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Abstract

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover of the country by the Taliban created a dilemma for the People's Republic of China. The Chinese leaders are wary of getting embroiled in the complex situation in Afghanistan. However, they also realize that without proper engagement, the country poses the threat of adverse outcomes for China. This study departs from such an idea and holds that the Chinese approach to a Taliban-led Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US withdrawal is one that is informed by the failure of the United States and its allies. The article describes the Chinese strategy towards Afghanistan as regional and multilateral. This multilateralism suggests that the Chinese are wary of repeating the missteps of NATO and the West. It also indicates the Chinese desire to avoid a regional competition involving Afghanistan.

Keywords: China-Afghanistan Relations, Taliban, US Withdrawal, Multilateralism

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China's Multilateral Strategy in Post-American Afghanistan

Abstract

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover of the country by the Taliban created a dilemma for the People's Republic of China. The Chinese leaders are wary of getting embroiled in the complex situation in Afghanistan. However, they also realize that without proper engagement, the country poses the threat of adverse outcomes for China. This study departs from such an idea and holds that the Chinese approach to a Taliban-led Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US withdrawal is one that is informed by the failure of the United States and its allies. The article describes the Chinese strategy towards Afghanistan as regional and multilateral. This multilateralism suggests that the Chinese are wary of repeating the missteps of NATO and the West. It also indicates the Chinese desire to avoid a regional competition involving Afghanistan.

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Introduction

The manner in which China has approached, and will continue to approach, the conflict in Afghanistan, especially after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, not only provides insights into the understanding of the Chinese policy towards Afghanistan but also provides an important framework for understanding the Chinese foreign policy, in general. Afghanistan poses a particularly difficult question for the Chinese leadership. On the one hand, to protect the Chinese interests in the region and to avoid getting embroiled in a regional conflict at a critical time of Chinese relationship with the West, it is important for China to maintain cordial, or at least working, ties

with Kabul. On the other hand, the track record of the previous Taliban government and its international image make it problematic for the People's Republic to readily embrace the current regime in Kabul.

The study contends that since the US withdrawal from the region, the People's Republic has tried to cautiously manage the situation in Afghanistan. In the immediate run, the Chinese policy towards Afghanistan appears to be more about managing threats resulting from the vacuum left by the departure of the Western powers and less about seizing opportunities. Even before the US and Western forces completed withdrawal from Afghanistan, China had already started to establish itself



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as a key stakeholder in Afghanistan. It instituted stable lines of communication with the Taliban and tried to mediate between the previous US-Backed Ashraf Ghani government and the Taliban. Since the fall of President Ghani's government, it seems that China is trying to minimize the fallout from the Taliban's takeover of power in Afghanistan by engaging the Taliban government through multilateral forums.

More importantly, to extend the argument, the Chinese leadership has decided to make Afghanistan a regional security issue rather than a strategy to capitalize on the windfalls of the US failure in the war-ravaged country. In this sense, China appears to prioritize a regional multilateral approach to Afghanistan. As the paper argues and provides detailed evidence in the coming sections, the Chinese government is cautiously avoiding a power struggle between major powers in the country – something that would jeopardize not only regional security and stability but can also potentially push Afghanistan deeper into conflict.

The notable issues in the association between China and the Taliban regime can cause both convergence as well as divergence. On its part, China wants, at a minimum, the denial of space to groups in Afghanistan that pose threats to the Chinese mainland or to Chinese interests in the region. China would also like for the Taliban to adopt an approach to governance that is sufficiently inclusive to allow China to recognize the government and foster closer ties without being blamed in the West for enabling an oppressive regime. The Taliban direly needs the goodwill of the Chinese government for international legitimacy and immediate economic relief.

This paper has three parts: The first part traces the history of Chinese policy towards Afghanistan, with a particular focus on China's relations with the Taliban during the Taliban's previous stint in power; the second part, focuses on the Chinese interests in Afghanistan and Chinese regional interests that can potentially impacted by developments in Kabul; and the last part analyzes the prospective Chinese strategy towards Taliban-controlled Afghanistan using the evidence from the Chinese policy towards Afghanistan since it became apparent that the US forces would depart.

