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ARTICLE



## China and the Taliban: Past as prologue?

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### ABSTRACT

Since the Taliban's seizure of Kabul in August 2021, there has been significant attention to and debate over China's ties with the Taliban. This article traces the development of China-Taliban relations from the Afghan Civil War in the 1990's to the present day. We find that China has consistently respected the Taliban as legitimate long-term political actors. We also find that the Taliban have found China to be a valuable source of economic and political support for its regime. We conclude with a discussion of the future trajectory of China-Taliban relations and the implications of this relationship for the balance of power in South Asia.

**KEYWORDS** China-Taliban relations; China-Afghanistan relations; CPEC

### Introduction

On 15 August 2021, Afghanistan's capital Kabul fell to the Taliban, the culmination of a rapid Taliban offensive that had begun three months prior. Following the collapse of Afghanistan's democratically elected – however flawed<sup>1</sup>—and internationally recognized government, attention quickly turned to the future of Taliban rule and the Taliban's foreign relations, particularly the Taliban's relations with American adversaries like China. In the days following the fall of Kabul, analysts opined that China would step in and fill the power vacuum created by the American withdrawal and rapid collapse of the Afghan government. Such accounts dilated upon the potential consequences of Beijing gaining control of strategically important territory, such as Bagram airfield,<sup>2</sup> or Afghanistan's plentiful natural resources like copper or lithium.<sup>3</sup> Other analysts' prediction that China would step into America's shoes in Afghanistan overestimated both Beijing's

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, 'The illusion of Afghanistan's electoral representative democracy: The cases of Afghan presidential and national legislative elections', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 29/1 (2018), 1–37.

<sup>2</sup>Paul D. Shinkansen, 'China Weighing Occupation of Former U.S. Air Base at Bagram: Sources', *U.S. News*, 7 September 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Iain Marlow and Enda Curran, 'China Eyes Afghanistan's \$1 Trillion of Minerals with Risky Bet on Taliban', *Bloomberg*, 24 August 2021.

willingness and capability to exploit the Taliban takeover and underestimated the Taliban's political acumen.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, we draw upon China's historical engagement with Afghanistan and the Taliban to argue that these claims are discordant with China's past engagement with Afghanistan and the Taliban.<sup>5</sup> We argue Afghanistan is a formidable environment that has thwarted the fructification of Chinese aspirations in the past and will continue to do so in the future. While China may seek to integrate Afghanistan into its new regional policy and embed Afghanistan into its various connectivity projects as well as to extract precious minerals from the country, China will face innumerable challenges in doing so.

In this essay, we first provide a historical overview of China's engagement with Afghanistan and Taliban prior to the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001. Second, we exposit China's engagement with Afghanistan between the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 and 2013. The next section examines Chinese engagement following Xi Jinping's assumption of the presidency in March 2013. In the final section, we leverage this historical analysis to offer tempered expectations of Chinese ambitions in Afghanistan under the new Taliban government and Beijing's ability to effectuate these ambitions.

## 1990–2001: Past as prologue

Beijing's ties to Afghan Islamist groups began after the Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. During the anti-Soviet war, China and the Soviet Union were strategic competitors. Consequently, Beijing coordinated closely with the United States and Pakistan to supply arms, ammunition, and training to Mujahadeen forces fighting the Soviet-backed communist regime.<sup>6</sup> China supported a variety of Mujahadeen groups, including the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shad Massoud as well as a small Maoist faction, Shola-e Jawer.<sup>7</sup> By the time the Soviets departed Afghanistan in February 1989, Chinese support for the Mujahadeen effort totaled approximately \$100 million dollars.<sup>8</sup> In addition to providing material support, Beijing also allegedly supported Chinese Uyghur Muslim participation in the anti-Soviet Jihad.<sup>9</sup> China's support for the Mujahadeen during the anti-Soviet struggle had implications

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<sup>4</sup>Matthew P. Funaiole and Brian Hart, 'Afghanistan is No Treasure Trove for China', *Foreign Policy*, 28 September 2021; and Westcott, Stephen P. 'The Pragmatic Neighbour: China's Afghanistan Policy 2001–2021', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 9/3 (2022), 446–461.

<sup>5</sup>Huasheng Zhao, 'Afghanistan and China's new Neighbourhood Diplomacy', *International Affairs* 92/4 (2016), 891–908.

<sup>6</sup>Raghav Sharma, 'China's Afghanistan Policy: Slow Recalibration', *China Report* 46, No. 3, 2010, p. 202.

<sup>7</sup>Anath Krishnan and Stanly Johnny, *The Comrades and the Mullahs: China, Afghanistan, and the Asian Geopolitics* (Gurugram: HarperCollins 2022).

<sup>8</sup>Jonathan Ludwig, 'Sino-Afghan Relations in the Twenty-First Century: From Uncertainty to Engagement', *Griffith Asia Quarterly*, 2015, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup>Sharma, *China's Afghan Policy*, 203.

domestically. The success of the Mujahedeen and the defeat of the Soviets revitalized Uyghur separatist groups in Xinjiang, the Chinese province abutting Afghanistan, who advocated for independence from Beijing.<sup>10</sup> The experience of the Soviet-Afghan war also led the Uyghur movement, whose members now include combat veterans of the anti-Soviet Afghan campaign, to adopt a more violent approach to the independence struggle.<sup>11</sup> Drawing upon contacts made during the jihad against the Soviet Union, Uyghur groups now tapped into transnational networks for arms, training, and financial support in their struggle with Beijing.<sup>12</sup>

Uyghur agitation for independence climaxed in the years following the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Empire as emboldened fighters with combat experience adopted new tactics. In April 1990, Baren Muslims in favor of a free Turkestan revolted against the Chinese government for five days.<sup>13</sup> This represented the first major protest in Xinjiang against Beijing's rule since the People's Republic of China's takeover of the region in 1949.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the 1990's Xinjiang witnessed escalating attacks by Uyghur separatist groups and civil unrest. These included: a 1991 government office bombing, a 1992 bus bombing in Urumqi, 1993 riots in 12 counties, 1995 explosions in Urumqi, and riots and unrest in Hotan in Yining in 1995.<sup>15</sup> Acts of Uyghur unrest employed arms and explosives sourced largely from Afghanistan, a product of ties forged with Afghan groups during the anti-Soviet struggle.<sup>16</sup>

While Uyghur resistance spiked in the decade after the Soviet withdrawal, the cause of this violence, the extent of Uyghur-related violence in Xinjiang, and the group's ties with the Taliban remain contested. Chinese government sources, such as the 2003 White Paper on the History and Development of Xinjiang, argue that 'in the 1990's under the influence of extremism, separatism, and international terrorism, part of the "East Turkistan" forces inside and outside Chinese territory turned to a splittist and sabotage activities with terrorist violence as the main means'.<sup>17</sup> Scholars such as Bovingdon have pushed back against this narrative, arguing that Uyghur resistance to Chinese rule is prompted by nationalism, not Islamism, and that this Chinese framing

<sup>10</sup>E Ehsan Ahrari, 'China, Pakistan, and the 'Taliban Syndrome'', *Asian Survey* 40/4 (Jul.-Aug. 2000), 661.

