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different points of view.*

The UKNCC Guest Contributor Programme offers contrasting 'short, sharp reads' for those seeking a fuller exploration of key questions. This September 2021 edition explores the question:

"What are the implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan?"

Authors, alphabetically by surname:

- *Alessandro Arduino, Principal Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore*
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"What are the implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan?"

Author: Alessandro Arduino
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September 2021

China's wait and see approach to Kabul's fall.

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The writing is on the wall; the speed of the Afghan government's collapse was not a surprise, except for the US and its allies. At the same time, when President Biden was talking to the nation shifting the blame to the Afghan government for being unable to stop the Taliban advance, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson tweeted, "China hopes to see these remarks implemented to ensure a smooth transition in Afghanistan, keep at bay terrorism and criminal acts, and make sure that the Afghan people stay away from war & rebuild their homeland."

Following the Taliban's return to power in Kabul, the highly fluid situation presents several degrees of anxiety for Beijing. China shares the same fears of Central Asian countries neighbouring Afghanistan, namely the rise of Islamic terrorism, a new wave of refugees, and increased narcotics trafficking.



The truth of the Taliban's real intentions, which will unfold in the coming months, will reveal whether the regime will be able or even willing to avoid acts of violence against the population. A broad range of scenarios on the country's future stem from two extremes: the Taliban building a functional Islamic Emirate and a looming humanitarian crisis. In this respect, that the Taliban ruled until 1996 is a harbinger of a bad omen for the future. Nevertheless, today's Taliban are not the same as 20 years ago, and something very similar may be said for the 3 million Afghans living in Kabul with a young population that grew up in the American dream. Nevertheless, the question on the possibility of a stable Afghanistan remains identical after two decades: How can a country ravaged by 40 years of war get back on track?

With the economy based almost exclusively on foreign economic aid and opioids' trade, and the political and security structure centred on decentralised militias, the question is not when but if Afghanistan will become a centralised state.

Miscalculations on the Taliban's advance and the rapid collapse of the Ghani government will have long-term ripple effects. In the meantime, with the west scrambling to repatriate diplomats and the remaining security forces, China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan are at different degrees in their threat management mode. Predictably, Pakistan will foster its relationship with the Taliban as a buffer against India, a country that missed its chance to start a dialogue with the winners.

Iran is already in full crisis management mode, being hit by refugee waves in a time of pandemic and economic distress. The Russian military bases in Central Asia provide Moscow intelligence gathering and a counter-terrorism presence in the region as well as joint military drills with Uzbek and Tajik forces in proximity to their Afghan borders. Also, a possible role for battle-tested Russian private military companies, like the Wagner group, could allow Moscow some degree of public deniability while avoiding another entanglement in the Afghan quagmire.

From a bilateral to a multilateral perspective, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), when founded 20 years ago had Afghan risk mitigation as one of its key objectives. Today it can be a litmus test of the SCO's matured capabilities in containing negative spill overs in Central Asia.

From the Chinese side, the Tianjin meeting between Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi and the Taliban envoy Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who now resides in Kabul's presidential palace, foretold China's pragmatic approach to the evolving security situation in Afghanistan: keeping the communication channels open since Qatar's meetings with the Taliban representatives in Doha and receiving a guarantee that militant Uighurs, from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, are not going to use Afghanistan as a safe haven for attacks in Xinjiang. At the same time, the Tianjin meeting represented a sort of recognition of the Taliban and of their status as well as the hope to attract Chinese capital and infrastructure development.





Most certainly, deploying the People's Liberation Army or even sending Chinese private security companies (PSCs) into Afghanistan is not an option for Beijing. It is not just a matter of the decade's old principle of non-interference; Chinese government officials and analysts are adamant that Beijing will not step into the "graveyard of empires".

Just months prior to the Taliban's swift advance, Wang Yi's recently toured the region by attending an SCO summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, and entertaining bilateral talks in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan focusing on border security and promoting an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned solution.

At the same time, the use of private security companies as a proxy for an indirect security involvement is off the table not only for lack of willingness but mainly the lack of capabilities. The limited presence of Chinese PSCs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is related to protecting Chinese mining operations in the region in the presence of moderate risk, not a grand strategy.

