

Six Months On: China and Taliban 2.0

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Summary

In the last six months since the Taliban took control of Kabul, the relations between the group and Beijing have grown. China has followed through on its promise of humanitarian assistance and has been outspoken on international platforms in calling for support and aid to rebuild the Afghan economy. This paper looks at the interactions between Beijing and the Taliban-led interim government in Kabul as well as the new security challenges that China faces in Afghanistan's developing security matrix.

Humanitarian Assistance

When the Taliban assumed power, China was the first to pledge emergency humanitarian assistance worth 200 million yuan (S\$43.13 million) to Afghanistan. The first aid arrived in late September 2021, where Wang Yu, Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan, presented clothing and food supplies to Khalil Haqqani, Acting Minister for Refugees, in a reception ceremony. Two months later, the first shipment of 80,000 of the promised 300,000 COVID-19 vaccines arrived, along with more medical and winter supplies. Between September 2021 and February 2022, China continually sent supplies like blankets, down coats, naan and cooking oil to Afghanistan. On 6 December 2021, Wang Yu shared on Twitter that Beijing committed to giving additional 30 million yuan (S\$6.47 million) of food aid.¹ Images and stories of how the Afghan people have benefitted from Chinese aid are prevalent on both Afghan and Chinese media sources.²

Unlike the European Union and the United States (US), which have made it clear that they do not want aid to fall into the Taliban's hands, China has delivered its aid mostly to official Taliban departments, like the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation and the Ministry of Public Health. The Chinese embassy in Kabul is also proactively donating food supplies to Kabul residents and even funded a small-scale construction project of a mosque and two wells in the Ministry of Justice. Other Chinese organisations like the China Red Cross collaborated with the Tencent Foundation to donate flour and wheat to the Afghan Red Crescent Society. Given China's preference for working directly with governments rather than non-state actors, the aid delivery to the Taliban is hardly surprising. But, even more tellingly, it hints at China's subtle acknowledgement of the Taliban's rule.

¹ Wang Yu (@ChinaEmbKabul), "China will aid another 30 mil RMB...", *Twitter*, 6 December 2021, 1:15 PM, <https://twitter.com/ChinaEmbKabul/status/1467724401118490624>.

² For example, see "Feature: Afghan women in Kabul benefit from aid provided by China", *People's Daily Online*, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2021/1231/c90000-9939627.html>; and "Chinese Group Provides Food for 350 Afghan School Teachers, Staff", *TOLOnews*, 27 February 2022, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-176877>.

US President Joe Biden's recent announcement to allocate half of the frozen Afghan overseas funds to families of 9/11 victims, to compare, drew ire in Afghanistan, with many accusing Biden of misusing Afghan money.³ The Chinese newspaper *Global Times* organised an online petition with a colourful and provocative illustration claiming – "US STOLE FROM SYRIA; US STOLE FROM IRAQ; US STOLE FROM AFGHANISTAN" – to demand Washington return the money to Afghans.⁴

The United Nations is likewise progressing slowly in raising funding for its ambitious US\$5 billion (S\$6.82 billion) aid package for Kabul. Against this backdrop, China's ongoing assistance and aid delivery have undoubtedly elevated its status and image before the Taliban. Beijing is not only willing to help but is also proving to be a reliable partner. The Taliban often praises Beijing as its "most important partner" and "dependable friend".

Reconstruction and Pine Nut Diplomacy

Wang Yi, State Councillor and Chinese Foreign Minister, met with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Acting Deputy Prime Minister of the Taliban interim government, for the second time since July on 26 October 2021 in Doha, and separately with Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi. A notable outcome of these meetings was the agreement to establish a joint liaison mechanism at the working level to increase bilateral dialogue. The inaugural meeting took place virtually on 30 December 2021, and was led by Liu Jinsong, Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs of the Foreign Minister, and Zakir Jalaly, Director-General of the Third Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Many departments from both sides there discussed bilateral cooperation, Chinese humanitarian assistance and Afghan economic reconstruction. The Chinese counterpart raised that "China is ready to share development experience with Afghanistan",⁵ a familiar trope promoted by Beijing to popularise its development model in developing countries. Not long after, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan at the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony; both released a joint statement indicating readiness to discuss the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan and to organise the fifth China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue.⁶

Aside from providing aid, China has opened limited trade with Afghanistan in the export of pine nuts. The Pine Nut Air Corridor resumed in November 2021, marking the first instance

³ Christina Goldbaum, Safiullah Padshah and Taimoor Shah, "Biden's Decision on Frozen Funds Stokes Anger Among Afghans", *The New York Times*, 13 February 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/13/world/asia/afghanistan-funds-biden.html>.

⁴ "Global Times' online petition demands US return money to Afghans", *Global Times*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1252953.shtml>.

⁵ "China and Afghanistan Hold the First Meeting of the China-Afghanistan Liaison Mechanisms at the Working Levels for Humanitarian Assistance and Economic Reconstruction", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 31 December 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202112/t20211231_10478089.html.