The paper adopts a qualitative approach to understanding the Chinese policy towards Afghanistan. Since the study analyzes Chinese policy towards Afghanistan, much of the evidence used in the paper comes from official statements, participation in official events, and understanding the actions – or sometimes the non-actions, as in the case of non-recognition of the Taliban government – by the Chinese government, but also by other states. The data undergo content analysis for contextual interpretation. In doing so, the study is

aware of the bias of some official and news sources and uses these sources with the same understanding.

History of China and Interaction with Afghanistan

The history of the relations between the two countries can be traced back more than 2100 years. When Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty of China (140 B.C.) sought a military alliance against the Hsuing-nu tribespeople, he found common ground with Ta Yueh-chih people who had fled China under pressure from Hsuing-nu and lived in the territory of modern-day Afghanistan. This common cause led to an alliance that has been among other things credited for the development of the Silk Road. There are also historical records of an Afghan envoy traveling to the Chinese Imperial Court, using the same route. More recent research in China has also claimed that the first Chinese were converted to Buddhism in 2 B.C. by a monk from the region that now constitutes Afghanistan (Dai, [1966](#)). The area that currently constitutes Afghanistan had become a center of Buddhism and attracted pilgrims and missionaries from China for about a thousand years. Jalalabad was home to the great monastic complex of Hadda (Gaulier, et al., [1976](#)). The ancient Chinese maps identify Kau-Fu to the southwest of Badakhshan, which evidently is what the Chinese called Kabul at the time (Bretschneider, [2013](#)).

Over the subsequent centuries, interactions between the regions through religions, trade, and war continued. The Kushan Empire (circa 30 A.D. to circa 375 A.D.) reached the height of its glory in the 2nd Century and ruled most of present-day Afghanistan, was established by the nomadic descendants of the Yuezhi people who had lived in the territory of the current Chinese province of Gansu (Benjamin, 2018). When Islam arrived in the region, the Silk Road carried religious and cultural influences as well as pottery and carpets between the two countries (Frankopan, [2017](#)). The balance of power between the regions shifted over the subsequent centuries. Often, the people of Afghanistan would pay tribute to strong Chinese dynasties like the T'ang empire (618 A.D.-907 A.D.) and later, the weaker Chinese rulers would try to appease the powerful Afghan rulers such as Mahmud of Ghazna (Dai, [1966](#)). A lasting legacy of the exchanges between the regions is the Hazara people of Afghanistan who claim their descent from the Mongols (Weatherford, [2005](#)).

During the great Ming and Qing periods, the Chinese became more ambivalent towards Afghanistan. During the former dynasty, the trade activity disrupted by the Mongol invasion was revived by some of the rulers of the areas of Afghanistan. However, the development of sea routes to the West resulted in the gradual decline of Chinese interest in the area (Dai, [1966](#)). It was during the

time of the Qing Dynasty that the British Empire and Russia competed for control of Afghanistan. In order to establish Afghanistan as a buffer between the two powers, Britain and Russia created the Afghan Boundary Commission (1884-85) and the Pamir Boundary Commission (1885) which delineated the region. In the process, they awarded a small portion of territory to Afghanistan and created a buffer known as the Wakhan Corridor. The surveys included neither Chinese nor Afghan representation. However, as a result of the actions of the two great powers, Afghanistan and China were left with a short border with each other in Taghdumbash-Pamir (Rowe, 2010). In the early 20th Century, except for a largely inconsequential Afghan effort, carried out at the Soviet behest, to assert some influence in Xinjiang, the relationship between the two countries remained dormant (Segal, 1981). On the one hand, Afghanistan, under the influence of the British Empire could not pursue an independent foreign policy and on the other, Chinese governments, due to the internal challenges, could not assert control over Xinjiang. These factors prevented the two countries from establishing meaningful relations between 1900 and 1949 (Ludwig, 2013).

The establishment of the Wakhan Corridor made Afghanistan one of China's fourteen territorial neighbors. Afghanistan is also the neighbor that shares with China its shortest border – only spanning 76 kilometers (Szcudlik-Tatar, 2014). The area on either side of the boundary is inhospitable, and therefore, sparsely populated. For a time, during the Nationalist Government and the subsequent Communist Government, these factors rendered the boundary to have little significance for China in trade or communication terms (Huasheng 2016).

