

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

### Beijing's Strategic Moments with Taliban: Policy, Strategy and Worldview

*Jagannath P. Panda*

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#### *Summary*

The future of geo-political security and power-balancing in the Middle-East/West Asia and regions adjacent to South and Central Asia is at present being drawn in Afghanistan. Post the US troops' withdrawal, the Taliban have returned to power for a second time after two decades in Kabul. This issue brief evaluates the role and behavioural approach of China towards Taliban in a rapidly changing Afghanistan. In specific, the brief examines Beijing's policy, evolving strategic outlook and evaluates its growing worldview vis-à-vis Taliban. The brief essentially concludes that while the ascent of Taliban is not unfavourable to Beijing, it remains an outcome that Beijing would not have liked to see realised in the way that it did. Beijing's threat perception of what Afghanistan under Taliban could mean for its own national security is looked at keeping in mind the broader political Islam outlook.

## Introduction

The testimony of a great power is drawn on how a power responds, handles or deals with a crisis or sudden development that brings opportunities as well as challenges. The current developments (or crisis) in Afghanistan, resulting from the US troops' withdrawal, are indeed testing the "greatness" of the Chinese power, pushing its *policy, strategy* and *worldview vis-à-vis* the Taliban, Afghanistan and the wider Islamic world into the spotlight. In fact, in contrast to its already accumulated "great power" image and presence in world politics, China is still a newly emerging power in Afghanistan—even though there is a strong historically rich connection between China and Afghanistan (or Middle East/West Asia) given their emerging alignment. Beijing's stance on the country's political crisis and its approach towards the Taliban regime taking the reins in Afghanistan is a critical variable that will shape the geometrics of the China–Taliban–Pakistan nexus versus India and the West (if not the rest). Moreover, as India tries to navigate the waters in Afghanistan, which had become a crucial partner over the past two decades, and manages its response to the Taliban, the China factor will continue to feature in (if not shape) New Delhi's Taliban question.

This issue brief examines Beijing's policy outlook, strategic approach and worldview towards Taliban to understand the prevalence of emerging Chinese power in Afghanistan. *Firstly*, the brief looks at Beijing's position on the Taliban in the evolutionary or historical context to understand how it traditionally perceived the extremist grouping. Based on this context, the issue brief then examines China's response to the Taliban today to explicate how its low-key engagement or position in Afghanistan has changed as the country has become exceedingly important strategically. It argues that while the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan could be a strategic leverage for China *vis-à-vis* its great power competition with the US—and therefore bring several far-reaching geo-political benefits for China in the West Asia/Middle East and wider Islamic world—Beijing is likely to take a cautious approach amid its own grave concerns of how the Taliban may destabilise the region (and resort to violent or even terrorist activities if the situation demands). In other words, while the incoming of the Taliban may be a positive development when looked at through a distorted lens of US–China great power rivalry,<sup>1</sup> and could even help Beijing promote and pursue its interests in the region, it is not entirely a rosy picture as China must simultaneously grapple with the possibility of a conflict spill over, particularly in its Xinjiang province, and handle prudently the wider Islamic world that the Taliban is an integral part of.

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<sup>1</sup> This argument is also briefly explicated in a commentary by Michael Clarke published on the East Asia Forum. See Michael Clarke, **"Taliban Takeover is Bad News for China"**, *East Asia Forum*, 26 August 2021.

## China's Tryst with Taliban: 1996–2001

To understand Beijing's perception and stance on the Taliban, it is vital to look at China's relationship with the Taliban in an evolutionary or historical context. Even as the Western world focused on Afghanistan as an epicentre for regional rivalries and struggle for influence in Central Asia post the Cold War, China's stance towards the country (including the period 1996–2001 when it was led by the Taliban) has been somewhat reserved and low key. China's involvement in Afghanistan comes as a direct neighbour of the country: its border meets with Afghanistan along the end of the Wakhan Corridor, in the northwest of the Chinese autonomous province of Xinjiang. Accordingly, Beijing's principal interest has been to prevent the conflict in Afghanistan from destabilising Xinjiang.<sup>2</sup> During the era of Soviet occupation, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) provided support (in terms of training, arms, military advisors and finances) to the mujahideen resistance alongside the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>3</sup> Several thousands of these mujahideen militants were trained in camps inside Xinjiang; China also provided them with considerably high-grade equipment including machine guns and surface-to-air missiles worth up to US\$ 400 million.<sup>4</sup> By the time the Afghan mujahideen formed the Taliban in the early 1990s, China already shared a connection with the grouping. Therefore, when the Taliban came to power in 1996, Beijing chose to engage (albeit a low level engagement) with the group via diplomatic channels as a way to ensure safety and stability at its border.