<sup>11</sup>Sharma, 'China's Afghanistan Policy', 208.

<sup>12</sup>Sharma, 'China's Afghanistan Policy', 208.

<sup>13</sup>Raphael Israeli, 'A New Wave of Muslim Revivalism in China', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17/2 (1997), 273.

<sup>14</sup>Raghav Sharma, 'Afghanistan: Discerning China's Westward March', *Asian Affairs* 50/4 (2019), 550. In 1989 protests broke out in response to Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* which was perceived to be offensive to the Muslim. However, Chinese authorities allowed these demonstrations and moved quickly to ban the book and remove it from circulation. See Raphael Israeli, 'A New Wave of Muslim Revivalism in China'.

<sup>15</sup>Israeli, *A New Wave*, 269.

<sup>16</sup>Ahmed Rashid, 'Taliban Temptation', *Far Eastern Economic Review* (1999), 22.

<sup>17</sup>'Full Text of White Paper on History and Development of Xinjiang', The Information Office of the State Council, 26 May 2003. [http://en.people.cn/200305/26/eng20030526\\_117240.shtml](http://en.people.cn/200305/26/eng20030526_117240.shtml).

of the Uyghur separatist movement is a bid to capitalize on post-9/11 attitudes towards Islamist extremism.<sup>18</sup> Sean Roberts and Michael Clark echo this sentiment, arguing that the Chinese had strong incentives to portray all Uyghur dissent post-9/11 as terrorism and tie Uyghur separatists groups such as the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) to groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the levels of violence in Xinjiang during this period are unclear. According to the official East Turkestan Terrorists Exposed report, released in 2002, there were 200 terrorist incidents between 1990 and 2001 that claimed the lives of 162 people and injured 440.<sup>20</sup> However, the data from the document also attributes 56 dead and 362 injured to the same period in question.<sup>21</sup> Sean Roberts analyzed 29 alleged Uyghur terrorist incidents during the same period, 1990–2001, and classified one as Uyghur terrorist incident, sixteen as maybe Uyghur terrorist incidents, seven as probably not Uyghur terrorism, and four as not Uyghur terrorism.<sup>22</sup> Internal Chinese discrepancies and external estimates suggest that while Uyghur civil unrest, resistance, and acts of terrorism grew during the 1990's, the Uyghur terrorist threat to the Chinese state has been exaggerated by Beijing.

The depth of Uyghur-Taliban ties is also debated. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a Taliban commander with close ties with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), approved of and enabled Uyghur fighters to establish a camp in Jalalabad in early 1998, later moving to Khost that year.<sup>23</sup> While the Taliban allowed ETIM to operate and train in Afghanistan, the group was isolated from other militant groups and its requests to launch attacks on China were ignored by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, according to Abdullah Kariaji, the alleged Vice-Chairman of ETIM who was interviewed by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2004, there were no incidences where men, who trained at the camps, executed attacks on China.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the Uyghur presence in Afghanistan remained small. Kariaji claims that between 1997 and 2001, ETIM had three camps with up to five hundred families, not fighters, in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia UP 2010), 3.

<sup>19</sup>Michael Clarke, 'China's War on Terror in Xinjiang: Human Security and the Causes of Violent Uighur Separatism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 20/ 2 (2008), 156; and Sean R. Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2020), 66.

<sup>20</sup>Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, "East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity", *People's Daily*, 21 January 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/Jan/25582.htm>.

<sup>21</sup>Clarke, *China's War on Terror*, 282.

<sup>22</sup>Sean Roberts, 'Imaginary Terrorism: The Global War on Terror and the Narrative of the Uyghur Terrorist Threat', *PONARS Eurasia Working Paper*, 2012, p. 11–13.

<sup>23</sup>Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 105.

<sup>24</sup>Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 105.

<sup>25</sup>David S. Cloud and Ian Johnson, 'In Post-9/11 World, Chinese Dissidents Pose U.S. Dilemma', *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 August 2004. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109149176842581209>.

<sup>26</sup>Cloud and Johnson, 'In Post-9/11 World'.

The small overall Uyghur presence is corroborated by the leader of a Uyghur emigree organization, the United National Revolutionary Front, based in Kazakhstan, which acknowledged that approximately 100 Uyghurs fighting for the Taliban in the late 1990's and early 2000s.<sup>27</sup> Despite the lack of a clear threat to the Chinese regime in Xinjiang and small number of fighters in Afghanistan, Uyghur groups ties with Islamist extremist organizations and the surge in Uyghur dissent and terrorism during the 1990s proved intolerable for Beijing. Beijing's public identification of external Islamist forces as a key driver of Uyghur dissent, in addition to the flow of arms and equipment from Afghanistan, made cutting external support for the Uyghur cause a key component of China's Afghan strategy and Central Asian strategy writ large.

To achieve its strategic objectives, Beijing moved to increase its involvement in Central Asia during the 1990s. In 1996, Beijing formed the Shanghai Five, later renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.<sup>28</sup> Through mutual security treaties and agreements within the SCO, Beijing sought to increase cooperation in combating Uyghur separatism. As part of this broader push to connect with Central Asian nations in the 1990's, Beijing moved to forge economic and political ties with the Taliban. This policy of engagement with the Taliban was a tacit recognition of Beijing's vulnerabilities in Xinjiang and the threat to its interests in Central Asia.<sup>29</sup> Chinese efforts in Afghanistan were also buttressed by a convergence of interests between China and Pakistan, China's long-term client in South Asia. Pakistan sought to retard Indian influence in a post-Soviet Central Asia to secure its strategic depth.<sup>30</sup>

Ostensibly, forging ties with the Taliban would afford Chinese leverage with which to pressure the group to cease their support for and sever ties with separatist Uyghur groups. Beijing also sought to garner the Taliban's support in dissuading non-Uyghur Islamist groups operating in Afghanistan, such as al Qaeda, from launching attacks against China. For Beijing, this was a tried and trusted strategy for dealing with Uyghur separatist groups. In the 1990's, Pakistan had emerged as a haven for Uyghur refugees, some of whom were trained as militants by jihadi groups operating in the tribal areas of Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> Beijing used its close economic and military ties with Pakistan to pressure Islamabad to crack down on Uyghur refugees in Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> In 1997

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<sup>27</sup>Michael E. Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia- A History* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 131.

<sup>28</sup>Sean Roberts: *A Land of Borderlands*, 234.

<sup>29</sup>Michael Clarke, 'One Belt, One Road and China's Emerging Afghanistan Dilemma', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 70/5 (2016), 568.

<sup>30</sup>C. Christine Fair, 'Pakistan's relations with Central Asia: Is Past Prologue?' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31/2 (2008), 201–227.

