

CHINA AND AFGHANISTAN IN THE NEW ERA

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan creates a geopolitical vacuum, which will be fraught with vast security consequences for the region around. The ensuing dilemma is multidimensional, which means that each country in the region has specific interests in Afghanistan's future. Here China holds a special role.

Prof. Emil Avdaliani

European University, Tbilisi, Georgia

China fears repercussions from US' hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan; rise of extremism may threaten Beijing's hold on Xinjiang and undermine Chinese general security in Central Asia. But US' exit also brings benefits. Chinese peacebuilding agenda would mean intensified cooperation with Iran, Pakistan, and Russia to build an order of exclusion to side-line the collective West.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan creates a geopolitical vacuum, which will be fraught with vast security consequences for the region around. The ensuing dilemma is multidimensional, which means that each country in the region has specific interests in Afghanistan's future. Here China holds a special role. Its interests in Afghanistan with which it has more than 80 km long border have grown complex in the last decade. For Beijing Afghanistan serves both as a geographic corridor and fertile ground where potential security threats could emerge and threaten China's hold over its restive Xinjiang province and Central Asia – both critical to China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China has benefited from American presence in the region for it served as a bulwark against Islamist extremism while allowing Beijing to cement its position in Xinjiang. Second, the presence of US and NATO forces in

Afghanistan allowed Beijing to spread the BRI to Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province and Central Asia. This might no longer be the case. Finally, the US presence in Afghanistan did not expose China directly to the jihadist threat; jihadist threat to China has often been rhetorical. With the US exit from Afghanistan, this dynamic is likely to change.

No wonder then, if nearly 20 years ago China was lukewarm about the US invasion, now Beijing is worried about the swift American withdrawal; if the exit will not immediately resuscitate the Taliban's self-styled theocratic rule, it will definitely usher in the 'three evil forces' of separatism, religious extremism and terrorism that Beijing has been fighting.¹ It should also be noted that China also fears the US' withdrawal from the Middle East and Afghanistan might pull China into the Afghan conundrum thus serving a major American goal, that is, distracting China from other regions, most notably, the South and East China seas.

From a long-term perspective US's exit signals a shift in Washington's foreign policy away from the Middle East and South Central Asia to the Indo-Pacific region. Essentially America is minding the limits of its military potential. The US sees that outcompeting China in the heart



of Eurasia is a self-defeating geopolitical goal. What the US managed to accomplish so far has been exceptional for a sea power. It penetrated deep into Eurasia, into hostile lands which rarely, if ever, were tamed even by continental powers both in antiquity or middle ages. American expansion into Afghanistan thus represented a historical anomaly. It could not continue for long without expanded cooperation with the neighboring states, which was not the case.

In a way, with its withdrawal, the US is freeing the space for China, Russia and other Eurasian powers to fill in the gap and to spend resources. The US withdrawal deviates these powers' attention from other critical theaters where the US faces stiff resistance. Beijing is worried about American withdrawal for security reasons. A longer term perspective too disturbs the minds in Chinese political leadership. America that is barely able to contain China in the South China Sea, frees a space for Beijing to dedicate its energy and resources to. Afghanistan could be such a distraction. Indeed, it was the US, its allies in the Pacific region and the competition which they offered that drove China to seek alternative trade routes. Thence the Belt and Road Initiative was established. In Chinese minds, the American exit could be a similar ploy to draw Chinese resources and attention from other regions.

The emerging power vacuum in Afghanistan would allow China to become more active in the region. As argued, America's withdrawal can be a clever geopolitical move to entice China since as history shows no sole power was ever able to control the space from China to the Mediterranean for a long period of time. Even the Mongols, who managed to unify this expanse, quickly saw their empire divided into four warring parts and eventually fading away. Why would the Chinese be able to succeed? Beijing has larger resources than any other power in Eurasia. It has better chances to triumph, but it would be facing a myriad of problems from terrorism to nationalism and to competition from other powers. In the end, its fate is likely to follow the path of previous similar unsuccessful attempts to influence and effectively control the depths of Eurasia from one center.

If the withdrawal from Afghanistan is a ploy used by the US, it is very similar to what sea powers do when it comes to preventing continental powers from dominating entire continents. For instance, Great Britain stopped Napoleon's France by essentially cutting the country from the sea and pushing it into the depths of the European continent. How this ended is all well known. In the 20th century the US managed to stop the Soviet Union by navigating Soviet expansionism to tricky places such as Afghanistan.