Further, during the period of Taliban's rule from 1996 till 2001, China and Taliban saw some low level economic and technical cooperation.<sup>5</sup> Some accounts suggest that after the US' cruise missile attack on Afghani militant bases, Beijing reached out to the Taliban to offer Chinese support in the form of access to a missile computer guidance system.<sup>6</sup> As the Taliban strengthened their hold over the country, Beijing signed a military pact to train Afghan (and therefore, Taliban) pilots in 1998, and an economic cooperation agreement in 1999.<sup>7</sup> However, this outreach was driven not by a synergy in China–Taliban ties, but rather by China's belief that improved ties would

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<sup>2</sup> **"How Big a Security Threat Does China Face as Taliban Draws Closer to Border with Xinjiang?"**, *Global Times*, 13 July 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Bartholomew, **2009 Report to Congress of the US China Economic and Security Review Commission**, Washington, Diane Publishing, 2010, p. 212.

<sup>4</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, New York, M. E. Sharp, 2004, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> No. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Imrana Begum, **"Chinese Growing Diplomatic, Strategic and Economic Interest in Afghanistan"**, *Pakistan Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 2, July–December 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Hamid Wahed Alikuzai, *From Aryana-Khorasan to Afghanistan: Afghanistan History*, Trafford Publishing, 2011, p. 345; Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region*, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p. 191.

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help control illicit activity (including acts of terrorism and drug trafficking) and discourage the Taliban from providing support to Uyghur Muslim rebels in Xinjiang—which China considered a major internal security threat. In fact, after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Xinjiang province came to share a border with eight states—five of which were Islamic—making Beijing wary of the support that they could provide to Muslim or Islamic rebellion within Xinjiang.

In essence, Beijing's diplomatic outreach—setting up of an embassy in Kabul and meeting with Taliban head Mullah Omar in 2000<sup>8</sup>—was aimed at gaining assurances that Taliban would refrain from training or harbouring Uyghurs in Afghanistan, such as with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).<sup>9</sup> In return, Taliban hoped for Beijing's support in preventing sanctions against the regime and a formal recognition of their government. This give-and-take deal failed as the Taliban refused to entirely expel ETIM (even though they did handover 13 Uyghurs to China) and Beijing refused to block sanctions.<sup>10</sup>

Notably, in a sign of China's wariness and lack of trust in the Taliban regime, Beijing proposed and took forward an “anti-Islamic-fundamentalist alliance” with Central Asian states—Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—to “isolate the Islamic revolt in Xinjiang and prevent movement of Muslim rebels across the region's borders”.<sup>11</sup> By 1996, as Kabul fell to the Taliban (sending shock waves across the region), the Sino-Central Asian alliance evolved as the “Shanghai Five”,<sup>12</sup> aimed at securing their borders, controlling religious extremist forces and building confidence between Beijing and the former Soviet satellite states. In 2001, China led the path towards this alliance's formal institutionalisation as the Shanghai Cooperation

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<sup>8</sup> Rupert Stone, **“The Odd Couple: China's Deepening Relationship with the Taliban”**, *TRT World*, 2 August 2019.

<sup>9</sup> The ETIM is also known as Turkistan Islamic Movement. It is primarily a group formed by radical or rebellious Uyghurs, aimed at not only establishing an autonomous “East Turkestan” but also better rights and privileges for the self-determination of the ethnic Uyghur community in Xinjiang.

<sup>10</sup> No. 8.

<sup>11</sup> No. 3.

<sup>12</sup> “Shanghai Five” originally consisted of China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Its main aim was to address border demarcation and promote demilitarisation talks between/among its constituent members. China took a lead with the “Shanghai Five”, and expanded the grouping to a pan-multilateral grouping in 2001 with the name of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). See Bates Gill, **“Shanghai Five: An Attempt to Counter U.S. Influence in Asia?”**, *Brookings*, 4 May 2001; also read Tyler Roney, **“The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China's NATO?”**, *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2013.

