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# The Graveyard of Empires: America, China, and the New Great Game in Afghanistan

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## Introduction

A new Great Game, a term referring to the historical rivalry between Russia and Britain in South and Central Asia, is taking place on the geopolitical chessboard of the region, albeit with different competitors.<sup>1</sup> China's growing influence in Afghanistan is a recent and concerning development. Already, the Chinese government has capitalized on the opportunities offered by the U.S. withdrawal and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan government in the summer of 2021 to fill the ensuing power vacuum.<sup>2</sup> Cooperation between the United States and China, two countries with diametrically opposing goals for Afghanistan, remains unlikely if the Chinese government abets and emboldens the Taliban to the detriment of Afghanistan's welfare.

Even an informal alliance between the Taliban and Beijing, two geopolitical actors which maintain a shared hostility toward the West, presents a fundamental threat to the United States, necessitating a response to prevent a new era of Chinese ascendancy. China, abstaining so far from formally recognizing the Taliban government, has asked the new regime to abide by certain terms stipulated by the international community.<sup>3</sup> However, by maintaining its embassy in Kabul, the Chinese government has essentially acknowledged the group as Afghanistan's de facto government.<sup>4</sup> Addressing China's support of the Taliban, especially on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks, is a pertinent and pressing policy question that should command the immediate attention of the U.S. government.

China's calculated stance toward the Taliban's resurgence is motivated by opportunism and is driven by "three geostrategic interests: national security, westward expansion, and economic/resource interests", which are all clearly intertwined.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese government claims that Islamic terrorists have frequently launched attacks on the northwestern periphery of China's mainland from their sanctuary in Afghanistan. Therefore, Beijing has pushed the Taliban to exert a moderating force on its more extreme counterparts and to clamp down on potential jihadist activity within Afghanistan's borders.<sup>6</sup>

China also intends to play a more direct economic role. Since the previous Afghan government did not succumb to Chinese monetary incentives, Beijing aims to profoundly shape Afghanistan's domestic political scene and to exploit the country's vast mineral resources by inducing the Taliban to accept the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>7</sup> The Taliban have already extracted trade concessions from China, and, in a gesture of goodwill to Kabul, the Chinese government has granted the Taliban further humanitarian assistance.<sup>8</sup> Beijing understands that soft power, perhaps more than the traditional methods of hard power utilized by Afghanistan's

past occupiers, will be highly effective in determining the fragmented country's affairs. Furthermore, it has used the Taliban's fragility as an emerging, disarrayed government to extend the length of its reach within Afghanistan.

By abruptly retreating from Afghanistan to more efficiently prevent China's rise in the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration has misjudged Beijing's highly ambitious claim to the mantle of global leadership.<sup>9</sup> China's expansionism, as displayed by Beijing's intrusions in other parts of the world, is not necessarily limited to East Asia, a fact that America should remain aware of.<sup>10</sup> China's foreign minister, while expressing some optimism for future cooperation, declared that the United States must not attempt to "suppress China's legitimate rights" in Afghanistan, illuminating the two countries' conflicting visions for the country's future.<sup>11</sup>

Deterring China in different areas of the globe requires a broader and more nuanced perception of the Chinese national interest than the one currently espoused by the Biden administration. The latter has overly focused on America's traditional rivalries with competing great powers in specific regional contexts and, in doing so, risks ceding ground to the Chinese elsewhere. Its neglect of America's security interests in South and Central Asia, displayed in the hasty and premature nature of its abandonment of Afghanistan in favor of a swift pivot to Europe and the Pacific Ocean, has exposed a deficient outlook that downplays the continued threat of state-sponsored Islamic terrorism. While the West has counteracted China and Russia in their respective spheres of influence, the U.S. government has not formulated a coherent strategy against Beijing's less apparent encroachments in South and Central Asia.

Radical Islamism has become a potent force in twenty-first century geopolitics, and the United States must distinguish pro-Taliban sympathizers from potential allies within the Muslim world while not ignoring the obvious threat that the Taliban continue to pose to the West. A sense of immediacy should inform an American response to Chinese intervention in Afghanistan, for the Taliban will become a much greater hazard to stability in South and Central Asia with sovereign backing in the form of Beijing. If the Taliban, who have repeatedly acted in bad faith, acquires international legitimacy and stay in power due to Chinese support, and if Afghanistan becomes a safe haven for terrorist activity again despite China's entreaties, the danger of renewed jihadist activity could proliferate throughout the entire region. The United States is certainly limited in what it can accomplish due to the loss of trust that it engendered with its withdrawal in 2021. However, the U.S. government, acting in Afghanistan's best interest, must contain China.

## **Recommendations**

The United States can undertake several actions to counter Chinese expansionism in Afghanistan. Declaring the Taliban a foreign terrorist organization would demonstrate that the US government will continue its hardline attitude toward the organization despite its reduced level of regional influence.<sup>12</sup> The US government

must also maintain its stance against the Taliban's request to represent Afghanistan at the United Nations.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, further punitive measures in addition to the Biden administration's current sanctions policy risk alienating and driving the Taliban further into Beijing's arms and making them more amenable to Chinese pressure.<sup>14</sup>

Undermining the public illusion that China and America can cooperate to deter jihadist activity is similarly essential because both countries possess different understandings of what activities exactly define Islamic terrorism. During the war on terror, the Chinese government approached the United States under a deceptive guise of vowing to prevent further Islamic terrorist activity; in doing so, it appropriated American approval for retaliatory measures against its Uighur minority.<sup>15</sup> Over the decades, Beijing has refined this strategy. For example, it recently asked the Taliban to deport members of Afghanistan's Uighur populace, blaming them for allegedly hatching and launching terrorist strikes from Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> The Trump administration removed the ETIM, an alleged Uighur militant group, from a list of terrorist groups in October 2020, stating that the organization no longer exists and that China has applied the classification too broadly to large swathes of its Uighur population.<sup>17</sup> A clear distinction may not exist between ETIM and the TIP, a Uighur group that hopes for a closer relationship with Washington.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the Biden administration can, in a highly symbolic move, reach out to various dissident Uighur organizations to determine whether they are credible threats against the United States or can serve as partners in the struggle against Beijing.