<sup>31</sup>Andrew Small, 'China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan', *The Washington Quarterly* (July 2010), 90.

<sup>32</sup>Small, 'China's Caution', 90.

for instance, China successfully pressured Islamabad to deport 13 Uyghurs studying at Pakistani madrassahs to China.<sup>33</sup>

In an attempt to develop relations, a Chinese delegation visited Kabul in February of 1998, the first official visit to Afghanistan in nearly seven years. This Chinese visit was prompted by requests from Pakistan, a steadfast Chinese partner, and the primary backer of the Taliban. Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Interservice Intelligence Directorate (ISI), which had close contacts with the Taliban leadership, reportedly arranged the visit.<sup>34</sup> From this initial meeting, China quickly gained Taliban assurances that Afghan territory would not be used as a base for Islamist groups to attack China.<sup>35</sup> In exchange, Beijing agreed to several economic and military deals to support the nascent Taliban government desperate for operating capital. In 1998, following further talks with the Taliban, China agreed to open formal trade ties with the newly formed Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and increase the volume of Chinese food aid. In addition, according to Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan in the 1990's, China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, met with Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar in December 2000.<sup>36</sup> As part of these discussions, Mullah Omar offered Lu Shulin assurances that the Taliban would not allow groups to use Afghanistan to launch attacks on China in exchange for recognition and help with UN sanctions.<sup>37</sup>

Economically, Chinese firms received contracts in 2000 to build telecommunications infrastructure in Kandahar and Kabul and repair Afghanistan's power grid, which had been damaged by years of war.<sup>38</sup> These ambitious infrastructure projects were stalled by 9/11. Chinese relations with the Taliban were also not without tension. The Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan on the orders of Mullah Omar for instance brought widespread international condemnation, including from China's civil society. Nonetheless, on the eve of 9/11, China had established itself as one of the largest foreign investors in Afghanistan, with several tens of millions of dollars in investments or pending investments in telecommunications and construction projects. Militarily, China aided the Taliban in their struggle against the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance movement during the Afghan civil war, providing arms, spare parts, and maintenance services for the Taliban's forces.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Sean R. Roberts, 'A "Land of Borderlands": Implications of Xinjiang's Trans-border Interactions', in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (New York: Routledge 2004), 232.

<sup>34</sup>Rashid, *Taliban Temptation*, 21.

<sup>35</sup>J Mohan Malik, 'Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses after 11 September', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24/2 (August 2002), 258.

<sup>36</sup>Clarke, *One Belt, One Road*, 570.

<sup>37</sup>Clarke, *One Belt, One Road*, 570.

<sup>38</sup>SOURCE.

<sup>39</sup>See Malik, *Dragon on Terrorism*, 258–271.

The Northern Alliance in turn was aided militarily by India, Tajikistan, Iran, Russia, and episodically the United States.<sup>40</sup>

These economic and military deals with the Taliban also helped strengthen Pakistan, China's long-term partner, by easing Islamabad's financial burden while ensuring an ostensibly friendly government in Kabul.<sup>41</sup> However, Chinese support only went so far. As the Former Foreign Minister for the Taliban during the period, Wakil Ahmed Muttwakil acknowledges, 'we (the Afghan Taliban) did not have diplomatic relations with the Chinese. What we had were business and trade relations with the Chinese'.<sup>42</sup> While China was willing to engage in long term political and economic projects with the Taliban in pursuit of its own strategic objectives, full diplomatic recognition for the Taliban was a bridge too far for Beijing.

The Taliban welcomed better relations with Beijing as a source of economic relief. When the Taliban seized power in 1996 with the help of the Pakistani military and intelligence services, they were ill-equipped to run the country. Afghanistan's economy was in shambles and the Taliban's mullahs, more effective on the battlefield than in the office of a bureaucrat, had a limited ability to extract resources or deliver public goods.<sup>43</sup> These issues were exacerbated by the poor state of the country's infrastructure as well as global economic sanctions that deprived the Taliban government of foreign aid and development funds. Most of the Taliban's limited budget was spent persecuting the war against the Northern Alliance and maintaining control over its existing territories,<sup>44</sup> leaving little for delivering public goods or economic development. Until the expulsion of international organizations in July of 1998, basic services like healthcare and water were almost entirely dependent on international aid and run by international non-profits.<sup>45</sup> This situation bears a marked similarity to that currently confronting the Taliban.

In this respect, China proved to be a valuable partner for the Taliban. Large Chinese infrastructure and development projects provided the Taliban with economic investment they were unable to fund domestically or finance internationally due to the international sanction regime. The Taliban were

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<sup>40</sup>C. Christine Fair, 'Under the Shrinking US Security Umbrella: India's End Game in Afghanistan?' *The Washington Quarterly*, 34/2 (Spring 2011), 179–192; C. Christine Fair, 'India and Iran: New Delhi's Balancing Act', *The Washington Quarterly* 30/3 (Summer 2007), 145–159; and Avinash Paliwal, *My Enemy's Enemy: India in Afghanistan from the Soviet Invasion to the US Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>41</sup>Despite Pakistani hopes, the Taliban never accepted the hotly contested the Durand Line as the *de jure* international border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and harbored Pakistani criminals wanted in Pakistan. See Ijaz Ahmad Khan, 'Understanding Pakistan's Pro-Taliban Afghan Policy', *Pakistan Horizon* 60/2 (2007), 141–157; and Satinder Kumar Lambah, 'The Durand Line', *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 7/1 (2012), 42–60.

<sup>42</sup>Quoted in Sharma, *Afghanistan: Discerning China's Westward March*, 553.

<sup>43</sup>S. Yaqub Ibrahim, 'The Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996–2001): "War-Making and State Making" as an Insurgency Strategy', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28/6 (2017), 962.

<sup>44</sup>Ibrahim, 'The Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', 962.

<sup>45</sup>Ibrahim, 'The Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', 964.



also able to diversify their base of support away from Pakistan as they continued their campaign against the internationally supported Northern Alliance. Furthermore, Chinese support came at minimal cost to the Taliban. Unlike other organizations with transnational and global ambitions, the Taliban's aspirations were limited and confined to Afghanistan. While it would've cost the Taliban little to sever support for the Uyghurs, it is doubtful if the Taliban actually did so. Jalaluddin Haqqani, a Taliban commander with close ties to Pakistan's ISI, permitted ETIM to establish three bases in Afghanistan between 1998 and 2001, indicating that Taliban-Uyghur ties persisted after the initial 1998 visit by the Chinese delegation and the December 2000 meeting between Mullah Omar and Lu Shulin.<sup>46</sup> Roberts asserts, 'there is credible evidence that the Taliban, and probably Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), sought to use Mäkhsum and his group (ETIM) as a bargaining chip in their diplomatic negotiations with China at the time, much as Kazakhstan had used local Uyghur nationalists for similar purposes with the PRC during the same period'.<sup>47</sup> To maintain this bargaining chip, ETIM members and ETIM's leadership were kept under close supervision in Kabul, effectively eliminating any remaining threat the group posed to China.<sup>48</sup> The Taliban were thus able to parlay Chinese concerns over Uyghur separatism being driven by ties with external groups in the 1990's into valuable economic support for little political cost. They they were also able to do so without alienating their main backer, Islamabad, which had encouraged and facilitated the initial development of ties.<sup>49</sup>