⁶ Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 6 February 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202202/t20220206_10639501.html.

of international trade in Afghanistan under the Taliban-led administration. In a highly televised livestream as part of the China International Import Expo broadcasted by Chinese state-owned media, China Central Television, a trio consisting of top Chinese influencers promoted Afghan pine nuts and sold 120,000 cans within minutes.⁷ As of December 2021, 1,170 tonnes of pine nuts have been exported to China, generating over US\$16 million (S\$21.82 million) for Afghanistan's economy.⁸

In an insightful analysis, Ajmal Waziri and Raffaello Pantucci highlight that agricultural exports need minimal commitment from Beijing, and their easy conversion to cash make it a "practical" and "easy" solution "with immediate wins for both sides".⁹ Moreover, they speculated that Beijing picked pine nuts over other cash crops to build leverage and economic influence for future contingencies, as pine-nut producing regions in Afghanistan are hosts to various militant activities.

Chinese firms are wary of investing in Afghanistan due to the turbulent security situation. According to an exclusive report by *Global Times*, Chinese representatives from several companies visiting Afghanistan to explore mining opportunities were "most concerned about basic guarantees of security and social order", especially for Chinese personnel and projects.¹⁰ Their visit drew scrutiny from the Chinese embassy in Kabul, which issued a warning to Chinese firms and citizens to avoid "blindly" visiting Afghanistan to inspect minerals.¹¹

Old and New Security Threats

Notably, Afghanistan's shifting security landscape presents significant challenges for Beijing, particularly in light of the threats posed by other militant groups. First, Beijing wanted the Taliban to cut ties with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM, also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party) and guarantee that no attacks on Chinese soil would occur. The ETIM has been present in Afghanistan since the 1990s and has participated in multiple Taliban-led offensives against US-led coalition and Afghan forces, leading analysts to believe it was "one of the Taliban's closest foreign jihadist allies for nearly 25 years."¹² Although the last attack on Chinese territory was documented in 2017, the scars left from previous ETIM attacks and Uyghur separatist sentiments remain vivid in Chinese memory. Domestic efforts in Xinjiang to curb separatism, terrorism and extremism – the three evils identified by

⁷ "Live-streaming session helps sell out 120,000 cans of Afghan pine nuts in China", *Global Times*, 7 November 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1238348.shtml>.

⁸ "1,170 tons of pine nuts shipped from Afghanistan to China to aid economic reconstruction of the war-torn country", *Global Times*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1242945.shtml>.

⁹ Ajmal Waziri and Raffaello Pantucci, "Why is Beijing Going Nuts for Afghan Pine Nuts?", *The Diplomat*, 1 December 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/why-is-beijing-going-nuts-for-afghan-pine-nuts/>.

¹⁰ "GT Exclusive: Chinese firms explore lithium projects in Afghanistan, but risks remain", *Global Times*, 23 November 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1239730.shtml>.

¹¹ Tao Mingyang and Chu Daye, "GT Exclusive: Chinese firm's copper mine project in Afghanistan hasn't started, despite Taliban's push", *Global Times*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1241686.shtml>.

¹² Raffaello Pantucci and Nordirbek Soliev, "China: Xinjiang Province", in *Annual Threat Assessment, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research*, RSIS, Volume 14, Issue 1 (January 2022): pp. 99-105.

Beijing as threats to its national security – through re-education camps and heavy surveillance have garnered international condemnation.

While the Taliban has repeatedly promised security guarantees to Beijing and has declared in interviews that many Uyghur fighters have left Afghanistan at the Taliban's request, reports have indicated that ETIM cadres have merely relocated in Afghanistan away from the Afghanistan-China border.¹³ This raises concerns about the Taliban's willingness to sever connections with those it has fought alongside for the past two decades.

In addition, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) poses a separate threat to China. Having no prior records or messages involving China, the group appeared to have adopted a new lexicon when it publicly stated that the attack on a Shia mosque in the Afghan city of Kunduz in October 2021 was to target "both Shias and the Taliban for their purported willingness to expel Uyghurs to meet demands from China."¹⁴ The suicide bomber was allegedly identified to be Uyghur Muslim. This development worries Beijing as the ISIS-K could emerge as the custodian of Uyghur fighters and adopt an anti-China stance.

The advances of the ISIS-K in Afghanistan are eroding internal stability and the Taliban's control. The group, for instance, launched 304 attacks in Afghanistan in the first 11 months of 2021, a drastic rise from 84 attacks in 2020.¹⁵ The group has been active in recruiting and absorbing members who have defected from other groups and ramped up online propaganda campaigns targeting the Taliban and Pakistan.

If the Taliban fails to manage the rivalries of its militant counterparts, more disarray and violence could spill across borders. Although Beijing seems to have bet on the Taliban's staying power, and has not engaged with other militant organisations to public knowledge, it does not appear to be confident in the Taliban's capabilities to contain the fighting; sources show that Beijing has offered 55 million yuan (\$\$11.86 million) to Tajikistan to build a Tajik special police base near the Tajik-Afghan border.¹⁶ Recent news of the Taliban bolstering its army may bring China a modicum of relief, but it remains unclear how the interim government intends to fight the other militants and prevent defection.

