# Bush China Foundation Brief: Report on U.S.-China Strategic Policy Dialogue on Afghanistan

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On August 15, Afghanistan's government and security forces collapsed, with the Taliban capturing Kabul and then President Ashraf Ghani fleeing the country. The United States' complete withdrawal after 20 years of intervention in Afghanistan precipitated the fall of Kabul. The Taliban's return to power has yet to bring peace and stability to the country, with the armed opposition and the provision of governance and jobs as ongoing challenges. Meanwhile, an unstable Afghanistan is at risk of becoming a terrorist haven further threatening its fragile state and its neighbors.

To assess the future of U.S. and Chinese policy toward Afghanistan as well as prospects for U.S.-China cooperation in the region, the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations partnered with Peking University's Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding in bringing together former diplomats and academics from the United States and China for a closed-door discussion on the desired outcomes for respective interests in Afghanistan. The dialogue session, held in October, was the second round of the track 2 U.S.-China Strategic Policy Dialogue series launched in May of the same year, which seeks to facilitate action-focused exchanges between the two countries.

## THE AFGHANISTAN CRISIS

### Taliban's takeover

Information on the internal politics of the Taliban and its state-building has been limited. The country's political situation largely remains the same: high political fragmentation, transnational ethnic groups and political militancy, a tradition of proxy conflict, a stark urban-rural divide and a tense relationship between central and tribal systems of governance. Factionalization and regionalization are expected to shape power-sharing arrangements as institutions develop. Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), the Afghan branch of the Islamic State, poses an asymmetric threat to the Taliban regime and has the potential to destabilize the whole region.

The Taliban leadership has announced its intentions to respect the security of women and to not engage in reprisal against its former adversaries, but most countries are waiting to see if the Taliban's actions will live up to its promises. To date, the interim government has yet to be recognized by a single country. It is clear that the Biden administration is not ready to recognize the regime as legitimate until it shows efforts to protect human rights. The Taliban now looks to the countries of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which recognized its first government 20 years ago. China is a notable addition to the Taliban's list of potential diplomatic partners: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met top Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar twice this year, in July and October.

*A less ideological and politically coherent Taliban*

Domestically, the Taliban faces the same challenges it struggled with two decades ago, but this time as a much different organization. Afghanistan is ethnically and linguistically diverse; there are 14 recognized ethnic groups and over 40 languages spoken in the country, and the diversity has given rise to nationalist and militant groups built along identitarian lines. Historically, the Taliban is predominantly Pashtun and has previously clashed with ethnic Uzbeks, Hazaras and Tajiks. As part of its strategy to take over Afghanistan, the Taliban broadened its membership composition to include ethnic minorities and groups with varying degrees of adherence to the Taliban's religious dogma. This strategy proved militarily successful, but now the Taliban must manage a less ideologically coherent organization composed of far more interests than ever before.

*Threats*

**Non-state violence** presents a serious security threat to Afghanistan and its neighbors. It exacerbates instability and should it continue, terrorism, drug trafficking and refugee migration have a high risk of spillover into neighboring countries. Additionally, intensifying regional great power rivalries between India and Pakistan or China and the United States may embolden non-state actors to take advantage of regional divisions to advance their political agendas.

**Terrorism** remains the most significant threat in Afghanistan. Without an occupying foreign power to center their interests, there is a risk that the Taliban's constituent factions may return to their core interests and pivot their force capabilities toward other countries such as Pakistan, India, Tajikistan or even the United States. Although the Taliban has promised to quell terrorism, many doubt whether the regime is even capable of containing groups like ISIS-K. The real test in the near term is how capable the Central Asian regimes are in countering attacks from these groups when they move back in and target the economic backbones of their governments. An example is Pakistan's ability to protect the strategic economic project, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Chinese side was particularly wary of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uyghur outfit active in China's Xinjiang province that took root in Afghanistan under the Taliban's auspices.

**Security-culture nexus**: Though often neglected by strategists, cultural heritage sites are of particular importance to the Taliban, its opponents and humanity writ large. Despite its legacy of destroying important historic sites on ideological grounds, the Taliban has promised to protect those that remain. However, there is a vicious set of incentives that may place these sites in further jeopardy. Groups like ISIS-K may engage in looting and destruction of Afghanistan's heritage sites to delegitimize the Taliban's adherence to fundamentalist Islam. Should the Taliban feel ideologically threatened, it may renege on its promises and resume destruction of these sites to shore up its base. Otherwise, the looting of these sites is an important funding mechanism for terror groups in the country. To protect these heritage sites, a collective effort within the international community, including the United States and China, is required to mitigate these incentives and hold the Taliban to its promises.

