

Will China be better off as the US quits Afghanistan?

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China is enjoying the United States' precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan. From Beijing's perspective, America's abrupt dash for the exit as the conflict continues to rage reinforces the argument that the US is an erratic and unreliable player on the world stage.

This glee, however, should be tempered by the fact that the trouble that is likely to follow America's withdrawal is going to cause Beijing more trouble than the seemingly never-ending conflict which it has been able to observe from the sidelines.

In the short term, China has comfortably hedged itself against all direct threats from Afghanistan.

In the wake of declarations under the Obama administration that the US was going to withdraw from Afghanistan, China started a programme of investment into the military and border capabilities of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, countries with which it shares the Wakhan Corridor, China's direct border with Afghanistan.

It established a forward base for the People's Armed Police in Tajikistan, as well as built a base for Afghan forces in Badakhshan, where in the first few years Chinese forces would also patrol.

The Chinese also inaugurated a new regional multicultural structure, the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism that brought together

the chiefs of army staff of the countries with which it shared the Wakhan Corridor.

China also started to more openly cultivate its relations with all of factions on the Afghan battlefield. Previously Beijing would rely on its “iron brother” Pakistan to facilitate contacts with the Taliban. This included visits to Kabul pre-2001 to meet Taliban leader Mullah Omar and offers by companies like Huawei to help build infrastructure in the country. But while this outreach was initially done behind the scenes, from 2014 onwards China started to openly host Taliban delegations in Urumqi and Beijing, while its special envoy for Afghanistan Sun Yuxi would help to organize meetings involving Pakistan, Afghanistan, the US, and China.

In addition, every senior visit by a Chinese official to Afghanistan was accompanied by photo calls with all of the major political leaders in the city. The result of all this engagement was statements by the Taliban that they would help protect Chinese infrastructure investments in the country, as well as regular support for Chinese perspectives by all factions in the Afghan government.

Neither the Taliban nor the Afghan government said that they would provide support for Uighur militant groups using Afghanistan as a base to launch attacks in China. In fact, both said that they would actively eject such groups from their territory.

All of this has given Beijing the sense of having effectively shielded itself from the Afghan conflict. It has hardened its direct and indirect borders and has won friends across the board.

Theoretically, China is well-placed no matter what happens in a post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

India, U.S. And The Uighurs

Yet this happy situation for China is now vulnerable to the broader tensions it has engendered through its recent aggressive foreign policy. Afghanistan used to

shine for China as a place where it could cooperate with even its most difficult partners. During the Obama years, China and the US had developed a series of cooperative projects in Afghanistan, including a diplomat training programme which involved courses in Beijing and Washington.

When President Xi Jinping and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi met first in Wuhan in April 2018 and then later near Chennai in October last year, they discussed Afghanistan as a place for cooperation, with infrastructure as a possible area of particular focus.

But the souring of ties with the US and India has largely put paid to these efforts. The Sino-US joint programme was suspended earlier in the year purportedly because of Covid-19 restrictions, but seems unlikely to start again. And anyway, any cooperative activity between the US and China in Afghanistan is going to be complicated by the fact that the US government made a decision in October this year to remove the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) from its list of terrorist organisations.

An organization whose specific existence has long been disputed, ETIM is the catch-all term used by the Chinese authorities to describe Uighur militants. For years the US had acceded to the group's inclusion on its list of banned terrorist groups, in part to ensure China's support for Washington's broader war against terrorism. But what Uighur militants do exist tend to use a different name, fighting in Afghanistan and Syria under the banner of the Turkestan Islamic Party. They talk about attacking China in their videos, and have historically claimed links to incidents in China (though the evidence of actual responsibility is limited).

Washington's decision to remove ETIM from its list of proscribed groups hardens the rupture between China and Washington in Afghanistan. One of Beijing's biggest stated concerns about Afghanistan is the possibility of Uighur militants operating as ETIM using the country as a staging point from which to attack China.

Yet now Washington does not even acknowledge that the organization exists, meaning it formally disputes one of the fundamental reasons for Chinese engagement in Afghanistan. For the US to reverse this decision would require the

State Department to push through legislation targeting Uighur militants at the same time as the entire US government is attacking China's broader policy towards Uighurs through an escalating sanctions regime.

India's position is less complicated, though it is unlikely that the government in Delhi will be very interested in engaging China over Afghanistan given current broader tensions as a result of the border clashes earlier this year.

The Taliban's continued hostility towards India as well as Pakistan's long shadow and close ties to China suggest it is unlikely that we will see cooperation between Delhi and Beijing soon. In fact, there are indications that we might even see the opposite.

Baluchistan Separatists

One of the irritants that China has noticed over the past few years is the growing instances of violence by Baloch separatist groups in Pakistan targeting Chinese projects in the country. These groups loudly tout their anger against Islamabad and Beijing, accusing them both of raping their land in Pakistan's Baluchistan province while launching attacks on prominent targets linked to China such as a busload of Chinese engineers, or a hotel in Gwadar (the Pakistani port that is spoken of as the "jewel" of the wider China Pakistan Economic Corridor). They do this from bases in Afghanistan, particularly in Kandahar.

Pakistani and increasingly Chinese experts blame much of this Baloch Separatists violence on Indians and their Afghan proxies. From their perspective, Delhi is playing an old game of manipulating militants based in Afghanistan against them. Place this activity alongside the American about ETIM, and it can look to Beijing like Afghanistan is becoming a place where two of its biggest adversaries are lining up to support anti-Chinese militant groups.

Whatever the merits of the accusations, the fact remains that Afghanistan's geography and porous borders make it an inviting base from which militant fighters can strike at Pakistan and Xinjiang province.

Taliban Promises

China may draw comfort from Taliban statements about not supporting foreign militants in using their territory, but the Taliban's history of reliability about such statements is quite thin.

Chinese officials and experts alike love to chuckle about how Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires. They point to the futility of previous British, Russian and now American efforts to assert their might over the country. They would never be so silly as to get caught in that trap, they say.

Yet simply standing back is not going to make Afghanistan's problems go away. China's large mineral extraction projects in Afghanistan (a copper mine in Mes Aynak and an oilfield in the north) have not brought the Afghans the benefits hoped for. Beijing cannot but be on the watchout for its adversaries latching on to local disgruntlement against failed projects to stoke a bigger backlash.

China may not want to get dragged into Afghanistan's troubles, but it may find itself unable to avoid them. Whether America completely withdraws or not, China will still be Afghanistan's wealthiest neighbour with growing economic interests in every country that Afghanistan borders. Its concerns about domestic and regional threats from terrorism and instability have links into the country.

Beijing may now be enjoying America's embarrassing withdrawal, but it is the one that is most likely to feel the longer-term repercussions.