Providing greater assistance to local, anti-Taliban movements within Afghanistan would be another necessary step in undermining China's burgeoning hegemony and the Taliban's authority. The National Resistance Force, a local group composed of loyalists to the previous Afghan government, remains the most effective force against the Taliban.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the U.S. government should provide more aid, both financially and politically, to the NRF and various elements of the Afghan diaspora to weaken the Taliban. Helping Afghan groups opposed to the Taliban will only increase their legitimacy as rival options to Taliban rule and void the latter's profession to sovereignty over a country whose politics are frequently delineated by a shifting, interlocking web of tribal loyalties.<sup>20</sup> However, the United States must recognize the validity of the claims that other nations in the region have set forth in their stakes to Afghanistan's future.

To prevent the spread of Chinese influence, the United States should foster further strategic security dialogue with other countries which are committed to stability in South Asia, and which are poised to shoulder new responsibilities for regional leadership after the US withdrawal. If hard power was ineffective in maintaining America's presence, more persistent urging by the U.S. government for deeper multilateral cooperation offers promising avenues for success. The United States should encourage India, which is well-situated to restrain both Beijing and the Taliban, to further invest in Afghanistan, both politically and economically, by

appealing to New Delhi's own security interests.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the US government must reduce its reliance on Pakistan, which has often encouraged radical Islamic activity in Afghanistan to intimidate India into submission.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the United States can cultivate currently non-existent ties with the Turkic states as a means of countering Beijing's sway in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan are dedicated to the protection of Muslim minorities regionally, and none of them care to accept Chinese supremacy.<sup>23</sup> The United States can negotiate cooperative arrangements with these countries, improving its own counterterrorism capabilities for stemming jihadist activity within Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Although Tajikistan is sympathetic to Moscow, it remains decidedly hostile to the Taliban.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the United States can detach Tajikistan from its friendship with Russia. There are limitations in regard to diplomatic overtures to these countries as Beijing has already developed economic links to their governments.<sup>26</sup> Even so, engagement with the Turkic states would signify publicly that the United States has embraced a more holistic mindset toward other Islamic state actors that belies its past reputation for unilateral interventionism.

Despite the fanfare surrounding China and Afghanistan, certain tensions reside within Beijing's budding relationship with the Taliban that the United States can easily exploit to drive a wedge. First, the Taliban's openness to Chinese interference in Afghanistan will place great strain on their relationship with other radical Islamic groups resentful of Beijing's intrusiveness, which limits the number of areas for future cooperation.<sup>27</sup> Also, Beijing's support of the Taliban could eventually backfire since the Chinese government, despite its intentions, could appear as a state sponsor of terrorism and lose credibility on the international stage. Ultimately, the geopolitical aspirations of the Taliban and China are mutually exclusive: the former aims for a position of independence as an Islamic state, but the latter seeks preeminence in South and Central Asia by infringing on the autonomy of its weaker neighbors.

## **Conclusion**

While America's withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted in a devastating blow for its overseas prestige, it simultaneously offered a bold and promising new direction for U.S. foreign policy. A more deliberate, multilayered approach of widespread regional collaboration advanced by the United States would thwart China's hopes for dominance in the region. It would also enhance the United States' reputation among native Afghans, since America is widely blamed for treating Afghanistan as a disposable backwater.<sup>28</sup> If China decreases its involvement in the country to avoid a potential clash with a renewed American presence and desists from overtly supporting the Taliban, which will lose the advantages associated with Chinese backing, then these proposed recommendations will have yielded some significant strategic benefits.

Throughout its history as a geostrategic enigma, Afghanistan has long been regarded as the graveyard of empires. In the nineteenth century, Victorian Britain unsuccessfully attempted to secure it as a bulwark against Russia. During the Cold

War, the Soviet army was rapidly bogged down in the quicksand of local guerrilla resistance financed by the United States.<sup>29</sup> These historical events share a unifying and edifying theme: rarely, does untamed unilateral action by a foreign nation that uses Afghanistan as a pawn triumph in a diverse region with multiple local and international players which often possess complex, diverging objectives. Moreover, China has self-righteously heralded the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as the natural, final climax in the historical process of America's decline as a superpower, as well as a fatal, justified consequence for its consistent policy of high-handed meddling in other parts of the world.<sup>30</sup> To challenge this false narrative, the United States, acting in a more multilateral fashion, must embrace a less myopic view of Afghanistan if it is to assume a leading role in the country's affairs again and prevent Beijing's pernicious designs from upsetting them for its own aggrandizement.

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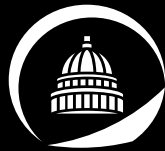
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## Endnotes

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