

Strategic Analysis Paper

22 July 2021

The Challenges to China's National Rejuvenation Part Four: The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Key Points

- As the US withdraws from Afghanistan, China will almost certainly be drawn to it.
- China needs to ensure that any unrest in Afghanistan does not spill over into Xinjiang.
- It must also ensure that it can placate and calm any hostility caused by its treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.
- China would like to have, additionally, an alternative to the current Kazakhstan-Russia overland route for its Belt-Road Initiative and to be able to secure that new route.
- It would also like to have an alternative route to its existing one through Pakistan to access Iran's oil and gas fields.

Summary

China's fears that the fighting in Afghanistan between Kabul's forces and the Taliban have now been dangerously compounded by the Biden Administration's plan to [withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021](#), bringing an end to the US's longest-running war. China is right to fear that decision for two broad reasons. First, by withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan, Washington will put an end to the [waste of 2,448 US lives and US\\$2 trillion](#) (\$2.7 trillion) that was lost in sustaining a fight that has occupied it for twenty years, a

fight that it knew it could never win. Washington could now focus its time and assets on countering China without the distraction of an unwinnable war. Afghanistan has resisted all efforts to conquer it; Alexander the Great could not accomplish that task, nor could the British, the Soviets or the US. While Zahirudin Muhammad Babur Padshah Ghazi, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, captured Kabul in 1504 and carved out a kingdom before moving on India, he did so without having to contend with the constraints that human rights and international law places on states today.

Withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan will allow Washington to re-focus on China, politically, economically and militarily. Second, the US recognises, as does China, that by withdrawing, it will give the Taliban the opportunity to return to power in Kabul by overthrowing the current US-supported regime there. That situation has major implications for China. Beijing recognises that it has been the US's efforts in Afghanistan that have drained, to a large extent, Washington's coffers and, simultaneously, allowed China to focus on its own economic development secure in the knowledge that the US maintained a modicum of peace in Afghanistan. These are matters that demand further examination.

Analysis

The Biden Administration's decision to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan does not automatically imply that China's influence, let alone power, will increase in that country. It is the general consensus that when the US pulls out, the Taliban will overwhelm the democratically-elected regime in Kabul in short order. As when it ruled Afghanistan previously, however, it is unlikely that the Taliban will have complete control over the country, with various ideological and ethnic factions fighting for power and likely controlling different parts of the country. That situation will create at the very least a power vacuum that, as occurred in Syria and Iraq, will lead to more conflict, suffering and death. That appears to be increasingly the case with the news that one warlord, a senior member of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, Ismail Khan, whose militia helped the US to topple the Taliban in 2001, has [urged his party members](#) to take up arms to fight against the Taliban. It is more than likely that the country will return to the "warlord-ism" that prevailed during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the civil war thereafter. When that occurs, China will almost inevitably be drawn into a quagmire that would place it in a situation roughly analogous to the US in Vietnam. That analogue becomes more apparent in light of a Taliban spokesman's [statement](#) that China is a 'welcome friend' for reconstruction in Afghanistan just as the Jamaat-e-Islami party is preparing for conflict. Its situation would be worse than that of the US in Vietnam, however, because if it fights against another Muslim adversary, given its abuses of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang, it could be portrayed across the Muslim world as being anti-Muslim.

While Beijing may be able to influence the political and military élites in some Muslim-majority countries, it cannot do the same with all the citizens of those countries, many of whom could be galvanised into actively acting against it. China also fears that the fighting that ensues in Afghanistan will spill over its borders into Tajikistan because it is almost certain that the return of the Taliban to power will resurrect the Tajik-dominated Northern

Alliance in one form or another, which will take up arms once more, this time against them. The Northern Alliance and similar factions could then be used by, say, the US, just as it used them against the Soviet forces. It is perhaps that fear that led China to [evacuate](#) over 200 civilians from Afghanistan recently. A civil war will likely also spill over into Kyrgyzstan as Afghan drug smugglers travel along the Northern Route on their way to their destinations in Russia and Europe. That situation will force Beijing to pay even more attention to the situation to its west, thereby detracting from its efforts to counter the growing number of its adversaries to its east.

