structure centred on decentralised militias, the question is not when but if Afghanistan will become a centralised state.

Miscalculations on the Taliban's advance and the rapid collapse of the Ghani government will have long-term ripple effects. In the meantime, with the west scrambling to repatriate diplomats and the remaining security forces, China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan are at different degrees in their threat management mode. Predictably, Pakistan will foster its relationship with the Taliban as a buffer against India, a country that missed its chance to start a dialogue with the winners.

Iran is already in full crisis management mode, being hit by refugee waves in a time of pandemic and economic distress. The Russian military bases in Central Asia provide Moscow intelligence gathering and a counter-terrorism presence in the region as well as joint military drills with Uzbek and Tajik forces in proximity to their Afghan borders. Also, a possible role for battle-tested Russian private military companies, like the Wagner group, could allow Moscow some degree of public deniability while avoiding another entanglement in the Afghan quagmire.

From a bilateral to a multilateral perspective, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), when founded 20 years ago had Afghan risk mitigation as one of its key objectives. Today it can be a litmus test of the SCO's matured capabilities in containing negative spill overs in Central Asia.

From the Chinese side, the Tianjin meeting between Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi and the Taliban envoy Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who now resides in Kabul's presidential palace, foretold China's pragmatic approach to the evolving security situation in Afghanistan: keeping the communication channels open since Qatar's meetings with the Taliban representatives in Doha and receiving a guarantee that militant Uighurs, from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, are not going to use Afghanistan as a safe haven for attacks in Xinjiang. At the same time, the Tianjin meeting represented a sort of recognition of the Taliban and of their status as well as the hope to attract Chinese capital and infrastructure development.





Most certainly, deploying the People's Liberation Army or even sending Chinese private security companies (PSCs) into Afghanistan is not an option for Beijing. It is not just a matter of the decade's old principle of non-interference; Chinese government officials and analysts are adamant that Beijing will not step into the "graveyard of empires".

Just months prior to the Taliban's swift advance, Wang Yi's recently toured the region by attending an SCO summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and entertaining bilateral talks in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan focusing on border security and promoting an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution.

At the same time, the use of private security companies as a proxy for an indirect security involvement is off the table not only for lack of willingness but mainly the lack of capabilities. The limited presence of Chinese PSCs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is related to protecting Chinese mining operations in the region in the presence of moderate risk, not a grand strategy.

Albeit the Chinese PSCs should not to be confused with the Russian private military companies (PMCs), as they lack equipment and battle-tested combat capabilities, they will provide valuable intelligence to Beijing.

Also, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reaching Kabul in the short term is unlikely. While the promise of future economic development could buy Beijing some time in dealing with the Taliban, the security problems already encountered along the US\$ 63 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridors (CPEC) will be tenfold in case of a fully-fledged involvement in the Afghan reconstruction. Lebanon and Syria share an over-expectation of Chinese support to solve their own desperate situations; Afghanistan could be the next waiting in line.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan's proximity to China will force Beijing to take some steps to avoid further constraints in the BRI's development in the region.

The July 2021 killing of nine Chinese workers near Pakistan's Dasu powerplant, not far from the Afghan border, is a grim reminder to Beijing how uncertainty and insecurity cannot be tamed by just throwing money at the problem. While the US evacuation helicopters buzz around the closing US embassy in Kabul, at the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan it is business as usual.



About the Author

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The current debate on China in the UK is too often dominated by 'hawks' and 'apologists'. This can lead to over simplification and poor decision making.

The UKNCC seeks to promote a fuller debate without entertaining extreme views or perpetuating false silos.

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