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US Afghan Withdrawal: Enter China and Taliban?

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

After nearly 20 years of war, more than US\$2 trillion spent and 240,000 deaths including 2,312 US military personnel, the United States is withdrawing from Afghanistan with very little to show for its [massive investment](#). China, on the other hand, seems to have made inroads and possibly secured its interests.

COMMENTARY

DURING THE US intervention in Afghanistan, China kept a low profile. Sharing a border with Afghanistan, Beijing has always watched closely developments across. Notwithstanding its low profile, China had not been passive. While avoiding involvement in Afghanistan's politics, Beijing had focussed instead on economic opportunities.

As the US and NATO provided security, Chinese companies have been making inroads into the troubled country. As of 2020 China was the biggest foreign investor in Afghanistan, investing mainly in mining and infrastructure. In 2011 two Chinese state-owned companies signed an agreement with the Afghan government to invest US\$3.5 billion in an iron ore mine near the [capital Kabul](#). In the same year China's state-owned oil company, CNPC, began oil extraction in the Amu Darya basin, a [\\$700 million](#) investment. Afghanistan also has significant deposits of rare earth minerals.

Rare Earths & Beijing's Strategic Concerns

The country's rare earth minerals reserves are estimated at one million metric tonnes. Rare earth minerals are used in computers, smart phones, digital cameras and other advanced electronic equipment. They are also vital for the military industry. China

currently possesses the largest reserves of such minerals and has aggressively sought mining concessions throughout the world.

With a China-friendly regime, Afghanistan could play an important role in China's Belt and Road Initiative {BRI}. Afghanistan borders two important Chinese allies, Pakistan and Iran. Beijing hopes to connect these two countries via railroad through Afghanistan. An oil and gas pipeline from Iran passing through Afghanistan, Pakistan and into China has also been discussed.

Such a pipeline would reduce China's dependence on maritime sea lanes currently dominated by the US navy, including the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

While China economic interests have grown in Afghanistan, Beijing's motivation is not profit. China's main interests in Afghanistan are of a strategic and political nature. With the American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan to be completed by 31 August this year, most observers are predicting the rapid collapse of the [Afghan government](#). In the aftermath, the Taliban is expected to take control of most of the country.

China fears that instability in Afghanistan could spill over the border to its restive province of Xinjiang where Beijing is facing Uighur separatists, an ethnic Turkic Muslim people. Many Uighurs were captured by the US military while fighting in Afghanistan among the ranks of [Al Qaeda and IS](#).

Chinese authorities fear that Al Qaeda and IS could infiltrate the Taliban and assist Uighur separatists. Therefore, China is determined to build close ties with the Taliban and assist in the consolidation of its power. Beijing's quiet diplomacy seems to be working.

Security Considerations

In early July the Taliban announced that it saw China as a friend and an important partner in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The Taliban pledged not to allow Uighur militants to use its territory to [target China](#). China seems to be securing its main objective: stability along its border and the containment of Uighur militants.

Why would the Taliban, a movement whose goal is to create an Islamic republic in Afghanistan ruled by Sharia law, cooperate with a secular communist state? Afghanistan has been devastated by decades of war and it is among the poorest nations in the world.

The Taliban will need significant assistance to rebuild the country. Western countries and financial institutions are unlikely to assist. China, with its massive reserves of capital and close proximity to Afghanistan, can play a supporting role in the survival of a future Taliban government.

The country with the most influence over the Taliban is arguably Pakistan. Several US intelligence organisations and senior officials have for years linked Pakistan to the Taliban.

Some claimed that without Islamabad's support, the Taliban could not have become

as strong as they are today. Pakistan is said to have been providing money and training to the Taliban. More vital for the Taliban and its associates, Pakistan has provided sanctuary.

Filling in the Vacuum

Pakistan is China's closest and most reliable ally. Both sides describe their alliance as an "all weather relationship". China counts on its loyal ally to keep the Taliban friendly towards China. Some Western observers have suggested that China's engagement with a movement with a questionable human rights record is motivated by a desire to protect Beijing's strategic interests.

The fact of the matter is that China and its ally Pakistan could contribute to stabilising Afghanistan and moderating the Taliban. Al Qaeda and IS in particular have gained ground in Afghanistan and are trying to infiltrate the Taliban. The Taliban are the strongest force in Afghanistan today and are quite likely to take control of the country in the near future.

These are the facts on the ground. China has chosen to face them without any hypocritical moral sermons. After all President Trump did invite the Taliban to the White House. Ironically, if China fills the vacuum left by the US, it is to the benefit of all, including the US and its allies.

Loro Horta is a diplomat from Timor Leste. He is a graduate of the People's Liberation Army National Defence University senior officers course, the US Naval Post Graduate School, the American National Defence University and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. The views expressed here are strictly his own.

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