By the time al Qaeda struck on 11 September 2001, Beijing had forged initial ties with the Afghan Taliban as part of its wider campaign in Central Asia to suppress the increasingly active Uyghur separatist movement. In exchange for economic support through development deals and military support for its fight against the Northern Alliance, the Chinese received assurances that the Taliban would prevent Afghan-based Uyghur groups from attacking China. If Kariaji is to be believed, China's Taliban policy was successful as no Afghan trained Uyghurs carried out attacks in China.<sup>50</sup> In turn, the Taliban had acquired a valuable partner that helped sustain its continued struggle against the Northern Alliance and stave off complete economic collapse. However, the 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, which enjoyed Taliban protection in Afghanistan, drastically altered the trajectory of this relationship for the next decade.

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<sup>46</sup>Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 105.

<sup>47</sup>Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 108.

<sup>48</sup>Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 109.

<sup>49</sup>Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 108–109.

<sup>50</sup>Cloud and Johnson, 'In Post-9/11 World'.

## 2001–2013: China reoptimizes its Afghanistan strategy

Many Chinese analysts saw the US invasion as a geopolitical play for control of Central Asia, similar to how Beijing viewed the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>51</sup> In the early years of the war, Beijing simultaneously supported the new Afghan government while providing continued political and material support to the Taliban, which was waging an insurgency with Pakistan's unstinting assistance. Beijing's support for both sides can be attributed to its indifference to which party governed Kabul. China was willing to back any group that supported the crackdown on Uyghurs, enabled Chinese investment, and provided a friendly backyard to Pakistan. Recognizing that the Taliban were unable to help China achieve its strategic objectives while out of power, Beijing quickly moved to recognize the new transitional government in Kabul and pledged \$150 million in reconstruction aid.<sup>52</sup> However, China's initial investment appetite quickly ceded following growing attacks on foreign investment projects in the country, including a 2004 attack that killed 11 Chinese workers involved in building a World Bank funded highway in Kunduz.<sup>53</sup>

This rather modest initial sum was followed in later years by greater Chinese investment in Afghanistan through state-backed companies, concentrated primarily in infrastructure development and raw material extraction. For instance, in 2007 the state-backed China Metallurgical Group made a highly publicized successful \$3.5 billion dollar bid for the Aynak copper fields, the world's largest unexploited field.<sup>54</sup> At the time the deal was signed, it was anticipated that revenue from the mine would account for 40% percent of the Afghan government's revenue, in addition to providing thousands of jobs.<sup>55</sup> Chinese investment wasn't isolated to the mines. By the end of 2008, Chinese companies were involved in 33 infrastructure projects nearing half a billion dollars in value.<sup>56</sup> In addition to these investments in Afghanistan, the Chinese heavily invested in infrastructure in China's western provinces and Pakistan to help facilitate the import and exports goods to Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup> Despite the ongoing security challenges that undermined prospects for the Aynak copper mine, in 2011, Chinese National Petroleum Corp. signed a \$400 million deal over 25 years to extract and refine oil from the Amu Darya

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<sup>51</sup>Small, *China's Caution on Afghanistan-Pakistan*, 88.

<sup>52</sup>Sharma, 'China's Afghanistan Policy', 203.

<sup>53</sup>Carlotta Gall, '11 Chinese Workers Killed in Rebel Attack in Afghanistan', *The New York Times*, 10 June 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/10/international/asia/11-chinese-workers-killed-in-rebel-attack-in-afghanistan.html>.

<sup>54</sup>Michael Wines, 'China Willing to Spend Big on Afghan Commerce', *The New York Times*, 29 December 2009.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/30/world/asia/30mine.html>.

<sup>55</sup>Sharma, 'China's Afghanistan Policy', 204.

<sup>56</sup>Michael M. Phillips and Shai Oster, 'U.S. and China Work Together to Rebuild Afghanistan', *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 June 2009.

<sup>57</sup>Sharma, 'China's Afghanistan Policy', 204.

basin.<sup>58</sup> Many of these projects failed to materialize, including the Aynak copper field due to security, cultural and political problems.<sup>59</sup> Afghanistan lacked the prerequisite infrastructure to take advantage of its natural resources and the deteriorating security situation increased operating costs and weakened the appetites of Chinese companies to make risky investments in the region.

Part of Beijing's diversification of ties in the region included improving ties with various Islamist political parties in Pakistan. In 2009, the Chinese hosted a delegation from Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Pakistan's largest Islamist political party, and signed a memorandum of understanding, the first of its kind between the Chinese Communist Party and a non-communist foreign political party.<sup>60</sup> According to one senior JI leader, the memorandum, which has not been made public, 'makes us [JI] accept finally and formally that China's internal affairs are not our business'.<sup>61</sup> In 2010, a Jamiat-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) delegation led by Maulana Fazlur Rahman, visited Beijing.<sup>62</sup> Chinese ties to Islamist political parties are reflective of Beijing's desire to diversify its base of support within Pakistan, relations with whom had been strained by growing Pakistani-American cooperation due to the war in Afghanistan. Furthermore, both JI and JUI have connections with Uyghur separatist groups and the Afghan Taliban.<sup>63</sup> Forming connections with them thus killed two birds with one stone from China's perspective, denying Uyghur's support within Pakistan's largest Islamist political parties and strengthening Chinese influence with the Afghan Taliban indirectly.

While Beijing diversified its influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, China endeavored not to alienate the Taliban. Rather than harshly criticizing the Taliban, China viewed the group as a viable political and fighting force that would remain an enduring feature of Afghanistan's political milieu for the foreseeable future.<sup>64</sup> As Zhao Hua Sheng argues, 'China believes that the Taliban is a political faction. The Taliban existed in Afghanistan for some time and to eliminate it through military force is impossible'.<sup>65</sup>

After the American invasion and rapid downfall of the Taliban government, China and Pakistan, argued for the inclusion of a 'moderate Taliban' faction in the new Kabul government.<sup>66</sup> At a 2010 conference, China's foreign

<sup>58</sup>Hamid Shalizi, 'China's CNPC begins oil production in Afghanistan', *Reuters*, 21 October 2012.

<sup>59</sup>Archie Hunter, Julian Luk, Yasemin Esmen, 'Afghanistan's mighty copper reserves remain out of reach, even for China', *Fast Markets Bulletin*, 24 August 2021. <https://www.metalbulletin.com/Article/4004437/Afghanistans-mighty-copper-reserves-remain-out-of-reach-even-for-China.html>.

