

## China's anxiety over Afghanistan

### I. Beijing's increasing anxiety\*

Since the collapse of the Afghan government on 15 August 2021 amid the less-than-optimal withdrawal of US security forces from Afghanistan and the US botched drone strike in Kabul, China's anxiety over negative spillovers from Afghanistan has been growing.

Back in 2009, Beijing became increasingly concerned over the Obama administration's "surge-then-exit" policy<sup>1</sup> in Afghanistan, as the proposed date of 2014 withdrawal of the coalition forces was getting closer.<sup>2</sup> When the then NATO secretary-general Anders Rasmussen mentioned 2014 as the end of NATO's combat mission in Afghanistan, the US kept referring to 2014 as an objective rather than a deadline.

The 28 July 2021 Tianjin meeting<sup>3</sup> between the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who now is the deputy leader of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, foretold China's pragmatic approach to the evolving security situation in Afghanistan: keeping communication channels open, promising aid and reconstruction assistance and receiving a guarantee that the Taliban will not support terrorist attacks against China.

The subsequent meeting in the Qatari capital of Doha on 25 October 2021 formalised what

had been agreed in Tianjin and in previously closed-door meetings in Qatar: Beijing's recognition of the Taliban's status in return for the Taliban promising that they will not train, fund or allow militant Uygurs from the Turkistan Islamic Party (also known as East Turkestan Islamic Movement) to carry out operations from Afghanistan against the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region within China. During the Doha discussion Wang Yi stated that:

*"Afghanistan, now standing at a critical stage of transforming from chaos to governance, is currently facing a historic opportunity to truly master its own destiny, achieve reconciliation and tolerance, and advance national reconstruction."*<sup>4</sup>

The statement reflects Beijing change of approach to the Taliban's return to power. The new realist approach differs from the previous refusal to engage the Taliban when they came to power in 1996. Therefore, Beijing's wait-and-see approach to dealing with the fast-evolving situation that characterises Afghanistan's convoluted balance of power is going to be a leitmotiv for the months to come.

From the Taliban perspective, similar to other highly unstable environments from the Middle East to North Africa, there is an unreasonable expectation with regard to the Chinese economic support. Mullah Baradar's declaration

---

\* The core concepts of the article are based on the authors previous work: Arduino, *China and the Taliban – Friends with Benefits*, 2021.

<sup>1</sup> King, *Obama, the Media, and Framing the U.S. Exit from Iraq and Afghanistan*, 2014, 74.

<sup>2</sup> Fei and Yu, *What Can the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China Bring to Post-2014 Afghanistan?*, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> CGTN, *China urges Afghan Taliban to fight against ETIM terrorists*, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Xinhua, *Chinese FM meets with acting deputy PM of Afghan Taliban's interim gov't*, 2021.

that Beijing is willing to provide capital and infrastructural assistance at short notice echoes the expectations of Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of the Lebanese Hizbollah organisation,<sup>5</sup> or even those of the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, all of which look to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a quick solution to the looming economic crisis.

Nevertheless, Beijing is well aware that in the long term, unmet expectations from the Taliban side could constrain the expansion of the USD 63bn China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The bus blast that killed 10 Chinese engineers near the construction site of the Dasu hydropower plant in Pakistan, not far from the Afghan border, is a case in point.<sup>6</sup>

Wang Yi's statement during the Group of 20 Foreign Ministers' Video Conference on Afghanistan,<sup>7</sup> summarised China's pragmatic position on the fast-evolving situation in Afghanistan: "The destiny of Afghanistan is once again in the hands of the Afghan people, yet there is still uncertainty in its future development." Wang's statement then articulated six points that are at the core of China's commitment to Afghanistan:

- (1) The first was related to immediate humanitarian assistance. In this respect, China has already provided USD 31m in equipment, including three million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.
- (2) The second point was a call to end all economic sanctions and free Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves, which, according to Beijing, are used unilaterally as a bargaining chip to exert political pressure on Afghanistan. Instead, Beijing calls for a multilateral approach

led by international financial institutions to provide financing support. There is no mention of unilateral aid under the BRI or involving just the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