Albeit the Chinese PSCs should not to be confused with the Russian private military companies (PMCs), as they lack equipment and battle-tested combat capabilities, they will provide valuable intelligence to Beijing.

Also, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reaching Kabul in the short term is unlikely. While the promise of future economic development could buy Beijing some time in dealing with the Taliban, the security problems already encountered along the US\$ 63 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridors (CPEC) will be tenfold in case of a fully-fledged involvement in the Afghan reconstruction. Lebanon and Syria share an over-expectation of Chinese support to solve their own desperate situations; Afghanistan could be the next waiting in line.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan's proximity to China will force Beijing to take some steps to avoid further constraints in the BRI's development in the region.

The July 2021 killing of nine Chinese workers near Pakistan's Dasu powerplant, not far from the Afghan border, is a grim reminder to Beijing how uncertainty and insecurity cannot be tamed by just throwing money at the problem. While the US evacuation helicopters buzz around the closing US embassy in Kabul, at the Chinese Embassy in Afghanistan it is business as usual.



About the Author

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The world is increasingly defined by great power conflict. Escalating tensions between the US and China have grown to touch on almost every aspect of international relations. This reality has most recently been on display in Afghanistan. The US withdrawal from a two-decade long military commitment on China's borders has thrown into question American security commitments and raised questions about what kind of a power China will be in its own backyard. For a power such as the United Kingdom that straddles the relationships between Beijing, Kabul and Washington, the question is how, in this complicated strategic equation, to ensure British interests. The balance is a complex one which highlights the nature of the challenges that the UK is going to face in trying to carve out its own path in the world.

The most prominent and immediate question to emerge from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is what it means for London's much vaunted 'special relationship' with Washington.



Senior officials, including the Defence Secretary, have openly questioned President Biden's decision-making on the withdrawal, while the public discourse in London has focused on how events have shown the limits of British influence in Washington. Yet the reality remains that the US is the UK's key strategic security ally on the world stage. The narrative of divergence in UK and US interests is exaggerated, even if it is clear that Washington is focusing on its confrontation with Beijing as the driving policy focus to the detriment of everything else.

At the same time, it is clear that the UK is unable to entirely disengage from Afghanistan. Quite aside from the deep commitments generated from twenty years of conflict, there are the human and historical connections that the UK has with South Asia. Large diaspora communities from Pakistan, and to a lesser extent from

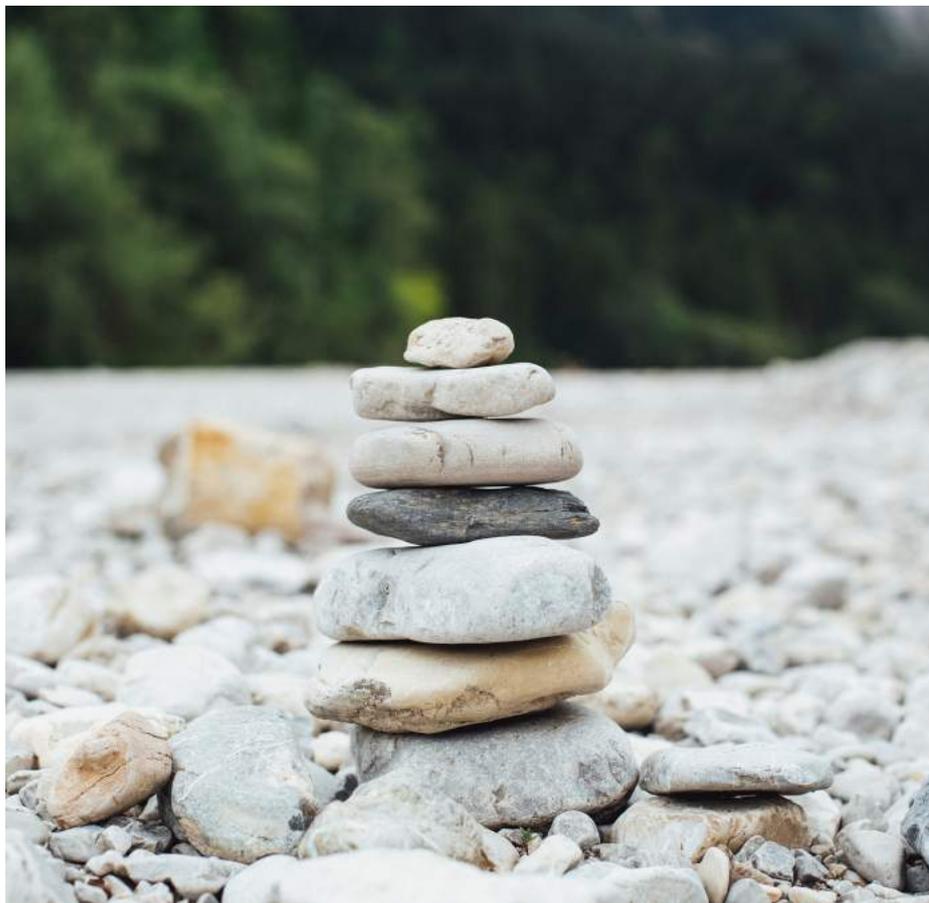
Afghanistan, give the UK a particular stake in the country and region. This also means that the UK needs to explore ways in which to engage and secure its interests in Afghanistan in the longer-term, including generating creative options that reflect the changing regional geopolitics.

