

Understanding China in Taliban-led Afghanistan

DR. CHULANEE ATTANAYAKE

ZHENG HAIQI

On 15 August 2021, the world shockingly witnessed the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan after 20 years. Many countries are reeling from the shock and still struggling to figure out how to respond to the radical change in Kabul. China, however, responded calmly and cautiously, as if Beijing was always prepared for this change of scene. Noting that Afghanistan has undergone major changes, China expressed hope in the Taliban's statement of its intent to pursue a peaceful power transition.¹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying noted that China respects the sovereignty of Afghanistan and the will of all factions in the country and hopes that the Taliban can form solidarity with all Afghan factions and ethnic groups.

Some have described China's response as a moment of redrawing Asia's geopolitical map and that China can coax Taliban onto a path of peaceful coexistence.² Some others express concerns over China's response. These analysts and observers believe Beijing's designs on seizing the moment to increase China's presence and influence by filling the vacuum left by the US withdrawal has always been expected;³ yet, the return of Taliban poses more uncertainties for Beijing than real strategic interest. However, Beijing's unflustered response to the situation in Kabul reveals that China's leaders have carefully thought through the situation and have taken multiple factors into account in making the decision.

China Saw It Coming

China's response to Taliban's takeover and its subsequent approach toward Afghanistan is unsurprising for those who have watched Beijing's change of policy over the years. After the Taliban seized power in 1996, China suspended diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, refusing to recognize the radical Islamic group's rule. Beijing kept its embassy shut for years, until reopening relations with the post-Taliban regime in 2002.

For some time, China has shown signs of gradually recognizing the Taliban as an important political power in Afghanistan. Since 2014, Taliban leaders have been visiting China, and Beijing has accepted their position as a stakeholder in

Afghan domestic politics. During the second China–Pakistan–Afghanistan trilateral dialogue, China urged the Taliban to join the Afghan peace process at an early date.⁴ Having observed how the Taliban has continued winning on the battleground since 2020, Beijing realized that the group’s return to power was inevitable. As the Taliban gained official recognition as a political party after signing the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, also known as the Doha Agreement, with the United States in February 2020, China enhanced its engagement with the Taliban. In the fourth China–Pakistan–Afghanistan trilateral dialogue held on 3 June 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi officially welcomed the Taliban’s return to “mainstream” politics.⁵

Moreover, just before taking control of Kabul, Taliban leaders had a meeting with Chinese representatives at the end of July. Taliban’s spokesperson Suhail Shaheen called China a “friendly” country and promised not to allow any separatist groups from China to operate in Afghanistan, referring to China’s reiterated call to cut ties with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). During this meeting, Wang Yi said that the “Taliban is an important military and political force in Afghanistan and is expected to play an important role in the country’s peace, reconciliation and reconstruction process.” Getting the endorsement from a global power may have boosted Taliban’s confidence.⁶

China’s Outreach to Taliban-led Afghanistan

While much is discussed regarding China being among the first to embrace the Taliban, understanding China’s reasons for such an approach is important. As a pragmatic global player, Beijing considers its economic, security, and strategic interests in its decision.

Afghanistan’s security is an important factor for China’s own stability and security. China shares a narrow border—the Wakhan Corridor—with Afghanistan, which is difficult to cross because of its high altitude. Still, China is concerned that the violence in Afghanistan could spill over into Central Asia and poses a potential threat to China’s Xinjiang province. In particular, Beijing fears the spread of Islamist extremism among its own Uyghur minority, and given the ETIM has been active in Afghanistan, Beijing fears the possibility of that group’s impact on separatist activities in Xinjiang.⁷ Thus, rather than severing relations, Beijing sees a more pragmatic and less interventionist approach as the way forward to ensure China’s security. This is in line with China’s previous efforts to coordinate with regional stakeholders to build a consensus-based framework. In the context where the Taliban is under international scrutiny and faces immense external pressure, Beijing has the upper hand in controlling the Taliban to China’s advantage by

putting pressure that it will establish good relations with the government only if the Taliban can provide security in return.