- (3) The third point delved into inclusivity, something that the caretaker government failed to provide by neglecting to accommodate all the Taliban groups jockeying for cabinet positions. According to the Afghanistan expert Antonio Giustozzi,<sup>8</sup> the main fault line lies between the Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Haibathullah Akhunzada and key Taliban figures in the new government such as acting defence minister Mohammad Yaqub and Baradar on the one hand, and the group's top military leaders in the south on the other. The international call for more inclusive representation of minorities and women fell short of recognising the compelling need to accommodate all the groups that had delivered the Taliban's victory. In this respect, Beijing does not feel compelled to call for the inclusion of all ethnic groups, unlike Iran or Tajikistan, which would like to see the representation of ethnic minorities – the Hazaras in Iran's case and the Tajiks in Tajikistan's – which would be critical to ensuring stability along their respective borders with Afghanistan. Nevertheless, cooperating with a government that is not composed exclusively of Taliban elements could make collaboration more palatable for Beijing on the international scene.
- (4) The fourth point called to the fore President Xi's notion of a "community with a shared future for mankind," which stresses the importance of counter-

<sup>5</sup> Vohra, *China Wants to Be Lebanon's Savior*, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> BBC, *Chinese engineers killed in Pakistan bus blast*, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Singapore, *Wang Yi Attends the G20 Foreign Ministers' Video Conference on Afghanistan*, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Terrorism Monitor, *Terrorism Monitor Interview with Dr. Antonio Giustozzi*, 2021.

terrorism cooperation and calls for the Taliban to honour their promise to oppose all international terrorist forces.

- (5) Fifth, Wang Yi pointed the finger directly towards NATO, calling on the organisation to take the primary responsibility for dealing with the increasing wave of migrants from Afghanistan.
- (6) The final point summarised the Chinese vision for a new security architecture, namely one in which the United Nations acts as the main channel for maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan and for offering humanitarian assistance.

## II. Beijing view on border containment

The Taliban's grip on power in Kabul and long-term survival hinges on the caretaker government's ability to learn from the group's failed attempt to govern Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 while facing new challenges arising from a more fluid and fast-changing security environment. To complicate the matter, the legacy of Afghanistan's 40 years of war is an economy based almost exclusively on foreign aid and the opioid trade.

*"In the wake of collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has transformed into a key hub along the Afghan opiates trafficking routes. Around 30 percent of the heroin manufactured in Afghanistan is estimated to be smuggled through Central Asian republics in its way to booming drug markets in Russia and Eastern Europe."<sup>9</sup>*

Also, for hundreds of years, Afghanistan's political and security structure has revolved

around decentralised militias and not a centralised state, making it unlikely that political arrangements forged in Kabul will survive over the long term.

China's wait-and-see approach in response to Kabul's fall will persist until the Taliban begins to achieve a modicum of stability.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, China shares the fears of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours: the rise of Islamist terrorism, a new wave of refugees and increased narcotics trafficking. Through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Central Asian countries, Russia and China have for many years preached against the "three evils" of ethnic separatism, religious extremism and international terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Recent SCO members like India, Pakistan and the newly admitted Iran are plagued by the same problem. Still, it seems that a multilateral approach to the Afghan issue is not going to appear any time soon. Since its founding 20 years ago, the SCO had as one of its key objectives Afghan risk mitigation. Today, a multilateral approach to crisis management in Afghanistan could be the litmus test of the SCO's matured capabilities in containing negative spillover into Central Asia. However, the only recent development of any significance in the organisation was the acceleration of the acceptance of Iran as full member,<sup>12</sup> as SCO members such as Tajikistan feel that Iran will now exert greater influence on Afghanistan and therefore needs to be drawn into the organisation's fold.

In the short term, the government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the Taliban is not likely to achieve international recognition given its less than inclusive nature and the remarkable number of internationally designated terrorists within its ranks. If the government does attain recognition nonethe-

<sup>9</sup> De Danieli, *Beyond the Drug-Terror Nexus: Drug Trafficking and State-Crime Relations in Central Asia*, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Arduino, Pantucci and Xiaoyong, *What Are the Implications of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan?*, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Yuan, *China's Role in Establishing and Building the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)*, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), *SCO officially accepts Iran permanent membership*, 2021.

less, that will have several legal ripple effects, which the United States will consider a severe setback for its security interests in the region. For example, the Taliban could rightfully claim the USD 9bn of Afghan Central Bank reserves lying idle in New York<sup>13</sup> or legally deny access to its airspace to any unwelcome drone.