China will be drawn to Afghanistan for economic and strategic reasons. It was [reported](#) (also [here](#)) in 2010, that the Pentagon believed that Afghanistan's untapped mineral wealth could be worth around US\$1 trillion. According to [another report](#), the Afghan Government declared that figure to be around US\$3 trillion but that figure is likely an exaggeration. According to the news report, a task force studying the country's resources found that Afghanistan has significant deposits of copper, iron ore, niobium, cobalt, gold, molybdenum, silver and aluminium, as well as sources of fluor spar, beryllium and lithium, among others. While even the one trillion dollar figure may be exaggerated, the fact remains that the country does have enormous unexploited mineral wealth. Even if another country did not avail of the minerals itself (an unlikely possibility or outcome), there could be much profit to be had in partnering with still-to-be-established Afghan mining companies, by providing the technology and expertise required, for example, to extract those minerals.

More specifically, it is the discovery of major lithium deposits in Afghanistan – one [source](#) provides an idea of the amounts of lithium available by referring to Afghanistan as “the Saudi Arabia of lithium” – that is of consequence. The original Pentagon report, while stating that the main minerals found were iron ore, with an estimated value US\$421 billion (\$571 billion) and copper worth US\$273 billion (\$370 billion), was careful to note that the trillion dollar figure did not include known oil and gas reserves or the value of minerals like lithium that have not been verified to an extent that would permit a valid estimation. While two Chinese firms have committed themselves to a US\$4 billion investment in the vast Aynak copper mine, south of Kabul, it is the lithium deposits that are of strategic interest. There are also reports of huge deposits of [potash](#).

In the past few years, the demand for lithium has exploded along with the growth of lithium-ion battery technology in mobile telephones, personal digital assistants, laptop computers and, more recently, electric vehicles and batteries that can be attached to solar-powered systems. China, which seeks to position itself as a major electric-powered automobile and solar panel manufacturer, could see its plans disrupted if another civil war takes place in Afghanistan.

To ensure that it has access to those resources, China has conducted talks not only with the Afghan Government but also with some Taliban groups. The approach appears to have been successful. While the government has [cracked down](#) on illegal mining, thus enabling Chinese mining companies to expand their operations, the [Taliban](#) has assured the Chinese firms that they need have no fear of attacks by its members and also offered to protect at least one mine and several [gas projects](#) with its members. While this has caused some discomfort in

Kabul, which says that it has the sole right to grant mining leases and protect the ensuing operations, the Chinese companies remain secure in the knowledge that their operations can continue with minimal fear of being attacked.

China began its political initiatives to extend its influence in Afghanistan while the US had its forces emplaced there. In December 2017, China hosted a [trilateral meeting](#) with the foreign ministers of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Salahuddin Rabbani and Khawaja Asif, his Afghan and Pakistani counterparts, respectively. Going against its stated policy of not interfering in the internal politics of other nations and demonstrating Beijing's confidence in its ability to play as large a role in international politics as befits a rising superpower, Mr Wang sought to bring the two governments together to resolve their differences. While he was only partially successful, Mr Wang did elicit promises from both to continue with their dialogue. That meeting was followed only days later by a meeting between the Defence Ministers of Afghanistan and China, which ended with a statement that the two sides had worked to 'deepen pragmatic co-operation in various fields including anti-terrorism operations, and push forward the state and military relations between the two countries'. It is interesting to note that both meetings ended with statements regarding co-operation in anti-terrorism initiatives, an indication of how nervous Beijing is about terrorism in Central Asia spilling over into Xinjiang.

China is acting to mitigate those fears. In keeping with its policy of bringing bordering countries under its influence economically and militarily in progressive stages, China entered into discussions with Afghanistan to establish a military base there. It was [reported](#) by several sources that Beijing entered into talks with Kabul to construct a military base in Afghanistan's remote and mountainous Wakhan Corridor, where witnesses have reported seeing Chinese and Afghan troops on joint patrols. Beijing allegedly fears that exiled Uyghur members of the insurgent East Turkestan Islamic Movement use the Wakhan Corridor to cross into Xinjiang to carry out attacks there. Beijing also worries that Uyghurs who were trained by and fought for Islamic State are now fleeing Iraq and Syria and could, similarly, use the Wakhan Corridor to enter China. Beijing is correct in fearing that these various groups and factions could amalgamate, based on their common hatred of China's repression of their co-religionists, and foment further unrest in Xinjiang.