1950-1980

After the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, the two states established relations on January 20, 1955 (Yongbiao, 2018). It is noteworthy that Afghanistan had already recognized the Peoples Republic in January 1950; the Chinese government reciprocated in 1955. Shortly afterward, ambassadors were appointed on either side (Emadi, 1993). In the subsequent years, the Chinese government and policy establishment saw Afghanistan as a country in the Soviet sphere of influence. Due to the Soviet political and military influence, China neither considered Afghanistan as posing any significant challenge to its security nor did it see in it many opportunities for an expansion of the Chinese strategic influence.

Between 1950 and 1973, despite a lack of closer and regular cooperation, the relations were largely cordial. China signed a commerce agreement with Afghanistan in 1957. In 1957, the Chinese Premier Chou En-lai visited

Afghanistan. China also established a cycle factory in Afghanistan. The two states concluded a Treaty of and a Nonaggression Pact in 1960, and a border agreement in 1963. The latter treaty and a subsequent protocol signed in 1965 formalized the shared border (Emadi, 1993).

The policy underwent a shift due to the increased Soviet influence on the Daud Khan regime. Since the late 1960s, Chinese and Soviet governments developed ideological differences over their respective brands of communism. Therefore, with the help of Pakistan, the Chinese government sought to support resistance to the Soviet-supported Daud Khan government that came into power in July 1973. Afghanistan attempted to mend fences with the Peoples Republic when Daud Khan's brother Muhammad Naim was sent to China to meet the Chinese leadership. The Chinese government not wishing to completely alienate Afghanistan and lose the country to Soviet influence, extended an interest-free loan of \$55 million to Afghanistan (Dutt, 1980).

Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan

As an aberration, in the 1980s, due to Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, Chinese policy officials took an active interest in the developments in Afghanistan. China had by this time improved its relations with the Western world. It also saw active Soviet presence in Afghanistan as an attempt to encircle China. Further, the Chinese policy establishment believed that the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan posed dangers to the security and stability of Pakistan with which it enjoyed close relations. China did not grant recognition to the Karmal government (Emadi, 1993). The Chinese government also supported the various groups resisting the Soviet intervention that were collectively called *Mujahidin*. Not only did China extend diplomatic support to Mujahidin, but the Soviets also alleged that the People's Republic provided arms to the various resistance groups (Dutt, 1980). American intelligence authorities confirmed the same (Ludwig, 2013). The Chinese interest in Afghanistan, however, diminished after the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989.

Post-Cold War Era

Like most other countries, China refrained from getting involved in the Afghan warlord competition. The trend in Chinese foreign policy was evident from the closure of the embassy in Kabul in 1993 (Yongbiao, 2018). From the civil war, the Taliban emerged as the dominant group in the mid-1990s. After the Taliban controlled much of the territory of Afghanistan, the Chinese government was concerned by the linkages between the Taliban and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement or ETIM. ETIM had been declared a terrorist organization by the Chinese authorities. It was reported that the most notable leader

of the group Hasan Muhsam had established an alliance with the Taliban and their allies, al-Qaeda. It was also understood that, in 1998, the group moved its headquarters to Kabul (Reed & Raschke, 2010). Initially, therefore, Beijing supported UN sanctions against the Taliban regime.

In the late 1990s, however, the Chinese started to take a different approach. Although the Peoples Republic still did not recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, diplomatic contacts became more frequent. The Chinese embassy in Islamabad retained contacts with the Taliban's diplomatic mission in the city. Mullah Abdul S. Zaeef, in his memoir, *My Life with the Taliban*, spoke at relative length about the Chinese embassy maintaining cordial relations with the Afghan embassy. He also revealed that after a request by China, the Chinese head of the mission to Pakistan, Lu Shunlin, traveled to Kabul and met Mullah Umar. In the meeting, the Chinese ambassador communicated to the Taliban leader the Chinese concerns regarding the ETIM. Zaeef also noted that Mullah Umar assured the Chinese ambassador that Afghan land under Taliban control would not be used against China (Zaeef, 2010).

The relationship grew steadily, albeit at a slow pace. After the meeting between the ambassador and Mullah Umar, ETIM was restrained but not expelled. And the Chinese too, instead of supporting or opposing resolutions calling for sanctions against the Taliban at the UN, only abstained from voting on them. The two sides also expressed interest in allowing the Chinese companies to expand their operations to Afghanistan. However, the progress in relations was halted after 9/11.