In this respect, a broad range of scenarios regarding the country's future can be envisioned, stemming from two extremes: the Taliban building a functional Islamic emirate, and civil war. While today's Taliban are not the same as the group that was in power two decades ago, the stability of Afghanistan remains a key question.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the interruption of external funding for Afghanistan has exacerbated an already critical humanitarian situation.

Also, the evolution of the so-called Islamic State's footprint from Syria to Afghanistan into the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) is a serious threat to the Taliban's stabilisation process. Recent attacks such as the one at Kabul International Airport, taking the lives of hundreds of Afghans and 13 US service members, complicate Taliban efforts to demonstrate its control of Afghanistan. Terrorist attacks on Shi'a mosques could soon escalate into an ISKP assassination campaign to eliminate high-level Taliban cadres, using the same tactics previously employed by the Taliban themselves when they attacked Afghan government officials. At the same time, in seeking greater cooperation with China and other external powers, the Taliban could tarnish their Islamist credentials, promote dissatisfaction within their ranks, which will in turn increase the ISKP's recruitment.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding the uncertainties, China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan have maintained their diplomatic presence in Kabul, hoping to keep a direct line to the Taliban and an intelligence-gathering presence on the ground. But each country's crisis management approach in Afghanistan differs in capabilities and expectations. Beijing is closely monitoring how the other SCO members are responding to the Afghan crisis. It can be presumed that Pakistan will foster its relationship with the Taliban as a buffer against India.<sup>16</sup> The visit of Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed, the director of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, to Kabul just after the Taliban had taken possession of the presidential place is a case in point. Also, Pakistan is set to play a game that has been well rehearsed, which is to serve as the conduit to Afghanistan's power brokers. In this respect, having long stonewalled Islamabad's request for Turkey's armed drones, Ankara has agreed to transfer to Pakistan the technology for the production of Anka combat drones<sup>17</sup> in exchange for strategic support in the region. While Beijing is counting on Islamabad's close relations with the Taliban, the rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and the return of Ankara on the scene is casting a shadow on the "all weather Sino-Pakistani friendship".

Iran is already in full crisis management mode. Hopes for an inclusive government with the Shi'a Hazara minority being represented have not materialised. Meanwhile, the Iranian border is being hit by a wave of Afghan refugees at a time of severe pandemic and economic distress for Tehran. Following an increased presence of Iranian troops, the border between the two Islamic republics now

<sup>13</sup> Stevenson, *Short on Money, Legal and Otherwise, the Taliban Face a Crisis*, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Dorsey, *Initial Taliban Moves Don't Convince Afghanistan's Neighbors of a New Regime*, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Author discussion with Antonio Giustozzi and Raffaello Pantucci on 9 November 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Al Jazeera, *Pakistan urges Taliban to start peace talks with Afghan gov't 20*, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Pak5 News, *Pakistan, Turkey to produce military drones*, 2021.

seems stable. Likewise, Turkey has deployed additional military personnel at its border with Iran and erected a wall to contain additional waves of Afghan refugees slipping in through Iran. In Ankara, public criticism over the influx of Afghan migrants is even higher than in Tehran as Turkey struggles with an economic downturn that has been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the interests of Beijing and Tehran are fully aligned and the development of the recently signed 25 years cooperation agreement could cause an increase in arms transfers from China to Iran when the US sanctions are lifted.

In the case of Russia, direct military intervention in Afghanistan is even more unlikely than a Chinese intervention. Nevertheless, Russian military bases in Central Asia provide Moscow with timely intelligence. Meanwhile, joint Russian military drills with forces from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan mean that Moscow has a rapid reaction force in close proximity to Afghan borders if the need for intervention arises. In fact, Russia has several military facilities in Central Asia, inherited from the Soviet period. These include the Kant Air Base near the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, and the 201<sup>st</sup> Military Base in Tajikistan, which is an encompassing label for a group of bases and outposts that sprawl from the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, to the border with Afghanistan.

Beijing maintains a little-known military base in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan province, near the Wakhan corridor, the 92 kilometres of border that China shares with Afghanistan. The base was previously devoted to the training of Afghan mountain forces and to joint training between Tajikistan's border guards and China's People's Armed Police.

