

# Afghanistan, China, and Indo-Pacific

## Significant Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

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**W**ith the current situation in Afghanistan unfolding faster than one can blink an eye, many have speculated that the Taliban's seeming victory will be a confidence booster to multiple separatist and terror groups around the world, most notably to Southeast Asia and South Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, there has been conjecture that with the Taliban assuming governance of Afghanistan, China, and Russia will be among the countries to gain the most. The Taliban issued a statement that China has a significant role to play in the new Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> With China's "economy first" and no-holds-barred diplomacy, it is not surprising to see the two sides warming up to each other. In the past, Beijing has shown China's ability to support political takeovers, irrespective of the type of government formed at the capital. For example, Myanmar, Thailand, and now Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

However, the sudden withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan begs the question of whether China can gain an advantage in the post-war environment? If yes, then what advantages can Beijing realize? Add, if no, what challenges will China's efforts face and how will Beijing's policies in Central Asia affect other issues it needs to address, especially those relating to cross-strait relations? And for the United States, will working with like-minded allies in the Indo-Pacific prove an effective way to deter China? Moreover, does New Delhi's recent talks with the Taliban indicate that latter does not want to rely on only one benefactor?

China did not recognize the pre-2001 Taliban government. Moreover, Beijing welcomed, to some extent, the presence of the American troops in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, viewing it as providing some degree of regional stability. The interim Afghan leadership, under Hamid Karzai,<sup>4</sup> greatly improved relations with China, with Karzai visiting China in 2002 and again 2006 and 2010 as the president of Afghanistan.

China has been an active partner in developing and rebuilding Afghanistan and in seeking peace in the region. There are multiple reasons for this, primarily gaining access to Afghanistan's vast mineral deposits that lie within the mountain ranges of Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, China would be able to secure a nearby long-

term steady resource deposit and advantage in critical technology developments that require such rare earth minerals for innovation and development.

Second, China must have a secure transportation link to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its long-term investments with all-weather ally Pakistan, i.e., the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). On 20 August 2021, Pakistani militants attempted a suicide attack targeting Chinese nationals.<sup>6</sup> If successful in securing a solid deal with the Taliban, China and Pakistan could focus on the security of the CPEC corridor, which is a vital economic linkage between the two countries.

With the abrupt US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Chinese state media had a field day in propaganda, delivering a warning to Taiwan. In one such report, published on 18 August 2021, the *Global Times* headline cautioned, “Why the U.S. will abandon island of Taiwan eventually.”<sup>7</sup> The report mentioned five significant reasons the United States would abandon Taiwan. Furthermore, the article asserted that the current Taiwanese government, led by Pres. Tsai Ing-wen’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), is “weaker and less motivated than the former Kuomintang (KMT) authorities” and described Taiwanese authorities as “lame ducks,” who are engaged in wishful thinking regarding the likelihood of Washington supporting the island should China opt to seize it by military force.

Such statements from Beijing’s propaganda mill are nothing new, and both Pres. Tsai Ing-wen<sup>8</sup> and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan have refuted such speculations. Upon being asked about the US commitment to Taiwan in case of an attack, Sullivan responded by saying, “When it comes to Taiwan, it is a fundamentally different question in a—in a different context.”<sup>9</sup>

China’s increased military flights crossing the median line—the unofficial air boundary between China and Taiwan—has also led to growing concerns of armed action.<sup>10</sup> In some quarters, observers have drawn parallels between the Taiwan situation and China’s increasing aggressiveness to the Russian takeover of Crimea.<sup>11</sup> The argument is that modern Russian doctrine has heavily influenced that of the People’s Liberation Army’s doctrinal modernization.<sup>12</sup>

However, the comparison between Afghanistan and Taiwan is entirely fallacious. The ground realities between the two situations are wide apart. Unlike the Afghan National Army (ANA), Taiwan’s military is well-trained and equipped with the most-sophisticated US weapons systems. Moreover, combat motivation will play a significant role in any military combat, and the Taiwanese military is unlikely to cut and run in a fashion similar to the ANA.

For decades, the United States has maintained its stance and demonstrated its support toward maintaining the status quo in cross-strait relations. In 2020, when Beijing declared that China does not consider the “median line” in the Taiwan

Strait as the de facto air border between the two sides, a US plane flew into the Taiwan Strait following the that very route.<sup>13</sup>

Since President Tsai took power in 2016, Taiwan has lost half a dozen diplomatic allies to Beijing, attributed to “checkbook” diplomatic tactics employed by China, which promises an enormous economic benefit to countries to drop recognition of Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> To counter such measures, the Trump administration signed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, on 26 March 2020, to law,<sup>15</sup> which supports Taiwan’s diplomatic relations and alters US engagement with those countries that undermine Taiwan’s security and prosperity.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson mentions that China wants to “respect the will and choice of the Afghan people,”<sup>16</sup> which draws sharp contradictions to Chinese policy toward Taiwan. As per the latest survey provided by the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, the percentage of people living in Taiwan considering themselves as Taiwanese rather than Chinese has risen to 63.3 percent in 2021. At the same time, those considering themselves to be *both* Taiwanese and Chinese was 31.4 percent, and those thinking of themselves as strictly Chinese was a mere 2.7 percent. Such significant differences show the people’s inclination in Taiwan.<sup>17</sup>

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has sent signals to its allies that the present US administration seeks reciprocity in not only protecting but respecting each other’s interests in achieving a common goal—such as maintaining the status quo in the cross-strait relations. Therefore, as long as the Taiwanese administration does not attempt anything to abruptly alter the current situation, Taipei can be assured of US support.

Even as specific contours of this future policy are emerging, much will depend upon how effectively the United States keeps Chinese ambitions in check while boosting allied country’s economic growth and shaping the regional and international system. It is evident the Biden administration is committed to shifting resources to the Indo-Pacific to deal with China and Beijing’s proxy, Pakistan—unfortunately, a clear-cut blueprint is missing for outlining how the United States and its allies can establish a new division of responsibilities and maintain stability in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

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## Notes

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