It must be noted, however, that despite the initiatives detailed above, China will be dealing with a notoriously volatile party, the Taliban, which, like China, is not above breaking any agreement into which it may enter or manipulating its terms to suit its agenda if it feels that is required. Their future interactions will be instructive to watch. Any advantages that China may gain from its discussions with the Taliban must also be tempered by the knowledge that India, in a dramatic reversal of its previous Afghan policy, has also [entered into discussions with factions of the Taliban](#) that are not inimical to it. Afghanistan and Afghans have generally held India in high esteem, a sentiment that is shared to a large extent by factions within the Taliban. By endeavouring to enter into discussions with those factions, India likely hopes to retain its reputation among them and, simultaneously, [blunt Pakistan's influence](#) over them as well as any advantage that China might obtain from its own discussions with the Taliban. The external actors might change once again but Afghanistan, it appears, will remain the battleground, a situation that will undoubtedly please New Delhi to an extent,

and more so if China is drawn into that maelstrom. Beijing, it has been argued, could obtain a façade of legitimacy by sending Chinese “peace-keeping forces” into Afghanistan to protect its investments there. While that is certainly possible, the fact remains that no matter their guise, Chinese troops in Afghanistan will be targeted by Afghan factions, be those the Taliban or forces arrayed against them, thereby drawing China deeper into a volatile and dangerous country.

It is becoming increasingly clear that there will be a civil war in Afghanistan soon. Apart from many Afghan professionals choosing to [leave the country](#) in the wake of the Taliban’s recent territorial gains, others, including [ordinary citizens](#) and [women, are taking up arms](#) against them. Worse, even if it were not a deliberate tactic, the US decision to leave behind [large caches of weapons](#), combined with those that it [seized from Afghan forces](#), will give the Taliban great potential to fight against any force, including the Chinese. In short, any hopes that China has of insulating itself from Afghan politics will come to nought in that climate; it will almost inevitably be drawn into Afghan politics.

A few other Chinese objectives in Afghanistan are worth noting. First, Beijing would like to reduce India’s influence in the country. New Delhi, which has a strong relationship with Kabul, is detested by Islamabad, which works to reduce Indian influence in the region in which it seeks “strategic depth” in the event of an Indian attack. China, for its part, seeks to isolate India in South Asia in a zero-sum game for influence in that region.

Second, China would want to create an alternative route for its Belt and Road Initiative through Afghanistan, a country that it could better influence than, say, Kazakhstan, which a resurgent Russia, for all its messages of friendship with China, would not readily permit, since Moscow sees Astana as being in its own zone of influence. China recognises the risks associated with a BRI route running through Kazakhstan and would wish to avoid that if it can. Afghanistan offers a viable option if China could influence it to a greater degree. An Afghanistan route also gives China direct overland access to Iranian gas fields. That could eliminate even the comparatively minor risks associated with piping oil and gas through Pakistan, such as attacks upon the infrastructure and personnel by Balochi insurgents or by India during a conflict with Pakistan. Islamabad undoubtedly recognises, in turn, the risks that Afghanistan poses to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Chinese investment in it and would make even greater efforts to comply with China’s requirements, a situation that appeals to Beijing.

Beijing faces challenges to those objectives and initiatives, however. As with its behaviour in other countries, China’s behaviour has led to its embarrassment yet again. It was reported in December 2020 that Afghan authorities had uncovered a [Chinese spy network](#) that operated in Afghanistan to hunt down Uyghur Muslims, with the help of a terrorist group, the Haqqani Group, which is linked to the Taliban. Afghanistan’s National Directorate of Security, its intelligence service, [arrested ten Chinese operatives](#) (including a Thai citizen). Reporting that US intelligence services worked with their Afghan counterparts to uncover the spy network, the Pajhwok Afghan News agency commented:

... a real “spy holding” was destroyed, which included not only Chinese intelligence officers, but also operatives of the Pakistani special services,

terrorists of the Taliban, the Haqqani network and, probably, Al-Qaeda, who are waging a brutal war against the government and people of Afghanistan. Of course, Beijing is unlikely to like it. However, the Afghan side will be able to weather the Chinese discontent. Moreover, the PRC leadership today is more concerned with its partnership with Islamabad, [which is] hostile to Kabul, than with real cooperation with Afghanistan. The Chinese talk a lot about peace in Afghanistan, while supporting the Pakistani military, [which] is waging a multi-year hybrid war against the Afghans, using the Taliban terrorists and other groups for this. Now, Kabul has made it clear to Beijing that it will no longer tolerate Chinese spies co-operating with Pakistani agents and militants of the Haqqani network on its soil.

It is obvious that the Americans are now interested in weakening the intelligence capabilities of the PRC in Afghanistan. The forthcoming reduction in the number of the US military contingent will inevitably lead to a decrease in American influence in Afghanistan. Certain countries in the region will most likely try to fill the “resource void” using, first of all, the potential of their intelligence services. It can be assumed that China will be one of the first who wants to enter the positions vacated by the US, which will inevitably lead to a “war of intelligence”. Obviously, the Americans are preparing for such circumstances and are already beginning to clean up the Afghan landscape from Chinese competitors, by using the hands of Afghan intelligence agents.

The [exposure of the Chinese spy ring](#) has led

Afghanistan to recalibrate its relationship with China, its resource-hungry giant neighbour to the east. Afghan government officials said that the country has terminated oil and gas contracts with China and is seeking to renegotiate the terms of a massive mining concession that has been nearly dormant since it was inked by China more than a decade ago.

That report’s version of the matter surprisingly claims that Indian intelligence services helped the Afghan authorities uncover the spy network. It states that:

The Afghan officials said they busted an alleged Chinese espionage ring operating in Kabul to hunt down Uyghur Muslims with the help of the Haqqani network, a terrorist outfit linked to the Taliban. A senior security official said the ring had been operating for six or seven years. Afghan authorities have co-operated with China in the past on the detention and deportation of Uyghurs suspected of terrorist activity, but officials said they were shocked at China’s duplicity.

“Is this the behaviour of a friend?” said one. Another source said the presence of the Chinese cell—widely reported by Indian news outlets, though notably not by Afghan or international media—was revealed to Afghan authorities by Indian intelligence.

Whatever the case may be, it is clear that [China sees opportunity and threats in Central Asia](#), especially Afghanistan. It will go to any lengths to ensure that it can make full use of the opportunities that Central Asia offers it while mitigating the region's threats, such as the potential for unrest within its borders, underlining again the Chinese Communist Party's fear of social unrest and Beijing's desire to become the regional hegemon. It is in that regard and as a consequence of its efforts to balance the so-called Quad, which has been described as an incipient Asian NATO, that China is reportedly making an effort to draw together a number of Himalayan nations – Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan and itself – that could act as a [counterweight to the Quad](#). That grouping, which would almost certainly have the support of Russia, itself upset by India's drift towards the US, would almost completely isolate India geographically, with only Bangladesh and Burma remaining as its neutral terrestrial neighbours. There again, Burma will only remain a neutral neighbour if India can retain control of its [Siliguri Corridor](#), often described as its “chicken's neck”, a 22 kilometre-wide strip of land that connects mainland India to its eastern states. On the other hand, if that grouping were to eventuate, India would likely increase its ties to the US and Russia, although it is uncertain if the latter, given its growing ties to China and deteriorating relationship with India, would assist New Delhi as swiftly and in as concrete terms as it did previously. Given China's deteriorating international relations, however, it is quite possible that Beijing, reasoning that it has nothing to lose and is powerful enough in any case, could disregard any such outcomes and proceed to form such a group.

Whether Nepal and Afghanistan would join that grouping also remains uncertain. The new India-leaning government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba could soon de-emphasise Nepal's interest in any such grouping, unless he finds it difficult to do so because of the Chinese major [loans and investments](#) that need to be serviced. Afghanistan, similarly, has a good relationship with India, even if the Taliban and New Delhi do not see eye-to-eye on many issues. As one [analysis](#) of the situation notes:

The fact that India is possibly the only country that can engage with the United States and Europe on the one hand, and Iran and Russia on the other, underscores its unique position to contribute to the Afghan peace process. While each country seeks to align its engagement policy to its respective strategic objectives, the overarching goal for all is peace in Afghanistan. A consensus among major international stakeholders about how to deal with the Taliban is of utmost importance—and India can help forge it and carry it out.