Since 2001

Following the September 11 attacks, the Peoples Republic respected the international consensus on the US-led intervention in Afghanistan that dislodged the Taliban government. China recognized the Karzai government and revived the Embassy in Kabul in February 2002 (Scobell, 2015). In the subsequent years, the People's Republic extended limited economic aid to the Afghan governments of President Hamid Karzai and later President Ashraf Ghani. Further, China joined five other neighboring states of Afghanistan in 2002 to sign a noninterference pact – the Kabul Declaration (Ludwig, 2013). During the past two decades, the Chinese government has supported Afghanistan and the Afghan governments by providing occasional economic support and by initiating infrastructural projects such as the Aynak Copper Mine project in 2008 and similarly the Amu Darya Oil Exploration. Although the economic assistance that totaled about \$240 million between 2001 and 2014 was largely symbolic, and the infrastructure projects have also mostly stalled due to political issues, these did suggest the Chinese willingness to foster

friendly relations with the government in Kabul without getting entangled into the complex web of Afghan power politics (Hirono, 2019).

At a strategic level, the US intervention in Afghanistan posed a predicament to the Chinese leadership. On the one hand, it diminished the threat militant groups posed to China. In the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime, for instance, the ETIM not only lost the support of the Taliban, but in August 2002, the United States also declared it a terrorist organization which deprived the group of international legitimacy (Reed & Raschke, 2010). On the other hand, however, the US and NATO presence in the region made Beijing uncomfortable. China viewed the coalition as “transformative actors” that could undermine the Chinese regional and global outlook. Further, it saw with suspicion the growing role of India under the patronage of the United States. China saw long-term American bases and the promotion of American-style governance as a strategic as well as an ideological challenge (Pantucci, 2010).

By extension, the same predicament defines China's reaction to the eventual US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Understandably, the Chinese government viewed the US withdrawal as an opportunity in the long term. The withdrawal opens strategic space and undermines the American image of unassailability (Hass, 2021). Yet, in the short term, the People's Republic is apprehensive of the ensuing power struggles in Afghanistan and its potentially violent fallout that can damage Chinese interests across the region. Understandably, Beijing is also uneasy that the assumed victory of the Taliban against the US and NATO might revitalize groups such as the ETIM in China and other groups such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that might hurt Chinese regional interests (Kine, 2021). It is in view of these immediate threats to its security that the Chinese officials dubbed the withdrawal as “hurried” and irresponsible (Reuters, 2021). Chinese concerns regarding the future of Afghanistan and its impacts on the Chinese ambitions and projects in the region seem to have compelled China to play a more proactive role in attempting to shape the political landscape of Afghanistan.

Chinese interests in Afghanistan

Put simply, the Chinese interests in Afghanistan are two-fold: security and economics. The Chinese security concerns, as stated earlier, relate partially to Beijing's anxiety about the use of Afghan territory by militant groups that endanger Chinese security and its interests in the region. The Chinese government is apprehensive about, what it calls the three evils of extremism, terrorism, and violent quest for self-rule, especially for its potential to destabilize Xinjiang and its neighboring regions (Omelicheva, 2021). As noted in the preceding

sections, the ETIM remained the foremost entity that Beijing demanded that the Taliban control. The recent negotiations between the Chinese officials, whether bilaterally or in multilateral settings, have demanded that the Taliban sever any links with the ETIM (Xinhua, 2021).

It is pertinent to mention that whereas the ETIM is the most notable militant group that poses a security threat on Chinese land, it is not the only one that China fears could benefit from Taliban support. To start with, researchers have noted that ETIM or its different wings have operated under various names such as ETIP (East Turkistan Islamic Party), TIP (Turkistan Islamic Party), and the IPT (Islamic Party of Turkistan). There are other distinct organizations, such as the East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO), that Chinese authorities have blamed for incidents such as poisoning in Kashgar in 1998, arson in Urumqi the same year, bomb attacks, target killings, and robbing banks. The Chinese government has previously claimed that ETLO was allowed to run training camps in Khost and Mazar-i-Sharif by the Taliban (Reed & Raschke, 2010).

