

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

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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 world is increasingly defined by great power conflict. Escalating tensions between the US and China have grown to touch on almost every aspect of international relations. This reality has most recently been on display in Afghanistan. The US withdrawal from a two-decade long military commitment on China's borders has thrown into question American security commitments and raised questions about what kind of a power China will be in its own backyard. For a power such as the United Kingdom that straddles the relationships between Beijing, Kabul and Washington, the question is how, in this complicated strategic equation, to ensure British interests. The balance is a complex one which highlights the nature of the challenges that the UK is going to face in trying to carve out its own path in the world.

The most prominent and immediate question to emerge from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is what it means for London's much vaunted 'special relationship' with Washington.



Senior officials, including the Defence Secretary, have openly questioned President Biden's decision-making on the withdrawal, while the public discourse in London has focused on how events have shown the limits of British influence in Washington. Yet the reality remains that the US is the UK's key strategic security ally on the world stage. The narrative of divergence in UK and US interests is exaggerated, even if it is clear that Washington is focusing on its confrontation with Beijing as the driving policy focus to the detriment of everything else.

At the same time, it is clear that the UK is unable to entirely disengage from Afghanistan. Quite aside from the deep commitments generated from twenty years of conflict, there are the human and historical connections that the UK has with South Asia. Large diaspora communities from Pakistan, and to a lesser extent from

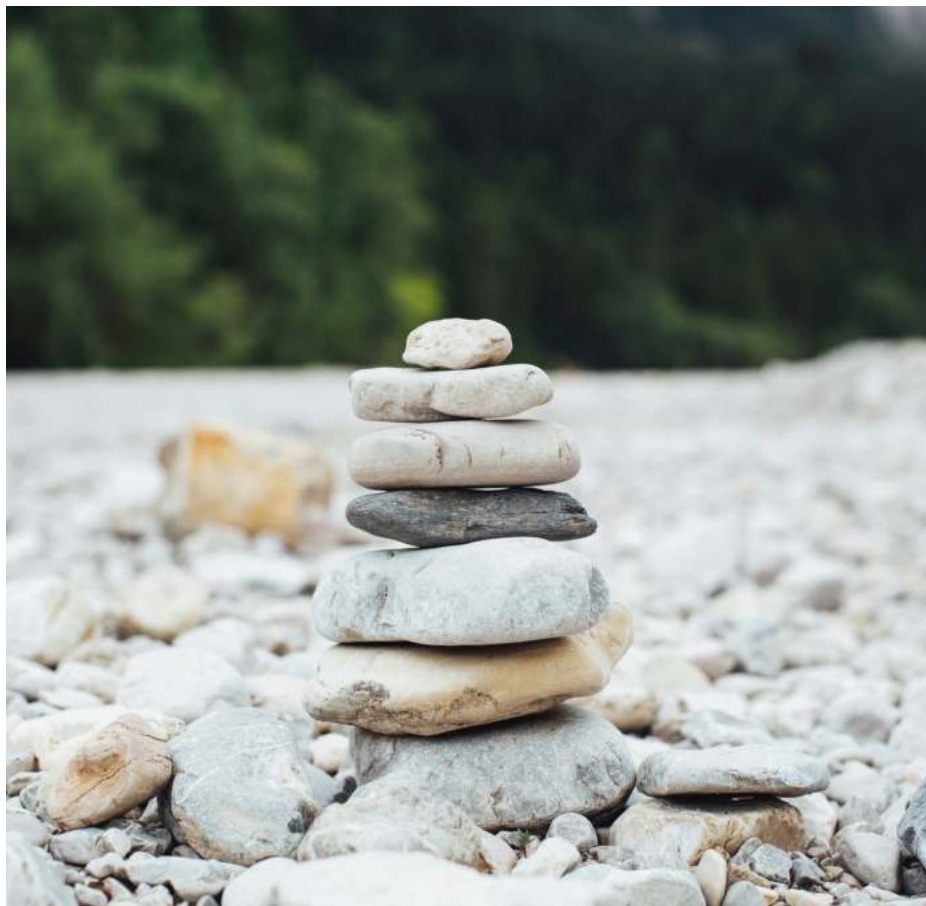
Afghanistan, give the UK a particular stake in the country and region. This also means that the UK needs to explore ways in which to engage and secure its interests in Afghanistan in the longer-term, including generating creative options that reflect the changing regional geopolitics.

The harsh geopolitical reality is that the United States-led withdrawal from Afghanistan will bolster Chinese influence in the region. This is not a reflection of a push by Beijing to fill an abstract security vacuum, but rather a demonstration of geographical reality. With the departure of American forces, Beijing is set to become the most consequential power in the Eurasian heartland. For the UK, threading the needle of a uninterested Washington and influential Beijing will require strategic thinking.