Organisation (SCO). Gradually, China operated through the SCO to maximise its economic and security interests in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup>

## A Pragmatic Hedging Strategy Post 9/11

The 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States, was a game changer as Beijing's formal Taliban engagement and hedging strategy could no longer be sustainable. China outwardly supported the US war on terror, even as it continued to maintain informal and clandestine links with the Taliban via Pakistan. These links have principally aimed to serve Chinese economic interests in the region with an eye to maintaining stability in Xinjiang. For instance, reports suggested that the Taliban may have received Chinese-made weapons via Iran,<sup>14</sup> while analysts raised suspicions that the Haqqani-led group had intentionally kept attacks away from Chinese infrastructure projects (like the MesAynak copper mine outside Kabul, in which China invested US\$ 3 billion in 2007 under a 30-year lease agreement<sup>15</sup>).

Such a pragmatic hedging strategy follows from China's broader approach of balance towards the West Asia/Middle East, where it has sought to build somewhat equi-cordial ties with all states. Beijing not only shares a comprehensive strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia,<sup>16</sup> United Arab Emirates,<sup>17</sup> and Iran<sup>18</sup> simultaneously, but also maintains ties with Israel and Palestinians. Accordingly, China's involvement in Afghanistan was dictated by the economic opportunities in the region, which remained slim amid the first decade of US presence in the country and widespread issues of corruption and political instability. In other words, China had "limited goals" in Afghanistan: although it was interested in containing the security threat that the internal conflict of the country presented, it was unwilling to participate in any military effort in the country.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Afghanistan became an observer of the SCO during the June 2011 Astana Summit. See Jagannath P. Panda, **"China or the SCO: Who will Supervise Afghanistan?"**, *China Brief*, 12 August 2011.

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

<sup>15</sup> Mariam Amini, **"China's Plan to Mine for Copper Beneath an Ancient City Gets Thrown Off by Corruption Charges"**, *CNBC*, 6 April 2017.

<sup>16</sup> **"KSA, China Agree on Strategic Partnership"**, *Arab News*, 21 January 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Nick Webster, **"UAE and China Declare Deep Strategic Partnership as State Visit Ends"**, *The National News*, 12 August 2018.

<sup>18</sup> **"Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China"**, President of Iran, 23 January 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Zhao Huasheng and Andrew C. Kuchins, **"China and Afghanistan: China's Interests, Stances and Perspectives"**, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2012.

In the last few years however, this has gradually changed as Beijing has moved from a periphery actor to one with strong influence in Afghanistan's future, emerging as a critical actor. This increased involvement can be attributed to two reasons: *First*, with the Obama administration's announcement that the US would withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by 2014, Beijing was faced with a real possibility of a resurgence of instability and terrorism at its borders. In fact, China began meeting with the Taliban regularly,<sup>20</sup> under a pragmatic strategy to foster favourable ties with all factions in Afghanistan in anticipation of a US withdrawal. China-Taliban summits in 2018<sup>21</sup> and 2019<sup>22</sup> saw a growing association between both the countries, as the Trump administration negotiated a peace deal with the Taliban. Notably, the nine-member Taliban delegation travelled to China to seek Beijing's advice on Trump's proposed deal for a peace framework—demonstrating China's considerable influence over the Islamist group.<sup>23</sup> *Second*, to realise Xi Jinping's dream of “national rejuvenation” of the Chinese kingdom, Beijing has embarked on a grand strategy that seeks to firmly establish China as a global great power. It has thus undertaken not only expanded economic engagement and developmental aid lending, but also an expansion of security interests to protect such investments. This further extended China's geo-political clout. Deepening engagement with Afghanistan came under such a strategic calculus, albeit with a degree of pragmatism.