The harsh geopolitical reality is that the United States-led withdrawal from Afghanistan will bolster Chinese influence in the region. This is not a reflection of a push by Beijing to fill an abstract security vacuum, but rather a demonstration of geographical reality. With the departure of American forces, Beijing is set to become the most consequential power in the Eurasian heartland. For the UK, threading the needle of a uninterested Washington and influential Beijing will require strategic thinking.

Chinese influence across Eurasia has been ascendant for some time. Yet until now, China has chosen to prioritize economic engagement, with security engagement placed a discrete but focused second. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan has complicated this approach. While parts of Beijing may have chafed at the idea of military bases on their borders, others sensibly reckoned that an American security presence was likely dealing with problems that otherwise Beijing might have to address.

The US withdrawal has therefore left Beijing seeking new partners in the region. The most pragmatic and logical choice from China's perspective is the new Taliban-led government. However, there is still no clarity about the level of power and control the Taliban may command, their long-term stability in power, or whether they are interested in dealing with the issues that most concern Beijing. Recognizing this, China has also sought greater coordination with Russia, increased its bilateral discussion on Afghanistan with Iran, and continued its engagement with Pakistan.

Yet, while these relationships are more established than those with the Taliban, each has its own complications and mistrusts. This is most clear in the lack of any action or discussion recently by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) about doing anything concerning Afghanistan. Including as it does all of Afghanistan's neighbours except Turkmenistan, and with a particular interest in terrorism, the SCO should theoretically be the obvious platform for greater engagement in Afghanistan.





Established with Chinese impetus, Beijing has long sought to get the SCO to do more in Afghanistan, but has struggled to get members to share its focus. For the most part, these other countries have rather sought to engage Afghanistan bilaterally or through other regional formats that they host and control.

In many ways, this is exactly the approach Beijing has itself taken. While China has done a great deal of multilateral engagement in the wider region and on Afghanistan, it has usually taken a bilateral approach to focus on its real interests, through selective security engagement, economic investment or developing political and social partnerships. In Afghanistan, the prime concern is that the country might become a base from which Uyghur militants (or other anti-Chinese elements) gather to try to attack China directly or its interests in the wider region. This has led to quite focused security and intelligence attention.

This focus on counter-terrorism is something that provides the UK with a first potential point of engagement.

London is as concerned about terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan as Beijing is, though the degree of threat and the nature of them is slightly different. The degree of actual threat that China might face from militant Uyghurs in Afghanistan remains an open question. It is after all many years since a specific threat has been seen. There does though appear to be evidence of some presence and there is no doubt that its wider regional concerns are of relevance. In recent years, terrorists have targeted both China's embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and its consulate in Karachi, Pakistan, part of a wider trend of targeting of Chinese interests.

But engagement on counter-terrorism with China is a double-edged sword for the UK. There may be some concurrence in the assessment of threats abroad: for example, the UK continues to list the Turkestan Islamic Party (also known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement) as a proscribed terrorist entity in contrast to the US.