Chinese influence across Eurasia has been ascendant for some time. Yet until now, China has chosen to prioritize economic engagement, with security engagement placed a discrete but focused second. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan has complicated this approach. While parts of Beijing may have chafed at the idea of military bases on their borders, others sensibly reckoned that an American security presence was likely dealing with problems that otherwise Beijing might have to address.

The US withdrawal has therefore left Beijing seeking new partners in the region. The most pragmatic and logical choice from China's perspective is the new Taliban-led government. However, there is still no clarity about the level of power and control the Taliban may command, their long-term stability in power, or whether they are interested in dealing with the issues that most concern Beijing. Recognizing this, China has also sought greater coordination with Russia, increased its bilateral discussion on Afghanistan with Iran, and continued its engagement with Pakistan.

Yet, while these relationships are more established than those with the Taliban, each has its own complications and mistrusts. This is most clear in the lack of any action or discussion recently by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) about doing anything concerning Afghanistan. Including as it does all of Afghanistan's neighbours except Turkmenistan, and with a particular interest in terrorism, the SCO should theoretically be the obvious platform for greater engagement in Afghanistan.





Established with Chinese impetus, Beijing has long sought to get the SCO to do more in Afghanistan, but has struggled to get members to share its focus. For the most part, these other countries have rather sought to engage Afghanistan bilaterally or through other regional formats that they host and control.

In many ways, this is exactly the approach Beijing has itself taken. While China has done a great deal of multilateral engagement in the wider region and on Afghanistan, it has usually taken a bilateral approach to focus on its real interests, through selective security engagement, economic investment or developing political and social partnerships. In Afghanistan, the prime concern is that the country might become a base from which Uyghur militants (or other anti-Chinese elements) gather to try to attack China directly or its interests in the wider region. This has led to quite focused security and intelligence attention.

This focus on counter-terrorism is something that provides the UK with a first potential point of engagement.

London is as concerned about terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan as Beijing is, though the degree of threat and the nature of them is slightly different. The degree of actual threat that China might face from militant Uyghurs in Afghanistan remains an open question. It is after all many years since a specific threat has been seen. There does though appear to be evidence of some presence and there is no doubt that its wider regional concerns are of relevance. In recent years, terrorists have targeted both China's embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and its consulate in Karachi, Pakistan, part of a wider trend of targeting of Chinese interests.

But engagement on counter-terrorism with China is a double-edged sword for the UK. There may be some concurrence in the assessment of threats abroad: for example, the UK continues to list the Turkestan Islamic Party (also known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement) as a proscribed terrorist entity in contrast to the US.

However, there is little agreement on domestic counter-terrorism policy. The UK has correctly been at the forefront of the global push to condemn Chinese action in Xinjiang which is done under the rubric of countering extremism. Threading the needle of engaging abroad while condemning at home will be difficult. But focusing on shared concerns about groups such as al Qaeda, ISIS, and other regional salafi-jihadi groups that are likely to play a major role in destabilizing the wider region would be something China and the UK might work on.

Focusing on cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative is equally fraught, though for more prosaic reasons. Whilst Beijing talks a great deal about BRI cooperation, it is hard to find evidence of genuine action following this rhetoric.

The UK has tried, for example, a great deal in Pakistan with limited success. Meaningful BRI cooperation has been largely limited to the level of individual contracts where UK firms take on defined sub-contract roles within larger projects.

Humanitarian aid might offer itself as the most obvious first point of pressure and engagement. The Taliban take-over has precipitated a frantic run for the door in all directions. Most visibly via Kabul International Airport, but in far larger numbers across the country's land borders into Pakistan and Iran – places already swelled by years of Afghan emigration. These problems sit in addition to the larger humanitarian crisis that is likely coming in Afghanistan, if the country remains cut off from the international community and from the aid flows that dominated the economy. Beijing should be engaged and encouraged to expend more money and effort in alleviating these humanitarian crises that sit in its backyard.

What happens in Afghanistan matters to both the UK and China. It matters also to the United States, but Washington has clearly articulated that it is prioritizing efforts elsewhere. London should not step back in a similar way, but should instead explore whether targeted cooperation is possible to advance shared concerns and interests. While at the moment it increasingly looks like there is little appetite in Beijing for genuine cooperation, the problems that Afghanistan faces are likely to be with us for some time yet. Working towards encouraging Beijing to take a greater humanitarian role while recognizing the common terrorist threats offers a way of trying to strike the difficult strategic balance that the UK will need to find in a world of great power confrontation.

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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