<sup>60</sup>See Farhan Bokhari, 'Pakistani Islamists Sign Deal with China', *CBS News*, 18 February 2009.

<sup>61</sup>Farhan Bokhari, 'Pakistani Islamists'.

<sup>62</sup>Sharma, *Afghanistan*, 553.

<sup>63</sup>Sharma, *Afghanistan*, 553.

<sup>64</sup>Zhao, *Afghanistan and China*, 891–908.

<sup>65</sup>Huasheng, *Chinese Views of Post-2014 Afghanistan*, 57.

<sup>66</sup>Mohan, *Dragon on Terrorism*, 261. For a critical examination of the moderate Taliban myth see Vikash Yadav, 'The Myth of the Moderate Taliban', *Asia Affairs: An American Review* 37 (2010), 133–145.

minister called for 'promoting national reconciliation and making the reconciliation process more inclusive', a clear call for great Taliban participation.<sup>67</sup> While offering public political support for the Taliban's participation in the government, Beijing also provided some material support to the Taliban in the form of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition.<sup>68</sup> For the Taliban, waging a brutal insurgency against the Kabul government and its western allies, Chinese political and material backing was one of the few sources of external support for its struggle outside of its main benefactor, Pakistan.

Simultaneously, Beijing steadily deepened its relationship with the government in Kabul. In 2012, Zhou Yongkang, a member of the Politburo and Minister for Security, visited Afghanistan and agreed to train, fund, and equip the Afghan Police.<sup>69</sup> This agreement, although small in scale compared to other international training missions, was a marked departure from prior Chinese relations with the government in Kabul, which had been confined to small aid packages and commercial dealings through Chinese companies. Beijing also took the special step of appointing a special envoy to Afghanistan.<sup>70</sup>

### 2013–2022: China's Afghan strategy under Xi

In October 2013, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party convened to discuss China's neighborhood policy. Zhao Huasheng describes this 'new neighborhood diplomacy' as 'an adjustment, development, and upgrading of policies', which we have detailed in the above section.<sup>71</sup> He identifies four emphases of China's regional diplomacy, implicitly ranked in their significance *qin*, *cheng*, *hui*, and *rong*. *Qin*, to practice amity, means to 'uphold good-neighborly relations and give mutual help and protection'. *Cheng*, sincerity, suggest that 'interactions with neighboring countries should always be genuine, aimed at gaining more friends and partners . . . and should place justice above material benefits'. *Hui*, mutual benefits, suggest cooperation with neighboring states in a way that benefits all while *rong*, inclusiveness, entails 'promoting regional cooperation with China's neighboring countries, manifest in cultivating shared opportunities and meeting collective challenges . . . to create common prosperity'.<sup>72</sup> The two land-mark initiatives

<sup>67</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China 'Full Text of Chinese FM's Remarks at London Conference on Afghanistan', January 29, 2010; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 'Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Attends the International Conference on Afghanistan', 21 July 2010.

<sup>68</sup>See Ron Synovitz, 'Afghanistan: U.S. Worried Iran Sending Chinese Weapons to Taliban', *Radio Free Europe*, 14 September 2007.

<sup>69</sup>Sharma, *Afghanistan*, 554.

<sup>70</sup>Teddy Ng, 'Sun Yuxi appointed special envoy to Afghanistan', *South China Morning Post*, 19 July 2014.

<sup>71</sup>Zhao Huasheng, 'Afghanistan and China's New Neighborhood diplomacy', *International Affairs* 92/4 (2016), 893.

<sup>72</sup>Zhao Huasheng, 'Afghanistan'.

intended to advance China's grand strategic goals of this neighborhood policy are the so-called 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road'. These two initiatives together have been dubbed the 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)', which bears the imprimatur of President Xi himself.

Chinese scholars have identified Central Asia as a critical region for China and the success of BRI initiatives. Li Yonghui and Zhao Jinfu liken Central Asia's importance to China as akin to the importance of Latin America to the United States.<sup>73</sup> They argue that the region serves as a 'strategic supporting peripheral belt' that serves as a 'buffer, source of growth, and a platform and channel for the expansion of Chinese influence'.<sup>74</sup> Yuan Peng also asserts that Central Asia is critical for its connectivity, linking the three rings of China's diplomacy, the inner ring of geographical neighbors, the middle ring of South Asia, and the outer ring of outlying countries.<sup>75</sup>

This conception of Central Asia and the introduction of the BRI meant Afghanistan, with its central geopolitical position and its abundant natural resources, assumed greater salience. Afghanistan's addition to the BRI in 2016 signals Beijing's belief that stability in Afghanistan is critical for the efficacy and viability of BRI and one of the initiative's flagship components, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>76</sup> As Ali observes, two of the six planned BRI corridors, China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor and CPEC, abut Afghanistan.<sup>77</sup> Instability in or emanating from Afghanistan into neighboring regions like Pakistan and Xinjiang could compromise the economic viability of the BRI.<sup>78</sup> The importance of stability in Afghanistan to the success of the BRI and to ensuring stability in Xinjiang, motivated Chinese analysts to conclude that active and sustained engagement with Afghanistan was critical to mitigating risks both to its investments in Afghanistan and within the wider region.<sup>79</sup>

Secondly, as detailed above, Afghanistan's natural resources render it an attractive – if elusive – target for Chinese investment. Afghanistan's abundant

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<sup>73</sup>Li Yonghui and Zhao Jinfu, 'Constructing a Strategic Peripheral Belt to Support the Wings of China's Rise', *Contemporary International Relations* 23/6 (2013), 66.

<sup>74</sup>Yonghui and Jinfu, 'Constructing', 66.

<sup>75</sup>Peng, Yuan 'China's Grand Periphery Strategy', *Contemporary International Relations* 23/6 (2013), 59–60.

<sup>76</sup>Sebastien Goulard, 'Does the Belt and Road Have a Future in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan?' *The Diplomat*, 21 August 2021.

<sup>77</sup>Ghulam Ali 'China – Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan: assessing key interests and implementing strategies', *The Pacific Review* (2020), 1–23.

<sup>78</sup>Ali, 'China – Pakistan'. See also Times of Israel, 'China "strategic accord" could give Iran a \$400 billion boost, up military ties', 13 July 2020. Akram Umarov, 'Assessing China's new policy in Afghanistan', *Central Asian Affairs*, 4/4 (2017), 384–406.