Apart from the groups that pose threats to the security and stability of the Chinese land, there are other groups that can potentially benefit from the Taliban's logistical or ideological support and harm Chinese interests such as the safety or feasibility of Chinese infrastructure projects elsewhere. For instance, in November 2018, Baloch insurgents carried out a terrorist attack targeting the Chinese Consulate (Janjua & Shams, 2018). The alleged mastermind of the attack was killed in Kandahar, Afghanistan in December of the same year (Express Tribune, 2018). It has to be noted that the Taliban have little or no convergence in ideological goals with the Baloch insurgents. In fact, according to some reports the Taliban have, since capturing Kabul, cracked down on these insurgent groups (Rehman, 2021). However, it is reasonable to expect that the Chinese government would be anxious about the destabilization of Afghanistan which could provide space for these groups to jeopardize Chinese economic interests and the security of the Chinese projects and people in Pakistan.

The more complicated issue for the Chinese and the Taliban is the question of the threat from the TTP. In 2020, the *Financial Times* reported an intensification of anti-China rhetoric in the TTP media (Rehman, 2020). The TTP was blamed for the attacks on Quetta's Serena Hotel in which the Chinese envoy to Pakistan Nong Rong, narrowly escaped harm (Basit & Pantucci, 2021). In July 2021, when 13 people, including nine Chinese citizens working on a dam project, were killed in a blast in Dasu, the Chinese authorities attributed the attack to the ETIM working together with the TTP (Shahzad, 2021). Although the TTP denied involvement in the attack, the incident does suggest Chinese anxieties regarding the

threat from the TTP and the potential support it can provide to the Chinese successionist groups.

Strategically, the People's Republic might also expect certain gains from the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. As noted earlier, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has already been construed by many as a major sign of the beginning of the end of American dominance (Khan, 2021). The uprooting of the American and NATO military bases from Afghanistan, and the removal of the US-backed regime in Kabul, might also be seen as a positive outcome of the Taliban takeover. Similarly, the Taliban takeover also diminishes the role of India in the country. In the regional context, China would view Afghanistan as an important piece of its regional competition with India.

On the economic side, the Chinese interests in Afghanistan, as noted earlier, are of a less immediate nature. The central piece of Chinese economic interests in Afghanistan is the integration of the country into the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – also called the One Belt, One Road or OBOR is the centerpiece of recent Chinese efforts to economically integrate Asia and beyond through road and sea routes. To bring Afghanistan into the BRI fold, an MoU was signed in 2016 between China and the Ashraf Ghani government (Calabrese, 2021). Already, there is some progress on important projects to bring Afghanistan into the BRI fold, for instance, the Five-Nations Railway Project, the Afghan National Railway Plan, and the Digital Silk Road (Tchakarova, 2011). The Taliban government has also expressed interest in inclusion in the BRI. Speaking to the Chinese news outlet, the *Global Times*, Taliban Spokesperson Suhail Shaheen maintained that the Taliban believed that projects such as the BRI were mutually beneficial for China and Afghanistan (Wenting, et al., 2021).

In addition to extending the BRI to Afghanistan and integrating Afghanistan with the CPEC, Chinese companies have also shown interest in investing in the exploration of Afghanistan's mineral resources. The US military geologists have estimated Afghanistan's mostly untapped mineral resources at almost US\$1 trillion (CNN, 2010). During the previous governments in Afghanistan, Chinese companies already took measures to explore these resources. In 2008, two Chinese firms secured a 30-year lease for the exploration of copper in Mes Aynak near Kabul (Marlow & Curran, 2021). However, it is pertinent to mention that the work on the contract has been stalled since some Afghan officials claimed that the project went against the interests of Afghanistan. Similarly, another Chinese company National Petroleum Corp acquired a 25-year contract of drilling for oil in the Amu Darya basin. Reuters reported that drilling had started in 2012 (Shalizi, 2012). However, work on the project was halted in 2013.

In addition to the BRI and the exploration and investment opportunities, Afghanistan is an important piece in the regional energy supply chain that connects China and South Asia with Central Asia. Nevertheless, to reiterate, the economic dimension of China's interests and involvement, if it materializes significantly, will only be seen as a windfall of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Due to the risks associated with investment in Afghanistan, Chinese companies and the government will put off substantial investment in Afghanistan in the near future. In due course, if Afghanistan does stabilize, the economic interests would gain greater prominence in the Chinese strategy towards Afghanistan.