**Unconventional security threats** stemming from Afghanistan's instability could lead the country to spiral into further chaos. Narcotics trafficking has been the backbone of the Taliban's revenue stream, and there is currently no indication that opium farming will slow in the near

future. Moreover, despite the already large outflow of refugees during the Afghan government's collapse, refugee migration could sharply increase should non-state violence intensify. Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic is a serious threat to Afghanistan, given its low vaccination rate and underinvestment in medical infrastructure, exacerbated by the withdrawal of foreign aid. All of these unconventional threats remain issues of significant international interest and will require serious international coordination to resolve.

## HISTORIC PERSPECTIVES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Parallels can be drawn between China's approach to Afghanistan today and the United States' approach to Afghanistan when the Soviets withdrew their military in the 1980s. An American expert at this dialogue argued that China is using Afghanistan as a proxy against the United States as the U.S. once did to the USSR. Just as the United States provided economic blueprints for a recovering post-Soviet Afghanistan, China now has a significant interest in setting the Afghan economy on a stable development path and capturing its extractive industrial potential. China sees economic development as the key to Afghanistan's domestic security and itself as capable of delivering the means to Afghanistan. Economic development and security go hand in hand, but the absence of war after the Taliban takeover does not automatically result in security, which is inextricably tied to regional dynamics that may or may not help China suppress Uyghur militants.

With the benefit of hindsight, the U.S. and Chinese sides at this dialogue agreed that China heed the lessons from the United States' mistakes, but each side had its own perspective on which lessons should be learned. Some U.S. participants argued that the Afghan government's collapse stemmed from hubris or a lack of American strategic patience. As Beijing tries its hand at economic reconstruction, one U.S. expert specifically warned China against succumbing to the same sense of national exceptionalism and overestimation of its sway that led the United States to bog itself down in the protracted and fruitless process of state-building after the Soviet withdrawal. The Chinese side, in contrast, posited that the U.S. project of democratic transformation was a strategic miscalculation and doomed at its outset given Afghanistan's political landscape.

### *The significance of Afghanistan*

U.S. and Chinese understandings of Afghanistan's significance have shifted greatly over the past half-century. Whereas great powers have historically viewed Afghanistan as a keystone in great power competition, Afghanistan's particular position in the fabric of Asian security has radically changed since the era of "The Great Game" of the 19th century between the British and Russian empires. The Chinese side offered two interpretations of Afghanistan's significance: 1) the prologue and epilogue of an era of militarily imposed democratization by the United States, with the fall of the Afghan government as a harbinger for a new era of Middle Eastern politics; and 2) a challenge and priority issue for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), given that Afghanistan's instability makes it a sort of "heart disease" in the center of the SCO. The American side's interpretations of Afghanistan's significance conversely focused on great power competition. One U.S. participant argued that the U.S. public sees China's openness to working with the new Taliban government as an opportunistic move to add a new puzzle piece to a fledgling anti-American bloc. The same participant then posited that China sees U.S. policy

toward Afghanistan as an attempt to destabilize the region so that China will focus on its border instead of maritime issues in the Western Pacific.

## THE WAY FORWARD

The credibility of the Taliban assurance that the Afghan territory will not be used against the security of any country is being closely watched by the international community. Since the Taliban's military victory, China has maintained contact and communication with the Taliban, promoting an "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led" approach to the political settlement. The Chinese side maintained the international community can play a constructive role in steering the Taliban to pursue a stable, inclusive political architecture that respects civil rights.

As the final makeup of the Taliban government and the power-sharing structure is unresolved, the United States has not defined its future relationship with the Taliban. The current security situation is still a long way from the goal of a stable Afghanistan that does not threaten its neighbors. With a full withdrawal, the U.S. ability to get a sense of developments on the ground is severely diminished and, from a counterterrorism perspective, will likely require intelligence from consultations with Afghanistan's immediate neighbors. On that front, there is room for the United States and China to work together on countering emerging terrorist threats in Afghanistan. Both sides agreed that more consultation on Afghanistan is needed, despite the great power competition.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report captures the discussions between the U.S. and Chinese participants of the U.S.-China Strategic Policy Dialogue held on October 28, 2021. It draws upon experiences and expertise in the government, military and academia from the two countries. Special thanks to the participants on both sides for their time and input.