

# Afghanistan: The new geopolitical arena for China and India

By Raffaello Pantucci

There have been numerous developments in Afghanistan since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021. Amongst the most unexpected was the rapidity with which New Delhi appears to have built up its relationship with new regime. While it was never clear how antagonistic the core Taliban leadership itself was to the Indian government, the fact they hosted numerous militant groups targeting India and were close to Pakistan meant they seemed obvious adversaries. Moreover, given that New Delhi had developed a strong relationship with the Republic government in Kabul, there was an expectation that India's relationship with Afghanistan would go into a deep freeze.

Yet, as things have played out, New Delhi has instead leaned into its relationship with the Taliban. Now going so far as to open an Embassy in Kabul and having senior officials meet with Taliban counterparts. India has sent humanitarian aid and technical support teams, and suggested it might do more. In so doing, India has seemed to emulate the approach taken by China which has been very prominent in its support for the new authorities in Kabul. But the path taken by both has been very different, and the reasons for this engagement are equally different. A question lingering over all of this has been



the degree to which their engagement reflects a desire to try to curtail each other's activity in Afghanistan with the country becoming another point of conflict between the two Asian giants.

The Taliban's desire to court the two Asian giants is clear. From their perspective, any opportunity to try to gain greater support, potential investment and exposure as a legitimate international authority is positive. The Taliban have long made it clear they are happy to work with China on certain issues (mostly around investment)—even during the previous Republic government's time they would speak of protecting Chinese investments. Cooperation on dealing with China's Uyghur concerns seems more mixed, with few in the movement wanting to turn over their former battlefield allies to China.

India is a newer player in this regard, though the Taliban have been quick to grab

at the opportunity. It is not clear how much India has been demanding counter-terrorism support which is being delivered, though presumably this is a part of the conversation. Doubtless there is a part of the Taliban that likes the fact that the growing proximity to New Delhi causes consternation in Islamabad, demonstrating their distance from Pakistan and giving them a sense of strategic depth and control over their destiny.

For New Delhi, it is an obvious play to try to create some options for itself and to try to find ways of insulating itself from potential terrorist problems that might emerge. Engaging the Taliban also plays into regional geopolitics, placing India in a stronger position in a battlefield where its two biggest regional adversaries (China and Pakistan) are strong players. The Indian expert community has articulated the view that a large part of New Delhi's engagement is a product of ensuring China does not end up owning the geopolitical vacuum that might exist in Kabul.

For Beijing, the question seems more narrowly focused on engaging with the Taliban to ensure the country does not become a locus for threats against China (both at home and in the region) and creating its own backstops to Pakistani security guarantees. Where China sees great power conflict, it tends to be more towards the United States (US), with India interpreted as a player that Washington is working through.

Beijing was never quite as agitated by Indian activity in Afghanistan as was sometimes made out. These concerns were largely expressed by Pakistan and sometimes echoed by Beijing. During the tenure of the previous Republic government, the Indian and Chinese governments actually even went so far as to cooperate on diplomatic training programmes of Afghan diplomats—an outcome from the successful summits between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping in 2018 and 2019.

But as the wider China-India relationship fell apart, in large part due to increasingly aggressive border clashes and the growing proximity between India and the US, this cooperation fell by the wayside. The Republic government in Kabul continued to try to find ways of engaging with both, but this became harder as trust levels fell. It was clear that direct cooperation between New Delhi and Beijing was going to be impossible. Beijing started to agree with Islamabad and mutter about Indian support for terrorist groups using bases in Afghanistan to strike Chinese targets in Pakistan. And in December 2020, Indian intelligence was suspected as being behind information that was given to the National Directorate of Security (NDS) in Kabul about a network of 10 Chinese Ministry of State Security (MSS) agents who had been operating in the country under cover.

It is not clear how this growing confrontation will develop. China and India continue to seem to want to both confront

and appear to engage at the same time. It is likely that we will see some steps towards rapprochement more broadly between New Delhi and Beijing, notwithstanding their deep disagreements. The leaderships are not eager for a full-on open conflict, as reflected by their willingness to both still participate in the Samarkand Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit. It is not clear this limited rapprochement will happen in Afghanistan as well.

From what is discernible in the public domain, the Indian government has for the most part been engaging with the parts of the Taliban government that are linked to the group who used to run the Doha office and those from Kandahar. Mullah Yacoub, the son of the former Taliban leader Mullah Omar and current Defence Minister, gave an interview to the Indian press in June. Prior to that much of India's engagement seems to have been through the Ministry of External Affairs which has been engaging with its counterparts in the Taliban Ministry (mostly men who were involved in the Doha office).

Beijing on the other hand has been engaging with a far wider range of actors but does not seem to be gaining absolute trust from all of them. Where it does seem to be finding more acceptance is amongst the Haqqani faction of the Taliban government in Kabul. While it is clear other parts are eager to engage as well—in particular on economic matters—a certain level of tension lingers. This is in part a

product of over-inflated expectations on the Kabul side, as well as an awareness on the Chinese side of the sheer complexity of any major endeavour in war-scarred Afghanistan.

What both China and India share, however, is a general negative image that could catch on amongst the wider community of committed extremists in Afghanistan. India's BJP government is perceived as being Islamophobic—a topic repeatedly harped on about in extremist literature linked to organisations like al Qaeda or Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). While China's mistreatment of Uyghurs is a topic that ISKP has particularly locked on to as a topic recognising that it is a subject of great sensitivity both amongst the Uyghur contingent in Afghanistan and their supporters, this is also an anger that resonates amongst rank and file Taliban fighters.

China and India are therefore in the awkward position of potentially garnering support from the Taliban authorities but not at a wider level. Implementing their projects on the ground could become highly complicated, and even lead to some sort of internal fractures of fissures within the Taliban movement. The wider chaos that might ensue is more likely to damage Chinese interests than Indian ones[KPBI]. China's direct border and substantial investments in Afghanistan's neighbourhood mean there is a wider range of interests that could be damaged, while

India still has a certain level of insulation provided by geography.

The final aspect to this dynamic is the degree to which China and India will transfer their wider tensions to the Afghanistan, and turn the country into an arena of confrontation. There are two external elements which are likely to play into this—the US and Pakistan. Both powers are close allies of India and China respectively, and have different interests in Afghanistan. The degree to which relations between China and the US or India and Pakistan are going well or badly is likely to influence how Beijing and New Delhi lock horns in Afghanistan. Given that we seem set on a period of geopolitical confrontation, the outlook for positive resolution seems unlikely. There is, sadly, a very high chance of Afghanistan becoming once again a place for geopolitical competition, this time between China and India.

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