Economically, China sees Kabul as an important variable in its economic interests in the region. Even though Beijing's economic engagement in Afghanistan has been limited in the past, the country could serve as an important partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Afghanistan's stability is key to protecting BRI projects in neighboring Pakistan, which provide Beijing an overland route to the Indian Ocean. China has invested in a limited number of projects in Afghanistan, including Aynak Copper Mine project and Amu Darya Basin Oil project, which have made little progress. Given how investments and financial assistance is important for Afghanistan's nation building and given how the Taliban has expressed that they welcome Chinese investment in Afghan reconstruction, China sees a resumed opportunity for investing via state-owned enterprises and private companies.

Strategically, China's outreach to the Taliban has much to do with its own rise as a global power. Unlike its geopolitical situation in 1996, today China commands an economy worth USD 14.7 trillion and views itself as a global power. The failure of Washington's USD 840-billion nation-building project in Afghanistan has led the world to question America's role as the global hegemon.⁸ With China's rival withdrawing from this failed endeavor, an opportunity opened for Beijing to assume a regional leadership role. Even though Beijing officially rejects Western assumptions of filling the power vacuum left by the United States in Kabul, China has emerged as the sole international player actively engaging in Afghanistan.⁹ Following Washington's diminished presence in Kabul, China has begun to play an essential mediator role among regional powers.¹⁰ China has established consultations with Pakistan, Russia, and the United States, which have issued joint statements to keep an eye on Afghanistan.

However, China's road ahead with Taliban-led Afghanistan will not be easy. Since the Taliban's victory is already a *fait accompli*, recognition of its legitimacy by the international community will eventually follow. Until then, China will be among the only countries to recognize Taliban leadership. Given the Taliban's history, China will have to be cautious of the rise of Islamic terrorism, a new wave of refugees, and increased narcotics trafficking. If the Taliban pursue moderate policies that facilitate engagement with other nations and achieve political stability, it will attract an array of investments. However, Afghanistan could become among the biggest tests yet for a Chinese diplomatic model driven by loans, commodities, and infrastructure deals.¹¹ It looks like China is placing yet another high-risk, high-reward geopolitical bet in Afghanistan as it did in Somalia.¹² Whether it will be a success or not, only time will tell.

Dr. Chulanee Attanayake

Dr. Attanayake is a research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She is also a volunteer senior researcher and editor at the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers, the affiliated think tank of the *Journal of the Indo-Pacific Affairs*. She can be contacted at chulanee@nus.edu.sg.

Zheng Haiqi

Mr. Zheng is a PhD candidate in the School of International Studies, Renmin University of China, and a visiting scholar at ISAS. He can be reached at zheng.haiqi@nus.edu.sg.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in JIPA are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.

Notes

1. Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the Republic of Finland, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on August 16, 2021," <http://www.chinaembassy-fi.org/>.

2. James Kynge, Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, and Sun Yu, "China and Russia poised to step into the Afghanistan gap," *Financial Times*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.ft.com/>.

3. Nectar Gan and Steve George, "For China, the return of the Taliban poses more risk than it does opportunity," *CNN*, 16 August 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/>.

4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Joint Statement of the 2nd Afghanistan-China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue," 15 December 2018, <http://mofa.gov.pk/>.

5. "China, Afghanistan, Pakistan reach 8-point consensus on promoting Afghanistan's peace process," *CGTN*, 4 June 2021, <https://newsaf.cgtn.com/>.

6. Amy Chew, "Boosted by China ties, Taliban now faces tough call on ETIM crackdown," *South China Morning Post*, 6 August 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

7. Amy Chew, "Militant group ETIM, which has been targeted by China, remains active in Afghanistan, UN report says," *South China Morning Post*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/>.

8. Ishaan Tharoor, "Afghanistan's crisis underscores the U.S.'s shifting place in the world," *Washington Post*, 20 August 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

9. "社评：阿富汗局势20年轮回，美国栽了大跟头，"[Social Commentary: The situation in Afghanistan has been reincarnated for 20 years, and the United States has lost ground,] *Global Times*, 15 August 2021, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/>.

10. Xu Keyue and Wan Lin, "China to serve as 'mediator' for regional security on Afghan issue during Wang Yi's visit to Central Asia," *Global Times*, 11 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

11. Bloomberg News, "With economic assets to secure, China embraces the Taliban," *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>.

12. Alessandro Arduino, "To understand China's plans for Afghanistan, take a look at Somalia," *South China Morning Post*, 23 August 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/>.