<sup>79</sup>Zhao Hong, 'The Forming of the China's Afghan policy: March West' Strategy?' *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, 44/1 (2013), 27–43; and Azeta Hatef and Luwei Rose Luqiu, 'Where does Afghanistan fit in China's Grand Project? A Content Analysis of Afghan and Chinese News Coverage of the One Belt, One Road Initiative', *International Communication Gazette* 80, 551–569.

yet largely untapped mineral resources are currently valued between \$1 and \$3 trillion.<sup>80</sup> Prior to the American withdrawal, China could pursue investments largely under the US-NATO security umbrella. To mitigate the perception that China was free-riding, Beijing expanded economic engagement in Afghanistan.<sup>81</sup> For example, in 2017, China Communications Construction signed a \$200 million deal to construct a 178-kilometer highway from Dar-e-Sof to Yakawlang.<sup>82</sup>

Nonetheless, Chinese investment in Afghanistan remained minor relative to other BRI regional projects like the CPEC. In 2015, there were only 90 Chinese personnel involved in contract work in Afghanistan.<sup>83</sup> In 2017, only 12 Chinese companies were active in Afghanistan.<sup>84</sup> These investments, while not insignificant relative to the size of the Afghan economy, are dwarfed by initiatives like CPEC, which totals over \$50 billion.<sup>85</sup> However, the dismissal of the importance of Afghanistan to the BRI, on the grounds that investment in Afghanistan pales in comparison to investment in Afghanistan, ignores the wider importance of Afghan stability to the success of such regional projects.<sup>86</sup>

Violence spilling over from an unstable Afghanistan into Xinjiang or Pakistan in the long run threatens to increase the cost of development projects, strain already stretched Pakistani security resources, and decrease companies' investment appetites. China has already pressured Pakistan to allow for the deployment of private security personnel to guard CPEC projects from Baloch insurgent groups owing to a shortage of Pakistani troops in the region.<sup>87</sup> Growing instability in Afghanistan would further hamper CPEC's effectuation. While the US-NATO security umbrella ultimately provided inadequate security to permit Chinese extraction of Afghanistan's resources China's investments paid political dividends. Eager for Chinese investment, the Ghani government extradited 15 Uyghurs with alleged separatist links to China on the eve of a summit with the Taliban.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>80</sup>Eltaf Najafzada, 'U.S., Afghan Study Finds Mineral Deposits Worth \$3 Trillion', *Bloomberg*, 29 January 2011. See also: Marlow, Iain and Edna Curran, 'China Eyes Afghanistan's \$1 Trillion of Minerals With Risky Bet on Taliban', *Bloomberg*, 24 August 2021.

<sup>81</sup>Ali, *China – Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan*, 7.

<sup>82</sup>'CCCC Project Singing Ceremony Witnessed by Afghan President', China Communications Construction Company Ltd., 10 January 2017.

<sup>83</sup>Zhuo Yongbiao, 'China's Afghanistan Policy Since 9/11: Stages and Prospects', *Asian Survey* 58/2, 292.

<sup>84</sup>Yongbiao, *China's Afghanistan Policy Since 9/11*, 292.

<sup>85</sup>Ishrat Husain, 'CPEC and Pakistani Economy: An Appraisal', *Center of Excellence: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Report 36* <https://ir.iba.edu.pk/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=faculty-research-books>.

<sup>86</sup>Feng Zhang, 'China's New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal', *LSE Public Policy Review* 2/3 (2022), 5.

<sup>87</sup>Umair Jamal, 'Does Pakistan Have the Capability to Secure CPEC Projects?' *The Diplomat*, 22 July 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/does-pakistan-have-the-capability-to-secure-cpec-projects/>.

<sup>88</sup>See Hamid Shalizi, 'Afghan's arrested Chinese Uyghurs to aid Taliban Talk bid', *Reuters*, 20 February 2015.

After Xi's accession, China deployed its political capital with both the Taliban and the Ghani government in a push for political reconciliation. Growing Chinese involvement during Xi's regime can be attributed to two interrelated factors: declining faith in Pakistan's ability to forge peace and increasing Uyghur terror attacks within China. As early as 2012, western analysts argued that Beijing increasingly recognized 'that it can no longer simply abrogate its strategy toward Kabul to Islamabad – a default setting Beijing previously employed'.<sup>89</sup> An upsurge in terrorist attacks in Xinjiang and attacks linked to the Uyghur issue throughout China motivated Beijing increasingly to involve itself directly with the Afghan peace process. Between 2003 and 2006, the Chinese government claimed there were no violent incidents in Xinjiang or Central Asia attributed to Uyghur groups.<sup>90</sup> However, according to data compiled by Julienne and Rudolf, terrorist attacks claimed the lives of 468 people and injured 548 in China between 2010 and 2014.<sup>91</sup> Some analysts attribute lower levels of violence to the 2003 death of ETIM's founder in Pakistan as well as China's own increasing crackdown in Xinjiang.<sup>92</sup> However, this respite was short-lived: by 2010 Uyghur groups had reorganized and regrouped and were capable of launching some of their most deadly attacks to date, including the 2014 Kunming Railway Station attack that claimed the lives of 29 people.<sup>93</sup> During this period Uyghur groups also perpetrated attacks outside of Xinjiang, including a 2013 vehicle attack in Beijing's Tiananmen Square that killed five.<sup>94</sup>

Reflecting increasing involvement in the Afghan peace process and negotiations, in October 2014, China organized and hosted the so-called Istanbul Process in Beijing to facilitate reconciliation between the Taliban and the Afghan government. This was the first occasion when China hosted any kind of meeting on Afghanistan.<sup>95</sup> At the meeting, Premier Li Keqiang argued that 'it is imperative to promote a broadly-based, inclusive political reconciliation. We call on all political parties in Afghanistan to leave behind past grievances, join the political reconciliation process, and discuss ways to achieve peace and development of their country'.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, 'Shifts in Beijing's Afghan Policy: A View from the Ground', *China Brief* 12 No 21, 2012, <https://jamestown.org/program/shifts-in-beijings-afghan-policy-a-view-from-the-ground/>.

<sup>90</sup>Clarke, *China's War on Terror*, 283.

<sup>91</sup>Marc Julienne and Moritz Rudolf, 'The Terrorist Threat in China', *The Diplomat*, 26 May 2015. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/the-terrorist-threat-in-china/>.

<sup>92</sup>Clarke, *China's War on Terror*, 283.

<sup>93</sup>Carrie Gracie, 'The Knife Attack that Changed Kunming', *BBC*, 16 July 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-28305109>.

<sup>94</sup>'Islamist Group Calls Tiananmen Attack "Jihadist Operation": Monitoring Service', *SCMP*, 24 November 2013. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1364374/jihadist-group-speaks-out-tiananmen-square-car-attack>.

<sup>95</sup>Ali, *China – Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan*, 1–23.

<sup>96</sup>The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 'Let Us Join Hands to Promote Security and Prosperity of Afghanistan and the Region', 31 October 2014.

