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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

EAI COMMENTARY

No. 36 30 September 2021

Does China Have Unique Advantages in Afghanistan? Risks and Opportunities for Beijing's Long Game

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CHINA IS NOT A NEW ENTRANT TO AFGHANISTAN

China's experience in Afghanistan can be directly traced all the way back to the Tang Dynasty in the eighth century. During this period, China exerted direct control over Afghanistan before being defeated in the Battle of Talas against the Abbasid Caliphate in 751. In the contemporary period, China also has decades of experience working with various factions that constitute Afghanistan today.

During the 1979 Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan, China (like the United States) provided weapons to the various Mujahideen groups. Several of these groups morphed into the Taliban and the Haqqani Network after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. While the United States declared victory and left, China remained engaged with the Taliban even after it conquered Kabul in 1996 and officially founded the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

For example, then-Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, met former Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar in November 2000 primarily to obtain pledges that Uyghur militants would not be allowed to utilise Afghanistan to carry out attacks in Xinjiang. This meeting occurred while Mullah Omar was an internationally designated terrorist with a reward of up to US\$10 million being offered by the United States for his capture.

The strategic rationale of China's engagement with the Taliban has remained consistent over time. China seeks to:

- keep perceived hostile influences out of Afghanistan
- secure privileged access to Afghanistan's vast mineral deposits, including rare earths and
- establish a land bridge running through to Iran and the rest of the Middle East.

Despite possessing the strategic vision and diplomatic flexibility to work with the Taliban, China has yet to achieve any of the aforementioned objectives. China's recent commitment of US\$31 million of emergency aid to Afghanistan should be viewed as a cautious preliminary step under new ground conditions. However, in 2021 China faces roughly the same set of challenges and constraints that it had faced in previous decades.

GOVERNING AFGHANISTAN: CHALLENGES FACED

Afghanistan is one of the most highly fragmented countries in the world with a kaleidoscope of languages, ethnicities, tribal affiliations and religious differences. The Taliban is not a unifier in any concrete sense: it is a Pashtun tribal faction that originates from Kandahar province in the South and includes practically no other groups from within Afghanistan. Several other Pashtun groupings actively oppose the Taliban.

The Taliban has never been able and is unlikely to provide a stable government in Afghanistan. It is doubtful that it could create the combined stable and predictable political, economic and security conditions that allow the type of long-term fixed investment that China seeks for resource extraction and infrastructure projects.

Real Chinese investment in Afghanistan has remained in the low single-digit millions (US Dollar equivalent) even with the heavy American and NATO conventional security presence across the country. China appears to be taking a more incremental, cautious approach. There is currently no evidence that China is actively attempting to exert greater strategic influence over Afghanistan, either independently or in concert with Pakistan.

IMMEDIATE FEE-FOR-SERVICE SUCCESS, MEDIUM-TERM CHALLENGES

China has developed methods for executing local projects in western Pakistan near the Afghan border, a Pashtun-majority area. Most of these methods will not scale to Afghanistan for a range of reasons, such as the lack of security, which in the case of Pakistan is provided by the heavy Pakistani military presence in Pashtun regions. China could achieve some modest results that can be virtually guaranteed through localised cash payments or other straightforward near-term inducements to Taliban faction leaders or even other militias.

Therefore, initial modest production was reported in some Chinese-operated assets, such as the Mes Aynak mine. There are also media stories circulating that the Taliban is looking for an international partner to operate the American-abandoned Bagram Air Base. Given China's consistent track record of engagement in Afghanistan over time, it is realistic to suggest that the Taliban may offer this opportunity to China. Such initial developments may give rise to the notion that Chinese dominance in Afghanistan is inevitable and feasible due to China's unique approach and capabilities. However, these initial tactical successes may prove to be short-lived and unable to translate into long-term strategic gains.

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The Bagram Air Base is of limited economic utility for the type of extractive industry opportunities that Afghanistan offers. It is also too close to Hamid Karzai International Airport in central Kabul to be commercially viable on its own. While the Mes Aynak mine has enormous wealth potential underneath the ground, it is not near any heavy rail or other transportation infrastructure that would enable cost-effective access to markets.

Given the tribal fragmentation and constant state of violence across Afghanistan, it is unlikely that this infrastructure will be developed at the scale required. China's Pakistan-style approach of hiring local groups to secure assets with conventional military backing is likely to fail in Afghanistan. The Taliban's capabilities to protect assets fall well short of those of the Pakistan Army and, even after the Taliban has overthrown the previous government, the country is far from a centralised state.

WHAT IS ACHIEVABLE FOR CHINA IN AFGHANISTAN?

China's primary focus on Afghanistan will likely settle on two security-related areas: counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics. China appears intent on preventing the establishment of organisations in Afghanistan that Beijing believes pose threats to China such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. So far, the Taliban leadership in Kabul is positioning itself as a willing partner for the pursuit of these goals. How sustainable this willingness will be is conditioned heavily on China's continued economic engagement in the country. If China is unable to provide the type of infrastructure and market access for Afghanistan to move up the value chain, this Taliban support could wither.

Afghanistan also remains as one of the world's leading producers of opium poppy. The illicit revenues of opium have supported the Taliban's insurrection and permeated all aspects of the domestic economy. Opium poppy is an ideal wartime crop in that it requires very little water, fertiliser, or other expensive inputs. Despite marketing themselves as devout religious warriors, the Taliban and myriad foreign terrorist groups in Afghanistan control the full spectrum of these activities, from supply to distribution. While China has not officially expressed its concerns in this area, Beijing has a strong interest in avoiding the drug addiction and associated destabilisation that several of Afghanistan's neighbours have experienced.

China is likely to be both unwilling and unable to establish the previous American-style dominant position in Afghanistan. Beijing will need to deftly manage the relatively narrow and localised economic and security interests in direct partnership with the Taliban under a more cooperative model. This approach will have to differ fundamentally from previous Western and Soviet approaches to the Taliban that occurred while these powers were occupiers in the country. While China has proved adept at managing complex situations from Democratic Republic of Congo to Pakistan, Afghanistan will likely present a unique set of challenges.

EVENTUAL REVERSION TO THE HISTORICAL NORM: CHINA FOLLOWS A SIMILAR PATH AS THE WEST

There is little evidence to suggest that China possesses unique capabilities, leverage, relationships, or other advantages that could defy the trend of history in Afghanistan. While China may achieve some initial localised successes, Beijing will likely collide head-on with the immovable, centuries-old tribal, ethnic and religious structures that have generated present-day Afghanistan. As such, China may find itself more narrowly focusing on immediate security risks with Taliban partners who are becoming increasingly unpredictable

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and possibly unwilling to continue to accommodate Beijing. In such a scenario, China risks following a similar path as that taken by Western countries and Soviets who came and went before them in Afghanistan.

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