However, there is little agreement on domestic counter-terrorism policy. The UK has correctly been at the forefront of the global push to condemn Chinese action in Xinjiang which is done under the rubric of countering extremism. Threading the needle of engaging abroad while condemning at home will be difficult. But focusing on shared concerns about groups such as al Qaeda, ISIS, and other regional salafi-jihadi groups that are likely to play a major role in destabilizing the wider region would be something China and the UK might work on.

Focusing on cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative is equally fraught, though for more prosaic reasons. Whilst Beijing talks a great deal about BRI cooperation, it is hard to find evidence of genuine action following this rhetoric.

The UK has tried, for example, a great deal in Pakistan with limited success. Meaningful BRI cooperation has been largely limited to the level of individual contracts where UK firms take on defined sub-contract roles within larger projects.

Humanitarian aid might offer itself as the most obvious first point of pressure and engagement. The Taliban take-over has precipitated a frantic run for the door in all directions. Most visibly via Kabul International Airport, but in far larger numbers across the country's land borders into Pakistan and Iran – places already swelled by years of Afghan emigration. These problems sit in addition to the larger humanitarian crisis that is likely coming in Afghanistan, if the country remains cut off from the international community and from the aid flows that dominated the economy. Beijing should be engaged and encouraged to expend more money and effort in alleviating these humanitarian crises that sit in its backyard.

What happens in Afghanistan matters to both the UK and China. It matters also to the United States, but Washington has clearly articulated that it is prioritizing efforts elsewhere. London should not step back in a similar way, but should instead explore whether targeted cooperation is possible to advance shared concerns and interests. While at the moment it increasingly looks like there is little appetite in Beijing for genuine cooperation, the problems that Afghanistan faces are likely to be with us for some time yet. Working towards encouraging Beijing to take a greater humanitarian role while recognizing the common terrorist threats offers a way of trying to strike the difficult strategic balance that the UK will need to find in a world of great power confrontation.

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"What are the implications of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan?"

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The perspective from China.

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Looking at the current situation in Afghanistan, the main cause of the chaotic disaster and crisis is the hasty, irresponsible withdrawal of US and NATO troops without any real responsible arrangement for the stability and peace of the country. The US should draw lessons from the last 20 years. It has put in extensive resources, spent large sums of money and suffered several thousand casualties in Afghanistan, which has itself incurred drastic damage and a huge cost in human life. Despite this, the chaotic situation that we see today has still arisen, with terrorist groups growing; the country becoming poorer; narcotics and other problems only intensifying. Not only is this an American military failure, but it is also a failure of America's international politics and American credibility. At the core of all this is the US failure and mistake in attempting to use power and military means to impose their own political and social model onto another sovereign nation and its people.



The current situation in Afghanistan clearly shows that using power politics and military means to solve problems in regional hotspots or meddling in another sovereign country's internal affairs will get you nowhere. In fact, it creates more problems than it solves. Over the past 20 years, countries such as the US have continually sought to transplant their own models to sovereign nations. This has led to numerous disasters and troubles: not only in Afghanistan but in other places too. As such, US policymakers should draw the right lessons from the situation and earnestly correct their mistakes.

In dealing with the current crisis in Afghanistan, as well as in the future, the US needs to avoid repeating these same mistakes. This is especially necessary as the US remains an important participant in resolving the Afghanistan issue.

When dealing with regional conflicts and other international affairs, it is important that all countries, and the US in particular, genuinely return to the UN charter and follow the core objectives and goals of the charter as a foundation. In the whole process of dealing with the Afghan crisis, the principle of "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" should always be followed and the sovereignty and independence of Afghanistan respected. There has been much commentary and criticism of the Taliban's past and many predictions of how they will act in the future. Some reports are positive about the change in the organisation, while others remain doubtful. The right question is not whether or how much they have "really" changed. Instead, it is whether you respect their own sovereignty and can refrain from interfering in their internal affairs,

while at the same time creating a good international environment to help them by encouraging positive trends which lead to peace, reconciliation and stability in the country. This will allow for the establishment of an inclusive and open political structure with friendly relations with the rest of the world, built through dialogue and political means. In fact, the Taliban has already become an important political and military force in Afghanistan. It is a new start historically. We respect Afghanistan's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the right of the Afghan people to independently handle the affairs of their nation. For the first time in the past 20 years they, the Afghan people, are able to hold the fate of Afghanistan in their own hands. It is an opportunity for them.

