



# Alternating Interests:

## How will China seek to benefit from Taliban after the fall of Kabul?

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The spokesperson of China's foreign ministry Hua Chunying affirmed on August 16 that China hopes that Taliban will fulfill its promises and end the war in Afghanistan, having managed to take full control of Kabul, the capital. She also stressed that it is the Afghans, and not anyone else, that should decide the destiny of their country. She added that the Chinese embassy in Kabul is doing its job as usual and most Chinese citizens, who were in Kabul returned to their countries with the aid of their embassy.

### China's interests in Afghanistan

On July 21, China appointed Yue Xiaoyong, a veteran diplomat with much experience on US policy and the Middle East, as a special envoy to Afghanistan. The decision reflects Beijing's desire to be more engaged with Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US forces. It is worth noting that Afghanistan is of special importance to China, not only for security considerations (being China's backyard, so to speak), but also for economic considerations. Following is a detailed discussion of these considerations:

**1- Getting rid of the threat of US presence:** the military presence of the US in China's backyard has always constituted a fatal strategic threat to Beijing, which was undoubtedly looking forward to the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, but wanted this to happen in a systematic, well-organized way, and after a peace agreement between the Taliban and the

Afghan government is reached.

It is noteworthy here that in an editorial in the Chinese Global Times, the author indirectly threatened Taiwan, which China considers part of its territories. It affirms that the withdrawal from Afghanistan showed how the US, Taiwan's closest and most powerful ally, will not always be there for Taiwan when the latter needs its help. This opinion shows how relieved China is because of USA's withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was also reflected in statements by Chinese officials. For example, China's foreign minister Wang Yi stressed that his country supports Afghanistan as an independent, neutral country that follows a moderate Islamic policy. He added that his country is highly keen on a strategic partnership between China and Afghanistan, and is ready to arrange for top-level communications between the two countries. This means that Beijing believes that opportunities in Af-

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ghanistan after US withdrawal outweigh threats.

**2- Making sure that Afghanistan does not become a terrorist safe haven:** the Taliban is a strategic-minded terrorist group that uses terrorism to reach certain limited, well-defined goals. Unlike Qa-eda, the Taliban does not aim at establishing an international Islamic state; rather, its aim is to rule. This makes it possible for China to communicate with the movement leaders to control Uighur, especially as the Taliban is eager to achieve its goal, which is to control Afghanistan, and to win international recognition.

A Taliban spokesperson said, on July 28, that a delegation of Taliban leaders that visited China met China's foreign minister and several Chinese diplomats. The Taliban promised China that Afghan territories will not be used against the security of any other state. In return for that, the Chinese officials promised not to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs, and to help resolve the problem and restore peace in the country.

The Uighur problem is one of the most troubling issues that China is facing. Beijing is trying to convince the Taliban to help to limit and control the movement of Chinese Uighur extremists (Uighur is an ethnic minority located in the Xinjiang province, northwest of China). Though the Taliban's success in Afghanistan could be an inspiration for Uighur fighters, the firm grip of Chinese security makes this rather unlikely. In this respect, in February 2021 ten Chinese spies were arrested in Kabul based on information from Indian intelligence. The National Directorate of Security, which arrested them, found out that two of them had communications with the Haqqani terrorist network. Beijing's aim was to engage Haqqani's services to track Uighur fighters. This shows that Beijing was successful in managing its interests in Afghanistan with utmost pragmatism, so that it can reach an understanding with any group in the country.

**3- Integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative:** China's interest in Afghanistan has also to do with the Belt and Road Initiative. China has two options to integrate Afghanistan in the initiative. One of these is to tie Afghanistan to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Afghanistan is connected with Pakistan via four railway points in Helmand, Kandahar, Khost and Nangarhar. These connections can be fur-

ther linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The other option is to integrate Afghanistan into the initiative through Central Asia. Some successful steps were taken in this direction. In September 2016, the first Chinese freight train arrived at Hairatan, which is a border town and port in the north of Balkh Province, in Afghanistan. However, the Chinese-Afghan railway service was suspended because of security threats and the bad condition of the infrastructure. This road connects Afghanistan with China via railway in Central Asia, where the economic belt of the Silk Road (vital to the initiative) also passes. This makes it even more possible for Afghanistan to be integrated into the initiative. As Pakistan is Afghanistan's ally, and as Islamabad is always accused of supporting the Afghan movement by providing it with arms and fighters, a Chinese-Pakistani-Afghan cooperation is not unlikely. This development will have geo-political implications, as both China and Pakistan are not on good terms with India. If the three countries cooperate as such, this may be at the expense of the India-supported project of Chabahar Port in Iran. The project was agreed upon by Iran, India and Afghanistan in May 2016. India wants to establish a new freight corridor to Afghanistan (which is a landlocked country) via Iran, so that it can limit its dependence on Pakistan. The port can also be a door to trade for other Central-Asian countries. Again, this will be at Pakistan's expense, as Pakistan, for years, provided passage to Central Asia through Karachi port. Undoubtedly, integrating Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative will enable Pakistan to stress its central role for Afghanistan and Central Asia as far as trade is concerned, which will not be in Iran's favour, of course.

## Beijing's policies towards Taliban

The policies that Beijing adopts in dealing with the Taliban can be summed up as follows:

**1- Recognizing Taliban:** it is expected that China will recognize the Taliban as the legitimate ruler of Afghanistan. This was already made clear by the spokesperson of China's foreign ministry, who also stressed that if the Taliban fulfills its promises, China will be ready to have a peaceful, friendly relationship with the movement.



**2- Enhancing diplomatic understanding:** Chinese officials already met with the Taliban officials, but will have more meetings with them. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a Taliban leader, met China's foreign minister late in July 2021, to stress that Afghanistan will not be a basis for Uighur dissenters.

**3- Investing in projects in Afghanistan:** Beijing dropped hints to the Taliban about the possibility of directing Chinese investments to Afghanistan, including huge investments in energy and infrastructure projects. If the Taliban succeeds in achieving stability in Afghanistan, which is highly likely, China will integrate it into the Belt and Road Initiative, and this will enable China to connect the trade roads that pass through Central Asia with those which pass through Pakistan.

**4- Coordinating with Taliban's ally:** Pakistan is considered China's most powerful ally in South Asia. Due to the strong relationship between Islamabad and the Taliban, it is probable that China, Pakistan and Afghanistan will reach an understanding, not only concerning security issues, but also economically.


**5- Conducting limited military intervention:** Beijing fully realizes the risks of military intervention in Afghanistan, which is regarded as a 'strategic trap' that has always weakened the major powers which tried to invade the country. Chinese analyses even refer to Afghanistan as 'the tomb of empires'. Therefore, it is expected that China will not attempt military intervention in Afghanistan, except to face the Uighur terrorists that constitute an immediate threat to Beijing's security. However, China will only do such a thing if all other ways of handling this threat prove futile; Beijing's first option will be to hire armed agents, likes of the Haqqani Network, to do the job.

**6- Integrating Kabul into Chinese security structures:** China can opt for integrating Kabul into the mechanisms and frameworks of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This is a local organization dedicated to discussing security issues, which does not have any military capabilities that enable it to take collective action. The organization was founded by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2001, and then India and Pakistan officially became members in 2017.

In conclusion, China seems to have weighed the benefits of cooperation with post-USA Afghanistan against the costs, only to find out that such cooperation is highly beneficial as far as security and economy are concerned, whereas any security threats emanating from Afghanistan will be somehow trivial.

## ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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