The US, for its part, has lost two strategic military components in Afghanistan since the fall of Kabul. Future US operations in the region are likely to be carried out in an over-the-horizon manner. This refers primarily to the use of combat drones and precision strikes launched from regional locations. It is worth highlighting that the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, raised the possibility of the US using Russian bases in Central Asia to improve its ability to monitor the Afghan terror threat during a meeting with the Russian Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov<sup>19</sup> US President Joe Biden has used the notion of over-the-horizon capability to rebut criticism that the US pullout from Afghanistan will encourage terrorists to gather there and plan brazen attacks on US soil once again. Unfortunately, the promise of winning a war on terror in Afghanistan by employing only air assets with precision-guided munitions has been graphically deflated by the tragic mistake that cost the lives of 10 Afghan civilians during the botched US drone strike in Kabul on 29 August 2021.<sup>20</sup> From a diplomatic standpoint, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has designated Qatar as a "protecting power" for US interests in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

In this respect, China has viewed the US military presence in Afghanistan with ambivalence. On the one hand, Beijing benefited from the stabilising effect of the US security umbrella, yet on the other it was also concerned that Afghanistan allowed the US better intelligence capabilities against China and power projection in Central Asia. While the official narrative in Beijing is still bent on the claim that "the failure of the war on terror has taught us those countries should stop

<sup>18</sup> Guzel, *Fearing Afghan refugee influx, Turkey reinforces border*, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon and Lubold, *US Asked Russia about Offer of Bases to Monitor Afghan Terror Threat*, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Arduino, *Kabul drone strike exposes myth of Joe Biden's 'over the horizon' war on terror*, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Al Jazeera, *Qatar to act as US diplomatic representative in Afghanistan*, 2021.



using anti-terrorism operations as a pretext to intervene in other countries [...] and the UN should lead the global war against terrorism,"<sup>22</sup> Beijing is still concerned that the ability of the US to deal with the terrorist threat has become severely limited.

### III. Crisis management in Afghanistan by Beijing and Moscow

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban accelerated Iran's access to the SCO. It also put another Central Asian organisation, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), on alert.<sup>23</sup> While China has relentlessly tried to shape the SCO towards economic diplomacy, Russia shaped the CSTO to reflect its core value: power expressed by military might. Although it is a member of both organisations, the CSTO represents Moscow's security embrace of the region's post-Soviet states.<sup>24</sup>

China and Russia share the same level of anxiety towards the future of Afghanistan. Moscow took a different approach. In contrast to China's velvet glove, it showed an iron fist, leading the large-scale "Combat Brotherhood" CSTO exercise involving more than 4,000 troops near the Tajik-Afghan border on 18 October 2021,<sup>25</sup> The exercise, which involved air and armour assets, sends a clear warning to Kabul to toe the line.

Looking at a clear-cut division of labour between Beijing and Moscow could be an oversimplification; it is not just China providing funding and Russia security. The Moscow approach to the containment of the Afghan crisis expands across multiple layers. While China does count on rapid Russian military prowess, Moscow's diplomats feel at home in the former Soviet

countries, and they are already pressuring Tajikistan to avoid any escalation.

Tajikistan has not recognised the Taliban government, and both sides took pot shots at each other in the weeks following Kabul's fall. Dushanbe's approach is different from the one employed by Afghanistan's other Central Asian neighbours, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The latter two countries have chosen the diplomatic route, promoting a modicum of trade in the hope of heading off a collapse of the Afghan economy and sending a new wave of migrants over the border, or worse, spawning a new generation of recruits for the Islamic State in Khorasan. As happened decades ago, Tajikistan is supporting the Northern Alliance against the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance of today pales in comparison to its recent past, looking in disarray and without a commonly agreed strategy. Therefore, the October joint military exercise by the Russia-led CSTO near the Tajik-Afghan border was an expression of Dushanbe's firm bet on Moscow.

The drills at the border continue a trend of Russia flexing its military muscle to send not-so-subtle messages. In September, it held the massive Zapad-2021 drill in western Russia and Belarus. Involving a reported 200,000 troops from the ground, air, naval, nuclear, chemical, biological and radiological defence units from the Russian Western Military District, Baltic Sea and Arctic Sea, the exercise was a clear message to NATO amid rising tensions in the area.