Chinese Strategy in Afghanistan

The Chinese government has adopted a cautious strategy to deal with the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan. After it became evident that America would withdraw from Afghanistan, Beijing tried to keep a balance between its relations with the Ghani government in Kabul and the Taliban. It also on occasions made efforts for a reconciliation between the government and the Taliban. During that time and since the Taliban capture of power, China has been attempting to form a regional consensus on a joint strategy to deal with the Afghan issue.

It is pertinent to note that even when the previous US-backed government ran the affairs, there had been reports of contacts between China and the Taliban. The *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, reported in 2015 that while the Chinese government retained cordial relations with the government in Kabul, the Taliban delegations have also visited the country, since 2014 – sometimes publicly. The same newspaper also reported that secret meetings took place between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Urumqi in 2015 (Stancati, 2015). Additionally, in May 2021, China again offered to facilitate intra-Afghan negotiations in China (Gul, 2021). In July 2021, the Chinese Foreign Minister met the head of the Taliban Political Commission Mullah Ghani Baradar. In the meeting, he secured the assurance that the Taliban would not allow Afghan territory under their control for any acts detrimental to the Chinese interests (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). In late July 2021, when the Taliban's march on Kabul was well underway, China hosted a Taliban delegation in Tianjin where they held talks with Chinese officials for two days. It was on the same occasion that the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi called the Taliban a "pivotal military and political force" in Afghanistan (Myers, 2021). The point is to highlight that despite maintaining good relations with the previous US-backed governments in Kabul, the Chinese government never completely disconnected itself from the Taliban. The coming paragraphs discuss the expectations and the

evolving strategy of the People's Republic towards the Taliban.

Inclusivity in Governance

China understands that establishing and maintaining cordial relations with the Taliban could be problematic for its international image. The policies of the previous Taliban government were almost universally reviled. The insurgency since 2001 has not done the international image of the Taliban any favors. Therefore, the Chinese government would want the Taliban to soften their positions on matters of governance. Even before the Taliban takeover of power in Kabul, the Chinese Foreign Minister had clearly pointed out that the Chinese preference for the future leadership of Afghanistan is that it should follow a "moderate Muslim policy", maintain a peaceful foreign policy and it should fight against all forms of terrorism (News Desk, 2021). In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of power, the spokesperson of the Chinese foreign ministry repeated that the recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan is possible only after the establishment of an "open and inclusive political framework" (APP, 2021).

The Chinese government has two potential reasons for demanding the Taliban to establish a more inclusive and open system of governance: one, as noted, the People's Republic itself often comes under criticism from Western states and international human rights organizations for its human records. Therefore, closer friendship with a government that has a bad human rights record would only add to the narrative. Two, in order to have a long-term commitment to Afghanistan, China would want the violent conflict in Afghanistan to come to an end. And there seems to be a realization in China that such an eventuality can only be reached once there is a politically, ethnically, and ideologically representative government.

Multilateral Approach

Another aspect of the Chinese strategy towards Afghanistan is to take a preferably regional, multilateral approach to prevent competition between regional actors. At the global multilateral level, the Chinese government has repeatedly called on the UN to play a more proactive role in preventing an escalation of hostilities in post-American Afghanistan. In late October 2021, while speaking at a meeting of the six neighboring countries of Afghanistan, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for multilateral coordination on Afghanistan. Specifically, he called on the multilateral forums, particularly the United Nations, to work towards maintaining stability and order and providing emergency relief (Business Standard, 2021). The same approach was again on display when Xi Jinping at the SCO summit in Dushanbe in September 2021

emphasized that the SCO members should help in a smooth transition in Afghanistan (Reuters, [2021](#)).

Since the Chinese influence in the UN is limited by global power politics, it appears that the Chinese government will more likely seek support from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and regional consultative processes. President Xi Jinping has already revived the Afghanistan Contact Group of the SCO which was established in 2005 before it went defunct in 2009 and was once more brought to life in 2015 (Omelicheva, [2021](#)). The Contact Group has approved a roadmap for enhancing cooperation between the SCO members and Afghanistan. The SCO is also suitably placed as a multilateral organization because not only does it include most of the important regional countries, but it has also granted Afghanistan observer status.