Beijing is also threatened by Afghanistan-based Pakistani militant groups. The past years saw ongoing attacks by militants on Chinese-led projects and Chinese staff on Pakistani soil. Baloch separatists, particularly the Baloch Liberation Army – who have been fighting Islamabad for decades – have sought shelter in southern Afghanistan along the porous tribal

¹³ Reid Standish, "Taliban 'Removing' Uyghur Militants From Afghanistan's Border With China", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 5 October 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-talibanuyghurs-china/31494226.html>.

¹⁴ "Afghanistan: Dozens Killed in Suicide Bombing at Kunduz Mosque", *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/8/blast-hits-a-mosque-in-afghanistans-kunduz-during-friday-prayers>.

¹⁵ "Isis-K escalates terror attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan in show of resistance against Taliban", *South China Morning Post*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3158929/isis-k-escalates-terror-attacks-afghanistan-and-pakistan-show-resistance>.

¹⁶ "China to build base for Tajik special police unit in GBAO, says Tajik high-ranking police official", *Asia-Plus*, 28 October 2021, <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20211028/china-to-build-base-for-tajik-special-police-unit-in-gbao-says-tajik-high-ranking-police-official>.

borderlands that run through Pakistan and Afghanistan, and frequently attacked the Pakistani army and Chinese projects in Balochistan.¹⁷ The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which claimed responsibility for the fatal car bombing in the Serena Hotel parking lot in southwestern Balochistan in April 2021, was thought to have targetted the guest Chinese ambassador there.¹⁸ The group was also suspected to be behind the Dasu hydropower attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province that killed ten Chinese and four Pakistani nationals.¹⁹ Given that the attack happened close to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, it heightens uncertainty for Chinese projects in Afghanistan.

Consequentially, the Taliban's ascension to power has emboldened militant parties operating in the region, and they are expected to launch more offensives. Compellingly, the closed borders brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has helped to contain fighting and migration; however, there will be new security challenges and increased movement of militants and refugees once countries open up.

As the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contains many projects in flashpoints or geopolitically sensitive locations, Beijing has started to take the safety of Chinese personnel and assets overseas seriously. Other than having Pakistani paramilitary forces to protect CPEC-related projects, Chinese private security companies have been hired by Chinese companies to protect their projects and staff in Pakistan and Afghanistan.²⁰

Conclusion

For better Beijing-Taliban ties, the latter would have to prove that they have completely severed links with other militant groups, especially the ETIM, and have moved away from terrorist agendas. In the short term, Beijing will continue with aid provision and gradually normalise trade with Kabul. Chinese economic investments would be limited to small-scale, lower-risk infrastructure projects as the security threats multiply.

Beyond security concerns, expectations must be realistic on how far Beijing is willing to invest in Afghanistan through the CPEC, as BRI investments were already declining before the pandemic. China's zero-COVID approach has also witnessed the country walling itself off from the world for the past two years; domestic clampdowns on several industries further indicate forthcoming changes in its overall economic policies and direction.

All this notwithstanding, China's role as the middleman between Pakistan and Afghanistan will evolve. Previously, China stepped in to mend Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, successfully bringing both parties into communication and setting up the annual Trilateral

¹⁷ Ashish Dangwal, "Baloch Rebels Claim Responsibility For Attack Near China-Funded Gwadar Port; Pak Army Says 10 Soldiers Killed", *The Eurasian Times*, 29 January 2022, <https://eurasianimes.com/balochistan-rebels-claim-responsibility-for-attack-pak-army/>.

¹⁸ "Pakistan hotel bomb: Deadly blast hits luxury venue in Quetta", *BBC*, 22 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56834937>.

¹⁹ "Truth on Dasu terror attack surfaces amid unanswered questions, as China and Pakistan step up security for Chinese", *Global Times*, 13 August 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231423.shtml>.

²⁰ "Guardians of the Belt and Road", *Merics*, 16 August 2018, <https://merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>; and Alessandro Arduino, *China's Private Army: Protecting the New Silk Road* (Palgrave Pivot, Singapore, 2018).

Foreign Ministers' Dialogue. The China-Afghanistan-Pakistan axis could grow if all parties see eye-to-eye on combatting counterterrorism and focus on building economic integration. Islamabad and Kabul often fall into political deadlock due to border disputes and contesting support for different militant parties; bilateral relations thus remain fragile, with China serving as the linchpin. Beijing could try to win over Islamabad and the Taliban with its economic clout, which it could leverage to push both sides to curb terrorism and stabilise the region, making it more conducive for Chinese investments. However, China will remain reluctant to enforce stability through military means.

Lastly, Afghanistan's integration into the regional order could pay dividends. Afghanistan is an observer member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). It has applied to join as a full member since 2015. So far, the Taliban has not openly requested membership, but it may do so soon as it consolidates Afghanistan as its state and seeks deeper integration with the regional bloc to gain from enhanced regional economic and road connectivity. The recent progress on formally admitting Iran's membership into SCO, after over 15 years of Iranian efforts, highlights the evolving continental order in Eurasia in which Afghanistan might seek to participate.

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