While the Zapad<sup>26</sup> exercise allows the Russian General Staff to test operational concepts and tinker with new combinations of

<sup>22</sup> Xiaoqiang, *A tale of two anti-terror modes*, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Allison, *Protective Integration and Security Policy Coordination: Comparing the SCO and CSTO*, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Kropatcheva, *Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation: Multilateral Policy or Unilateral Ambitions?*, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> TASS, *Moscow-led bloc to engage over 5,000 troops in Combat Brotherhood drills in Tajikistan*, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Clark and Barros, *Russia's Zapad-2021 Exercise*, 2021.

material and logistical elements, the drill in Tajikistan was aimed more at showcasing the Russian military's battle readiness. Predictably, both military drills saw the deployment of drones for scouting and combat missions, though the Tajikistan exercise allows Moscow to demonstrate its ability to project its unmanned aerial and land combat capability from military bases next door to Afghanistan – an effort that is far less complex than the over-the-horizon strategy of the US towards combating terrorist groups emboldened by the Taliban takeover.

Russian military bases in Central Asian countries and joint military drills in proximity to their Afghan borders provide Moscow with timely intelligence and boots on the ground for a rapid reaction force if the need arises – two strategic advantages that the US has lost since the fall of Kabul. While Zapad and Brotherhood exercises are different from an operational point of view, the messages being sent to Kabul and Brussels will not be lost in translation: the long-term costs of confronting Russia will outclass any short-term benefits.

All these reminders from Moscow to Kabul were reinforced when a high-level delegation from the Islamic emirate visited Russia to discuss the future of Afghanistan together with China and Pakistan.<sup>27</sup> The meeting took place in the wake of another ISKP attack, which killed over 40 people in a Kandahar mosque, giving Russia another opportunity to pressure the Taliban.

Although Beijing and Moscow's plan to work together on the world stage<sup>28</sup> was always encountered by broad scepticism, the impact of a Sino-Russian temporary alignment of interests in Afghanistan is not to be discounted. Following an earlier G-20 meeting on Afghanistan via video conference, the

Moscow Format Consultations reiterated the willingness of China and Russia to cooperate with the Taliban without being the first to recognise their official status. Moreover, the call for the UN to lift sanctions to Afghanistan to avoid a humanitarian crisis was part of the Moscow summit's promises to the Taliban: Chinese economic aid and Russia diplomatic support at the international level. At the same time, Russian military manoeuvring on the Tajik-Afghan border is a timely reminder in case of Taliban failure to maintain their part of the deal.

Therefore, it will be crucial to see whether the Sino-Russian call for the international community to work with the Taliban rationally and pragmatically will gain traction. These developments highlight several truths of the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan: while Washington got a bloody nose, the problem is now in Chinese and Russian hands, and the price they pay could be higher.

As predicted, this means that both Beijing and Moscow will have to devote more resources to the issue – while the US is focusing more tightly on its own interests, namely the Indo-Pacific.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the effects of the Sino-Russian commonality of intent in Afghanistan will be felt not only in South and Central Asia. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan increased the anxiety of several US partners in the MENA region. The Gulf states in particular are looking at viable alternatives following a perceived US abandonment.<sup>30</sup> A joint success of Moscow and Beijing in Afghanistan would increase their perception as a reliable security partner, but previous military cooperation with the US could not be disentangled overnight. At the same time, Afghanistan and Central Asia are the near abroad for both Beijing and Moscow; this is not the case for the Middle East.

<sup>27</sup> TASS, *Taliban hold talks with Russian, Chinese and Pakistani special envoys to Afghanistan*, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Bekkevold and Lo, *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Kausikan, *Afghanistan - hard truths about America's pullout*, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Wechsler, *US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality*, 2019.

Finally, the evolution of the situation in Kabul also reveals that both Beijing and Moscow will continue to stick to their playbook in tackling nettlesome issues: the former will continue to throw money at the problem, while the latter's solution is to hurl more men and metal at it.

#### IV. Conclusion

The July 2021 killing of 10 Chinese workers near Pakistan's Dasu power plant, not far from the Afghan border, showcased how violent spillovers from Afghanistan could derail Chinese investments in the region. The increasing attacks against Chinese workers and infrastructure related to the CPEC exposed how uncertainty and insecurity cannot be tamed by just throwing money at the problem.

Deploying the People's Liberation Army or even sending the People's Armed Police into Afghanistan is certainly not an option for Beijing. It is not just a matter of China's decades-old principle of non-interference; Chinese government officials and analysts<sup>31</sup> are adamant that Beijing will not step into the "graveyard of empires."<sup>32</sup> Just months before the Taliban's swift advance, Wang Yi toured the region, attending an SCO summit in Dushanbe and holding bilateral talks in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan that focused on border security and promoted the idea of an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution.

