

## To China, Afghan Fall Proves U.S. Hubris. It Also Brings New Dangers.

The Taliban's return to power is no victory for Beijing, which faces the threat of extremism and an American military no longer bogged down by the "war on terror."



By Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers

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For China's leaders, the chaotic scenes unfolding in Afghanistan have served as stinging vindication of their hostility to American might. "The last dusk of empire," China's official news agency said. The Chinese foreign ministry called it a lesson in "reckless military adventures."

Any smugness in Beijing could be premature. China is now left scrambling to judge how the American defeat could reshape the contest between the world's two great powers. While the Taliban's rout has weakened American prestige and its influence on China's western frontier, it could also create new geopolitical dangers and security risks.

Officials in Beijing worry that extremists could use Afghanistan to regroup on China's flank and sow violence around the region, even as the Taliban look to deep-pocketed countries like China for aid and investment. The American military withdrawal could also allow the United States to direct its planning and matériel toward countering Chinese power across Asia.

"There should be anxiety rather than glee in Beijing," said John Delury, a professor of Chinese studies at Yonsei University in Seoul. "The U.S. is at last extricating itself from an unpopular, unwinnable war in a geopolitically peripheral theater. Ending the military presence in Afghanistan frees up resources and attention to focus on the long-term rivalry with China."

The two-decade American effort to build a functioning democratic government in Afghanistan crumbled far faster than the world expected. The Chinese government criticized what it called a hasty, ill-planned withdrawal by the Americans, which has upended hopes that the Taliban would build a broader governing coalition before taking power.



Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, the deputy leader of the Taliban, left, was warmly greeted by China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin in July. Li Ran/Xinhua, via Associated Press

"Wherever the United States sets foot, be it Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan, we see turbulence, division, broken families, deaths and other scars," Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told a regular news briefing this week.

How China engages the Taliban will be closely watched well beyond Afghanistan. Governments across the world are grappling with the new rulers there, especially their promises that they will pursue more moderate policies and stop any violence spilling abroad. China, Afghanistan's richest and most powerful neighbor, will be particularly attentive to how a Taliban-led government performs.

China says it has won assurances from the Taliban that Afghan territory will not be used as a staging ground for attacks inside China, but its sway over the group is unclear.

Only three weeks ago, China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, met with Taliban leaders in the northern Chinese city of Tianjin and urged them "to hold high the banner of peace talks." Instead, the Taliban exploited the cratering morale of Afghan government forces to seize city after city.

"Although the Taliban has made promises, there is still great uncertainty about the extent to which they will be fulfilled," Zhu Yongbiao, the director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at Lanzhou University in northwest China, said in a telephone interview.

"I think Chinese influence over the Afghanistan issue has been overestimated," he said. "The United States finally thinks that after pulling its forces out of Afghanistan, this mess will become one for China. I find that a bit baffling."



A man in Beijing on Tuesday reading an article about the downfall of Afghanistan in Global Times, a Chinese state-backed nationalist tabloid. Jade Gao/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

For China, a lot is at stake. If the Taliban victory leads to a surge of regional instability, it could disrupt China’s “Belt and Road” program to finance and build infrastructure across the region, which has largely sidestepped Afghanistan because of the war. Beijing is concerned about the security of other countries near Afghanistan: Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. An attack last month on a bus carrying Chinese workers in Pakistan, killing nine of them, has since been attributed to assailants operating from inside Afghanistan.

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“All of their concerns are magnified by this outcome,” said Andrew Small, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States who studies China’s relations with Afghanistan, referring to Beijing’s view.

“They worry that it will have a kind of inspirational effect, with the country becoming a permissive environment for the groups they most worry about,” he said.

The American pullout will also allow the United States to refocus its attention on Beijing. President Biden made it clear that the war in Afghanistan — however chaotic its denouement — had for too long distracted the country from larger geopolitical priorities.

“Our true strategic competitors — China and Russia — would love nothing more than the United States to continue to funnel billions of dollars in resources and attention into stabilizing Afghanistan indefinitely,” Mr. Biden said at the White House on Monday.

Twenty years ago, the swift American toppling of the Taliban following the attacks of Sept. 11 was seen by China as a worrisome demonstration of military power near its border, but it also provided a kind of relief.



Livestock grazing in the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan, near the Chinese border. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan magnifies China's security concerns. Gohar Abbas/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Until then, President George W. Bush had appeared eager to carry out his campaign pledges to curb China. He voiced support for Taiwan, the self-ruled island claimed by Beijing, and criticized China's manipulation of trade rules at the expense of American companies.

#### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

After Sept. 11, though, as the United States sought Chinese support for its war in Afghanistan, it agreed to designate as a terrorist organization a group of Uyghur fighters from Xinjiang, China's far western region, which shares a short, mountainous border with Afghanistan. According to the United Nations, the Uyghur group, known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, once maintained links to Al Qaeda and was responsible for a number of violent incidents, including several in Xinjiang in the late 1990s that killed a total of 140 people.

"Every time it looks like the U.S. is going to be able to focus seriously on China, something gets in the way," Mr. Small, the researcher at the German Marshall Fund, said. "You've had this succession of crises that have given China additional space, and Afghanistan has been a constant. When American forces and lives are at stake, that just dominates."

The question is what China will do now. While some expect China to step unto the breach created by the American withdrawal, Beijing is deeply wary of wading into Afghan political and military conflicts that have dragged down the United States and Soviet Union.

China's unofficial contacts with the Taliban date to the 1990s, and officials from Beijing stayed in touch with the group in the past two decades, largely to urge the Taliban not to support attacks in Xinjiang.



A street in the western Chinese region of Xinjiang in 2019. After Sept. 11, the United States agreed to designate a Uyghur group that once maintained links to Al Qaeda as a terrorist organization, to gain support from China in the war in Afghanistan. Gilles Sabrié for The New York Times

Those contacts have lately served China well. The Chinese Embassy in the Afghan capital, Kabul, has stayed open after the Taliban takeover. Even so, China has showed no eagerness to step up its involvement in Afghanistan under its new rulers.

"In Chinese discussions about Afghanistan, you will often hear that phrase, 'the graveyard of empires,'" said Raffaello Pantucci, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. "I think their concern is that instability in Afghanistan gets spread north and south, and that's a bigger problem for them. It could destabilize their entire back region."

Given those concerns, China seems unlikely to move quickly to recognize the Taliban's seizure of power. A week before the collapse of the Afghan government, officials from China, the United States, Russia and Pakistan met in Qatar to discuss a path forward. It is not yet clear whether countries will choose to negotiate with the Taliban or rather repeat efforts to isolate them, as happened after they seized power in 1996.

China's statements suggest that it first wants clarity about the political future of Afghanistan and whether the Taliban will fulfill their security promises. Ms. Hua, the spokeswoman for the Chinese foreign ministry, said Tuesday that the Taliban should "pursue a moderate and prudent religious policy," and "work with other parties to form an open and inclusive political structure."

Even if Beijing decides to more actively support Afghanistan, it should do so only under the auspices of the United Nations and regional groupings, said Wu Baiyi, a research fellow with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

“Relying on one great power to solve Afghanistan’s problems won’t work,” Mr. Wu said. “We’re all in common absorbing the lessons of the past 40 years. We can’t carry on like that.”

Liu Yi and Claire Fu contributed research.