Additionally, China has been organizing and participating in a number of consultations, conferences, and summits across the region to discuss and decide on matters pertaining to Afghanistan. I already referred to the SCO Dushanbe moot and the Tehran meeting on Afghanistan in the above paragraphs. In October 2021, Chinese participation in the 10-country consultation on Afghanistan in Moscow, where the Taliban were represented by the Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanifi, again indicated that this multilateral approach is key to understanding Chinese strategy in Afghanistan (Gul, [2021](#)). China's multilateralism implies that the People's Republic feels that the situation in Afghanistan is unpredictable, and the Taliban takeover might only be a phase in the violent powerplay in the country. Multilateral cooperation with the Taliban is more easily justifiable. Further, a multilateral approach allows China to press the Taliban on issues such as international recognition and economic assistance more reliably. Since China holds arguably the most important position in the SCO and the regional forums, it drives the point home to the Taliban that Chinese support will result in the backing of almost all states in these arrangements. Therefore, one might argue that instead of these multilateral settings diminishing China's ability to shape the Taliban's behavior, these might accentuate it.

It is pertinent to distinguish the Chinese regional multilateral approach to Afghanistan from the unilateral Western policy whereby the US-led coalition attempted to recast Afghanistan into a specific type of country without much input from states that potentially had a different vision. However, the Chinese multilateralism in Afghanistan should also be distinguished from a universal multilateralism. It appears that the Chinese government realizes the impossibility of reaching a global consensus on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Therefore, understanding that the Chinese strategy is regional is as important as pointing out that it is multilateral.

Military Strategy

Although Beijing has assumed a more active role in the Afghan conflict in recent years, and its role in the Afghan future will grow further, it appears that the Peoples Republic has learned two policy lessons from the failure of the Soviet and American military interventions in Afghanistan. First, China has provided some military support to the Afghan government. For instance, In July 2016, Afghanistan received the first shipment of China's US\$70 million in military assistance to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) with the second installment due later in the same year (Khaama Press News Agency, [2016](#)). However, such assistance remained limited to combatting the groups that pose the greatest danger to Chinese security. In general, China has maintained a distance from engaging in any military activity in Afghanistan. Even before the Taliban offensive that eventually resulted in the removal of the Ghani government, China had been calling for a dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban to bring the hostilities to an end. Now with the Taliban back in power, the resumption of military support from China to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is unlikely any time soon. It is even harder to imagine that China would at any point send its own military personnel to Afghanistan.

Second, China does not wish to present itself as the only, or even the major, country that takes the credit or blame for the future of Afghanistan. Afghanistan presents a complexity that repeated international interventions have failed to recognize. The result has been repeated failures to rebuild it to reflect the intervening country or alliance's desires. Afghanistan's reputation as "the graveyard of empires" has been fortified by the ignominious withdrawal of the American forces. Further, the various groups in Afghanistan are often linked in one way or another with the regional states. The Chinese officials are wary of getting engaged in a power competition with other regional states in Afghanistan that jeopardizes not only the peace in Afghanistan but more importantly for China, it can cause a regional conflict involving China that Beijing would wish to avoid.

Conclusion

The statements, actions, and policy steps of the Chinese government analyzed in this study reveal that the Chinese leadership has taken an approach to the situation in post-US withdrawal Afghanistan that can be described as regional multilateralism. The Chinese officials, as data revealed here, have rarely engaged the Taliban government bilaterally. The paper also cited examples where when the Chinese government engaged the Taliban through multilateral forums, it was always with other regional powers. Similarly, the statements of the top Chinese officials confirm other findings of the paper such

as the Chinese desire for an inclusive setup in Afghanistan and the improbability of direct military involvement in the country.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has compelled the Chinese government to become more actively involved in the developments in Afghanistan. The Chinese strategy towards Afghanistan has clearly suggested the country's reluctance to readily give up its policy of non-interference in domestic conflicts. At the same time, the conflict in Afghanistan has obvious consequences for Chinese security and the safety of its economic interests. As evidence in this article suggests, the Chinese foreign policymakers have decided to take a regional multilateral approach to the conflict in

Afghanistan. Such an approach is suited to shape the behavior of the Taliban regime without appearing to be responsible for the outcomes of the actions of the Taliban government.

The recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan and the provision of economic relief and assistance to Afghanistan are the foremost instruments for the People's Republic, and other regional states, to attempt to soften the Taliban's view of governance. Likewise, China is conditioning significant progress on these matters with the demonstrable change of approach to governance on the part of the Taliban.

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