At the time of writing, the deployment of Chinese private security companies (PSCs)<sup>33</sup> as a proxy for indirect security involvement is off the table, not because of a lack of willingness but mainly because these companies lack combat experience. This is unlike

Russia, which has battle-tested private military companies (PMCs), such as the Wagner group, which could be deployed in Afghanistan to allow Moscow some degree of public deniability while avoiding another entanglement in an Afghan quagmire. While deploying such companies is an option, it is unlikely Moscow will do so. In China's case, however, if China begins to invest in Afghanistan, it is likely to deploy Chinese PSCs to protect its investments.<sup>34</sup>

Chinese PSCs have a modest footprint in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which is related to protecting Chinese mining operations in the region in the presence of moderate risk;<sup>35</sup> their presence does not constitute a grand strategy of using PSCs as a proxy for a security presence on Beijing's part. Unlike Russian PMCs, Chinese PSCs lack equipment and battle-tested combat capabilities, although they provide valuable intelligence to Beijing. In Central Asia, Chinese PSCs adopt the same modus operandi that is applied throughout the BRI: entering into joint ventures with local security providers and training local armed guards to work inside Chinese gated infrastructure sites.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan's proximity to China will force Beijing to take steps to protect its BRI-related investments in the region. Chinese state-owned enterprises already operating in Afghanistan could embark on modest expansion<sup>36</sup> drawing on the security services provided by a selected number of Chinese PSCs, probably the ones that are already operating in Pakistan from Islamabad to Lahore. If their operating procedure replicates the one adopted in Pakistan, their security footprint will be even

<sup>31</sup> Jiadong, *China will not fall into 'Afghan trap' as other powers have bitterly learned*, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Kung, *China's Tang Dynasty and Afghanistan: The Graveyard of Empires*, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Arduino, *China's Private Army: Protecting the New Silk Road*, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with Chinese PSC contractors, September 25, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Yau and van der Kley, *The Growth, Adaptation and Limitations of Chinese Private Security Companies in Central Asia*, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Pantucci, *The myth of Chinese investment in Afghanistan*, 2021.



smaller than that in Central Asia, limited to a few unarmed Chinese security managers who operate as links between locally contracted armed militia and Chinese workers housed in gated compounds.

The prospect of the BRI reaching Kabul in the short term is unlikely. Nevertheless, Beijing's approach to the return of the Taliban in Kabul differs substantially from 1996, when China refused to recognise the Islamist group and closed its embassy in the Afghan capital. This time the promise of future economic development could buy Beijing some time in dealing with the Taliban, as the security

problems likely to be encountered in a full-fledged involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan will be ten times more than those already encountered along the CPEC. Like several countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, Afghanistan has high expectations of Chinese support to bail it out of its desperate situation. At the same time, substantial amounts of financial support from Beijing could compromise the Islamist credentials of the Taliban leadership and will probably also come with the kind of bill that Beijing has been presenting from Turkey to the Far East<sup>37</sup>: their stance on the return of the Uygurs to China.

---

#### Reference list

AL JAZEERA, "Pakistan urges Taliban to start peace talks with Afghan gov't 20," August 25, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/52sy9vcr>.

AL JAZEERA, "Qatar to act as US diplomatic representative in Afghanistan," November 12, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/kvu3vher>.

ALLISON, ROY, "Protective Integration and Security Policy Coordination: Comparing the SCO and CSTO," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11 (3:2018), 297-338.

ARDUINO, ALESSANDRO, "Kabul drone strike exposes myth of Joe Biden's 'over the horizon' war on terror," *South China Morning Post*, September 29, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4e49bfss>.

ARDUINO, ALESSANDRO, *China's Private Army: Protecting the New Silk Road* (Singapore: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

ARDUINO, ALESSANDRO, RAFFAELLO PANTUCCI AND YUE XIAOYONG, "What Are the Implications of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan?," *UK National Committee on China*, September 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yskuz9wv>.

ARDUINO, ALESSANDRO, "China and the Taliban – Friends with Benefits," *Middle East Institute Singapore Insights* No. 27, November 9, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/bdfws2y2>.

BBC, "Chinese engineers killed in Pakistan bus blast," July 14, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/buujrbe7>.

BEKKEVOLD, JO INGE AND BOBO LO (EDS.), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

CGTN, "China urges Afghan Taliban to fight against ETIM terrorists," September 28, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/shhmjwte>.