### Legitimising Taliban?

Since the rapid US withdrawal from Afghanistan under President Joe Biden, Beijing has been forthcoming (rather welcomed) in its support to the Taliban regime in the country. It is important to note that China's positive overture is a special case: Beijing is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Notably, on 28 July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met a visiting Taliban delegation, led by head of its political committee Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin—marking the first time Beijing engaged in such high-level diplomacy with the group in the recent past openly.<sup>24</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, highlighted at a press conference on 16 August that Beijing had maintained contact with the Taliban and

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<sup>20</sup> Yun Sun, **“China's Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan”**, *War on the Rocks*, 8 April 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Farhan Bokhari, Kiran Stacey and Emily Feng, **“China Courted Afghan Taliban in Secret Meetings”**, *Financial Times*, 6 August 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Rupam Jain, **“Afghanistan's Taliban Meets Chinese Government in Beijing”**, *Reuters*, 22 September 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> **“Wang Yi Meets with Head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar”**, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 28 July 2021.



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played a “constructive role in promoting the political settlement of the Afghan issue”.<sup>25</sup> She further added that China “hoped” for a smooth transition in Afghanistan and that the Taliban would implement its promise of forming an “inclusive Islamic government”.<sup>26</sup> For Beijing, an “inclusive Islamic government” is not to denounce an Islamic government but to advocate that it should be a government that must adhere or promote peace and stability, and more importantly, facilitating Chinese interests and conditions. In fact, Beijing has repeatedly urged the Taliban to cut all links with any terrorist organisation—particularly the “anti-China” ETIM—to ensure that Afghanistan does not again resort to becoming a haven for terrorists.<sup>27</sup> Taliban, for its part, has been more media-savvy and presented a more modern image (perceived as Taliban 2.0) to its international audiences (even if few believe they will stand by their promises). Yet, China (and Pakistan) is likely to recognise the Taliban as the legitimate ruling faction in Afghanistan, according to intelligence assessments by the US, and hope that they create conditions that enable security, stability and development in the region.<sup>28</sup> Amidst many other factors, such recognition will be heavily dependent upon what kind of Taliban-led government is formed in Kabul; and importantly, the kind of understanding or nexus unfolding between China and Taliban (protecting Chinese interest), perhaps including Pakistan.

Therefore, in essence, despite its apprehensions over a resurgence of instability due to Taliban-supported terrorism, Beijing has officially stated that it is prepared to work with the Taliban.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it should be noted that dealing with the Taliban has not only been a matter of convenience and necessity for China but a part of an astute strategy. Beijing no doubt realises that the Taliban is the only group that has successfully fought both the US and Russia—at the height of their powers—and continues to survive if not thrive today.<sup>30</sup> If Beijing can effectively control the Taliban’s more extremist actions and secure assurances of its support in restricting the ETIM and Uyghur “rebellion”, a Taliban-led Afghanistan can prove to be an

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<sup>25</sup> **“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on August 16, 2021”**, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Finland, 16 August 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ayaz Gul, **“China Urges Afghan Taliban to Cut Ties with All Terrorists”**, *VOA News*, 28 July 2021; also see, **“China Warns Taliban against Afghanistan Again Becoming ‘Haven’ for Terror Groups”**, *India Today*, 17 August 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Paul D. Shinkman, **“China Preparing to Recognize Taliban if Kabul Falls: Sources”**, *US News*, 12 August 2021; also see, Derek Grossman, **“Chinese Recognition of the Taliban Is All but Inevitable”**, *Foreign Policy*, 27 August 2021.

<sup>29</sup> No. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Deon Canyon and Srinu Sitaraman, **“China's Global Security Aspirations with Afghanistan and the Taliban”**, *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies*, 2020.

effective ally, and its entry to solidifying ties with the Islamic world, enriching the Chinese Communist Party's worldview. This willingness to engage with the Taliban is first and foremost drawn (and heavily) on China's great power competition with the US. Unlike before, when China could feasibly stay out of Afghanistan and make it a low-priority in its national strategy, engagement with the country is now becoming an important part of Beijing's efforts to credibly establish itself as the unparalleled great power (if not superpower) in the region.