In this ongoing situation, the best course going forward is for us to have dialogues with the Taliban; engage with them; and together with them work hard to facilitate peaceful reconciliation in Afghanistan and allow a government inclusive of all parties to be established. The Taliban emphasise that they have been trying to unite all parties to reconstruct the country; that they must work with different political forces to reach peace and reconciliation. As such the Taliban have engaged in dialogue and are continuing to do so, now, after the US completed its withdrawal on the 30th August 2021. It is encouraging to see that groups from different traditions, tribes, ethnicities and parties are coming together. Let the Afghan people, together with neighbouring countries and other countries in the region, work together to realise Afghan internal peace, reconciliation and reconstruction.





This will enable neighbouring and international partners to share a prosperous future through peaceful mutual beneficial cooperation constructively.

While words and promises are heard, deeds need to follow. So far, as the Taliban have entered Kabul and recovered many cities across the country, some positive trends are present already. The situation in Afghanistan is a crisis, but also the biggest opportunity in perhaps 70 years for Afghanistan and the Afghan people to grasp their own destiny. We must allow the Afghan people to make use of this opportunity to achieve domestic peace and overcome challenges such as long-term stability, national reconstruction, the creation of an open and inclusive government and - importantly - the clear removal from the nation of terrorist organisations. It is hoped that Afghanistan can seize this opportunity to find its own path, a path that is supported by its own people and suits Afghanistan's own characteristics and development route. The Afghan people are heroic people, as Chairman Mao Zedong used to put it, and have never yielded to foreign aggression.

They are now very keen to learn from the development experience and success of neighbouring and regional countries. As we have always said, it is important that they find their own appropriate development model, so that they can create their own domestic stability, peace and reconstruct their country. In this context, we are willing to offer help and are prepared to work together. China is not only ready to open up and develop our own country, but is also willing to carry out mutually beneficial cooperation. We have already worked with partners in neighbouring countries in the region and with the international community for that purpose. Both neighbouring and regional nations are ready to share their opportunities with Afghanistan, having enjoyed successful cooperation with each other and with China in the Belt and Road Initiative and from each countries' own development cooperation initiatives and projects (such as connectivity projects and energy delivery programs). I have heard many good ideas and plans from them.

For example, in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has been established. People there are contemplating how to guide its economic development so that Afghanistan can share in its benefits, which is of great interest to both parties. The Chinese government and our Party leadership have always put the Chinese people first in our internal and external policies. The peace of our nation and the safety of our people is the core mission for both our overall foreign policy and our work with the Afghan people.

China is Afghanistan's biggest neighbour with a 92 km shared border. We are naturally very concerned about Afghanistan's peace and stability and have great sympathy for their suffering both from terrorism and from the fight against it. We are paying attention to how Afghanistan navigates through this crisis. In particular, close attention is being paid to how effective the crackdown on terrorism is. China faces the threat of a typical terrorist organisation, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). This UN Security Council-listed and internationally watched terrorist group has committed many terrorist

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acts and crimes against China, as well as against other countries and peoples. It is known in both China and in the international community that ETIM operates within Afghanistan. The Taliban and other stakeholders in Afghanistan have promised that they will completely break away from all terrorist groups and resolutely fight terrorist groups within Afghanistan to the very end.

The Kabul airport terrorist attacks clearly show that the security threat within Kabul and Afghanistan is real and severe. We must watch the development of the situation and ensure a soft landing and a smooth transition of the situation in Afghanistan.

Three lessons need to be learned from the terrorist attacks. First, peace and stability in Afghanistan need to be achieved as soon as possible during this crucial time. Second, effectively fighting and cracking down on terrorism is vital. Afghanistan cannot once again become a haven for terrorist organisations. The Taliban and all stakeholders in the country must effectively carry out efforts to eliminate the ETIM. Thirdly, in the international arena, the US should totally cast away its "double standards" in this field and implement all required measures.

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