CLARK, MASON AND GEORGE BARROS, "Russia's Zapad-2021 Exercise," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 17, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/y9776ub3>.

DE DANIELI, FILIPPO, "Beyond the Drug-Terror Nexus: Drug Trafficking and State-Crime Relations in Central Asia," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 25 (6:2014), 1235-240.

DORSEY, JAMES, "Initial Taliban Moves Don't Convince Afghanistan's Neighbors of a New Regime," *Responsible Statecraft*, August 17, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/ymmp7kc4>.

DORSEY, JAMES, "Initial Taliban moves fail to convince Afghanistan's neighbours," *China-India Brief* No. 188, August 28, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/kh8hed3e>.

---

<sup>37</sup> Dorsey, *Initial Taliban moves fail to convince Afghanistan's neighbours*, 2021.

- EMBASSY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA IN SINGAPORE, "Wang Yi Attends the G20 Foreign Ministers' Video Conference on Afghanistan," September 23, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/m9f6axvk>.
- FEI, GAO AND XIAO YU, "What Can the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China Bring to Post-2014 Afghanistan?," *Asian Perspective* 38 (4:2014), 519-540.
- GORDON, MICHAEL R. AND GORDON LUBOLD, "US Asked Russia about Offer of Bases to Monitor Afghan Terror Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/9vetkdzx>.
- GUZEL, MEHMET, "Fearing Afghan refugee influx, Turkey reinforces border," *ABC News*, August 18, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/v7ycsvfj>.
- ISLAMIC REPUBLIC NEWS AGENCY (IRNA), "SCO officially accepts Iran permanent membership," September 17, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2pxwfwpm>.
- JIADONG, ZHANG, "China will not fall into 'Afghan trap' as other powers have bitterly learned," *Global Times*, July 6, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/5z6h9xzp>.
- KAUSIKAN, BILAHARI, "Afghanistan - hard truths about America's pullout," *The Straits Times*, August 20, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2xs4hycz>.
- KING, ERIKA G., *Obama, the Media, and Framing the U.S. Exit from Iraq and Afghanistan* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014).
- KROPATCHEVA, ELENA, "Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation: Multilateral Policy or Unilateral Ambitions?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68 (9:2016), 1526-1552.
- KUNG, CHAN, "China's Tang Dynasty and Afghanistan: The Graveyard of Empires," *The Diplomat*, August 28, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/f5bzakhb>.
- LESZEK, BUSZYNSKI, "Russia's New Role in Central Asia," *Asian Survey* 45 (4:2005), 546-565.
- PAK5 NEWS, "Pakistan, Turkey to produce military drones," August 30, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/y4e8hvmw>.
- PANTUCCI, RAFFAELLO, "The myth of Chinese investment in Afghanistan," *Nikkei Asia Review*, August 28, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/cn4t949h>.
- STEVENSON, ALEXANDRA, "Short on Money, Legal and Otherwise, the Taliban Face a Crisis," *New York Times*, September 2, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/pw4h7x4w>.
- TASS, "Moscow-led bloc to engage over 5,000 troops in Combat Brotherhood drills in Tajikistan," October 14, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yuhm5szt>.
- TASS, "Taliban hold talks with Russian, Chinese and Pakistani special envoys to Afghanistan," October 21, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/n7t6crrb>.
- TERRORISM MONITOR, "Terrorism Monitor Interview with Dr. Antonio Giustozzi," No. 17, September 7, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/nzy8hjsh>.
- VOHRA, ANCHAL, "China Wants to Be Lebanon's Savior," *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/d3vw9bjd>.
- WECHSLER, WILLIAM F., "US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality," *The Atlantic Council*, October 10, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/2936kp49>.
- XIAOQIANG, FU, "A tale of two anti-terror modes," *China Daily*, September 16, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/j86uj7nu>.
- XINHUA, "Chinese FM meets with acting deputy PM of Afghan Taliban's interim gov't," October 26, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2mrd7bt6>.
- YAU, NIVA AND DIRK VAN DER KLEY, "The Growth, Adaptation and Limitations of Chinese Private Security Companies in Central Asia," *The Oxus Society*, October 13, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/n5tjxxn>.
- YUAN, JING-DONG, "China's Role in Establishing and Building the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)," *Journal of Contemporary China* 19 (67:2010), 855-869.

*All internet sources were accessed and verified on November 24, 2021.*