Benefits of Withdrawal

The US withdrawal presents China with certain opportunities, as well. Though cooperation with Afghanistan lagged behind what Beijing envisioned (by the end of 2017 Beijing had only \$400 million of investments), the geopolitical vacuum in the country may provide a necessary momentum to China for expanding its economic presence through the BRI projects. This would allow Beijing to create an overland connection to another element of the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which links a strategic port on the Arabian Sea to highways that lead north across the Himalayas².

Afghanistan's economic lure is hard to ignore; its mineral riches are valued by \$1 to \$3 trillion. Furthermore, China may set sight on the unexplored Afghan oil reserves, standing at approximately 1,596 million barrels, and natural gas reserves of nearly 15,687 trillion cubic feet³.

Another advantage of America's exit is China's likely use of Afghanistan as a testing ground for the promotion of alternative peacebuilding and security measures to settle the conflict. Western military presence as well as security and peace initiatives will likely be replaced by China's order of exclusion, where non-regional, mostly Western liberal states, will be side-lined from participating in peacebuilding and security provision along China's borders. Chinese version of peacebuilding would also likely involve an agreement with Eurasia's like-minded states such as Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Central Asian states as junior partners. They are now forming the illiberal movement where the Westphalian concept of primacy and inviolability of the state borders and internal governance model are feverishly upheld. This sentiment was echoed in the initial reaction to the US announcement by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi who argued that Beijing supports the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and is ready to help promote future 'stability and development.'

Putting Boots on the Ground – Unlikely

As the US withdrew, the main question posited by the analysts was whether Beijing would look into transforming its fledgling security presence in the north of Afghanistan into a wider military operation, i.e. peace-keeping mission. Much will depend on the level non-state security threats emanating from Afghanistan, but the most probable security path Beijing would take is to merge efforts with other regional states to contain and, when necessary, wipe out terrorist and extremist cells in Afghanistan. Russia, Pakistan, Iran would gladly agree to work with China as it would increase their geopolitical

importance. Chinese analysts already opined⁴ the cooperation between the regional states would provide a more effective security umbrella.

The China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran quartet could forswear efforts of banning the Taliban from governing the country, but these four Eurasian powers would nevertheless work on containing where necessary, remaking and influencing the Taliban's behavior so that it befits the security patterns of China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran. Thus China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran would likely abstain from putting boots on the ground in Afghanistan. They will nevertheless cooperate to heighten their strategic competition with the US. The quartet could make the Taliban cooperate, but increasingly along the lines of China's and other potential quartet powers' economic and security interests.

The quartet's driving force is the high pace of bilateralism. For instance, China and Iran recently signed a whopping \$400-billion investment agreement. China and Russia have developed a comprehensive partnership which goes beyond purely military and economic cooperation. Pakistan and China enjoy partnership within the framework of the BRI. The four are also cooperating in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Iran as an observer) and indeed what China could push forward is the use of its Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to take a more active security role in Afghanistan. This would serve as a model for similar future activities by SCO which so far has not got an opportunity to prove its own mettle.

Thus, in Beijing's view, the US presence in Afghanistan war has long deviated from its original goal of combatting terrorism and has since turned into a geopolitical project for preventing growth of China's power in the region. True, after US forces leave Afghanistan China faces a dilemma of potential security blowback in Central Asia and Xinjiang. But it also sees long-term benefits as there is a potential to set-up an alternative mechanism for providing a longer-term solution to the Afghan problem. China can be more innovative

The most probable security path Beijing would take is to merge efforts with other regional states to contain and, when necessary, wipe out terrorist and extremist cells in Afghanistan. Russia, Pakistan, Iran would gladly agree to work with China as it would increase their geopolitical importance.

and based on its close and near strategic ties with Russia, Pakistan and Iran, could create a quartet – effectively an order of exclusion against the collective West.

Limits of the US Influence in Central Asia

Following its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US has allegedly tried to re-establish its military presence in Central Asia similar to what it did in early 2000s. Though some level of cooperation is possible with Russia within the framework of great power relations, much is still depending on Moscow's goodwill. There is, however, another player, that is, China, which is against America's military or security expansion near the restive Xinjiang province.

As argued above, the US' exit from Afghanistan creates a power vacuum. The quartet of China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran are the powers which would benefit the most from the American withdrawal. The least benefits are slated for Central Asia, whose five states and Afghanistan geographically represent one continuous

space. Separation one from another would be geopolitically harmful as security spillover from Afghanistan has a direct impact on the bordering Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan because of their long border.