Chinese advocacy for political reconciliation continued after the Istanbul process. On the eve of the International Security Assistance Force pullout in 2014, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated the need for political reconciliation, arguing now was the time for all parties to take the opportunity to begin peace talks.<sup>97</sup> Following the Istanbul process meeting, in January 2015, China invited a Taliban delegation, led by Qari Din Muhammad from the Taliban's Qatar office, to China to exchange views.<sup>98</sup> In February 2015, Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited to Afghanistan, a first for a Chinese Foreign Minister, calling once more for political reconciliation.<sup>99</sup> In May 2015, Pakistan's ISI helped China host secret talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. The Taliban have been frequent public guests of the Chinese since.<sup>100</sup> In 2019, the head of the Taliban's Doha political office, Mullah Baradar, also visited Beijing. The meeting concluded with both sides agreeing 'to stay in communication and cooperation for the political settlement of the Afghan issue'.<sup>101</sup>

Chinese reconciliation efforts continued up until the fall of the internationally recognized Afghan government. On 29 February 2020 in Doha, the United States and the Taliban inked the unfortunately titled 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan', according to which the United States and its allies would withdraw all military forces within 14 months and facilitate intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan authorities.<sup>102</sup> The Taliban, for their part, provided ostensible—if not outright risible—security assurances that they would not permit terrorists to use Afghan to conduct against the USA and its allies.<sup>103</sup> While China and Pakistan were not formal partners to the agreement, their participation was critical in facilitating it. China helped break the various impasses between the Afghan government and Pakistan as well as the Afghan government and the Taliban.<sup>104</sup> Pakistan,

<sup>97</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi: China is willing to Play Constructive Role in peaceful Reconciliation Process of Afghanistan', 1 November 2014.

<sup>98</sup>Shannon Tiezzi, 'China Hosted Afghan Taliban for Talks: Report', *The Diplomat*, 7 January 2015.

<sup>99</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi: Resolving the Afghanistan issue requires strengthening support in four areas', 12 February 2015.

<sup>100</sup>Petr Topychkanov, 'Secret Meeting Brings Taliban to China', *Carnegie Endowment*, 28 May 2016. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2015/05/28/secret-meeting-brings-taliban-to-china-pub-60241>; and Reid Standish, 'Explainer: Why Is China Talking To The Taliban?', *Gandhara*, 20 July 2021.

<https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/explainer-china-taliban-afghanistan/31368531.html>.

<sup>101</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang's Regular Press Conference on June 20, 2019', 20 June 2019.

<sup>102</sup>Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States, February 29, 2020.

<sup>103</sup>Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States, February 29, 2020. See also Ali, 'China – Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan: assessing key interests and implementing strategies', *The Pacific Review* (2020), 1–23.

<sup>104</sup>Ghulam Ali 'China – Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan: assessing key interests and implementing strategies', *The Pacific Review* (2020), 1–23.



for its part, leveraged its influence over the Taliban to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Between 2013 and the end of 2022 Beijing continued to support the Taliban, which had been out of power for nearly twenty years, for three primary reasons. First, the Chinese respected the Taliban as a viable political actor in Afghanistan, thanks in part to strong Pakistani support for the Afghan Taliban and the weakness of the Kabul government. Secondly, the Chinese have had a long relationship with the Taliban that pre-dates 9/11 and understand them as political actors. Third, the Taliban have consistently proven receptive to Beijing's demands on Uyghur groups, although as discussed previously the Taliban's level of compliance with these requests has been mixed. Other insurgent groups that threaten to take the Taliban's place may not necessarily toe Beijing's line. For instance, splinter groups of the Pakistani Taliban have publicly threatened Beijing over its treatment of Uyghurs, proclaiming publicly in propaganda: 'We're warning Beijing to stop killing Uyghurs. If you don't change your anti-Muslim policies, soon the mujahideen will target you'.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, China's ties with the Taliban have imposed some important costs for Beijing's Afghan policy which have intensified since the Taliban took power. With the Taliban ensconced in Kabul, its most credible emergent foe is the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). As the ISKP seeks to differentiate itself from the Taliban, it has intensified its targeting of China, which began in 2015, in large measure because of China's close relations with the Taliban.<sup>106</sup> Generally speaking, Beijing's support the Taliban served its interests in diversifying relations while simultaneously preventing the rise of groups less amiable to China's strategic interests until recently.

## After the Deluge

In May 2021, the Taliban began an offensive across Afghanistan that would ultimately result in their return to power after a twenty-year hiatus. Beijing continued to engage with both sides. In July, a Taliban delegation met with Chinese diplomats in Tianjin for another round of talks during which China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi acknowledged the Taliban as a 'pivotal political and military force'.<sup>107</sup> The Taliban also pledged that Afghan territory would not be used to attack China.<sup>108</sup> Afterwards, a Taliban spokesman asserted 'we care about the oppression of Muslims, be it in Palestine, in Myanmar, or in China, and we care about the oppression of non-Muslims anywhere in the world. But

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<sup>105</sup>Sharma, *Afghanistan*, 555.

<sup>106</sup>Barbara Kelemen, "China's Clouded Future in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, February 22, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/chinas-clouded-future-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>107</sup>Steven Lee Myers, 'China Offers the Taliban a Warm Welcome While Urging Peace Talks', *The New York Times*, 28 July 2021.

<sup>108</sup>Feng Zhang, China's New Engagement with Afghanistan after the Withdrawal, *LSE Public Policy Review*, 7.

what we are not going to do is interfere in China's internal affairs'.<sup>109</sup> Simultaneously, Xi Jinping urged President Ghani to pursue political reconciliation.<sup>110</sup> The Taliban's seizure of Kabul on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021, caught many off guard, including the Chinese.

After Kabul fell, China and the Taliban quickly resumed talks. On 19 August, while the American evacuation effort was still underway, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen explained that 'China is a big country with a huge economy and capacity-I think they can play a very big role in the rebuilding, rehabilitation, reconstruction of Afghanistan'.<sup>111</sup> This set an optimistic tone for subsequent meetings between China's ambassador to Afghanistan and senior Taliban political leadership.<sup>112</sup> Later in October 2021, when Wany Yi and Mullah Baradar met, the Taliban stopped short of promising to sever ties with ETIM, instead reiterating their stance that the group would stop Afghan territory from being used to launch attacks on China.<sup>113</sup> This suggests that like in the 1990's, the Taliban will keep the Uyghur issue in their back pocket as a negotiating tool with Beijing.

In the months that followed the Taliban's conquest, China extended \$31 million dollars in emergency food and medical aid to the new regime.<sup>114</sup> In March 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Kabul, the first visit by a senior Chinese diplomat since 2018, to meet with senior Taliban about the country's economic crisis and prospects for bilateral trade.<sup>115</sup> Taliban officials have expressed a desire to join CPEC to enhance Afghanistan's infrastructure and to aid Chinese extraction of Afghanistan's natural resources.<sup>116</sup> To demonstrate its commitment, the Taliban revised its position on Buddha statues, specifically those recovered at the site of the Mes Aynak copper mine. Twenty years ago, the Taliban blew up the massive Buddhist statues in Bamiyan to near universal condemnation, including from Chinese civil society. However, reflecting the Taliban's tighter ties with Beijing and the Taliban's hope that China can get the copper out of the ground and into markets to help fund their crippled economy, Taliban fighters now

<sup>109</sup>Yaroslav Trofimov and Chao Dengin, 'Afghanistan's Taliban, Now on China's Border, Seek to Reassure Beijing', *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 July 2021.