The Taliban is a religious group that will always be aware of China's treatment of its Muslims, an awareness that will override any economic benefits that Beijing may offer. It is quite possible that factions within the Taliban will choose to work with India over China unless Beijing ends its abuses of the Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, something that it is hardly likely to do.

To conclude, China's hubris and arrogance, coupled with its ambition to achieve its strategic goals at any cost, have seen its relationships with the countries of Central Asia deteriorate, just as they have with many of those in Europe, North America, Asia and Oceania. The Chinese Communist Party cannot amend its behaviour now that the democracies in those

regions have begun to push back for fear of losing face before its domestic audience, as occurred when three [US Senators arrived in Taiwan aboard a US Air Force aircraft](#), thereby demonstrating that Beijing's implicit threat previously of a red line being crossed was little more than bluster. It is China's domestic issues, however, that ought to cause Beijing more concern. While the country's [GDP grew 6.5 per cent last year](#), outstripping virtually every other economy worldwide, that growth was underpinned by [hidden debt of US\\$2.3 trillion](#) that is expected to grow further. Income inequality is also growing; last year the richest 20 per cent of the population had an average [disposable income](#) of US\$12,000, ten times that of the poorest twenty per cent, a situation that was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. As [one study noted](#),

... at least 30-50 million migrants lost their jobs in late March, far more than the local urban workers. An online survey also indicates that the rural-*hukou* population have borne the brunt of the outbreak. More than 90% rural-*hukou* migrant workers could not find work as of late February, compared to 42% for urban-*hukou* migrant workers. Those who are less educated and low skilled had also a higher rate of unemployment. At the same time, there is a serious mismatch between workers covered by the social safety net and those who really need it. Both across the Chinese population at large and within the migrant population itself, the pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities along the household registration system line.

It is the combination of its deteriorating foreign relationships, which will have a marked effect on its economy, and some of the Chinese Communist Party's misguided domestic policies that makes China the more dangerous. Recognising that its initiatives are unravelling, the Chinese Communist Party, headed by General Secretary Xi, will be forced to act against, say, Taiwan in order to obtain the skills and capacity to manufacture the semiconductors that underpin its goal of global technological hegemony. It may not initiate a sudden, all-out invasion of Taiwan – that is not its way – but it could start an incremental process that could hasten Taiwan's economic and political deterioration and, in the process, gauge how determined Washington is to protect Taipei. China could, similarly, act more forcefully to control the South China Sea, no matter that its actions could see the other claimants to parts of that sea gravitate towards the US. Again, by isolating India, Beijing could gauge India's reactions and if and how the US may assist it. In every instance, China's actions may be designed to provoke a US reaction in order to gauge its extent. It remains for the US, then, to show that it has the determination and the capacity to negate the challenge that China poses to it.

While that could raise the risk of kinetic conflict, the US and its allies must prove, as they did in 1945, that democracy is superior to, and will overcome, authoritarianism and fascism. The world cannot afford to appease the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party as it initially did Hitler. It cannot afford to let Taiwan or the South China Sea become the new Sudetenland, much less the Uyghur and other Muslim communities of Xinjiang the new Jews and Romany. To allow that to happen would prove that humanity has learned nothing from the sacrifices made by millions of people who lived and died at that time, by those of the students and workers who stood up to the tanks and soldiers of the PLA in Tiananmen

Square and elsewhere in China in 1989, and by the sacrifices of ordinary people of Hong Kong and Tibet whose freedoms have been drastically curtailed in order that one party may remain in power.

The West must realise that China is prosecuting an undeclared non-kinetic war and, consequently, that it has no option but to retaliate in kind now, when China is weaker than it appears to be because of the Chinese Communist Party's strategic social and political mistakes, rather than later, when the party has had the time to correct them.

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Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
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