Surprisingly the US withdrawal could also serve as a basis for potential improvement of bilateral ties with Russia. When Russian and American presidents met in June in Geneva, Switzerland, the media was aflush with various details of the summit. Since both leaders have not touched upon the question of Afghanistan at their separate press-conferences, world attention was drawn to other issues of the bilateral relations. Now it is increasingly clear that Afghanistan was a top issue. The Russian daily, *Kommersant*, reported on July 17th that Putin in June offered Biden the use of Russian military bases in Central Asia for information gathering from Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan host a collection of Russia's military bases and other installations with some of them close to the Afghan border. This followed recent high-profile meetings in Washington between US and Central Asian diplomats about letting in the at-risk Afghan citizens. For the moment, it seems, potential cooperation would in-



volve the exchange of information gathered through the use of drones.

There have been reports that the US is allegedly trying to establish military bases in Central Asia. Twenty years ago it was possible because of Russia's agreement back then, as well as Moscow's willingness to build an anti-terrorism momentum. It is unlikely that the US will be allowed in Central Asia this time around. Compared to the period when America established military presence in Central Asia following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, nowadays geopolitical configuration is strikingly different both in the region and more broadly in Eurasia. Conditions are not as conducive as before. And it is not only because Central Asian states themselves are better prepared militarily to withstand the Taliban threat. Russia too strengthened its military presence in the region and will be unwilling to allow external powers especially in the "age of exclusion" Moscow is trying to create.

While Russia's approval for stationing military bases still matters, there is yet another player – China – which will be strongly opposed to any kind of American presence. In early 2000s concern about Taliban support for Xinjiang-based separatist and extremist groups pushed China to view the US efforts as fitting its wider security interests. Since then, however, China-US ties sharply deteriorated and Beijing has started to see the US presence in Afghanistan deviating from initial anti-terrorism operations to a policy more focused on containing China's regional ambitions. The latter will therefore will be a staunch opponent of America's military expansion to Central Asia – critical region for Beijing's westerward push. Moreover, China would not be happy with western presence in Central Asia also because the latter borders on the restive Xinjiang province. China, too, has been expansive militarily and security-wise in Central Asia. It has opened a military base in Tajikistan and over the past several years has increased the number of military

exercises with Central Asia states⁵. An external competitor risks disturbing the regional balance of power China has been carefully building.

The diplomacy around the Afghan conundrum also means that Russia and the US, despite being in tense competition over vast swathes of Eurasian lands, can at times cooperate too. Russia's alleged decision to allow the US military to use Russian facilities in Central Asia fits into the great power model Moscow has been upholding. In this type of relations cooperation and competition co-exist. But if in early 2000s Russia supported America's offensive against terrorism in Afghanistan, Moscow's thinking has evolved since then. Potential American presence is now viewed in negative context. Moreover, increasingly it is also not only about Russia in Central Asia. The US now has to heed Chinese concerns too, which will be extremely difficult to realize. China-US global competition does leave much room for improvement. Beijing would rather work closely with Moscow. Both share similar concerns and both oppose Western military presence. But Russia could be bent on cooperating with the US by showing to China that it is still Moscow which is in charge in the region and can decide on whether to allow or prevent military presence of non-regional powers in Central Asia.

The geopolitical vacuum around Afghanistan is thus a multidimensional issue. No sole power will be able to dominate the war-torn country. History also shows that without the cooperation from Pakistan, Iran and others a heavy military involvement cannot serve as a guarantor for pacification of Afghanistan. A clever Chinese policy would be to base future bilateral relations with Kabul on the Westphalian principles of non-interference into Afghanistan's internal affairs in exchange for the Taliban's pledge to contain potential terrorist cells from metastasizing into a regional threat.

Endnotes

- 1 Catherine Wong, "China says extremism must not be allowed to return to Afghanistan," SCMP, May 12, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3133237/china-says-extremism-must-not-be-allowed-return-afghanistan>
- 2 David Sachs, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor—Hard Reality Greets BRI's Signature Initiative", CFR, March 30, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-hard-reality-greets-bris-signature-initiative>
- 3 "As U.S. Withdraws, China Set to Increase Influence in Afghanistan," Japan Forward, April 28, 2021, https://japan-forward.com/as-u-s-withdraws-china-set-to-increase-influence-in-afghanistan/?gsearch=click&gclid=Cj0KCQjw_dWGBhDAA RlsAMcYujy4lTXF8sxjLJ64LJnnFibltHFwmYSXj0k1DRoMC 0KoKHEBODd3wDcaAqJcEALw_wcB
- 4 Wang Li, "China's role in post-U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan," May 14, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-05-14/China-s-role-in-post-U-S-withdrawal-from-Afghanistan-10fWHYORehO/index.html>
- 5 Emil Avdalani, "The Deeper Meaning of China's Base in Tajikistan," April 2, 2019, <https://besacenter.org/china-base-tajikistan/>