Previously, China's interest in Afghanistan was low key not only because of the turmoil in the nation, but also because it was unwilling to play a "subordinate role" in the nation under the dominance of the US.<sup>31</sup> Besides, Beijing had to prioritise focusing towards Central Asia, Northeast Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia including South Asia in order to build its authoritative base across Asia. Now, however, US' withdrawal has created a vacuum, and therefore, a huge space that Beijing can move into. Its history of engagement with the Taliban under a hedging strategy has paid off, and could enable China to make a substantial base in West Asia/Middle East outside of its ties with Iran—although this will depend on whether China–Taliban ties continue to evolve and move in a positive trajectory. China has first-hand experience of the Taliban continuing to tacitly support Uyghurs and the ETIM and it will be wary of the group resorting to such tactics once it has received recognition from Beijing. China's consideration of the Taliban's legitimacy is also drawn on a desire to show up the US on the international stage while expanding its own sphere of influence. Afghanistan's geographical position is strategically vital for China as it offers a chance to further strengthen Beijing's regional position. The expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Trans-Himalayan Connectivity Network (THCN) into Afghanistan can give Beijing an added pathway to expand its Eurasian base, by extending the outreach to the Gulf states, and further, Europe and Africa.<sup>32</sup> In other words, legitimising Taliban has enormous implications for the region and power politics.

## Beijing's Worldview vis-à-vis the Taliban

Beijing is seeing the Taliban takeover as a new beginning, a strategic opportunity, and perhaps more importantly, an entry to solidify its position and impression among the Islamic world. For long, due to its repressive measures against the Uyghurs in

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<sup>31</sup> No. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Officially, China uses the term "West Asia" to imply "Middle East". The Chinese government has a Department of West Asian and North African Affairs under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, there are occasions and instances when the Chinese government and strategic communities have used both "West Asia" and "Middle East" interchangeably, as per their convenience. Keeping the complexities of the issues in hand and the region itself, this *Issue Brief* is using both West Asia and Middle East at the same occasion.



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Xinjiang and adjacent regions, China's approach towards the Islamic community has been questioned in the wider Islamic world.<sup>33</sup> Though Beijing has continuously expanded its relationship with countries in the West Asia/Middle East, including solidifying its ties with Iran (and Pakistan in South Asia), Chinese power is yet to emerge as an effective (or credible) power in the mind of the wider Islamic world. A stronger connection with the Taliban might allow China to build credence gradually in this regard. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Beijing is emerging as a "crucial supporter"<sup>34</sup> of Taliban-led Afghanistan. To what extent Beijing could build its strategic confidence, strategic base and support-system with a religiously motivated radical (authoritarian) regime—the Taliban—that would not export extremism or terrorism, and would facilitate its ever-expanding Eurasian reach by tying South Asia, West Asia/Middle East and Central Asia, needs to be seen.

Moreover, it is becoming obviously clear that Beijing's approach towards Afghanistan will pursue a "mercantilist" outlook wherein it will execute its economic investment interests to fill the power vacuum that the West is leaving behind in the country.<sup>35</sup> Beijing's target would be to make the Taliban regime economically dependent on China, therein effectively limiting Western dependency of Kabul; such strategy has worked in the past with respect to China–North Korea ties as well. A potent example of this is that since 2018 itself, China has been seeking to extend its flagship BRI project, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), into Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup> Strategic assets in Taxkorgan, Wakhan and Gwadar will highly aid China's economic and political global outreach. With Taliban saying they "welcome" Chinese investments, talks to successfully extend CPEC into Afghanistan have seen positive progress recently.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, the China–Pakistan "iron" brotherhood will allow Islamabad to emerge as a trump card for Beijing in its outreach to Kabul. Ultimately, China could achieve more infrastructure-driven success than the US in Afghanistan on the grounds of its extensive leverage with Pakistan. However, China is unlikely to push the BRI haphazardly in an unstable Afghanistan: some semblance of peace before such an

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<sup>33</sup> "**Eradicating Ideological Viruses' China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims**", *Human Rights Watch*, 9 September 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Ian Johnson, "**How Will China Deal With the Taliban?**", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 24 August 2021.

<sup>35</sup> "**Is China Mercantilist?**", *National Bureau of Economic Research*, December 2005; see also, Fu-Lai Tony Yu, "**Neo-Mercantilist Policy and China's Rise as a Global Power**", in Fu-Lai Tony Yu and Diana S. Kwan (eds), *Contemporary Issues in International Political Economy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Ayaz Gul, "**China, Pakistan Seeking CPEC Extension to Afghanistan**", *VOA News*, 1 November 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Xie Jun and Chu Daye, "**Extension of CPEC into Afghanistan to Boost Local Exports, Journey of Peace: Analysts**", *Global Times*, 13 July 2021.