<sup>110</sup>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China (MOFA, PRC), 'Xi Jinping Talks on the Phone with Afghan President Ghani', 16 July 2021.

<sup>111</sup>China can contribute to Afghan development-Taliban spokesman', *Reuters*, 19 August 2021.

<sup>112</sup>Taliban leader meets Chinese ambassador in Kabul, discuss bilateral issues', *The Times of India*, 7 September 2021.

<sup>113</sup>Zhang, *China's New Engagement*, 7.

<sup>114</sup>FM Shakil, 'China extends a fast helping hand to the Taliban', *Asia Times*, 9 September 2021. <https://asiatimes.com/2021/09/china-extends-a-fast-helping-hand-to-the-taliban/>.

<sup>115</sup>Eltaf Najafizada, 'China's Foreign Minister Wany Yi Meets Taliban Leaders in Kabul', *Bloomberg*, 24 March 2022.

<sup>116</sup>Ruth Pollard, 'Is China About to Tuck Afghanistan Under Its Belt and Road', *Bloomberg*, 17 August 2021.

guard the surviving Buddha statues above the Chinese owned copper mine.<sup>117</sup>

There has been substantial public debate within the Chinese foreign policy community over China's future relationship with the Taliban. Yue Xiaoyong, China's special envoy to the Taliban, expressed optimism about the future of the Taliban regime and its relationship with China. During an online video interview, Yue referred to the Taliban as 'very friendly', framed them as allies in China's war on terror and was optimistic about future economic prospects.<sup>118</sup>

Others are less convinced. Mei Xinyu, a scholar at the PRC ministry of Commerce, argued for caution about China's economic opportunities given Afghanistan's troubled history with economic development.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, Afghanistan continues to remain at the periphery of Beijing's foreign policy concerns.

Importantly, the Taliban are not reliable allies in China's war on terror given their historic interactions over Uyghur groups in Afghanistan and their ideology. Pan Guang, the head of the Shanghai Cooperation Council research center and a counterterrorism expert, argued that 'we must not forget the point that the Taliban are Sunni Muslims, and their religious claims are ultra-orthodox, One might say they are religious extremist forces, and this essence will not change'.<sup>120</sup> This public divergence in opinion between those involved in government related think tanks and government officials like Yue Xiaoyong suggests Beijing's about the relationship is in flux. Minimal Chinese economic aid thus far, as well as the continued reticence from Chinese state-owned firms to invest in Afghanistan, suggests that the Chinese are not as optimistic as Yue Xiaoyong suggests.

## Conclusions and implications: The past as prologue?

In June 2022, Afghanistan was devastated by an earthquake that killed more than 1,000 people. In response, China dispatched an \$8-million aid package and China's ambassador announced long-term reconstruction plans in a joint conference with the Taliban. The noise of these overtures drowned out the fact that US immediate earthquake-related aid totaled \$55 million, bringing American humanitarian assistance to \$774 million which certainly dwarfs Beijing's \$37.4

<sup>117</sup>Samya Kullab, 'With Eye to China Investment, Taliban Now Preserve Buddhas', *Bloomberg*, 27 March 2022.

<sup>118</sup>Li Shimo, 'Exclusive Interview with Yue Xiaoyong, China's Special Envoy on the Afghan Issue', *YouTube Video*, 28 August 2021. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t94SifsXmLA&ab\\_channel=%E8%A7%82%E5%AF%9F%E8%80%85%E7%BD%91](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t94SifsXmLA&ab_channel=%E8%A7%82%E5%AF%9F%E8%80%85%E7%BD%91).

<sup>119</sup>Mei Xinyu, 'Do Not Blidnt Revel in the Post-American Afghan Economy', (Chinese), Aisixiang, 18 August 2021. <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/128108.html>.

<sup>120</sup>Pan Guang: The Taliban may be different from more than 20 years ago, but the essence has not changed', *Guancha* (Chinese), 20 August 2021, [https://www.guancha.cn/PanGuang/2021\\_08\\_20\\_603675.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/PanGuang/2021_08_20_603675.shtml).

million.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, China has largely reneged on its vocal promises of economic investments. Khan Jan Alokozay, vice president of Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce and Investment, repined 'There has not even been a penny of investment by China . . . Many of their companies came, met with us, conducted research and then left and vanished, which is frustrating'.<sup>122</sup>

This is consistent with China's past performance: over promise and under-deliver. The fact is that China's interests in Afghanistan are limited to preventing instability in Afghanistan from undermining China's domestic security or endangering its more consequential investments in the region. While the Taliban want Chinese economic investment, Chinese enthusiasm will remain tempered by the realities of the country and the Taliban's own lackluster track record on terrorism.<sup>123</sup> The assassination of Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al Zawahiri, in a tony Kabul neighborhood underscores Taliban's ongoing ties to international terrorist organizations. Even if the Taliban want to provide a more secure environment, they do not have a monopoly on violence in Afghanistan as evidenced by ongoing violence by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Taliban control of Kabul could promise Pakistan greater strategic depth allowing Pakistan to devote its energies more fully to India, much to the advantage of Beijing. However, this expectation is undermined by significant rifts between Pakistan and the Taliban over the Durand Line and the ties between the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban, which have been denuerated by their allies' return to power. Chinese expanded influence over a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan may strain China-Pakistan and Pakistan-Taliban ties. Pakistan is unaccustomed to strong, potentially competing influences over the group. Ongoing border clashes between Taliban and Pakistani forces along the Durand line have also strained relations between Kabul and Islamabad and left Beijing in an awkward crossfire between its two partners.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, domestic political instability within Pakistan over the strategic orientation of Islamabad, as highlighted by the downfall of Imran Khan's government in April 2022, may further complicate Beijing's relationship with the Taliban and their historic backers in Islamabad.<sup>125</sup> Maintaining good relations with both parties may prove a more difficult balancing act than Beijing anticipated.

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<sup>121</sup>Rachel Cheung, *Vice News*, 16 August 2022. Is China Replacing the US in Afghanistan? A Reality Check. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z34m89/is-china-replacing-us-in-afghanistan>.

<sup>122</sup>Eltaf Najafizada, 'China Wooed Taliban With Investment Promises That Haven't Panned Out', *Bloomberg*, 26 September 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-26/china-s-fail-ure-to-invest-in-afghanistan-is-frustrating-the-taliban?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

<sup>123</sup>See also: Shuli Ren, 'How Afghanistan Snags China in \$282 Billion Creditor Trap', *Bloomberg*, 18 August 2021.

<sup>124</sup>Michael Kugelman, 'The Taliban Pick Fight Over Border with Pakistan', *Foreign Policy*, 6 January 2022.

<sup>125</sup>See Secunder Kermani, 'Imran Khan: What Led to Charismatic Pakistan PM's Downfall', *BBC News*, 10 April 2022.

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