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investment is crucial to China. Taliban's return to power could mark an increased presence of ISIS—which has already shown its presence in the country via two suicide bomb attacks at Kabul airport in the week following Taliban's return<sup>38</sup>—and Uyghur extremists which could trickle into China itself via the Wakhan Corridor, posing instability challenges in China's Xinjiang.

Importantly, Beijing has its own insecurities over rehashing US' mistakes in the country especially as it is openly targeting the same following the return of Taliban.<sup>39</sup> The Islamophobia<sup>40</sup> driven by the Chinese government's crackdown in Xinjiang has likewise caused some blowback against working with the Taliban. The past Afghan government had at one point been re-examining relations<sup>41</sup> with Beijing in the wake of finding out that China worked with the Haqqani network, a conspicuous psychological militant gathering, to find Uyghurs inside Afghanistan. The same Haqqani network has now been placed responsible for security in Kabul.<sup>42</sup> For Beijing, the bigger challenge will be to deal with a "fractious Afghanistan", particularly when the Taliban have a sympathetic and supportive stance towards an extremist Islamist group that has backed and offered sanctuary to Al-Qaeda.<sup>43</sup> In this context, for countries like India, a major threat of the Taliban takeover is probably going to be Chinese intelligence extending its impressive ties with its Pakistani partners.<sup>44</sup>

Overall, Beijing's policies towards Afghanistan highlight its worldview on global leadership wherein it is poised to place its national interests over human security and human rights.<sup>45</sup> While Beijing hopes for a weaker US, its presence in Afghanistan will reflect how it will balance its revisionist tendencies against what the world will view as the "greater good". Beijing's emphasis that the Taliban break away from terror activities and become a political faction (Taliban 2.0) is driven by this recognition itself. Beijing would not want to lose an opportunity to strengthen its presence in

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<sup>38</sup> Jason Burke, **"Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Kabul Airport Blasts"**, *The Guardian*, 26 August 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Derek Grossman, **"China and the Taliban Begin Their Romance"**, *Foreign Policy*, 21 July 2021; read also, Azeem Ibrahim, **"China Won't Repeat America's Mistakes in Afghanistan"**, *Foreign Policy*, 17 August 2021.

<sup>40</sup> James Palmer, **"China's Muslims Brace for Attacks"**, *Foreign Policy*, 5 January 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Lynne O'Donnell, **"Afghanistan Wanted Chinese Mining Investment. It Got a Chinese Spy Ring Instead"**, *Foreign Policy*, 27 January 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Jamie Dettmer, **"Hardline Haqqani Network Put in Charge of Kabul Security"**, *VOA News*, 19 August 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Emily Feng and John Ruwitch, **"Here's What A Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan May Mean For China"**, *NPR*, 23 August 2021.

<sup>44</sup> **"Pakistan's Support of the Taliban"**, *Human Rights Watch*.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Schuman, **"An 'Early Test Case' for a China-Led World"**, *The Atlantic*, 24 August 2021.

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Afghanistan—and West Asia/Middle East and South Asia—and make it increasingly a part of its broader “Eurasia” game plan, and aim to excel where Washington did not.

Afghanistan will be crucial to China's Eurasian outreach as well and its potential legitimisation of governance via a possible full inclusion in China-led ventures like the SCO cannot be entirely ruled out even though it looks far away at present. China's fear is associated with the radical groups in Xinjiang and in adjacent regions in Central Asia, particularly with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that have possibly close linkages with the Uyghurs. Should the Taliban be able to assuage Chinese fears on this front by striking some deal, the recognition of Taliban by China may be swift. While Taliban-related issues will undoubtedly test Beijing's evolving worldview *vis-à-vis* the Islamic world, it is emerging as the main defender or campaigner as P-5 member of the UNSC to internationalise and legitimise the Taliban as a political group, and more importantly, helping Afghanistan to become an “Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan” under the Taliban.

## About the Author



**Dr Jagannath P. Panda** is Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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